

A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON TRAVEL BEHAVIOR OF GENERATION Z TOURISTS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This study synthesizes research on Generation Z (Gen Z) travel behavior in Malaysia. The findings show that social media, particularly TikTok and Instagram, plays a major role in travel information, destination awareness, motivation, trust, and travel intentions, with authentic and credible influencers strengthening these effects. However, Gen Z travel behavior is multidimensional and also influenced by psychological, social, cultural, religious, financial, and experiential factors. Malaysian Gen Z increasingly values authenticity, sustainability, meaningful experiences, and cultural and educational learning. For Muslim Gen Z travelers, Muslim-friendly facilities such as halal food and prayer facilities are also important. The review further indicates that awareness of overtourism may encourage sustainable travel and interest in lesser-known destinations. Most existing studies use quantitative methods, highlighting the need for more qualitative and integrated research. Overall, understanding Gen Z travel behavior requires consideration of digital media alongside trust, social influence, cultural and religious values, sustainability, and tourism experiences. These findings can support tourism stakeholders in developing authentic, inclusive, sustainable, and digitally relevant tourism strategies for Gen Z.

Keywords: Generation Z; Tourism Behavior; social media; TikTok; Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

Global tourism has recovered to near pre-COVID-19 levels, with approximately 1.1 billion international tourists in the first nine months of 2024, representing 98% of pre-pandemic levels (UN Tourism, 2024). Going forward, tourism trends are moving towards greener and more responsible travel. This article examines factors related to the travel behavior of Gen Z, a group poised to play a significant role in the future direction of the industry.

Gen Z (approximately 14-29 years old) (Francis & Hoefel, 2018) differs from previous generations in several aspects, including global values, an emphasis on human rights, and environmental awareness. They prefer diverse travel experiences, conduct thorough research before making decisions, and prioritize experiences and sustainability (Corbisiero et al., 2022). Furthermore, their decisions are often influenced by friends and social networks, making them a key driving force behind the shift towards more sustainable tourism (Halibas et al., 2025).

In terms of decision-making behavior, Gen Z prioritizes convenience and access to real-time information. And engagement through social media, especially TikTok, has the greatest influence on travel aspirations (20% compared to Instagram at 14%) (ThaiPR, 2025). For this group, travel is not just about going to places, but about creating positive experiences and feelings through fun activities, learning, and hands-on activities (Samornsri Kamtrong, 2023). TikTok's algorithm, which presents personalized content based on viewing behavior further enhances the role of influencers on the platform in shaping Gen Z's perceptions, motivations, and travel decisions more than traditional social media that relies on static images or long pieces of content. In Malaysia, Gen Z is a rapidly growing travel demographic and relies on social media as its primary source of information for finding travel destinations (Asri et al., 2024).

Content on TikTok often blends factual information with emotional communication to attract viewers, and engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares are frequently used to select highly influential content (Campbell et al., 2020). However, despite various specific research studies on motivations and social media use, While research on Gen Z behavior in Malaysia has been conducted, it lacks a systematic synthesis of knowledge. Therefore, this article is valuable both academically, by linking Gen Z's tourism behavior, social and digital factors, and decision-making processes, and practically, by providing supporting information for tourism businesses and policymakers in designing sustainable strategies that align with the behavior and needs of this tourist group.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Concepts Regarding Tourist Behavior

Generation Z (Gen Z) is a digitally oriented generation whose tourist behavior is strongly influenced by digital technology, social media, personal values, and the desire for meaningful and authentic experiences. As digital natives, Gen Z commonly uses online platforms to search for destinations, compare alternatives, obtain recommendations, and share travel experiences (Kapusy & Lógó, 2017). Social media influencers and peer networks also play an important role in shaping their attitudes and travel decisions. Authentic influencer-generated content can strengthen positive attitudes and intentions toward sustainable travel (Rajput & Gandhi, 2025). Sustainability is another important characteristic of Gen Z tourist behavior. Social relationships, environmental knowledge, and psychological factors can encourage sustainable travel practices (Nguyen et al., 2025). However, sustainable travel engagement remains inconsistent due to affordability, inconvenience, authenticity concerns, and skepticism toward greenwashing (Lim et al., 2021). In Thailand, environmental literacy, green mindfulness, and social factors have also been found to contribute to sustainable tourism behavior among Gen Z students.

Overall, Gen Z tourist behavior involves digital information searching, online travel planning, destination evaluation, travel decision-making, experience consumption, and post-travel sharing. Key characteristics include (1) digital and social media dependence, (2) experience and

authenticity seeking, (3) peer and influencer influence, (4) sustainability awareness, and (5) value and price considerations. Gen Z is also motivated by cultural experiences, new cuisines, meeting people, exploration, and participation in activities or events (Dimitriou & AbouElgheit, 2019; Gray et al., 2019).

Concepts Regarding Gen Z Travel Behavior

Generation Z, defined as individuals born from 1995 onward, is characterized by individuality, openness to diverse perspectives, and a desire for authentic experiences (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). As digital natives, Gen Z relies heavily on digital media and user-generated content for travel information and decision-making. TikTok has become an important source of travel inspiration, particularly through short-form videos, personalized recommendations, and visual content that provide convenient and engaging information. Such content can influence travel perceptions and encourage spontaneous travel decisions (Liu et al., 2024). Therefore, TikTok plays a significant role in shaping Gen Z's travel motivations, perceptions, and decisions by combining entertainment with travel-related information (Campbell et al., 2020).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative research endeavor that examines trends and factors related to Generation Z's travel behavior through the collection, analysis, and synthesis of existing research. A systematic literature review methodology was employed using a structured research process.

Populations and samples

The population of this study comprises research articles and academic papers related to the travel behavior of Generation Z (Gen Z) in Malaysia. The articles were identified from Scopus and Google Scholar. The publication period was limited to studies published between 2021 and 2026 to ensure that the review reflects recent developments in Generation Z travel behavior, digital media use, and tourism. The sample consisted of 12 studies selected through purposive sampling based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

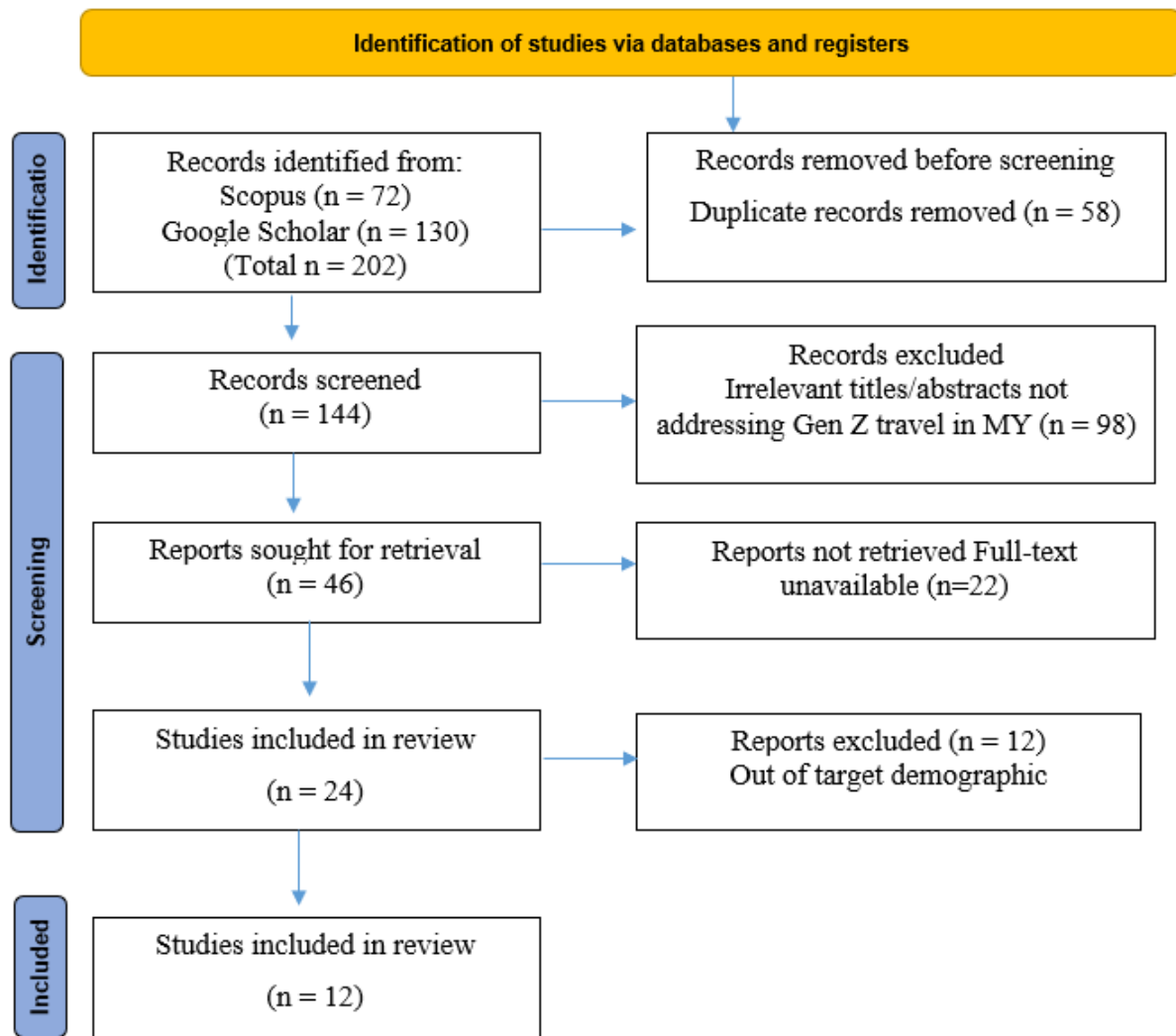
1.1 The study focuses on Generation Z individuals in Malaysia or Gen Z tourists traveling within Malaysia.

1.2 The study examines factors influencing travel decisions, travel behavior, the use of digital media in tourism, or responsible and sustainable tourism behavior among Generation Z.

1.3 The study is a full-text research article or academic paper that clearly describes the research methodology and presents research findings.

1.4 The study was published between 2021 and 2026.

1.5 The study was published in a reputable academic journal or academic database and provides sufficient information for data extraction and synthesis. Studies were excluded when they did not focus on Generation Z, were conducted outside the Malaysian context, were unrelated to travel behavior or tourism, were duplicate records, or did not provide sufficient full-text information for analysis.



PRISMA framework

Scope of data source

The scope of the data sources was limited to peer-reviewed research articles and academic papers published in reputable international and Malaysian academic journals or databases. The review included studies published between 2021 and 2026.

Non-academic sources, such as general websites, news reports, blogs, social media posts, opinion articles, and other materials that had not undergone an academic review process, were excluded. This restriction was applied to enhance the credibility, reliability, and academic rigor of the evidence synthesized in the study.

Data collection process

Data collection was conducted using a systematic literature review approach to ensure that the identification, selection, analysis, and synthesis of relevant studies were conducted systematically, transparently, and consistently. The data collection process consisted of the following steps.

2.1 Identification of Search Keywords

The researchers developed search keywords based on the research objectives and the main concepts of the study. Keywords were formulated in English and Thai where appropriate to maximize the identification of relevant studies concerning Generation Z, travel behavior, and tourism in Malaysia. Examples of the search keywords included “Gen Z Tourism Malaysia,” “Generation Z Travel Behavior Malaysia,” “Travel Behavior Malaysia,” “Malaysian Youth

Travel,” and “Generation Z Responsible Tourism Malaysia.” Boolean operators, including AND and OR, were used to combine keywords and broaden or narrow the search results. For example, combinations such as “Generation Z” AND “Travel Behavior” AND “Malaysia” and “Gen Z” AND “Tourism” AND “Malaysia” were applied.

The literature search was conducted using reputable international Scopus and Google Scholar. The search was limited to studies published between 2021 and 2026.

2.2 Screening of Titles and Abstracts

The identified records were screened based on their titles and abstracts. Duplicate records were first removed, resulting in 144 records remaining for title and abstract screening. Subsequently, studies that did not address Generation Z, travel behavior, tourism, or the Malaysian context were excluded. Following the title and abstract screening, 98 records were excluded as they were considered irrelevant to the research objectives, leaving 46 reports for full-text retrieval.

2.3 Full-Text Eligibility Assessment

The remaining studies were assessed through full-text examination. The researchers evaluated each article according to the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Particular attention was given to the target population, geographic context, research topic, research methodology, and completeness of the research findings. Studies were excluded if they did not meet the target demographic, were outside the Malaysian context, were unrelated to Generation Z travel behavior, or did not provide sufficient information for analysis.

2.4 Data Extraction and Synthesis

The studies that met all eligibility criteria were recorded and organized in an Excel spreadsheet. The extracted information included the title of the study, authors, publication year, study population or sample, research methodology, key findings, and recommendations.

The final set of 12 studies was subsequently analyzed using content analysis and thematic synthesis. The findings were compared and synthesized to identify common trends, factors, and patterns associated with the travel behavior of Generation Z in Malaysia.

3. Data Analysis

3.1 Content Analysis The researchers reviewed and interpreted the selected studies to extract relevant information on Generation Z's travel behavior.

3.2 Thematic Analysis The extracted data were categorized into key themes, including digital media, social and environmental factors, and tourism decision-making behavior.

3.3 Comparison and Synthesis The researchers compared similarities and differences across the selected studies to identify overall trends in Generation Z's travel behavior in Malaysia and highlight gaps for future research.

RESEARCH RESULTS

An analysis of research on Generation Z travel behavior in Malaysia shows that most studies focus on the role of social media, particularly visually oriented platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, in shaping travel perceptions, motivations, and decisions. Recent research further indicates that digital media influences not only destination choice and travel intention but also perceptions of authenticity, trust, sustainability, and tourism experience quality. Methodologically, most studies employed quantitative approaches, with six studies using descriptive and inferential statistics, correlation, experimental designs, and structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine relationships among social media use, influencers, trust, and travel behavior. Two qualitative studies used semi-structured interviews and other approaches to explore young tourists' deeper motivations and experiences. Sample sizes varied considerably, ranging from 5 participants in qualitative research to 267–531 participants in quantitative studies. Some studies focused specifically on TikTok or Instagram users, which may limit the findings to platform-specific perspectives. Overall, the findings consistently demonstrate that social

media is a major factor influencing Gen Z's information seeking, travel motivation, destination evaluation, and decision-making. High levels of social media engagement are significantly associated with travel intentions and behaviors among Malaysian youth.

TikTok and Instagram are among the platforms with the greatest influence on younger tourists. Their emphasis on visual content, short-form videos, interactive functions, and user-generated content aligns closely with the media consumption characteristics of Gen Z. Such content can increase destination awareness, generate interest, enhance travel motivation, and stimulate travel intention. In particular, Instagram has been found to influence destination choice through habit, hedonic motivation, social influence, perceived trust, and behavioral intention. The influence of facilitating conditions on actual behavior was also found to be stronger among Generation Z than Generation Y, suggesting that younger users may respond more strongly to digital convenience and platform functionality. Furthermore, social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as important actors in shaping the travel motivations and destination choices of Gen Z. Influencer-generated content is perceived as credible and relatable when it communicates authentic experiences and reflects the lifestyle of younger audiences. Recent evidence also indicates that the authenticity and transparency of influencer communication are important factors. Non-sponsored influencer messages can enhance perceptions of sincerity, which subsequently influence mimicry, campaign attitudes, and travel intention. In addition, loss-framed messages may generate more favorable responses when promoting lesser-known destinations as an approach to mitigating overtourism. Gen Z travelers who have greater awareness of overtourism are particularly responsive to influencer campaigns that promote sustainable travel redirection.

TikTok and Instagram are among the most influential platforms for younger tourists. Their visual content, short-form videos, interactive features, and user-generated content align closely with Gen Z's media habits, increasing destination awareness, travel motivation, and travel intention. Instagram, in particular, influences destination choice through habit, hedonic motivation, social influence, perceived trust, and behavioral intention. Facilitating conditions also appear to have a stronger influence on Gen Z than Gen Y, indicating their greater responsiveness to digital convenience and platform functionality. Gen Z travel behavior also reflects specific needs and values related to inclusive and meaningful tourism. In Muslim-friendly adventure tourism, Gen Z values halal food, hygienic prayer facilities, gender-segregated amenities, flexibility in religious practices, and same-gender guides. They also prefer tourism providers that clearly communicate Muslim-friendly services through digital platforms. Similarly, mosque tourism research shows that Gen Z is attracted not only by architectural aesthetics but also by educational, cultural, immersive, and reflective experiences. This suggests a preference for tourism that offers meaning, learning, authenticity, and personal engagement. However, Gen Z travel behavior is not shaped by social media alone. Financial knowledge, personal attitudes, previous travel experiences, trust, social influence, religious requirements, tourism experiences, and situational factors such as COVID-19 also influence travel decisions. The integration of perceived trust into UTAUT2 further highlights trust as an important predictor of behavioral intention and actual behavior, particularly among digitally literate Gen Z users, for whom trust, social influence, enjoyment, and habitual platform use may be more influential than technical factors alone.

Gen Z travel behavior extends beyond destination selection to include needs and values related to inclusive and meaningful tourism experiences. In Muslim-friendly adventure tourism, Gen Z values halal food, hygienic prayer facilities, gender-segregated amenities, flexibility in religious practices, and same-gender guides. They also prefer tourism providers that clearly communicate Muslim-friendly facilities through digital platforms. Similarly, mosque tourism research shows that Gen Z is influenced by educational and cultural learning, immersive experiences, reflection, and digital relevance. Although architectural aesthetics may initially attract visitors, continued engagement depends more on meaningful interpretation and experiential design. Overall, Gen Z seeks tourism experiences that offer meaning, learning, authenticity, and personal engagement

rather than sightseeing alone. However, social media is not the only factor influencing their travel behavior. Financial knowledge, personal attitudes, previous travel experiences, trust, social influence, religious requirements, tourism experiences, and situational factors such as COVID-19 also play important roles. The integration of trust into the UTAUT2 model further highlights its importance in predicting behavioral intention and actual travel behavior, particularly among digitally literate Gen Z users, for whom trust, social influence, enjoyment, and habitual platform use may be more influential than technical factors.

The findings also demonstrate that Gen Z travel behavior extends beyond conventional destination selection to include specific needs and values associated with inclusive and meaningful tourism experiences. For example, research on Muslim friendly adventure tourism in Malaysia found that Gen Z values the availability of halal food, accessible and hygienic prayer facilities, gender-segregated amenities, flexibility in religious practices, and same-gender guides during adventure activities. These findings indicate that tourism providers need to consider religious and cultural requirements when designing tourism services for younger Muslim travellers. Moreover, Gen Z prefers tourism operators that clearly communicate Muslim friendly facilities and services through digital platforms. Similarly, research on mosque tourism indicates that Gen Z participation is influenced by educational and cultural learning, immersive and reflective experiences, and digital relevance. Although architectural aesthetics can initially attract younger visitors, continued engagement depends more strongly on meaningful interpretation and experiential design. This suggests that Gen Z is increasingly seeking tourism experiences that provide meaning, learning, authenticity, and personal engagement, rather than simply visiting destinations for sightseeing purposes. Overall, the findings demonstrate that Generation Z travel behavior is multidimensional and increasingly shaped by the interaction between digital media, psychological factors, social influence, personal values, and the quality of tourism experiences. Social media platforms and influencers remain important sources of travel information and motivation; however, Gen Z also places increasing importance on authenticity, trust, sustainability, inclusivity, religious considerations, experiential learning, and meaningful engagement. Therefore, future research on Gen Z travel behavior in Malaysia should move beyond examining social media usage alone and consider the integration of digital behavior with cultural, religious, psychological, and experiential dimensions. This broader perspective would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the changing travel behavior and preferences of Malaysia's Generation Z.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings also demonstrate that Gen Z travel behavior extends beyond conventional destination selection to include specific needs and values associated with inclusive and meaningful tourism experiences. For example, research on Muslim friendly adventure tourism in Malaysia found that Gen Z values the availability of halal food, accessible and hygienic prayer facilities, gender-segregated amenities, flexibility in religious practices, and same-gender guides during adventure activities. These findings indicate that tourism providers need to consider religious and cultural requirements when designing tourism services for younger Muslim travellers. Moreover, Gen Z prefers tourism operators that clearly communicate Muslim friendly facilities and services through digital platforms. Similarly, research on mosque tourism indicates that Gen Z participation is influenced by educational and cultural learning, immersive and reflective experiences, and digital relevance. Although architectural aesthetics can initially attract younger visitors, continued engagement depends more strongly on meaningful interpretation and experiential design. This suggests that Gen Z is increasingly seeking tourism experiences that provide meaning, learning, authenticity, and personal engagement, rather than simply visiting destinations for sightseeing purposes. The findings indicate that Generation Z's travel behavior is strongly influenced by digital media, particularly TikTok and Instagram, which

play important roles in information seeking, travel motivation, destination selection, and travel intention. Social media influencers also have a significant influence, especially when their content is authentic, transparent, trustworthy, and based on real experiences. However, Gen Z's travel behavior is not determined by social media alone. They increasingly value meaningful tourism experiences, cultural and educational learning, sustainability, inclusivity, and personal values. For Muslim Gen Z travelers, Muslim-friendly facilities such as halal food, accessible prayer facilities, gender-segregated amenities, and respect for religious practices are particularly important. In addition, Gen Z travelers who are aware of overtourism tend to respond positively to sustainable travel campaigns that promote lesser-known destinations. Overall, the findings suggest that Gen Z travel behavior is multidimensional and shaped by the interaction of digital media, psychological factors, social influence, trust, cultural and religious values, and tourism experiences. Therefore, future research should adopt a broader and more integrated perspective rather than focusing solely on social media use.

Research on the travel behavior of Generation Z tourists in Malaysia clearly indicates that social media has become a primary factor in information perception, motivation generation, and travel decision-making among this younger cohort. Notably, platforms such as TikTok and Instagram facilitate communication through visual and video content that create immersive experiences and effectively stimulate audience emotions.

The research findings also show that influential figures on social media platforms play a crucial role in persuading and motivating travel. They serve as social intermediaries who share authentic experiences in ways that resonate with and are trusted by Gen Z. Furthermore, although Malaysian Gen Z possesses a high level of financial literacy and is aware of budgetary constraints, communication through social media continues to stimulate emotional decision-making. This highlights the complexity of travel behavior among the younger generation.

In summary, the travel behavior of Generation Z in Malaysia is shaped by a combination of factors, including social media, influential figures, personal knowledge and attitudes, social context, and tourist experiences. This synthesis indicates that the tourism sector should shift its focus from merely presenting tourist attractions to designing and communicating travel experiences that cater to the emotional needs, identity, and lifestyle of the younger generation. This approach will enhance the effectiveness and alignment of tourism development and marketing with the behaviors of Generation Z travelers.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The sample group should be expanded to include greater diversity in terms of age range, region, and social context, in order to enhance the comprehensiveness and reliability of the research findings. It is essential to study the behavior of Generation Z tourists in Malaysia by employing a mixed-methods research approach. This should involve integrating quantitative and qualitative data to provide a more comprehensive explanation of Generation Z tourists' travel behavior.

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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