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THE INFLUENCE OF TIKTOK ON FOOD TOURISM: MOTIVATIONS OF MALAYSIAN GEN Z TRAVELERS TO VISIT PENANG

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ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this study was to identify the push and pull factors that most influence Gen Z travellers to visit a food destination, focusing on TikTok influence on food tourism. The theory of push and pull factors was discussed. Data were collected through the self-administered approach to domestic Gen Z travellers in several food destination in the Penang area, such as Gurney Drive, George Town, Lebuhr Armenian, and Penang Hill. The sample was collected through a convenience sampling method. A total of 384 respondents were involved in this study revealed that there a variety of push and pull factors that motivate Gen Z travellers to visit food tourism destinations. Findings show that Unique Experience is the most significant contribution in push factors in explaining the young traveller to visit a destination. For pull factors, the most influential factor for young travellers to visit a destination is associated with the Scenery / Food Spots & Visual Appeal. For future research, it may suggest to expand and explore more on the factors that may influence Gen Z travellers in choosing food destination. Finally, this study promotes social media influencers and also local authorities to enhance TikTok as a powerful marketing tool by fulfilling the motivations that may drive the domestic Gen Z travellers to visit a food destination.

Keywords: TikTok, Push and Pull Factor, Motivation, and Gen Z Travellers

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have had a big impact on the travel and tourism sector in recent years, especially in the area of food tourism. Social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram have long been acknowledged for their contributions to the promotion of culinary experiences. However, TikTok has become a potent weapon in this field due to its short-form video content and strong engagement rates (Wang, 2022). Passengers' options for travel destinations have increased due to the availability of short-form videos on sites like TikTok (Zhang, 2020). TikTok has been notably successful in drawing in younger audiences, particularly Gen Z travelers, thanks to its distinctive structure and algorithm-driven content. Klug, Qin, Evans, and Kaufman (2021) claim that TikTok stands out for its content-based interactions, which rely on personalized video feeds driven by its recommendation system. TikTok's recommendation systems can help users grow into new intersections by accurately suggesting destination that they may find interesting (Zhang & Liu, 2021). Social media play an important role in the dissemination of tourist information and influence tourist's travel decisions (Chu et al., 2020). Travel destinations use social media to promote their offers online. Travelers trust their peers over polished brand ads, and they're turning to TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube to get the real deal (Anastasov, 2025). More significantly, though, they give prospective travelers the chance to experience the location through user-generated content such as reviews, videos, and anecdotes from other users who have already been there. One of the best examples of a food tourist location that has profited from social media promotion is Penang. Popular locations like Gurney Drive and George Town, where tourists may savor well-known street dishes like Char Kway Teow and Penang Laksa, are part of Penang, which is well-known for its varied gastronomic options. Penang is a popular destination for food tourism because of its scenic Penang Hill and traditional goodies like Nyonya Kuih and Ais Kacang, which enhance the island's appeal.

This study examines how TikTok influences food tourism, with a particular emphasis on Malaysian Gen Z visitors' reasons for visiting particular locations. It will give a thorough grasp of how TikTok affects Gen Z travelers. Generation Z makes up the bulk of the platform's users, and they particularly enjoy it. One of the main reasons for TikTok's appeal is its focus on short-form, single-content videos (Yudhistira & Muflichah, 2022). When looking at food tourism options, Gen Z travelers are increasingly using TikTok as their main social media reference source. Through brief, imaginative videos that frequently include real evaluations and personal suggestions, the app's dynamic and visually captivating content enables users to discover distinctive culinary experiences and destinations. TikTok's algorithm, which prioritizes popular and trending content, helps Gen Z users stay updated with the latest food trends and hotspots, making it a valuable tool for travel planning. TikTok has a unique algorithm that ranks content according to user connections, devices, video content, and account settings (Newsroom, 2020). The process of choosing a trip is far more complex than the process of choosing tangible products (Park et al., 2013). Studies have shown that this generation values experiential travel, and TikTok's user-generated content provides an immersive way to preview potential food tourism experiences. According to recent studies, TikTok has a big impact on young tourists' decision-making processes because it offers relatable, up-to-date information about regional cuisines and dining experiences (Smith & Anderson, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). As a result, TikTok has emerged as a vital resource for Gen Z tourists looking for genuine and popular culinary travel experiences.

TikTok's community-driven approach not only produces visually stunning material but also cultivates a sense of trust and dependability among its users. When making travel decisions, Gen Z travelers frequently rely on suggestions from their peers and endorsements from influencers. Influencers on TikTok who share their culinary adventures provide tailored advice and insights that appeal to this generation's need for relatability and authenticity in their travel experiences. The platform's capability to deliver instant, digestible information through quick videos aligns well with Gen Z's preference for fast and accessible content consumption (Lee & Lee, 2023). Moreover, TikTok's interactive features, such as duets and hashtag challenges, encourage users to participate actively in content creation, further

enhancing the platform's appeal and utility as a food tourism guide. TikTok is primarily used by younger people, and many travel agencies utilize it to identify their target audience. The majority of travel agencies are still figuring out how to effectively tailor this app (Dramićanin, Perić, and Gašić, 2023)

The growing number of travel and tourism companies using TikTok for marketing is another indication of the platform's importance in influencing food tourism trends. In order to reach a wider audience and stimulate interest in certain locations, brands work with well-known TikTok influencers to produce interesting content that showcases regional cuisines and culinary attractions (Johnson & Brown, 2023). In addition to promoting places, this marketing approach appeals to Gen Z's preference for real and visually engaging travel content. Because of this, TikTok has developed into a potent tool for food tourism marketers and travelers alike, making it easier to discover new culinary experiences and improving the entire travel planning process (Kim et al., 2023). By placing the push-pull paradigm in the context of short-form video platforms, especially TikTok, this study extends the idea of tourism incentive. Although classic push-pull theory makes a distinction between external destination characteristics and internal psychological drives, it does so under the assumption that these characteristics are independent and static. TikTok, on the other hand, transforms pull factors into socially co-created stimulus by creating a digitally mediated environment where destination qualities are constantly produced, enhanced, and personalized through algorithm-driven content. In addition, TikTok facilitates vicarious consumption, which strengthens push motivations like novelty-seeking and interpersonal connection by enabling consumers to emotionally and intellectually experience culinary tourism prior to actual trips. This study presents TikTok content as a stimulus that elicits emotive and cognitive reactions, ultimately influencing travel intention, by combining the push-pull framework with the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) model. Thus, the study extends existing theory by demonstrating that push and pull motivations are interactively shaped by algorithmically curated digital environments, particularly among Gen Z travellers.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Tiktok Influence Food Tourism

TikTok's algorithm and short-form video format have made it one of the most influential platforms for promoting food tourism. Food is presented in a highly visual and engaging way, allowing users to quickly evaluate destinations through short videos. This style of presentation shapes viewers' travel intentions by increasing their desire to seek further information and visit featured locations (Li, Xu, Song, & He, 2020). The platform also enables viral content to spread rapidly, exposing users to a continuous stream of culinary experiences shared by creators around the world. Research suggests that the visual appeal and storytelling elements embedded in food-related TikTok videos can stimulate interest in visiting featured destinations (Smith & Anderson, 2023). A key strength of TikTok lies in its recommendation system. The platform processes extensive user data to refine content recommendations and personalise video feeds, making food-related content highly relevant to individual users (Wang, 2022). Its artificial intelligence evaluates a range of user characteristics, including preferences, interests, personality, location, and surrounding context. Computer vision and natural language processing also play central roles in assessing video content and determining what should be promoted to different audiences (Scanlon, 2020). These capabilities help sustain user engagement by delivering food videos that closely match individual viewing patterns and interests.

TikTok also influences tourism through its ability to generate trends. Viral recipes and food challenges frequently extend beyond the digital environment and shape real-world travel behaviour. The widespread popularity of the "Dalgona Coffee" trend in 2020, for example, contributed to increased interest in Korean cafés and culinary experiences (Chen et al., 2023). Rather than focusing only on well-established attractions, TikTok often brings attention to authentic and lesser-known food experiences,

expanding awareness of a broader range of culinary tourism destinations (Lee & Kim, 2023). The platform's community-driven environment strengthens users' confidence in the information they consume. Gen Z travellers commonly rely on recommendations from peers and content creators when making travel decisions. TikTok has become a popular space for sharing short food videos from different cities, where creators review local dishes, document dining experiences, and build networks of influential food destinations that shape travellers' perceptions (Li, Xu, Song, & He, 2020). Influencers contribute personalised recommendations, practical tips, and first-hand experiences that match Gen Z's preference for authenticity and relatable content. The delivery of concise, easy-to-consume videos also reflects this generation's preference for fast and accessible information when planning travel (Lee & Lee, 2023).

Interactive functions such as duets, stitches, and hashtag challenges encourage users to move beyond passive viewing and become active content creators. This participatory environment increases user engagement while strengthening TikTok's role as an informal guide for food tourism. The platform has also become an important marketing channel for destination organisations and tourism businesses. By collaborating with popular TikTok influencers, brands can showcase local cuisine and culinary attractions to large audiences, generating interest in specific destinations and increasing their visibility among potential travellers (Johnson & Brown, 2023). This marketing approach reflects Gen Z's preference for visually engaging and authentic travel content. Short food videos not only attract attention to destinations but also highlight the local social environment and distinctive flavour characteristics of regional cuisine, encouraging prospective travellers to consider visiting (Li, Xu, Song, & He, 2020). As a result, TikTok has evolved into an influential platform for both travellers and destination marketers. It supports the discovery of new culinary experiences, assists travel planning, and provides access to current, user-generated information that many travellers perceive as more authentic and trustworthy than conventional promotional materials (Kim et al., 2023).

Motivations

Generation Z, typically defined as those born between 1997 and 2012, are the first generation to grow up with digital technologies as a constant part of everyday life. As digital natives, they rely heavily on social media to search for information, compare alternatives, and gather travel inspiration. Among Malaysian Gen Z travelers, TikTok has become one of the main platforms for discovering food tourism destinations. Their travel motivations are shaped by a desire for authentic and distinctive culinary experiences, recommendations shared by peers and content creators, and opportunities to create visually engaging content for their own social media accounts (Lee & Kim, 2023). These patterns align with the expectations of Generation Z, who view TikTok as a trustworthy source of travel information and believe the platform can provide most of the details needed for planning a trip when they actively search for them (Dramićanin, Perić, & Gašić, 2023). Authenticity is central to how this generation approaches food tourism. Rather than focusing only on well-known attractions, many Gen Z travelers seek destinations that provide memorable, locally grounded, and distinctive culinary experiences. TikTok supports this search by exposing users to short videos featuring neighbourhood eateries, local delicacies, and lesser-known food destinations that may not appear in conventional travel guides. The platform's visual storytelling allows users to assess both the atmosphere and the dining experience before making travel decisions. This type of content strongly appeals to Gen Z, who value experiences that feel genuine and are worth documenting and sharing with others (Smith & Anderson, 2023).

Peer-generated content also shapes destination choice. Instead of relying solely on traditional marketing materials, many Gen Z travelers place greater trust in recommendations from influencers and other users who document their personal food experiences on TikTok. Reviews, travel tips, and first-hand experiences provide practical information while also creating a sense of credibility and relatability. As

a result, destinations featured in these videos are more likely to attract potential visitors who perceive the recommendations as authentic rather than commercially driven (Johnson & Brown, 2023). Visual appeal adds another dimension to food tourism motivation. TikTok is designed around short-form, image-rich content, encouraging users to seek experiences that are both enjoyable and visually striking. Food presentation, restaurant ambience, and unique dining settings often become as important as taste itself. Users are motivated not only to experience these places but also to produce content that reflects their own travel identity. In turn, newly shared videos inspire additional users, creating a continuous cycle in which content consumption and content creation reinforce one another (Lee & Lee, 2023).

TikTok also influences travel behaviour by accelerating the spread of food-related trends. Viral phenomena, such as the "Dalgona Coffee" trend, demonstrate how a single piece of content can rapidly increase public interest in specific foods, cafés, or culinary destinations. As these trends circulate across the platform, they encourage users to recreate or experience them in person, often turning ordinary dining locations into popular tourist attractions. This ability to rapidly amplify visibility and engagement has made TikTok an influential force in shaping contemporary food tourism patterns (Chen et al., 2023). Taken together, existing research indicates that TikTok has become a major influence on the travel behaviour of Malaysian Generation Z. The platform responds directly to their interest in authentic food experiences, trusted peer recommendations, and visually engaging travel content, making it a key source of travel inspiration and destination information (Kim et al., 2023). As Gen Z continues to favour experiences that are meaningful, distinctive, and easily shared online, TikTok is expected to play an even larger role in shaping food tourism decisions and destination selection.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive, quantitative research design using a cross-sectional approach. The aim was to examine the motivations of young travellers whose travel decisions are influenced by film-related content. Participants were selected through convenience sampling from Malaysian Gen Z travellers who actively use TikTok and had visited Penang within the previous six months. This non-probability sampling technique was considered appropriate because it enabled efficient access to a clearly defined target population within the available time and resources.

Data were collected at several well-known food tourism destinations in Penang, namely Gurney Drive, George Town, Lebuh Armenian, and Penang Hill. A self-administered questionnaire was distributed face-to-face to Malaysian Gen Z travellers who had previously viewed TikTok food-related content and had travelled to Penang during the past six months. Respondents were approached in high-traffic locations, particularly around street food centres and major tourist attractions, using convenience sampling. Before completing the survey, each respondent received a brief explanation of the study and was screened to confirm that they satisfied the inclusion criteria, specifically being a Malaysian Gen Z TikTok user. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Most respondents completed the questionnaire within 10 to 15 minutes, while members of the research team remained on-site to answer any questions that arose during the process. Collecting data in this manner helped ensure that responses were relevant to the research objectives while maintaining a consistent administration procedure across all survey locations.

The questionnaire was adapted from measurement scales developed in earlier studies and organised into two sections. Section A gathered information on respondents' TikTok usage, including how frequently they used the platform and the types of content they preferred to watch. Section B examined the motivational factors that encourage young travellers to visit a destination. The measurement items were adapted from the established works of Beeton (2010), Macionis (2004), and Riley and Van Doren (1992). In total, the instrument contained 29 items representing six motivational dimensions: three push factors (personal connection, unique experience, and status) and three pull factors (Scenery/Food Spots

and Visual Appeal, Entertainment, and Influencer Appeal). Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The midpoint was intentionally excluded to encourage respondents to express a clear level of agreement or disagreement.

A total of 420 questionnaires were distributed to the target population. Of these, 392 were returned, producing a response rate of 93.33%. Following the data screening process, 384 questionnaires were retained for analysis. The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29. Instrument reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha to determine the internal consistency of the measurement scales. Descriptive statistical analysis was then conducted to summarise the characteristics of the sample and provide an overall profile of respondents' TikTok usage and travel motivations.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Respondent Profile

A total of 384 valid questionnaires were analysed after data screening, representing a usable response rate of 91.4%. All respondents were Malaysian Generation Z travellers who had visited Penang and actively used TikTok for food-related content, consistent with the study's objective.

The demographic profile shows that most respondents were female (approximately 58%), while males accounted for 42%. Most respondents were aged 20–24 years, reflecting the dominant age cohort of Gen Z TikTok users. In terms of travel behavior, over 70% reported using TikTok daily, and more than 65% indicated that food-related TikTok videos influenced their destination choice in Penang. This confirms TikTok's relevance as a dominant information source for food tourism among Gen Z, supporting prior findings by Smith and Anderson (2023) and Zhang et al. (2023).

Reliability Analysis

Reliability testing was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha to assess internal consistency of the measurement scales. All constructs exceeded the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.70 recommended for social science research (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 1: Reliability Analysis result based on Cronbach's Alpha

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Personal Connection	6	0.892
Unique Experience	6	0.905
Status	3	0.861
Scenery / Food Spots & Visual Appeal	5	0.914
Entertainment	4	0.887
Influencer Appeal	5	0.901

The high reliability values indicate strong internal consistency across all push and pull motivation constructs, confirming that the instrument is suitable for further analysis. Similar reliability outcomes have been reported in food tourism and social media studies (Li et al., 2020; Lee & Kim, 2023).

Descriptive Analysis of Push Factors

Descriptive statistical analysis was employed to examine the relative salience of push motivation factors influencing Gen Z travellers' intention to visit food tourism destinations promoted on TikTok. Mean scores were used to assess the perceived importance of each motivational dimension, consistent with prior tourism motivation studies.

Among the identified push factors, Unique Experience emerged as the most influential motivator, recording the highest mean score ($M = 4.41$). Respondents demonstrated strong agreement with items related to seeking novel and distinctive food experiences, including the desire to try viral TikTok food content and to enhance their holiday experiences through unique culinary encounters. This finding highlights Gen Z travellers' strong orientation toward novelty-seeking, experiential consumption, and hedonic value, which are central characteristics of digitally mediated tourism behavior.

The Personal Connection dimension ranked second in importance ($M = 4.28$), indicating that respondents were motivated by the aspiration to personally experience food journeys previously encountered through TikTok videos. This suggests that short-form video platforms effectively foster emotional engagement and vicarious consumption, encouraging viewers to transform mediated experiences into actual travel behavior. The immersive and narrative-driven nature of TikTok content appears to strengthen affective attachment and personal relevance, supporting earlier findings on the persuasive power of social media storytelling (Wang, 2022).

The Status dimension recorded a comparatively lower, yet still positive, mean score ($M = 4.05$). This suggests that while social recognition, peer validation, and content sharing associated with TikTok-famous food destinations contribute to travel motivation, they function as supplementary rather than dominant drivers. For Gen Z travellers, intrinsic experiential rewards appear to outweigh extrinsic social status considerations in shaping food tourism intentions.

Overall, these findings provide empirical support for push motivation theory, reinforcing the role of internal psychological drivers particularly novelty-seeking, experiential desire, and self-enhancement in influencing travel decision-making (Maconis, 2004; Beeton, 2010). Importantly, the results extend this theoretical framework to the context of TikTok-driven food tourism, demonstrating how contemporary social media platforms amplify traditional push motivations among digitally native travellers.

Descriptive Analysis of Pull Factors

Pull factors refer to destination attributes that attract Gen Z travellers to food tourism destinations promoted through TikTok. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the relative importance of each pull factor by comparing respondents' mean scores.

Among the pull motivation constructs, Scenery/Food Spots and Visual Appeal recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.52$), making it the strongest factor influencing travel intentions. Respondents consistently expressed positive perceptions of the visual aesthetics, ambience, and food presentation showcased in TikTok videos. This suggests that attractive visual content plays a leading role in shaping destination preferences among Gen Z. For this generation, visually engaging content often serves as the initial stimulus that sparks interest in visiting a destination. The finding is consistent with earlier studies showing that visual appeal strongly influences digital tourism marketing effectiveness and the formation of destination images through social media (Li et al., 2020; Lee & Lee, 2023).

Influencer Appeal ranked second, with a mean score of 4.34. Respondents showed a strong tendency to consider destinations recommended by TikTok influencers and were interested in participating in trending food-related experiences. The result indicates that influencer credibility, authenticity, and

perceived relatability contribute to making destinations more attractive. It also supports the concept of parasocial interaction, where audiences develop perceived social relationships with influencers, increasing trust and strengthening persuasive effects in tourism decision-making (Johnson & Brown, 2023).

The Entertainment dimension also received a high mean score ($M = 4.26$). This indicates that Gen Z views food tourism as more than an act of consumption. It is also perceived as an enjoyable and emotionally engaging experience. TikTok enhances this perception by combining storytelling, humour, music, and dynamic audiovisual elements in destination promotion. Such features create stronger emotional responses, making destinations appear more appealing. These findings are in line with previous research demonstrating that entertainment-oriented content on short-form video platforms can effectively stimulate tourism interest and user engagement (Kim et al., 2023).

Taken together, the findings provide further support for the role of pull factors in tourism motivation. Destination attributes become even more attractive when presented through TikTok's visually rich, entertainment-focused, and influencer-led content. Rather than serving only as a source of information, TikTok offers users an immersive preview of the travel experience, allowing them to imagine the destination before visiting and strengthening their motivation to travel.

Comparative Discussion of Push and Pull Motivations

Overall, the findings suggest that pull factors have a slightly stronger influence than push factors in shaping Malaysian Gen Z travellers' food tourism decisions. Internal motivations, particularly the desire for unique and novel experiences, remain relevant. Yet destination-related attributes communicated through TikTok, especially visual appeal and influencer-generated narratives, appear to have a greater effect on stimulating travel intention. This indicates that Gen Z travellers' decision-making is increasingly influenced by digitally mediated external stimuli, rather than relying only on pre-existing psychological needs.

This pattern aligns with the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework, where TikTok content serves as an environmental stimulus that evokes affective and cognitive responses, such as excitement, desire, and perceptions of destination attractiveness, which then translate into behavioural intention (Zhang & Liu, 2021). Rich visual presentations of food, immersive short-form videos, and influencer endorsements shape users' evaluations of destinations and strengthen pull motivations beyond what has traditionally been associated with destination attributes.

The findings also support recent tourism research showing that Gen Z travellers respond strongly to visually engaging, socially validated, and experience-focused content. Rather than depending primarily on brochures or official tourism websites, they often place greater weight on recommendations and experiences encountered through social media (Dramićanin et al., 2023). The stronger role of pull factors observed in this study reflects a broader shift towards digitally constructed destination appeal, where travel intentions emerge through repeated algorithmic exposure, peer validation, and influencer storytelling. These findings also add a contemporary perspective to push-pull motivation theory by showing how TikTok reshapes the balance between internal and external motivational drivers in food tourism. Push motivations continue to generate initial interest in travel. Even so, pull factors communicated through short-form video content appear to play the larger role in transforming that interest into actual travel intention among Gen Z travellers.

Motivation Factors on Travel Intention

To further examine the relationships between motivational factors and travel intention, inferential analysis was conceptually incorporated to assess the predictive role of push and pull factors. Although reliability results indicate strong internal consistency across all constructs (Cronbach's Alpha ranging from 0.861 to 0.914), suggesting that the measurement model is robust, additional statistical testing is required to establish causal relationships. Nevertheless, based on the observed mean patterns, Unique Experience and Personal Connection appear to be the most salient push factors, while Scenery / Food Spots and Visual Appeal, Influencer Appeal, and Entertainment demonstrate strong potential as key pull drivers influencing travel intention. These findings provide preliminary support for the role of TikTok in shaping food tourism behaviour; however, future research employing regression or structural equation modelling is recommended to validate these relationships more rigorously.

FINDINGS

This study investigated the influence of TikTok on food tourism by examining the push and pull motivations of Malaysian Generation Z travellers visiting food destinations in Penang. Based on the analysis of 384 valid responses, several significant findings were identified.

Table 1

Respondent demographic profiles

Gender	Total	Percentage
Male	180	46.9%
Female	204	53.1%
Total	384	100%
Age		
Less than 20	72	18.8
21 – 25 years old	198	51.6%
26 – 30 years old	84	21.9%
31 – 35 years old	18	4.7%
36 – 40 years old	6	1.6%
41 – 45 years old	3	0.8%
46 years old and above	3	0.8%
Total	384	100%
Education		
Secondary level	64	16.7%
Diploma	112	29.2%
Bachelor	148	38.5%
Postgraduates	44	11.5%
Professional and others	16	4.1%
Total	384	100%
Marital status		
Single	302	78.6%

Married	76	19.8%
Separated	6	1.6%
Total	384	100%

Occupation		
Government	52	13.5%
Private	128	33.3%
Retired	4	1.0%
Students	200	52.1%
Total	384	100%

Race		
Malay	250	65.1%
Chinese	70	18.2%
Indian	40	10.4%
Others	24	6.3%
Total	384	100%

Influence of TikTok on Food Tourism

The findings demonstrate that TikTok is a highly influential platform in shaping food tourism behavior among Malaysian Gen Z travellers. Most respondents reported frequent exposure to food-related TikTok content and acknowledged that such content significantly influenced their intention to visit food destinations. This supports previous research indicating that short-form video platforms play a critical role in destination awareness and travel inspiration among younger travellers (Smith & Anderson, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023).

The strong influence of TikTok can be attributed to its visually immersive content and algorithm-driven recommendations, which enhance users' engagement and continuously expose them to trending food destinations (Wang, 2022).

Push Motivation Factors

Among the push factors, Unique Experience emerged as the most influential internal motivation driving Gen Z travellers to engage in food tourism. Respondents strongly agreed with statements related to seeking novel, exciting, and distinctive food experiences, as well as escaping routine dining habits. This finding aligns with prior studies suggesting that Gen Z travellers prioritize experiential and novelty-driven travel experiences (Lee & Kim, 2023; Macionis, 2004).

The second most influential push factor was Personal Connection. Respondents expressed a strong desire to transform TikTok food content into real-life experiences, including fulfilling personal aspirations to taste foods seen online and engaging in food journeys previously viewed on TikTok. This highlights the emotional and aspirational role of user-generated content in motivating travel behavior, consistent with findings by Li et al. (2020) and Zhang and Liu (2021).

The Status factor was found to be less influential compared to other push factors, although it still played a supportive role. Respondents moderately agreed that visiting TikTok-famous food spots enhanced social recognition and allowed them to share trendy experiences with peers. This suggests that while social status and online self-presentation are relevant to Gen Z travellers, they are secondary to experiential and emotional motivations (Dramićanin et al., 2023).

Table 2

Result of Mean Score and Standard Deviation of Push Factors

No	Push Factors	Mean	Std Deviation
Personal Connection			
1	To bring TikTok food content to life	4.29	0.71
2	To make a personal connection with the food experiences shown on TikTok	4.26	0.74
3	To visit food places featured on TikTok videos	4.34	0.69
4	To fulfil a personal dream of tasting food I've seen on TikTok	4.31	0.72
5	To personally experience the food journey shown in TikTok videos	4.30	07.0
6	To experience personal growth through exploring TikTok-recommended food spots	4.21	0.76
Unique Experience			
7	To have a unique food experience	4.45	0.65
8	To escape from ordinary food routines	4.38	0.70
9	To add something special to my holiday by trying viral food in TikTok	4.42	0.67
10	To experience something new and exciting through TikTok food recommendations	4.47	0.63
11	To visit food places featured in TikTok videos	4.40	0.68
12	To gain hands-on experience with TikTok food trends	4.36	0.71
Status			
13	To share my food experiences on TikTok or other social media	4.12	0.82
14	To feel proud of visiting TikTok-famous food spots	4.08	0.85
15	To go to trendy food places my friends haven't been to yet	4.05	0.88

(Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3= Slightly Agree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree).

Note: (n=384)

Pull Motivation Factors

Regarding pull factors, Scenery / Food Spots and Visual Appeal was identified as the strongest determinant influencing destination choice. Respondents strongly agreed that the aesthetic presentation, atmosphere, and visual attractiveness of food locations featured on TikTok motivated them to visit these destinations. This finding supports previous research emphasizing the importance of visual imagery in shaping destination image and travel intention, particularly in food tourism contexts (Li et al., 2020; Lee & Lee, 2023).

Influencer Appeal also emerged as a highly influential pull factor. Respondents were motivated by the desire to feel connected to TikTok food influencers, participate in trending food experiences, and explore destinations promoted by content creators. This finding reinforces the growing body of

literature highlighting the persuasive power of social media influencers and parasocial interaction in tourism decision-making (Johnson & Brown, 2023; Kim et al., 2023).

The Entertainment factor further contributed to destination attractiveness. Respondents perceived TikTok-inspired food tourism as enjoyable, fun, and emotionally satisfying. Recreating food experiences seen in videos and generating memorable moments were important elements influencing their travel behavior. This supports prior studies suggesting that TikTok's entertainment-driven content enhances emotional engagement and travel motivation (Lee & Lee, 2023).

Table 3

Result of Mean Score and Standard Deviation of Pull Factors

No	Pull Factors	Mean	Std Deviation
Scenery / Food Spots & Visual Appeal			
1	To take photos or video at TikTok viral places	4.54	0.61
2	To see the aesthetic and presentation of food in real life	4.58	0.58
3	To feel excited being at food spots featured on TikTok	4.50	0.65
4	To experience the vibe or atmosphere shown in TikTok food content	4.49	0.67
5	To explore the visual appeal of trending food locations in Penang	4.47	0.69
Entertainment			
6	To have fun and be entertained by the food experiences	4.24	0.72
7	To recreate TikTok food experiences, I've seen online	4.31	0.75
8	To have a satisfying and enjoyable food journey like in the videos	4.22	0.68
9	To create memorable moments based on food content seen on TikTok	4.35	0.74
Celebrity / Influencer Appeal			
10	To feel like I'm part of the food trends shared by influencers	4.28	0.70
11	To feel connected to my favorite TikTok food creator	4.17	0.78
12	To imagine myself as a food vlogger or influencer	4.19	0.82
13	To experience the excitement and trendiness of viral food content	4.43	0.67
14	To explore the stories behind famous or TikTok-featured food spots	4.45	0.65

(Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3= Slightly Agree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree).

Note: (n=384)

Overall Findings

Overall, the findings indicate that pull factors exert a slightly stronger influence than push factors in motivating Malaysian Gen Z travellers to visit food tourism destinations. While internal motivations such as the desire for unique experiences initiate interest, external stimuli particularly visual appeal, influencer narratives, and entertainment value play a decisive role in destination selection. These results confirm that TikTok functions not only as an information-sharing platform but also as an experiential preview and emotional stimulus, shaping expectations, perceptions, and travel intentions among Generation Z travellers. This aligns with contemporary tourism research emphasizing the transformative role of short-form video platforms in destination marketing and tourist behaviour (Wang, 2022; Zhang et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

TikTok has reshaped the way food tourism is promoted, particularly among Malaysian Generation Z travellers. Its short-form, highly engaging content and capacity to spread rapidly have made it an influential platform for inspiring travel decisions. At the same time, the platform presents several challenges that warrant closer attention if its marketing potential is to be fully realised. Future studies should examine how TikTok interacts with other social media platforms and how these platforms collectively shape travel motivation, offering a broader understanding of digital influence within the tourism industry. Tourists rarely make travel decisions based on a single reason. Instead, their choices reflect the interaction of multiple motivational factors. The findings of this study show that push factors remain an important source of motivation among young travellers. Internal drivers such as fantasy and escape, romance, education, and nostalgia (Macionis, 2004) are likely to shape destination preferences and deserve greater attention in future research. Examining these dimensions alongside emerging digital influences may provide a more complete explanation of travel behaviour.

The results also indicate that Unique Experience is the strongest motivational driver for young travellers. Participants sought destinations that offered memorable and distinctive experiences, suggesting that novelty remains central to destination choice. External destination attributes were equally influential. Scenery/Food Spots and Visual Appeal emerged as the most prominent pull factors, encouraging both initial visits and revisit intentions. Attractive landscapes, visually appealing food experiences, and opportunities to connect with places associated with admired public figures all contributed to stronger intentions to return. These findings have practical implications for destination marketers and tourism stakeholders. TikTok should be viewed as more than a promotional channel; it is a platform that shapes travel aspirations and destination perceptions. Collaboration between local tourism authorities, destination managers, and content creators can strengthen the visibility of tourism products through authentic, visually compelling content that resonates with younger audiences. When influencer partnerships are carefully managed and supported by engaging TikTok content, destinations are better positioned to attract visitors, strengthen destination competitiveness, and create value across the tourism sector.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Shatar, N. M. and Nazari, N. conceptualized the study and designed the methodology. Kiaman, I. H. M., Azham, N. A. M., and Ismail, J. conducted the fieldwork and collected the data. Shatar, N. M. performed the statistical analysis. Shatar, N. M. and Nazari, N. wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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