

UNDERSTANDING ESCAPISM AS A KEY MOTIVATION BEHIND GENERATION Z'S ENGAGEMENT IN TIKTOK HASHTAG TRENDS

RAZEMI, M. S.^{1*} – MAHAMAD, T. E. T.¹ – YASSIN, Y. M.¹

¹ *Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Selangor, Malaysia.*

**Corresponding author
e-mail: mierasr11[at]yahoo.com*

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Abstract. This study explores the motivations driving Generation Z's engagement with TikTok hashtag trends in Malaysia, with a particular focus on escapism as a key psychological and social factor. Rather than analyzing specific hashtags, the study examines content appearing on the platform's "For You Page" (FYP), where algorithmic exposure encourages spontaneous engagement and interaction. It investigates how TikTok functions as a digital escape from societal, academic, and personal pressures, while simultaneously enabling self-expression and identity construction within online communities. A qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted, combining semi-structured interviews with digital ethnographic observations of Malaysian Gen Z users actively participating in TikTok hashtag trends. Purposive sampling guided informant selection, and data were thematically analyzed and saturated using NVivo 14 software. Grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT), the findings revealed four key themes: Theme 1: Trends Virality; Theme 2: Fear of Missing Out; Theme 3: Self-Representation and Alternate Identity and Theme 4: Algorithm Exposure and Digital Immersion. The analysis indicates that while TikTok provides avenues for creativity, self-expression, and emotional regulation, it simultaneously fosters social pressure to remain visible and relevant within fast-moving trends. Overall, the study concludes that TikTok operates as a dual-purpose platform that serves as both a coping mechanism for emotional relief and a space for online identity negotiation. These insights hold implications for educators, mental health professionals, and digital policymakers, helping them understand and support healthier digital engagement among young adults in Malaysia.

Keywords: *TikTok, Generation Z (Gen Z), escapism, motivation, hashtag trends*

Introduction

Over the years, social media sites like Facebook and Instagram have become the main ways that people talk to each other, share material, and build communities online. But the popularity of TikTok has changed how users interact with and watch material in big ways. TikTok was created by ByteDance in 2016 and rebranded globally in 2018. It became very famous very quickly, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and now has over 315 million users, more than any other social media platform. Young people in Generation Z are very interested in the platform's short-form video format, song integration, and algorithm-driven "For You Page" (#FYP). This is especially true in Malaysia, where 6.41 million people belong to this group. Gen Z users are drawn to TikTok because it has creative tools, a community, and personalized suggestions that help them express themselves, follow trends, and build their identities (Purbaningrum and Andrini, 2023; Zips and Holendová, 2023). Even though TikTok is very popular and has a big impact on culture, not much study has been done on why Gen Z is so interested in hashtag trends, especially in Malaysia. Hashtags have turned simple filtering tools into places for shared interests, cultural expression, and popular

movements that make it easier for people to see and join in on TikTok. Gen Zers often feel like they join, have fun, and even escape from the stresses of real life by participating in these trends. While entertainment and social contact have been studied in the past, the psychological need for escapism, the desire to briefly avoid worry or reality that has not been studied as much. This gap is especially important because Malaysian teens and young adults spend almost ten hours a day on social media. The main goals of this study are to find out why Generation Z in Malaysia is interested in TikTok hashtag trends, with a focus on escape and identity creation. Based on the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and the Social Identity Theory (SIT), the study investigates why Gen Z users add to and follow trends, how these trends affect their online identities, and how the design of TikTok affects these drives. By finding these connections, the study adds to our knowledge of how Gen Z uses technology and gives us ideas on how to encourage healthy, more thoughtful use of social media. The results should help teachers, digital artists, and lawmakers make the internet a better place for Malaysia's young people by making it more positive and fairer.

Materials and Methods

This study utilised NVivo 14 qualitative analysis software to organise, process, and categorise data obtained from various sources. The core data were comprehensive interviews and online observations, whilst the secondary data were sourced from scholarly papers, academic journals, and conference proceedings pertinent to TikTok usage, Generation Z behaviour, and social identity theory. Participants openly acknowledged their involvement with TikTok hashtag trends during interviews and online observations. NVivo 14 enabled systematic qualitative coding, revealing themes derived from Gen Z consumers' interactions with TikTok patterns of escapism, inspiration, and social identity (Nowell et al., 2017). A total of 12 informants were randomly chosen and reached via TikTok. All participants were Malaysian Generation Z individuals aged 20 to 28 years (born 1997–2003) who actively engaged in hashtag trends on the site. The sample comprised six Malays, three Chinese, and three Indians from both urban and suburban regions, ensuring broad representation. The group consisted of an equal division of six males and six females. Of the individuals, seven were early-career professionals in marketing, logistics, and digital creative sectors, while five were students enrolled in diploma, bachelor's, or master's programs. This variation guaranteed a diverse array of viewpoints and experiences consistent with the research aims.

Data were gathered via semi-structured, comprehensive interviews and internet observations. In accordance with Guest et al. (2006), twelve interviews were performed to provide enough data saturation for a homogeneous sample. Two further validation interviews were conducted as recommended. Participants were questioned using many methods based on their convenience either in person (on campus, at workplaces, or in cafés), via Google Meet video calls, asynchronous emails, or instant messaging. Each informant was permitted to talk in their own language and manner to guarantee comfort and transparency. All sessions were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, then translated into English to ensure authenticity and precision. Online observations predominantly encompassed publicly available TikTok content, adhering to the methodology. Both explicit and implicit techniques were utilised to record genuine user activity. In overt contexts, individuals consented to observation, whereas covert

observations used publicly accessible data to mitigate bias and maintain authentic online interactions. No private or personal information was gathered to maintain ethical standards and participant confidentiality. This dual methodology facilitated a comprehensive comprehension of both articulated (overt) and implicit (covert) reasons associated with escapism and social identity (Hopman, 2021). The research employed a qualitative, inductive analytical methodology. The researchers employed NVivo 14 to methodically code data in order to discern patterns, reoccurring motives, and interaction styles. Codes were categorised into wider classifications, leading to the identification of three principal themes and eight sub-themes. Data saturation was attained by the sixth interview, since no more insights were revealed. Four further interviews were performed to validate the reliability and consistency of the findings (Guest et al., 2006). The supplementary data did not introduce new information but rather strengthened existing themes, hence validating the analysis's robustness. The qualitative methodology facilitated a meaningful interpretation of informants narratives, elucidating how escapism and social identity influenced Generation Z's interaction with TikTok hashtag trends (*Figure 1*).

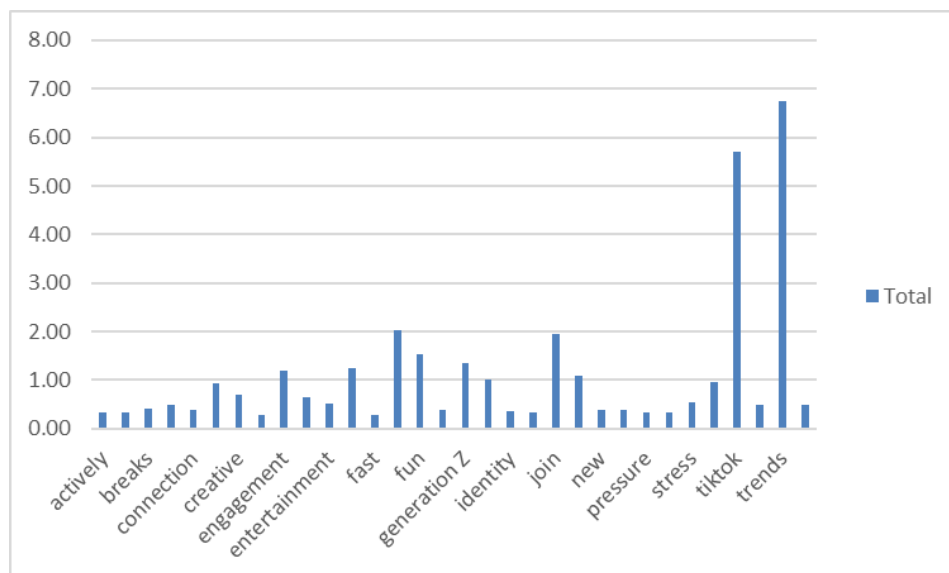


Figure 1. Words used coded into Nvivo14.

Results and Discussion

TikTok hashtag trends indicate that users engage with and follow hashtag trends not merely for entertainment and diversion, but also for validation and social connection. Users choose on their own to actively engage with and participate in TikTok hashtag trends. Also, online observations and interviews reveal that TikTok hashtags function as personal and social identity markers, allowing users to identify with different cultural or lifestyle communities. Users joining a hashtag group, such as #BookTok, indicates an interest in literature, while #GlowUp represents personal development or advancement. This participatory activity reflects users' desire to create an online identity that combines relatability through casual real life footage with ambitious self-presentation through polished transitions and AR effects based on viral sounds and memes. The ability to switch between funny, light-hearted, and ambitious content demonstrates how hashtag trends function as instruments for identity expression and performance.

TikTok's technology and platform design play a major role in driving the engagement trend (Marzuki and Mustapha, 2023). The personalised For You Page (FYP) exposes users to recurring sounds, hashtags, and formats, creating a feedback loop that encourages repeated participation. Furthermore, features such as easy editing tools, augmented reality effects, and audio integration remove technological barriers, making trend engagement more engaging and accessible (Zips and Holendová, 2023). The continued algorithmic reinforcement of streaming content, as well as the possibility of recognition through likes and shares, shows how TikTok serves as a motivational engine to keep Gen Z engaged in TikTok trends.

Table 1. TikTok hashtag trends in 2024 and 2025.

Trend Type	Hashtag Trends	Why It's Popular	Key Points
Viral Sound and Meme	#nothingbeatsajet2holidays #tungtungsahur #trallallerotralla #ASMR	Catchy and rhythmic	Trends built primarily around a specific audio clip, song, or meme format. The sound is the essential ingredient.
Fun and Humour	#smileifyou	Comfort, community, and cultural bonding	Lighthearted content trends focused on comedy, joy, and shared laughter.
Dance	#velocity #jedagjedug #jj	Express emotions and dance style	Content of trends and challenges choreography or dance style of new music
Transformation	#makeachange #workout #bodypositive	Relatable narratives of change and growth	Content showcasing before and after journeys, focusing on personal change.
Lifestyle	#booktok, #malaysianfood #GRWM #OOTD #gymoutfit #womenfashion	Comfort, community, and cultural bonding	Trends that organise and display aspects of daily life, personal style and consumption habits.
Interests	#smallbusiness, #LearnOnTikTok, #FitnessJourney, #DIYCrafts #MomsofTikTok business tips	Creative and self-expression	Niche communities are built around specific hobbies, passions, or stages of life.
Nostalgia	#iforgotthatyouexisted #nostalgia #realatable	Blends visual artistry with nostalgia	Trends that evoke feelings of nostalgia, often using music, filters or themes from the past.

Theme 1: Trends virality

Participation motivation is the desire to express oneself creatively and uniquely, even when following popular trends. Gen Z users often personalise trends to stand out and showcase their identity. For example, informants try to balance conformity with self-expression, shaping a unique online identity to reflect their personality (Purbaningrum and Andrini, 2023). A TikTok trend involves content that aims to understand the broader context. TikTok trends consist of a series of short, viral videos that incorporate trending features, music, sound effects, and/or hashtags. New trends emerge daily, significantly contributing to TikTok's status as one of the most exciting social media platforms. The term viral refers to a new video that has received thousands or millions of views. The name comes from the similarity to a virus, which refers to the rapid spread of an idea or material. In fact, the algorithm for calculating virality is the same as the algorithm for calculating virality online. Informants were highly motivated by the viral potential of hashtag trends. Also, informants realised that participating in current or rapidly growing trends increased their chances of being featured on the For You Page and gaining visibility. This finding claims that TikTok thrives on trends, with a "For You Page" featuring a collection of currently popular videos. The vast majority of these topics are drawn from trending or important issues, which helps explain why 32% of

TikTok users rely on the platform for news and current events updates. The excitement of TikTok hashtag trends made informants aware of the algorithm and how it promotes trending content, influencing them to act quickly and strategically in following these trends. These TikTok hashtag trends provide a coping mechanism and social network for Gen Z, allowing users to temporarily escape the demands of reality. Several informants have indicated that participating in TikTok hashtag trends reduces stress, alleviates boredom, and helps with emotional issues associated with using TikTok content for relaxation (Şot, 2023).

For instance, Informant #5 described the platform as “*a great escape,*” capturing its role in providing psychological relief. Other informants agreed with this sentiment, explaining that they turn to TikTok to escape academic pressures, work-related stress, personal struggles, and emotional burdens whether through actively participating in trends or passively consuming content. TikTok offered these escapism to users as a sense of release, comfort, and distraction, highlighting its importance as a digital sanctuary for emotional and mental well being (Ngadiron and Zanudin, 2025). For example, one informant explained:

“I join trends mostly for the fun of it, that’s what drives me. Sometimes it helps me escape the pressures of real life. It’s entertaining to see what other people are doing, and I like to create my own version of the trend. I love watching or participating in a trend that takes my mind off my work and personal problems. TikTok trends are also satisfying to get reactions from friends or followers, that it makes my life experience more fun and less isolating. TikTok trends give me a chance to be creative without the pressure. I can just follow along, have fun, and feel part of a community.” (Informant #9)

Another informant added:

“I join trends because TikTok trends are fun and entertaining. When I see everyone participating makes me want to try it too. It helps me forget about my problems for a while and helps me escape my stress. Sometimes I just want to be creative. Trends give me a chance to make something funny or interesting without the pressure. Also, it’s interesting to see if my video gets likes or comments where there will add a little motivation and recognition to myself.” (Informant #10)

The interviews show that virality trends are related to the rapid spread and widespread use of certain content on social media platforms. On TikTok, trends grow rapidly through algorithmic promotion, user engagement, and peer-to-peer sharing, making popular videos prominently accessible on the For You Page. Informants indicated that they participated in these viral trends mostly for entertainment or as a form of emotional escape. Also, informants mostly cited similar motivations for engaging in viral trends, namely for fun, stress relief, or a temporary reprieve from daily demands. These findings highlight that trend virality not only encourages engagement through entertainment but also serves as a coping strategy to reduce real-life stress (Madeson, 2024). These findings align with the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which emphasises how audiences actively engage with media to fulfill specific needs. Informants reported joining TikTok trends for entertainment, social interaction, creativity, and recognition. Also, they described how the viral potential of the TikTok

hashtag trends drives their participation, as being featured on the For You Page increases visibility and engagement. This reflects the UGT gratification category, where TikTok trends provide enjoyment, opportunities for self-expression, and a sense of belonging through shared participation in popular content. Informants repeatedly explained that TikTok trends help them de-stress, overcome boredom and temporarily distance themselves from academic pressures, work obligations or personal struggles. For many, engaging with trends that offer not only fun and creativity but also psychological relief, transforms TikTok into a digital sanctuary for emotional well-being (Zips and Holendová, 2023). This suggests that while UGT captures the motivations behind trend engagement as stated in Zips and Holendová (2023) study on trend following and social proof, that escapism plays a very important role in shaping how Gen Z Malaysians experience and appreciate TikTok trends. To relate this with UGT, one informant highlighted how trends vitality creates the motivation to join:

“I'm driven by the power of trends virality. I like to join TikTok trends because when it goes viral, the chances of my video being featured on the For You Page are higher, and more people will engage with it.” (Informant #2)

Another one, informant explained:

“TikTok makes trending feel easy and exciting. When a trend is everywhere on TikTok, I feel more excited to join it because I know more people will see it. You don't have to be super famous to go viral.” (Informant #8)

Informants revealed that the viral nature of TikTok hashtag trends played a significant role in motivating their participation. TikTok trends' viral potential provides both visibility and a sense of inclusion, while also serving as a way for Gen Z users to escape stress and boredom. This suggests that virality itself is not only a feature of the platform but also a motivating force that shapes how users engage with TikTok trends.

Theme 2: Fear of missing out

A sense of community includes feelings of belonging, perceptions of importance to the group, confidence that one's needs will be supported through shared resources, and the presence of shared emotional connections (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Accordingly, community is people living in a particular area or people considered as a unit because of their common interests, background, religion, social group, or nationality. Belonging, or a sense of belonging, has a rich history in the psychological and educational literature, dating back to Maslow's hierarchy of needs model. The belonging is a basic emotional need, reflecting the desire to feel accepted by others and to be part of a group (McLeod, 2025). Furthermore, social influence also plays a strong role. One of the most significant advantages of social media is its ability to connect people who may never have met before. Online platforms allow individuals to share experiences, connect over common interests, and form inclusive communities that celebrate identity and provide social support. Social media platforms can fulfill basic psychological needs for belonging and social support, creating meaningful communities that transcend physical boundaries by fostering these forms of connection. Several informants mentioned that they often join trends out of curiosity or a desire not to be left out, highlighting the role of FOMO and the need for social inclusion. This sense of

connectedness was echoed by other informants who stated that participating in a stream made them feel part of the larger TikTok community. This response illustrates that TikTok trends do more than just entertaining and they foster a sense of belonging and community among TikTok users, even for those who engage passively by watching or liking content without actively creating their own videos. For example, one informant explained:

"I think participating in TikTok trends influences how I present myself online and offline. It shows that I'm up to date, so people won't think I'm out of date by engaging in trends. I participate in trends so I can be part of the conversation with my friends. I don't like missing out on what's popular. Also, joining a trend gives me a sense of belonging, like I'm part of something bigger, and it reassures me that I'm included in the social conversation happening on the platform." (Informant #1)

One informant further explained:

"TikTok trends are a fun way to express myself and escape my boring routine. Even if I don't join them all, just watching and enjoying them feels like I'm a part of something. Sometimes, it's because I don't want to feel left out or left behind by others. So, I join trends to keep up with what others are doing. It also makes me feel connected to the wider TikTok community because everyone is experiencing the hashtag trend together." (Informant #2)

A different informants shared also that:

"I join trends mostly to fit in and connect with other people. If I ignore them, I feel like I'm left behind. It's fun to follow trends, but I also join because I don't want to stand out from my peers." (Informant #7)

These responses discovered that FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) is a key driver of informants' active engagement, prompting informants to join trends to remain relevant and socially included for this community belonging theme. FOMO, or Fear of Missing Out, is a psychological phenomenon in which individuals feel anxious or worried that others are having a rewarding experience in which they are not present. This desire to compete with peers contributes to a sense of connectedness and belonging, allowing users to feel part of a larger TikTok community even when engaging passively through watching or liking content. On TikTok, FOMO drives participation not only for fun but also to stay *"in the loop,"* reflecting the need for social inclusion and reassurance in a collective experience. As such, FOMO can serve as a powerful driver of engagement, influencing both active content creation and passive interactions, such as liking, commenting, or sharing. This theme is closely related to Social Identity Theory (SIT). The reason is that FOMO emphasises the need for social inclusion, belonging, and relatedness within a group, which is a central idea in SIT. SIT explains that individuals gain a sense of identity, self-esteem, and belonging through group membership. Informants' fear of being left out motivated them to participate in TikTok trends so that they could remain connected to the collective community. SIT better explains the social comparison and peer-driven behaviors that emerge from FOMO from the online communities. Informants agree that by participating in TikTok trends, not only fulfill

individual needs but also reinforce their membership and status in the TikTok community, aligning their actions with group norms and expectations such as their shared interests and identity. To relate this with SIT, one informant stated that:

“If I don't follow the trends, I won't be able to join the conversation later, and I joined because I wanted to feel a part of what everyone was doing. It gave me a sense of connection.” (Informant #2)

Another one informant also expressed a similar sentiment:

“Yes, I usually reference TikTok when I talk to my friends to make the convo funnier and more relatable, it becomes a shared language with those who keep up to date with current trends” (Informant #1)

This reflection demonstrates how FOMO and participation in TikTok trends foster a sense of shared identity, reinforcing SIT's view that individuals align with group practices to maintain belonging and strengthen social bonds.

Theme 3: Self-representation and alternate identity

Self-presentation refers to the way individuals control and manage how an individual is perceived by others. The online environment allows users to experiment with different self-presentations. On TikTok, self-presentation has become particularly prominent among youth, as users curate videos, participate in trends, and share creative content to convey aspects of their personality, interests, and social identity. TikTok users shape how they are perceived by their peers, followers, and the broader community by selectively posting and engaging with content. This process of online self-presentation has important implications for identity development, allowing young people to explore, express, and refine their sense of self in a dynamic digital space. Informants mentioned that TikTok hashtag trends serve as a medium for identity expression, allowing to showcase their personality, creativity, and personal style. Also, informants as Gen Z users, report that participating in these trends also fosters a sense of community and belonging, as following and engaging with trends helps them feel connected to others. TikTok hashtag trends serve as digital social spaces where users can bond through shared activities and experiences. The collective nature of these trends enhances informants' sense of social identity and group affiliation, providing both an outlet for self-expression and a platform for meaningful social interaction (Stahl and Literat, 2023). For example, one informant pointed out about personality and community:

“I feel like TikTok understands my personality and the community I want to be part of. When I join a trend, especially dance or creative editing, it helps me express my personality and style in a way that people can relate to. Also, when I join a trend, especially in K-pop or editing, I connect with other people who like the same things.” (Informant #3)

Three informants also emphasised about online identity:

“Joining the TikTok trend gives me the opportunity to show off my fun and creative side. I try to choose trends that align with who I am or what I want to portray.” (Informant #5)

“If I think the trend is fun or suits my personality, I'll do it. If it feels too forced or stuffy, I skip it.” (Informant #8)

“I join trends that match my interests or personality. I skip the ones I don't relate to or that feel too fake.” (Informant #9)

Another two informants highlighted about trends affect how one present themselves online:

“I really think that participating in a trend affects how you present yourself online. I think what I participate in or post reflects my personality. It's part of how I show who I am.” (Informant #11)

“I agree when people say trends definitely influence how I present myself. because yes we are different when online and offline. I tend to go with trends that match my personality, style or sense of humor. I avoid those that feel forced or don't feel authentic to me, because I care about how my content reflects who I am.” (Informant #12)

Other informants admitted to adapting their behavior to fit the norms of popular content, even if it did not fully reflect their true selves. Many reported feeling more attracted to trends that resonated with their cultural or community background. This response suggests that TikTok trends not only provide a way to release stress and find entertainment but also play a significant role in shaping users' digital identities (Ivana, 2024). Trends offer opportunities for self-expression and identity construction, with the performative aspect allowing users to try out different versions of themselves in a low-risk, highly visible and comfortable environment, revealing aspects of their personalities that they might not otherwise share online.

Theme 4: Algorithm exposure and digital immersion

Platform design and influence refers to the intentional arrangement of features, interface elements, and user interactions within a digital platform that can shape behavior, engagement, and social interactions. This includes aspects such as layout, notifications, and interactive tools, all of which can encourage certain usage patterns and influence user motivation. Algorithmic exposure refers to how digital platforms use automated systems to recommend, prioritize, or display content to users based on their past behavior, preferences, and engagement patterns. TikTok represents an extreme case of an algorithm-driven ecosystem. As a short-form video-sharing platform, TikTok allows users to create, share, and engage with highly viral, user-generated content across a variety of topics, including entertainment, lifestyle, education, and politics. Unlike other digital platforms, where content discovery is often driven by user search or social connections, TikTok's content exposure is almost entirely determined by its algorithm. TikTok's design and algorithm play a key role in influencing user motivation. Informants highlighted the highly personalised and engaging nature of the

“For You” page, noting that the algorithm’s recommendations directly influenced their behavior and increased engagement with trending content. Many expressed excitement about FYP, describing it as unpredictable but highly accurate in delivering content that matches their interests and preferences. For example, two informants highlighted about TikTok algorithm:

“TikTok FYP makes it easy to discover new trends, especially if the algorithm knows what I’m interested in. It keeps showing me things I didn’t know I wanted to see, and sometimes I end up joining a trend just because it keeps popping up.” (Informant #2)

“I feel like the TikTok algorithm helps users discover trends quickly, and it feels more fun and less curated than other apps.” (Informant #3)

Another two informants pointed out the algorithm shaping their experience on the platform:

“It’s the algorithm that detects my niche. The videos that appear in my FYP that I watch are always relevant to me, so I feel compelled to try out the trends and engage with the content that I like.” (Informant #6)

“TikTok FYP algorithm is a bit unpredictable. One minute I’m watching local news about something happening in Malaysia, the next it’s about entertainment gossip, then it’s about someone promoting a product, then it’s the viral trends like velocity and stecu-stecu.” (Informant #1)

Informants expressed the joy of discovering new videos, noting that the algorithm “always seems to know what I want to watch next,” which keeps them scrolling and exploring trends. TikTok’s platform design not only enhances entertainment but also fosters participation in trends, encourages content creation, and supports social connections by curating videos tailored to individual preferences. The combination of personalised TikTok recommendations and algorithmic accuracy creates a highly immersive and engaging experience that encourages users to return to the platform frequently.

Conclusion

This study focused on Malaysian Gen Z users, resulting in valuable insights while limiting the cultural scope. Future research involves larger and more diverse samples that include not only Gen Z but also other generations such as Millennials and Gen Alphas. This approach revealed generational differences in how individuals approach the TikTok trends. Furthermore, expanding the study geographically beyond Malaysia strengthens the potential. For example, expanding to Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Thailand or the Philippines provides regional comparisons in similar cultural and technological contexts and including Western contexts such as the United States or European countries allows researchers to explore how different cultural norms, media systems and social pressures influence TikTok usage differently. This analysis will show whether such motivations as escaping reality are common or specific to different specific backgrounds. Also, while this study examines hashtag trends on TikTok, which

provides a variety of features that influence user engagement, including monetization tools, e.g., TikTok Shop or Creator Fund, live streaming, duet or stitching functionality, and private messaging, there are other features that have not been examined that could provide a more holistic view.

Moreover, the current study took a qualitative approach, which identified deep insights but limited the potential for generalization to larger groups. Future research could use quantitative methods, such as large-scale surveys, to assess motivation and behavior among thousands of users. A mixed-methods approach that combines surveys and follow-up interviews would allow researchers to map broad patterns with rich narratives. Furthermore, longitudinal studies can monitor changes in users' motivations and identities over time, which is important given TikTok's rapid evolution. For example, tracking a group of Gen Z users over a year or two could show how their motives change in response to new platform features, global events, or changes in personal life stages. Clearer ethical norms are also needed, especially for the covert observation of publicly available content, as internet surveillance techniques become increasingly common. While these technologies do not interfere with users' natural behavior, they raise questions about privacy and informed consent. Future research should aim to find a compromise between protecting users' rights and recording genuine internet practices. This could include developing a transparent ethical framework or using hybrid techniques that combine observation with interviews with willing informants to explain the findings while adhering to ethical standards.

Future research should investigate the implications for mental health, stress management, and identity formation, as escapism was identified as an important factor in this study. For example, does TikTok escapism serve as a constructive coping mechanism, or does it encourage procrastination and avoidance. Also, comparisons across platforms TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts will reveal whether escapism manifests differently according to content culture, algorithmic structure, or platform design. These comparisons will allow researchers to assess whether TikTok is different in encouraging its diversion or if this incentive is a component of a broader digital phenomenon.

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Conflict of interest

I hereby declare that this thesis is my original work and confirms that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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