
Indonesian Gen Z in Travel Information Search: A Qualitative Study Using the Uses and Gratifications Theory

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Abstract

This study provides exploratory insight into how Generation Z users search for travel information on TikTok, interpreted through the lens of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). Using a qualitative phenomenological design, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with five female respondents aged 20–29 from major Indonesian cities. Thematic analysis with NVivo 15 identified four interconnected gratification dimensions: affective gratification, social gratification, cognitive-credibility gratification, and cognitive-efficiency gratification. These findings reveal that TikTok functions not merely as an entertainment platform but as an algorithmically mediated information ecosystem that blends emotion, trust, and efficiency in digital discovery. From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the contextual application of UGT by introducing the exploratory concept of Algorithmically Mediated Gratification (AMG). Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for business owners and tourism marketers by designing authentic, visually compelling, and interactive short-form content, collaborating with credible micro-influencers, and maintaining consistency across digital platforms to enhance user trust and engagement.

Keywords: UGT, TikTok, Gen Z, Ecommerce, Tourism

1. Introduction

The rise of social media has reshaped how younger generations seek information and make travel decisions. In contrast, traditional search engines like Google have dominated information-seeking behaviour across domains. However, recent evidence shows a growing shift among Generation Z toward using visual-first platforms such as TikTok, not only for entertainment but also as functional search tools for travel-related content. Generation Z, defined as individuals born between the mid-to-late 1990s and early 2010s, is widely acknowledged as the first truly digital-native (IDN Research Institute, 2024; Pradipta et al., 2024). Thus, this change reflects a broader movement from keyword-based search toward algorithmically and socially curated discovery.

Having grown up in a digital environment, Generation Z's communication, learning, and information consumption habits are shaped by visual and interactive media (Fauziyah & Sudradjat, 2025). Studies show that they prefer short, engaging content created by relatable peers and tend to discover information through personalized feeds rather than text-based searches (Rosário & Casaca, 2025; Yang et al., 2025). Moreover, Doan et al. (2025) and Nguyen et al. (2021) stated that their communication and learning habits are shaped by constant exposure to visual, interactive, and community-based media environments.

These patterns have been increasingly recognized in emerging tourism economies such as Indonesia, where digital media plays a crucial role in destination visibility. In Indonesia's context, this trend acquires strategic significance. Gen Z accounts for approximately 27.94 % of the population (74.93 million people), making them the country's largest demographic (Siahaan, 2024). Their consumption patterns have a profound impact on Indonesia's digital economy, including the tourism sector. TikTok, with over 107 million Indonesian users as of early 2025 (Statista, 2025), has become a primary space for travel inspiration and decision-making. In a post-pandemic environment where hotel occupancy rates in key destinations such as Jakarta and Bali have fluctuated (BPS, 2024; Hindriyanti, 2025), understanding how Gen Z discovers destinations online is crucial for developing effective tourism marketing strategies.

Existing studies emphasize TikTok's growing role in shaping travel intentions. Ramos & Ramos (2025) found that user-generated content (UGC) on TikTok significantly influences purchase decisions, while Huang et al. (2024) demonstrating that authenticity, visual quality, and enjoyment drive engagement. However, most of the existing research relies on quantitative approaches and conceptualizes TikTok primarily as a marketing channel rather than a search tool for users. As Gaetaniello (2024) observed, social media platforms increasingly function as

personalized search engines that curate information through algorithmic recommendations. To deepen understanding of this behaviour, a qualitative approach is needed to examine how and why users engage with TikTok for information-seeking purposes, particularly in the tourism context.

The present study employs Uses and Gratifications theory (UGT) as its conceptual foundation to understand this behaviour. UGT explains how individuals actively select media to fulfil cognitive, affective, and social needs (Katz et al., 1973; Li et al., 2023; Lien & Cao, 2014). While traditionally applied to television, radio, and early social media, recent studies have expanded its use to digital and algorithmic platforms (Kennedy & Funk, 2023; Moon & An, 2022). However, few studies have critically examined how gratification-seeking operates within short-form, discovery-oriented platforms like TikTok, where algorithmic curation and user participation jointly influence exposure and engagement.

Despite the growing literature connecting TikTok with tourism marketing, three critical gaps remain. First, little is known about how Indonesian female Gen Z users utilize TikTok as a functional search tool, rather than merely as an entertainment platform. Second, the application of UGT to short-video search behaviour has rarely been explored qualitatively. Third, gender and cultural context, key moderators in digital behaviour, have not been sufficiently integrated into UGT interpretations.

Accordingly, this study aims to bridge these gaps by exploring why and how female Gen Z in Indonesia use TikTok to search for travel information. The following questions guide the research:

1. What gratifications (cognitive, affective, and social) motivate female Gen Z in Indonesia to use TikTok for travel information search?
2. How do credibility, authenticity, and interactivity shape their trust and decision-making processes?
3. In what ways does TikTok's algorithmic and visual design influence its search experience compared to traditional search engines?

2. Method

This research employed a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences and attitudes of Indonesian female Generation Z users regarding their use of TikTok to obtain travel information. Phenomenology was chosen to capture the subjective meanings and emotional processes underlying users' engagement with TikTok, consistent with UGT.

Data were collected from five female respondents aged 20–29 years residing in metropolitan areas of Indonesia (Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung, Denpasar, and Yogyakarta). The small sample size aligns with

phenomenological research, which emphasizes depth over breadth. Data saturation was reached when no new themes emerged during the final two interviews.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that each respondent met the following criteria:

1. Active TikTok users for at least one year.
2. Frequently engage with or create travel-related content.
3. Have experience using Google Search for similar purposes.

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis method, using NVivo 15 software to organize and code the data. The process included open coding to identify common words. This was followed by categorization, which groups related codes. Next, theme formulation involved developing higher-level themes that capture the psychological and social rewards associated with TikTok use. An inductive approach was employed to allow patterns to emerge naturally from the participants' narratives. To ensure credibility, two independent coders verified the themes, and the researcher maintained reflexivity through the use of analytical memos. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Moreover, credibility and trustworthiness were established through triangulation of data sources (face-to-face and online), peer debriefing, and maintaining a transparent audit trail of the coding process.

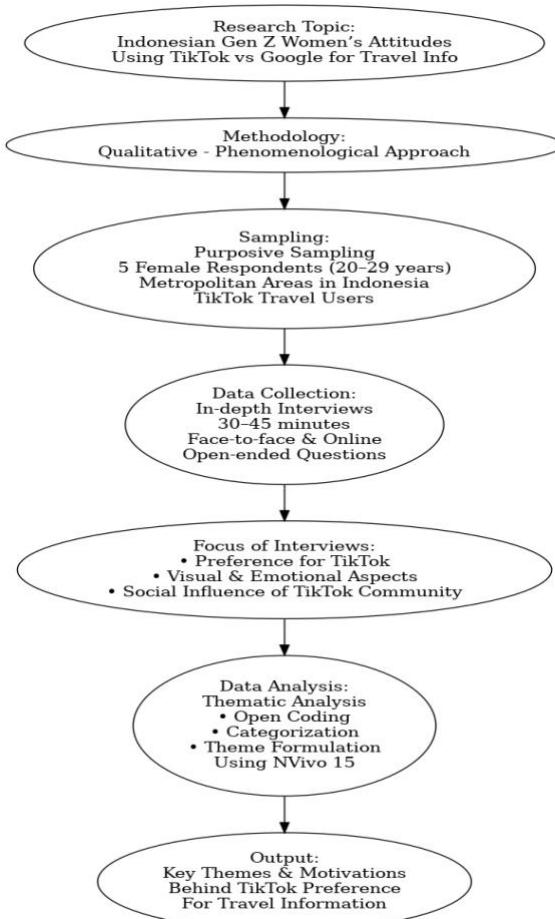


Figure 1. Research Framework

3. Results

The interview data were analysed inductively using NVivo 15 following an open and axial coding process. Eight preliminary codes were initially identified: emotional resonance, personalized discovery, interaction, community validation, trust, source evaluation, simplicity, and visual accessibility. Through axial coding, conceptually overlapping items were clustered into four higher-order themes that align with UGT's key dimensions. Each theme was mentioned by at least three of the five participants, indicating cross-case recurrence and thematic robustness.

Table 1. Coded Statements Across Gratification Categories

Gratification Level	Subcategory	Number of Statements	Participant Coverage (out of 5)	Codes
Affective Gratification	Emotional resonance	18	5	“excited”, “real”, “inspired”

Gratification Level	Subcategory	Number of Statements	Participant Coverage (out of 5)	Codes
Social Gratification	Personalized Discovery	11	4	“FYP shows what I like”, “relatable”, “kept appearing”
	Interaction	15	4	“comments help decide”, “connected through FYP”
	Community Validation	10	3	“see others’ perspectives”, “popular in comments”
Cognitive-Credibility Gratification	Trust	9	4	“depends on who’s reviewing”, “experienced influencer”
	Source Evaluation	10	3	“not sponsored”, “consistent info across videos”
Cognitive-Efficiency Gratification	Simplicity	10	5	“short video”, “easy to watch”, “just watch video vs read”
	Visual Accessibility	7	2	“get the vibe”, “see the ambience through video”

3.1 Affective Gratification: Emotionally Resonant and Personalized Discovery

All participants emphasized that TikTok content creates strong emotional engagement through its visual appeal, personalization, and sense of authenticity. They described feeling drawn to destinations shown in short, relatable videos.

For instance, one informant observed: *“If the video is good, I feel interested in visiting the place. TikTok can show hidden gems that most people don’t know about.”* (Informant 1). Another stated: *“I feel excited, especially when the content feels real... I became more excited about visiting Kawah Ijen after seeing a lot of videos.”* (Informant 4). These accounts demonstrate how personalization and visual storytelling create an emotional connection between users and destinations. The findings reflect the affective gratification dimension of UGT, wherein media consumption provides emotional stimulation and enjoyment.

3.2 Social Gratification: Interaction and Community Validation

TikTok’s interactive features, such as commenting, sharing, and responding to multiple points of view, were identified as key ways users exchange opinions and validate travel choices.

As one participant explained: *“Connected through FYP. As a food creator, I can comment on other creators’ posts and eventually get connected.”* (Informant 3). Another highlighted the interpretive diversity enabled by user interaction: *“Through comments or shares, you can see different people’s perspectives.”* (Informant 4). Another highlighted the interpretive diversity

enabled by user interaction: “*Through comments or shares, you can see different people’s perspectives.*” (Informant 4)

These interactions transform travel information into shared knowledge, helping users to view travel details from multiple perspectives. Participants often judged a destination’s reliability based on what they saw in the comment section. This theme reflects the social gratification dimension of UGT, highlighting the satisfaction derived from belonging, interaction, and peer validation.

3.3 Cognitive-Credibility Gratification: Trust and Source Evaluation

Perceived credibility and authenticity were key factors influencing participants’ reliance on TikTok for Travel Information. Trust was often linked to the creator’s identity, background, and the consistency of information that they uploaded across multiple videos. One respondent noted: “*It depends on who’s reviewing. Experienced influencers are more trustworthy.*” (Informant 1). Another elaborated: “*If the review comes from a travel influencer, I trust it more, especially if they often highlight places that aren’t mainstream.*” (Informant 2).

Participants stated they cross-checked several videos and comments to confirm accuracy. This theme reflects the cognitive gratification dimension of UGT, where users seek information that satisfies their need for understanding and reliability. The findings show that credibility on TikTok is not inherent in the content but shaped by social and algorithmic factors, such as creator identity, tone, and audience engagement.

3.4 Cognitive-Efficiency Gratification: Simplicity and Visual Accessibility

Participants consistently described TikTok as an efficient way to obtain travel information. Its short-form, audio-visual format allowed quick understanding and decision-making. Illustratively, one participant remarked: “*TikTok is simpler and more informative; you just watch, while Google is more complex because you have to read.*” (Informant 2). Another added: “*You can immediately watch short videos about a place. On Google, it’s just written reviews or photos, so you don’t get the atmosphere.*” (Informant 4).

This pattern reflects Gen Z’s preference for immediacy and visual learning. TikTok’s format enables users to grasp key details such as ambience and place details without having to read long texts. This finding expands the cognitive dimension of UGS by highlighting efficiency-based gratification, where satisfaction comes from the format that suits the user’s visual habits.

4. Discussion

This study explored why Indonesian Gen Z female users prefer TikTok for travel information. The findings show that this preference is driven by affective gratification, cognitive-creativity gratification, cognitive-efficiency gratification, and social gratification.

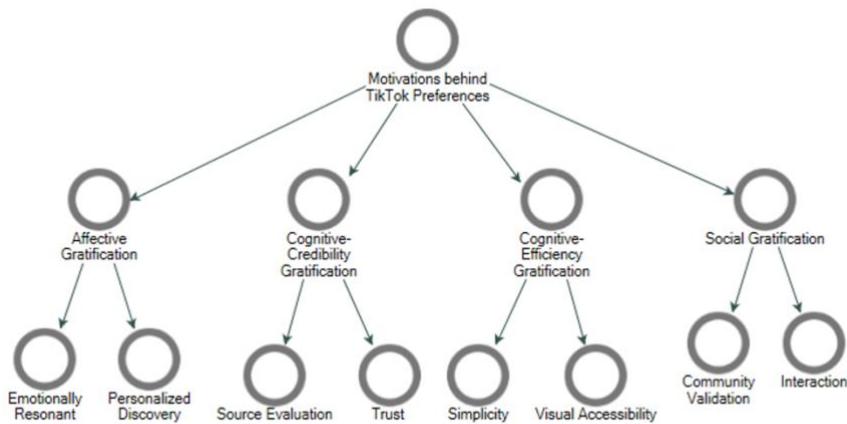


Figure 2. Mind Map Data Analyzed Using NVIVO 15.0

The first theme, Affective Gratification, illustrates that TikTok provides an emotionally engaging experience where users gain satisfaction not only from information but also from emotional connection and visual appeal. Participants' frequent descriptions of feeling "excited," "inspired," or "connected" reflect how TikTok gratifies hedonic and affective needs (Moon & An, 2022; Wang et al., 2022). This study extends the traditional UGT perspective by showing that such gratification is algorithmically mediated. TikTok's For You Page tailors what users see based on their previous interactions, which then creates emotional experiences that match their personal interests. This finding aligns with the prior tourism studies that emphasize visual enjoyment as an intrinsic driver of digital media use (Gaetaniello, 2024).

The second theme, Social Gratification, explains how TikTok turns searching for travel information into a shared social experience through comments and users' exchanged opinions, which confirm the reliability of travel information. This interactive dimension resonates with UGT's social integrative needs, connection, belonging, and participation (Hoang et al., 2024). Unlike earlier media environments, TikTok combines information seeking with social interaction. Users don't just look for facts; they also find satisfaction in seeing others agree, comment, and share their views in

real time. For Indonesian Gen Z users, this social interaction fits with a culture that values group harmony and peer approval. Trust and decisions often come from what others say or support online (Yuan et al., 2021).

Third, the Cognitive-Credibility Gratification theme reveals that TikTok is built through authenticity, consistent information, and feedback from other users. This supports earlier studies suggesting that on user-generated platforms, credibility often depends on sincerity instead of institutional expertise (Lien & Cao, 2014). This study adds to that understanding by showing that trust on TikTok is also shaped by the platform's algorithm. Interviewees judged credibility based on cues such as the creator's tone, style, and engagement with followers, as well as the consistency of the information across different videos. These factors are influenced by how TikTok's system ranks and recommends content. As a result, credibility becomes dynamic. It grows through both algorithmic visibility and community interactions inside the platform.

Fourth, the Cognitive-Efficiency Gratification theme demonstrates that TikTok meets users' cognitive needs by providing quick and effortless understanding through short, visually engaging content. This aligns with previous studies showing that Gen Z values speed, clarity, and visual formats in their digital media use (Li et al., 2023; Yang & Zilberg, 2020). Therefore, TikTok's algorithm helps users find information faster by showing content that matches their interests. At the same time, it limits what they see to topics they already like, a pattern known as selective exposure.

Theoretically, this finding refines UGT's cognitive dimension by showing that information-seeking gratification works alongside processing-efficiency gratification. Users find satisfaction in quick, effortless content. TikTok's algorithm helps by filtering content to match users' preferences, allowing them to find relevant information faster. This efficiency is particularly important in Indonesia, where most users rely on mobile devices and prefer visual, easy-to-digest content.

Taken together, the four themes reveal that gratifications on TikTok are interconnected rather than separate. Emotional engagement (affective gratification) leads to social interaction, which builds trust (cognitive-credibility gratification) and encourages ongoing engagement through easy-to-access content (cognitive-efficiency gratification). These processes show that user satisfaction depends on the interaction between personal intention and the platform's algorithmic design. To describe this interaction, the study introduces Algorithmically Mediated Gratification (AMG). AMG suggests that user satisfaction on digital platforms is shaped by continuous feedback between user behavior and algorithmic recommendations. In other words, both users and the algorithm influence

each other; the users train the algorithm through their actions, while the algorithm, in turn, shapes what users see and enjoy. This concept connects UGT with newer theories of algorithmic media use (Hu & Ou, 2025; Qiao et al., 2024). In TikTok, emotional engagement, community validation, and trust are all reinforced through algorithmic visibility. This shows that users are not completely independent in their choices but act as co-creators of gratification, where their decisions are partly guided by platform design and recommendation systems.

From a practical standpoint, the findings provide several insights for digital tourism marketing strategy. First, business owners and marketers in the tourism industry should work with trusted micro-influencers and use storytelling to build emotional connections and encourage social engagement among audiences. Second, maintaining transparency in content creation is essential to strengthening trust and sustaining audience credibility. Third, marketers should optimize content visibility by posting consistently and engaging actively with communities to show credibility.

This study acknowledges several methodological limitations. The use of a small, purposive sample of five female respondents provides depth but limits generalizability. Future research should incorporate a larger and more diverse population, including male users, varying age ranges, and regional differences, to achieve broader representation. Additionally, while qualitative inquiry captures rich experiential insights, it cannot establish causal relationships. Future studies may adopt quantitative or mixed-method approaches to measure the strength and interrelation of gratification factors. Finally, this research focused solely on TikTok; comparative analyses across multiple digital platforms (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, and Google Search) would illuminate how Gen Z integrates algorithmically mediated discovery across ecosystems.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that TikTok has changed how Indonesian female Gen Z users search for travel information. Their search process is now shaped by emotions, social interaction, and visual experiences. TikTok is not just an entertainment platform; it has become an algorithmically mediated space where emotional connection, social validation, and quick access to information come together to meet user needs.

From a theoretical perspective, this research expands the Uses and Gratifications Theory by introducing the concept of Algorithmically Mediated Gratification (AMG). This concept explains that user satisfaction on digital platforms comes not only from personal motivation but also from ongoing interaction between users and the algorithm. From

a practical perspective, the findings highlight that authenticity, trust, and simplicity are essential for attracting Gen Z users.

This study also has some limitations. The small number of participants limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized. Future research should include a more diverse set of respondents and use quantitative or mixed-methods to test and refine the AMG framework. Comparing TikTok with other platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, or Google Search would also help explain how algorithmic systems shape Gen Z's way of finding and evaluating travel information.

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