

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

**ESCAPISM, MOTIVATION AND
IDENTITY IN MALAYSIAN
GENERATION Z'S ENGAGEMENT
WITH TIKTOK HASHTAG TRENDS**

MIERA SYAFIERA RAZEMI

MA

April 2026

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IDENTITY IN MALAYSIAN
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MIERA SYAFIERA RAZEMI

Thesis submitted in fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
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(Communication and Media Studies)

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April 2026

CONFIRMATION BY PANEL OF EXAMINERS

I certify that a Panel of Examiners has met on 12 December 2025 to conduct the final examination of Miera Syafiera Razemi on her Master of Arts thesis entitled “Escapism, Motivation and Identity in Malaysian Generation Z’s Engagement with Tiktok Hashtag Trends” in accordance with Universiti Teknologi MARA Act 1976 (Akta 173). The Panel of Examiners recommends that the student be awarded the relevant degree. The Panel of Examiners was as follows:

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how escapism motivates Generation Z's participation in TikTok hashtag trends and shapes their online identity, addressing a research gap on TikTok's role beyond entertainment as a sociocultural space for engagement and self-representation. However, this study does not focus on any specific hashtag, trend, or challenge. Instead, it examines content surfaced through TikTok's For You Page (FYP), reflects how Gen Z users typically discover, interpret, and engage with trends through algorithmic recommendation rather than intentional search. The study adopts a qualitative phenomenological design to capture users' lived experiences and meanings associated with TikTok engagement guided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 Malaysian Gen Z TikTok users selected via purposive sampling, complemented by online observation of publicly accessible trending videos. The data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to motivation, engagement, and identity expression. The findings revealed three (3) key themes are (i) escapism, (ii) fear of missing out (FOMO), and (iii) digital immersion. These themes demonstrate that TikTok functions both as a space for temporary disengagement from daily routines and as a platform for visibility, self-presentation, and social belonging. TikTok hashtag trends operate as sociocultural instruments that shape shared practices, reinforce peer norms, and sustain engagement within an algorithm-driven media environment. This study contributes to existing literature by offering a localised qualitative perspective on TikTok use among Malaysian Gen Z and by integrating motivational and identity-based explanations of trend participation. Future research is encouraged to expand demographic diversity, conduct cross-cultural comparisons, and employ longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to further examine evolving engagement patterns and platform-driven participation over time.

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LIST OF SYMBOLS

Symbols	Description
#	Hashtag (used in TikTok trends)

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations	Description
FYP	For You Page
Gen Z	Generation Z
MCMC	Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission
SIT	Social Identity Theory
UGC	User-Generated Content
UGT	Uses and Gratifications Theory

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

For years, social media users have primarily relied on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram for communication, content sharing, and online community building. However, the emergence of TikTok reshaped user engagement and content consumption habits. TikTok, owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, was launched in China in 2016 under the name “Douyin” and rebranded for global audiences in 2018 after merging with Musical.ly (Hassan, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok surpassed all other social media platforms in downloads, with 315 million installs (Chapple, 2020), and since then, has maintained its global dominance (Kumar & Prabha, 2019). Initially, TikTok focused on lip syncing and dancing videos however, the platform quickly evolved into a popular space for diverse short-form video content (Mahendran & Alsherif, 2020). Similar to other countries, TikTok has gained significant traction in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching four million users (Hao et al., 2022). The platform became especially popular among individuals under 30, establishing itself as a platform for Generation Z (or Gen Z) to express their creativity (Roth et al., 2021). TikTok is widely recognised as a creative platform for Generation Z, allowing users to express themselves through short videos, memes, and challenges. Most studies show that the intensity of TikTok usage is significantly associated with increased creativity among Gen Z, with active participation such as content creation and sharing, driven primarily by a desire for creative expression, trying new things, and building personal influence or recognition (Purbaningrum & Andrini, 2023; Zips & Holendová, 2024). TikTok’s success is largely attributed to its advanced recommendation system and the widespread appeal of hashtag trends. The platform has also popularised the phenomenon of hashtag challenge trends, which have become a defining feature of its identity. In January 2024, TikTok had surpassed 2.7 billion downloads worldwide, with Gen Z making up 60% of its user base (Doyle, 2024).

TikTok was designed to bring joy and inspire creativity, enabling users, particularly younger audiences like Gen Z, to enhance their videos with music, sound effects, and visual elements (Diaz et al., 2023). The platform’s functionality including

editing tools, music integration and algorithmic content discovery encourages rapid content experimentation and development (Purbaningrum & Andrini, 2023; C. C. Stahl & Literat, 2023). This generation, often referred to as the digital native or digital first generation, includes individuals born between 1997 and 2012. They are recognised for their strong technological skills and entrepreneurial mindsets (Tjiptono et al., 2020). Gen Z has easy access to devices like smartphones, laptops, and tablets because they grew up in a world ruled by technology and the internet with easy access to digital platforms and social media (McKinsey & Company., 2024). Gen Z in Asia spends over six hours daily on social media, primarily on TikTok. This platform has become a cultural force, shaping trends and influencing lifestyles (Doyle, 2024).

Most of the existing studies primarily focus on motivations such as entertainment, self-expression, and social interaction. For example, Ravi (2024) explored TikTok's impact on academic motivation among university students in Malaysia, but did not specifically address escapism, including a review by Sharma and Singh (2023) on its impact on the younger generation, there are still gaps in understanding Gen Z's specific motivations for engaging in TikTok streams, especially their desire for escapism. Agater (2022) examined the impact of TikTok on the mental wellbeing of Gen Z creators, but did not specifically explore escapism. Similarly, a study by Zheluk et al. (2022) and Khalaf et al. (2023) focused on the impact of the TikTok on anxiety and mental health, without addressing escapism directly. Furthermore, most studies on social media, such as Zips & Holendová (2024) and Erenia et al. (2024), mostly focused on the Western context, ignoring to specify the social media and the unique sociocultural dynamics of a region like Malaysia.

TikTok serves as an important medium for Gen Z, facilitating creative self-expression and influencing emerging cultural and linguistic standards (Zips & Holendová, 2024). The unique features compared to other social media and communal interactions make it a powerful environment for creativity, identity development, and innovation among these youths. In Malaysia, there are approximately 6.41 million Gen Z individuals Kemp (2024), who, on average, spend 9 hours and 56 minutes daily on social media (FMT Media Sdn. Bhd, 2022). Gen Z online activities are diverse, including accessing news, gaining knowledge, entertainment, social interaction, and seeking fashion inspiration (Wineburg & Ziv, 2022).

Daryus et al. (2022) found that features like hashtags, audio tagging, reactions, and lip syncing help users build new relationships, which can lead to TikTok videos

gaining popularity and encourage co-creation of content. Hashtags, in particular, play a vital role in boosting content visibility by associating it with specific themes, allowing users to reach a wider audience (O'Brien, 2024). Originally hashtags were introduced to categorise and organise content, hashtags have evolved to foster meaningful conversations and build communities around shared interests (Sheikh, 2024). On TikTok, hashtags significantly enhance visibility on the platform's primary feed, the "For You Page" or commonly known as #FYP, where users spend the majority of their time. This increased visibility greatly improves the chances of a video going viral (West, 2024). For instance, in Malaysia, the #AlamakRayaLagi hashtag launched during Hari Raya Aidilfitri 2024 as part of De Fam's first Raya Muzik trend went viral, garnering over 12 million views and inspiring widespread user participation ((NST Entertainment, 2024). This is also because TikTok's popularity is further driven by its highly personalised recommendation system, which curates video feeds based on individual user preferences and interactions (Wang, 2022). This algorithm analyses user activities such as likes, follows, viewing time, and shares to suggest relevant content on the #FYP. The engagement, blending authenticity and real time responsiveness, TikTok creates a dynamic and captivating platform experience (Reetz, 2024). This personalised approach ensures that each users' experience aligns closely with their unique preferences, habits, and viewing history (Manandhar, 2023).

Therefore, the main point of this study is to look into how Gen Z and TikTok hashtag trends interact in a way that is unique and important to Malaysian culture and society. The goal of this study is to find out how TikTok helps Gen Z escape reality and build their online personality by looking into the reasons behind their active engagement in trend following behaviour. TikTok gives Gen Z a place to be creative, make friends, and shape their digital identities through its personalised recommendation system and features like the "For You Page" or #FYP, and hashtags. This study will help to understand a lot about how TikTok affects Gen Z's motivations to escape reality and their overall digital habits.

1.2 Problem Statement

The exponential growth of TikTok has transformed how digital natives, particularly Generation Z, to consume, create, and interact with media content characterised by short-form videos and algorithm-driven recommendations. TikTok

offers not only entertainment but also an immersive digital space for identity formation, emotional coping, and social belonging. While much of the existing scholarship focuses on entertainment and social gratification, limited attention has been given to escapism as a personal coping mechanism and cultural motivation influencing Gen Z's active engagement with TikTok hashtag trends. This study was undertaken to address this research gap by examining how escapism functions as a key motivational force that shapes Gen Z's digital participation and online identity within the Malaysian context.

TikTok has become one of the most dominant social media platforms among Malaysian Generation Z, within the Malaysian context of rapid digitalisation, academic and work pressure, and evolving sociocultural expectations particularly through its short-form, algorithmically curated content and participatory hashtag trends. TikTok has emerged as a central site for everyday media engagement, creative expression, and peer interaction.

A growing body of media scholarship suggests that escapism is understood as the temporary diversion from everyday demands through immersive media use that plays a significant role in digital engagement. For example, existing studies consistently identify entertainment, self-expression, and social interaction as primary motivations for TikTok use, positioning the platform largely as a leisure-oriented and socially connective medium. However, these framing risks oversimplifying Gen Z's engagement by neglecting the emotional and cultural dimensions that shape sustained participation, especially within non-Western contexts, as escapism has been examined in relation to gaming, streaming platforms, and online fandoms, its role in TikTok engagement remains under-theorised. In particular, limited attention has been paid to how escapism operates within algorithm-driven environments such as TikTok's For You Page (FYP), where users encounter trends passively rather than through deliberate search. This omission is notable, as the FYP structures continuous exposure, repetitive scrolling, and trend circulation, which may intensify immersive engagement and habitual participation. Yet, existing TikTok research has largely prioritised surface-level motivations, leaving the experiential and affective dimensions of escapism insufficiently explored. Theoretically, this gap is reinforced by limitations within dominant frameworks. The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) has been widely applied to TikTok research but tends to privilege rational, goal-oriented motivations such as entertainment or information-seeking, often marginalising escapism as a secondary or incidental factor. The Social Identity Theory (SIT), while useful for

explaining group affiliation and identity performance, has rarely been applied to examine how escapist engagement with shared trends facilitates identity negotiation within algorithmically mediated spaces. As a result, these two theories play an important role between personal emotional motives and collective identity processes that remain insufficiently conceptualised.

Therefore, the central problem addressed in this study is the lack of empirical and theoretical understanding of escapism as a key motivational force in TikTok engagement and its relationship to identity formation among Malaysian Generation Z by examining how escapism operates through FYP-driven hashtag trends, this study seeks to address the broader absence of emotional and cultural dimensions in existing TikTok research and to extend the UGT and SIT by integrating motivational and identity-based explanations within an algorithmic media environment. Therefore, the primary aim of this research is to understand how escapism drives Gen Z's engagement in TikTok hashtag trends and how this behaviour contributes to their identity formation and social interaction.

Based on the problems and gaps stated, this study attempts to answer three (3) specific research questions:

RQ1: Why does escapism motivate Malaysian Generation Z users to engage with TikTok hashtag trends?

RQ2: What role do TikTok hashtag trends play in shaping Malaysian Generation Z users' online identity?

RQ3: How do TikTok's platform features and algorithmic dynamics influence Malaysian Generation Z users' motivation to engage with trending content?

1.3 Research Objectives

The primary aim of this research is to understand how escapism drives Gen Z's engagement in TikTok hashtag trends and how this behaviour contributes to their identity formation and social interaction.

The study is guided by three (3) specific objectives:

RO1: To investigate the role of escapism in motivating Malaysian Generation Z's engagement with TikTok hashtag trends.

RO2: To examine how Gen Z users perceive the role of hashtag trends in shaping their online identity.

RO3: To analyse how TikTok's platform features and algorithmic dynamics influence Gen Z's motivation to engage with trending content.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it explores the motivations driving Generation Z's active participation in TikTok hashtag trends in Malaysia. The research aims to understand the relationship between Generation Z, TikTok, and escapism, and through analysis, uncover how these hashtag trends shape Gen Z's online identity and influence their active engagement. Also, understanding this dynamic is crucial, as Gen Z often turns to fast growing digital platforms like TikTok to escape the pressures of the real world. The study can help develop strategies to encourage healthier digital habits and mitigate the negative effects of excessive digital engagement by gaining insight into Gen Z's motivations. In essence, these findings have the potential to foster a more supportive and inclusive digital environment for young individuals in Malaysia. This aligns with the research objective to investigate escapism motivations and explore TikTok's impact on Gen Z's active engagement with hashtag trends.

1.4.1 Academic and Future References

1.4.1.1 For Academic Researchers and Scholars

This study contributes theoretically by extending Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT) within the context of TikTok and Generation Z hashtag trends. From a UGT perspective, the findings provide insights into how Gen Z actively uses TikTok hashtag trends to fulfil the personal and social needs such as entertainment, escapism, self-expression, and social interaction. This helps advance UGT by demonstrating how gratifications are negotiated within algorithm-driven and participatory social media environments (Koç, 2023). From a SIT perspective, this study deepens understanding of online identity formation and group belonging, showing how participation in hashtag trends enables Gen Z to align with peer communities, reinforce social identities, and negotiate in-group and out-group dynamics in digital spaces. These insights are valuable for future research in

communication, sociology, and digital media, particularly in examining how algorithmic content recommendation systems shape collective identities and participatory culture (Selig, 2024). Also, this study supports interdisciplinary research integrating digital media studies, behavioural psychology, and media literacy to better understand the personal and social implications of social media use (Ahmad Fuad et al., 2023). The findings may also inform discussions on digital wellbeing and policy development, providing empirical support for educators and policymakers (Scatton, 2023) in designing social media policies that address identity, wellbeing, and responsible platform engagement (Jafar et al., 2023).

1.4.1.2 For Students

This study helps students understand why Gen Z engages with TikTok hashtag trends by explaining their social media use through UGT and SIT. From a UGT perspective, students can recognise how their engagement with TikTok fulfils personal needs such as relaxation, entertainment, validation, and escapism. This awareness can help them better manage their digital identity, emotional wellbeing, and online presence (Syaifuddin & Sari, 2024). From a SIT perspective, the study highlights how social media participation influences self-perception, peer interaction, and group belonging, which is particularly important during identity development. Understanding how hashtag trends shape social identity and peer comparison can help students reflect on the impact of social media on their mental health and interpersonal relationships (Adegboyega, 2020). Furthermore, this study enhances digital literacy by encouraging students to critically evaluate algorithmic influence, content visibility, and data privacy practices on platforms like TikTok (Swart, 2021). With improved digital literacy, students are better equipped to regulate their social media use and make more informed, responsible decisions online (Lcom Team, 2024).

1.4.1.3 For Parents

This study provides parents with theoretical insights grounded in UGT and SIT to better understand their children's engagement with TikTok hashtag trends. From a UGT perspective, parents can recognise that Gen Z's social media use is often motivated by specific needs such as social connection, entertainment, and self-

expression, rather than passive consumption. This understanding enables more meaningful conversations about healthy and purposeful social media use (Apdillah et al., 2022). From a SIT perspective, the study highlights how TikTok influences social identity formation, peer norms, and a sense of belonging, helping parents understand both the positive and negative impacts of online communities. Parents can provide guidance on digital privacy, online safety, and responsible participation while respecting their children's need for social connection by acknowledging these identity-driven motivations (H. E. Lee et al., 2022). Moreover, the study emphasises the importance of digital literacy and balanced media use, encouraging parents to foster critical awareness of content influence and data protection. By promoting open communication, setting appropriate boundaries such as screen-time limits, and supporting responsible online behaviour, parents can help reduce excessive engagement linked to mental health challenges (Muppalla et al., 2023).

1.4.2 Policy

1.4.2.1 For Policymakers

The findings of this study can guide policymakers in developing effective regulations that encourage safe, responsible, and meaningful social media engagement among Gen Z, informed by the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT). From a UGT perspective, understanding why Gen Z actively engages with TikTok hashtag trends such as for entertainment, self-expression, social connection, and escapism that allows policymakers to design interventions that address these motivations without limiting positive platform use. For example, regulatory bodies such as the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) can implement policies that mitigate online risks, including harassment, privacy invasion, and cyber threats, while still supporting the gratifications Gen Z seeks from social media. Such measures may also promote positive online behaviours and strengthen digital literacy skills among young users (McKinsey & Company, 2024). From a SIT perspective, the study highlights how TikTok hashtag trends shape group norms, peer influence, and collective identity. Moreover, policymakers can use these insights to develop guidelines that discourage harmful group behaviours, such as cyberbullying or exclusion, while promoting inclusive and prosocial online

communities. In addition, the study supports policy efforts aimed at strengthening Malaysia's digital economy. In collaboration with agencies such as the Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC), policymakers can allocate funding to initiatives that harness Gen Z's digital creativity and participatory culture. By recognising social media as a space for identity expression and community building, investment in digital entrepreneurship and content creation can further contribute to the growth of Malaysia's digital sector (Hanafiah et al., 2024).

1.4.2.2 For The Country

Malaysian youths navigate both the opportunities and challenges of an increasingly dynamic digital environment (Ahmad et al., 2023). Grounded in UGT and SIT, this study provides valuable insights into the motivations and identity-related factors behind Generation Z's active participation in TikTok hashtag trends. Understanding these motivations is essential for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders seeking to promote digital literacy, youth empowerment, and cultural diversity in Malaysia. From a UGT perspective, the findings can inform national policies that leverage social media for education, creativity, and skill development while encouraging responsible platform use. From a SIT perspective, the study highlights the role of social media in shaping national youth identities, cultural expression, and a sense of belonging, which can be strategically harnessed to strengthen creative industries and promote inclusive digital citizenship. Furthermore, the findings support evidence-based initiatives that enhance online safety awareness and address cyber risks, particularly among youth. As digital tools continue to play a central role in education and everyday life, this study advocates for targeted resources and public awareness campaigns to help young Malaysians navigate digital spaces safely, ethically, and responsibly (Scholl, 2023).

1.4.3 Institution

1.4.3.1 For Educational Institutions

Educational institutions play a vital role in shaping institutional policies and promoting digital and media literacy among students, particularly in response to the increasing influence of social media platforms such as TikTok. Grounded in the Uses

and Gratifications Theory (UGT), this study highlights that Gen Z actively engages with social media to fulfil needs such as entertainment, self-expression, and social interaction. Understanding these motivations allows educational institutions to design media literacy initiatives that address not only how students use social media, but why they use it. In Malaysia, media literacy is increasingly recognised as essential in addressing challenges posed by new media environments. Experts have emphasised that media literacy skills enable students to critically evaluate online content, navigate platforms responsibly, and understand the effects of social media use (Erda Khursyiah, 2024). From a Social Identity Theory (SIT) perspective, media literacy education can also help students reflect on how online trends, peer norms, and hashtag communities shape their social identity and sense of belonging. Additionally, incorporating media literacy into school and university curricula can equip Gen Z with practical skills to manage their digital presence while fostering critical thinking and ethical online behaviour. As recommended by Wong (2023), structured media literacy education prepares students to engage with platforms like TikTok in a more informed and self-regulated manner. Furthermore, educational institutions can organise seminars and workshops that encourage students to balance social media use with academic responsibilities, thereby strengthening digital competence and promoting responsible participation in a technology-driven learning environment.

1.4.3.2 For Healthcare Professionals

Healthcare professionals, particularly those working in mental health and wellbeing, can benefit from the insights of this study by understanding social media use through the lens of UGT and SIT. From a UGT perspective, excessive engagement with platforms such as TikTok may reflect escapism-oriented gratifications, where users turn to social media to cope with stress, emotional fatigue, or academic pressure. Over time, such patterns may contribute to negative mental health outcomes, including stress, anxiety, and mild depressive symptoms (Király et al., 2020). In addition, by recognising these motivational factors, it allows healthcare practitioners to focus on early prevention, rather than intervening only in severe cases. From a SIT perspective, healthcare professionals can also consider how online peer norms, social comparison, and identity validation within hashtag communities influence young people's emotional wellbeing and self-esteem. This theoretical understanding can guide the development

of targeted digital health interventions, such as promoting balanced social media use, encouraging periodic digital detox practices, and strengthening personal and social needs resilience among Gen Z. As suggested by Coe et al. (2023), integrating digital wellbeing education into preventive healthcare strategies can help mitigate mild mental health challenges before they escalate. Therefore, by prioritising early intervention and fostering a supportive digital environment, healthcare professionals can play a crucial role in maintaining youth mental wellbeing in an increasingly connected society.

1.4.4 Public

1.4.4.1 For the Community

This study highlights the role of social media, particularly TikTok, in shaping cultural expression and community development in Malaysia, viewed through the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT). From a UGT perspective, Gen Z's participation in TikTok hashtag trends fulfils needs such as entertainment, self-expression, and social interaction, making social media a powerful tool for community engagement when used responsibly. Understanding these motivations allows community-based programmes to be developed that educate young Malaysians on safe and responsible social media use, while encouraging critical thinking in their interaction with online content. From a SIT perspective, TikTok hashtag trends function as spaces where collective identities are formed and reinforced. Community initiatives can therefore leverage these platforms to promote shared values, cultural pride, and social cohesion. For example, workshops organised by bodies such as the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) or local cultural councils can guide Generation Z in responsible digital participation while respecting Malaysia's cultural values. Such initiatives may emphasise the use of social media to promote Malaysia's unique heritage, including traditional arts, language, and customs, in ways that strengthen unity and national identity. In response to societal concerns about the social effects of social media (Abdullah et al., 2023), community leaders can collaborate with educational institutions and non-governmental organisations to develop youth programmes that promote digital wellbeing. For example, campaigns such as MCMC's Klik Dengan Bijak initiative may be expanded

to include modules that encourage balanced social media use while reinforcing values such as harmony, mutual respect, and cultural appreciation.

1.4.4.2 For the Digital World Provider, Media Creators and Marketers

TikTok functions as a highly influential platform for digital providers, content creators, influencers, and marketers seeking to engage Generation Z audiences. Grounded in UGT, this study provides insights into the motivations that drive Gen Z's participation in trending TikTok hashtags, including entertainment, social connection, self-presentation, and validation. Understanding these gratifications allows digital providers and marketers to design content strategies that are more relevant, ethical, and audience centred. From a SIT perspective, hashtag trends also operate as identity markers that signal group belonging, values, and lifestyle preferences. Media creators and influencers who align their content with these identity cues are more likely to build authenticity, trust, and sustained engagement. As a result, the study's findings can enhance influencer marketing strategies, strengthen brand collaborations, and improve the quality and cultural relevance of TikTok content, ultimately increasing visibility and audience engagement (Coe et al., 2023).

1.4.4.3 For Businesses and Corporations

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into Gen Z's digital habits, preferences, and identity-driven consumption patterns, which are highly relevant for businesses and corporations. From a UGT perspective, Gen Z engages with brands that fulfil personal and social needs such as self-expression, enjoyment, and social recognition. From a SIT perspective, brand choices often reflect group identity, personal values, and social affiliation. Likewise, businesses can design marketing strategies that align with these identity and gratification-based motivations by understanding how Gen Z perceives and participates in TikTok hashtag trends. This approach enables organisations to foster more genuine brand connections, build long-term loyalty, and enhance market impact. Applying these insights can also inform product development and innovation, allowing brands to remain culturally relevant and responsive to the expectations of a digitally engaged generation (Coe et al., 2023).

1.5 Limitation

This study intentionally focuses on Malaysian Generation Z TikTok users, excluding other age groups, geographical regions, and specific content genres to maintain methodological control and analytical clarity. This study focuses on strengthening contextual depth, it limits comparative insights across demographics and cultural settings. The study applies the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT) to a contemporary digital context but does not aim to extend or challenge these frameworks. As a qualitative inquiry based on a small, purposively selected sample, the findings are not intended to be generalisable beyond the Malaysian context. Reliance on self-reported experiences may reflect culturally specific interpretations of escapism and online identity formation. As a matter of fact, the exclusive focus on TikTok restricts broader understanding of cross-platform social media behaviour. Therefore, given the platform's rapidly evolving algorithms and trends, findings reflect a specific temporal context. Future research may build on this study by adopting mixed methods approaches, larger samples, or cross-cultural comparisons to extend its applicability.

1.6 Definition of Terms

This section provides definitions of key terms used in the study to facilitate consistent and clear interpretation. The research focus guides the choice of terms, which include both platform-specific ideas and theoretical constructs. This section defines TikTok, Generation Z (Gen Z), escapism, motivation, active participation, hashtag trends, and For You Page (FYP), ensuring that this terminology is used in line with the research objectives and analysis.

i) TikTok

TikTok is a popular social media app that allows users to create, share, and view short videos (LaFleur, 2023). TikTok users can upload videos of themselves dancing, singing, cooking, or doing something creative, and others can like, comment, or share them (D'Souza, 2024). The app's standout feature is the For You page or also known as #FYP, which displays a personalised feed of videos based on what users like and

interact with. It's entertaining, simple to use, and a place where trends and challenges frequently go viral (Patel, 2023).

ii) Generation Z (Gen Z)

Generation Z refers to individuals born between 1996 and 2010. As the second youngest generation that has a high level of familiarity with social media and online culture, positioned between Millennials and Generation Alpha, they are often called “digital natives” due to their upbringing in the digital age. This generation is the first to have grown up with the internet as an integral part of their daily lives, shaping their identity and interactions (McKinsey & Company, 2024).

iii) Escapism

Escapism is a mental diversion with leisure or pleasure to “escape” from the perceived unpleasant or mundane parts of daily life (Rehman et al., 2024). Escapism means any behaviour that distracts from current reality. This form of removal is often observed in physical, emotional or mental transitions to alternate life conditions. Escape may take place in various places and with various actions (Riley, 2014).

iv) Motivation

Motivation comes from meeting basic needs like feeling connected to others, having control over our actions, and developing skills. Motivation is important because it drives us to set and achieve goals in areas like work, relationships, sports, and learning. Also, motivation helps turn our values into actions, leading to healthier and more positive life outcomes (Sutton, 2024).

v) Active engagement

Active participation in social media is interacting with content rather than merely scrolling through it from time to time (Eckstein, 2024). Some examples of acts that fall under this category are liking, commenting, sharing, posting, and initiating interactions with other people (Zote, 2024). This meaningful engagement is achieved when people actively participate in discussions, share personalised experiences, or contribute user generated content (UGC) or TikTok algorithm driven (Emplifi, 2024). It demonstrates engagement and connectivity within the online community.

vi) TikTok hashtag trends

TikTok hashtags are terms or key phrases marked by the hashtag (#) symbol that popular and recurring hashtags, utilised to classify material on the platform for specific challenges, themes, or topics, facilitating user navigation across the content that drive user engagement by encouraging participation (West, 2024).

vii) For You Page

The “For You” page (FYP) is the first screen users view when they open the TikTok app. This app offers a tailored stream of videos from creators’ users may not follow but are recommended by TikTok’s algorithm based on users’ interests and past interactions. This personalisation is driven by machine learning, which analyses data to predict, refine, and identify what individuals seek from a vast array of options (NVIDIA, 2024). Unlike systems that compare individuals with similar interests, TikTok’s algorithm prioritises each user’s unique preferences (TikTok, 2024c). Also, FYP demonstrates how machine learning may be implemented in real world circumstances to increase user experience through precise and personalised recommendations.

1.7 Thesis Outline

In Chapter 1, the researcher presents an overview of the research topic, including background settings, the research problem, objectives, and the significance of the study. Chapter 2 is the literature review which summarises relevant literature and theoretical frameworks related to the research topic, highlighting existing knowledge, gaps in the literature, and theoretical foundations that inform the study. Chapter 3, on the other hand is the research methodology describing the research design, methods, and procedures used to collect and analyse data. This section may include information on sampling techniques, data collection methods (e.g., interviews, online observations), data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations. In Chapter 4, the researcher will present the results and findings obtained from the data collection and analysis often organised according to the research objectives or themes identified during data analysis will be presented with supporting citations from the narratives. Lastly, the research concludes with Chapter 5, the main findings of the study, reiterates its significance, and discusses

potential implications for theory and the findings. This section may also offer final reflections or recommendations based on the study's findings.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter explores existing literature to provide a thorough knowledge of the area for the study, focusing on TikTok as a transformative platform, the characteristics of Generation Z as digital natives, and the role of escapism in digital media. It reviews the following key topics, TikTok: the revolution of new media and its mechanism of influence in the social media ecosystem (section 2.1), TikTok in Malaysia (section 2.2), Gen Z as digital natives driving change in Malaysia (section 2.3). The chapter further examines how #TikTok hashtags enhance active engagement among Gen Z in Malaysia (section 2.4), the motivation and motivating Gen Z's active engagement (section 2.5), and the escapism behaviour of Gen Z in Malaysia (section 2.6). Then, section 2.7 discusses the research framework, while section 2.8 presents the conceptual framework that guides the study's analysis, linking the reviewed literature to the study's objectives.

2.1 TikTok: The Revolution of New Media and its Mechanism of Influence in the Social Media Ecosystem

Since its launch in 2016, TikTok has rapidly become a dominant force among social media platforms, revolutionising how users engage, communicate, and consume content (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Now a global phenomenon, TikTok appeals to audiences across diverse age groups and backgrounds (Ma, 2024). TikTok's innovative impact mechanism has profoundly influenced the new media landscape, particularly among younger generations (Ng et al., 2021a). In accordance with its objective to promote fun and creativity (TikTok, 2024a), the platform emphasises short, captivating videos (D'Souza, 2024) spanning 15 seconds to 3 minutes that allow users to express their creativity, humour, and talent via an intuitive interface (Hutchinson, 2023). TikTok's highly interactive and addictive nature has made it a transformative presence in the digital world, reshaping how social media users create, share, and interact with content. This platform empowers users to explore new forms of expression, significantly impacting the broader digital ecosystem and solidifying its role as a revolutionary force in social media (Sedona Sky Academy, 2024) and also contributes to the users often remain engaged until the content ceases to captivate their interest,

prompting them to gradually reduce their participation over time because of the algorithm precision (Petrillo, 2021).

TikTok is distinguished by its sophisticated machine learning algorithm, often termed its recommendation system or artificial intelligence engine (Khalid et al., 2023). Scholars and researchers have increasingly examined the mechanisms of influence embedded in TikTok's dynamic and immersive platform. Although TikTok shares similarities with its prominent competitors in the social media ecosystem (Rejeb et al., 2024), TikTok represents a paradigm shift as one of the fastest growing apps. This growth has spurred a surge in video creation and distribution, encompassing hashtag trends and short loop videos, features also accessible on platforms like Facebook and Instagram (Needle, 2024). This algorithm generates a highly individualised experience, frequently mirroring facets of a user's preferences that they may not disclose publicly (Haslem, 2022). The platform's "For You Page" or also known as FYP is a distinctive feature that curates' material aligned with users' interactions, preferences, and demographic information. Meanwhile, FYP plays a pivotal role in promoting content, fostering user interaction, and driving participation, which has significantly contributed to TikTok's rapid growth and its status as the most downloaded app across various demographic groups (Ma, 2024). TikTok prioritises algorithm driven content delivery unlike other social media platforms (Lewis, 2024). TikTok's ability to balance personalisation and user retention has solidified its position as a groundbreaking force in the digital media landscape.

TikTok aims to foster a sense of community, ease of use, and freedom of expression (TikTok, 2024b). This platform has provided everyday users with a space to gain recognition and influence through users' creative content contributions (Taulli & Kessel, 2021). Moreno (2022) reported in *Forbes* that TikTok has surpassed YouTube in various social media metrics. This claim is supported by Porter (2021), who noted that TikTok users now spend more time per month watching content than YouTube users. TikTok has challenged traditional concepts of the social media ecosystem, particularly in redefining fame and celebrity with its focus on creativity and entertainment. In February 2022, TikTok extended the video time limit from 3 minutes to 10 minutes, offering creators more flexibility for content creation. Previously, the platform started with a 15 second video limit, which later increased to 60 seconds. Today, TikTok is emerging as a formidable competitor to YouTube, posing a challenge to its dominance in video content (Malik, 2023). The algorithmic features of TikTok

contribute to its addictive nature, encouraging users to consume more content (Khalid et al., 2023). TikTok enhances user engagement and accelerates its rise as one of the fastest growing cultural forces in history by personalising content to reflect users' personal interests and emotional responses (Peña-Fernández et al., 2022).

2.2 TikTok in Malaysia

TikTok has experienced a remarkable rise in popularity in Malaysia since its introduction in 2018, when it attracted 4 million downloads (Kemp, 2024). Over the years, the platform has become a central part of the Malaysian social media landscape, particularly during the Covid19 pandemic, which saw a substantial increase in its usage (Khalid et al., 2023). In Malaysia, by early 2022, TikTok surpassed other social media platforms, amassing a user base of 17 million (Farid, 2024). TikTok's growth is attributed to a bandwagon effect, where users are drawn to trends and the platform's innovative features (Hao et al., 2022) and by 2024, TikTok had reached 28.68 million users aged 18 and above, accounting for 84.4% of Malaysia's internet users, making it the country's most popular social media platform (Ivana, 2024).

TikTok has dominated and disrupted the competitive ecosystem of social media in Malaysia, challenging established platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Although Facebook has traditionally been Malaysia's leading social media platform, TikTok has now established itself as a strong competitor, particularly among Gen Z users (Siddharta, 2024). Also, this platform's interactive features such as reaction videos and duets (J. Lee & Abidin, 2023) have encouraged Malaysians to engage with content in creative ways, boosting user loyalty and participation (Zips & Holendová, 2024). TikTok's hashtag trends and challenges also foster cultural exploration and community interaction, making it a dynamic platform for showcasing self-expression and discovering trends (Jessica, 2024).

Moreover, TikTok has positively impacted users' lifestyles by enhancing self-confidence, creativity, and self-esteem (Ahmad Fuad et al., 2023). It has become a crucial medium for communication, business, and information dissemination in Malaysia, solidifying its role as a key player in the country's digital landscape. TikTok's growth trajectory in Malaysia has been extraordinary, with the platform experiencing an 81.7 million download milestone during the first half of 2024 where a 6.6% increase from the previous year, and by January 2024, TikTok had overtaken Facebook as the

most popular social media site in Malaysia, with 21.9% of users favouring its engaging short form video content compared to Facebook's 18.8% (Ivana, 2024). This shift highlights TikTok's evolving role as Malaysia's leading platform for entertainment, community connection, and trend setting, shaping the digital habits of millions of Malaysians.

2.3 Gen Z as Digital Natives Driving Change in Malaysia

In Malaysia, Gen Z comprises 26% of the population, making it the largest demographic group in the country. This generation, Gen Z, comprising nearly 8.476 million people (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024), is the first generation to grow up entirely in the digital age and with 99% of them owning a smartphone, they have a broad digital understanding and are known as the first digital natives (The Nielsen Company, 2022). Gen Z spends an average of 8 hours a day on the internet, mainly using smartphones and social media platforms, demonstrating their ability to navigate both the online and offline worlds with ease and process large amounts of data (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024). Gen Z prioritises their digital identity and privacy, seeking control over their lifestyles and beliefs (McKinsey & Company., 2024).

Gen Z prefers to get news from social media over traditional newspapers, pushing brands and companies to adapt their strategies to engage this tech savvy generation (Adgate, 2022). Unlike Millennials, who grew up reading newspapers, Gen Z spends more time shopping online for clothes, electronics and beauty products. Gen Z carefully compares prices, shipping rates and delivery schedules to make sure they get the best deal (McKinsey & Company., 2024). Also, the rise of ecommerce has greatly benefited this generation. Furthermore, 94% of Gen Z prefer streaming platforms like Netflix, Iflix and Tonton over traditional media, enjoying the convenience of watching movies on their phones anytime and anywhere. Despite the popularity of streaming, cinema remains relevant, with 40% of Gen Z regularly visiting the cinema (The Nielsen Company, 2022).

Neurobiological research by Cervi (2021) has shown that the brains of Gen Z are structurally different from previous generations due to their surroundings. Gen Z highly developed visual cortex contributes to a shorter attention span when exposed to complex visual imagery. This is further supported by Supramani (2022), who stated that

social media applications such as TikTok, with their short video formats, have worsened the decline in attention span. Studies show that the attention span of Gen Z has shrunk to 8 seconds, compared to the 12 second span of Millennials (Lontoh et al., 2022). This constant exposure to digital content leads to faster boredom and burnout (Roberto, 2024). This prolonged screen time can cause developmental delays in areas such as communication, problem solving, motor skills, and social and personal skills (Rogers, 2023).

2.4 #TikTok Hashtags Enhance Active Engagement Among Gen Z in Malaysia

In the early days of Twitter, hashtags were a way to organise tweets into groups and coordinate important information into easily searchable categories (Middis, 2021). Since then, hashtags have demonstrated their impact on the effectiveness of communication across various social media platforms. For example, on Instagram, hashtags classify and organise image and video content, helping users discover new content (Fedushko & Kolos, 2019). In today's digital age, especially on TikTok, hashtags have become a powerful social media tool. TikTok is changing the social media landscape with innovative and engaging ways to gather creative content (Oladipo, 2024). In TikTok, hashtags act as labels that allow users to identify posts or materials with a specific topic or content. The hashtag challenges and trends have the ability to leverage active participation, involve users in trends and revolutionise marketing by targeting specific individuals (TikTok for Business, 2024). Gen Z uses TikTok hashtags to engage and build relationships, interact with people who share similar interests and express their feelings and thoughts (Shamsuddin et al., 2023).

In Malaysia, the number of TikTok users is projected to increase continuously between 2023 and 2027. Malaysia will have 21.7 million TikTok users, with Gen Z making up the majority of this user base in 2029 (Siddharta, 2024). This growth is largely driven by Gen Z's active engagement with TikTok hashtag trends and challenges, which goes beyond passive content consumption of their hashtag trends and challenges. This challenge played an important role in this expansion by allowing Gen Z TikTok users to engage in viral trends, discover content related to their interests and communicate with the larger community (Kemp, 2024). While passive engagement involves activities such as scrolling, watching, or liking videos, active engagement is reflected through content creation, participation in trends, remixing videos, and

interacting with others using hashtags. TikTok hashtag trends encourage Gen Z users to move from passive viewing to active participation by inviting them to recreate, personalise, and contribute to viral content. For example, popular hashtag trends and challenges in Malaysia, such as dance trends and local cultural festivals, have seen widespread participation. This helps users feel more connected to their cultural identity and the global TikTok community (Ng et al., 2021).

Moreover, Gen Z in Malaysia is motivated in expanding their online presence and social media influence. Active participation in trending hashtags enhances algorithmic visibility on the “For You Page,” for example, participating in trending hashtags or challenges on TikTok can significantly increase their visibility on the platform, enhance their personal brand and create opportunities for collaboration with well-known brands and companies (Shamsuddin et al., 2023). This increased visibility and engagement not only increases their social media presence but also provides opportunities for personal and professional growth. Unlike passive scrolling, which offers short-term entertainment, active engagement through hashtag participation supports identity construction, creativity, and social validation. The interactive and community-driven nature of TikTok hashtags thus plays a critical role in transforming Gen Z users from passive viewers into active contributors, strengthening their online identity and sustaining long-term platform engagement (Oladipo, 2024).

While existing studies commonly frame escapism as an individual personal’s motivation for social media use, such approaches risk overlooking the role of platform architectures in shaping this motivation. Consequently, critical algorithm studies challenge the assumption that algorithms merely respond to user preferences, instead of arguing that they actively configure what users encounter, value, and desire (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014). From this perspective, escapist engagement on platforms such as TikTok may not solely originate from users’ pre-existing needs but may be intensified or even partially manufactured through algorithmic reward mechanisms such as infinite scroll, personalised content feeds, and intermittent reinforcement. These design features are known to foster habitual engagement and emotional regulation through continuous stimulation (Montag et al., 2021).

Despite TikTok’s heavy reliance on algorithmic curation, much of the current literature continues to treat escapism as an exogenous motivational factor, rather than one co-produced by platform affordances. This theoretical gap is significant, particularly given evidence that TikTok’s recommender system plays a central role in

shaping user experience, identity performance, and engagement rhythms (Kaye et al., 2021). Incorporating insights from critical algorithm studies therefore allows for a more nuanced understanding of escapism as a dynamic interaction between user agency and algorithmic governance, rather than a purely individual personal's drive.

2.4.1 Dynamics of Engagement Through TikTok Hashtags

TikTok hashtags are an effective community-building tool that allows Gen Z users to express themselves, create a sense of belonging, and engage in collective flows. This, in turn, increases content generation and interaction rates (C. C. Stahl & Literat, 2023). TikTok hashtags are an effective algorithmic and community-boosting tool that allows Gen Z users to express their identity and build a sense of belonging, resulting in rapid collective interaction (Emplifi, 2024). However, heightened interaction does not necessarily equate to active content creation, as engagement on TikTok exists along a spectrum that includes both high-frequency content consumption and participatory production. TikTok features such as hashtags, short-form videos, music integration, and viral challenges encourage multiple forms of engagement, including liking, commenting, sharing, saving, and following trends such as participating in hashtag-driven campaigns (Marlina & Hakim, 2025). While these actions reflect behavioural engagement, they vary in intensity and intent. For example, repeatedly liking or commenting on hash tagged content represents an active form of interaction, yet it remains distinct from content creation, which requires greater effort, visibility, and identity investment. This distinction is crucial for construct validity, particularly given that this study recruits informants identified as “active TikTok users.” In this context, “active” encompasses both frequent platform consumption and selective content production, rather than creation alone. Hashtags also help increase the popularity of social media and increase visibility, whose perceived authenticity and content often increase followers' self-efficacy. This approach may allow Gen Z users to become more engaged with products, places, or social concerns highlighted by trending hashtags (Fong et al., 2025). For example, TikTok hashtags serve as public affirmations of membership in a digital community or “tribe,” such as #BookTok for literary enthusiasts and #MalaysianFood for local culinary content (Marzuki & Mustapha, 2023). TikTok users signal their interests, align with specific social groups, and reinforce their personal and social identities, allowing content to reach a larger audience beyond the user's

immediate network and driving content virality by using or following these hashtags (TikTok for Business, 2024).

2.4.2 Evidence From Malaysia

A study of Gen Z in Malaysia revealed that TikTok, particularly through hashtags and influencer-generated content, has increased young users' curiosity to join the trends by increasing their confidence and sense of belonging (Fong et al., 2025). In addition to lifestyle and tourism, TikTok elements such as hashtags have demonstrated their ability to raise political awareness and foster engagement with social and civic matters among Malaysian youth (Azyani Tsania Mohd Nor et al., 2025). Hashtags help Gen Z create, negotiate, and share their identities in online groups as this is true in all countries, not just Malaysia (C. C. Stahl & Literat, 2023). This suggests that the trends seen among Gen Z in Malaysia is part of a broader movement around the world where hashtags are used to express one's identity, connect with communities, and support cultural exploration and engagement. This is a mechanism of online identity formation that makes symbolic resources and content visible (Sair et al., 2025). For example, individuals may be reluctant to visit a location due to perceived barriers such as expense or logistical challenges. After constantly seeing TikTok hashtags and related videos on the For You Page labelled with #JomJalan, users' confidence increases. The comments section, filled with questions for advice and sharing enjoyable experiences, fosters a sense of belonging within the local exploration community (Fong et al., 2025).

2.5 The Motivation and Motivating Gen Z's Active Engagement

Niežurawska et al. (2023) highlighted that motivation plays a crucial role in influencing and shaping behaviours in desirable and acceptable ways. It is closely linked to concepts such as motives and stimuli, which together drive individuals toward specific actions. Stimulus serves as a catalyst that initiates motivation, influencing how individuals respond to external and internal factors. For example, the motivations of Gen Z for actively participating on platforms such as TikTok are the factors or elements that drive their engagement. These include a desire for social connection, the allure of escapism from the pressures of the real world (Stamenković & Mitrović, 2023), and the excitement of new experiences, creative self-expression, and the potential for fame or

influence (Jamesbrades, 2023). Additionally, the interactive elements on TikTok, such as the duet feature, allow users to engage directly with content, fostering creativity and a sense of community. Moreover, TikTok's algorithm dynamically adapts to user preferences, generating a personalised feed that sustains active engagement and promotes ongoing interaction. These features foster a collaborative environment, allowing Gen Z to express themselves while building virtual communities. TikTok reinforces sustained engagement and keeps users connected by delivering a continuous stream of tailored videos that match individual interests (Addiction Center, 2024).

The motivations driving Gen Z's active engagement with TikTok, such as escapism, social connection and creative expression. Gen Z uses TikTok to fulfil these needs by seeking entertainment, building communities, and escaping the pressures of reality (Developer Networks, 2023). TikTok's success is built on these motivations, providing a platform that aligns with Gen Z's desires for self-expression, creativity, and connection (Roth et al., 2021). TikTok's short-form video content, algorithmic recommendations, and user-friendly design (McLachlan, 2024) create a highly engaging experience tailored to these motivations. This platform's features, such as musical elements and visual enhancements, not only captivate users but also support their self-expression and entertainment needs (Chen, 2023). Also, TikTok's personalised feeds and culturally relevant content enable Gen Z to explore and express their digital identities within a space that respects local cultural preferences (Wang, 2022). Thus, TikTok serves as a dynamic platform where Gen Z's motivations are seamlessly integrated, fostering active engagement and creating a space for innovative and adaptive interactions.

2.6 The Escapism Behaviour of Gen Z in Malaysia

Igorevna (2015) explains that escapism serves as a way to relax and temporarily avoid the challenges of everyday life. At its core, escapism can be positive and negative, depending on how it is done. On the positive side, escapism allows individuals to find joy and relaxation through activities that enhance self-expression and contribute to personal growth (Schellewald, 2023). Escapism, as a concept, closely aligns with the motivation behind Gen Z's engagement with the TikTok hashtag trend. In the context of TikTok, this is evident when Gen Z engages in challenges or creative trends that help them escape stress, connect with others, and feel a sense of belonging within a larger

community. TikTok's immersive platform amplifies the positive aspects of this escapism motivation. As Roth et al. (2021) explained, elements such as self-presentation, excellence and novelty significantly increase consumer enjoyment. Gen Z users often participate in challenges or viral trends to temporarily escape from their reality, such as academic pressure or work responsibilities, and experience a sense of belonging and fun, use it to spend some time alone, away from family, friends, and other distractions Krisadhi et al. (2023). A study by Sharabati et al. (2022) supports this, stating that TikTok provides Gen Z a digital space to destress, relax and temporarily escape from the demands of everyday life.

However, Igorevna (2015) also elaborates that escapism also brings potential weaknesses, such as counterproductive behaviours such as procrastination or overindulgence, which can lead to isolation or habitual dependence. This risk is evident in the extended periods Gen Z spend on platforms like TikTok, where scrolling and engaging with content can sometimes be a coping mechanism to avoid more pressing responsibilities (Şot, 2023). This escapism refers to the desire to avoid harsh realities. This escapism behaviour involves engaging in activities that suppress disturbing thoughts and painful experiences. The process to cope includes exiting the current reality to seek fulfilment in other activities, such as scrolling TikTok and joining TikTok challenges (Ezeonwumelu & Okoro, 2020). Nonetheless, the therapeutic quality of TikTok, highlighted by Ahmad Fuad et al. (2023), showed that short and engaging videos provide a form of digital therapy. TikTok allows users to manage stress in a rewarding and meaningful way by allowing users to engage in entertaining and relatable content. Oladipo (2024) adds that the motivation to participate in viral content or trends reinforces TikTok's role as a tool for emotional relief and creative engagement.

In short, TikTok represents a modern form of escapism for Gen Z, combining entertainment, self-expression and social connection (Roth et al., 2021). While it offers significant benefits as a coping mechanism and creative space, the balance between productive escape and potential overuse highlights the relationship between digital media and emotional wellbeing. This dynamic underscores why the TikTok hashtag trend appeals to Gen Z as a means of temporary escape and emotional relief.

2.6.1 Escapism and Usage Patterns

TikTok's design, which promotes the "endless trend" of short, engaging videos, compels Malaysian youth to engage in prolonged, frequent use of the site to relieve boredom, stress, or negative emotions. This design addressed immediate emotional needs but also raises concerns about excessive use, as longer engagement has been linked to addictive behaviours (Ngadiron & Syed Zanudin, 2025). This highlights the dual nature of TikTok's algorithmic structure, that on the one hand, it offers entertainment and emotional relief, while on the other, it risks encouraging problematic usage patterns. For Generation Z in Malaysia, TikTok primarily serves as a platform for entertainment, fun, and social interaction, emphasising its function as a digital recreational environment. Many users indicated that the app provides a temporary reprieve from the responsibilities and pressures of daily life, thus making escapism a primary reason for engagement (Marzuki & Mustapha, 2023). This aligns with the larger findings that TikTok offers not only distraction but also important opportunities for emotional management. Also, TikTok serves as a cultural and linguistic platform for Malaysian Generation Z, where slang and trends are central to everyday digital communication. Over fifty percent (50%) of informants in Marzuki and Mustapha's (2023) study indicated that they use TikTok language for fun, creativity, and social connection.

2.6.2 Social Impacts

TikTok offers great opportunities for connection and self-expression, allowing users to showcase their creativity and engage with their peers in a meaningful way. However, excessive use of the platform can result in adverse effects, including decreased self-esteem, wasted time, and distress, especially when users encounter unethical, misleading, or harmful content (Ngadiron & Syed Zanudin, 2025). These findings highlight the importance of assessing the beneficial potential of the platform in relation to the risks associated with excessive use. Moreover, TikTok exerts a significant influence on users' online and offline behaviours, influencing both digital behaviours and everyday choices. For example, exposure to influencer-generated or trend-oriented content often results in impulsive purchases, illustrating the platform's ability to shape user behaviours. TikTok is transforming interpersonal communication

by integrating slang, humour, and expressive styles from the platform into face-to-face interactions (Jie & Ibrahim, 2025). This influence can foster creativity, social visibility, and digital literacy. However, it can also be harmful, especially when commercial or unhealthy behaviours are normalised among young users.

2.7 Relevant Theories and Prior Research

This research examines the motivations behind Gen Z's active participation in TikTok hashtag trends in Malaysia, employing two primary theories that are the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT). The two theories are essential for examining the dynamic Gen Z nature of digital interactions, especially in understanding how this generation of digital natives engages with social media platforms like TikTok. UGT and SIT offer a thorough framework for examining Gen Z's engagement. SIT emphasises the formation of online identities via digital interactions. UGT and SIT provide a solid theoretical framework for analysing the ways in which Malaysian Gen Z engages with their digital experiences. The two theories illustrate TikTok's dual function in fulfilling individual needs for escapism and self-expression, while also promoting a sense of community and collective identity within a culturally diverse context of Malaysia. The following sections, 2.7.1 UGT and 2.7.2 SIT, will explore these aspects in greater depth, providing specific examples and thorough analysis.

2.7.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

Previous research has widely used Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) to understand why and how people engage with media platforms (Vinney, 2024b). Unlike theories like cultivation theory, UGT focuses not on the content itself but on how users actively choose media to fulfil their needs (Vinney, 2024a). UGT emphasises the motivations that drive users to consume media, focusing on how individuals seek satisfaction through their media interactions (Miller et al., 2016). Falgoust et al. (2022) found that users turn to media to enhance their satisfaction and experiences. UGT provides a framework to understand how people use technology to meet their needs and achieve their goals (Kasirye, 2024). From an escapism perspective, UGT provides valuable insights into Gen Z's use of TikTok. UGT discusses how Gen Z utilises 24

TikTok to fulfil their emotional requirements, particularly as a means of escaping reality. This platform's visually and interactively engaging material provides users with a brief respite from real life stressors, allowing Gen Z to immerse themselves in a virtual realm that aligns with their interests. This form of escapism is particularly appealing in the Malaysian cultural context, where societal demands and norms necessitate spaces that allow individuals to be and express themselves authentically. In addition to escapism, Shamsuddin et al. (2023) highlighted how TikTok fosters social engagement by enabling users to form relationships and build communities that reflect their cultural identities. This aspect of social interaction allows Gen Z to maintain connections while participating in the platform (Falgoust et al., 2022). This aspect of social interaction directly addresses RQ1 by showing how TikTok hashtags and challenges meet the social engagement and connection needs of Gen Z. According to Ahmad Fuad et al. (2023), UGT suggests that Gen Z's active engagement in TikTok allows them to showcase their originality and uniqueness, thus influencing their online identity. UGT examines RQ3 by highlighting the impact of TikTok's user friendly features and algorithmic recommendations on user engagement (Lewis, 2024), which in turn influences Gen Z's motivation to actively participate and follow trends (Haslem, 2022). Also, UGT offers a comprehensive framework to understand the specific motivations and behaviours of Gen Z in Malaysia when it comes to their active engagement with the TikTok hashtag trends. This emphasises the importance of entertainment, social interaction and self-expression for their escapism in influencing their digital interactions through UGT (Jessica, 2024). Thus, this study utilises UGT to investigate the underlying motivations that drive the active engagement of Gen Z in the TikTok hashtag trends in Malaysia. The concept of UGT focuses on the selection and deliberate use of media (Hoque & Hossain, 2023) by individuals to meet their specific needs and achieve satisfaction (Krisadhi et al., 2023). Additionally, based on UGT, Gen Z participates in the TikTok trends mostly for fun and escapism purposes, as suggested by Ayten et al. (2019), Roth et al. (2021), and Schellewald (2023) in their studies, TikTok serves as a platform that allows Gen Z to relieve daily stress and find happiness, seek joy, and find peace, allowing them to momentarily escape from daily life pressures.

2.7.2 Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Social Identity Theory (SIT) focuses on how individuals form their identity and self-esteem based on social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). SIT emphasises the importance of belonging to a group in shaping an individual's self-concept and personal identity. This theory explains how people associate themselves with specific groups and conform to group norms to enhance self-esteem and establish their social identity (Barta & Andalibi, 2021). SIT addresses the cognitive processes and social conditions underlying intergroup behaviour, particularly those related to prejudice, bias, and discrimination (McLeod, 2023). For instance, SIT is relevant to Gen Z's motivations for escapism and online identity as Ng et al. (2021) highlights how group membership and social validation can increase self-worth and provide a sense of belonging. Through TikTok hashtag trends, Gen Z finds supportive communities where peer validation and shared identities foster their social identity, creating a space for self-expression and connection (Sharabati et al., 2022). SIT provides valuable insights into how Gen Z in Malaysia uses TikTok trends for escapism and to build their online identity, allowing them to move from individual challenges to a sense of group-oriented belonging (Ellemers, 2024). Gen Z immerse themselves in virtual communities that reinforce their social identity and provide peer validation by engaging in these trends. For example, in Malaysian society, SIT is particularly relevant as it highlights the importance of group affiliation and conformity to social norms. TikTok hashtag trends serve as a platform for Malaysian Gen Z to express their cultural identity, align with group expectations, and foster a sense of shared belonging that resonates with local cultural values where TikTok community offers relatability and support, inspiring users to make meaningful connections and personal growth (Ellemers, 2024). Another example, TikTok connects like-minded individuals such as K-pop fans and gamers, creating spaces for shared experiences and stress-free interaction. Through these hyper niche communities, Gen Z broadens their perspectives and pursues passions alongside peers who share similar journeys (Madeson, 2024). Also, TikTok functions as a collection of smaller groups, where individuals can explore new ways to engage with others who share the same passions and challenge societal norms (Shamsuddin et al., 2023). SIT highlights how these group-oriented interactions fulfil the users' need for connection and provide a space for both individual expression and collective participation, thereby shaping Gen Z online social identity.

2.8 Conceptual Framework

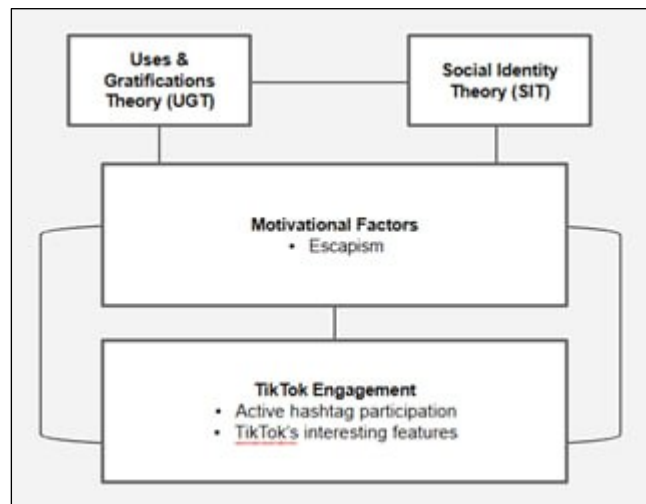


Figure 2.1 Conceptual Framework of UGT-SIT

The conceptual framework (see Figure 2.1) explains how the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT) jointly explain the escapism motivations behind Gen Z Malaysia's active engagement with TikTok. However, it cannot be explained by escapism alone, but escapism is still the primary motivational factor. Escapism emphasises the platform's role in relieving users' daily stress, boredom, and pressures by allowing them to temporarily escape from academic, social, or personal responsibilities (Ngadiron & Syed Zanudin, 2025). Escapism, or the need to get away from the stress and routine of everyday life, has been named as one of the most important needs. The way TikTok is set up with the endless trends of short videos chosen by an algorithm that makes it almost perfect for this kind of mental distraction and immersion. Moreover, research shows that creativity and self-expression are equally important, as TikTok hashtags empower users to showcase their humour, unique talents through short-form videos, reinforcing their sense of individuality that encourages users' active hashtag participation (Marzuki & Mustapha, 2023). In addition, TikTok's attractive features influence TikTok engagement, such as likes, shares, and comments which serve as a form of recognition that encourages continued interaction and increases users' sense of satisfaction (Fong et al., 2025).

So from here comes the two theories, first, UGT explains how individuals actively seek media to satisfy specific needs, such as entertainment, social connection, or information (Vinney, 2024a). In this study, UGT is employed to explore how Gen Z users derive gratification and pleasure from engaging with TikTok hashtag trends.

TikTok's engaging features, such as its user-friendly interface, personalised algorithm, and creative tools, e.g., short form videos, filters, duets, and reaction videos, enhance user participation by encouraging the creation and replication of content. An interesting aspect of TikTok is its algorithm. TikTok's interesting features such as duets, stitches, green screen effects and viral sounds significantly reduce the boundaries to creative expression. The features are concrete tools that facilitate the active engagement required by UGT. Also, the viral trends and challenges that are often featured on the "For You" page further drive active engagement by providing fun, interactive opportunities that promote both escapism and social connection (Buffer, 2024). Thus, escapism emerges as a primary driver, as users leverage the platform's features to disconnect from daily life stress and find relaxation in the creative platform (Zips & Holendová, 2024).

This aligns with UGT, as users seek emotional release and positive relationships beyond mere entertainment (Tang, 2021). SIT, on the other hand, focuses on how individuals define themselves within social contexts, emphasising the role of group identity (Ellemers, 2024). SIT explains how connecting with communities or trends on TikTok fosters a sense of connectedness and social belonging, allowing users to momentarily set aside personal concerns (Sharabati et al., 2022). On TikTok, hashtags and trends create virtual communities where users can express their identities, gain social validation, and feel a sense of belonging. Gen Z constructs and communicates their social identity, finding self-worth through group affiliation and shared interactions by participating in these trends. For example, hashtags like #BookTok, #GymTok and #LearnOnTikTok represents more than just content aggregation, but also signifies digital communities (TikTok for Business, 2024). TikTok features facilitate the sense of belonging and shared language that support group identity in SIT. Also, escapism is enhanced here by allowing users to play characters, participate in TikTok trends or alter their reality, making the process of generating and receiving looping material very interesting and enjoyable. The features are therefore practical interfaces that translate theoretical requirements into observable and highly engaged user behaviour (Jouhki et al., 2022). This creates active participation in these hashtags, users' actively construct and refine social identities, finding a sense of belonging and collective purpose that provides a satisfying kind of escape.

The existing literature provides a clear theoretical foundation for addressing the research questions of this study. Studies on escapism and digital media use, grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory, explain why Generation Z users turn to platforms

such as TikTok for entertainment, emotional relief, and temporary disengagement from offline stressors, directly informing RQ1 on escapism as a key motivational driver. Research on online identity construction and participatory culture highlights how hashtag trends function as symbolic and social tools through which users perform identity, gain visibility, and negotiate belonging within digital communities, thereby aligning with RQ2. Likewise, scholarship on platform affordances, algorithmic curation, and visibility mechanisms demonstrates how TikTok's recommendation system, interactive features, and trend amplification shape user motivation and participation patterns, providing the conceptual basis for RQ3. Together, these strands of literature justify the study's focus on motivation, identity, and platform dynamics within the Malaysian Generation Z context.

2.9 Summary of the Chapter

As presented in Chapter 2, TikTok's short-form video content and advanced algorithms revolutionised the social media landscape, making it a global phenomenon, particularly among Gen Z. Since its launch in 2018, TikTok gained immense popularity in Malaysia, significantly influencing how Gen Z interacted with social media. This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the study's theoretical and contextual background, emphasising the importance of escapism as an underexplored motivational driver for TikTok engagement among Malaysian Gen Z. This chapter underscored the relevance of the study by identifying gaps in existing research. The conceptual framework established there served as a guide for the research methodology and data analysis in subsequent chapters, ensuring a systematic and detailed approach to the study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlined the research design and methodology used to investigate the escapism motivations that drove Gen Z's active participation with TikTok hashtag trends. It employed an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative phenomenological approach, with in-depth semi-structured interviews and online observations. A purposeful sampling technique was used, with data gathered from both online and offline interviews. The chapter described the processes used to establish a comfortable setting for informants while maintaining openness and truthful responses. Ethical concerns were addressed, and NVivo software was introduced as a method for thematic analysis, allowing for the systematic identification of themes connected to escapism and motivation.

3.1 Research Paradigm and Approach

This study used the interpretivist paradigm, which stated that reality was subjective and constructed through social and cultural interactions. As a qualitative approach, interpretivism emphasised understanding the ideas, intentions, and reasoning of individuals in their social contexts to uncover the meaning behind observable phenomena (Nickerson, 2024). According to Wirman et al. (2023), phenomenology was a philosophical approach that considered phenomena as the fundamental source of knowledge and truth. As a method, it outlined the steps necessary to access authentic experience and study the intrinsic features of experience that were directly apparent in consciousness. Unlike positivist research, which tested hypotheses, interpretivism aimed to understand social truths rooted in a particular context by prioritising the subjective experiences, thoughts, and beliefs of informants (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022).

Phenomenology was chosen for this study because it enables an in-depth exploration of informants' lived experiences and subjective interpretations of engaging with TikTok hashtag trends. The study seeks to understand how Malaysian Generation Z users experience escapism, identity expression, and platform engagement in their everyday digital practices, making phenomenology particularly suitable for capturing these shared meanings and perceptions. In contrast, other qualitative approaches were

considered but deemed less appropriate. For example, grounded theory is designed to generate a new explanatory model through systematic theory building, which falls outside the scope of this study, as the aim is not to develop a formal theory but to describe and interpret experiential patterns. Narrative analysis, on the other hand, prioritises individual life stories and chronological accounts, whereas this study focuses on common experiences across participants rather than personal biographies. The study prioritises depth, reflexivity, and participant perspectives, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how TikTok hashtag trends are experienced and made meaningful by Malaysian Generation Z users by adopting a phenomenological design.

A core principle of interpretivism was its focus on the subjective nature of human experience. It sought to understand informants' cognitive processes by exploring their perceptions and the meanings they attributed to their environment. This approach prioritised the perspective of the subject over the researcher, emphasising the sociocultural context in which individuals existed. Interpretivism also argued that reality was socially constructed and context-dependent (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). This approach provided insights that were highly relevant to informants and their individual contexts (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019), making findings situational rather than generalisable (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2024). Furthermore, it was particularly suitable for investigating the motivations and lived experiences (Dudovskiy, 2024) of Gen Z TikTok users in Malaysia. This paradigm emphasised understanding the meaning-making processes that drove engagement with TikTok hashtag trends, including escapism as a coping mechanism, and aligned with qualitative research that valued rich in-depth insights over numerical generalisations. Interpretivism investigated how individuals perceived and experienced TikTok trends, considering the sociocultural context of Malaysia and how it shaped Gen Z escapism motivations and online identities.

Furthermore, this study also used inductive thematic analysis, a systematic approach to detecting, evaluating, and documenting patterns or themes in qualitative data (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2024). This method produced significant findings while remaining true to the informants' opinions (Politz, 2024). The analysis was guided by the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT). UGT explained how Generation Z derived satisfaction from TikTok, while SIT examined how they formulated and expressed their identities in digital communities. Hence, these two theories facilitated an enhanced understanding of TikTok's function as a source of

fulfilment and a medium for identity expression. The research applied an inductive thematic saturation method, focusing on identifying themes directly from informants' statements during the interviews rather than using pre-established themes (Guest et al., 2006). The process was exploratory and data-centred, facilitating the emergence of new insights throughout coding. The analysis aimed to explore and understand Gen Z's escapism and motivations on TikTok, making inductive theme saturation the most appropriate method, rather than building theories based on or validating existing themes.

3.2 Research Design

This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach, combining interviews and online observations to explore the first-hand experiences of Malaysian Gen Z TikTok users who actively participated in hashtag trends. This approach allowed the researcher to examine the subjective realities of informants, focusing on their motivations, particularly escapism and the social identities they constructed through online interactions (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). Phenomenology, as both a philosophy and research method, emphasised understanding the essence of human experience (Neubauer et al., 2019) as described by informants. It involved ongoing engagement with a small group of informants to uncover meaningful patterns and relationships in their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). In addition, qualitative research is adopted because its focus on detailed descriptions and narratives provided insights into social phenomena that went beyond simple cause-and-effect analysis (Glesne, 1999). This method is applied to address three research questions: (RQ1) to understand the motivations behind Gen Z's active engagement, (RQ2) to explore online identity formation, and (RQ3) to examine engagement with TikTok hashtag trends. This methodology has proven to be highly effective in analysing complex, context-sensitive events, producing nuanced and detailed data that quantitative methods fail to capture (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Conversely, researchers use detachment, intentionally disregarding biases and personal assumptions to enhance understanding of informants' perspectives to ensure objectivity, (Nieswiadomy, 1993). For example, Gen Z informants participated in in-depth interviews, offering detailed accounts of their experiences with TikTok hashtag trends. As Creswell and Poth (2018) noted, qualitative strategies emphasised the use of words and narratives over numerical data, making them

particularly suitable for exploring detailed social phenomena. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2017) highlighted that qualitative research accommodated multiple perspectives, focusing on how individuals understood, interpreted, and created social reality.

3.3 Method of Data Collection

In this study, data were collected from a variety of sources, including scientific articles, academic publications, conference proceedings, interviews, and online observations. During interviews and online observations, informants openly identified and communicated key themes through their responses (Kibuacha, 2024). These probes encouraged informants to reflect on their motivations and perceived benefits, enabling an examination of how specific needs drive sustained engagement. Also, it enabled informants to articulate how TikTok's features shape their motivations, behaviours, and perceptions of trends, thereby connecting individual experiences to broader platform-driven influences. The themes were systematically recorded using qualitative coding and categorisation, where specific data segments were linked to nodes representing different themes (Nowell et al., 2017), such as Gen Z engagement with TikTok hashtags related to escapism, motivations and social identity. This is intentionally mapped to these constructs to ensure coherence between the study's conceptual framework, data collection, and research questions, while preserving the flexibility inherent in a phenomenological approach.

The researchers identified and selected 12 informants through purposive sampling, contacting them via TikTok. The informants were Malaysian Gen Z users aged between 20 and 28 that were born between 1997 to 2003 and were confirmed to be active TikTok users who were familiar with hashtag trends. Diversity was intentionally incorporated by including six (6) Malays, three (3) Chinese, and three (3) Indians from both urban and suburban areas. The sample consisted of six (6) males and six (6) females, consisting of five (5) students pursuing diploma, bachelor's, or master's degrees, and seven early-career professionals in marketing, logistics, and the digital creative sectors. This diversity was designed to capture the diverse experiences and perspectives of TikTok users relevant to the study objectives.

A pilot study was conducted prior to the main data collection to assess the clarity, relevance, and validity of the 13 interview questions. The initial pilot study

involved two (2) informants. Based on feedback from the volunteers and supervisors, necessary revisions were made to the interview protocol. A second pilot study was then carried out with another two (2) informants, followed by further amendments. After this iterative process, the final interview guide was refined to focus solely on the primary questions aligned with the three (3) research questions. In total, three (3) rounds of pilot testing were conducted, each involving two (2) different volunteers, to validate the research instrument, particularly the interview questions. The pilot testing the interview questions with different informants in each pilot round strengthens the validity and credibility of the research instrument as reusing the same informants could have introduced response bias due to prior exposure to the questions. Using different informants allowed the study to evaluate the clarity and effectiveness of the interview guide under conditions similar to the actual data collection. As a result, before proceeding with the actual interviews, the revised interview questions were reviewed by the supervisors and tested with one to two (2) volunteers to ensure clarity and appropriateness for the main study.

Data collection involved in-depth semi-structured interviews and online observations. 12 interviews were conducted in line with Guest et al.'s (2006) guideline that this number was sufficient to achieve data saturation for a relatively homogeneous group, while Rahimi and Khatooni's (2024) recommendation to conduct two additional interviews for validation was also followed. Informants were recruited and interviewed through a variety of modalities according to availability and preference which are either face-to-face meetings on campus, in the office, or in a café, video conferencing via Google Meet, asynchronous communication via email, and synchronous text discussions. Informants were allowed to use their preferred language and mode of expression to ensure openness. All sessions were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and, where necessary, translated into English for accuracy.

The interviews were guided by three main research questions supported by nine additional questions designed to validate and elaborate on informants' responses. An inductive inquiry approach was used to encourage informants to expand on their experiences. In parallel, online observations focused on publicly available TikTok content (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2024). This study used both overt and covert methods. Informants were not directly aware of these observations, making this component covert. Ethical principles were maintained by limiting the analysis to publicly accessible material and excluding any personal or identifiable information. This balance ensured

that natural online behaviour could be studied while maintaining ethical transparency. Overt interviews were conducted with informed consent and full awareness of participation, while covert themes emerged during analysis, reflecting underlying patterns that were not explicitly stated by informants (Hopman, 2022). This combination allowed the study to capture both explicit expressions and implicit behaviours associated with refugeehood, motivation, and social identity.

Following the data collection, all transcripts and observation notes were imported into NVivo for analysis. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage framework. Firstly, the data were familiarised through repeated reading of the transcripts to gain an overall understanding. Secondly, line-by-line coding was undertaken to identify and categorise meaningful segments of the data. Thirdly, initial themes were generated by grouping related codes into broader categories. Fourthly, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and consistency with the dataset. Fifthly, each theme was defined and named to clearly capture its scope and meaning. Finally, in the sixth stage, the analysis was written up, integrating illustrative informant quotes to support and validate the findings.

The data collection and analysis in this study were not characterised by quantitative metrics, but by the depth and repetition of narrative of qualitative methods. The 12 Malaysian Gen Z informants were interviewed, each offering a different perspective on their experiences with the TikTok hashtag trends. From these discussions, 32 initial codes were generated (refer Figure 3.1), encompassing a variety of motivations, patterns of engagement, and underlying social interests. These codes were progressively integrated into more comprehensive topics, forming the themes of the study. Then, the following developed three (3) main themes and eight (8) sub-themes as data saturation was evident after the eighth interview. There were no new insights generated, and recognised motifs began to re-emerge routinely among informants at this point. However, four more interviews were conducted to ensure robustness and reliability (Guest et al., 2006). These did not present new themes but confirmed the recurrence of established patterns, thus validating the overall data. This marked the conclusion of results, as further interviews produced familiar narratives rather than new insights, clearly indicating that thematic saturation had been achieved.

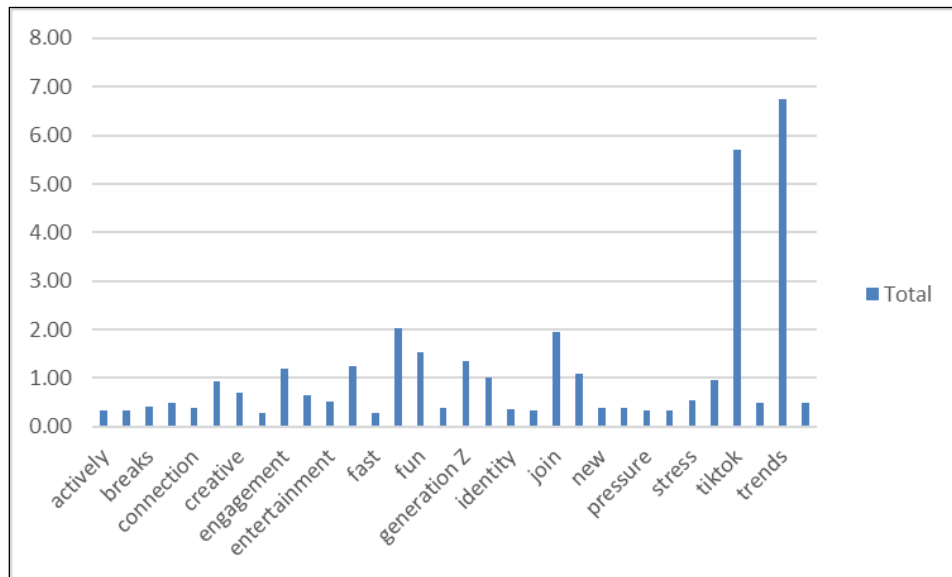


Figure 3.1 Words Used Coded into Nvivo14
Source: Author - Obtained from Nvivo14 Results

3.3.1 In-depth Interviews

Purposive sampling was used in this study to select informants for in-depth semi-structured interviews. Informants were required to be active TikTok users from Generation Z in Malaysia who had participated in the hashtag trend. This targeted approach ensured the inclusion of informants with relevant experiences, allowing for comprehensive and meaningful data collection (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Informants were recruited via TikTok, with recruitment materials outlining the study, eligibility criteria, and electronic consent. Only eligible individuals were invited to participate, and existing informants were able to refer to others who met the inclusion criteria (Guest et al., 2006). A total of 12 informants were targeted, split equally by gender (6 males and 6 females) to achieve balanced representation. However, the final number remained flexible, depending on data saturation where the point at which no new themes or insights emerged, and responses became redundant. This ensured that the data set was rich and comprehensive (Saunders et al., 2018).

In-depth semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection. As a qualitative research approach, in-depth interviews are particularly effective in exploring personal experiences and perspectives (Boyce & Neale, 2006), making them well-suited to investigating the motivations behind specific behaviours, such as TikTok engagement (Neubauer et al., 2019). Compared to narrative interviews, they are more structured, focusing on key topics while still allowing flexibility for

informants to elaborate on their responses (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). This method provides a platform for informants to openly express their motivations and perceptions, fostering meaningful dialogue and generating data that goes beyond what a structured survey or questionnaire can capture (Crimson et al., 2016). This approach is particularly suitable for accessing niche or hard-to-reach demographics, such as Gen Z TikTok users (Creswell, 2014). Insights gleaned from these interviews were then analysed to generate codes and themes, contributing to a deeper understanding of the motivations and behaviours that underpin TikTok hashtag participation (Politz, 2024).

3.3.1.1 Interview Design and Procedure

A structured interview guide guided the sessions, ensuring consistency across informants while allowing flexibility for follow-up questions to explore new or emerging topics (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, providing sufficient depth while remaining practical for informant availability. Semi-structured interviews were used as a qualitative method to examine the motivations and experiences of Malaysian Gen Z users engaging with the TikTok hashtag trend. This design balanced structure with flexibility, accommodating multiple perspectives while allowing room for unexpected insights (Gibbs, 2007).

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with eligible informants, with each session lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes, depending on the depth of the responses. Interviews were carried out using platforms that were most convenient for the informants, including face-to-face meetings on campus, in offices, or in cafés, as well as online platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet. This flexible approach was adopted to ensure accessibility and participant comfort. Informants were recruited based on clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The study targeted Malaysian Generation Z users aged between 20 and 28 years, specifically individuals born between 1997 and 2003, who were confirmed to be active TikTok users. Active use was defined as engaging with the platform on a daily or weekly basis for at least one year, with demonstrated familiarity and engagement with TikTok hashtag trends, either through content creation or regular consumption of trend-related videos. Only informants who were residents of Malaysia were included to ensure the findings reflected the local socio-cultural context of TikTok use. All informants were required to provide informed consent and were willing to share their experiences in a semi-structured interview

setting. Individuals who were not Gen Z, inactive TikTok users, unfamiliar with hashtag trends, non-Malaysian residents, or did not wish to participate were excluded from this study.

At the beginning of each session, opening and warm up questions were used to help informants relax and feel comfortable. The interviewer fostered a conversational atmosphere that encouraged openness and honesty, ensuring that informants felt comfortable sharing their experiences without judgment. Once trust was established, the discussion shifted to questions about the main topic which are the motivation, identity formation, and engagement with TikTok hashtag trends. Also, reminders, prompts, and follow up probes were incorporated rather than relying solely on structured questions to facilitate richer dialogue. Below are the main questions and some of the follow up questions to make sure that informants are comfortable to share their experience.

Table 3.1
The Main Questions and Some of the Follow Up Questions

Main Questions	Follow up Questions
1. What makes you join or skip certain TikTok trends, and how do they make you feel?	1. What motivates you to join TikTok trends? (E.g., entertainment, connection, escapism)
2. How do TikTok trends influence the way you present yourself or connect with others online?	2. Do you use TikTok to take breaks from stress? Can you share an example?
3. What do you think is unique about TikTok's environment that keeps you engaged with its trends?	3. How do you feel when engaging in trends?
	4. Does participating in trends affect how you present yourself online? How?
	5. How do you decide which trends to join or skip?
	6. Do trends help you connect with like-minded people?
	7. What makes TikTok trends more appealing than those on other platforms?
	8. How does the "For You Page" affect your engagement?
	9. Do you feel pressured to join trends? Why or why not?

Source: Author

3.3.2 Informants Background

In this study, 12 interview informants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities, in line with ethical standards of confidentiality. As noted by Lahman et al. (2023), names of people, places, animals, or objects often carry deep personal, cultural, and identity meanings. For this reason, qualitative researchers typically replace such identifiers with pseudonyms to protect informants from potential exposure or harm. This practice was adopted in this study to uphold the ethical principles of anonymity and confidentiality while preserving the confidentiality and richness of informant narratives. The study respected the privacy of informants without compromising the integrity of their accounts or the validity of the findings by using pseudonyms (Wang et al., 2024).

Past studies have used a variety of pseudonym formats, from simple numerical labels (e.g., Informant 1, Informant 2) to coded combinations that include demographic details such as gender and age (e.g., F31 for a 31-year-old woman or M33 for a 33-year-old man). In some cases, lengthier composite codes have been used, such as PIF23 to denote a 23-year-old Pacific Islander woman. While such identifiers add contextual depth, overly long and detailed codes (e.g., MCSEAF78 for a 78-year-old middle-class Southeast Asian woman) risk disrupting the narrative by requiring frequent decoding (Prof Partout, 2024).

Hence, this study provides a summary table of the backgrounds of 12 informants. The table includes age, gender, race, and employment or student status, as well as brief descriptive notes to balance anonymity with richness. Simple numerical pseudonyms (#1, #2, #3, etc.) are used in the findings rather than real names, while the table provides background context separately (Lahman et al., 2023). This approach maintains ethical standards of confidentiality and privacy while still offering readers a deeper understanding of the informants' perspectives, particularly regarding their engagement with TikTok.

Table 3.2
12 Informants' Background from Semi-Structured Interviews

Informant	Age	Race	Gender	Position	Character Description
Informant #1	25	Malay	Male	Enrolled student: Master's in applied Statistics	2 hr/day, escapes academic stress through memes and POV videos
Informant #2	25	Malay	Male	Production Assistant at Media Creative firm	2 hrs/day, motivated by trend virality and community feel
Informant #3	23	Malay	Female	Graphic Designer at Retail brand	1.5 hrs/day, uses TikTok to follow and mimic art/editing influencers
Informant #4	26	Malay	Male	Bachelor's in media, Culture and Communication	2 hrs/day, engages with design- and art-related hashtags
Informant #5	27	Malay	Male	Sales Admin at Logistic company	2 hrs/day, follows trends for social bonding and humour
Informant #6	25	Malay	Female	Social Media Strategist at Advertising Agency	2 hrs/day, interested in cultural commentary and identity content
Informant #7	24	Chinese	Female	Marketing Executive at Digital Agency	3–4 hrs/day, sees TikTok as both work and escape
Informant #8	28	Chinese	Female	Operations and Administration Manager at Telco Communication Provider	1 hr/day, uses TikTok for emotional release, personal struggles and psychological escape
Informant #9	25	India	Female	E-commerce Operation Coordinator at Courier services, and part time tutor	1.5 hrs/day, sees TikTok as escape and emotional relief
Informant #10	20	Malay	Female	Enrolled student: Year 1 in Diploma in Digital Graphic Design	3 hrs/day, watches story-based and lifestyle trends
Informant #11	20	India	Male	Enrolled student: Year 2 in Diploma of Psychology	1 hr/day, follows trending challenges to unwind
Informant #12	22	Chinese	Male	Enrolled student: Final-year student in Multimedia	2.5 hrs/day, passionate about video editing and effects

Source: Author - obtained from interviews with informants

3.3.3 Interview Protocol

The interview protocol for this study was designed to provide a structured yet flexible framework for data collection, ensuring reliability, ethical conduct and consistency across all sessions (Lincoln et al., 1985). In addition, a semi-structured interview guide was prepared in advance and aligned with the study objectives, combining pre-defined topics with flexibility to explore emerging issues in more depth (Gibbs, 2007). Data were collected through online and offline individual interviews conducted between 13 March 2025 and 31 May 2025. Prior to recruitment, informants were identified through purposive sampling on TikTok to ensure diversity in gender, ethnicity, education, and occupation. Each informant received an information sheet and consent form outlining the purpose of the study, confidentiality measures, and their rights as informants. The interview guide was guided by an informant to refine the clarity and flow of questions before the formal interview began. Interviews were scheduled according to each informant's preferences and were conducted either online via Zoom or Google Meet or in person at an office, campus, or coffee shop. Furthermore, the original plan to conduct all interviews online was revised due to scheduling restrictions, Internet connectivity issues, and other unforeseen circumstances.

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher warmly welcomed the informant, explained the objectives of the study, and reiterated that participation was voluntary, confidential, and could be withdrawn at any time. Subsequently, informants were encouraged to respond in their preferred language after providing informed consent, either verbally or in writing to ensure comfort and privacy. The semi-structured design was guided by three main questions: (1) motivations for engaging in TikTok hashtag trends, (2) emotional experiences and consequences of this engagement, and (3) the role of TikTok content in providing relief or influencing daily life. Also, additional research questions were asked when necessary to clarify issues, encourage elaboration, or capture nuanced perspectives (refer Table 3.1). Throughout the sessions, the researcher maintained a neutral and open-ended questioning approach that allowed informants to express their feelings freely while ensuring consistency across interviews. Field notes were taken to document contextual elements, nonverbal cues, and the overall tone of the conversation. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, depending on the depth of responses. In the meantime, adjustments were made when necessary to

accommodate internet access issues and scheduling conflicts, ensuring full participation without compromising data quality.

At the end of each session, informants were invited to share any additional reflections or insights. They were again reminded of their right to withdraw at any time and thanked for their contribution. Also, they were also informed about how their data would be used, stored and protected for the study. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with selected transcripts translated into English where necessary to verify accuracy of interpretation. Audio files and field notes were securely stored in password-protected folders, and transcripts were anonymised using pseudonym codes. The data were then imported into NVivo software for thematic analysis and systematic categorisation. This process was supported by continuous monitoring of data saturation to ensure the full breadth and depth of relevant experiences were captured.

3.3.4 Data Analysis for Interview

This study used thematic analysis to systematically identify, examine, and document patterns and themes that emerged from interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This qualitative approach was optimal for exploring the motivations behind Gen Z's escape, online identity motivations and construction, and patterns of engagement with the TikTok hashtag trend. Thematic analysis was chosen because of its flexibility and rigour in revealing deep insights into the experiences and perspectives of informants (Gibbs, 2007). It facilitates the analysis of both established and emerging concepts, leading to a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. This technique is particularly beneficial in addressing research topics because it connects factors such as escape and social identification to broader patterns of TikTok engagement. Thematic analysis aims to identify trends in Gen Z's motivations for engaging with the TikTok hashtag trend. This aligns with Uses and Gratifications Theory, particularly with informants, as well as Social Identity Theory, which emphasises self-definition in relation to community belonging. The study aims to explain how TikTok trends influence the motivations of Gen Z informants, offering insights into the platform's impact on Malaysian Gen Z through the analysis of interview data from an escapism perspective.

A thematic analysis approach was used to identify initial emerging themes. Initial data analysis led to the development of a central theme, which then informed the formation of other related themes and subthemes. However, not all themes were treated with equal importance, as the amount of information shared by informants varied instead, themes with strong explanatory were prioritised and explored further until data saturation was achieved (refer Figure 3.1). This study used an inductive thematic saturation model, as themes were identified directly from informants' responses rather than from pre-determined codes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The analysis was exploratory and data-driven, allowing new insights to emerge organically throughout the coding process. In this study, saturation is not determined by counting codes but by achieving a full understanding of each code, reviewing the interviews for new aspects, dimensions, or nuances until none emerged anymore (Nascimento et al., 2018). For example, different codes reach saturation at different points in the data set. NVivo software supports analysis by identifying frequently used words, grouping similar terms together and organising dissimilar ones into separate themes. Additionally, NVivo software's word cloud feature is also used to visualise the most common terms across interviews (refer Figure 3.2).

This analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. First, familiarisation with the data required transcribing interviews, reviewing transcripts repeatedly, and documenting initial insights to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the material (Dawadi, 2020). This phase allowed the researcher to identify common themes, such as escape, as consistent motivators for TikTok participation. Second, initial code generation required careful coding of key responses to gain baseline insights. For example, refer Figure 3.2, informants' statements about their motivations for participating in TikTok hashtag trends were categorised with codes such as "escapism," "engagement," or "connection." Third, finding themes requires organising codes into overarching categories that encompass the TikTok trends, such as "creative self-expression," "community belonging," or "trend participation." Fourth, theme screening requires verifying the consistency and significance of emerging themes in relation to the research question, thereby ensuring proper data representation. Fifth, defining and labelling topics involves refining each theme and assigning a concise title that captures its essence, such as "participation motivation" or "online identity formation." Finally, creating a report requires formulating a comprehensive narrative, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), connecting themes to academic frameworks

that the findings are coherent, grounded in informants' lived experiences, and reflective of actual platform practices, while minimising the influence of researcher bias based on the data collected. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the research context, including sustained observation of TikTok content via the For You Page over a three- to four-week period and in-depth semi-structured interviews with active Gen Z users. The combination of interview data and observational field notes enabled triangulation, strengthening the accuracy of interpretations related to engagement, escapism, and trend participation. Firstly, transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of the Malaysian context, informants' characteristics, and the data collection procedures, allowing readers to assess the relevance of the findings to similar populations or platform environments. Next, dependability was ensured through transparent and systematic documentation of the research process, including interview protocols, observation procedures, and analytic steps. Finally, confirmability was supported through reflexive practices, with analytic decisions grounded in the data through the use of direct participant quotations and observation excerpts, ensuring that interpretations were shaped by participants' accounts rather than researcher's assumptions.

Credibility refers to the authenticity of the study's conclusions, ensuring that interpretations reflect the informants' perspectives and lived experiences (The Farnsworth Group, 2024). Therefore, credibility is enhanced through triangulation by integrating interview data with online observations of TikTok hashtag trends. It is further strengthened by systematically validating findings through data collection from multiple sources and cross-validation (Bans-Akutey, 2021). Informant validation is also used by sharing initial findings with a selected group of informants to ensure accurate representation of their views (N. Stahl & King, 2020). In addition, reflexivity is maintained by recording the researcher's reflections throughout the research process to reduce bias and provide an authentic account of the motivations and behaviours of Gen Z TikTok users in Malaysia (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). For example, after discussion, the researcher conducted an expert check by summarising informants' responses during the interview and requesting confirmation that their experiences were accurately captured.

Transferability was supported through purposive sampling that ensured a diverse selection of Gen Z TikTok users from urban areas in Malaysia, providing a broad view of their interactions with hashtag trends. Furthermore, attention was paid to

gender balance and racial representation, which broadened the inclusiveness of perspectives. In line with qualitative research principles, transferability was achieved by offering detailed descriptions of the study context, methods and informants, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts (The Farnsworth Group, 2024). Most importantly, the combination of semi-structured interviews and online observations allowed for a comprehensive understanding of Gen Z's motivations, behaviours and experiences, both individually and collectively (Zorgle, 2023).

Reliability refers to the consistency and stability of the research process, ensuring that findings can be relied upon under similar circumstances (Stahl & King, 2020). This study supported reliability by carefully documenting each stage of the research, including purposive sampling, interview procedures, and thematic analysis (The Farnsworth Group, 2024). For example, each participant was asked the same set of semi-structured questions about TikTok usage, trend engagement, and motivations for their participation. Besides, NVivo software was used to maintain an audit trail of coding and theme development, while achieving data saturation after interviewing 12 informants provided evidence of both consistency and comprehensiveness. For example, during interviews, informants consistently described similar experiences, such as using TikTok primarily for entertainment and escape.

Confirmability reflected the extent to which the findings could be verified by others and were not shaped by researcher bias or personal interests (Zorgle, 2023). Furthermore, confirmability was ensured by grounding conclusions in the data, supported with evidence from transcripts, field notes, and coding records. The systematic documentation and archiving of materials provided a clear audit trail. Peer review and expert consultation were also incorporated as safeguards against bias and to strengthen the methodological rigour of the study (Earnest, 2020). In short, the findings of this study were derived directly from the data and were not unduly influenced by external factors, thereby strengthening both the credibility and reliability of the results (Stahl & King, 2020).

3.5 Ethical Consideration and Confidentiality

Ethical considerations are essential to analyse Gen Z engagement with the TikTok hashtag trend in Malaysia. This study adhered to key ethical principles,

including informed consent, confidentiality, transparency, and informant well-being, to ensure compliance with established research standards (InnovateMR, 2024). Informed consent is an essential element, as it ensures that informants fully understand the nature, objectives, and methodology of the study (ASA Guidelines of 1987, 2001). This study received ethical clearance from the relevant Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA. Prior to the interview, informants received a detailed information sheet outlining the study's aims, methodology, potential risks, benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For instance, informants were asked to sign an electronic consent form to confirm their voluntary participation (see Appendices). The well-being of the informants was prioritised throughout the research process. The researcher created a respectful and comfortable interview atmosphere by engaging in active listening, interpreting nonverbal cues, and maintaining a neutral and non-judgmental stance (Pucci, 2022). Since the study touched on sensitive topics such as emotional needs, social affirmation, and identity formation, interviews were conducted with empathy and sensitivity (Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022). Informants were encouraged to share their perspectives freely, without coercion or external pressure that might influence their participation or responses (Trymata, 2023).

This study targeted Generation Z users aged 20 to 28 years to ensure that all participants were legally able to provide informed consent without requiring parental or guardian approval. Selecting participants aged 20 and above aligns with ethical research standards in Malaysia, where individuals in this age group are recognised as adults capable of making independent decisions regarding research participation. In addition to ethical considerations, this age group is particularly relevant to the study's focus on escapism and engagement with TikTok hashtag trends. Individuals in early adulthood often experience academic, career, and social pressures, which may increase the use of social media as a form of escapism and stress relief. Moreover, as active TikTok users, participants within this age range are likely to have substantial exposure to and involvement in hashtag trends, enabling them to provide informed and reflective responses from the informants that fully understand the nature of the study, the consent process, and their rights, including voluntary participation and withdrawal, thereby strengthening the ethical integrity and validity of the research.

Interviews were audio-recorded only with the express permission of the informant. The recordings were then transcribed for analysis, following ethical

principles that respect autonomy and the right to withdraw at any stage (Hill et al., 2022). Confidentiality and privacy were protected through multiple measures: all personal identifiers were anonymised or removed, and data were stored securely on encrypted devices. Findings reporting ensured that no individual informant could be identified. A systematic audit trail was maintained throughout the research process to ensure integrity and reliability (Solano, 2020). For this study, data, transcripts, and analysis notes were carefully documented, labelled, and updated to reflect modifications. Additionally, reliability checks were carried out through coder agreement assessments, supported by input from the research supervisors, AP Dr. Elena and Dr. Yuslinda Mat Yassin. Their expertise not only validated the accuracy of transcripts but also enhanced the rigour of the study by refining research questions to better align with the study's objectives and theoretical framework (Ahmed, 2024).

3.6 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter described the empirical approach used to examine Malaysian Generation Z's engagement with TikTok hashtag trends, with a particular focus on escapism. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured online and offline interviews conducted between 13 March and 31 May 2025, following the establishment of the qualitative study design, sampling strategy, and informant profiles. The interview protocol outlined the equipment, platforms, and procedures employed to ensure uniformity and methodological rigour. Furthermore, ethical considerations, informed consent, and measures to ensure reliability and validity were also addressed in this chapter. Credibility, trustworthiness, and reliability were strengthened through the maintenance of an audit trail, systematic data management, expert verification, and consultation with research supervisors. The chapter concluded with a commitment to safeguarding the rights, confidentiality, and well-being of informants while upholding academic integrity and ethical standards throughout the research process.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presented the findings from the data analysis. The findings were organised according to the study objectives and the themes identified through inductive thematic analysis. Each theme was directly linked to the relevant research purpose, ensuring clarity and coherence in addressing the study goals. Evidence was drawn from interview narratives, with selected quotes used to illustrate the authentic experiences and perspectives of the informants. The findings were interpreted in relation to theoretical frameworks such as the Theory of Uses and Gratifications and Social Identity Theory, offering a deeper understanding of the underlying motivations and identity processes. This approach provided an in-depth contextual insight into the factors that influenced Generation Z's participation in Malaysian TikTok hashtag trends.

4.1 Introduction of Findings

The analysis of 12 interviews identified three (3) main themes and eight (8) sub-themes regarding Gen Z Malaysia's active engagement with TikTok hashtag trends. The main themes included motivation for participation, online identity forming, and platform design and influence. The (4) four sub-themes emerged from the first theme, motivation for participation that are trend virality, community belonging, entertainment, and a break from reality. Informants frequently expressed a desire to keep up with the latest developments in viral trends, connect with others, and have fun or escape from daily stress. These themes highlighted key parts of the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), particularly the informants' reliance on TikTok to fulfill emotional needs including distraction, belonging, and personal enjoyment.

The second theme, shaping an online identity, encompasses the sub-theme of self-representation and connectedness. Informants stated that they use TikTok hashtag trends to communicate aspects of their personalities and engage with content that reflects their similar lived experiences. This often indicates a longing for social validation or an attempt to avoid exclusion from peer engagement. These findings align with the principles of the Social Identity Theory (SIT), which explains how Gen Z

formulates and controls their digital identities in relation to the peer interactions resulting from TikTok hashtag trends.

The third theme, platform design and influence, analyses how TikTok's algorithmic exposure and engagement functions drive informants' use of the app. Informants highlighted that the For You Page (FYP) consistently displays relevant and emotionally impactful content, fostering long-term engagement and directing engagement in a specific direction. This platform-driven function reflects the integration of personal rewards and social connections in shaping their unexpected patterns of digital media engagement.

Table 4.1
Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Participation Motivation	Online Identity Formation	Platform Design and Influence
Sub-themes	Trends virality	Self-representation	Algorithm exposure
	Community belonging	Relatability	Engagement features
	Entertainment		
	Time out from reality		

Source: Author - obtained from Nvivo14 results

This study draws on the experiences and perspectives of 12 Malaysian Generation Z informants aged 20 to 28, representing a range of genders, races, education and occupations. The sample was equally divided between male and female informants, comprising people from both urban and suburban areas. There were six (6) Malay informants, three (3) Chinese and three (3) Indians. Additionally, the differences in education and employment status influenced how TikTok was used. Among the informants, five (5) informants were diploma, undergraduate or graduate students, and seven (7) were early-career professionals working in marketing, logistics and the digital creative sector. Informants are individuals who regularly engage with TikTok content through both consumption and interaction, rather than passive or occasional use. For example, some are actively interacting with content, such as liking, commenting, sharing, saving videos, or following trends and have experience engaging with trending content, including exposure to trending sounds, formats, or hashtag trends (with or without content creation). Regardless of informants' background, all informants were

active TikTok users, spending 1 to 4 hours per day, with an average of 1.5 to 3 hours a week (refer Figure 4.1).

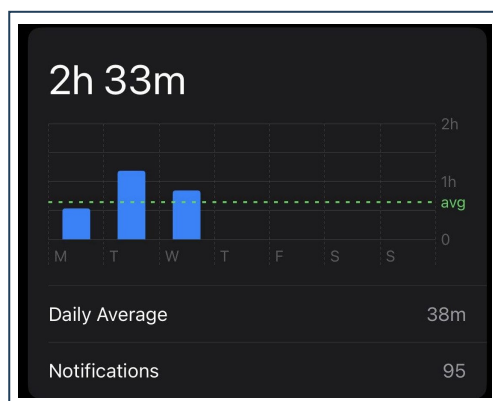


Figure 4.1 Infomant's TikTok Weekly Screen Time
Source: Infomant

Informants' TikTok usage patterns greatly influenced how informants interacted with the growing hashtag trends. TikTok was often used by students as a break from academic expectations, while young professionals saw it as a way to temporarily escape work pressures while maintaining social connections (Ngadiron & Syed Zanudin, 2025). During the interviews, informants consistently described TikTok as a platform for entertainment, emotional release, and self-expression, supporting the main point that Gen Z's engagement with the platform is driven by a need for escapism (Tang, 2021). The words used by informants during interviews provide insight into their motivations to further illustrate this point. Also, these are the frequently repeated words, represented in word bubbles below, capture the way informants' express ideas such as "*trends*," "*escape*," "*breaks*," "*funny*," "*connect*," and "*influences*." These keywords not only highlight informants' lived experiences but also reflect the themes of this study. These frequently used terms not only highlight informants' lived experiences but also describe what they actually experienced and are directly related to the main theme of the study. The repetition of such terms in their natural speech suggests that TikTok hashtag trends are strongly linked to Gen Z's emotional needs, sense of belonging and self-expression. This is derived from an analysis of the genuine perspectives of the informants (refer Figure 4.2).

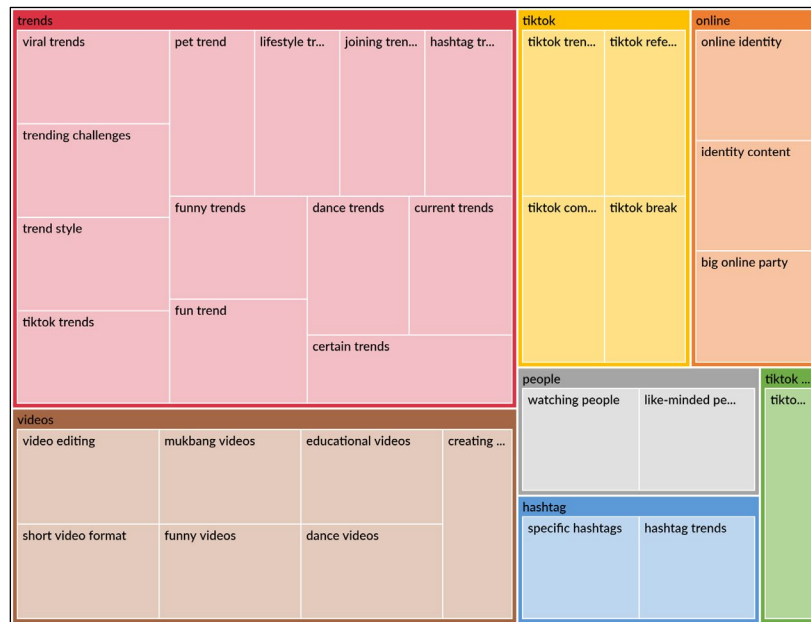


Figure 4.2 Items Coded and References from Informants
Source: Author - obtained from Nvivo14 results

The study also included online observations to investigate the motivations behind Gen Z Malaysia's participation in TikTok hashtag trends, with a specific focus on escapism as a key motivation. Trending videos accessible to the public were analysed without user interaction, adhering to ethical research protocols. The aim was to explore how Gen Z interacts with viral content and trend engagement as a form of emotional relief, distraction and temporary escape from real-life stress. The online observations were conducted using TikTok versions 34.8.x (2024) to 41.1.x (2025) (Illogical Robot LLC, 2025), the latest version available during the data collection period. TikTok continues to advance as a mobile-first video platform with a recently updated version featuring more intuitive editing tools, enhanced audio integration, filters, AR effects, and monetisation features such as TikTok shop (TikTok for Business, 2025). These versions enhance the algorithmically personalised content and FYPs contribute directly to users' motivation to join trends, have lowered participation barriers and encouraged consistent trends engagement. This platform enhancement supports escapism that provides personal comfort, emotional gratification, and a sense of social connection (Galanis et al., 2024).

4.2 Participation Motivation

4.2.1 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 & Andrini, 2023). A TikTok trend involves content that aims to understand the broader context (TikTok For Business, 2025c). 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 (Brzezicki, 2022). 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 (Indeed Editorial Team, 2025).

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 is supported by (Indeed Editorial Team, 2025), who 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 personal 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 escapisms to users as a sense of release, comfort, and distraction, highlighting its importance as a digital sanctuary for emotional and mental well-being (Ngadiron & Syed 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 (Indeed Editorial Team, 2025). Informants indicated that they participated in these viral trends mostly for entertainment or as a form of emotional escape, *“helps me escape the pressures of real life”* or *“TikTok trends are fun and entertaining”*. 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 fulfil 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 personal relief, transforms TikTok into a digital sanctuary for emotional well-being (Zips & Holendová, 2024). This suggests that while UGT captures the motivations behind trend engagement as stated in Zips and Holendová (2024) 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 and 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 trends (Dopson, 2025).

4.2.2 Community Belonging

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 & Chavis, 1986). According to Cambridge University Press & Assessment (2025) 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 educational literature, dating back to Maslow's hierarchy of needs model. According to Maslow (1987), 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. In addition, online platforms allow individuals to share experiences, connect over common interests, and form inclusive communities that celebrate identity and provide social support (Public Administration Note, 2024). Social media platforms can fulfil basic personal 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 phenomenon in which an individual feels anxious or worried that others are having a rewarding experience in which they are not present (Rozgonjuk et al., 2021). 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 (Chan et al., 2022).

This theme is closely related to the 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 behaviours that emerge from FOMO from the online communities. Informants agree that by participating in TikTok trends, not only fulfil 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 strengthening social bonds.

4.2.3 Entertainment

According to Collins Dictionaries (2025), entertainment consists of drama and film performances, as well as activities such as reading and watching television, that provide people with enjoyment. On TikTok, entertainment extends this concept into digital and interactive forms, where short videos, trends and creative content provide users with instant enjoyment and engagement. TikTok allows users to not only consume content but also actively participate through the creation, sharing and interaction with videos, making entertainment a highly personalised and socially connected experience (TikTok, 2024b), unlike traditional media like television, radio and cinema. This combination of fun, entertainment, creativity and interaction illustrates how TikTok functions as a modern platform for digital entertainment.

TikTok represents a new era of digital entertainment, characterised by media fragmentation and fierce competition for audience attention (TikTok for Business, 2025). Informants echoed this view, describing the platform as a space where attention-earning content thrives within an environment that feels inclusive and engaging. According to Austin (2025), TikTok's appeal lies in its visual immediacy, viral

potential, interactive audience engagement, seamless trend integration, and cost-effective reach making it particularly attractive to a younger, tech-savvy demographic (Ma, 2024). Informants reinforced this by expressing how they turn to TikTok not just for passive consumption, but for a blend of entertainment and informal learning. They reported using TikTok to laugh, learn, and discover new ideas that are often at the expense of more traditional or long-form entertainment. In this sense, TikTok has not only transformed how content is consumed but has also redefined what counts as entertainment for Gen Z users.

For example, one informant explained,

“I watch TikTok because it's fun and makes me laugh. I use TikTok every day. I like funny videos, dance trends, and short vlogs. It shows me the latest trends, so I always know what's popular. It's a fun way to stay connected and it's like my digital entertainment. It's entertaining because I like sharing my own content and seeing the reactions.”

(Informant #7)

Similarly, one informant noted,

“TikTok is a source of entertainment for me. I enjoy how personalised the content feels and how easy it is to discover fun, creative, and sometimes even educational videos. I used TikTok mainly for entertainment and to feel connected with others. Trends are fun and let me express myself. Sometimes it's a form of escapism and it helps me take my mind off stress.”

(Informant #5)

TikTok provides a dynamic form of entertainment that goes beyond passive consumption, combining fun, creativity and social interaction. The findings from the interviews revealed that informants engaged with the platform for entertainment by keeping up to date and enjoying and exploring creative content and connecting with others (Jessica, 2024). Informants stated that these interactive experiences drove their engagement and fostered a sense of belonging and community among Gen Z users. This response suggests that TikTok's entertainment value is closely linked to social participation, demonstrating how content sharing and engagement contribute to fun and community building on the platform (Krisadhi et al., 2023).

The motivation to engage with TikTok trends can be understood through the lens of Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), specifically within the framework of

entertainment and escapism. According to UGT, media users actively select content to satisfy personal and social needs (Katz et al., 1973). TikTok trends provide users with opportunities for entertainment, such as humour, creativity, and aesthetic pleasure, which fulfil their desire for fun and recreation. At the same time, trends serve escapism as a function, allowing users to temporarily escape from the stress or boredom of daily routine, offering a sense of relief and emotional refreshment (Ruggiero, 2000). The hedonic aspect seeking pleasure and excitement is central to this motivation, as users experience excitement, curiosity, and novelty when interacting with trending content. Thus, engagement with TikTok trends reflects a conscious choice to seek media experiences that provide emotional satisfaction and diversion, highlighting the platform's role as a source of immediate gratification and leisure for Generation Z users.

4.2.4 Time-Out From Reality

In Yildirim Demirdöğen et al. (2024) study, mentioned that problematic internet use was defined as excessive and uncontrolled internet use that negatively affects daily life functioning. However, with platforms like TikTok, users often engage with content as a way to take a “time out” from reality, using the platform to relax, distract themselves, or temporarily escape from daily stress (Riley, 2014). This form of engagement allows individuals to enjoy personal time and emotional relief without having to experience the negative consequences associated with problematic internet use. As such, TikTok can serve as a tool for entertainment, stress management, and momentary escape, providing users with a controlled and enjoyable digital break from the demands of real life (Rehman et al., 2024).

For example, one informant pointed out that,

“I use TikTok for about an hour every day as a way to take a break from personal struggles and to release emotions. Especially when I feel tired or anxious, scrolling through funny or calming videos helps me escape reality and feel better.”

(Informant #8)

Two informants also emphasised similar points,

“I join the trends mostly for the fun of it, but it also allows me to escape for a while from the pressures of real life.”

(Informant #9)

“Participating in TikTok trends is enjoyable and helps me forget my problems for a while, providing a temporary escape from stress.”

(Informant #10)

One informant added further insight, stating that,

“I get involved in TikTok trends for entertainment and social connections. When life feels heavy, participating gives me something light and fun to focus on, serving as a form of escape.”

(Informant #11)

Informants reported using TikTok as a way to escape the stresses and strains of daily life (Zsila & Reyes, 2023). They described the platform as a source of stress relief, stating that participating in hashtag trends, watching humorous content, or engaging with POV videos helped them feel less stressed by academic or work-related demands. Several informants explained that scrolling through TikTok or creating content allowed them to unwind after studying or completing daily responsibilities, providing temporary emotional relief. These responses highlighted TikTok’s role in offering relief from personal struggles, suggesting that the platform serves as a safe and accessible outlet for managing emotions (Zsila & Reyes, 2023). Escapism and emotional relief emerged as the primary motivations for engagement, suggesting that TikTok fulfils not only entertainment needs but also important resilience functions for students and working adults.

4.3 Online Identity Formation

4.3.1 Self-Representation

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 (Wilson et al., 2024) 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 (Christakis et al., 2025).

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 (C. C. Stahl & 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 how trends affect one's presentation 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 humour. 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 behaviour 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.

4.4 Platform Design and Influence

4.4.1 Algorithm Exposure

Platform design and influence refers to the intentional arrangement of features, interface elements, and user interactions within a digital platform that can shape behaviour, engagement, and social interactions (Baumann et al., 2026). 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, prioritise, or display content to users based on their past behaviour, 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 (Baumann et al., 2026).

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 behaviour and increased engagement with trending content (Addiction Center, 2024). 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 stecustec."

(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.

4.4.2 Engagement Feature

Social media engagement is the process of interacting with online communities and evaluating the effectiveness of these interactions across digital platforms (Qualtrics, 2025). Social features encompass a variety of functions designed to foster interaction, collaboration, and community building, including messaging, forums, comment sections, user profiles, content sharing, and likes or reactions. The platform transforms from a static site into a dynamic, interactive community that encourages deeper engagement with content and other users (Noren, 2025). On TikTok, the For You Page (FYP) represents a key engagement feature. It is a personalised content feed tailored to individual interests and interaction patterns. The FYP is the first feed that users see when they open the app, and the more they engage with the platform, the more the FYP reflects their preferences, showing creators and content they are likely to enjoy (TikTok, 2025). This personalised and dynamic feed encourages ongoing exploration, participation in trends, and ongoing user engagement.

TikTok FYP, in particular, was frequently used by students and digital workers as a reason for increased usage, as its personalised recommendations often guided users toward trending content without active search (Ma, 2024). Informants working in design, marketing, and multimedia also appreciated TikTok's editing tools, which made trends fun and easy to replicate. Some informants stated that they were interested in video editing and specifically engaged with the stream as an opportunity to showcase their skills. TikTok likes, shares, and responses from the community provided a sense of inclusion and validation, further motivating users to participate in trends that were fun, popular, and socially beneficial (Marlina & Hakim, 2025).

For example, two informants mentioned the how addictive personalised FYP that affect their active engagement,

“My FYP really affected my engagement. It caught my attention quickly because it was all the things I liked, I ended up scrolling and engaging more.”

(Informant #4)

“TikTok FYP keeps me updated on what's trending and introduces me to new content I wouldn't otherwise look for. It often piqued my interest in joining, especially the new filters, catchy songs and the hashtag trends.”

(Informant #5)

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

“I usually use TikTok during my free time or before bed, about an hour daily. I engage with a mix of content including funny skits, lifestyle vlogs, makeup tutorials, humour, life hacks, and trending challenges.”

(Informant #12)

“I usually use TikTok during my free time or before bed, for about an hour every day. I watch a mix of content including funny skits, lifestyle vlogs, makeup tutorials, jokes, life hacks, and trending challenges. The For You page always shows me videos that match my interests, and I think TikTok's filters, music, and effects make it easy to try out trends for myself. It's entertaining and fun, and I feel connected because the features are relevant to my interests.”

(Informant #10)

TikTok's features greatly influence engagement trends. Informants highlight the addictive nature of the “For You” page (FYP), which continuously delivers trends aligned with their interests, encouraging long-term and repeat engagement. TikTok engagement features are easy-to-use such as filters, music, and templates appear to lower the barrier to participation, allowing users to join trends quickly and easily (Kemp, 2024). Other TikTok features are the validation through likes, views, and comments further reinforces engagement, creating a social feedback loop that drives continued engagement.

4.5 Online Observations

One of the most basic and oldest research methodologies is observation in qualitative research. This approach involves the systematic and meaningful collection of data through the use of one's senses, especially listening and observing (McKechnie,

2008). An online observation approach was methodically implemented to ensure thorough data collection. The study examined the algorithmically generated For You Page and targeted hashtag feeds as digital research sites, recognising how its development features, e.g., intuitive editing tools, integrated audio that influenced TikTok user behaviour. A covert, online observation methodology was initially established, describing the units of analysis such as trends involved and an initial coding framework based on the theoretical objectives of the study (Crimson et al., 2016). This covert approach emerged during analysis, reflecting underlying results that were not openly stated by informants (Hopman, 2022). Observations focused on public content from Malaysian Gen Z TikTok users that were involved in specific viral trends, monitoring behaviours including hashtag usage, creative modifications, and engagement trends. During this process, the researcher maintained a strict non-participant position, avoiding any contact such as liking or commenting to ensure an unobtrusive and passive presence. Data were systematically documented through comprehensive field notes, encompassing descriptive accounts of the videos and their engagement metrics, complemented by analytical memos that included initial interpretations, emerging themes, and reflexive insights, thereby generating a robust data set for subsequent thematic analysis (Ayton, 2023).

Observation notes were recorded as structured field notes rather than verbatim transcripts. The notes focused on descriptive observations such as the recurring visual themes, common captions, hashtag usage, and interaction patterns and analytic reflections (e.g., initial interpretations related to engagement motives and identity expression). Furthermore, each entry included the date of observation, hashtag name, video type, and brief contextual details such as engagement indicators such as likes, comments, shares. Notes were written immediately after each observation session to maintain accuracy and were used to complement the interview data by providing contextual and visual insights into how TikTok hashtag trends are enacted in practice, rather than to quantify platform activity. For example, the observation focused on recurring content patterns, user interactions, and engagement cues related to trend participation. Data were systematically documented through screenshots of selected videos and hashtag pages, accompanied by field notes that captured contextual details such as captions, visual themes, engagement metrics, and observable interaction patterns. These materials were used to support and contextualise insights generated from the interview data.

Online observations for this study were conducted using TikTok versions 34.8.x (2024) to 41.1.x (2025) (Illogical Robot LLC, 2025), the latest available during the data collection period. TikTok continues to evolve as a mobile-first video platform, introducing features that enhance both content creation and user experience. TikTok recent updates include more intuitive editing tools, improved audio integration, a variety of AR filters and effects, and monetisation features such as TikTok Shop (TikTok for Business, 2025). These features not only make video production easier but also reinforce personalised content based on the algorithm presented on the For You Page (FYP). TikTok encourages greater participation in trends, making it easier for users to consistently engage by reducing technical and creative barriers. The combination of personalised recommendations, interactive tools, and instant rewards encourages users to seek entertainment, escape, and social connection, reinforcing their ongoing engagement with trending content. A non-participant observation approach was adopted, where the researcher's role was solely to observe and analyse publicly available content and behaviour without direct interaction (Crimson et al., 2016). The observations focused primarily on content presented on the For You Page (FYP) (refer Table 4.2), as this feed reflects trends curated by TikTok's algorithm and captures the content most visible to users. A purposeful sampling strategy was used to select trending content representing a variety of themes, including entertainment, humour, dance, transformation, and lifestyle. Observations were conducted for 30 hours, recording data such as the number of likes, comments, shares, usage of trending sounds or hashtags, video style, and user interaction patterns. This approach allowed researchers to systematically capture how Gen Z users interact with trending content, identify recurring patterns, and understand the motivational factors particularly entertainment and escape that drive consistent participation in TikTok trends. Since TikTok content is fast-moving and trends can change daily, a common approach in qualitative research is to observe for several weeks to obtain a representative sample of trending content. Therefore, the total observation time is 30 hours over 3 to 4 weeks, across different times of the day to capture variations in trends and engagement patterns. This gives enough time to analyse trends, interactions, and user behaviour.

Table 4.2
Examples 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	Light-hearted 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 #businesstips	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.

Source: Author - obtained from TikTok, observed during the study

The observation was directed toward content featured on the FYP, as this feed reflects algorithmically curated trends that typify the broader TikTok experience. Researchers set a particular attention given to trending hashtags, viral audios, and patterns of participation, such as humour, dance, transformation, and lifestyle content (refer Table 4.2). This focus ensured that data collected remained relevant to the research aim of exploring entertainment and escapism as key motivations for trend engagement. Based on the online observations, hashtags such as #fyp, #viral, #foryou, and #trending, alongside niche tags such as #smallbusiness, #ASMR, or #OOTD serves

as portals to digital communities by signalling shared interests and membership. The visibility of social interaction signals encourages participation, with films with high levels of likes, comments, and shares serving as templates for replication. The algorithmic repetition of popular forms lowers barriers to participation by making the material seem familiar and accessible (Koç, 2023). A clear example, TikTok's algorithm keeps users engaged is the viral "*Nothing beats a Jet2 vacation.*" This audio, originally created for a British airline advertising campaign, has been repurposed by Gen Z users to humorously describe vacation mishaps or unexpected life situations. The sound instantly attracted tens of millions of likes, with the most popular video alone receiving over 35 million (Murray, 2025). The algorithm proceeds to amplify related videos, ensuring further exposure to the trend when people search for this sound or find it on their For You Page (FYP). Also, this algorithmic reinforcement loop not only increases familiarity with the music but also lowers the creative barrier to entry by allowing users to quickly replicate the current format while adding their own spin (Scholl, 2023).

On top of that, 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 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. Moreover, 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 (TikTok for Business, 2025). Furthermore, 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 & Mustapha, 2023). Additionally, 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 & Holendová, 2024). 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 (Reetz, 2024).

Moreover, similar trends can be seen that is a more Malaysian-specific phenomenon, where hashtags and locally resonant music gain traction through similar algorithmic amplification. For example, Malaysian Gen Z producers frequently use the hashtag #TungTungSahur, synonymous with the hustle and bustle of Ramadan celebrations, to playfully capture the practice of pre-dawn dining. This method typically combines cultural expression and comedy. Engaging users with one or two of these films quickly fills their FYPs with similar content, encouraging playful participation while reinforcing a sense of cultural belonging. In a similar vein, hashtags like #JedagJedug (a fast-paced dance edit), #MakeAChange (a transformation/light video) and #SmileIfYou (a relatable, humorous prompt) demonstrates how algorithmic curation consistently generates content that seamlessly integrates global trending aesthetics with local cultural preferences.

This study did not focus on any specific hashtag, trend, or challenge. Instead, observations were conducted through TikTok's For You Page (FYP), reflecting how Generation Z users typically encounter and engage with trending content via algorithmic recommendation rather than intentional hashtag search. Content was observed organically as it appeared on the FYP during the observation period of three (3) to four (4) weeks, encompassing a total of 30 hours across different times of the day rather than quantifying specific hashtags or videos, the observation prioritised identifying recurring content formats, trending sounds, visual styles, and interaction patterns that signalled trend participation. Data were documented using structured field notes and anonymised screenshots of representative content to capture contextual features such as video style, engagement cues, and trend indicators. This approach ensured that the observations remained aligned with everyday user experiences while allowing for systematic analysis of how trends emerge, circulate, and are interpreted within TikTok's algorithm-driven environment. However, to estimate the method this online observation method is approximately 900–1,200 videos in total where videos typically ranged from 15–60 seconds, but with scrolling, replays, pauses, and note-taking, qualitative observation usually averages 1–2 minutes per video depending on video length and engagement.

4.6 Summary of the Chapter

For Research Question 1 (RO1), the study found that motivation is strongly driven by FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), trends, pressure, and the influence of digital immersion. Many informants expressed that they follow trends to remain socially relevant, avoid exclusion, and stay connected with peers. TikTok's fast-paced algorithm and real-time culture further encouraged this participation, making trend-following feel almost compulsory for many Gen Z users.

For Research Question 2 (RO2), findings revealed that trends are used both for individual expression and social alignment. The theme of originality emerged as users creatively adapt trends to reflect their personality while still fitting into community norms. This balancing act allows users to maintain a sense of uniqueness while also reinforcing group belonging, showing that trends significantly contribute to how Gen Z curates their digital identities.

For Research Question 3 (RO3) the platform's immersive design, endless scroll, and emotionally engaging content were found to promote frequent interaction. Many informants cited escapism, emotional relief, and the ease of content discovery as key motivators. The platform encourages habitual use, making trend engagement not only socially driven but also tied to emotional and personal needs.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This chapter will conclude the findings in light of the research objectives and theoretical frameworks discussed in earlier chapters. The discussion will explore the implications of the findings, their limitations, and contributions to existing knowledge. This study successfully achieved all of the three research objectives, namely (1) to investigate Generation Z TikTok users choose to actively contribute to and follow TikTok hashtag trends, (2) to examine Generation Z users' perceptions of the role that TikTok hashtag trends play in shaping their online identity, and (3) explore how the TikTok platform influences the motivation of Generation Z users to engage with the trends.

5.1 Summary of Findings

The first objective, which aimed to explore the motivations behind Gen Z Malaysians' actively contributing to and following hashtag trends, the findings reveal motivations rooted in viral trends, community belonging, entertainment, and the need for temporary relief from daily stress. The second objective, which examined how TikTok hashtag trends shape online identities, as informants stated that engaging with trends allows them to experiment with self-representation and connectedness, thereby strengthening their digital presence and social belonging, particularly the For You Page, in shaping user experience and encouraging active hashtag trends engagement. The third objective, which investigated the influence of the TikTok platform on motivation, was also achieved. Furthermore, findings showed that escapism was the primary motivation, with many informants expressing that they used TikTok for emotional relief and as a distraction from real-life stress. Moreover, the role of the algorithm's disclosure and engagement features, particularly the For You Page (FYP), was crucial in maintaining user motivation. The platform's immersive design fostered repeat engagement and deeper participation through the continuous presentation of trending content. This insight confirmed that all three objectives were achieved through the analysis of interview data, providing a comprehensive understanding of Gen Z's motivations, identity expression, and platform-driven experiences on TikTok.

Although the findings were initially categorised into themes and subthemes, closer examination revealed that they consistently converged on three overarching saturated outcomes that are escapism, FOMO, and digital immersion, which highlight how Malaysian Gen Z users are not passive consumers but active TikTok users seeking emotional, social, and cognitive gratification through TikTok. Under the first theme, participation motivation, sub-themes such as virality, community belonging, entertainment, and time out from reality all referred to escapism, as informants repeatedly described TikTok as a space for temporary relief, fun, and distraction from daily stress. For online identity formation, elements such as self-representation and relatedness were strongly tied to fear of missing out (FOMO), with informants emphasising the importance of staying relevant, connected, and socially included through TikTok trends. The third theme, in platform design and influence, the role of algorithmic disclosure and engagement features reflected the depth of digital immersion, demonstrating how TikTok's design encourages prolonged engagement and shapes user behaviour. Therefore, the table below presents the main themes that were identified across the three research questions, derived from the interview results. These themes re-emerged consistently throughout the coding process, demonstrating data saturation and reflecting core patterns that explain Gen Z's motivations for joining the TikTok hashtag trends.

Table 5.1
Saturated Key Themes Across All Three Research Questions, Based on the Interviews Findings

Themes	Participation Motivation	Online Identity Formation	Platform Design and Influence
Sub-themes	Trends virality	Self-representation	Algorithm exposure
	Community belonging	Relatability	Engagement features
	Entertainment		
	Time out from reality		
Saturated Results	Escapism	FOMO	Digital immersion

Source: Author - obtained from Nvivo14 results

The first saturation result, escapism, emerged strongly from the motivational theme of participation. Informants repeatedly described TikTok as a way to relieve

stress, overcome boredom, and temporarily escape from academic demands, work pressures, or personal struggles. Viral trends, in particular, offer light-hearted entertainment and humour, transforming TikTok into a digital haven where users can disconnect from real-life stress. Escapism, therefore, is not a secondary effect but a primary driver of participation, shaping how Gen Z uses TikTok to manage emotional well-being. The first theme, motivation for participation, reflects the variety of reasons why Gen Z users join trends, from entertainment and excitement to a desire for visibility and community belonging. Informants described how trends offer opportunities to showcase creativity and personality, while also providing relief from academic and personal stress. Trend contagion is a strong driver of engagement, as informants are drawn to content that is widely distributed and likely to reach the For You Page. This demonstrates how TikTok trends fulfil both personal and social needs, giving users the opportunity to express themselves while feeling connected to a larger community.

The second saturation result, FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), is closely related to the formation of online identities. Informants emphasised the pressure to join trends in order to remain socially relevant and avoid being excluded from peer conversations. Many explained that engaging with trends allows them to maintain visibility among friends and feel connected to what “others” are doing. This illustrates how participation is not only about self-expression, but also about fulfilling social expectations and reinforcing group belonging. In this way, FOMO functions as a motivator and a form of social anxiety, prompting Gen Z to align their digital identities with broader collective practices. The second theme, online identity formation, highlights how TikTok trends function as a medium for self-representation and connectedness. Informants explained that they often adapt or remix trends to reflect their personalities, demonstrating originality in a shared format. At the same time, they use trends to align themselves with peers, creating a sense of connectedness and shared understanding. This balance between personal expression and group conformity demonstrates how TikTok is a space where identities are continually shaped and negotiated through collective digital practices.

The third saturation outcome, digital immersion, is strongly related to the design and influence of the TikTok platform. Informants described how the algorithm continuously exposed them to viral trends, encouraging prolonged engagement. Features such as duets, sounds, and hashtags created a seamless cycle of participation, where users could easily replicate or adapt trends. Over time, this led to habitual use

and deep immersion in the platform, with TikTok becoming part of their daily routine. Digital immersion, therefore, reflects not only the design of TikTok's technology but also the extent to which Gen Z users became embedded in its streaming ecosystem. The third theme, platform design and influence, captures how TikTok's algorithm and features actively shape user engagement. Informants highlighted how the algorithm's exposure makes certain trends inevitable, as viral content appears repeatedly on the For You Page, encouraging both active and passive engagement. Additionally, built-in tools such as hashtags, filters, duets, and sound effects also lower the barriers to participation, making it easier for users to join and maintain interactions. This reflects how the platform itself plays an active role in motivating engagement, drawing users deeper into an immersive environment.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

As for the two theories, the analysis shows that both UGT and SIT have played an important role in explaining Gen Z engagement with TikTok hashtag trends. User engagement with trends clearly illustrates the pursuit of entertainment, escape, self-expression, and emotional relief. Informants stated that they used TikTok trends to relieve stress, to reduce boredom, or to increase visibility. The motivational themes of participation directly support UGT's focus on gratifications such as entertainment, escape, and self-expression. Informants consistently described how they used the stream to relieve stress, regulate emotions, or simply enjoy humorous and relatable content, consistent with the escapism saturation findings. Similarly, digital immersion reflects how TikTok's algorithm consistently fulfils users' needs for entertainment and distraction, making media consumption a common and rewarding practice. These results underscore UGT's claim that media consumption is not passive but driven by active audience choices to fulfil specific needs.

From an SIT perspective, the findings demonstrate how identity and group belonging are central to Gen Z's participation in TikTok trends. The theme of online identity formation reflects the principles of self-categorisation and social comparison of SIT, as users adopt, remix, and share trends to mark their membership in digital communities. Besides, the FOMO saturation result highlights the concept of belonging within SIT groups, as informants admitted to joining trends primarily to avoid social exclusion and stay connected with peers. Therefore, trends act as social markers,

shaping how individuals see themselves and how they are seen by others in the group. Additionally, digital immersion reinforces identity through repeated group engagement, where consistent participation strengthens bonds with the online community and validates one's social identity.

Together, these insights suggest that UGT and SIT are not isolated explanations but are intertwined in the context of TikTok. While UGT highlights how users fulfil personal, social and emotional needs through media consumption, SIT explains how these same practices are tied to social identity and group belonging. Thus, TikTok hashtag trends represent a dual process in which satisfaction is achieved individually such as escape, entertainment, creativity and socially like belonging, visibility, relevance. This suggests that media consumption and identity formation theories must increasingly be used in combination to fully capture the complexity of a short-form, trend-driven platform like TikTok.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

This study presents several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the limited sample size of 12 informants, selected through purposive sampling, limits the findings. This approach provided a detailed view of the informants' experiences; however, the findings may not be representative of the broader Generation Z population. The sample was limited to Malaysian youths who were identified as Malay, Chinese, or Indian, which shows some ethnic diversity, however, it does not include other cultural, linguistic, and regional groups, including East Malaysian youths from Sabah and Sarawak, or individuals from rural and suburban areas. The findings mostly reflect the urban and digitally engaged segment of Gen Z in Malaysia. Future research should expand the demographic scope to explore more diverse perspectives. Next, the qualitative nature of the study introduces a degree of subjectivity into the interpretation of the data. Data triangulation and collaborative coding were used to increase credibility and reduce individual bias. However, thematic analysis continued to rely on the researcher's perspective and interpretation. Social desirability biases are likely to influence informants' responses, as individuals may have offered answers, they considered socially acceptable, particularly regarding identity, motivation, or digital behaviour. In addition, the exclusive focus on TikTok hashtag trends limits the breadth of the study. Other important aspects of TikTok related to TikTok usage, including

content monetisation such as TikTok stores, private messaging, and cross-platform engagement, e.g., sharing TikToks on Instagram or WhatsApp, were not analysed. These areas could significantly impact Gen Z's engagement with the platform and warrant exploration in future research.

Another important limitation lies in the timing of data collection. Data collection was conducted between March and May 2025, so the study only reflects a short-term view of user behaviour. TikTok trends are highly dynamic, evolving daily or weekly, and informant motivations may change rapidly in response to new viral content, cultural events, or algorithm changes. Therefore, the findings represent a timely snapshot and may not fully capture long-term or evolving TikTok engagement patterns. Furthermore, the tendency toward social desirability imposes constraints, as informants may have offered answers that are considered socially acceptable, particularly on matters of identity, motivation, and digital behaviour. Interviews were conducted with transparency and informed consent, while the online observation component required analysing publicly accessible TikTok content without direct notification to the user. This introduces an element of anonymity to the study and reduces the contextual depth of findings, as the user's intentions and motivations cannot be directly explored. Finally, if any interviews require translation or back-translation, there is a potential risk of losing meaning or subtle nuances, which could compromise the accuracy of interpretation during thematic coding.

5.4 Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on Malaysian Gen Z users, resulting in valuable insights while limiting the cultural scope. Future research should involve a 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. Moreover, this analysis will show whether such motivations

as escaping reality are common or specific to different specific backgrounds. Additionally, while this study examines hashtag trends on TikTok, which provides a variety of features that influence user engagement, including monetisation 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.

Furthermore, 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 motivations and behaviours 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. Consequently, 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 behaviour, they raise questions about privacy and informed consent. Additionally, 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.

Furthermore, 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.

5.5 Theoretical Reflexivity

The two theories, (1) Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and (2) Social Identity Theory (SIT) provide a useful lens for understanding Gen Z engagement with TikTok hashtag trends, their application in this study also reveals certain limitations that warrant critical reflection. UGT assumes that media users are largely autonomous, goal-oriented actors who consciously select media to satisfy pre-existing needs such as entertainment, social connection, or escapism. However, in the context of TikTok's algorithmically curated "For You" page, this assumption may be overly simplistic. Informants' accounts suggest that engagement often emerges from prolonged exposure to personalised content streams rather than deliberate media choice, indicating that gratifications may be shaped or intensified through algorithmic recommendation systems rather than independently sought by users. This challenges UGT's emphasis on user agency and highlights the need to account for platform-driven influences in contemporary social media environments.

Meanwhile, SIT helps explain how hashtag participation fosters a sense of belonging and shared identity, the theory traditionally conceptualises social identities as relatively stable and group based. On TikTok, however, identity expression appears more fluid, situational, and performance-oriented, shaped by trends that are ephemeral and algorithmically amplified. Informants frequently shifted between hashtags and communities, suggesting a form of "temporary" or "ambient" identification rather than long-term group affiliation. This complicates SIT's assumption of enduring in-group/out-group boundaries and suggests that TikTok hashtag engagement may reflect momentary alignment rather than sustained social identity formation. Taken together, these findings indicate that while UGT and SIT remain valuable explanatory frameworks, they are insufficient on their own to fully capture the dynamics of engagement on algorithmically driven platforms such as TikTok. Future theoretical approaches may benefit from integrating insights from critical algorithm studies or platform studies to better account for how user motivations and identities are co-produced through interactions between individual agency and platform design.

5.5.1 UGT and Algorithmic Influence

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) traditionally emphasises user agency, conceptualising media audiences as active and autonomous individuals who consciously select media to satisfy pre-existing needs. While this thesis acknowledges the relevance of this perspective, the findings suggest that such an assumption is increasingly difficult to sustain within algorithmically driven platforms such as TikTok. Informants' engagement with hashtag content was often shaped by personalised recommendation systems rather than intentional media choice, indicating that gratifications may emerge through prolonged algorithmic exposure rather than deliberate selection. Critical algorithm scholars argue that algorithms do not simply respond to user preferences but actively participate in shaping attention, desire, and affective engagement (Bucher, 2018; Couldry, 2020). From this perspective, escapism and entertainment may not function solely as antecedent motivations, as assumed by UGT, but may be intensified or even partially produced through platform design features such as infinite scroll and reward-based content circulation. This tension highlights a theoretical limitation of UGT in its traditional form and underscores the need to reinterpret user agency as relational and co-constructed within algorithmic systems rather than wholly autonomous.

5.5.2 SIT and the Performativity of Identity

The Social Identity Theory (SIT) provides a useful framework for understanding how TikTok hashtag participation facilitates feelings of belonging and group affiliation and its application in this chapter tends to foreground identity expression as a largely voluntary and agentic act. In digitally networked environments such as TikTok, however, identity performance is often shaped by structural and contextual constraints that extend beyond individual intention. The concept of "context collapse" highlights how multiple audiences, peers, strangers, and algorithmically inferred publics are simultaneously addressed within a single communicative space, limiting users' ability to tailor self-presentation to distinct social groups (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Within this collapsed context, identity expression becomes a strategic and often cautious performance rather than a purely expressive act. Moreover, Papacharissi's (2015) notion of fragmented or networked selfhood suggests that digital identities are not stable

or singular but distributed across platforms, moments, and affective states. Informants' shifting engagement with TikTok hashtags may therefore reflect situational alignment and performative experimentation rather than enduring in-group identification as traditionally conceptualised by SIT. Hashtag participation, in this sense, operates less as evidence of stable social identity formation and more as a transient performance calibrated to visibility, audience reception, and algorithmic amplification. This perspective complicates SIT's assumption of relatively coherent and enduring group identities and underscores the need to understand TikTok identity work as negotiated, constrained, and contextually fragmented.

5.6 Summary of the Chapter

This study concludes that escapism is not merely a form of avoidance but a meaningful social process shaping Gen Z's participation in digital culture. Through TikTok hashtag trends, young users negotiate identity, belonging, and emotional balance in an increasingly mediated world. The findings highlight the dual role of TikTok as a space of self-expression and social connection, yet also a platform that amplifies validation-seeking behaviour. All research objectives are explicitly aligned with the revised research questions and are based on the theoretical framework of the study, ensuring internal consistency across the thesis. Each objective directly corresponds to a specific research question and operationalises the core theoretical constructs that underpin the study. Specifically, the Uses and Gratification Theory inform the examination of escapism as a motivational factor (RO1/RQ1), an identity construction perspective guides the exploration of online identity formation through hashtag trends (RO2/RQ2), and critical algorithmic research provides a theoretical foundation for analysing the influence of TikTok platform features and algorithmic dynamics (RO3/RQ3) on user engagement. This structured alignment ensures conceptual coherence between the study goals, questions, theoretical framing, and analytical focus. Therefore, this research contributes new understanding to digital media scholarship by conceptualising escapism as a mediating bridge between motivation and identity, offering both theoretical advancement and practical implications for sustainable digital engagement.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Example set of Transcripts and Observation Notes

Picture 1: Interview transcript - materials serve as primary data sources

engage with?	connection, escapism)	an example?	How?	platforms?
Quite often, kdrama and kpop contents, viral trends, local and international news	The algorithm of tt's fyp which is quite unpredictable. One minute I'm watching the local news about something that happened in Malaysia, the next it's about entertainment gossip, then it's about someone promoting products, pastu ada velocity ada stecuz	To keep up with the current trends, of course la kadang2 rasa fomo but mostly it's just for fun	Exciting and fun I guess??	Short videos. I don't need to spend so much time to watch a video
I usually scroll through TikTok a few times a day, especially during breaks or before sleeping. I mostly watch funny skits, dance trends, and sometimes those "day in my life" videos or people telling interesting stories.	I like how fast and entertaining everything is. The content is short but fun, and I don't have to think too much. It's also easy to find things that match my mood whether I want to laugh, relax, or just get inspired.	Yes, for sure. When I'm tired from studying or work, I just scroll for a bit and watch people dancing or doing funny filters. One time I had a really rough day, and watching that Mamushi dance challenge actually cheered me up a bit.	Yes, by engaging in trends, it's showing that I keep up with the current trends, kira macam tak ketinggalan zaman la	I discover a lot of new content creators and trends. So it's fresh with every scroll
I use TikTok a lot, mostly dance videos and funny skits.	I love how entertaining and addictive the For You Page is.	I feel so happy.	Sometimes it does. When I join trends, especially dance or choreo edits, it helps me express my personality and style in a way people can relate to.	The FYP makes it easy to discover new trends, especially if the algorithm knows what I like. It keeps showing me things I didn't even know I wanted to see, and sometimes I end up joining a trend just because it kept popping up.
I use TikTok almost daily, mostly during breaks, I'm into funny skits, lifestyle stuff, creative edits, and anything music or design-related. I also enjoy the occasional life hack or educational post.	I love how random and diverse the content is you never know what's coming next, and that keeps it fun. It also feels more real than other apps, like people are just being themselves, not trying too hard.	Definitely. When I'm stressed, I scroll TikTok to take my mind off things. I remember being super overwhelmed before a deadline, then I saw this funny pet trend it actually made me laugh out loud and feel better right away.	Yeah, it does trends can be a fun way to keep it true to me.	The FYP helps my engagement a lot. When my videos end up there, I get more views and reactions from people who enjoy the same trends, especially in K-pop.
I use TikTok daily, sometimes multiple times a day. I usually watch humorous skits, music-related content, relatable life	I enjoy how personalized the content feels and how easy it is to discover fun, creative, and sometimes even	Yes, often. For example, during exam periods, I scroll through TikTok to laugh and relax for a bit. It helps me reset my mood.	It's exciting and gives a sense of being part of something bigger. There's also a creative thrill in putting my own spin on a trend.	The FYP keeps me updated on what's trending and introduces me to new content that I wouldn't have searched for. It often sparks my

Picture 2: Observation notes - that capture informants' responses and experiences

Warm Up	
1. How often do you use TikTok, and what kind of content do you engage with?	- 35 minutes a day and entertainment quota only.
2. What do you enjoy most about TikTok?	- watch people dance, watch charity work and watch mukbang
RO1: To investigate Generation Z TikTok users choose to actively contribute to and follow TikTok hashtag trends	
1. What motivates you to join TikTok trends? (E.g., entertainment, connection, escapism)	- entertainment
2. Do you use TikTok to take breaks from stress? Can you share an example?	- Yes, that's right i use tiktok is i feel sad, bored, etc. because tiktok can entertain me and relieve my boredom.
3. How do you feel when engaging in trends?	- i feel happy and surprised
RO2: To examine Generation Z users' perceptions of the role that TikTok hashtag trends play in shaping their online identity	
1. Does participating in trends affect how you present yourself online? How?	- yes that's me
2. How do you decide which trends to join or skip?	- in a nice and not rude way
3. Do trends help you connect with like minded people?	- yeah that's right that's stream can find people who are like a minded with me
RO3: To explore how the TikTok platform influences the motivation of Generation Z users to engage with the trends	
1. What makes TikTok trends more appealing than those on other platforms?	- how to dance, how to dress and how to be conten
2. How does the "For You Page" affect your engagement?	- creat interesting video so that's everyone enjoys watching and will follow
3. Do you feel pressure to join trends? Why or why not?	- not because i like to join in on fun and beneficial trends just to entertain myself
Closing	
1. Any final thoughts on your experience with TikTok trends?	- My last thought is to become famous in the form of kindness and goodness.
2. How do you think TikTok trends will evolve?	- This TikTok trend will grow if there is more interesting and fun content for everyone to watch instead of replaying videos and viewing TikTok profiles every day.

APPENDIX 2

Example of Steps for Thematic Analysis in NVivo

Picture 1: Second step where the line-by-line coding was undertaken to identify and categorise meaningful segments of the data

Themes in your files have been identified. Please review the information provided below.

A code or case will be created for each selected theme.

Identified themes:

	☒	Themes	Mentions
☐	☒	trends	45
☐	☒	tiktok	24
☐	☒	tiktok trends	21
☐	☒	online	11
☐	☒	hashtag	10
☐	☒	people	9
☐	☒	videos	9

Picture 2: Third step, initial themes were generated by grouping related codes into broader categories

The screenshot displays the NVivo software interface. On the left is a navigation pane with sections: Quick Access, IMPORT, Data (Files, File Classifications, Externals), ORGANIZE, Coding (Codes, Sentiment, Relationships, Relationship Types), Cases, Notes, Sets, and EXPLORE (Queries, Visualizations, Reports). The main window is divided into three panes. The top pane shows a list of codes with columns for Name, Codes, and References. The middle pane shows a text document with interview questions and responses. The bottom pane shows a search bar and a code entry field.

Name	Codes	References
R1	0	0
R10	0	0
R11	0	0
R12	0	0
R2	0	0
R3	0	0
R4	0	0
R5	0	0
R6	0	0
R7	0	0
R8	0	0
R9	0	0

Document Content:

- How often do you use TikTok, and what kind of content do you engage with?
I use TikTok every day. I usually watch funny videos, trends, short vlogs, DIY, cooking content and many more.
- What do you enjoy most about TikTok?
It's entertaining and helps me relax.

RO1: To investigate Generation Z TikTok users choose to actively contribute to and follow TikTok hashtag trends

- What motivates you to join TikTok trends? (E.g., entertainment, connection, escapism)
I join trends because they're fun. It helps me forget my problems for a while and helps me escape from my stress.
- Do you use TikTok to take breaks from stress? Can you share an example?
Yes, when I feel stressed from assignments, I go on TikTok to relax and laugh.
- How do you feel when engaging in trends?
I feel happy and excited.

RO2: To examine Generation Z users' perceptions of the role that TikTok hashtag trends play in shaping their online identity

- Does participating in trends affect how you present yourself online? How?
Yes, I follow the style of the trend so I can look more fun or interesting.
- How do you decide which trends to join or skip?
I join trends that I like or find it fun. I skip ones that don't suit me.
- Do trends help you connect with like-minded people?

Picture 3: Fourth step, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and consistency with the dataset

The screenshot displays a qualitative data analysis software interface. The top menu bar includes options like Clipboard, Item, Organize, Query, Visualize, Code, Autocode, Range Code, Uncode, Case Classification, File Classification, and Workspace. Below the menu, there's a 'Codes' section with a search bar and a table of themes. The table has columns for Name, Files, and References. The theme '(RQ3) Motivations' is selected and highlighted in blue. To the right of the table, a detailed view of the selected theme is shown, containing a list of sub-themes and their corresponding text excerpts.

Name	Files	References
(RQ1) Active Engagement	1	9
helps me relax	1	2
(RQ2) Online Identity	1	7
like-minded people	0	0
(RQ3) Motivations	1	9
TikTok features	0	0

Drag selection here to code to a new code

(RQ3) Active Engagement

- I avoid trends like dancing and self-aggrandizing content.
- 3. Do trends help you connect with like-minded people?
Yes, it definitely helps.

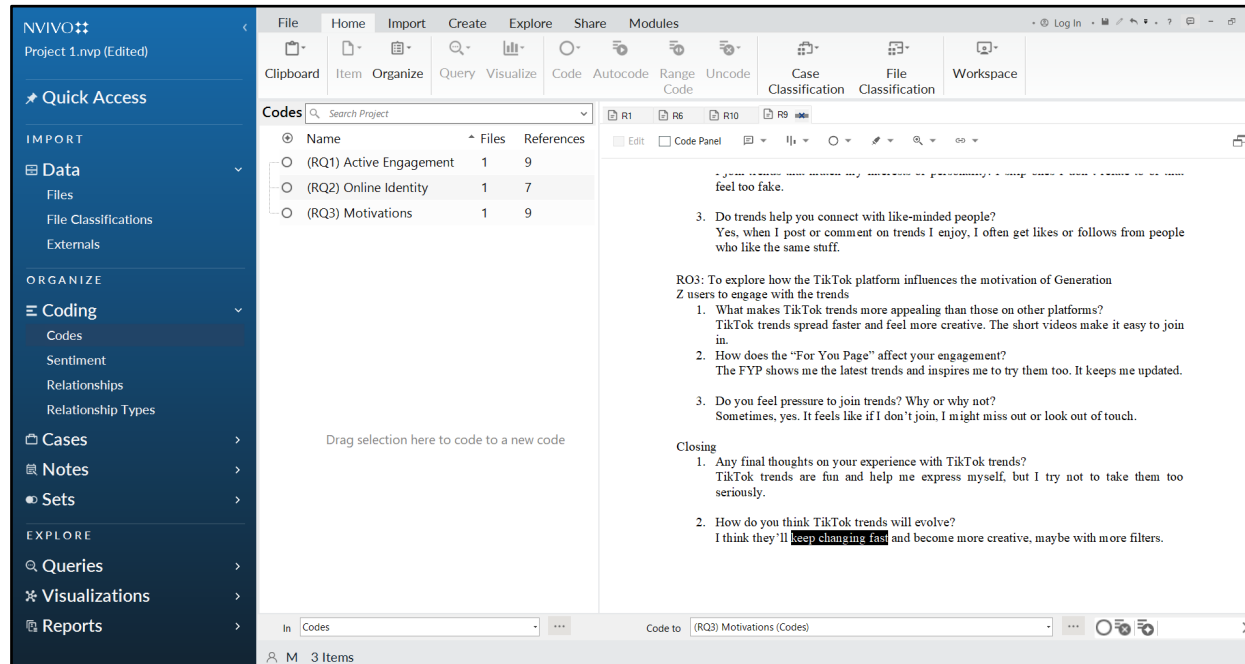
RO3: To explore how the TikTok platform influences the motivation of Generation Z users to engage with the trends

- What makes TikTok trends more appealing than those on other platforms?
TikTok is a platform with features that are easy to navigate.
- How does the "For You Page" affect your engagement?
Obviously, it's the algorithm.
- Do you feel pressure to join trends? Why or why not?
I don't feel pressured. I'll do it if I want to, and I won't if I don't. It's a choice.

Closing

- Any final thoughts on your experience with TikTok trends?
I think TikTok trends are fun and help people feel connected. Sometimes they get repetitive, but overall, they make the app more exciting and keep things fresh.
- How do you think TikTok trends will evolve?
I think trends will keep changing faster. More AI and editing tools might make videos even more creative. People might also use trends to talk about deeper stuff, not just for fun.

Picture 4: Fifth step, each theme was defined and named to clearly capture its scope and meaning



Picture 5: The sixth stage of analysis, where NVivo outputs were used to integrate illustrative informant quotes, summarising data by theme and case to support and validate the research findings

⊕ ^	Name	Codes	References
+ [icon]	R1	40	117
+ [icon]	R10	20	55
+ [icon]	R11	24	84
+ [icon]	R12	27	83
+ [icon]	R2	26	73
+ [icon]	R3	26	60
+ [icon]	R4	17	67
+ [icon]	R5	27	80
+ [icon]	R6	23	69
+ [icon]	R7	26	72
+ [icon]	R8	25	66
+ [icon]	R9	26	77

APPENDIX 3

Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information and Consent Form - Offline (Page 1 & 2)

Research Ethics Committee Research Management Centre Universiti Teknologi MARA 40450 SHAH ALAM Tel: 03 – 5544-8069, Fax: 03 – 5544-2096/2767  Participant Information Sheet Research Title Escapism, Motivation and Identity in Malaysian Generation Z's Engagement with TikTok Hashtag Trends Introduction of Research This study explores how Malaysian Generation Z use TikTok, focusing on trends, hashtag participation, and engagement. With TikTok becoming a key platform for self-expression, entertainment, and social connection, understanding users' motivations and experiences provides insight into digital behaviors of young people. The research also examines how social media shapes identity, communication, and leisure activities among Gen Z, highlighting the interplay between technology and everyday life. Purpose of Research The purpose of this study is to understand why Malaysian Gen Z use TikTok, what motivates them to participate in trends, and how the platform affects their online interactions. It aims to learn how TikTok influences their daily routines, social connections, and sense of identity. This knowledge will help educators, parents, and digital platforms better understand the experiences and needs of young social media users. Research Procedure Informants will take part in one-on-one interviews lasting about 45-60 minutes. Questions will focus on TikTok usage, experiences with trends and hashtags, and the effects of the platform on social connections and personal identity. Interviews will be audio-recorded (with consent) and transcribed for analysis. Data will be treated confidentially, and participants can withdraw at any time. The findings will be analysed using thematic analysis to identify common patterns and insights from participants' experiences. Participation in Research Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you do take part, you can withdraw at any time without having to give a reason. Benefit of Research No monetary benefit will be received by the participants in this research. Research Risk No research risk is involved.	Confidentiality Your information will be kept confidential by the investigators and will not be made public unless disclosure is required by law. By signing this consent form, you will authorize the review of records, analysis, and use of the data arising from this research. If you have any questions about this research or your rights, please contact: <i>Miera Syafiera Razemi</i> Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA 40450 SHAH ALAM 2024778767@student.uitm.edu.my / +60 1137605354 Consent Form¹ To become a participant in the research, you or your legal guardian are required to sign this Consent Form. I _____ herewith confirm that I have met the requirement of age and can act on behalf of myself / as² a legal guardian as follows: 1. I understand the nature and scope of the research being undertaken. 2. I have read and understood all the terms and conditions of my participation in the research. 3. All my questions relating to this research and my participation therein have been answered to my satisfaction. 4. I voluntarily agree to take part in this research, to follow the study procedures and to provide all necessary information to the investigators as requested. 5. I may at any time choose to withdraw from this research without giving any reason. 6. I have received a copy of the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form. 7. Except for damages resulting from negligent or malicious conduct of the researcher(s), I hereby release and discharge UITM and all participating researchers from all liability associated with, arising out of, or related to my participation. I agree to hold them harmless from any harm or loss that may be incurred by me due to my participation in the research. Name of Participant/Legally authorized representative (LAR) Signature I.C No Date Name of Witness³ Signature I.C No Date Name of Consent Taker Signature I.C No Date
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Participant Information and Consent Form - Online (Page 1)

Participant Information and Consent Form

Title of the Study: Escapism, Motivation and Identity in Malaysian Generation Z's Engagement with Tiktok Hashtag Trends

Researcher: Miera Syafiera Razemi

Affiliation: Universiti Teknologi MARA

Contact: mierasr11@yahoo.com/ +60 1137606354

1. Invitation to Participate

You are invited to take part in this research study because you have experience or knowledge related to TikTok usage among Malaysian Generation Z. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without providing a reason.

Check all that apply.

☐ I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand why and how Generation Z engages with TikTok, including escapism, motivation and identity. The findings may contribute to academic knowledge and understanding of social media usage among youth in Malaysia.

Check all that apply.

☐ I understand that the study aims to explore TikTok usage and engagement among Malaysian Generation Z.

Participant Information and Consent Form - Online (Page 2)

3. Procedures If you agree to participate, you will be asked to: i. Take part in an interview lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. ii. Respond to questions about your experiences, perceptions, and opinions related to TikTok. iii. Allow the interview to be audio-recorded for transcription purposes. <i>Check all that apply.</i> ☐ I understand that if I participate, I will take part in an interview lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. ☐ I agree to respond to questions about my experiences and opinions regarding TikTok. ☐ I agree that the interview may be audio-recorded for research purposes. 4. Risks and Discomforts There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study. Some questions may touch on personal experiences or opinions. You may decline to answer any question or stop the interview at any time. <i>Check all that apply.</i> ☐ I understand that there are minimal risks in participating and that I may skip any question or stop the interview at any time. 5. Benefits There may be no direct benefit to you, but your participation will help researchers understand TikTok usage patterns and provide insights into social media engagement among Malaysian Gen Z. <i>Check all that apply.</i> ☐ I understand that there may be no direct benefit to me, but my participation will help researchers understand social media engagement among Malaysian Gen Z.

Participant Information and Consent Form - Online (Page 3)

6. Confidentiality

Your personal identity will remain **confidential**.

- i. All data will be **anonymised**; pseudonyms will be used in transcripts and reports.
- ii. Audio recordings and transcripts will be securely stored and accessible only to the research team.
- iii. Findings may be published in academic journals or reports, but you will not be personally identified.

Check all that apply.

- ☐ I understand that my personal information will be kept confidential.
- ☐ I understand that pseudonyms will be used in transcripts and reports.
- ☐ I understand that only the research team will have access to audio recordings and transcripts.

7. Voluntary Participation

Your participation is voluntary. You may **refuse to participate** or **withdraw at any time** without any penalty or effect on your relationship with the researcher or institution.

Check all that apply.

- ☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can refuse or withdraw at any time without penalty.

Participant Information and Consent Form - Online (Page 4)

8. **Consent to Participate**

By signing this form, you agree that:

- i. You have read and understood the information above.
- ii. You have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- iii. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
- iv. You consent to the interview being audio-recorded.

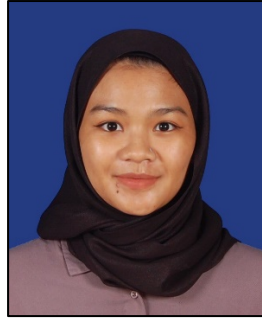
Check all that apply.

- ☐ I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
- ☐ I consent to the interview being audio-recorded.

9. By signing this form I agree that;

- 1. I am voluntarily taking part in this project. I understand that I do not have to take part, and I can stop the interview at any time.
- 2. The transcribed interview or extracts from it may be used as described above.
- 3. I have read the Information sheet.
- 4. I do not expect to receive any benefit or payment for my participation.
- 5. I can request a copy of the transcript of my interview and may make edits I feel necessary to ensure the effectiveness of any agreement made about confidentiality.
- 6. I have been able to ask any questions I might have, and I understand that I am free to contact the researcher with any questions I may have in the future.

AUTHOR'S PROFILE



Miera Syafiera Razemi is a postgraduate student in media and communication in Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), with a focus on digital culture, social media engagement, and Generation Z behaviour. The research primarily explores social media trends, user behaviour, and emerging technologies within the field of social sciences, and is currently working on several research papers that are under review and forthcoming for publication.

LIST OF PUBLICATION:

Tengku Mahamad, T. E., Razemi, M. S., & Mat Yassin, Y. (2026). Understanding escapism as a key motivation behind Generation Z's engagement in TikTok hashtag trends. *Quantum Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 7(2).
<https://doi.org/10.55197/qjssh.v7i2>

Razemi, M. S., Tengku Mahamad, T. E., & Mat Yassin, Y. (2025). Understanding escapism as a key motivation behind Generation Z's engagement in TikTok hashtag trends. In *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Media & Social Sciences: Shaping the Future of Global Communication—Trends, Technologies and Transformations* (Virtual Conference, 24–25 September 2025), p. 87.