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A THEORY OF REASONED ACTION APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING THE INFLUENCE OF TIKTOK TRENDS ON YOUTH IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of TikTok trends on the attitudes, behaviours, and subjective norms of Malaysian youth. As TikTok's user base among youth continues to expand, it has become a significant platform for the dissemination of trends that shape both individual and cultural standards. In addition, TikTok users face challenges such as cyberbullying, exposure to harmful behavior, information privacy breaches, and the presence of harmful communities. These have been associated with higher rates of body image dissatisfaction, sadness, eating disorders, and anxiety. The study employs the Theory of Reasoned Action to explore the young users' engagement with TikTok trends and the subsequent changes in their social attitudes and personal behaviours. Data were collected through one-to-one interviews with 12 participants from six regions in Malaysia and analysed using thematic analysis. The results indicate that exposure to viral content encourages individuals to adopt new behaviours aligned with popular culture while fostering a sense of connection and belonging. The study also highlights the importance of subjective norms, demonstrating how perceptions of friends' actions influence personal decisions. The findings of this study carry significant implications for educators, policymakers, and content creators. Educators can utilise the popularity of TikTok as a pedagogical tool by adapting the formats to design interactive learning to resonate with youth media practices. For policymakers to address the algorithmic amplification of potentially harmful content and support the creation of safer online environments by developing digital well-being campaigns.

Content creators should exercise ethical responsibility by avoiding the glorification of risky behaviours and instead leveraging trending formats to promote educational, cultural, and socially beneficial messages.

Keywords: TikTok trends, Theory of Reasoned Action, Youth behaviour, Social media influence, Malaysian

INTRODUCTION

Social media is a platform that enables people to interact and share information. It has gained significant popularity worldwide (Zyoud et al., 2018). The diverse features of social media have made it a primary communication tool among younger generation, encouraging users to create and share their own content. Social media platforms support various formats, including text, videos, and photos (Foo, 2023). However, excessive use of social media can disrupt students' daily lives. According to Woods and Scott (2016), students often struggle to control their social media usage, leading to adverse effects. Similarly, Melkevik et al., (2010) and Zou et al., (2019) argue that excessive social media use can result in reduced physical activity and other health disorders.

The increasing use of social media applications is partly attributed to children's early exposure to electronic devices, such as smartphones. Higher education students are also frequent users of social media due to its capacity to facilitate seamless communication with peers, friends, and the broader community. Furthermore, platforms like TikTok have gained popularity due to their unique features that enable users to express their creativity through filters, audio/visual effects, duets, and challenges, providing a never-ending stream of engaging content (Foo, 2023).

TikTok, an international version of the Chinese app Douyin, was created by ByteDance to reach a global audience (Foo, 2023). While Douyin targets Chinese-speaking users, TikTok caters to international audiences, offering similar features but serving a broader demographic. TikTok emerged as one of the most downloaded apps on the App Store by 2020, gradually replacing other popular platforms (Saxena, 2020). It is a distinctive platform for creating short music videos, allowing users to customize their content with beauty and slow-motion effects (Zhao et al., 2017). By 2020, TikTok had reached 800 million monthly active users worldwide (Saxena, 2020). The platform allows users to select background music from various genres or create original sound clips, fostering creativity and personalized communication. Users can also repurpose sound clips, including voice messages, in their videos, often incorporating music into dance performances, lip-sync contests, or comedic sketches. Sound, as Serrano et al. (2020) note, is a powerful medium for conveying messages and building narratives, contributing to TikTok's success.

Social media platforms, including TikTok, are widely used by young people to share a variety of content. Research suggests that youth tend to share positive content on social media. For instance, social media facilitated global support for Malaysian student Mohd Asyraf Haziq, who was attacked by British youth, by enabling users to create a financial assistance account through Twitter (Norhailawati et al., 2019). Similarly, social media has become a platform for discussing religious topics and exchanging religious information (Halim & Rahim, 2011).

Studies also indicate differences in how young men and women use social media. Women are more likely to use these platforms for constructive communication, sharing positive messages, and leaving encouraging comments (Mikami et al., 2010). Additionally, self-expression and social identification are key motivators for young people to share music on social media (Lee et al., 2011). Malaysian research highlights that young women are more inclined toward online shopping through social media, often sharing product information and making purchases online (Jumali & Mustaffa, 2023; Sin et al., 2012). In contrast, young men tend to engage with social media by playing online games and discussing topics such as software and sports (Salman et al., 2010).

During Malaysia's Movement Control Orders (MCOs) in 2019, TikTok emerged as the most downloaded app, appealing to adolescents who spent significant time on their phones. With its user-friendly design and short-form videos ranging from 3 to 60 seconds, TikTok enables users to quickly access engaging content (Markov, 2022). In an era where people seek concise and accessible information, TikTok's format aligns with the preference for consuming simple, time-efficient videos.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels are particularly popular among teenagers due to their short and engaging video formats. These brief snippets of content appeal to teenagers, who often have shorter attention spans, as they provide fast-paced entertainment (Guo, 2024). Furthermore, these platforms offer instant gratification by enabling users to consume a wide range of content quickly, including comedy, dance, and educational clips. TikTok's personalised recommendation system further enhances user engagement by delivering content tailored to individual preferences. As TikTok's usage rate has risen sharply, numerous trends have emerged. However, some young users may follow these trends uncritically.

Short videos on TikTok simplify content creation and dissemination, enabling trends and information to spread rapidly. These videos are widely accepted by audiences and require relatively minimal effort to produce. However, the growing addiction of young people to TikTok has raised concerns. Many teenagers aspire to gain fame on the platform and are willing to take extreme measures to increase their views, followers, and likes (He et al., 2021).

Observing others achieve popularity through viral trends motivates some users to imitate these actions without fully considering potential risks. For instance, viral challenges such as dancing on busy roads, extreme eating contests, and vaping stunts are examples of harmful trends (Tan, 2024). Additionally, TikTok can become unsafe when users repurpose previously posted short videos to criticize or create defamatory content. Such actions highlight the platform's potential for misuse and underscore the need for better awareness and regulation to protect users from negative consequences (Tan, 2024; Edwyetal, 2023).

TikTok users have also reported facing challenges such as cyberbullying, exposure to harmful behavior, information privacy breaches, and the presence of harmful communities (Cox, 2024; Tang et al., 2020). These difficulties have been associated with higher rates of body image dissatisfaction, sadness, eating disorders, and anxiety. TikTok's popularity among Generation Z provides insights into how this demographic interprets cultural trends and engages with brands (He et al., 2021; Kalyani, 2020). For instance, many individuals make purchases from TikTok Shop due to its competitive pricing and convenient doorstep delivery services. Shopping, once considered merely a functional activity, has now evolved into a lifestyle. The consumer behavior observed on TikTok Shop has led to a phenomenon of impulsive purchasing by the general public (Edwyetal, 2023; Khalid et al., 2023). In addition, TikTok presents negative implications, particularly in the form of addictive usage patterns, time mismanagement, and reduced productivity. Importantly, no direct improvement in communication skills was observed from TikTok use (Syam et al., 2022; Hanum and Yunus, 2023).TikTok users often spend significant amounts of time scrolling through short videos, which may lead to an unhealthy social lifestyle.

Adolescents, who are already in a stage of limited self-control, are particularly vulnerable to TikTok's highly stimulating and deliberately addictive design features. The platform's strategies such as concealing time indicators and promoting continuous engagement intensify usage patterns, thereby increasing the risk of addiction and negatively affecting both their daily lives and academic performance (Lin, 2022).

On the other hands TikTok exemplifies a platform that consistently produces the latest content while showcasing originality and user engagement (Yi, 2017). Typically, TikTok content is inspired by everyday life, providing users with unique and relatable experiences. Many videos entertain and inspire users to create similar content, spreading positivity and joy. Additionally, educational content on TikTok can impart knowledge and practical skills.

For instance, short culinary videos can teach users how to cook and apply these skills in their daily lives (Jia, 2017). TikTok is widely used by students daily, primarily for entertainment purposes, with popular content significantly influencing their motivations for platform engagement.

While TikTok use contributes positively by keeping students updated with global trends, fostering learning opportunities, and enabling participation in buying and selling activities (Syam et al., 2022; Hanum and Yunus, 2023).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This study investigates the influence of TikTok Trends on attitude, behaviours, and subjective norms among Malaysian youth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tiktok

TikTok has emerged as a dominant social media platform among young people worldwide, including Malaysia, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic when it became a medium for both entertainment and educational engagement (Wan, 2020; Iqbal, 2025). Its short-video format, hashtag challenges, and viral trends have made it a versatile tool for creative expression and interaction (Montag et al., 2021). While initially positioned as an entertainment platform, TikTok has increasingly evolved into a multifaceted space for self-expression, online learning, and even commercial activities such as product promotion and marketing (Sardar et al., 2023).

The platform's popularity can be attributed to its accessibility and interactive features, which allow users to create, share, and replicate content quickly. Studies consistently show that the majority of users are under 35, with the most active demographic being those below 24 years old (Montag et al., 2021; Sardar et al., 2023). This aligns with Quail's (2009) assertion that audiences are not passive consumers but active participants in shaping communication flows and cultural trends. Younger users often embrace TikTok for entertainment and creative purposes, whereas older users tend to adopt more selective and conscious consumption practices, reflecting generational differences in digital well-being awareness.

In addition, TikTok's design is closely tied to youth culture and societal norms. The platform fosters community through viral challenges, dancing, cooking, and lifestyle content, while simultaneously shaping user identity and cultural participation. Its ability to capture attention almost instantly makes it particularly influential in cultivating behaviours and subjective norms among young users (Sardar et al., 2023). However, this popularity also raises concerns, as the addictive design features and algorithmic amplification of trends may contribute to problematic usage, thereby affecting adolescents' academic performance and lifestyle choices.

Taken together, these studies highlight TikTok's dual role as both a space for positive engagement, supporting creativity, learning, and social interaction, and as a source of risk, particularly in relation to addictive patterns and exposure to harmful content. Despite this growing body of literature, research in the Malaysian context remains limited, particularly in exploring how TikTok trends shape attitudes, behaviours, and subjective norms among youth.

This study addresses that gap by employing the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) to investigate young people's engagement with TikTok trends and the social influences underpinning their digital practices.

Influence on positive TikTok

TikTok has been widely recognized for its positive impact on young users, particularly in elevating mood, fostering creativity, and enhancing self-expression. Across various studies, the platform is strongly associated with happiness, enjoyment, and inspiration, with users frequently engaging with humorous and innovative content (Kale, 2020; Qian & Jain, 2022). Such engagement not only enhances pleasure but also motivates users to spend substantial time on the platform, reinforcing its role in shaping digital leisure culture.

Beyond entertainment, TikTok has demonstrated significant potential in educational contexts. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated its adoption in teaching and learning, as traditional classrooms were replaced with online modalities. Research highlights how TikTok was employed as an innovative tool for delivering short, engaging educational content, offering an alternative to other social media platforms traditionally used in education, such as Facebook and WhatsApp (Xiuwen & Razalo, 2021; Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2021). These studies underscore the platform's versatility as a pedagogical resource, particularly in maintaining student engagement during remote learning.

TikTok's influence also extends into consumer behavior and lifestyle. Exposure to visually appealing promotional videos on the platform has been found to drive real-world actions, such as restaurant visits and food purchases, with some users even travelling across states to try products featured in viral videos (Guszkowski, 2021). This suggests TikTok's strong persuasive power in shaping youth consumption patterns.

At the individual level, TikTok serves as a medium for self-presentation and identity formation. Palupi et al. (2020) demonstrate that the platform enables students to showcase creativity, intelligence, and personal uniqueness, thereby enhancing self-confidence and encouraging social recognition. The pursuit of visibility and "TikTok fame" often motivates users to experiment with new ideas and experiences, further reinforcing the platform's role in personal development.

Taken together, these studies highlight TikTok's capacity to positively influence youth across multiple domains, emotional well-being, education, consumer decision-making, and self-confidence. However, while research has documented these benefits, there remains limited exploration of how these positive influences interact with broader social norms and attitudes, particularly within the Malaysian context. This gap underscores the need for deeper analysis using theoretical frameworks such as the TRA, which this study adopts.

Influence on negative TikTok

While TikTok offers entertainment and creative opportunities, growing evidence highlights its potential negative consequences for adolescents. Scholars emphasize that adolescence is a developmental stage characterized by heightened susceptibility to peer influence and risk-taking behaviours, which social media environments may amplify (Casey, 2015; Steinberg, 2010; Lajnef, 2023). Within this context, TikTok's algorithmic promotion of viral trends often exposes youth to harmful practices, ranging from unsafe challenges to content that normalizes risky behaviours.

A prominent area of concern is TikTok's impact on body image and mental health. Similar to other appearance-driven platforms, TikTok's emphasis on visual presentation and beauty filters can reinforce unrealistic standards, thereby contributing to body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and vulnerability to negative feedback or online abuse (Mazlan & Adnan, 2023).

Studies further associate image-focused apps with eating disorders, narcissistic tendencies, and heightened anxiety, underscoring the psychosocial risks linked to adolescents' immersion in TikTok culture (Abdul Jaffar et al., 2019). The addictive design of TikTok intensifies these challenges. Prolonged usage can interfere with cognitive and emotional development, exposing youth to inappropriate content, cyberbullying, and online predation (Sabir et al., 2020). Its immersive features encourage compulsive engagement, reducing users' ability to regulate screen time and heightening risks of psychological strain. These concerns are consistent with earlier findings that excessive social media use is associated with depression, anxiety, and disordered behaviours (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Elwadhi, 2024).

Another recurring theme is the adverse influence of TikTok on academic performance. Adolescents who devote excessive time to the platform are more likely to neglect academic responsibilities, leading to poorer outcomes such as lower grades and diminished concentration. The interplay between addictive use and academic underperformance reflects the broader tension between entertainment-oriented engagement and educational priorities (Liu et al., 2022).

Collectively, the literature underscores TikTok's multifaceted negative influence on youth, spanning risky behaviour, body image concerns, addictive tendencies, and academic decline (Lin, 2022). However, while prior research has established these individual risks, limited work has explored how such influences interact with social attitudes and subjective norms, particularly within the Malaysian context. This study addresses that gap by examining TikTok's role in shaping youth attitudes and behaviours through the lens of the TRA.

This study addresses the gap that despite TikTok's increasing popularity, there is still a lack of qualitative studies examining how TikTok trends influence the attitudes, behaviours, and subjective norms of youth in Malaysia. In addition, many past studies are descriptive, but rarely use theoretical frameworks such as the TRA to explain the relationship between attitudes, behaviours, and subjective norms, and the use of qualitative methods to explore in depth through the experiences and narratives of youth themselves (Syam et al., 2022; Lin, 2022; Hanum and Yunus, 2023).

The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)

The TRA provides a useful framework for understanding how individual attitudes and social influences shape behavioral intentions, which in turn guide actual behavior. Developed in the 1960s through increasing attention to consumer attitudes in marketing research (Ahtola, 1975), the theory emphasizes that people make reasoned decisions based on their evaluations of outcomes and the social pressures they perceive (Fishbein, 1980; Loudon & Della Bitta, 199; Ugwu, 2019).

Central to TRA are two constructs: attitudes and subjective norms. Attitudes reflect an individual's positive or negative evaluation of engaging in a specific behavior, shaped by behavioral beliefs about the consequences of that action (Bertran, 1962; Fishbein & Cappella, 2006). When outcomes are perceived as desirable, individuals are more likely to develop favorable attitudes and repeat the behavior; conversely, anticipated negative outcomes foster unfavorable attitudes. This highlights the evaluative role of attitudes in shaping behavioral intention.

Subjective norms, meanwhile, capture the perceived social pressures to engage—or not engage—in a behavior. These are reinforced through normative beliefs, which reflect an individual's perception of whether significant others approve of their actions (Aronson et al., 2005). Social acceptance and belonging therefore, become powerful motivators, as individuals often conform to the expectations of peers or broader cultural norms.

Taken together, TRA suggests that behavior is neither random nor purely habitual but shaped by reasoned evaluation and social influence.

This makes it a particularly relevant framework for studying digital media platforms such as TikTok, where youth attitudes toward content and the subjective norms created by peer groups play a central role in shaping online participation, trend adoption, and lifestyle behaviours. The application of TRA in this research is particularly appropriate because TikTok trends are not only driven by individual preferences but are also deeply embedded in peer influence and social validation. Youth often evaluate the desirability of engaging with viral content based on anticipated outcomes, such as enjoyment, recognition, or self-expression, which reflects the role of attitudes. At the same time, their participation is strongly shaped by perceived social expectations, whether friends, influencers, or online communities endorse such behaviours, which reflects the role of subjective norms. By integrating these two dimensions, TRA enables a nuanced understanding of how TikTok trends influence youth intentions and subsequent behaviours. Moreover, unlike other models of media influence that emphasize structural or technological factors, TRA foregrounds the interplay of individual cognition and social influence, making it well-suited to capture the decision-making processes that underlie youth engagement with TikTok in the Malaysian context.

This framework is closely with the study's objectives in three ways: First, Attitudes will look into whether youth perceive viral trends as entertaining, educational, risky, or harmful, shape their willingness to adopt such behaviours. By applying TRA, positive attitudes toward TikTok trends are expected to increase the likelihood of replication, while negative attitudes may discourage participation. Second is Subjective Norms investigates the youth participation in TikTok trend either perceived social approval or disapproval strongly influences whether individuals conform to viral challenges, mimic behaviours, or align themselves with popular content. Lastly, Behavior links attitudes and subjective norms to actual youth behaviours, such as participation in challenges, content creation, or lifestyle choices shaped by TikTok. By doing so, the research applies TRA to explain how cognitive evaluations (attitudes) and social expectations (subjective norms) converge to influence digital behaviours in the Malaysian youth context.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researchers decided to conduct face-to-face interviews with 12 participants from six regions in Malaysia (Northern, Southern, Central Region, East Coast, Sabah, and Sarawak), referred to as informants *(refer to Table 1),* based on purposive sampling. The criteria of purposive sampling are i) The informant must be a teenager aged 15 to 40 years old, and ii) Informants must watch TikTok videos for at least 2 hours a day. Using purposive sampling allows for the collection of participants' viewpoints and opinions on the topic, providing a deeper understanding. Guest et al., (2006) propose that 6 to 12 interviews may suffice for a qualitative research project. The adequacy of the sample is largely dependent on the careful application of purposive sampling. In qualitative research, data saturation is reached when no new information emerges from additional interviews (Muellmann et al., 2021). In this study, the 12 informants were sufficient to achieve data saturation.

The 12 informants were categorised as youth aged 15 to 40 years old according to the views of the National Youth Development Policy (1997), and this study that divided informant into three categories age groups: early youth (15–21 years old), mid youth (22 to 29 years old), and late youth (30–40 years old). This study involves designing six semi-structured interview questions in advance and two extra questions during the interview. These questions are adopted based on research by Syam et al., (2022), Lin (2022), & Hanum and Yunus (2023) and align with the research objective.

To ensure that the questions are aligned with the research objective and the theory that applies, a pilot study was conducted before the actual interview. This pilot study involved 5 informants through one-to-one interviews, and it took around 1 hour interview session to verify the interview questions. Pilot interviews are conducted afterward to refine these questions, allowing researchers to address topics that respondents might be less candid (Wangdi & Rigdel, 2025; Adam, 2015).

Following the pilot study, the researchers provided the date, time, and location for the participants invited them to the one-to-one interview. The researcher conducted interviews with the informants at their homes, ensuring convenience for the participants. This place ensures that participants do not feel pressured and helps minimise distractions.

Before the interviews, the informants were asked to complete a consent form, and informants were aware of the purpose of the study and were voluntary participants. In addition, the informants are aware of the benefits and risks of participation, and they can stop their participation at any time. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour and 30 minutes. During the interview, the researchers take notes and audio-record the entire session. Note-taking will serve as a backup in case the audio recording is unclear. It is essential to transcribe the recording as soon as possible after the interview and share the transcript with the informants.

Following the data transcription process, the researcher will categorise the data into codes. This study employs the thematic analysis method, as outlined by Braun and Clarke, to identify and develop the main themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) explained that thematic analysis, utilized in this study, is a qualitative research approach used to identify, analyse, describe, organize, and report themes emerging from data collection. Thematic analysis is particularly effective for examining the central themes of an investigation. Additionally, thematic analysis is beneficial for summarising key aspects of extensive datasets, as it encourages researchers to organize data systematically, leading to a clear and coherent final report (King, 2004). The themes are derived from the study's research questions and the information provided by the informants.

Table 1

Informants' Details

Informant Code	Gender	Age	Regions
IM1	Male	18 years old	Northern Region
IF2	Female	20 years old	
IM3	Male	32 years old	Southern Region
IF4	Female	21 years old	
IM5	Male	35 years old	Central Region
IF6	Female	24 years old	
IM7	Male	23 years old	East Cost
IF8	Female	19 years old	
IM9	Male	28 years old	Sabah
IF10	Female	36 years old	
IM11	Male	25 years old	Sarawak
IF12	Female	40 years old	

In addition, thematic analysis involves identifying and reporting patterns in interpreted data, which requires several steps. First, the data collected from semi-structured interviews were transcribed, followed by familiarisation with the transcripts through repeated readings.

Second, ATLAS.ti was used to generate initial codes, which were then organised into meaningful categories aligned with the research objectives. Third, after generating initial codes, the processes of creating names of the theme and sub-themes. The last categories were later refined and sorted in Microsoft Word into separate sections to facilitate the process of theme identification, reviewing, and refinement.

ANALYSIS

The findings show there are three main themes in this study namely Refer to figure 1.
(i)   Attitude: Engagement with the trends and Multi video preferences.
(ii)   Behaviour: Psychological Factors and Social Factors.
(iii)   Subjective Norms: Social Influence, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), and Joy of Missing Out (JOMO).

Figure 1

Influence of TikTok Trends Among Youth
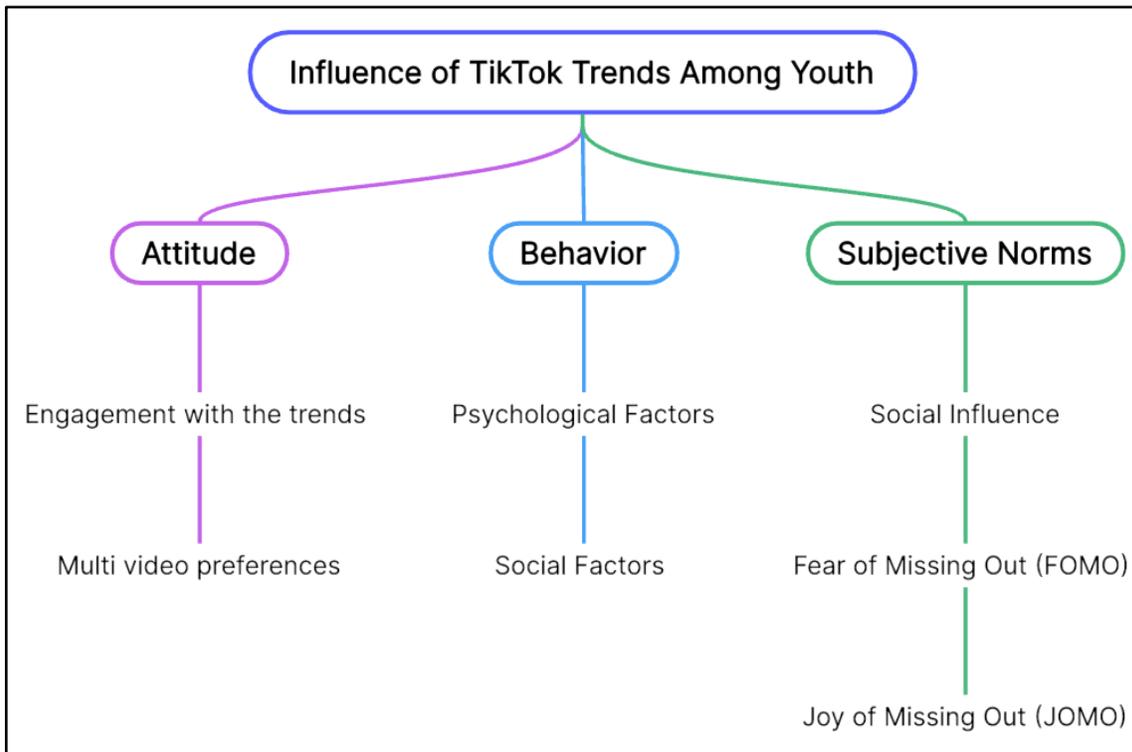
Attitudes

The attitude is one of the main themes of this research, with two sub-themes identified under it: (i) Engagement with trends and (ii) Multi video preferences. Regarding the first sub-theme, Engagement with trends, most informants stated that they actively participated in TikTok trends and frequently explored various types of content like dance challenge trends, to buy products live, and DIY projects, as noted by the informants who shared:

> *"I started using the TikTok app at the end of 2019. The latest trend I know is the dance challenge which is called "Emergency". It is quite famous; we can see a lot of people doing the challenge. Especially some of the dance challenges were done by some Kpop idols, that song will be challenged by more young people," (IF4).*
> *"I started using TikTok about a year ago. I tried to download, then I got hooked on some of the content, especially interesting in DIY projects. After that, I will always scroll about the DIY projects and sometimes watch live on TikTok because the things they sell are quite cheap sometimes. But for the latest trends, I don't really know," (IM5).*

> *"I started using the TikTok app back in 2019. For me, recently some of the TikTok Trends include Kpop dance challenges such as "Meow". Besides that, there is also lots of buzz around trending sounds and viral memes that keep the app lively and engaging,"* (IM7).
>
> *"I used TikTok recently in 2023. I've just begun to use it recently. I usually use it to buy things live, we can directly purchase on stream. This trend was actually quite popular, especially with beauty products, home goods or fashion items,"* (IF10).

The next sub-theme is Multi-video preferences, which refers to how TikTok users interact with a variety of video genres rather than focusing on a single type. This sub-theme explores the idea that, despite TikTok's extensive range of videos, users are still able to find content that aligns with their personal interests and moods on a given day. Genres such as sports, history, culture, food, children's content, motivation, DIY, dance challenges, and animals are among the options informants mentioned when selecting video content on TikTok. The informants expressed:

> *"I'm a Kpoppers so I will watch some short videos about my idols and food videos also known as "Mukbang". Some of the TikTokers will also share their travel vlog, it is fun to watch because some information we can obtain from the videos and use it while we are traveling,"* (IM1).
>
> *"I usually mix with sports, dance challenges and also animal videos. Some of the TikTokers shoot nice animal videos, such as cute cats and also their daily life with their pets. You can feel heart warmth when you watch the videos,"* (IM9).
>
> *"I love to watch video about kids because they so adorable. When I down, I also watch the motivation video to improve my feelings,"* (IF10).
>
> *"The video that I most often watch is about history and culture. For example, some of the TikTokers will share about some culture of some country and also share about history, so it is quite interesting for me and easy to absorb information through the interesting editing,"* (IF12).

Behaviour

The second main theme in this research is Behavior, which is further divided into two sub-themes: (i) Psychological Factors and (ii) Social Factors. Under the first sub-theme, Psychological Factors, most informants emphasized the challenges they face in allocating time effectively for TikTok usage, highlighting the difficulty of maintaining a balanced lifestyle and its impact on psychological well-being, including time management, emotional regulation, and mental health. Additionally, informants noted that the negative consequences of following trends on TikTok could lead to feelings of fear, stress, anxiety, and even depression. Some informants shared that they occasionally feel pressured to keep up with these trends. They stated:

"The negative effects on the TikTok trend, that leave us fear. The reason why I said it like this is because when you over focus on the trends, you will fear being left behind with the current trend. Even worse if you can't exactly follow the trend that is happening, you will get stress and anxiety," (IM3).

"Sometimes, following the trends can be a bit overwhelming. It's easy to get caught up in trying to keep up with the latest crazes, which can be time consuming. Additionally, there's the pressure to conform and participate, which can sometimes lead to stress or feelings of inadequacy if I'm not up to date," (IF4).

"For me, I feel that one of the negative impacts is the time I waste. I'm following the trends and feel pressure to stay updated, which means that I need to spend more time on TikTok," (IF6).

"The most negative impact for me is the issue of time. It's difficult to control the time when you're scrolling through it. I will think like I will just scroll through a few videos, but then one or two hours have passed," (IF10).

The second sub-theme of Behavior is Social Factors, which examines the various ways TikTok influences users in roles such as social connection, education and skill development, entertainment, and consumer decision-making. TikTok enables users to stay connected with friends, learn about the latest trends, and experience diverse cultures, serving as a sort of window to the world. Additionally, through short videos, users can quickly acquire new skills or expand their knowledge on a variety of topics, such as DIY projects and academic content. TikTok also provides entertaining, playful, or inspirational content, offering users an escape from their daily routines and a way to relieve stress. Furthermore, TikTok significantly impacts consumer decision-making, particularly in online shopping. Many users reported purchasing items via TikTok, where features such as live previews allow them to visually assess products, helping them make well-informed choices. Informants stated:

"For me, it really helps me in life, especially when I face some computer issues. I will search for it using TikTok, and it really helps me solve it." (IF2).

"Yes, it definitely helps us a lot and keeps us connected with friends. TikTok has its perks. It's a great source of entertainment and a platform for learning new skills, whether it's cooking or even educational content," (IF6).

"But I couldn't deny that TikTok was actually quite helpful. It not only offers entertainment but also provides insight into products that I'm interested in. Buying things in the live streaming, we can directly see real-time feedback from the viewers and you can see the host demonstrate on the screen, making me feel more confident about my purchases." (IF10).

"TikTok makes my life happier in many ways. It offers so much variety and is also entertaining. I can watch funny videos that will make my mood happier and also learn something new that I didn't know from it." (IF12).

Subjective Norms

Subjective norms constitute the third and final theme of this research, with three sub-themes identified: (i) Social Influence, (ii) FOMO, and (iii) JOMO. The first sub-theme is Social Influence, which includes the actions taken by friends and family to influencing the trends in TikTok toward attitudes, behaviours, or feelings of others; it occurs in informants' daily lives. They are influencing the informant to watch or do the trending video on TikTok. Informants shared:

> *"My friend plays a big role in influencing the trends that I follow. When they share a new dance challenge or a funny video, I'm more likely to check it out and join in. It's all about staying connected and having fun together…,"(IM3).*
> *"My family always influences me to any trend on TikTok, like dance, food, and many things we do together, and bonding time together. They like to share the link through TikTok inbox, and they always show me the video," (IF6).*
> *"My friend influences me by sharing live streaming for me that they've purchased through TikTok. When they talk about some shop or some store, I would not feel left out because I'm also stuck to the trends which product was more trending," (IF10).*
> *"My sister and my brother always influence me with all the treading in TikTok. We always share the stories about the trends together, we find the viral restaurant together, can you imagine we drove from Penang to KL just to eat viral food, and then returned to Penang on the same day. This is crazy right?" (IF2).*

The next sub-theme, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), refers to the anxiety experienced when individuals feel they are falling behind in various aspects compared to others. This phenomenon often brings about a sense of unease, particularly when individuals perceive themselves as being out of touch with current trends, viral content, or important issues. Typically, such pressure manifests as a compulsion to stay updated on the latest trends and happenings. The informants shared:

> *"Actually, there might be a bit of discomfort if I'm not up to date with the latest trends that my friends are into. It can make me feel a bit left out, I must always be up to date with what going on in the TikTok world, if not I feel like something missing in my life," (IM1).*
> *"Yeah, I tend to be quick to act when seeking information about a matter, thus making me very sensitive to important current issues. But I have a fear of being left behind in the trends on TikTok," (IF4).*
> *"Sometimes I feel like being left behind when I'm not keeping up with current trends or issues on TikTok. The feeling of unease comes when I see other people's vibrant and fun lives on social media," (IF8).*

The third and final sub-theme, Joy of Missing Out (JOMO), refers to the opposite of FOMO, while those with FOMO feel left out and want to do more things that can make their lives happier, those with JOMO stand their ground and are happier with the decision. Do things that are more beneficial for self and accept all of those decisions. The informants' ability to make decisions based on their own preferences, values, and interests. Strong JOMO enables users to engage with trends that align with their individual interests, rather than following them blindly. The informants stated:

> *"I just got engaged and up to date with what's going on every day, rather than keep myself thinking that I need to follow specific trends. I don't need to jump myself into fit in the trends," (IM5).*
> *"I prefer to watch videos on my own and watch the videos that are more helpful to me. I won't let them influence me unless I find some value in them. I would not feel outdated. I just be myself, stick to the videos that I find valuable or entertaining, that's enough," (IF10).*
> *"I will not chase every trend that my friends follow, because I realized I have more important things to focus on. Do not let TikTok control your life. So staying up to date was not the priority for me anymore," (IF12).*

In summary, the findings of this study indicate that several factors influence youth' engagement with TikTok trends, particularly in terms of attitude, behavior, and subjective norms. The study identifies two groups of youth, those who experience FOMO and feel compelled to keep up with TikTok trends is informant categories under early youth (15–21 years old) and mid youth (22 to 29 years old), while those who experience JOMO and engage with TikTok based on their personal preferences is categories under late youth (30–40 years old).

DISCUSSION

In summary, the findings of this study examine the influence of TikTok trends on Malaysian youth through TRA form three main themes, namely Attitude, Behaviour, and Subjective Norms. Using a qualitative, thematic analysis method, various sub-themes were derived from these main themes to determine the extent to which TikTok trends impact young individuals. The study categorises participants into three age groups: early youth (15–21 years old), mid youth (22 to 29 years old), and late youth (30–40 years old). The findings reveal that younger individuals, particularly those two age groups 15–21 years old and 22-29 years old, are significantly influenced by TikTok trends (Sari, 2025; Roth et al., 2021). This demographic is highly engaged with popular trends frequently emerging on the platform, with many actively participating in and sharing challenges within their social circles. These challenges often involve choreographed dances set to trending music, with users motivated by the potential to gain high viewership. Conversely, participants aged 30–40 years old demonstrate lower engagement with such trends, and they feel JOMO when used TikTok.

Instead, they are more inclined toward content that is practical and meaningful, utilising TikTok as an informational resource for life hacks, educational content, and skill development. This finding aligns with Brailovskaia et al., (2020), who suggest that social media serves as a platform for self-expression, entertainment, and time management. Additionally, previous studies indicate that frequent social media use may contribute to time distortion, which influences users' selective engagement with TikTok content based on its perceived usefulness rather than simply keeping up with trends.

Moreover, the study highlights the diverse content preferences of TikTok users, demonstrating the platform's ability to cater to a wide range of interests and moods. Participants reported engaging with various types of content, including dance challenges, lifestyle, animals, food, sports, and history. This multi-content preference can be attributed to TikTok's personalised algorithm, which curates content based on users' interests rather than limiting them to a single genre. One participant mentioned watching dance challenges, sports, and animal videos, further supporting the notion that TikTok serves as both an entertainment and learning platform. This finding aligns with Lee et al., (2015), who categorized users' content consumption behaviours into social engagement, archiving, self-expression, escapism, and curiosity. Additionally, Törhönen et al., (2019) found that interactive content on social media facilitates connections, builds networks of like-minded individuals, and fosters discussions on global events.

Subjective norms, as defined by Ajzen (1991), are shaped by normative beliefs and motivational compliance. Participants were asked how their friends influenced their engagement with TikTok trends and whether they experienced fear of missing out (FOMO) if they did not follow these trends. The responses were mixed, with some reporting strong peer influence, particularly among younger users, while older participants exhibited less susceptibility to social pressure (Castrellon et al., 2024; Lu & Brown, 2023). One participant noted that engaging with trends made it easier to stay connected with friends, suggesting that viral challenges contribute to shared experiences and social bonding. Similarly, another participant mentioned that friends' recommendations on live streams and brands enhanced their online shopping experience by exposing them to new products. TikTok frequently incorporates trending content to encourage user participation and reduce the likelihood of exclusion. This observation is consistent with Ajzen's (1991) theory, which posits that individuals are influenced by subjective norms, whether positively or negatively.

However, some participants expressed a sense of autonomy, stating that staying updated on trends was not their priority as they had more important personal goals to focus on. Ajzen (1991) further suggests that social groups play a critical role in determining whether individuals conform to or deviate from prevailing trends.

In summary, this study highlights the varying degrees of TikTok's influence on different age groups, emphasising the role of attitudes, behavior, and subjective norms in shaping user engagement with trends. While younger individuals are more likely to participate in viral challenges, older users tend to engage selectively, prioritizing content that aligns with their interests and daily needs.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, TikTok has rapidly emerged as one of the most influential social media platforms, particularly among young people. Through viral trends and dance challenges, it not only provides entertainment but also shapes attitudes, behaviours, and subjective norms. The findings of this study using qualitative and TRA indicate that youngsters' interactions with TikTok trends are complex, involving various social influences, active user engagement, and personal preferences. While live-stream shopping, DIY projects, and dance challenges are popular among users, some individuals exhibit a strong sense of autonomy by focusing on content that aligns with their personal interests rather than simply following trends. The primary objective of this study was to examine how TikTok trends influence young people's attitudes, behaviours, and subjective norms. Applying the TRA, the study sought to understand how social media trends impact personal decision-making.

In terms of subjective norms, participants' interactions with TikTok trends were significantly influenced by social dynamics. Some participants acknowledged feeling pressured to follow trends to maintain social connections. However, many users also demonstrated personal autonomy by resisting peer pressure and choosing trends based on their own interests. A key sub-theme that emerged was the fear of missing out (FOMO), with some participants expressing anxiety about not keeping up with the latest trends. Despite this, many emphasized the importance of balancing personal interests with the social dynamics of trend-following.

This study has several limitations that may affect the generalizability of the findings. The small sample size, which was limited to participants from six regions not represent the whole of Malaysia, restricting the broader applicability of the results. Additionally, future research should expand the sample size to include a more diverse demographic across all states in Malaysia.

In future recommendations, participants from various states and regions, future studies could offer a more representative analysis of how TikTok trends influence behaviour across different socioeconomic, cultural, and geographic backgrounds. Additionally, comparing TikTok usage, attitudes, and societal influences between Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia, or between urban and rural areas, could yield valuable insights. This broader approach would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how TikTok trends impact young people across different age groups and demographic profiles, providing a richer diversity of perspectives.

Moreover, TikTok influencers and content creators play a significant role in shaping trends, particularly in influencing youth behavior. However, the current study does not extensively examine how these factors impact the attitudes and subjective norms of different user groups. Future research could explore the role of TikTok influencers in greater depth, focusing on how branded content, lifestyle representation, and influencer endorsements shape youth behavior. Additionally, investigating how trust and confidence in influencers drive young consumers' desire to follow specific trends could provide valuable insights into the mechanisms of digital influence.

In addition, this study carries significant implications for educators, policymakers, and content creators. Educators can utilise the popularity of TikTok as a pedagogical tool by adapting the formats to design interactive learning to resonate with youth media practices. For policymakers to address the algorithmic amplification of potentially harmful content and support the creation of safer online environments by developing digital well-being campaigns. Content creators should exercise ethical responsibility by avoiding the glorification of risky behaviours and instead leveraging trending formats to promote educational, cultural, and socially beneficial messages.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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