THE ROLE OF YOUTUBE AND XIAOHONGSHU IN SHAPING UT AR KAMPAR STUDENTS' INFLUENCES OF TAIWAN TOURISM: A CASE STUDY OF CHINESE-FLUENT UNDERGRADUATES

ANGELINA CHOO WEN YI

A RESEARCH PROJECT
SUBMITTED IN
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE AWARD OF
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FACULTY OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCE
UNIVERSITI TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN

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ANGELINA CHOO WEN YI

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Malaysian audiences rely on social media platforms—particularly YouTube, Xiaohongshu (RED), Instagram, and TikTok—and the content of Taiwanese key opinion leaders (KOLs) to obtain travel information. The research addresses the problem of shifting information-seeking behavior, where young travelers increasingly prioritize influencer-generated content over traditional sources. Guided by the Social Media Engagement Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory, the study adopts a qualitative approach, using focus group discussions to examine how KOL credibility, relatability, and presentation style influence travel perceptions and decision-making. Findings reveal that Malaysian audiences perceive Taiwanese KOLs as authentic sources of insider cultural knowledge and Malaysian KOLs abroad as cultural bridges, which collectively enhance trust, engagement, and positive destination image. The study concludes that KOL-driven content not only shapes travel preferences but also constructs a sense of familiarity with Taiwan, highlighting the role of social media as a key driver of tourism information and destination branding.

Keywords: social media; key opinion leaders; travel information; Taiwan tourism; Malaysian audience

Subject Area: G156.5.S62 Tourism and social media

DECLARATION

I declare that the material contained in this paper is the end result of my own work and that due acknowledgement has been given in the bibliography and references to ALL sources be they printed, electronic or personal.

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Approval Sheet

This research paper attached hereto, entitled “The Role Of Youtube And Xiaohongshu In Shaping Utar Kampar Students’ Influences Of Taiwan Tourism: A Case Study Of Chinese-Fluent Undergraduates” prepared and submitted by” Angelina Choo Wen Yi” in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Communication (Hons) Journalism is hereby accepted.

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Supervisor Date: 2 October 2025

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LIST OF ABBREVIATION

Abbreviation	Full Form
UTAR	Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman
KOL	Key Opinion Leader
SMET	Social Media Engagement Theory
UGT	Uses and Gratifications Theory
FOMO	Fear of Missing Out
COBRAs	Consumers' Online Brand-Related Activities
FGD	Focus Group Discussion

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Tourism research increasingly acknowledges the crucial role that social media plays in influencing travel-related decision-making, particularly among younger generations who actively use digital platforms to research destinations (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Leung et al., 2013). In addition to consuming information, viewers can now engage in content production, peer-to-peer recommendations, and engagement thanks to the transition from traditional media to social networking sites (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). This trend has been especially noticeable in Asia, where the emergence of social media platforms has changed the way that destination marketing and cultural interchange are conducted (Hsu, 2020).

Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), commonly known as influencers, have become important intermediaries of travel-related information within this trend. They can more successfully establish trust and mold the image of a location than traditional promotional sources because of their perceived authenticity, relatability, and cultural proximity (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018; Lim, 2020). Young people in Malaysia are depending more and more on KOLs to shape their opinions on neighboring places, such as Taiwan, which is both linguistically and culturally close by and provides unique travel experiences (Chung & Yen, 2016).

This study examines how Malaysian students, specifically Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) undergraduates, perceive and react to Taiwan-related travel content that is posted by KOLs on Xiaohongshu (RED) and YouTube. These two platforms were chosen because they are popular among Chinese-fluent Malaysian students and are the primary sources of lifestyle-focused community conversations and long-form video material, respectively (Liu

& Liang, 2022; Zhang, 2021). The short-form and highly visual formats of TikTok and Instagram, despite their popularity in Malaysia, were not chosen for this study because they tend to focus on entertainment and short-term engagement, which may not offer the depth of narrative and discussion required for identity-driven meaning-making in tourism (Sundar & Limperos, 2013; Omar & De Run, 2020). By narrowing the scope to YouTube and Xiaohongshu, this study ensures a more focused analysis of platforms where KOLs offer both information and cultural resonance.

The aim of this study is to examine how Malaysian students interact with Taiwanese KOLs on social media and how this interaction affects their perspectives, identity demands, and possible travel plans. The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) has frequently been used in earlier research to explain why people depend on media for amusement and information. However, the collaborative and participatory character of social media engagement with travel KOLs is not well captured by UGT alone. As a result, UGT serves as the conceptual underpinning for this study, which uses Social Media Engagement Theory (SMET) as its main theoretical framework. The study intends to advance a more sophisticated understanding of how students' identity-driven demands, cultural belonging, and meaning-making processes influence their interaction with Taiwan-related tourism content by utilizing this dual-theory approach.

1.2 Research Background

1.2.1 Malaysia’s Outbound Tourism and Interest in Taiwan

Over the past ten years, Malaysian arrivals have steadily climbed, making Malaysia one of Taiwan's top Southeast Asian source markets, according to data from the Taiwan Tourism

Bureau (Taiwan Tourism Bureau, 2022). Through programs like the "Taiwan Tourism 2025" strategy, which prioritizes accessible travel for senior citizens and halal travel for Muslim tourists, Taiwan's government aggressively markets itself as a welcoming, safe, and culturally diverse destination (Huang & Chen, 2021). This illustrates Taiwan's ability to adapt to the various demands of Malaysian visitors traveling abroad.

Even though Taiwan encourages inclusivity, Malaysian Chinese tourists, who make up a sizable share of outbound tourists, continue to find Taiwan especially alluring. Their similar customs, linguistic affinities, and cultural familiarity make Taiwan more approachable and alluring (Rahim, 2022). Studying and visiting Taiwan is particularly alluring for Malaysian Chinese students since it allows them to experience both a new environment and cultural familiarity (Ng & Tan, 2022). Both organic word-of-mouth and structural promotion, particularly through social media and KOLs, are responsible for the steady increase in arrivals (Lim, Ng, & Chiam, 2023). This growing interest in Taiwan is increasingly reinforced through digital platforms, particularly social media, which have become primary sources of tourism information for Malaysian students.

This pattern offers a compelling justification for the current study. Taiwan is a particularly appealing location for Malaysian students due to the steady increase in outbound Malaysian tourism as well as the country's close proximity in terms of language and culture. Examining how this group perceives and reacts to Taiwan-related content is crucial since they depend more and more on social media and KOLs to influence their travel choices. The study's focus on Taiwanese travel content and its appeal to Malaysian students is justified by an understanding of these dynamics, which also emphasize the importance of digital platforms in destination selection.

1.2.2 Social Media as a Tourism Information Source

The way Malaysians look for and use travel-related information has changed as a result of social media. According to studies, Malaysian tourists usually look at user comments, influencer material, and peer reviews before choosing a destination (Lim, Ng, & Chiam, 2023). In addition to offering instant access to travel-related content, social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Xiaohongshu also create interactive experiences that allow users to post recommendations, ask questions, and leave comments (Chen & Huang, 2021).

Social media's interactive elements, such liking, commenting, and sharing, can foster a culture of participation that increases the perceived legitimacy of travel-related information (Shao, 2009; Abidin, 2016). Students like dynamic, user-generated information because it feels more accessible and authentic than typical brochures or tourism board websites (Ng & Tan, 2022). This preference is frequently reflected in the popularity of particular KOLs in the context of Taiwan tourism, such as Annie Explore Taiwan, which specializes in solo female travel content; Andy in Taiwan, a foreign influencer who shares his experiences of Taiwanese culture and destinations; and The DoDo Men, a local Taiwanese creator duo renowned for their engaging and humorous style. Malaysian Chinese students are particularly drawn to their content because they believe that the combination of personal storytelling and cultural familiarity is more reliable than formal, polished narratives.

This dependence is a reflection of larger worldwide tendencies that value peer-to-peer sharing and authenticity over official tourism promotion (Kapoor et al., 2021). This interactive use of social media platforms gives UTAR Kampar students, a sense of agency in determining their own travel choices.

This background reinforces the current study's applicability. Understanding how students interact with and perceive influencer-generated material is crucial since social media has emerged as the main platform for them to receive and assess travel-related information. Examining how Malaysian undergraduates use websites like YouTube and Xiaohongshu to create their impressions of Taiwan in particular provides important insights into the relationship between digital media use, cultural identity, and destination image. This justification emphasizes how crucial it is to concentrate on KOL-driven content since it plays a significant role in influencing travel intentions.

1.2.3. KOL Types and the Rise of Travel Personalization

Through social media visibility and parasocial engagement, KOLs significantly influence viewers' attitudes, perceptions, and willingness to travel (Boerman, 2020). In general, KOL-generated travel content is more trusted by Malaysian consumers—especially students and young professionals—than information from official tourist authorities (Abidin, 2016; Ng & Tan, 2022). The SMET (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016) explains this phenomenon by highlighting the fact that audiences are active players who interact through likes, comments, and shares rather than just passive recipients. Participatory actions like these create trust, strengthen emotional ties, and influence opinions about travel. Audiences can lessen fear, connect with online communities that support their trip goals, and visualize their own travel experiences by engaging with KOL content on social media.

1.2.4. The Social Influence of KOLs: From Information to Imitation

Imitation is frequently triggered by KOL-endorsed material among Malaysian outbound travelers. Viewers are prompted to copy itineraries, photo styles, and even visit the same cafes

or attractions by visually appealing content and compelling narratives that evoke FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) (Przybylski et al., 2013). Such activity is consistent with status signaling and meeting social demands according to the framework of engagement theory. Travel becomes into a kind of social capital, a cosmopolitan identity to be displayed rather than just experienced, especially among Instagram and Xiaohongshu users (Lee & Watkins, 2016). KOLs serve as story curators, positioning Taiwan as a lifestyle brand that is clean, modern, and culturally alive, particularly appealing to consumers of ethnic Chinese Malaysian descent (Chou et al., 2020).

1.2.5. The Role of KOL Types: Foreigners, Locals, and Malaysians Abroad

The three main categories of KOLs in Taiwan are local Taiwanese content creators, Malaysian content creators living in Taiwan, and international influencers. Every category meets distinct communication goals and appeals to audiences in a distinctive way (Goh, 2022). Because their stories present Taiwan as both approachable and culturally rich, foreign influencers like Andy in Taiwan offer outsider viewpoints that frequently lessen psychological distance for viewers from other countries. Local Taiwanese producers, such as Taiwan Walker or The DoDo Men, frequently highlight insider information, cultural nuance, and useful travel advice, which increases audiences' perceptions of authenticity and parasocial trust (De Veirman, Hudders, & Nelson, 2019). As cultural mediators, Malaysian KOLs overseas like Annie Explore Taiwan and a number of Malaysian YouTubers studying or working in Taiwan address the unique needs of Malaysian audiences, such as halal food options, communication that is friendly to Malay or Mandarin, and student lifestyle experiences.

Malaysian KOLs, in my opinion, play an important but little-known role in influencing UTAR undergraduate students' perceptions of Taiwanese travel. Because they are accustomed to both Malaysian and Taiwanese society, their hybrid identity strikes a deep chord with viewers

who might otherwise have linguistic or cultural difficulties. For instance, Chinese-speaking Malaysians might favor their material due to cultural affinity and emotional connection, whereas Muslim tourists from Malaysia frequently depend on these KOLs for halal suggestions. In contrast to native Taiwanese KOLs, Malaysian influencers frequently portray Taiwan as a relevant living environment as well as a travel destination, addressing pragmatic issues like accessibility, pricing, and student life.

From useful knowledge and cultural education to amusement, nostalgia, and social identity validation, the variety of KOL roles fulfills a wide spectrum of needs (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016; Chen, Teng, & Yu, 2022). Importantly, Malaysian content creators overseas have a distinct competitive advantage for UTAR undergraduate students since they serve as both cultural interpreters and trip guides, even while local and foreign KOLs dominate global visibility. Future studies should look more closely at how Malaysian KOLs in Taiwan support the promotion of travel as well as the larger feeling of transnational cultural connection.

1.2.6. Short-Form Content and Travel Decision-Making

In terms of influence among younger Malaysian tourists, short-form video platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and Xiaohongshu clips are currently on par with long-form video platforms (Byun & Park, 2023). Higher levels of trust and peer identification are produced by content from Key Opinion Consumers (KOCs), or micro-influencers, who tend to seem more genuine and less financially motivated (Boerman, 2020). In fact, according to a survey conducted among university students in Malaysia, 64% of them planned their travels to Taiwan by watching travel vlogs or Xiaohongshu posts, whereas just 23% turned to official tourist sources (Ng & Tan, 2022). This emphasizes how important social media engagement behaviors are, particularly in meeting the emotional and social identity demands of these travelers.

1.2.7. Theoretical Framework: Applying Social Media Engagement Theory (SMET) to Taiwan Travel KOLs

A useful lens for comprehending how user participation and travel KOL content translate into tourism behaviors is provided by social media engagement theory, and more especially by the COBRAs framework (Consumption, Contribution, Creation) (Schivinski, Christodoulides, & Dabrowski, 2016; Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011). This approach states that content engagement transforms people from passive viewers into active creators and contributors, strengthening their engagement and raising the possibility of travel-related actions. This idea fits in nicely with digital tourism since social media interactive content helps people go from awareness to actual vacation planning while also influencing how people see a destination. This framework is supported by theoretical insights from recent research, such as the effectiveness of influencer advertising and tourism decision-making, which emphasize the effects of message informativeness, credibility, and platform interactivity on travel outcomes (Wang et al., 2025; Thama, Mair, & Croy, 2019).

1.2.8. Research Gap

Although research on social media engagement is expanding, the majority of studies have been on political involvement, health communication, or brand-consumer relationships (Barger et al., 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2019). There is still a lack of research on the use of Social Media Engagement Theory (SMET) in cross-cultural tourist communication. There is a theoretical gap, specifically in the way that Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) influence the perceptions of international audiences to promote destination involvement.

According to empirical research, previous studies on tourism communication have mostly focused on either domestic Taiwanese tourists or foreign visitors in general (Chen & Law, 2016; Xu & Pratt, 2018). However, not much is known about the particular subset of Malaysian university students, specifically UTAR Kampar students who are predominantly Chinese-fluent, and thus more likely to engage with Taiwan travel KOL content. Young adults increasingly rely on digital platforms like YouTube and Xiaohongshu to find information on travel, which makes this group important (Lim et al., 2022). However, there is an empirical gap as their social media engagement habits with Taiwan travel KOLs are still unknown.

Therefore, by using SMET to examine how UTAR degree students interact with Taiwan travel influencers on various platforms and how this interaction affects their perceptions and possible travel intentions, this study aims to close a theoretical and empirical gap.

1.2.9 Operational Definitions

To prevent confusion in subsequent chapters, a number of important concepts are defined operationally for the purposes of this study. The term "F&B social media content" describes user- or influencer-generated material that showcases Taiwan's food and beverage culture. Examples of this type of content include street food vlogs, café reviews, night markets, and culinary adventures posted on websites like Xiaohongshu and YouTube. Travel-related content that highlights Taiwan's landmarks, tourist attractions, cultural events, and picturesque locations including Jiufen, Sun Moon Lake, and Taroko Gorge is referred to as "destination social media content." Furthermore, in accordance with the Malaysian Lifestyle Studies (MLS), which classifies this group as youth in early adulthood, "young Malaysians" in this survey are classified as people between the ages of 18 and 25. Because they are digital natives who

primarily rely on social media for travel-related information and are heavily exposed to KOL content on Taiwan, this age group is especially relevant.

1.3 Problem Statement

Social media's explosive rise has completely changed how young Malaysians interact with travel-related content. They are used to participatory online platforms because they are digital natives, and the popularity of influencer-generated travel material is having an increasing impact on them (Lim, Ng, & Chien, 2023). Although earlier research has looked at how social media influences travel intentions, little is known about the unique situation of UTAR Kampar students, especially those who speak Chinese well. Due to their cultural and linguistic proximity, this group represents a distinct bilingual and multicultural subset of Malaysian youth who actively engage with content connected to Taiwan in addition to consuming tourism-related information (Rahim, 2022; Ng & Tan, 2022).

The impact of KOLs is often framed in existing research in terms of user-generated content (UGC). This conceptualization, however, runs the danger of ignoring the active audience engagement behaviors that define how Malaysian students connect with information on social media. Students participate by liking, discussing, sharing, and even co-constructing meaning with KOLs' travel narratives, as opposed to passively ingesting information (Abidin, 2016; Shao, 2009). By actively understanding and disseminating tourism-related materials, audiences actively shape their own opinions of Taiwan as a travel destination, a technique that reflects a participatory culture.

Such involvement includes emotional resonance and social identity needs in addition to cognitive and behavioral aspects, according to the SMET (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016). Interactions with Taiwan travel KOLs foster a feeling of community, lower uncertainty, and produce emotional bonds for UTAR Kampar students. These procedures go beyond passive receipt, emphasizing the direct role that engagement behaviors play in the development of destination intention.

Hence, the main research issue is the lack of empirical study on how young Malaysian audiences and more especially, Chinese-fluent students at UTAR Kampar who actively interact with Taiwan travel KOL content through co-constructive and participatory behaviors, and how this interaction ultimately influences their travel decisions and understandings.

Also, the UGT has frequently been used in earlier research to explain why people depend on media for amusement and information. However, the collaborative and participatory aspect of social media engagement with travel KOLs is not adequately captured by such an approach. Therefore, SMET, which builds on UGT by highlighting active user interactions and meaning-making processes, is adopted in this study.

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To examine how UTAR Kampar students' social identity needs shape their engagement with Taiwan travel KOL content on platforms such as YouTube and Xiaohongshu.
2. To analyze how UTAR Kampar students actively participate through engagement behaviors such as commenting, sharing, saving, and co-constructing content when interacting with Taiwan travel KOLs.

3. To understand how the combination of identity-driven needs and active audience engagement behaviors contributes to UTAR Kampar students' destination image of Taiwan and their travel intentions.

1.5 Research Questions

1. How do UTAR Kampar students' emotional and social identity needs shape their engagement with Taiwan travel KOL content on platforms such as YouTube and Xiaohongshu?
2. How do UTAR Kampar students actively engage through commenting, sharing, saving, and co-constructing when interacting with Taiwan travel KOLs?
3. What is the relationship between identity-driven needs, active engagement behaviors, and the construction of Taiwan's destination image and travel intentions among UTAR Kampar students?

1.6 Significance of Research Study

This study is important from a theoretical and practical standpoint. From a theoretical standpoint, it advances the use of SMET in the field of tourist studies. Previous studies have looked at how social media influences travelers' choices (Abidin, 2016; Shao, 2009; Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016). However, little attention has been paid to how engagement dimensions—such as cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and social identity—appear among Malaysian college students. This study adds to our knowledge of participatory culture, influencer credibility, and

co-construction of meaning in the tourist context by examining how UTAR Kampar students especially those who speak Chinese fluently interact with Taiwan travel KOLs.

From a practical standpoint, this study emphasizes how youth audiences' opinions on travel are influenced by KOL material on websites like YouTube and Xiaohongshu. According to earlier research, Malaysian tourists are depending more on peer recommendations and influencer-generated content than on conventional marketing channels (Ng & Tan, 2022; Lin, Ng, & Chien, 2023). The results will give Taiwan's tourist industry important insights into how Chinese-fluent UTAR Kampar students engage with KOLs through active audience behaviors including liking, sharing, commenting, and more. This entails improving authenticity and trust in tourist communication as well as creating focused promotional methods that suit the linguistic and cultural preferences of Malaysian students (Chen & Huang, 2021; Kapoor et al., 2021).

The study also has ramifications for content producers and tourism practitioners. Through an analysis of how students' participation is driven by emotional and social identity needs, as well as how these processes impact their travel intentions, the research offers practical ideas for creating campaigns that promote community building, trust, and sustained interest in a location. In the end, this study shows how crucial it is to comprehend youth-driven participatory involvement for both scholarly discussion and real-world marketing innovation.

1.7 Scope of Study

As a case study, UTAR undergraduate students in Kampar are the subject of this investigation. The inclusion criteria required respondents to have been continuously exposed to Taiwan travel content on websites like YouTube and Xiaohongshu for at least three to five years

in order to guarantee participation' sufficient familiarity with Taiwan-related social media content. This guarantees that students are engaged in Taiwan-related KOL tales and are not just casual viewers but also dedicated fans.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Social media has played an ever-more-important role in influencing how young people find, assess, and interact with vacation destinations in recent years. Traditional guidebooks, travel brochures, and official websites no longer control the trip planning process for Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) undergraduate students. Instead, social media sites like YouTube and Xiaohongshu have emerged as important information sources about travel, frequently filtered by powerful KOLs. These platforms are extremely engaging spaces for people looking for information on tourism since they not only offer factual information but also foster emotional resonance, visual narrative, and participatory dialogue (Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden, 2016).

Undergraduate students are a particularly significant cohort to research in connection to travel information behaviors in Malaysia. Compared to prior generations, UTAR students exhibit a higher level of dependence on user-generated content and suggestions from influencers since they are digital natives who are heavily involved in online platforms (Lim, Lim, & Wong, 2022). Because of its cultural proximity, affordability, and media presence, Taiwan in particular has become a favorite tourist destination among young Malaysians. Through a variety of digital marketing and influencer partnerships, Taiwan tourism boards and independent KOLs have simultaneously actively positioned Taiwan as a desirable travel destination (Chen & Law, 2023). Thus, there is a lot of room for scholarly investigation into the relationship between Taiwan tourist promotion, KOL involvement, and social media use by UTAR students.

The SMET serves as the theoretical foundation for this investigation. Social media engagement is an active activity that involves contact, co-creation, and affective involvement rather than just a passive act of consumption (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013). This approach places a strong emphasis on elements like emotional resonance, cognitive attention, and participatory behaviors (likes, shares, and comments). This may investigate how interaction with travel KOLs on YouTube and Xiaohongshu affects not just knowledge of Taiwan as a travel destination but also the intention to visit and share content with peers by applying SMET.

According to earlier studies, social media influencers have a big impact on how customers behave in the travel and hotel industries (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018). KOLs may provide immersive narrative and destination experiences thanks to YouTube's long-form video affordances. Conversely, Xiaohongshu, a platform that combines lifestyle sharing with e-commerce capabilities, cultivates micro-communities that value word-of-mouth credibility and authenticity (Zhang & Dong, 2022). Though in distinct ways, both platforms promote high levels of engagement: Xiaohongshu through peer-like trust networks and individualized suggestions, and YouTube through narrative immersion and parasocial interactions. Gaining knowledge about how UTAR students handle these situations will help one better understand the larger part social media play in traveler decision-making.to the instance of UTAR students.

Additionally, this study fills in a number of gaps in the literature. First, there are many studies on influencer marketing in tourism in Western contexts, but there aren't many that concentrate on Malaysian university students, especially when it comes to Taiwan as a travel destination (Hassan & Rahman, 2020). Second, whereas YouTube has been researched in great detail, Southeast Asia has paid relatively less attention to Xiaohongshu, a growing platform

outside of China. Finally, few research have specifically used SMET to explain how student audiences actively co-construct meaning with influencers in the tourist domain, despite the fact that UGT has been employed extensively in earlier works.

By locating the study within these gaps, this research hopes to fill them both theoretically and practically. In theory, it promotes the use of SMET in the context of travel influencers. In a practical sense, it provides Taiwanese travel authorities, tourist marketers, and KOLs with information on how to successfully interact with Malaysian students as a target audience. This research sheds light on UTAR students' own media consumption and digital-age travel decision-making tendencies.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations and Conceptual Framework

2.2.1 Social Media Engagement Theory (SMET)

The main theoretical framework for this research is the SMET, which views involvement as an active, multifaceted process as opposed to just passive media consumption (Brodie et al., 2011; Dessart, 2015). The literature frequently characterizes engagement as consisting of affective (emotional), cognitive, and behavioral components. Subsequent research has focused on the ways in which these dimensions interact to produce community-level phenomena like identity formation and co-creation (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013). Therefore, SMET contributes to the explanation of how engagement with KOL material on social media might impact information processing, trust building, and ultimately travel decision-making.

The mental focus and information processing viewers use when engaging with online content is known as cognitive engagement (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2014). When students examine itinerary details in a lengthy YouTube vlog, compare conflicting suggestions from different posts, assess the usefulness of advice (such as transportation, expenses, and halal options), or determine the veracity of a KOL's claims, they are demonstrating cognitive engagement in the context of Taiwan travel KOLs. The amount of internalization and whether the knowledge becomes useful for travel planning are both impacted by such laborious processing (Menon et al., 2022).

The emotions and affective reactions that material and creators evoke are captured by emotional engagement (Shao, 2009; Hollebeek et al., 2014). In order to evoke feelings of excitement, nostalgia, or identification in their audience, travel KOLs commonly employ narrative, vivid imagery, and personal tales. According to Abidin (2016), these affective reactions boost audience receptivity and can create parasocial ties that bolster the persuasiveness of KOL messaging. Emotionally charged KOL narratives may increase curiosity and reduce psychological distance to Taiwan for Malaysian students who have cultural or linguistic ties to Taiwan (Zhang & Dong, 2022).

According to Schivinski, Christodoulides, and Dabrowski (2016) and Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011), behavioral engagement refers to visible behaviors that indicate involvement with content, such as liking, commenting, sharing, saving, or producing derivative postings. According to de Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson (2019), these behaviors are not only signs of attention; they are a part of a feedback loop where audience involvement raises the exposure and social validation of KOL material. A student can increase the content's ability to impact peers by, for instance, reposting a YouTube itinerary to a group chat, posting an

experiential comment, or saving a Xiaohongshu trip note. These actions all contribute to diffusion and collaborative meaning-making (Hudson et al., 2016).

For the co-construction and social identity, SMET emphasizes how participation supports social identity processes and the co-construction of meaning in addition to individual cognition, emotion, and behavior (Brodie et al., 2011; Abidin, 2016). Users contribute to the creation of a common perception of the place when they leave comments, remix, or recount their personal experiences in reaction to KOL posts. According to Muntinga et al. (2011) and Schivinski et al. (2016), this participatory co-construction, which is encapsulated in similar frameworks like COBRAs (Consumption, Contribution, Creation), turns audiences from passive recipients into members of micro-communities that jointly define destination narratives. University students, who frequently use social media to express their group affiliation and lifestyle choices, are especially sensitive to these identity-forming interactions (Przybylski et al., 2013; Lim, Lim, & Wong, 2022).

When combined, these SMET elements clarify why social media use is a strong predictor of outcomes pertaining to travel. According to research, people are more likely to follow KOL recommendations and convert their online interest into offline behavior if they score highly on a number of engagement aspects (de Veirman et al., 2019; Menon et al., 2022). When used in the current study, SMET offers an organized method to investigate how UTAR Kampar students' cognitive processing, affective reactions, active behaviors (such as commenting, sharing, saving, and co-constructing), and social identity interact when they come across Taiwan travel KOL content—and how those interactions influence their perceptions of the destination and their plans to travel (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018; Zhang & Dong, 2022).

SMET provides the theoretical framework required to analyze the function of KOLs across various platform affordances by operationalizing engagement through the four interconnected dimensions mentioned above (e.g., long-form narrative on YouTube versus micro-community notes on Xiaohongshu). To explain how multidimensional engagement may help UTAR Kampar students develop stronger destination images of Taiwan and, ultimately, express greater travel intention, the current study draws on SMET (Brodie et al., 2011; Dessart, 2015; Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2014) and related empirical findings (de Veirman et al., 2019; Menon et al., 2022; Schivinski et al., 2016).

Because it combines the idea of user motivations and gratifications with the interactive and participatory affordances of social media platforms, SMET can be seen as an extension of UGT. By emphasizing how users actively participate, co-create, and respond within digital environments, SMET broadens the scope of UGT, which historically focuses on why audiences consume media to meet certain requirements (Lim, 2020; Phua, Jin, & Kim, 2020).

2.2.2 Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

A fundamental framework for comprehending how people actively seek out media to satisfy their cognitive, affective, personal, and social needs is provided by the UGT (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). UGT emphasizes the agency of users in selecting media content that fulfills their particular gratifications, such as amusement, knowledge, social connection, or identity reinforcement, in contrast to passive audience theories (Ruggiero, 2000). UGT has been used in the tourism context to explain why tourists depend on social media influencers and content to get knowledge about destinations, amusement, or a feeling of community in online communities (Leung, 2022).

2.2.3 Comparison between UGT and SMET

Although UGT clarifies the reasons people use media, it has been criticized for failing to adequately convey the participative and interactive aspects of social media platforms (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). SMET expands on UGT by focusing on how users interact with material, engage with influencers, and participate in online meaning-making processes in addition to why they consume media (Phua et al., 2020). SMET is chosen as the main theoretical framework, with UGT acting as its conceptual underpinning, because this study focuses on the dynamic relationships between Malaysian students and KOLs.

2.2.4 Influencer Credibility and Parasocial Interaction

A KOL's credibility and parasocial interaction (PSI) are important factors in addition to engagement itself. According to classic communication study by Hovland and Weiss (1951), an audience's ability to be persuaded is directly influenced by the credibility of the source. Credibility in social media is usually made out of the following components:

- Expertise: Does the KOL exhibit in-depth understanding of Taiwanese tourism, as seen by their ability to offer useful advice on travel, local customs, or tourist destinations?
- Authenticity: Is the information genuine, free of advertisements, and grounded in firsthand knowledge?
- Attractiveness – This includes physical attractiveness, expression, and personal style.
- Interactivity: Does the KOL encourage community discussion or actively reply to followers' comments?

According to research, viewers and KOLs develop a "friend-like" bond through pseudosocial engagement that deepens their emotional bond (Labrecque, 2014). Given that

younger audiences are more likely to form an identity through pseudosocial engagement, this association is especially noticeable among students (Bond, 2018). UTAR students' emotional involvement is further increased and their acceptance of the knowledge is boosted when they engage with KOLs through YouTube comment sections or like and remark on Xiaohongshu postings while waiting for responses.

2.2.5 Differences in Platform Mechanisms: YouTube vs. Xiaohongshu

The ways that engagement appears are also significantly impacted by the variations in the techniques used by various social media platforms.

- YouTube: The largest video platform in the world, YouTube mostly focuses on vlogs and long-form videos. Its immersive qualities and compelling storyline enable viewers to fully immerse themselves in travel settings in ten-minute or longer videos (Khan, 2017). Watching travel vlogs from Taiwan gives UTAR students the opportunity to engage socially with other viewers through the comment area in addition to experiencing the local atmosphere firsthand. Watch time, likes, and subscriptions are the main measures used to measure YouTube engagement, and they frequently show how engaged and devoted viewers are to the material (Xu, Chen, & Santhanam, 2015).
- Xiaohongshu (RED): A well-known lifestyle website for young people in China and Asia, also renowned for allowing influencer-created content (PGC) and user-generated content (UGC) to coexist. Users can easily obtain useful guides for Taiwanese sights, cuisine, lodging, and more thanks to its distinctive "note" structure and tagged recommendation system (Liu & Liang, 2022). Additionally, RED users frequently associate vacation planning with active audience engagement behaviors such as liking, commenting, sharing, and co-constructing content. For instance, UTAR students may

engage by saving notes about their preferred night markets in Taiwan, commenting on recommendations, or sharing posts with peers, thereby integrating KOL content into their future travel planning.

In contrast to Xiaohongshu, which stresses actionability and pragmatism, YouTube places more emphasis on immersion and camaraderie. This discrepancy implies that the psychological processes behind engagement also vary: Xiaohongshu engagement is more cognitive and behavioral, whereas YouTube engagement is more emotional and cognitive (Li, 2021). As a result, merging the two studies can yield a more thorough knowledge of how UTAR students engage with the information they get and make decisions about their travels.

2.2.6 Identity Needs in Media Use

Identity needs, which reflect people's desire to connect with others, validate who they are, and place themselves within larger cultural settings, have been identified as a major motivator of media consumption. These demands include emotional satisfactions like belonging, reassurance, and affective resonance in addition to self-expression. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) highlighted that media consumption fulfills a number of purposes, such as emotional fulfillment and identity reinforcement. Subsequent research confirms that affective requirements like comfort, enjoyment, and emotional connecting with media material are intrinsically linked to goals including cultural affinity, lifestyle validation, and peer recognition (Ruggiero, 2000; Sundar & Limperos, 2013).

Identity needs in the context of social media and travel are demonstrated by users' propensity to feel emotional rewards like inspiration, trust, or reassurance while also seeing

themselves mirrored in influencer narratives. Young tourists frequently rely on destination-related content to satisfy their affective needs for excitement, belonging, and cultural resonance in addition to gathering useful information, according to Leung (2022). This demonstrates how emotional experiences and identity-related media use motivations are inextricably linked, as they both influence how people interact with social media travel content.

This study makes sure that emotional gratifications and personal identity expression are not viewed as distinct notions by defining identity demands as inclusive of emotional dimensions. This closely relates to the study's first research goal and offers a more solid basis for examining how UTAR students perceive and react to travel-related content about Taiwan.

2.3 Empirical Research Review: The Social Media-Travel Decision-Making Path

2.3.1 Engagement and Destination Intention

Likes, comments, shares, favorites, and subscriptions are examples of social media engagement behaviors that have been shown to influence users' information adoption and final decision-making in addition to reflecting their interest in content (Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009; Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012). Engagement is specifically regarded as a major predictor of destination intention in tourism studies. According to study, for instance, users who are highly engaged are more likely to form an emotional bond with travel-related content and use this to influence their choice of location (Harrigan et al., 2021). In the Chinese context, the "Favorites" and "Notes Revisit" aspects of Xiaohongshu have a major impact on the user's planning phase. This is because users enhance their trip intentions by revisiting content regularly during their preparations (Zhang & Cole, 2016; Li & Katsumata, 2020). High

engagement increases the possibility that UTAR students will explore and choose a destination, particularly in Taiwan, which is an area with relatively tight cultural and geographic ties.

2.3.2 Interaction Mechanisms between KOLs and Students

According to research on influencer marketing, KOLs' style, knowledge, and authenticity are important factors that influence engagement (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In contrast to traditional advertising, UTAR students, who are digital natives, are more likely to look to social media influencers (KOLs) for travel inspiration (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Students are particularly vulnerable to the emotional pleas and visual tales of KOL content during the trip inspiration phase, which is intimately linked to the function of parasocial interaction (Labrecque, 2014). Students are more inclined to follow KOLs' advice when they have a "one-way but authentic emotional connection" with them (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Additionally, studies reveal that by encouraging secondary diffusion and group identification, engagement activities like sharing and commenting can further increase the persuasiveness of content (Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden, 2016). This indicates that the KOLs individually as well as the cumulative impact of their peer contacts have an impact on UTAR students' trip inclinations. According to research and industry views, various KOL types in Taiwan serve different purposes in influencing travel decisions. For instance, local Taiwanese creators like The DoDo Men offer humor and insider cultural knowledge that increase relatability, while international female travelers like Annie Explore Taiwan highlight solo travel experiences that appeal to young female audiences. In Taiwan, foreign influencers like Andy offer outsider perspectives that reduce psychological distance. These typologies show how KOLs help build Taiwan's reputation as a travel destination among Malaysian audiences in addition to providing information.

2.3.3 Platform Differences

The various ways that interaction affects travel choices are determined by the processes of various platforms. With its emphasis on long-form videos and vlogs, YouTube provides detailed insights and immersive travel experiences, which makes it especially helpful for long-term trip planning (Tan & Wu, 2016). On the other hand, Xiaohongshu, a platform that blends KOLs and UGC, highlights the instantaneous and dispersed distribution of information, providing special benefits in terms of suggested check-in locations and travel itinerary planning (Sun, Wang, & Law, 2017). Scholars have observed that Xiaohongshu engagement is better in line with users' planning needs because it depends more on active audience engagement behaviors (likes, comments, shares, co-construction) than YouTube engagement, which is primarily measured by view time and subscriptions (Gretzel, Yuan, & Fesenmaier, 2000; Mariani, Di Felice, & Mura, 2016). YouTube vlogs are a good way for UTAR students to learn about Taiwan's tourism scene in general, while Xiaohongshu is a good way to quickly refer to specific destinations and schedules.

2.3.4 Taiwan Context Case Study

KOLs and UGC have been demonstrated to improve location perception and encourage the growth of "check-in culture" in Taiwanese tourism studies (Chen & Law, 2016; Lin & Huang, 2020). For instance, researchers have discovered that social media travelogues and short videos not only raise awareness of a destination but also help prospective travelers feel accepted by others (Yen & Croy, 2016). Young people are especially affected by this phenomena, as they are more likely to select "influencer attractions" that are regularly highlighted on social media (Wu, Xie, & Tsai, 2018). This mechanism also applies to UTAR students, who may develop a "must-go" list by frequently viewing Taiwan travel notes on Xiaohongshu. At the same time,

they may learn more about Taiwan culture and travel tips from YouTube vlogs, which will increase their interest in and desire to visit Taiwan.

2.4 Related Research and Background on UTAR Undergraduate Students

According to Prensky (2001), Malaysian university students are sometimes referred to be "digital natives," as they extensively rely on social media for learning, entertainment, and lifestyle planning. This demographic frequently uses social media to plan plans, get inspiration, and confirm information about destinations when traveling (Majeed, 2023). The student body at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), one of Malaysia's top universities, is noticeably multilingual and multicultural, allowing them to get cross-contextual knowledge of social media, mostly in Chinese, English, and Malay (Lee & Ganapathy, 2020). Students' capacity to assimilate information about multicultural tourism is improved by this bilingual setting, which also increases their flexibility in ingesting information on destination image-building across platforms (Khoo, 2019).

Additionally, prior studies have demonstrated that compared to other age groups, Malaysian university students engage in much more active audience engagement behaviors (likes, comments, shares, co-construction) (Lim, Radzol, Cheah, & Wong, 2017). The ability to save and comment on material is very important for the adoption of travel-related content because it is directly related to the real planning and destination selection process (Chung & Koo, 2015). The most popular websites among UTAR students are YouTube and Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book). According to Phua, Jin, and Kim (2020), the former meets the requirement for instant access to useful instructions and UGC, while the latter improves the immersive trip

experience by using in-depth vlogs and storytelling. High levels of involvement boost trust and dependence on KOL content, which in turn drives travel intentions, according to studies on students from different Malaysian colleges (Teng, Khong, Goh, & Chong, 2014).

In the end, UTAR Kampar students, particularly those fluent in Chinese, demonstrate distinctive social media engagement and usage patterns which, along with their multicultural upbringing, offer a strong academic and practical basis for researching how they obtain travel information from Taiwanese tourism KOLs and social media.

2.5 Influence Path Integration: Engagement → Behavioral Intention

The relationship between audience behavior and the distribution of tourism information is not direct and linear; rather, it develops over time through a variety of behavioral and psychological processes. For the purposes of this study, KOLs provided content to UTAR Kampar students, particularly those fluent in Chinese, via Xiaohongshu and YouTube. A number of mediating factors frequently impacted their final behavioral intentions (e.g., whether to plan, book, or discuss their vacation experiences). This study suggests an integrated pathway to rigorously investigate this process: Cognitive and affective evaluation (trust, destination image) → engagement behavior (watching, saving, commenting, and sharing) → behavioral intention (booking, sharing, and planning) → KOL credibility and authenticity. This pathway demonstrates the fundamental mediating function of engagement in addition to exposing the hierarchical structure of the influence mechanism.

2.5.1 KOL credibility and authenticity as a starting point

KOLs' perceived authenticity and credibility are the main factors that contribute to their popularity in the social media space. While authenticity stresses the coherence of content and

personal image, credibility often includes three dimensions: knowledge, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990) (Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Guidry Moulard, 2020). For UTAR students, the thoroughness, usefulness, and relevance of the information Taiwan travel influencers offer are key indicators of their legitimacy. In Taiwan, for instance, Andy frequently portrays Taiwanese culture from an outsider's point of view. For Malaysian pupils, this cross-cultural tale is useful and relatable. Customers are more inclined to identify with influencers who are seen as genuine and open, according to research (Marwick & Boyd, 2011), which increases their ability to persuade.

Additionally, interaction requires authenticity and credibility. Students are more likely to view the full video, take notes, remark, or share it when they believe that a KOL's content is reliable (Jin & Ryu, 2020). As a result, the pathway's initial stage highlights how important KOL traits are for launching engagement.

2.5.2 Engagement Behavior: The Core of the Mediating Mechanism

According to Brodie, Ilic, Juric, and Hollebeek (2013), engagement is a multifaceted construct that encompasses behavior, emotion, and cognition rather than being a single dimension. The engagement habits of UTAR students in the context of this study mainly take four distinct forms:

- Viewership: The most basic type of interaction, it establishes if information is properly received.
- Save/Bookmark: Indicates that the audience has acknowledged the importance of the content and plans to revisit it later.

- Comment: Reflects the emotional and intellectual engagement of the audience by showcasing interaction and opinion expressing.
- Sharing: Entails social distribution, converting personal involvement into more extensive word-of-mouth spread.

According to Hollebeek (2011), these engagement behaviors not only show how strongly students relate to the material, but they also have a big impact on how they think and feel about the end result. For instance, while making future travel plans, students who take notes about Taiwanese attractions on Xiaohongshu frequently consult these notes immediately. By interacting with others, students who actively comment on YouTube may form a more comprehensive perception of the location. The route model is theoretically supported by research that demonstrates social media participation as a crucial mediator between consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions (Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2016).

2.5.3 Cognitive and Affective Evaluation: Trust and the Construction of Destination Image

Following interaction, the audience performs emotive and cognitive assessments. The two main components of this approach are destination image and trust.

First, consumers must have trust before they can take further action. According to Gefen, Karahanna, and Straub (2003), trust increases people's willingness to act in uncertain situations while simultaneously lessening information asymmetry. UTAR students have more confidence in the suggested Taiwanese experiences and attractions when they observe and engage with KOLs frequently, demonstrating their honesty and knowledge.

Second, the destination image is one of the most important psychological factors in tourism marketing. According to Echtner and Ritchie (2003), destination image includes both

cognitive and emotive components. According to research, pleasant social media interactions can considerably improve consumers' perceptions of their location. Videos on Xiaohongshu depicting Taiwanese night markets, food, and natural surroundings are frequently popular among Malaysian students, contributing to their overall positive perception of Taiwan.

Thus, cognitive and affective judgments are important psychological mediators of the impact of involvement on behavioral intention.

2.5.4 Behavioral Intention: The Final Outcome

The path model's final outcome is behavioral intention, which relates to whether an individual plans, books, or shares travel-related activities (Ajzen, 1991). Among UTAR students, behavioral intentions might emerge in three ways:

- Planning: For instance, making travel arrangements to Taiwan during academic breaks.
- Booking: This includes purchasing airline tickets, lodging, or tours using internet platforms.
- Sharing: Can include publishing vacation plans or actual experiences on social media.

According to research, social media participation dramatically improves trip purchase intentions among customers (Hudson, Roth, Madden, & Hudson, 2015). When students acquire trust in KOL-recommended Taiwanese tourism destinations and form a good image of the place, they are more inclined to act, demonstrating the driving impact of engagement.

2.5.5 The Mediating Role of Engagement

Overall, involvement serves as a mediator in the path model. A KOL's trustworthiness and authenticity do not directly convert into travel behavior intention; instead, it must be built

gradually through engagement. In other words, if students only view a KOL as professional but do not engage in further collecting, discussing, or sharing, it is difficult to transfer their trip intentions into actual conduct. Conversely, a high level of interaction can completely unleash a KOL's influence.

Empirical evidence supports this viewpoint. In their 2019 study of Instagram users, Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu discovered that influencer credibility dramatically improved consumers' purchase intentions through engagement. Similarly, in their tourism research, Leung, Bai, and Stahura (2015) found that social media activity is an important mediator between destination image and travel intention. These results give significant support for the path model provided in this work.

2.5.6 Summary

In conclusion, the path model suggested in this study demonstrates the whole logical chain of how Taiwanese tourism key opinion leaders impact UTAR students' behavioral intentions: The KOL's credibility and authenticity can have a favorable impact on students' engagement habits (like viewing, saving, commenting, and sharing). This engagement enhances students' cognitive and emotive evaluations, such as establishing trust in the material and developing a good destination image. Finally, these cognitive and affective alterations lead to behavioral intentions, such as travel planning, booking, and subsequent sharing.

This model points out the mediating role of involvement, which not only supports the main notion of social media engagement theory but also offers an alternative perspective on Malaysian students' cross-cultural travel decision-making behaviors. Future research could

investigate the differential effects of different engagement characteristics and platform performance (YouTube and Xiaohongshu) on the influence pathway.

2.6 Methodological and Evidence Limitations

Although major characteristics of influencer marketing, destination image construction, and audience interaction have been emphasized in previous studies on social media and tourism, there are still substantial methodological and evidentiary gaps. Numerous earlier studies mostly depend on surveys or extensive quantitative designs that are able to identify broad trends but fall short in revealing the identity-driven and interpretive processes of particular student groups. Consequently, there is frequently a lack of research on the complex ways in which students respond to influencer narratives, negotiate meaning, and link cultural identity with destination image (Casaló et al., 2018; Lim, 2020). This points to the necessity of qualitative, situation-specific methods that emphasize participants' lived experiences and give priority to depth over breadth.

2.6.1 Examples of Inadequate Empirical Research: Research Gaps on YouTube and Xiaohongshu

Despite the fact that websites like YouTube and Xiaohongshu are becoming more and more important for communicating about tourism, there is still a dearth of empirical study on how Malaysian students use these sites. Previous research has frequently ignored the unique cultural and linguistic factors that determine how Malaysian students interact with Taiwan-related travel information by focusing on Western-centric platforms or analyzing influencer content in broad terms (Liu & Liang, 2022; Zhang, 2021). Furthermore, current research tends

to focus on quantifiable indicators like view counts, likes, or algorithmic prominence, but it offers little understanding of how student audiences analyze, debate, and relate to information on an emotional level in group settings.

This disparity highlights the necessity of conducting focus groups with Malaysian undergraduates in order to better understand how cultural closeness, peer pressure, and identity demands affect how KOL tales on YouTube and Xiaohongshu are interpreted. By recording not just what students consume but also how they collectively make meaning of it within their social and educational environment, such an approach immediately addresses the inadequacies of previous studies. As a result, although previous research has improved our knowledge of social media in the travel industry, it is still insufficient to address how students specifically create meaning on YouTube and Xiaohongshu. The qualitative, focus group-based design of the current study, which directly addresses these methodological and evidence limitations, is predicated on this restriction.

2.7 Research Gaps and Future Directions

Although previous studies has provided some insights into the interaction between social media and travel decision-making, particular research aimed at UTAR Kampar students, especially those fluent in Chinese is seriously lacking. Malaysian university students, like other digital natives, are heavy users of social media, but the unique patterns in their travel information search and decision-making processes are still developing (Lim, Ng, & Chiam, 2023). For example, existing research frequently focuses on the broader "youth" or "Generation Z" perspective, ignoring the distinctive features of Chinese-fluent students in Malaysia's

multilingual and multicultural educational environment (Rahim, 2022). As a result, future research must urgently refine the sample size and investigate patterns of UTAR students' involvement behaviors across various social media platforms, as well as the links between them and travel decision-making.

The differences in effects of various engagement habits are still being investigated. Current academic research frequently studies involvement as a single, collective measure, for example, combining "views, likes, comments, and shares" (Zhang & Dong, 2021). However, based on behavioral psychology and consumer behavior, different types of engagement may carry different significance in travel decision-making. For example, "likes" typically imply immediacy and low-investment emotional responses, while "saving" may suggest stronger destination interest and potential action intents (Kim & Song, 2022). Similarly, "comments" frequently represent user participation and community identification, whereas "sharing" represents a chance to spread information and repeat discussion. Future study should clearly separate different levels of engagement in quantitative models or research methods to better show their mediating effect in travel intention.

Third, between platforms differences and interactions need to be empirically investigated. YouTube excels in long videos and visual comprehension, but Xiaohongshu can be identified by brief notes, rich text and images, and social interaction (Chen & Chang, 2021). Current study focuses on a single platform, with little comparative research on user psychology and behavioral differences between platforms. Users on YouTube, for example, may be attracted to scenario-based vacation vlogs, whereas those on Xiaohongshu may prefer to plan their trips using notes and bookmarks. A way to identify the supporting relationship between these two forms of social interaction through cross-platform research is an essential future direction.

Finally, future study should emphasize the use of multiple methods. On the other side, big data analysis (such as the clickstream, viewing time, stay time, return visit rate, and others) may increase the research's outside credibility and make the conclusions more applicable and relevant (Goh & Chuah, 2022). In contrast, qualitative research methods (such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions) may enhance emotional experience, cultural context, and identity factors that are difficult to measure in big data analysis (Huang & Su, 2020). Mixed methods research will give an expanded chain of evidence for understanding UTAR students' complicated motivations while making social media travel decisions.

In all, the study's future objectives focus mainly on three aspects: (1) sample group refining, (2) investigating the mechanism of the specific effect of engagement behavior, and (3) expanding cross-platform and mixed methodologies research. These directions not only serve to cover academic gaps, but also provide motivation for tourism marketing practice. Future research that better understands students' engagement behaviors and travel decision-making processes can provide practical strategic support to Taiwan's tourism-related departments, KOL marketing, and international cultural communication.

2.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study's analysis of context shows that YouTube and Xiaohongshu are not only key entertainment and enjoyment platforms for UTAR undergraduate students, but they also play an important role in the gathering, evaluation, and transformation of travel information. Social media exceeds traditional media in terms of rapidity, interaction, and individuality. KOLs' credibility and authenticity help students trust and identify (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Jin,

Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019). This trust not only motivates students to follow recommended travel guidance, but it also slowly influences their general views and emotional attitudes regarding Taiwan as a destination.

Combining with SMET, it is clear that engagement plays an important regulating function in this process. Students' likes, favorites, comments, and shares are more than just passive data reception; they also show engagement and cognitive processing (Dessart, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas, 2016). As a result, KOL information input changes through interaction, which impacts students' cognitive and emotional judgments, eventually affecting their travel behavior intentions. This logical process explains why engagement is a better predictor of behavioral conversion than contact, and it confirms the use of SMET in tourism communication research.

However, as previously stated in the "Research Gaps and Future Directions" section, different challenges need to be solved. For starters, there is still a lack of research aimed only at UTAR students, with little divided and targeted empirical information. Second, different engagement behaviors (such as likes and favorites, comments and shares) may have distinct psychological mechanisms and persuasive effects, which have not been comprehensively compared in the available literature. Third, YouTube and Xiaohongshu have different analytical push messages, user interaction cultures, and methodologies for presenting information. It is unknown how these relationships influence students' travel plans (Chen & Yuan, 2021; Li, 2022).

Thus, the findings of this study not only give theoretical support for understanding UTAR students' media usage behaviors in tourism information also provide a framework for future research. Future research can improve external validity and explanatory depth by combining big data (objective behavioral measurements like clickstreams and watching length)

with qualitative techniques (in-depth interviews and focus groups). This integration not only highlights the shortcomings of current methods, but it also brings academic research closer to the practical student decision-making process.

In other words, the results of this study serve as both a summary of current phenomena and a response to the research gaps identified, while acknowledging the critical role of social media and engagement in tourism decision-making, they also identify differentiated mechanisms and platform interaction logics among UTAR students that have yet to be explored. This study's connected methodology not only confirms the theoretical framework's validity, but it also provides concrete beginnings and practical research paths for future scholars.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Overview of Qualitative Research

The interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes comprehending social phenomena from individual viewpoints, is used in this study. According to interpretivism, knowledge arises from individuals' subjective meanings rather than from objective measurement and reality is socially created (Schwandt, 1994; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). According to this paradigm, researchers look at how individuals understand their experiences in particular social and cultural contexts.

This study uses a qualitative methodology that is consistent with interpretivism. Interpreting non-numerical data, including narratives, motivations, attitudes, and cultural understandings, is the main goal of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative approaches seek to reveal complexity, context, and the ways in which participants generate meaning rather than distilling results to variables and statistical connections. Because UTAR students' experiences are best expressed through debate and interpretation rather than quantitative measurement, the paradigm is especially well-suited for examining how they understand Taiwan-related travel information on social media platforms.

Because this study aims to comprehend how UTAR students perceive and react to Taiwan tourism content on YouTube and Xiaohongshu, the interpretivist paradigm is especially pertinent to it. Students' interpretations of influencer narratives are influenced by their cultural background, identification demands, and prolonged exposure to Taiwanese media in addition to the content itself. These sensations are socially ingrained and subjective, making it impossible

to properly quantify them (Bryman, 2016; Tracy, 2020). Therefore, the best lens for capturing the diversity of participants' viewpoints is interpretivism.

On the other hand, the goals of this study would not be sufficiently captured by a positivist paradigm that places an emphasis on objective measurement, hypothesis testing, and generalizability. Although surveys and quantitative approaches are useful for gauging correlation or frequency, they are unable to reveal the underlying cultural understandings, motives, and meaning-making processes that influence students' interaction with Taiwan-related material (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Flick, 2018). Thus, this study promotes contextualized interpretation above prediction by using interpretivism and a qualitative approach, guaranteeing that participant voices remain at the center of the investigation.

3.2 Interpretative Qualitative Research

Interpretive qualitative research is based on the interpretivism philosophical framework, which holds that social reality is produced through interactions between people and subjective meaning-making rather than being as an objective entity to be measured (Schwandt, 1994). With positivism, which emphasizes causality, universality, and objectivity, interpretivism believes that knowledge is dependent on context and impacted by personal viewpoints. Instead of focusing simply on measurable factors, researchers in this theoretical framework aim to discover how people comprehend their experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social relationships (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

This interpretive approach is especially pertinent to this study, which looked at how UTAR Kampar students, particularly those fluent in Chinese, engaged with travel-related

content produced by KOLs on Xiaohongshu and YouTube. Instead of passively consuming this media, students analyze, assess, and provide meaning to the material in relation to their own social, cultural, and individual contexts. For instance, if a Taiwanese vlogger's YouTube video fits with UTAR students' preconceived ideas about Taiwanese culture or relates to their friends' desire to travel, they may view the video as more authentic. Similar to this, Xiaohongshu's focus on user-generated comments that are related to lifestyles may lead students to view posts as reliable suggestions, particularly when the information is based on personal experiences rather than overt commercial advertising. These interpretive procedures emphasize how crucial that meaning-making is to comprehending how students use media.

The variability of reality is recognized as well by interpretivism. According to Schwandt (2000), meaning is negotiated and recreated within specific situations rather than being universal. Depending on their language skills, cultural familiarity, or past understanding of Taiwanese tourism promotion, UTAR students may have diverse interpretations of the same KOL video. The limitations of positivist techniques, which frequently believe that statistics like "view frequency" or "number of likes" are enough to measure the engagement of the audience, are highlighted by this difference of opinions. Although positivist techniques can measure how frequently UTAR students visit Xiaohongshu or YouTube, they are unable to identify the deeper, individualized meanings that students attach to these interactions, such as feelings related to the travel story or believe in the KOL's truthfulness.

Moreover, interpretive qualitative research promotes comprehension over prediction. In their sociological structure, Burrell and Morgan (1979) stated that interpretive frameworks place a greater value on the investigation of human subjectivity than on the development of universal causal laws. When used in this study, the interpretive method enabled researchers to move over

only determining the number of students who viewed such information and instead focus on why UTAR students found particular KOLs to be relatable or believable. Researchers could investigate how students collectively negotiate the meaning of travel information created by KOLs, how peer discussions generate authenticity, and how these interpretations influence broader opinions about Taiwan as a tourism destination using methods like focus groups. Walsham (1995) additionally highlighted that interpretive methods in case studies can assist in exposing the socially and contextually embedded ways of making meaning that are not subject to quantifiable data. Similar to this study's focus on media interpretations by UTAR students, Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2015) highlighted that interpretive research designs are especially suited to investigations aiming to reveal nuanced, contextualized understandings of human behavior.

In ultimately, the best viewpoint for this investigation was offered by interpretive qualitative research. It gave us insights that a positivist methodology was unable to capture and enabled us to fully investigate the meaning-making processes of UTAR students when interacting with KOLs on Xiaohongshu and YouTube. It also made sure that the study addressed the complex issues of social media engagement with tourism-related decision-making by giving priority to subjective understandings and context-specific interpretations.

3.3 Inductive Qualitative Methods

This study adopts an inductive field approach, allowing theoretical insights to emerge directly from UTAR students' experiences rather than applying pre-determined variables. The "field" aspect emphasizes that insights were grounded in real-world discussions collected from

focus groups with UTAR students, ensuring that theory was generated from participants' lived experiences rather than abstract assumptions. Because they enable theoretical insights to be gained from the data rather than enforcing pre-existing ideas, inductive qualitative approaches are crucial to this study. Inductive reasoning stresses developing theory from scratch, depending on trends and themes that arise during the analysis process, as opposed to deductive reasoning, which begins with a theory and tests it through empirical observation (Thomas, 2006). This involves gathering rich verbal or textual data, arranging it carefully, and then creating conceptual categories that represent participant viewpoints rather than researcher-imposed assumptions in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

An inductive approach was used in this study to examine the interactions between UTAR undergraduate students and KOLs on Xiaohongshu and YouTube. Instead of beginning with fixed variables like "perceived authenticity" or "trust in KOLs," the study initially gathered student narratives through focus group discussions. The reasons for concentrating on KOLs, standards for evaluating authenticity, and the significance of peer influence in interpreting travel information were among the recurrent topics found in these narratives. These topics can be used to generate more comprehensive theoretical insights that examine how students' opinions of Taiwan as a travel destination are influenced by KOLs on social media.

Data collection → coding and theme identification → theory generation are the three stages that usually comprise the inductive method. Raw data was gathered in the first phase by using verbatim focus group transcripts. The development of codes to capture important aspects of the data was then achieved through the use of theme analysis. The steps in this analysis were familiarizing the data, creating initial codes, looking for themes, reviewing themes, defining and labeling themes, and lastly creating a report, all in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006)

six-phase framework. The construction of a contextually relevant knowledge of media interaction among UTAR students was made possible by emerging themes, such as the influence of peers on attitude formation, the entertainment value of material, and belief in the credibility of KOLs.

Due to the topic's subjective interpretations and complicated reasons, which were beyond the scope of established theoretical frameworks, this inductive method was particularly relevant. Inductive analysis is especially useful in applied research, when the objective is to draw findings directly from participant experiences, as Thomas (2006) highlights. Cultural background, social dynamics, and media habits all have an impact on the meaning that UTAR students assign to KOL content, and these factors might differ greatly from person to person. To make sure that the results were influenced by participants' real experiences rather than a strict theoretical framework, this study used an inductive qualitative methodology.

The study's goals were achieved by this inductive qualitative research approach, which gave UTAR students' perspectives top priority and revealed how they perceive and react to travel-related content on Xiaohongshu and YouTube. This method gave the flexibility needed to record subtle, context-specific observations, ensuring that the study remained true to the viewpoints of the participants while advancing our knowledge of social media's impact in travel-related scenarios. By applying an inductive field approach, the study situates its theoretical insights firmly within the UTAR student context, highlighting how grounded qualitative evidence can produce contextually meaningful conclusions.

3.4 Case Study

A case study is a qualitative research technique that aims to deeply investigate contemporary phenomena in their real-world situations (Yin, 2018). Unlike methodologies that depend on large samples and broad generalizations, case study research emphasizes contextual richness and an in-depth comprehension of unique systems (such as a single group, institution, or social practice) (Stake, 1995). This method is especially beneficial when the difference between phenomena and background is unclear, as in the case of students' social media consumption and meaning-making.

Undergraduate students at UTAR serve as the main analytical unit in this study. This group reflects a distinctive social and academic setting where peer pressure, use of media, and cross-cultural interactions converge. Students use platforms like YouTube and Xiaohongshu to search for travel-related content, especially from KOLs, as they get ready for future trip or cross-cultural exchange. This study's focus on UTAR students allows it to investigate how a particular demographic processes and assimilates mediated tourism information while producing insights that could be relevant to more general trends in higher education.

As a case study of UTAR undergraduate students in Kampar, this study is further limited. Due to their close cultural and linguistic ties, Chinese-fluent students at UTAR are particularly exposed to Taiwanese-related content, making it a unique multicultural and multilingual setting in Malaysia. By focusing on this demographic, the study guarantees that participants are not only frequent social media users but also that they are in an environment where Taiwan travel information strongly aligns with their media habits and identity demands. Within a well-defined educational and cultural context, this constrained approach enables a targeted investigation of how KOLs impact travel intentions and destination image.

The contextualization of the case study method is its strongest point. It places students' contacts with KOLs in the cultural, educational, and peer contexts that influence their interpretations rather than seeing social media use as a singular behavior. For instance, students may interpret the same YouTube travel vlog differently based on whether they view it as entertainment, useful advice for planning a trip, or a means of connecting with classmates who have similar travel goals. Purely quantitative techniques, which frequently restrict audience engagement to measurable numbers like views or click-through rates, make it challenging to get this context-sensitive data.

Additionally, case studies give researchers the opportunity to investigate depth rather than broadness, which may highlight the complex meaning-making processes. Stake (1995) highlighted that case studies capture the complex relationship between individual experiences and larger societal influences, highlighting the distinctiveness of both individual and collective viewpoints. UTAR students' discussions about the reliability of Xiaohongshu posts, their dependence on YouTube KOLs for "authentic" travel experiences, and their balancing of peer viewpoints all show interpretive elements of social media use that are not adequately represented by statistics.

In practice, focus group discussions with UTAR students provided qualitative data that was collected and analyzed using a case study design. This methodology made it possible for the study to document media consumption habits while also exposing the underlying subjective interpretations of these behaviors. The study offered transferable insights into how young Malaysians engage with digital tourism influencers while providing a logical and controllable research environment by concentrating on a single student body inside a single university.

The Chinese-fluent undergraduates at UTAR Kampar constitute a limited system where social media usage, peer dynamics, and cultural identity intersect, making the case study design crucial. Case studies enable a thorough investigation of this particular community, where context and phenomena are intertwined (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Stake (1995), case studies work best when capturing interpretive complexity—rather than generalizable patterns—is the goal. Because case studies preserve contextual richness and identity negotiation in ways that large-scale surveys cannot, they are becoming more and more valuable in social research for examining digitally mediated cultures, according to more recent scholarship (Harrison et al., 2017; Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014). Thus, the bounded, culturally specific nature of the UTAR student population justifies case study as the only viable methodological choice.

Establishing precise protocols for participant selection was crucial because this study uses a case study methodology and focuses on undergraduate students at UTAR. To guarantee sufficient relevance to the study goals, participants were initially selected based on predetermined sampling criteria. Following the identification of suitable participants, they were divided into focus groups according to their primary driving forces (such as food and beverage, location, culture, or entertainment). This method guarantees that every participant satisfies the minimal requirements while simultaneously enabling the focus group talks to capture a range of viewpoints within the context of the case study.

3.5 Sampling Criteria

This study employs purposive sampling to ensure that participants possess sufficient familiarity with Taiwan-related content on social media platforms. The following criteria were established:

1. Chinese-fluent undergraduate students from UTAR Kampar – The research specifically focuses on UTAR students because they represent a unique multicultural and multilingual community, and Chinese-fluent students are more likely to follow Taiwanese KOLs and platforms such as Xiaohongshu and YouTube.
2. Minimum of three to five years of continuous exposure to Taiwan-related content – To ensure that participants are not casual viewers but rather long-term followers who have consistently engaged with Taiwan's F&B, travel, and cultural content on social media.
3. Active social media users – Participants must be regular users of YouTube and/or Xiaohongshu, and demonstrate familiarity with Taiwan travel KOLs such as Andy in Taiwan, Annie Explore Taiwan, and The DoDo Men.
4. Age between 18 and 25 years – In line with the definition of "young Malaysians" in the Malaysian Lifestyle Studies (MLS).

This set of criteria guarantees that participants are knowledgeable about Taiwan-related travel content, making their responses meaningful for understanding how long-term exposure to KOL-driven narratives shapes destination image and travel intentions.

Furthermore, these sampling criteria are directly aligned with the research questions. By ensuring participants have long-term exposure to Taiwan travel KOLs, the study captures respondents with the necessary knowledge and interpretive capacity to articulate how identity-

driven needs shape their engagement (RQ1). Their continuous social media experience provides values and perspectives on engagement behaviors (RQ2), while their accumulated experiences of cultural proximity and peer interaction allow them to interpret how such engagement constructs destination image and travel intention (RQ3).

3.6 Focus Group Discussion

Because focus groups enable participants to participate in interactive debate, share personal experiences, and co-construct meanings in a group context, they were chosen as the main technique for gathering data. Because focus groups enable participants to collectively negotiate meaning, mimic real-life peer interactions, and demonstrate how identity and cultural proximity are discussed within group settings, they were selected over individual interviews. Because engagement behaviors (commenting, sharing, and co-constructing) are by their very nature social and dialogic, this approach is especially well-suited for social media research (Nyumba et al., 2018; Cyr, 2019). Focus groups are the best way to find out how UTAR students co-interpret travel content connected to Taiwan because one-on-one interviews could not adequately capture such relationships.

Focus groups reveal individual variances in viewpoints and offer deeper insights into group perceptions than one-on-one interviews (Morgan, 1997). Because it allows the researcher to document how students perceive Taiwan-related social media content through group dynamics and shared narratives, this method is especially well-suited for studies with an interrupt. To ensure diversity of perspectives, participants who met the sampling criteria were divided into

four thematic focus groups, each representing a major attraction dimension of Taiwan commonly presented on social media:

- Group 1 – F&B-oriented participants: Students primarily drawn to Taiwanese food and beverage culture, including street food, night markets, and café-hopping experiences.
- Group 2 – Destination-oriented participants: Students motivated by natural scenery and cultural landmarks, such as Sun Moon Lake, Taroko Gorge, and Jiufen.
- Group 3 – Culture & Festival-oriented participants: Students with stronger interest in Taiwanese traditions, temple festivals, cultural performances, and heritage-related travel content.
- Group 4 – Entertainment-oriented participants: Students influenced by lifestyle vlogs, entertainment shows, and leisure-focused influencer content.retivist and inductive foundation.

Six to eight people participated in each focus group, which was a manageable number to enable everyone to engage while still producing a range of viewpoints. To guarantee clarity and ease of expression, discussions were held in Mandarin Chinese or a combination of Mandarin and English, based on participant desire. With the participants' permission, audio recordings of each session which lasted between 60 to 90 minutes were made for later transcription and analysis.

The study's research goals were purposefully in line with the thematic grouping. Examining how students' identity-driven needs such as cultural affiliation, food identity, and leisure identity drive their interaction with Taiwan-related content is one way to specifically address RO1. Participants' descriptions of active engagement practices including commenting, saving, sharing,

and co-creating influencer content are used to examine RO2. By comparing conversations between the four groups, RO3 is investigated to show how various engagement strategies and motives work together to influence how Taiwan is portrayed as a vacation destination and how students plan to travel there.

In addition to ensuring that every member satisfies the minimal eligibility requirements, this approach allows the focus groups to record both cross-group diversity and within-group depth. By doing this, the approach strengthens the validity of the results and offers a thorough comprehension of how UTAR students' interpretations and intents are influenced by prolonged exposure to Taiwan travel content on YouTube and Xiaohongshu.

3.7 Verbatim Transcription

Verbatim transcription is essential to qualitative research in order to guarantee accuracy and completeness of data analysis. Participants' pauses, hesitations, and, when practical, implicit nonverbal clues are all faithfully captured in verbatim transcription (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). This degree of specificity serves as the basis for thematic analysis, which allows researchers to code the data methodically and identify recurrent themes in the viewpoints of the participants. To maintain the authenticity of the UTAR students' voices and reduce the possibility of researcher bias in interpretation, all focus discussions were verbatim recorded for this study. After transcription, the information was inductively coded and categorized into themes, including the importance of peer influence in influencing opinions about Taiwanese tourism, the entertainment value of content, and confidence in the authenticity of KOLs.

Transparency and consistent findings based on participants' real experiences were guaranteed by using verbatim transcriptions.

3.8 Research Ethics

When conducting qualitative research, ethical considerations are especially important when working with student participants. The Malaysian National Research Ethics Policy (Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, 2013) and the American Psychological Association's (APA, 2017) Code of Ethics are both followed in this study. To guarantee informed consent, all UTAR students would be fully informed about the study's goals, methods, and their rights before taking part. By deleting all identifiable information from records and anonymizing them, strict secrecy will be upheld. Additionally, in compliance with ethical data protection guidelines, data will be safely kept in password-protected folders that are only accessible by the researchers. The researchers also recognize that it is their responsibilities to reduce participant risks (such discomfort during focus group talks) and provide them the freedom to leave at any moment without incurring any fees. This study protects participant rights and preserves the integrity of the research process by keeping by these ethical guidelines.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction and Respondent Coding Overview

Analysis and findings from four focus groups with a total of twenty-four UTAR Kampar Chinese-fluent students are presented in this chapter. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach was used to develop the themes inductively, and Social Media Engagement Theory (SMET), which frames engagement as a process driven by identity needs, followed by active participation and ultimately leading to outcomes like meaning co-construction and intention formation, guides the analytical interpretation. Only when relevant is Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) discussed.

To ensure clarity and transparency, respondent codes are preserved exactly as they appear in the original transcripts. Group 1 consists of Food & Beverages (F&B) -oriented participants (G1-A to G1-F), Group 2 includes destination-oriented participants (G2-甲 to G2-己), Group 3 comprises culture and festival-oriented participants (G3-1 to G3-6), while Group 4 involves entertainment-oriented participants (G4-I to G4-VI). The findings are presented according to three major themes, each supported by extensive verbatim quotations and followed by analytic interpretation rooted in SMET.

4.2 Theme 1: Emotional and Social Identity Needs as Drivers of Engagement

4.2.1 Findings and Analysis

The theme 1 (RQ1) shows that participants' interactions with Taiwan travel KOLs are mostly motivated by identification demands and emotional resonance. Students consistently

emphasize in all four FGDs that internal emotions—comfort, familiarity, aspiration, relatability, belonging, self-expression, or cultural affinity—rather than external elements like travel promotions or general informational value are what initially draw them to Taiwan-related content.

Subtheme 1 - Emotional Comfort and Everyday Escapism

Taiwanese KOL content is described by many participants as emotionally calming. Participants who are focused on entertainment (Group 4) and food and beverage (Group 1) exhibit this tendency particularly strongly. Students describe how watching Taiwanese vloggers provides a momentary sense of relaxation by acting as a mental escape from academic stress.

As one G4 respondent explains:

> “看他们拍 cafe，海景，夜市，我真的会觉得很放松，好像短暂脱离 assignment。” — G4-II
>
> (“When they film cafés, beaches, and night markets, I genuinely feel relaxed, like escaping from assignments for a moment.”—G4-II)

Similarly, a Group 1 participant notes:

> “他们的 vlog 很疗愈，节奏不会太快，看了心情会 calm down。” — G1-E
>
> (“Their vlogs are healing, with a slow pace that calms my mood.” — G1-E)

Students highlight how the aesthetics of Xiaohongshu and YouTube vlogs—warm tones, soft lighting, and relaxing background music—improve the emotional impact:

> “台湾 vlog 的配乐和色调很温暖，看了会有幸福感。” — G1-B
>
> (“The warm tones and music in Taiwanese vlogs give me a sense of happiness.” — G1-B)

According to SMET, the main causes of attentional engagement are basic emotional impulses. Emotional resonance is the initial step toward active involvement, as evidenced by participants' frequent comments to serenity and relaxation. By lowering cognitive difficulties and establishing a secure psychological environment for interaction, emotional comfort serves as a mental "entry point."

It's interesting to note that Groups 1 and 4, which concentrate on food and entertainment, show a more obvious dependence on these emotional triggers, indicating that the type of material influences the degree of emotional engagement. This suggests that sensory signals, narrative style, and aesthetic presentation in KOL videos serve a purpose in meeting viewers' emotional identification demands rather than just being decorative.

Additionally, emotional engagement interacts with other aspects of identity. Students claim that experiencing "calm" or "放松 (Relax)" enables them to think about their cultural interests or personal goals without being distracted by stress. This suggests a domino effect: emotional resonance sets the stage for attentional focus, which in turn enables the social and cognitive processing required for more involved activities like sharing, storing, and commenting. To put it simply, emotional fulfillment is not isolated; rather, it facilitates a variety of downstream engagement behaviors, which is in complete agreement with SMET's claim that identity gratification comes before active involvement.

Subtheme 2 - Cultural Familiarity and Perceived Closeness

Participants, particularly Chinese Malaysian students, believe Taiwan to be culturally similar to Malaysia. Identification with content is strengthened by cultural familiarity. Participants in Group 3 (Culture & Festival-oriented) especially appreciate religious rites, lantern festivals, and temple parades. Quotes emphasize a sense of kinship and cultural connections.

For example:

> “台湾文化跟我们真的很接近，看他们 vlog 会有亲切感。” — G1-D
>
> (“Taiwanese culture is really close to ours; watching their vlogs feels familiar.” — G1-D)

> “讲话方式、食物、习俗都不会太陌生。” — G3-4
>
> “Their way of speaking, food, and traditions don’t feel foreign.”

Some participants explicitly connect this familiarity to their sense of Chinese heritage:

> “他们讲的文化我小时候也看过，感觉像 reconnect 自己的文化。” — G3-2
>
> (“The cultural elements they show are things I grew up with too; it feels like reconnecting with my own heritage.” — G3-2)

This connection is particularly strong in Group 3 (Culture & Festival-oriented). Students from this group show interest in temple parades, lantern festivals and religious rituals:

> “看到庙会我会觉得很像马来西亚中元节或庙会，感觉很亲。” — G3-5
>
> (“Seeing their temple festivals reminds me of our Ghost Festival or temple events; it feels very close.” — G3-5)

Thus, cultural proximity is not merely informative; it satisfies a deeper identity need to feel connected to one’s roots. Identity validation is a mechanism that enhances engagement,

according to SMET. According to the findings, students actively perceive Taiwanese content as an extension of their own cultural background, and cultural familiarity satisfies this demand by providing symbolic recognition. Participants who experienced traditional Chinese holidays as children found this connection especially striking, suggesting that shared heritage serves as a link between passive viewing and more in-depth emotional and cognitive involvement.

Notably, non-Chinese individuals also demonstrate participation through perceived lifestyle similarities, demonstrating that cultural connection is multifaceted and includes social norms, values, and aesthetics in addition to ethnicity. This expands the use of SMET since identity congruence can occur at several levels, each of which improves behavioral and attentional engagement in a different way.

Additionally, participants' sense of expertise in navigating peer discussions is reinforced by frequent exposure to culturally recognizable information. According to this social validation loop, cultural familiarity indirectly promotes relational engagement in addition to strengthening personal identity. It shows how content that reflects the cultural framework of viewers improves the social and individual aspects of engagement.

Subtheme 3 - Lifestyle Aspiration and Self-Representation

Some students (Groups 1 and 4) believe that Taiwan KOLs have the perfect lifestyle: they are imaginative, carefree, young, and attractive. Participants can perform identity through social interactions and connect with aspirational lifestyles by engaging with the information.

A Group 1 participant states:

> “台湾 cafe culture 很文青，我会觉得那个 vibe 就是我，很符合我想呈现的 lifestyle。” — G1-B
>
> (“Taiwan’s café culture is very artsy, and that vibe represents me—it matches the lifestyle I want to present.” — G1-B)

Another respondent highlights lifestyle alignment:

> “台北那种慢节奏加一点文青感，就是我喜欢的。” — G4-VI
>
> (“That slow-paced yet artsy feel in Taipei is exactly the style I like.” — G4-VI)

Some even mention that engaging with Taiwan KOLs makes them feel more “updated” or “aesthetic” among their peers:

> “看台湾 KOL，我觉得自己也比较 in trend，可以跟朋友讲他们介绍的 cafe。” — G1-F
>
> (“Watching Taiwanese KOLs makes me feel more in trend; I can talk to friends about the cafés they introduce.” — G1-F)

In SMET, aspirational identity serves as a proactive engagement motivator. Content consumption is directly associated with self-expression and peer validation, as seen by students' fondness for Taiwan's cafe culture and "文青 vibe (literary youth vibe)." In order to project positive self-images and develop social capital among peers, participants choose internalize elements of KOLs' lifestyles, making engagement a purposeful act.

Lifestyle-oriented students are more likely to transition from passive observation to active participation, according to cross-group comparison. Using references in social interactions, sharing KOL content in group conversations, and saving itineraries are examples of actions that externally promote identity alignment. A network of reinforcing identity gratifications is formed when aspirational reasons interact with emotional and cultural components, as seen by this proactive involvement.

Additionally, aspirational engagement seems to have a feedback mechanism in which students believe that mimicking elements of KOLs' lifestyles improves peer recognition, which in turn encourages sustained engagement. SMET's assertion that identity-oriented incentives foster long-term user engagement through both internal satisfaction and external social reinforcement is best illustrated by this cyclical process.

Subtheme 4 - Social Belonging and Conversation Capital

Taiwanese content encourages peer-to-peer communication and fosters social ties. Groups 1 and 4 emphasize this behavior, but all groups reflect it. Maintaining social relevance and strengthening connections are two relational goals of engagement.

> “我们 group 的话题很多都是台湾夜市、美食，大家都会 share。” — G1-A
>
> (“In our group, many conversations revolve around Taiwanese night markets and food; everyone shares.” — G1-A)

> “我朋友会 tag 我台北 café，然后我们就会开始讨论。” — G4-IV
>
> (“My friend tags me in Taipei café posts, and then we start discussing them.” — G4-IV)

Some participants use engagement as a way to enter social circles:

> “朋友常分享台湾 vlog，我也跟着看，不然会接不上话题。” — G2-丁
>
> (“My friends often share Taiwan vlogs, so I also watch them; otherwise I can’t join the conversation.” — G2-丁)

This demonstrates that identity is socially co-constructed—students watch Taiwan content partly to maintain social belonging. In accordance with SMET, relational identity increases social-driven engagement. In order to preserve peer relationships, prevent social

marginalization, and engage in group conversation, participants deliberately watch, share, or debate KOL content. Thus, engagement reflects the dual character of identity-driven conduct by functioning as both a social tool and an individual source of satisfaction.

Differences across groups show that students who are interested in entertainment and food and beverage are especially aware of peer dynamics, whereas students who are interested in culture and festivals strike a balance between social motivations and their own cultural interests. This implies that content type and individual priorities may influence relational identity demands.

The results show a dynamic relationship in which social belonging incentives reinforce other identity traits in addition to driving immediate interaction (such as sharing and commenting). Relational engagement serves as both an amplifier and a mediator in the identity–engagement route, as evidenced by the greater effectiveness of emotional comfort and lifestyle desire when they are socially acknowledged.

4.2.2 Theme-Level Summary

Emotional, cultural, aspirational, and social identity demands show up as interconnected motivators of participation across the four subthemes. The results show a distinct pathway:

Identity Needs → Emotional/Cultural Resonance → Attentional Engagement → Active Participation → Social Reinforcement

SMET provides a coherent framework for interpreting these interactions:

1. **Emotional comfort** acts as the initial trigger, reducing cognitive barriers and creating a safe space for attentional focus.
2. **Cultural affinity** validates viewers' identity, fostering personal connection and reinforcing attention.
3. **Lifestyle aspiration** motivates proactive engagement, linking self-expression to social recognition.
4. **Social belonging** amplifies relational participation and reinforces other engagement motives.

When taken as a whole, these processes show that identity needs are important since they influence and precede engagement behaviors like sharing, co-creation, saving, and commenting. Comparisons across groups reveal that the type of content influences which aspects of identification are most prominent: students who are focused on entertainment and food and beverage prioritize social and emotional motivations, whereas students who are focused on culture are more motivated by familiarity with their culture.

Crucially, the four elements of identity interact dynamically: social belonging enhances relational outcomes, cultural connection fortifies self-concept, lifestyle aspiration promotes proactive engagement, and emotional resonance aids attentiveness. The intricacy of identity-driven engagement is shown by this interconnection, supporting SMET's statement that user involvement is a multi-layered process influenced by social and personal elements.

Lastly, the results highlight the need for comprehensive content strategies that incorporate emotional, cultural, aspirational, and social appeals. KOLs whose content resonates across multiple identity dimensions are more likely to generate sustained engagement.

4.3 Theme 2: Participation Behaviours and Multi-layered Engagement

4.3.1 Findings and Analysis

Theme 2 (RQ2) explains how students convert these motives into active involvement behaviors, whereas Theme 1 explains why students are emotionally and socially drawn to Taiwan travel KOLs. Engagement behaviors go well beyond passive observation in all four FGDs. Students frequently discuss behaviors including making travel notes, imitating recording techniques, storing, sharing, commenting, tagging friends, and even making travel plans based only on KOL content.

Strong cognitive, emotional, social, and creative investment is demonstrated by these behaviors, which are consistent with the Social Media Engagement Theory's (SMET) participation phase.

Subtheme 1 - Saving as Future-oriented Cognitive Engagement

Among all the groups, saving is the most frequently reported for planning. For future trip reference, participants store movies, screenshots, Xiaohongshu posts, maps, café lists, and even timestamps in YouTube videos.

> “我每次看到台湾的 café、food vlog 都会 save，等到真的有机会去就可以直接 refer。” — G1-A
>
> (“Whenever I see café or food vlogs about Taiwan, I save them so I can refer to them if I visit.” — G1-A)

> “我会 screenshot 他们的 itinerary，像是捷运路线、地点、budget 这种。” — G2-甲
>
> (“I screenshot their itineraries, like MRT routes, locations, or budgets.” — G2-甲)

> “小红书收藏我有一整个 folder 叫‘台湾必去’，里面几十个。” — G4-IV
>
> (“I have a whole Xiaohongshu folder called ‘Taiwan Must-Go’, with dozens of saved posts.” — G4-IV)

Additionally, even if the trip isn't scheduled anytime soon, students note that preserving content helps them organize and enhance their future plans:

> “其实不懂几时能去，但 save 了心里会比较踏实，感觉 plan 起来了。” — G1-F
>
> (“I don’t know when I’ll go, but saving makes me feel more secure—like I’ve already planned something.” — G1-F)

Saving behavior is much more than just storing information; it also demonstrates planning commitment, cognitive engagement, and the creation of a unique mental model of Taiwan as a possible vacation destination. Saving is consistent with cognitive engagement, when users selectively internalize information that they deem personally relevant, according to SMET. Because it makes future decision-making easier, lowers planning uncertainty, and enables them to create a personalized knowledge base, participants in all four groups store Taiwan-related content.

Students are creating a future travel plan as seen by the content they keep, which includes schedules, café lists, maps, MRT directions, and cultural explanations. Saving offers mental fulfillment and a sense of preparedness even in situations where travel is not imminent (“不懂几时能去，但 save 了会踏实”) (I don't know when I can go, but having saved it will give me peace of mind.). This shows prospective involvement, in which users picture themselves traveling in the future.

The cognitive depth of saving behavior is further supported by group variations.

- **Group 1** (Food & Beverage) saves café lists and food recommendations, showing sensory-oriented planning.
- **Group 2** (Functional/Planning-oriented) focuses heavily on logistics such as routes, budgets, and transportation.
- **Group 3** (Culture/Festival-oriented) saves temple events, festival dates, and cultural explanations, demonstrating culturally-rooted planning.
- **Group 4** (Entertainment) saves aesthetic vlogs, cinematic shots, and mood-setting music, revealing emotional and atmospheric planning.

Consequently, saving serves as a means of constructing personal projects. In order to create well-organized travel archives that represent their beliefs, aesthetic preferences, and expected travel identities, students organize disparate web resources. This suggests that saving serves as the behavioral link between future intention and passive viewing, laying the mental foundation needed for vacation consideration.

Subtheme 2 — Sharing as Relational Engagement and Social Signalling

Sharing shows relational engagement by allowing participants to form friendships, have an impact on group travel plans, and express their aesthetic or cultural favorites.

A Group 4 respondent expresses this clearly:

> “我看到适合我们 group trip 的就会 share，看看他们有没有兴趣一起去。” — G4-II
>
> (“If I see something suitable for our group trip, I share it to see if they’re interested in going together.” — G4-II)

Another participant describes sharing as “maintaining friendships”:

> “分享 vlog、tag 朋友就是我们维持感情的方式。” — G1-F
>
> (“Sharing vlogs and tagging friends is our way of maintaining relationships.” — G1-F)

Sharing also serves as a social identity display:

> “有时候 share 漂亮风景是为了表现我喜欢这种 vibe。” — G2-戊
>
> (“Sometimes I share scenic shots to show that this is the vibe I like.”)

Some participants use sharing to influence travel discussions:

> “我朋友本来要去韩国，我狂 share 台湾 vlog 给他们，最后他们也考虑台湾了。” — G3-1
>
> (“My friends originally planned for Korea, but I kept sharing Taiwan vlogs, and now they’re considering Taiwan too.” — G3-1)

This indicates that sharing functions as a subtle yet powerful form of peer persuasion. Sharing serves purposes beyond information transfer and is a clearly socially significant behavior. According to the SMET perspective, sharing is consistent with relational engagement, in which users utilize social media content to uphold, improve, and negotiate relationships. In order to strengthen friendships, have an impact on group choices, and maintain continuous discussions, participants often share travel-related content from Taiwan.

Sharing performs two parallel identity functions:

1. **Belonging** – maintaining closeness within friendship groups
2. **Signalling** – expressing one’s aesthetic, preferences, or imagined self

By framing sharing as a means of maintaining relationships, students demonstrate how Taiwanese content may serve as a conduit for emotional connection. Sharing also strengthens a

group's identity. For example, if friends often hang out at cafés, their group identity changes to "café lovers," and if they share information about trekking or beaches, it becomes "adventurous." This illustrates how sharing contributes to the development of social norms.

Sharing is also carefully employed. Participants use vlogs to influence group travel preferences, even convincing friends to move to Taiwan instead of other places. This demonstrates the persuasiveness of peer-to-peer recommendations, which SMET recognizes as a crucial relational impact mechanism.

Across groups, sharing patterns diverge:

- G1 & G4 share aesthetic cafés, food visuals, or cinematic vlogs to convey personal style.
- G2 shares informative posts to coordinate future plans.
- G3 shares festival-related content to promote cultural appreciation within their circle.

Sharing is therefore both performative and communicative. It is a potent kind of relational interaction in influencing destination interest since it strengthens friendships while also enabling people to express their identities through carefully chosen content.

Subtheme 3 - Commenting & Tagging as Interactive Co-presence

Interactive behaviors like commenting and tagging let users interact with peers and authors, build community knowledge together, and strengthen their social identities.

“有一次 KOL 回复我 comment，我开心到 screenshot 给朋友。” — G1-C

> (“A KOL replied to my comment once, and I was so happy I screenshot it to my friends.” — G1-C)

Another respondent describes joining the community:

> “我会在 comment 区跟别人聊 itinerary，好像我们都在一起 plan trip。” — G2-己
>
> (“I chat with others in the comment section about itineraries, like we are planning a trip together.” — G2-己)

Tagging friends is also a major sub-behaviour:

> “看到 cafe 我会 tag 女生朋友，看到海边我会 tag 男生朋友，很自然。” — G4-V
>
> (“When I see cafés I tag my girl friends, when I see beaches I tag my guy friends—it’s very natural.” — G4-V)

Students treat the comment section like a collaborative space.

Some mention that comments influence them more than the video itself:

> “comment 区很好笑，很多 hidden gems，我都会去看网友讲什么。” — G3-5
>
> (“The comment section is funny and full of hidden gems; I always check what viewers say.” — G3-5)

This shows that communal knowledge plays a major role in travel planning.

Users transition from passive consumption to active participation in the online community by commenting and tagging. According to SMET, interactive engagement is the phase in which users start interacting with other viewers and creators, creating a feeling of co-presence. Participants' actions amply demonstrate this psychological intimacy—feeling "present with others."

Students actively contribute to the content ecosystem when they leave comments to ask for advice, show appreciation, or participate in travel-related conversations. The symbolic worth

of recognition is demonstrated by the emotional importance of the creator's answers (“开心到 screenshot 给朋友”) (very happy so screenshot to friends). Receiving a response from a KOL enhances the viewer's sense of intimacy, affirms their identity, and boosts their allegiance to the creator.

Relationship dynamics are further improved by tagging pals. Initiating conversations, personalizing recommendations, and visualizing shared travel experiences are all made possible by the use of tagging (“看到 cafe 就会 tag 女生朋友”) (When I see cafe I tag my girl friends). Micro-interactions created by tagging encourage group planning and anticipation.

Crucially, a lot of participants stress that the comment area is just as valuable as the video. The comment box serves as a hub for collective knowledge, as seen by descriptions such as "很好笑 (very funny)," "很多 hidden gems (lot of hidden gems)," and "想一起 plan trip (want to plan trip together) ." Students participate in group travel planning, obtain social evidence, and double-check facts using comments.

Group variations reveal additional depth.

- G3 respondents actively participate in cultural discussions, reinforcing cultural identity.
- G2 respondents ask practical questions and read replies for logistics.
- G4 respondents interact for humor, emotional resonance, or entertainment community building.

As a result, the creation of micro-communities through commenting and labeling behaviors enables students to interact socially rather than individually with Taiwan. Interactive

engagement raises the possibility of additional behavioral engagement, builds trust, and deepens emotional connection.

Subtheme 4 — Co-creation as the Highest Level of Participatory Engagement

Co-creation represents the peak of engagement, where participants actively reproduce, reinterpret, or innovate based on KOL content to perform and express their personal and social identities.

A Group 4 participant shares:

> “我会 follow 台湾 KOL 的剪辑风格，像转场、滤镜、字体那些。” — G4-III
> (“I follow Taiwanese KOLs’ editing styles—transitions, filters, fonts.” — G4-III)

Group 1 respondents sometimes recreate food scenes:

> “我有试过复刻台式便当，他们教的很简单。” — G1-E
> (“I tried recreating Taiwanese bento meals—they made it look simple.” — G1-E)

Group 3 respondents mimic angles and filming sequences during events:

> “我拍庙会的时候会学他们的角度，看起来比较 professional。” — G3-5
> (“When I film festivals, I imitate their angles to look more professional.” — G3-5)

Some even use Taiwan vlog aesthetic as inspiration for editing Malaysia trip videos:

> “我们在槟城出游时也会拍成台湾 vlog 那样，有点文青。” — G2-乙
> (“When travelling in Penang, we film in the style of Taiwan vlogs to get that artsy vibe.” — G2-乙)

These behaviours show a clear transition from engagement to creative participation, one of the highest levels of user involvement.

When people transition from being consumers to contributors, co-creation is the pinnacle of audience engagement. Co-creative engagement, according to SMET, entails content creation that is inspired by artists as well as reinterpretation and imitation. Participants in this study demonstrate co-creation by imitating cultural scenes, filming methods, editing styles, and even Taiwanese cuisine.

This subtheme shows the highest degree of mental engagement: individuals actively replicate the aesthetics of Taiwanese content in their own social media activities and lifestyle, in addition to being inspired by it. Students who adopt visual or behavioral components that correspond with their desired self-image appear to have a strong alignment with aspirational identity.

When shooting local trips (like Penang), mimicking Taiwan vlog styles is an example of identity play and creative experimentation. Students present themselves as more creative, daring, or culturally aware by using Taiwan-inspired aesthetics. This supports the idea that co-creation is an identity performance.

Co-creation also strengthens cultural and emotional attachment.

- G1 participants recreate Taiwanese food as a sensory connection to the culture.
- G3 participants imitate angles during temple events, highlighting cultural empathy.
- G4 participants focus on transitions, filters, and typography, emphasizing aesthetic appreciation.

This shows that co-creation is directed by the identity needs mentioned in Theme 1 and is not random. Students develop a stronger, more individualized connection to Taiwan as a travel destination by taking part in Taiwan-inspired content development. Therefore, co-creation is the pinnacle of involvement, combining relational, emotional, cognitive, and creative aspects.

4.3.2 Theme-Level Summary

Theme 2 shows the multifaceted nature of UTAR students' interactions with Taiwan travel KOLs, progressing from internal identity demands (Theme 1) to external behavioral manifestation. These behaviors can be interpreted using SMET as a shift from cognitive to relational, interactive, and creative types of engagement. Saving, sharing, commenting, and co-creating are all behaviors that show progressively higher levels of connection and emotional engagement.

When taken as a whole, the four subthemes show that students create a customized travel ecosystem with Taiwan at its core. A sense of community is fostered by commenting, social ties are strengthened by sharing, identity expression is shaped by co-creating, and an internal archive is created by saving. These behaviors interact in a dynamic way, showing how exposure to KOL content results in significant engagement and reflection of travel.

Additionally, the results show that engagement is never just practical. It is closely linked to cultural resonance, connection to society, and identity performance. Students negotiate their self-presentation, interpersonal interaction, and imagined travel experiences through Taiwan-related content. Taiwan becomes more than just a travel destination as a result of this behavior;

it becomes a symbolic location for artistic expression, social interaction, emotional fulfillment, and creative inquiry.

Overall, Theme 2 shows that identity demands are transformed into travel-related acts through behavioral involvement. This establishes the framework for Theme 3, in which these interactions influence travel intention, emotional attachment, and cognitive destination picture.

4.4 Theme 3: Co-constructed Destination Image and Travel Intention

4.4.1 Findings and Analysis

Theme 3 (RQ3) examines how ongoing interaction with Taiwan travel experts influences UTAR students' opinions of Taiwan and results in specific travel intentions. Participants consistently said in all four FGDs that KOL material co-constructs an emotionally, culturally, and aesthetically significant destination image, eventually directing their planning and decision-making. Theme 3 emphasizes the result of such prolonged connection, showing how emotional, cultural, aesthetic, and social layers of engagement end in both perception and actionable intention, whereas Themes 1 and 2 concentrated on motivations and engagement behaviors.

Subtheme 1 — Food as a Destination Anchor

Food dominates the destination image for many students, particularly those in F&B-oriented and entertainment-oriented groups. Taiwan’s street food, night markets, cafés, and convenience store snacks repeatedly appear in participants’ descriptions.

> “台湾就是 food heaven，看越多 vlog 就越想去吃。” — G1-F
>
> (“Taiwan is basically a food heaven—the more I watch the vlogs, the more I want to go.” — G1-F)

> “他们介绍的小吃都很夸张，看了会很想飞过去 try。” — G1-A
>
> (“The street foods they introduce look insane; watching makes me want to fly there to try them.” — G1-A)

Others emphasise the emotional comfort associated with Taiwanese food culture:

> “他们吃东西的方式很自然，很像陪你吃饭。” — G4-I
>
> (“The way they eat feels natural, like they are eating with you.” — G4-I)

Convenience stores also play a surprising role in forming destination image:

> “我真的被 7-11 洗脑，他们的便当、饮品每个 vlog 都会拍。” — G4-V
>
> (“I’m honestly brainwashed by their 7-11—the bento meals and drinks appear in every vlog.” — G4-V)

Participants' mental images of Taiwan are dominated by food, which serves as a social identification marker, a source of comfort, and a cultural symbol. Students can match their own preferences with culturally meaningful experiences by watching KOLs explore Taiwanese street food, night markets, cafés, and convenience stores. This helps students internalize the content as part of their identity construction.

Food serves as a social referent that promotes conversation, sharing, and interpersonal interaction with peers in addition to aesthetic pleasure. Emotionally significant cues improve attentional engagement, cognitive processing, and memory retention, according to SMET. Taiwan becomes ingrained in students' mental maps as a desirable destination due to their

frequent exposure to food-related content, which also facilitates aspirational identity signaling and peer approval. As a result, food becomes both a source of enjoyment and a planning tool, illustrating the transformation of identity-driven engagement into tangible intention.

Subtheme 2 - Scenery and vibe: peaceful, aesthetic, slow-paced

Participants consistently describe Taiwan's landscapes as "healing", "chill", and "dreamlike". This aesthetic is shaped by KOL cinematography—drone shots, colour grading, and pacing.

> "他们拍日月潭的那个 vibe 很梦幻。" — G2-乙
> ("The vibe when they film Sun Moon Lake is very dreamlike." — G2-乙)

> "他们拍台北巷子、咖啡店，都很有慢活感。" — G4-VI
> ("The alleys and cafés in Taipei look so slow-paced and relaxing.")

Students describe these scenes as having a special "feeling" that Malaysia does not provide:

> "台湾那种 chill、美感、治愈的感觉，在马来西亚比较少。" — G3-3
> ("That chill, aesthetic, healing feeling in Taiwan is rare in Malaysia." — G3-3)

Scenic and aesthetic content facilitates both emotional and symbolic engagement. Participants envision themselves immersed in serene, attractive settings as they project their ideal experiences and lifestyle goals onto the location. According to SMET, emotional affordances like inspiration, tranquility, and escape enhance attentional engagement and promote extended involvement.

Participants' co-presence and immersive experience are enhanced by the cinematic portrayal, which includes warm tones, deliberate pacing, and drone shots, making them feel psychologically present in Taiwan. These aesthetic cues have a social purpose as well. By comparing, discussing, and sharing observations, participants strengthen their sense of community and relational identity. When emotional, symbolic, and social aspects are combined, passive looking is transformed into a customized and culturally relevant destination image, which increases the desire to make travel plans.

Subtheme 3 - Cultural richness and authenticity through festivals and rituals

Group 3 respondents show particularly strong cultural attraction. They believe KOLs help them understand Taiwan's traditions more deeply.

> "我看妈祖绕境的 vlog 会起鸡皮疙瘩。" — G3-1
>
> ("Watching the Mazu pilgrimage vlogs gives me goosebumps." — G3-1)

> "他们拍灯会的时候，我会觉得很壮观，也很文化。" — G3-5
>
> ("The lantern festival looks spectacular and culturally rich." — G3-5)

Cultural scenes are perceived as both "类似 (Similar)" and "有差别 (Differences)" compared to Malaysia.

> "有些习俗跟我们一样，可是他们做得更大更完整。" — G3-4
>
> ("Some customs are similar to ours, but they do it on a larger and more complete scale." — G3-4)

This creates a hybrid familiarity and curiosity effect, deepening the interest in travelling for cultural discovery. Participants can explore and validate aspects of their Asian identity and background through cultural participation. While non-Chinese participants learn about common cultural values and customs, students of Chinese heritage benefit from KOL portrayals of celebrations and ceremonies. According to SMET, co-constructed interpretation encourages users to actively create meaning by critically analyzing the parallels and discrepancies between Taiwan and Malaysia.

In addition to offering material for peer discussion and social negotiation, seeing the scope, authenticity, and completeness of cultural activities enhances cognitive and emotional engagement. In addition to directly influencing travel intention, these multiple contacts produce a rich, hybrid understanding of Taiwan as both familiar and foreign, satisfying curiosity and identification requirements. Cultural content thus bridges affective, cognitive, and social dimensions of engagement.

Subtheme 4 - Trust and authenticity driven by KOL personality

A recurring pattern is that participants trust Taiwan KOLs more than official tourism advertisements.

> “KOL 很真实，不像广告。” — G2-己
>
> (“KOLs are more real, unlike advertisements.” — G2-己)

> “看他们 vlog 很像朋友带你去旅行。” — G4-II
>
> (“Watching their vlogs feels like a friend guiding you on a trip.” — G4-II)

The willingness of participants to internalize and act upon content is largely dependent on perceived authenticity. In line with SMET's statement that trust promotes engagement progression from perception to behavior, KOLs' open presentation of both the advantages and disadvantages of traveling to Taiwan increases credibility and lowers uncertainty. When KOLs are relevant, participants report higher levels of emotional investment, which reflects psychological co-presence and improved identity alignment.

Students feel more led by their peers than by distant authorities, which increases relational involvement. This trust bridges the gap between desire and practical intention by supporting deeper interpretation, promoting conversation with friends, and influencing planned decisions. Authenticity serves as a crucial factor that transforms involvement into tangible travel behavior, illustrating how social media modulates the social, emotional, and cognitive pathways leading to the establishment of intentions.

Subtheme 5 — From Engagement to Travel Intention

Many participants move beyond desire into early-stage or active planning.

> “我已经开始做 itinerary，等预算够就去。” — G1-B
>
> (“I’ve already started making an itinerary; once I have enough budget, I will go.” — G1-B)

> “我今年 plan 去追妈祖绕境。” — G3-1
>
> (“This year I plan to join the Mazu pilgrimage.” — G3-1)

Some have a clear timeline:

> “毕业 trip 我想去台湾。” — G2-戊
>
> (“For my graduation trip, I want to go to Taiwan.” — G2-戊)

Others describe Taiwan as their “first choice” among Asian destinations:

> “如果 Asia trip，我会先选台湾。” — G4-IV
>
> (“For an Asia trip, Taiwan is my first choice.” — G4-IV)

Students showed a distinct path from initial identity-aligned involvement to intentional travel planning in all focus groups. A sequential scaffolding that is in line with SMET's framework is formed by engagement behaviors like saving posts, sharing content, commenting, tagging friends, and co-creating visual content. Identity alignment creates emotional resonance, which encourages active participation and group meaning-making, ultimately directing behavioral intention.

Participants are able to internalize Taiwan as a symbolic and customized location through the combination of aesthetic, cultural, emotional, and social signals. Students actively create itineraries, give priority to Taiwan over other locations, and integrate travel plans into social and aspirational settings rather than just wanting to go. This sequence demonstrates how engagement behaviors serve as both operational stages that translate perception and emotion into concrete action and demonstrations of interest.

4.4.2 Theme-Level Summary

The outcome stage of SMET is shown in Theme 3, which demonstrates how earlier identity-driven motivations (Theme 1) and engagement behaviors (Theme 2) come together to create a co-constructed, emotionally relevant, and useful experience of Taiwan. Students can incorporate cultural awareness, emotional experience, social validation, and personal identification into a comprehensive destination image through consistent engagement with KOL material.

While cultural and social aspects offer deeper levels of meaning-making, emotional resonance and aesthetic affordances promote attentional and cognitive involvement. Engagement results in reliable knowledge, less confusion, and concrete behavioral planning when KOLs are honest and viewed as trustworthy. Students gradually go from passive consumption to proactive intention development through storing, sharing, commenting, and co-creating, building a unique and symbolic representation of Taiwan.

This co-construction process shows that the destination picture is a dynamic blend of KOL framing, peer engagement, individual interpretation, and identity alignment rather than just an objective portrayal. In the end, engagement fully addresses RQ3 by converting viewers into prospective tourists by incorporating emotional, aesthetic, cultural, and social aspects into practical travel intention.

4.5 Summary

This chapter presents the findings from four focus group discussions and examines how UTAR Kampar students engage with Taiwan travel KOL content. Through inductive thematic analysis guided by SMET, three major themes emerge.

Theme 1 demonstrates that emotional and social identity needs are the primary drivers of engagement. Students feel comfort, cultural closeness, lifestyle aspiration, and social belonging when watching Taiwan-related content. These identity-driven motivations establish the foundation for deeper engagement.

Theme 2 explains how identity needs translate into active participation behaviours. Students engage cognitively by saving posts and creating folders, relationally by sharing and tagging friends, interactively by commenting, and creatively by imitating KOL filming styles or creating their own content. These forms of engagement reflect the behavioural and interactive stages of SMET.

Theme 3 shows how sustained engagement contributes to the co-construction of Taiwan's destination image and strong travel intention. Participants perceive Taiwan as a food paradise, aesthetic and peaceful landscape, culturally rich society, and trustworthy travel destination. The authenticity of KOLs enhances trust, while emotional and cultural resonance strengthens intention. Many participants progress from desire to concrete planning, such as drafting itineraries or proposing Taiwan for graduation trips.

Overall, the findings illustrate a clear engagement pathway**: identity needs initiate engagement, engagement behaviours deepen involvement, and this leads to the co-**

construction of destination meaning and travel intention. These insights form the basis for the theoretical discussion and implications to be explored in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 presented the findings from four focus group discussions and identified three major themes:

(1) Identity-driven emotional and social antecedents of engagement,

(2) Multi-layered participation behaviours

(3) The co-construction of Taiwan's destination image and travel intention.

Together, the results show that UTAR Kampar Chinese-fluent students' interactions with Taiwan travel KOLs are closely related to identity processes, emotional resonance, and social interaction rather than just being functional or informative. This is in line with SMET, which views engagement as a dynamic, multi-phase process motivated by meaning-making, social connection, and personal relevance (Brodie et al., 2013; Dessart, 2017).

Three interrelated stages are proposed by SMET: (1) motivational and identity-aligned antecedents; (2) behavioral participation; and (3) affective-cognitive outcomes. This structure is substantially supported by the results presented in Chapter 4. Emotional comfort, cultural familiarity, lifestyle aspirations, and social belonging are examples of identity gratifications that are potent antecedents that cause attentional engagement (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Ruggiero, 2000; Sundar & Limperos, 2013). These encounters then result in a variety of engagement activities, including as co-creating, labeling, sharing, commenting, and saving content. In the end, these actions strengthen students' plans to travel to Taiwan by helping to develop an emotive and symbolic image of the country (Leung, 2022; Zhang & Dong, 2022).

This distinct evolution strengthens SMET's explanatory power in influencer-driven tourist situations and matches the entire trajectory of interaction described in SMET.

UGT is helpful in understanding how students purposefully use Taiwan travel information to meet emotional, cultural, and social requirements, even if SMET is the main theoretical framework. Motivations including information-seeking, amusement, and escape are highlighted in traditional UGT (Katz et al., 1973; Sundar & Limperos, 2013). The results, however, go beyond UGT by demonstrating that youthful social media users are just as, if not more, influenced by identity-based and emotive gratifications. Therefore, although SMET provides a more thorough framework for comprehending how these motivations develop into deeper behavioral and outcome patterns, UGT helps explain users' initial motives.

Building on these theoretical foundations, this chapter discusses how the results support, expand upon, or contradict previous research on young travel behavior, influencer credibility, social media participation, and digital tourism consumption. Particular focus is placed on how identity-driven motivations trigger attentional engagement, how multi-dimensional participation behaviors mirror SMET's engagement stages, and how long-term engagement with KOL content influences destination perceptions via co-construction and social interpretation processes.

In addition to theoretical contributions, this chapter looks at the practical implications for Taiwanese and Malaysian tourism players, especially destination marketing companies, travel experts, and social media marketers. In order to draw in young audiences and encourage travel intention, the results emphasize the significance of authenticity, emotional connection, cultural congruence, and artistic narrative. Additionally, the role of peer-mediated participation

and co-creation offers fresh perspectives for creating participatory tourist campaigns that enable viewers to actively create meaning.

This chapter concludes by discussing the study's limitations, which include sampling restrictions and methodological limitations. It also makes suggestions for future research, including the use of quantitative measures, the comparison of cross-ethnic engagement patterns, and an investigation of the function of aesthetic identity performance in digital tourism content. When taken as a whole, these debates place the study in the context of a larger scholarly conversation and highlight the crucial role that identity-driven engagement plays in influencing young Malaysians' travel intentions and destination impressions.

5.2 Discussion of Findings

5.2.1 Discussion Related to RQ1

RQ 1 - “How do UTAR Kampar students’ emotional and social identity needs shape their engagement with Taiwan travel KOL content on platforms such as YouTube and Xiaohongshu?”

The results for RQ1 show that four identity-oriented motivations—emotional comfort, cultural familiarity, lifestyle desire, and social belonging—are the main drivers of UTAR Kampar Chinese-fluent students' interaction with Taiwan travel KOLs. According to UGT (Katz et al., 1973; Sundar & Limperos, 2013), these motivations go beyond the conventional information-seeking and entertainment gratifications. Rather, the findings demonstrate that students' involvement reflects intricate identity processes that closely correspond with the foundational stage of SMET, which highlights personal significance and identity relevance as antecedents that spark attentional engagement (Brodie et al., 2013; Dessart, 2017).

A. Identity Needs as Core Antecedents: Extending UGT's Conceptual Boundaries

The results show that identity-based gratifications—rather than utilitarian gratifications—serve as the primary engagement triggers, even though UGT is still helpful in explaining intentional platform usage. The importance of emotional comfort is consistent with recent improvements to UGT, which indicate that youthful internet users are increasingly motivated by emotional regulation (Valkenburg et al., 2022). Participants frequently referred to Taiwanese vacation vlogs as "therapeutic," "calming," and "soothing," particularly when they are feeling overburdened by scholastic pressure. According to media psychology research, which sees social media as a tool for mood management, this represents a type of affective coping behavior mediated through algorithmically selected visual media (Reinecke & Oliver, 2017).

Another powerful source of identity satisfaction was cultural familiarity. Taiwan was seen by Malaysian Chinese students in particular as a culturally close society that allowed for a "symbolic homecoming" (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Ruggiero, 2000). Research on transnational Chinese audiences also found that watching Taiwanese content maintained their Chinese ancestry through festivals, temple rites, cuisine practices, and dialectal similarities (Huang et al., 2023). It appears that UGT's category of "personal identity gratification" is not sufficiently complex to reflect culturally embedded resonance, as this cultural echo fosters emotional intimacy and symbolic validation. Therefore, by showing that cultural identity reinforcement is a potent motivating layer among culturally hybrid audiences, the findings expand UGT.

The aspirational shift in social media consumption, where users idealize and internalize influencer-aesthetic lifestyles, is further reflected in lifestyle ambition (Lee & Watkins, 2016).

Students might imagine a more artistic, free-spirited, or emotionally balanced version of themselves because to Taiwan's café culture, slow-living atmosphere, and "文青 aesthetic." This result supports studies showing that social media allows people to envision idealized versions of themselves, which promotes self-expansion (Argo & Main, 2019). Again stretching UGT beyond its traditional bounds, such aspirational drives are essentially identity-driven rather than utilitarian.

Lastly, social belonging shows how students preserve interpersonal relevance by utilizing Taiwan-related content. Smoother peer interactions are made possible by sharing vlogs, talking about cafes, or referring to KOL itineraries. Previous studies support this theory by demonstrating how youth use digital media as a social glue (Koivula et al., 2022). As a result, social membership serves as a relationship strategy as well as a means of personal fulfillment.

When taken as a whole, these four motivations show that the level of engagement cannot be well explained by UGT's fundamental categories—entertainment, information, and escape. Identity fulfillment is a core motivator, not a secondary one.

B. Reinforcing SMET: Identity Needs as Attentional Engagement Triggers

SMET states that identity relevance is the foundation for attentional engagement—the first stage of the model (Brodie et al., 2013). The findings strongly support this.

(1) Emotional comfort → lowering cognitive resistance

Viewers can reach an attentional state with little difficulty when the content is soothing, slow-paced, or visually appealing. According to Reinecke and Oliver (2017), emotional comfort lowers cognitive burden and increases viewers' openness to more in-depth interaction.

(2) Cultural familiarity → cognitive fluency

Content is easier to digest when it fits viewers' cultural schemas. According to Alter and Oppenheimer (2009), cognitive fluency improves message retention and attention span. Taiwanese cultural customs seem natural to Malaysian Chinese students, which facilitates easier attentional participation.

(3) Lifestyle aspiration → self-referential attention

"Self-referencing," a psychological process that improves focus and memory, is triggered by aspirational images (Ahn et al., 2021). Because they envision themselves living the lifestyle that is portrayed, students pay attention.

(4) Social belonging → relevance maintenance

Relevance, according to SMET, sustains engagement over time. According to social identity theory in online communities, students continue to pay attention to Taiwan content in order to stay current with peer group norms (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Thus, SMET's conceptualization of attentional engagement as a result of identity congruence rather than just media exposure is explicitly validated by RQ1 data.

C. Aesthetic Identity Resonance: A Novel Contribution

The finding that visual signals, such as color grading, slow-moving cinematography, gentle background music, and editing style, serve as identification triggers is among the study's most important contributions. Studies that have already been conducted acknowledge aesthetics as "engagement enhancers" (Abidin, 2016), but they rarely consider them as identity motivators.

The findings show that Taiwan's aesthetic representation serves three identity functions:

1. Emotional Identity - The "healing" vibe provides affective safety and emotional regulation.

2. Cultural Identity - The visual incorporation of traditional foods, festivals, and Mandarin-speaking environments reinforces cultural connectedness.

3. Aspirational Identity - The cafe culture, vintage alleys, and cinematic mood enable self-idealisation.

This is a theoretical addition to SMET: aesthetic resonance as an antecedent to engagement. According to this study, identity triggers in SMET need to be expanded; identity alignment can be triggered by visual and emotional aesthetics in addition to values and interests.

D. Cultural Echo Effect: Extending Literature on Transnational Media Audiences

The diverse setting of Malaysia produces a distinct audience dynamic. Taiwan is a symbolic cultural extension for Chinese students studying in Malaysia. According to transnational media studies, diasporic audiences frequently turn to culturally proximate media to strengthen their sense of identification and belonging, which is consistent with the cultural echo effect (Georgiou, 2012; Sun, 2021).

This findings contribute to this literature by showing that:

- Taiwanese travel KOLs inadvertently function as cultural mediators
- Students reinforce hybrid Malaysian–Chinese–Taiwanese identity through consumption
- Cultural resonance enhances emotional and behavioral engagement

This makes the RQ1 findings particularly important for understanding how identity shapes engagement in multicultural societies.

5.2.2 Discussion Related to RQ2

RQ 2 - "How do UTAR Kampar students actively engage through commenting, sharing, saving, and co-constructing when interacting with Taiwan travel KOLs?"

The findings for RQ2 show that students' interaction with Taiwan travel KOL content involves a range of multi-layered behavioral activity rather than just passive viewing. The second stage of SMET, which views engagement as a dynamic, iterative behavioral process that represents cognitive, affective, and relational participation, is strongly aligned with these behaviors: saving, sharing, commenting/tagging, and co-creating (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014).

By showing that involvement is an ecosystem of interrelated behaviors, each fulfilling distinct psychological and identity roles, rather than a single, uniform action, the results greatly improve the body of current work. According to Schivinski et al. (2016) and Pansari & Kumar (2017), there is a growing need in social media study to identify levels of interaction instead of treating it as a monolithic concept.

A. Engagement as a Multi-Layered Behavioural Ecosystem

The study identified four distinct behavioural modalities, each representing a different depth of SMET engagement:

1. Saving (Cognitive Engagement)
2. Sharing (Relational Engagement)
3. Commenting/Tagging (Interactive Engagement)
4. Co-creation (Creative and Identity-Performative Engagement)

The "hierarchy of engagement" put forth by earlier researchers (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011; Schivinski et al., 2016; Dolan et al., 2019) is reflected in this layered pattern; however, the results specifically modify this hierarchy for tourism KOL settings.

1. Saving: Cognitive Anchoring and Mental Planning

The most popular behavior was saving blogs, screenshots, travel vlogs, or Xiaohongshu notes. This behavior shows cognitive involvement, when users save information for personal archiving, itinerary planning, or future reference.

Saving serves three SMET-related cognitive functions:

(a) Mental scaffolding - Saving helps structure incomplete travel intentions into organised mental plans (Xiang et al., 2015).

(b) Information architecture - Students build their personalized travel database, reflecting cognitive elaboration (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019).

(c) Anticipatory travel planning - Saving fuels the psychological anticipation that enhances affective bonding with the destination (Kim, 2012).

Thus, saving is not passive. It validates the cognitive aspect of SMET's participation stage and is the first manifestation of internalized participation.

2. Sharing: Relational Signalling and Social Meaning-Making

It is a relational behavior to share content with friends, partners, and group chats. Sharing communicates identity, such as "this is who I am," "this is what I aspire to," or "this aligns with our shared culture," according to social signalling theory (Donath, 2007).

The participants shared Taiwan content for four reasons:

- To negotiate potential travel plans (“Let’s go here next semester”)
- To express identity affinities (“This café matches our vibe”)
- To deepen social bonds (“This reminds me of you”)
- To construct collective interest in Taiwan

This supports the SMET claim that social links among user groups are strengthened through relational involvement (Dessart, 2017). According to research, travel-related content is frequently socially consumed and co-interpreted, and sharing therefore constitutes a relational reinforcement mechanism (Mariani et al., 2022).

3. Commenting and Tagging: Interactive Co-Presence

A higher degree of interactive engagement is demonstrated by leaving comments or tagging friends. This behavior is a reflection of what SMET refers to as interactive co-presence, which is the feeling of being cognitively and socially "present" with people in a digital environment (Brodie et al., 2013).

Students used comments to:

- Ask KOLs clarifying questions (prices, routes, logistics)
- Tag friends to suggest join trips
- Express emotional reactions (“this feels comforting,” “I miss Taiwan”)
- Praise aesthetic elements (“the vibe is so healing”)

The findings are consistent with influencer studies demonstrating that remarks enhance perceived interaction and parasocial closeness (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). This interactive involvement also demonstrates how dialogic interaction allows users and influencers to co-create meaning (Men et al., 2020).

As a result, commenting and tagging are collaborative interpretive processes rather than just forms of communication.

4. Co-Creation: Identity Performance and Aesthetic Mimicry (Novel Contribution)

The rise of co-creation as the greatest level of participation is the most notable finding of RQ2. Students replicate, modify, and mimic Taiwan travel content in addition to consuming it by:

- Filming café visits in Taiwanese “文青 aesthetic”
- Using Taiwan-inspired colour grading
- Applying similar fonts, filters, or transitions
- Recreating scenes or food vlogs in Malaysia
- Making TikTok edits inspired by Taiwanese vloggers

This is rarely documented in tourism KOL literature and represents a major contribution. For the co-creation signifies:

(a) Identity performance - Students use Taiwan-inspired aesthetics to express who they are or who they aspire to be (Goffman, 1959; Leong et al., 2022).

(b) Cultural mimicry and creative adaptation - They internalise Taiwanese aesthetics and re-stage them in a Malaysian context. This demonstrates aesthetic affinity, deepening cultural closeness.

(c) Participatory co-construction of Taiwan’s image - Taiwan is no longer shaped solely by KOLs; students’ creative reproductions reinforce and re-amplify its imagery.

This reflects the “prosumption” paradigm (Toffler, 1980; Ritzer, 2015), where users become both producers and consumers.

This is one of that thesis’s strongest contributions, because engagement evolves into aesthetic identity performance, extending SMET’s participation stage to include creative self-expression. Very few tourism studies have identified KOL-induced aesthetic mimicry.

B. Reinforcing SMET's Participation Stage: Behaviour as Identity Alignment

SMET posits that behavioural engagement is driven by identity congruence. The findings validate the behavior and their identity function.

1. Saving - Cognitive identity ("this content fits my interests and future goals")
2. Sharing - Relational identity ("this reflects my friendship ties and group norms")
3. Commenting - Social identity ("I am part of this digital micro-community")
4. Co-creating - Aspirational identity ("I want to embody this lifestyle/aesthetic")

This progression expands SMET by illustrating that:

(1) Identity relevance influences not just attention (RQ1)

(2) But also the *type* and *depth* of behaviours chosen (RQ2)

Thus, behavioural engagement cannot be understood without considering identity motives (Hudson et al., 2016; Lim, Lim, & Wong, 2022).

C. Novel Insight: Engagement Behaviours as a "Peer-Mediated Ecosystem"

The significant impact of peer mediation is one notable outcome. The involvement behaviors of students were frequently:

- Encouraged by peers
- Performed for peers
- Interpreted with peers

- Reinforced by peer reactions

By showing that participation in tourism contexts is a collaboratively generated behavior ecology rather than an individual act, this advances SMET and supports social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). And the findings propose that engagement is: Not simply user–KOL interaction, but user–KOL–peer triangulation. Influencer tourism research has not given much attention to this contribution.

D. Co-Creation as the Highest Level of SMET Engagement (Theoretical Contribution)

Most SMET studies acknowledge high-level engagement but rarely specify its form. Your findings refine the model:

High-Level Engagement = Identity-Based Co-Creation

This implies that KOL material has the power to change viewers from being passive viewers into creative co-producers who repurpose and spread Taiwan's tourism imagery in various cultural contexts.

This insight bridges:

- SMET's behavioural engagement
- Influencer mimicry research
- Tourism image co-creation studies (Molinillo et al., 2022)
- Youth aesthetic identity literature

Thus, this study offers a conceptual extension to SMET: “Creative aesthetic mimicry” should be recognised as a form of deep engagement in influencer-mediated tourism.

5.2.3 Discussion Related to RQ3

RQ 3 - “What is the relationship between identity-driven needs, active engagement behaviors, and the construction of Taiwan’s destination image and travel intentions among UTAR Kampar students?”

The results for RQ3 show that students' multi-layered engagement behaviors (RQ2) and identity-based motives (RQ1) combine to create a co-constructed, emotionally charged, and aesthetically driven destination image of Taiwan, which subsequently increases their intention to visit. This is consistent with the outcome stage of SMET, where important psychological consequences like trust, preference, and behavioral intention are the result of cognitive, affective, and relational engagement (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014). By emphasizing the crucial importance of influencer aesthetics and peer-mediated meaning-making, aspects that are mainly disregarded in conventional tourism models, the findings also go beyond traditional destination image theory.

A. Destination Image as a Co-Constructed Outcome (KOL × Peer × Self-Identity)

The destination image is conceptualized in traditional literature as a blend of affective and cognitive assessments influenced by prior experiences and media exposure (Gunn, 1988;

Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). However, the findings demonstrate that students actively co-create Taiwan's destination image through the interaction of three layers:

1. KOL Framing: KOLs curate particular narratives, such as celebratory cultural scenes, slow-paced lifestyles, healing ambiances, and food-focused exploration. These framings produce an "anchor image" and influence pupils' early emotive impressions (Kim & Chen, 2016).

2. Peer Discussion and Sharing: Students often engage in social interpretation of content by discussing possible itineraries, uploading vlogs, and tagging peers. Certain perceptions are reinforced by peer interactions (e.g., "Taiwan is calm," "Taipei cafés are aesthetic"). This is consistent with theories of social meaning-making in tourism, which contend that social groups together negotiate perceptions of destinations (Mariani et al., 2022).

3. Identity Projection: Students reflect their own feelings, cultural preferences, and ideal lifestyles onto Taiwan. As a result, the destination image reflects personal identity rather than just being informative.

When combined, these methods show how a triadic co-construction produces the destination image: Influencer → Peer Group → Self-Identity (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). Hence, this emphasizes relational and participative components, going beyond classical models.

B. Food as the Strongest Anchor of Destination Image

One of the strongest conclusions is that students' perceptions of Taiwan are most strongly anchored by food, particularly night market snacks, Taiwanese breakfast, bubble tea, and cafe culture.

This is consistent with studies that demonstrate how foodscapes function as symbolic meaning structures in tourism, influencing cultural curiosity and emotional connection (Ellis et al., 2018). In contrast to picturesque scenery, food imagery is:

- Relatable
- Visually rich
- Emotionally comforting
- Easily shareable
- Strongly tied to identity (especially for Malaysian Chinese students)

Taiwan was characterized by students as "a place you can taste," "a foodie heaven," or "emotionally familiar but visually novel." These perceptions align with the emotive image dimension, which prioritizes emotions, familiarity, and sensory appeal over cognitive evaluations (Beerli & Martín, 2004). Thus, the findings reinforce and extend prior knowledge:

- Food is not just part of destination image - It is the emotional core of the image for Gen-Z Malaysian audiences.
- Food imagery activates cultural identity - strengthening the sense of connection.
- Food functions as a “bridge” linking Malaysia and Taiwan - reinforcing cultural proximity.

This illustrates the exceptionally potent persuasive power of KOL-mediated foodscapes in influencer tourism (Ajzen, 1991; Leung, Bai, & Stahura, 2015).

C. Aesthetic "Healing Vibe" as a New Form of Affective Destination Image

The study's unique contribution is the identification of aesthetic affect as a key element of destination image. Students repeatedly described Taiwan as:

- Calm
- Warm
- Healing
- Soft
- Slow-paced
- Cinematic
- Emotionally safe

These descriptions represent aesthetic-affective impressions generated by KOL editing methods rather than conventional cognitive criteria like cleanliness and convenience. This is consistent with recent studies on aesthetic tourism, which demonstrate how color tone and visual mood can significantly affect how people perceive a place (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2020). The findings suggest that KOLs do not only show Taiwan—they "emotionally frame" Taiwan.

The "healing" tone is created through:

- Soft colour grading
- Lo-fi music
- Long shots of alleys and sunsets
- Slow editing pace
- Intimate narration
- Minimalistic cafe scenes

Instead of creating a precisely accurate depiction of the actual location, KOLs' artistic style helps students create an "imagined Taiwan"—a mental and emotional image of the region that feels comforting and familiar.

Theoretically, this study fills a gap that previous destination image research has mostly ignored by highlighting how young travel intentions are greatly shaped by visual identity resonance.

D. Taiwan as an "Extended Imaginary Home" for Malaysian Chinese Students

The finding that Malaysian Chinese students view Taiwan as emotionally and culturally familiar—almost like an "extended imaginary home"—is among the most significant discoveries. This supports research on diasporic imaginaries, which contend that media can provide culturally mixed viewers with symbolic homelands (Sun, 2021; Georgiou, 2012).

The results show that Malaysian Chinese students have a high sense of comfort, familiarity, and emotional belonging due to Taiwan's Mandarin-speaking environment, family-oriented holidays, Chinese cultural rites, night market culture, and café aesthetics. Participants typically see Taiwan as a place that is emotionally and culturally accessible rather than just as a foreign tourism destination. Students might envision themselves blending in seamlessly with daily life in Taiwan because to this feeling of comfort and familiarity, which reflects a kind of symbolic homecoming based on a same language, customs, and way of life.

This interpretation is consistent with the idea of cultural closeness, which postulates that media representations that mirror well-known cultural symbols, values, and social practices are more likely to evoke a sense of connection in viewers (Georgiou, 2012). People feel less

psychological distance and more emotional affinity to places they consider to be culturally relevant (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2020). Taiwan's linguistic and cultural commonalities serve as identity-affirming cues in this study, allowing Malaysian Chinese teenagers to both imagine an idealized living overseas and justify their cultural identity.

Based on these perceptions, Taiwan simultaneously functions for them as:

• A travel destination

• A cultural reference point

• A lifestyle aspiration space

• An identity-validating imaginary home

Together, these insights help explain why Taiwan travel KOL content resonates so strongly with Malaysian students and exerts unusually powerful persuasive influence.

E. Authenticity and Trust as Key Predictors of Travel Intention

The findings indicate that a strong sense of authentic confidence fostered by KOLs drives travel intention rather than just interest or curiosity. Taiwan travel KOLs were often characterized by students as:

• Relatable

• Sincere

• Honest

• “Like a friend”

This supports the source credibility concept, which contends that authenticity and trustworthiness greatly increase persuasiveness (Ohanian, 1990; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Students reported trusting KOLs more than official tourism advertisements because:

• KOLs share real, everyday experiences

• They show genuine, unfiltered emotions

• They disclose costs transparently

• They demonstrate routes step-by-step

• They speak in a friendly, relatable tone

• They even share small mistakes or failures

According to narrative transportation theory, which contends that emotionally compelling storytelling enhances behavioral intention, such authenticity raises perceived realism (Green & Brock, 2000). Overall, these findings reinforce SMET's outcome stage:

(1) Identity needs → attentional engagement

(2) Engagement behaviours → relational bonding

(3) KOL trust → behavioural intention

This shows that in influencer-driven tourism situations, the entire SMET pathway is applicable and well-supported.

F. The Travel Intention Pathway: A Complete SMET Validation

The findings provide a complete map of how engagement leads to intention:

(1) Identity needs activate attentional engagement (RQ1)

- Emotional comfort, cultural familiarity, lifestyle aspiration, social belonging.

(2) Engagement behaviours deepen relational and affective involvement (RQ2)

- Saving → cognitive
- Sharing → relational
- Commenting → interactive
- Co-creation → identity performative

(3) Sustained engagement constructs a multi-layered destination image (RQ3)

- Anchored by food, aesthetics, trust, and cultural resonance.

(4) Affective destination image leads to travel intention

This integrated pathway shows how identity-based motives, behavioral engagement, and affective evaluations interact together to influence digital tourism decision-making and supports the coherence of the study's conceptual framework.

This is one of the strongest theoretical contributions:

This study shows that identity-motivated engagement behaviors significantly influence both destination image and travel intention, thoroughly validating the SMET engagement method in an influencer-mediated digital tourism setting.

5.3 Theoretical Implications

The findings of the study provide a number of important theoretical contributions to the domains of influencer studies, social media engagement, media psychology, and digital tourism research. This study adds new conceptual insights into identity-driven engagement, aesthetic social media consumption, and destination image co-construction to existing theoretical frameworks, especially UGT and SMET, by analyzing how UTAR Kampar Chinese-fluent students engage with Taiwan travel KOLs on platforms like YouTube and Xiaohongshu.

A. Extending Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) Into Identity-Based Motivations

According to classical UGT (Katz et al., 1973), media consumers look for knowledge, entertainment, escape, and reinforcement of their own identities. Later expansions (Sundar & Limperos, 2013) acknowledged more recent satisfactions influenced by the affordances of digital media. However, this study shows that deeper and more complicated identity-oriented gratifications that go beyond conventional UGT categories are what motivate young people to interact with travel KOLs.

1. Emotional Identity Gratification

Results indicate that students actively seek out Taiwan trip content for psychological peace, comfort, and emotional control. =In line with positive media psychology, this expands UGT's entertainment/escapism pleasure into a more complex category of affective safety (Reinecke & Oliver, 2017). Soft colors, serene narration, and low-fidelity music are examples of Taiwanese "healing" aesthetics that serve as emotional anchors to promote mood management, a type of identity-aligned affective maintenance.

2. Cultural Identity Gratification

Taiwanese festivals, Mandarin-speaking settings, night markets, and common Chinese cultural scripts all provided participants with a sense of familiarity and cultural resonance. UGT, which analyzes "personal identity" generally but does not distinguish cultural identity as a distinct driver, under-theorizes such cultural proximity gratifications (Huang et al., 2023). This study shows that, especially for multicultural or diasporic audiences like Malaysian Chinese adolescents, cultural identity satisfaction is a key motivation.

3. Lifestyle Identity Gratification

According to studies on aspirational media, students used KOL content to envision or aspire to an artistically curated lifestyle, such as slow living, artistic settings, and cafe culture (Lee & Watkins, 2016). This broadens the scope of UGT to include aesthetic-lifestyle motives as a separate form of satisfaction.

4. Social Identity Gratification

Students maintained relationship relevance, developed conversation capital, and strengthened peer belonging by using Taiwan-related content. By showing that social gratifications include identity validation inside peer groups rather than just keeping in touch, this expands UGT's social interaction dimension.

Theoretical Contribution:

This study shows that identity-based gratifications, which are more profound, emotive, and culturally placed, must be incorporated into UGT in addition to "uses" and "gratifications." This places identity demands at the center of modern social media use rather than on the periphery.

B. Strengthening SMET's Identity → Engagement → Outcome Pathway

Identity relevance influences attentional engagement, which in turn influences behavioral participation and affective-cognitive consequences, according to SMET (Brodie et al., 2013; Dessart, 2017). This study adds fresh perspectives to each level and offers empirical support for this pathway in influencer-driven tourism scenarios.

1. Identity Needs as Attentional Triggers

The results support SMET's claim that engagement comes after identity relevance (Brodie et al., 2011; Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016). Strong antecedents that trigger selective

attention for Taiwan travel content include emotional comfort, cultural familiarity, lifestyle aspirations, and social belonging.

2. Engagement as Multi-Layered Behaviour

The study supports and extends SMET's behavioral engagement stage by confirming that engagement behaviors—saving, sharing, commenting, tagging, and co-creation—correspond to increasing levels of involvement (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

3. Outcomes as Co-Constructed Destination Image

This study shows how SMET outcomes can influence travel intention in tourist situations by showing that interaction leads to the construction of emotive and aesthetic destination images rather than just trust or loyalty.

Theoretical Contribution:

This study offers a more detailed chain of evidence that enhances SMET's explanatory power and expands its use into the influencer tourism field by directly mapping identity demands onto engagement behaviors and final travel intention.

C. Proposing a Four-Layer Identity-Driven Engagement Model (New Contribution)

This study introduces a novel conceptual framework: **The Four-Layer Identity-Driven Engagement Model**, which explains how identity alignment fosters deeper engagement behaviours.

1. Emotional Identity

Students look to Taiwan KOLs for psychological relaxation, healing aesthetics, and emotional calmness. This identity layer explains why engagement is significantly impacted by specific editing techniques and tones.

2. Cultural Identity

Feelings of ethnic identity and symbolic homecoming are strengthened by cultural proximity and Malaysian Chinese-Taiwanese cultural resonance. This layer explains why people find Taiwanese content to be relatable and intuitive.

3. Lifestyle Identity

Taiwan is viewed by students as an ideal lifestyle model. KOL aesthetics serve provide models for idealized selves that are artistic, caring, or free-spirited. This layer connects aspirational self-expansion with aesthetic signals (Argo & Main, 2019).

4. Social Identity

Peer dynamics influence engagement behaviors, such as tagging friends, posting vlogs, and consulting KOL itineraries. Content that is preserved, shared, or replicated is influenced by social identity.

Contribution of the Model

Emotional, cultural, lifestyle, and social identities are all integrated into a logical framework by this multi-layer model, which shows that:

- These identities collectively determine attentional and behavioural engagement
- Engagement behaviours serve different identity functions
- Identity alignment predicts deeper forms of participation such as co-creation

This offers an improved viewpoint on how young people consume influencer travel content and advances identity theory in the context of social media participation.

D. Contributions to Travel KOL and Digital Tourism Literature

This study adds to the understanding of travel influencers, who have mostly been studied in terms of their persuasiveness, credibility, or marketing efficacy. The results show that travel KOLs play a number of novel theoretical roles.

1. KOLs as Cultural Interpreters

KOLs convey cultural experiences in ways that emotionally connect with audiences, rather than just promoting travel locations. This expands the study of mediated cultural closeness into the tourism sector (Sun, 2021).

2. KOLs as Emotional Companions

KOLs provide comfort and psychological reassurance to students. Influencers are positioned as emotive companions, a role that is seldom recognized in studies of tourism.

3. KOLs as Aesthetic Designers

KOLs create a relaxing aesthetic—soft tones, a leisurely tempo, and lo-fi music—that molds viewers' emotional perception of Taiwan. This adds to the growing body of research on aesthetic tourism (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2020).

4. KOLs as Co-Creation Stimulators

Aesthetic mimicry and co-creation, in which students replicate or reinterpret KOL aesthetics in their own content, showed the highest level of interest. This shows the applicability of prosumption theory in tourist influencer ecosystems and expands upon it (Ritzer, 2015).

Theoretical Contribution:

Travel KOLs are more than just marketing middlemen; they are cultural interpreters, emotional controllers, and co-creators of aesthetics who influence identity and destination significance. Influencers' role in tourism scholarship is reframed as a result.

5.4 Practical / Industry Implications

For industry stakeholders, such as Taiwanese tourism authorities, travel-related businesses, and KOL/creator communities, the study's conclusions provide important information. Three main areas of practical implications are revealed by looking at how Malaysian Chinese youth interact with Taiwan travel KOLs: best practices for travel brands looking to use co-creation and genuine engagement, actionable suggestions for KOLs and content creators, and strategic guidance for tourism agencies.

A. Implications for Taiwanese Tourism Authorities and Travel Organizations

The study emphasizes how important food, attractive presentation, and leisurely experiences are in influencing young Malaysian Chinese people's involvement and intention to travel. These information can be used into destination marketing initiatives by Taiwanese tourism authorities and related organizations.

1. Emphasize foodscapes and slow-living aesthetics

Taiwan's night markets, breakfast culture, cafe aesthetics, and relaxed pace were frequently cited by participants as the greatest anchors in their impression of the country. In addition to being pleasurable experiences, food and cafe culture are important means of fostering emotional comfort and cultural ties. Thus, food-focused content, immersive cultural experiences, and aesthetically pleasing, slow-living aesthetics should be given top priority in tourism marketing campaigns. Youth audiences can be successfully drawn in by emphasizing these components through social media platforms, video storytelling, and high-quality photography (Ellis et al., 2018; Kim & Stepchenkova, 2020).

2. Collaborate with authentic KOLs

Trust and engagement have been found to be significantly influenced by authenticity. Students appreciated KOLs who openly expressed their feelings, shared unvarnished experiences, and showed useful itineraries. Instead of depending only on high follower counts or celebrity status, tourism authorities should carefully choose KOLs who demonstrate relatability and credibility. KOL-driven campaigns can increase perceived reality and more successfully influence travel intention by promoting authentic storytelling (Ohanian, 1990; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

3. Promote cultural festivals and local rituals

Participants found events like lantern festivals, Mazu pilgrimages, and other regional festivities to be emotionally compelling and culturally relevant. Tourism authorities can raise awareness and anticipation among prospective visitors by strategically promoting these cultural festivals on social media, especially in Malaysia where cultural proximity increases interest. This will create opportunities for cross-border engagement and experiential tourism (Huang et al., 2023; Georgiou, 2012).

B. Implications for KOLs and Content Creators

For KOLs and digital content producers who want to engage young audiences with Taiwan tourism material, the report also offers practical suggestions.

1. Adopt “gentle, aesthetic, and slow-paced” styles

Participants stated that vlogs with soothing narration, gentle color grading, and relaxed tempo improved attentional engagement and provided emotional comfort. According to Abidin (2016) and Brodie et al. (2013), KOLs who use such techniques are better able to draw in audiences and enhance identity resonance, both of which promote deeper engagement. Slow-moving images and reflective scenes might produce a "healing" experience that entices viewers to stay and engage with the material.

2. Recognize the influence of vlog aesthetics on audience self-presentation

According to the study, students frequently mimic KOL aesthetics in their own social media posts, demonstrating aspirational behavior and identity performance. This emphasizes how crucial consistent aesthetic presentation and styled video editing are. Creators can increase the likelihood of audience imitation, co-creation, and long-term brand association by intentionally creating visually unified and aspirational material (Goffman, 1959; Leong et al., 2022).

3. Facilitate co-creation through shareable templates

In order to let consumers copy or modify KOL aesthetics in their own work, content providers can offer tools like filter packages, transition effects, or style instructions. Because UGC becomes an extension of the KOL's story and reaches larger audiences, this interactive strategy not only increases engagement but also naturally enhances the destination image (Toffler, 1980; Ritzer, 2015).

C. Implications for Travel Brands and Enterprises

Travel-related businesses, such as hotels, airlines, restaurants, and cafes, can strategically use the study's findings to improve marketing efficacy and customer engagement in addition to tourist authorities and KOLs.

1. Encourage user participation and co-creation

Brands can construct advertising campaigns that encourage viewers to capture their own trip adventures, replicate KOL-inspired looks, or share their own experiences. This supports the study's conclusion that identity validation and affective ties are strengthened via participatory participation. Social media challenges, photo competitions, and branded UGC campaigns that reward creativity and authentic storytelling are a few examples (Muntinga et al., 2011; Dolan et al., 2019).

2. Emphasize an "authentic friend" tone

Students frequently stated that more trust is fostered by KOLs that speak in an informal, friendly, and relatable style. In order to establish credibility and emotional connection, travel brands can use a similar authentic narrative style in their marketing communications, utilizing personal stories, behind-the-scenes looks, and useful travel advice (Green & Brock, 2000; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

3. Strategic partnerships with local hotspots

Engagement and influence can be increased by working together with cafes, night markets, convenience stores, and other culturally diverse neighborhood locations. These touchpoints are perfect for content development, co-branding opportunities, and experiential marketing campaigns because they are very relatable and visually appealing. Businesses can increase both digital engagement and physical visits by matching brand products with the

aspects that consumers already value, such as foodscapes, aesthetic experiences, and cultural familiarity (Ellis et al., 2018; Kim, 2012).

The study's practical implications highlight the significance of authentic, aesthetically pleasing, and identity-aligned involvement in digital tourism marketing. Leveraging foodscapes, slow-living aesthetics, and culturally relevant experiences while promoting co-creation and participative practices might be advantageous for Taiwanese tourist authorities, KOLs, and travel businesses. These tactics improve travel intention and destination perception among Malaysian youth audiences in addition to increasing audience engagement and trust.

5.5 Limitations

Although this study makes significant theoretical and practical contributions, it is important to recognize a number of limitations in order to contextualize the results and lead future research.

First, the sample was limited to students from a single institution—UTAR Kampar. Even though UTAR is one of Malaysia's biggest private colleges and has a varied student body with a majority of Chinese, the opinions expressed in this study might not accurately reflect the country's youth population as a whole. Students from cities like Johor Bahru, Penang, or Kuala Lumpur could have different travel interests, cultural identities, or media habits. Purposive sampling yields qualitative results that should not be extrapolated beyond the particular population under study, according to Patton (2015). Therefore, care should be taken when applying these observations to other ethnic groups or to all Malaysian Chinese adolescents.

Second, this study relied exclusively on focus group discussions (FGDs), which may introduce peer influence bias. Individual reactions can be influenced by group environments because members may support prevailing viewpoints, stifle opposing viewpoints, or use impression management in front of peers (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Students' descriptions of their media activities or identity-related motivations may also be influenced by social desirability bias (Fisher, 1993). FGDs were helpful in identifying common cultural meanings, but they might mask more unique or conflicting viewpoints on Taiwan travel-related content.

Third, the study employed a purely qualitative design without quantitative validation. Although a pathway connecting identity needs to engagement behaviors and trip intention was successfully established by the thematic analysis, these connection's strength, direction, and statistical significance were not examined. Researchers could assess the relative impact of emotional identification, cultural proximity, aesthetic resonance, and authenticity on engagement and intention using quantitative techniques such surveys or structural equation modeling (SEM) (Hair et al., 2019). The suggested paradigm is conceptual rather than empirically validated in the absence of such measurements.

Fourth, the study focused only on major visual-centric platforms—YouTube, Xiaohongshu. While Gen-Z digital consumption is dominated by these platforms, other platforms like Facebook, Threads, Instagram, and TikTok or newly developed community-based applications may also influence how various age groups perceive a place (Pew Research Center, 2023). The study may not fully represent the range of social media participation if these sites are excluded, particularly among older Malaysian Chinese audiences who have different information consumption habits. The way identification and engagement processes develop can also be influenced by platform-specific affordances, such as algorithmic suggestions, interactive

elements, or content formats (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). In order to present a more comprehensive picture, future research should expand platform coverage.

Finally, the study examined Taiwan-specific travel content, which may limit cross-cultural applicability. Taiwan's significant cultural ties to Malaysian Chinese youth—including their similar language, festivals, traditions, and food habits—have a special influence on identity resonance and involvement. For locations with less cultural affinity, like Western nations, the identity-driven engagement model suggested in this study might operate differently. According to earlier studies, viewers' interpretations of media narratives and destination imagery are greatly impacted by cultural distance (Huang et al., 2023; Georgiou, 2012). As a result, the results might not apply to situations in which symbolic homecoming and cultural familiarity are lacking.

In overall, these limitations show opportunities for methodological expansion, diverse sampling, and cross-cultural comparison, but they don't undermine the study's value. By addressing these issues, identity-driven interaction research in digital tourist contexts would become more robust and broadly applicable.

5.6 Recommendations for Future Research

Building on the findings and limitations of this study, a number of directions for further investigation are suggested in order to improve methodological robustness, expand contextual understanding, and increase theoretical development in studies of digital tourism and influencer involvement.

First, future research should incorporate quantitative methods to empirically validate the proposed identity–engagement–intention pathway. While this study conceptualized how

identity needs influence engagement behaviors and travel intention through qualitative thematic analysis, quantitative methods like surveys, covariance-based SEM, and partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) can statistically test the direction and strength of the relationships. This would enable researchers to investigate the relative impact of cultural proximity, emotional identification, aesthetic resonance, and authenticity on behavioral outcomes and attentional engagement (Hair et al., 2019). Moderating or mediating effects, such as the significance of perceived realism, narrative communication, or source reliability, may also be shown by quantitative validation. Therefore, incorporating mixed techniques could offer a more thorough comprehension of the identity-driven engagement paradigm.

Second, future research should include broader demographic groups, especially students from different ethnic backgrounds such as Malay and Indian youth in Malaysia. This study shows that among Malaysian Chinese students, cultural familiarity significantly increases engagement with Taiwan trip content. However, due to differences in linguistic exposure, media socialization, and cultural identification frameworks, this effect may vary among ethnic groups. Studies that compare different ethnic groups can determine whether cultural proximity is still a significant predictor of engagement or if other factors—like novelty-seeking, entertainment value, or influencer credibility—are more important (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2020). In addition to contributing to more general conversations on cultural distance and media reception, such comparative research would enhance knowledge of cultural segmentation in digital tourism marketing (Georgiou, 2012).

Third, future studies should compare Taiwan with other East Asian destinations such as Japan, South Korea, or Thailand. Through platforms like TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Xiaohongshu, a large number of young Malaysians enjoy regional travel content. It would be

possible to figure out whether Taiwan's strong identity-driven involvement is due to its close cultural connections, common language, and well-known traditions, or if such trends also exist other locations with distinct cultural profiles, by conducting a comparative destination analysis. Thailand's accessibility and affordability, South Korea's K-wave influence, or Japan's pop culture attraction, for instance, may trigger distinct identity pathways (Huang et al., 2023). Therefore, comparative research could examine the applicability of the suggested four-layer identity model outside of culturally close situations and improve or differentiate it.

Fourth, future research should further investigate co-creation as a destination marketing mechanism. According to this study, students use vlogs, photos, filters, and stylistic templates to both consume and replicate Taiwan-inspired aesthetics. This poses significant questions about how user-generated content (UGC) interacts with influencer-generated content (IGC) and how co-creation enhances destination images. Future research could look at the reasons behind co-creation (Muntinga et al., 2011), how aesthetic styles spread (Abidin, 2016), and how identity performances spread across platforms (Leong et al., 2022). Whether co-creation increases advocacy, travel intention, or emotional attachment could be investigated through experimental or long-term studies. It would also be beneficial for destination marketing companies using participatory content strategies to comprehend the dynamics of prosumer engagement (Ritzer, 2015).

Finally, future research should broaden platform diversity and examine algorithmic influences. Lastly, future studies ought to investigate algorithmic implications and increase platform variety. YouTube and Xiaohongshu are two highly visual sites that were the subject of this investigation. However, engagement, exposure, and persuasion are greatly influenced by platform affordances and algorithms (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Future research might

examine how platform-specific elements (such Facebook's community groups, TikTok's For You algorithm, or Threads' conversational format) affect users' identity-based interaction with travel-related content. Further insights into how content circulation influences destination image construction may also be obtained through algorithmic auditing or digital ethnography. Researchers could better grasp if identity-driven engagement is similar across many digital settings or changes based on interface design and algorithmic curation by comparing different platforms.

In recommendations, more methodological diversity, a wider range of demographic representation, and cross-cultural and cross-platform comparisons should all be included in future research. Scholars can gain a more thorough and broadly applicable understanding of identity-driven participation in digital tourism contexts by combining quantitative validation, ethnic comparison, destination differentiation, co-creation research, and platform analysis.

5.7 Conclusion

In order to explain how Taiwanese travel KOL material affects the engagement behaviors and travel inclinations of Malaysian Chinese youth, this chapter summarized the study's main findings and linked them with current theories. Together, the findings show that identity needs are the primary factor influencing social media involvement, contributing to our understanding of digital tourist communication in both theoretical and practical ways.

The results first show that, in contrast to traditional UGT, which usually emphasizes information seeking or entertainment, engagement starts with identity gratifications (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Rather, students follow and engage with Taiwan travel KOLs due to strong

identity-based incentives such as emotional ease, cultural familiarity, lifestyle desire, and social belonging. According to the first stage of SMET, these motives cause attentional engagement (Brodie et al., 2013). Therefore, identity requirements form the psychological basis that determines how young people pay attention to, interpret, and interact with travel-related content.

The chapter went on to show how engagement behaviors take place in a variety of layered levels, progressing from cognitive to relational, interactive, and creative engagement. Before moving on to social and interactive behaviors like sharing and commenting, students first participate cognitively by saving schedules and visual references. In the end, some users engage in creative co-construction, making content inspired by Taiwan or replicating Taiwanese aesthetics. This layered behavioral pathway reveals new identity-driven behaviors unique to influencer-mediated tourist contexts and is consistent with current conceptualizations of consumer involvement (Dolan et al., 2019).

It became clear that KOLs had a crucial part in this process. The audience's impressions and trust are significantly shaped by their authenticity, artistic style, and cultural storytelling. According to the source credibility model (Ohanian, 1990; Lou & Yuan, 2019), students thought that genuine KOLs were more reliable than official tourist sources. KOLs also serve as cultural mediators, creating an "imagined Taiwan" that speaks to people on an identity level through narrative, emotion, and visual style. KOLs provide a symbolic home that students feel attached to and promote cultural proximity through aesthetic cues, daily rituals, and emotionally calming representations (Georgiou, 2012). Together, these factors create a multifaceted destination image that combines emotional resonance, lifestyle creativity, and cultural familiarity.

Strong behavioral intention is the ultimate result of these identity and engagement processes, demonstrating the SMET model's complete applicability in influencer scenarios

related to digital tourism. This study's identification → engagement → intention pathway shows that travel intention is motivated by deep emotive ties created by consistent, genuine, and aesthetically pleasing content rather than just curiosity or outside influence (Green & Brock, 2000). Audiences grow to trust the KOL and, consequently, the place they represent when they experience a sense of cultural connection, emotional comfort, and visual inspiration.

In summary, Chapter 5 demonstrated how identity needs influence multi-layered engagement behaviors and how these behaviors work together to create trip intention and destination images. The theoretical implications present a new identity-driven engagement model, improve SMET, and expand UGT. In practical terms, the results provide direction for tourism authorities, artists, and companies looking to capitalize on co-creation, authenticity, and aesthetics. Therefore, this chapter points out that identity is the primary driver of digital tourism interaction, influencing how youthful audiences view, relate to, and ultimately decide to travel to a destination.

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APPENDIX II: FYP MEETINGS WITH SUPERVISOR

Note:
Incorporation of Blended Learning for UAMJ3073 and UAMJ3083

As per the DJR meeting held on 29th May, Wednesday, after FBO in P106, Block P, HOD Ms. Michelle has informed the department staff that DJR has nominated UAMJ3073 FYP 1 and UAMJ3083 FYP 2 to incorporate Blended Learning (OTL - Online Teaching and Learning) with effect June 2024 Trimester and onwards.

To implement OTL for UAMJ3073 FYP 1 and UAMJ3083 FYP 2, the supervisors can now arrange for consultation with the students ONLINE (OTL) for a minimum of 4 weeks and a maximum of 8 weeks.

Angelina Choo Wen Yi	ID: 20AAb05995	HP Number : 016 2892993	
1. THE ROLE OF YOUTUBE AND XIAOHONGSHU IN SHAPING UTAR KAMPAR STUDENTS' INFLUENCES OF TAIWAN TOURISM: A CASE STUDY OF CHINESE-FLUENT UNDERGRADUATES			
Date	Attended by	Progress	Signature
1.	30 June	Discussed research title, overall direction, and exploration of KOL focus.	鄭
2.	8 July	Guided on social science concepts and summarized typologies of social research.	鄭
3.	18 July	Discussed methodology (focus group) and formulated research questions and objectives.	鄭
4.	5 August	Reviewed and revised the introduction and problem statement.	鄭
5.	22 August	Examined the theoretical gap and decided to adopt Social Media Engagement Theory as the main framework.	鄭
6.	9 September	Discussed the case study scope and application of an inductive approach.	鄭
7.	26 September	Reviewed feedback after presentation and adding Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT).	鄭
8.	1 October	Need to add justifications in methodology: (1) link sampling	鄭

		criteria to RQs by showing how participants' knowledge, values, interpretations, and experiences help answer them; (2) explain why focus groups are chosen, with stronger methodological justification and recent citations; (3) justify the necessity of using a case study design, referring to social research books and adding newer references.	

APPENDIX II: FYP MEETINGS WITH SUPERVISOR

Note:
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Date	Attended by	Progress	Signature
1.	27 October	Discussed and confirmed the interview questions for the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with the supervisor.	鄭
2.	11 November	Received guidance on how to properly record and extract data from verbatim transcripts.	鄭
3.	23 November	Supervisor provided advice on writing Chapters 4 and 5, emphasizing that Chapter 4 should focus on findings and theme development, while Chapter 5 should link the discussion back to the Research Questions (RQs).	鄭
4.	19 December	Agreed to revise Chapter 5 to avoid presenting raw FGD data directly, ensuring it only contains discussion content.	鄭
5.	21 December	Supervisor suggested adding more relevant academic citations in Chapter 5 to strengthen the theoretical support.	鄭

6.	23 December	Discussed the plan to finalize the whole project, including completing revisions and ensuring all chapters are well-aligned.	鄭

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JOURNALISM DEPARTMENT UAMJ 3073/ UAMJ3083
FINAL YEAR PROJECT PRESENTATION

Faculty of Arts & Social Science UTAR

THE ROLE OF YOUTUBE AND XIAOHONGSHU IN SHAPING UTAR KAMPAR STUDENTS' INFLUENCES OF TAIWAN TOURISM: A CASE STUDY OF CHINESE FLUENT UNDERGRADUATES

By : ANGELINA CHOO WEN YI

Introduction

In today's digital era, social media has transformed how young Malaysians make travel decisions. UTAR Kampar students—especially those fluent in Chinese—often rely on YouTube and Xiaohongshu for tourism information, where Taiwan stands out due to cultural and linguistic similarities. Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) further shape perceptions with credibility and interactive content, making them more influential than official tourism boards (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Abidin, 2016).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

1. Limited research on UTAR Kampar Chinese-fluent students engaging with Taiwan travel KOLs.

2. Prior studies overlook active engagement behaviors (commenting, sharing, co-constructing)

3. Lack of empirical focus on how engagement shapes destination image & travel intention

Research Objectives/ Significance

i. Examine emotional & social identity needs in engagement with Taiwan KOL content

ii. Analyze active participation (commenting, sharing, saving, co-creating)

iii. Understand link between identity-driven engagement & Taiwan destination image/travel intentions

This study extends the Social Media Engagement Theory (SMET) into cross-cultural tourism. It offers practical insights for Taiwan's tourism and KOLs to design authentic strategies, while also highlighting how Malaysian students build trust and engage in participatory culture when making travel decisions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1) Social Media as a Tourism Information Source

Social media has become a dominant source of travel information, replacing brochures and official websites. For Malaysian undergraduates, YouTube and Xiaohongshu are trusted for their authenticity and interactive features. These platforms combine UGC with influencer narratives, allowing students to evaluate destinations collaboratively (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Lim, Lim, & Wong, 2022).

2) KOLs and SMET Framework

Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) shape travel perceptions by offering credibility and building parasocial bonds (Abidin, 2016). The Social Media Engagement Theory (SMET) explains this through cognitive, affective, behavioral, and identity-driven engagement. YouTube enables immersive storytelling, while Xiaohongshu emphasizes saving and sharing as active behaviors (Brodie et al., 2011).

3) Research Gap in Taiwan Tourism

Taiwan is attractive to Malaysian Chinese students due to linguistic and cultural proximity, with both local and foreign KOLs influencing perceptions (Goh, 2022). Yet, few studies explore Malaysian undergraduates' unique engagement patterns, often reducing likes, shares, and comments to the same behavior. This highlights the need to study UTAR students' interactions with Taiwan travel KOLs through SMET (Kim & Song, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

Interpretivist, qualitative case study

Sampling Technique: Purposive Sampling

Sample
- Chinese-fluent UTAR undergraduates students
- Age 18–25, with 3–5 years of Taiwan KOL content exposure

Respondents
- Four focus groups
- Each group: 6–8 students
- Categories: Food & Beverage, Destination, Culture, Entertainment

Research Setting

- UTAR Kampar campus
- Focus on social media use for Taiwan tourism

Data Collection Method

- Focus group discussions guided by semi-structured questions

Data Analysis

- Thematic coding based on Braun & Clarke (2006)

SUPERVISED BY : MR CHANG AND MS MOK

FINDINGS

- Based on 4 focus group discussions with UTAR Kampar students
- Engagement with Taiwan travel KOLs is **identity-driven**, not purely informational
- Engagement follows a clear pathway:**Identity Needs** →
- **Engagement Behaviours** → **Destination Image** → **Travel** Intention

Findings – Theme 1
Identity Needs as Drivers of Engagement
Four core identity motivations were identified:
- **Emotional identity** – comfort, relaxation, stress relief
- **Cultural identity** – cultural familiarity and symbolic homecoming
- **Lifestyle identity** – aspiration towards "文青 / slow-living" lifestyle
- **Social identity** – peer belonging and conversation capital

Identity alignment is the **starting point of engagement**

Findings – Theme 2
Multi-layered Engagement Behaviours
Students engage beyond passive viewing through:
- **Saving** – future-oriented cognitive planning
- **Sharing** – relational bonding & social signalling
- **Commenting & tagging** – interactive co-presence
- **Co-creation** – imitation of Taiwan vlog aesthetics

Engagement progresses from **cognitive** → **relational** → **interactive** → **creative**

Findings – Theme 3
Destination Image & Travel Intention
Taiwan is co-constructed as:
- A **food paradise** (night markets, cafés, convenience stores)
- An **aesthetic & healing destination** (slow-paced, cinematic vibe)
- A **culturally rich and authentic society**
- A **trustworthy destination** due to KOL authenticity

Engagement leads to **real travel intention and itinerary planning**

IMPACT

Impact – Theoretical Impact
Theoretical Contributions
- Extends **Social Media Engagement Theory (SMET)** into influencer tourism
- Demonstrates that **identity needs precede engagement behaviours**
- Identifies **co-creation** as the highest level of engagement
- Proposes the **Four-Layer Identity-Driven Engagement Model**
  - Emotional
  - Cultural
  - Lifestyle
  - Social identity

Impact – Methodological & Conceptual Impact
Conceptual Impact
- Engagement is not a single action but a **behavioural ecosystem**
- Peer influence plays a **mediating role** in engagement
- Destination image is **co-constructed by KOLs, peers, and self-identity**
- Aesthetic elements function as **identity triggers**, not decoration

Conclusion

Overall Conclusion
- Identity is the **core mechanism** behind engagement with Taiwan travel KOLs
- Emotional comfort initiates attention
- Engagement behaviours deepen attachment
- Sustained engagement leads to **strong destination image and travel intention**
- Taiwan is perceived as both **aspirational and culturally familiar**

Recommendation

Recommendations – For Tourism Authorities
Practical Recommendations (Industry)
- Emphasise **food culture & slow-living aesthetics**
- Collaborate with **authentic and relatable KOLs**, not just high-followers
- Promote **festivals, rituals, and everyday cultural scenes**
- Design campaigns encouraging **UGC and co-creation**

Recommendations – For KOLs & Creators
Practical Recommendations (Creators)
- Use **gentle pacing, warm tones, healing aesthetics**
- Show **real experiences**, including costs & mistakes
- Encourage **audience imitation and participation**
- Provide shareable aesthetics (filters, templates, formats)

Limitation

Study Limitations
- Sample limited to **UTAR Kampar Chinese-fluent students**
- Qualitative focus limits **generalizability**
- Findings based on **self-reported perceptions**
- Does not compare **other destinations or ethnic groups**

Suggestions for Future Research
- Quantitative validation of the engagement model
- Cross-ethnic and cross-country comparisons
- Longitudinal studies on engagement → actual travel behavior
- Further exploration of **aesthetic identity** performance in tourism

SUPERVISED BY : MR CHANG AND MS MOK

UNIVERSITI TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN DU012(A)
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Re: U/SERC/78-651/2025

1 December 2025

Ms Michelle Wong
Head, Department of Journalism
Faculty of Arts and Social Science
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman
Jalan Universiti, Bandar Baru Barat
31900 Kampar, Perak

Dear Ms Michelle,

Ethical Approval For Research Project/Protocol

We refer to the application for ethical approval for your students' research project from Bachelor of Communication (Honours) Journalism programme enrolled in course UAMJ3083. We are pleased to inform you that the application has been approved under Expedited Review.

The details of the research projects are as follows:

No.	Research Title	Student's Name	Supervisor's Name	Approval Validity
1.	The Challenges of Misinformation and Disinformation in Malaysian Journalism	Kelvin Chin Kai Yao	Ms Chiok Phaik Fern	1 December 2025 - 30 November 2026
2.	The Role Of Youtube And Xiaohongshu In Shaping Ut Ar Kampar Students' Influences Of Taiwan Tourism: A Case Study Of Chinese Fluent Undergraduates	Angelina Choo Wen Yi	Mr Chang Yi Chang	
3.	Switching between Rinsta and Finsta: Malaysian Youth's Navigation of Social Pressure on Instagram	Jass Lau Ming Yan	Dr Tan Huey Pyng	
4.	Social Media Political Information Use and Voting Behavior of the Malaysian Youth: 2025 Ayer Kuning By-Election	Hiroki Loh Shington	Mr Afi Roshezry Bin Abu Bakar	
5.	ATVN: A Uses and Gratifications Analysis of ATVN One Minute on TikTok Among Malaysian Chinese Audiences	Pan, Shiyan	Dr Teh Boon Teck	

The conduct of this research is subject to the following:

(1) The participants' informed consent be obtained prior to the commencement of the research;

(2) Confidentiality of participants' personal data must be maintained; and

(3) Compliance with procedures set out in related policies of UTAR such as the UTAR Research Ethics and Code of Conduct, Code of Practice for Research Involving Humans and other related policies/guidelines.

(4) Written consent be obtained from the institution(s)/company(ies) in which the physical or/and online survey will be carried out, prior to the commencement of the research.

Should the students collect personal data of participants in their studies, please have the participants sign the attached Personal Data Protection Statement for records.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Dr Zuraidah Abd Manaf
Chairman
UTAR Scientific and Ethical Review Committee

c.c Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Science
Director, Institute of Postgraduate Studies and Research

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PERSONAL DATA PROTECTION NOTICE

Please be informed that in accordance with Personal Data Protection Act 2010 ("PDPA") which came into force on 15 November 2013, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman ("UTAR") is hereby bound to make notice and require consent in relation to collection, recording, storage, usage and retention of personal information.

1. Personal data refers to any information which may directly or indirectly identify a person which could include sensitive personal data and expression of opinion. Among others it includes:

a) Name

b) Identity card

c) Place of Birth

d) Address

e) Education History

f) Employment History

g) Medical History

h) Blood type

i) Race

j) Religion

k) Photo

l) Personal Information and Associated Research Data

2. The purposes for which your personal data may be used are inclusive but not limited to:

a) For assessment of any application to UTAR

b) For processing any benefits and services

c) For communication purposes

d) For advertorial and news

e) For general administration and record purposes

f) For enhancing the value of education

g) For educational and related purposes consequential to UTAR

h) For replying any responds to complaints and enquiries

i) For the purpose of our corporate governance

j) For the purposes of conducting research/ collaboration

3. Your personal data may be transferred and/or disclosed to third party and/or UTAR collaborative partners including but not limited to the respective and appointed outsourcing agents for purpose of fulfilling our obligations to you in respect of the purposes and all such other purposes that are related to the purposes and also in providing integrated services, maintaining and storing records. Your data may be shared when required by laws and when disclosure is necessary to comply with applicable laws.

4. Any personal information retained by UTAR shall be destroyed and/or deleted in accordance with our retention policy applicable for us in the event such information is no longer required.

5. UTAR is committed in ensuring the confidentiality, protection, security and accuracy of your personal information made available to us and it has been our ongoing strict policy to ensure that your personal information is accurate, complete, not misleading and updated. UTAR would also ensure that your personal data shall not be used for political and commercial purposes.

Consent:

6. By submitting or providing your personal data to UTAR, you had consented and agreed for your personal data to be used in accordance to the terms and conditions in the Notice and our relevant policy.

7. If you do not consent or subsequently withdraw your consent to the processing and disclosure of your personal data, UTAR will not be able to fulfill our obligations or to contact you or to assist you in respect of the purposes and/or for any other purposes related to the purpose.

8. You may access and update your personal data by writing to us at .

Acknowledgment of Notice

[ ] I have been notified and that I hereby understood, consented and agreed per UTAR above notice.

[ ] I disagree, my personal data will not be processed.

…… Name:

Date: