

Inspiring travel intentions in the digital age: The role of TikTok content engagement

Abstract

This study investigates the impact of TikTok travel content on users' digital engagement and travel-related intentions. Drawing on the uses and gratifications theory and the model of goal-directed behavior, the results demonstrate that entertainment-focused content generates higher engagement levels than information-driven content, with social proof serving as a moderator. Parallel and serial mediation analyses reveal that the interaction between content gratification type and social proof influences both users' continued intention to use TikTok and their behavioral intention toward the featured destination. These effects occur through two distinct pathways: one mediated by content engagement and attitude toward TikTok, and the other by content engagement and desire toward destination. The findings underscore the value of creating socially engaging and goal-consistent content for tourism marketing. This study advances our understanding of how human-centered content strategies on social media can foster travel intentions and drive digital engagement.

Keywords: TikTok, gratification, content engagement, desire toward destination, travel intention

1. Introduction

Short-form video platforms like TikTok have revolutionized digital content consumption by delivering emotionally engaging, visually dynamic content that grabs attention instantly. As this format reshapes how users engage with travel-related media, questions arise about the mechanisms through which such content influences engagement, attitude toward social media, and travel intentions. Prior studies have established that users seek both informational and entertainment gratifications on social media (e.g., Mäntymäki & Riemer, 2014), yet little is

known about how these motivations interact with platform-specific features, such as social proof indicators (likes, comments, shares), to shape psychological responses and behavioral intentions. To address this, the present study focuses on how different gratification types, namely informational and entertaining content, interact with varying levels of social proof to influence content engagement, platform attitude, travel desire, and behavioral responses.

This study integrates two robust theoretical frameworks: the uses and gratification theory (UGT; Katz et al., 1973), which emphasizes the user’s motivation to select content, and the model of goal-directed behavior (MGB; Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001), which situates those motivations within a broader cognitive-emotional-behavioral framework. The complementary application of these theories helps bridge the gap between media selection and real-world behavioral intention, particularly within the context of tourism where choices are both aspirational and goal-directed. By identifying content engagement as a key psychological mechanism and distinguishing between two distinct outcomes—continued platform use and destination visit intention—this study sheds light on how short-form video content influences both platform loyalty and tourism behavior.

2. Literature review

2.1. Gratification type, social proof, and content engagement

UGT explains media selection as an active process in which individuals seek to fulfill specific needs, most commonly information and entertainment. On visually immersive platforms like TikTok, content intended to entertain, such as humor, storytelling, or aesthetic appeal, often elicits more affective engagement than content focused purely on conveying information. Prior research indicates that entertainment gratification is more closely linked to emotional immersion,

which can foster deeper cognitive and behavioral responses, particularly in tourism contexts (Aluri et al., 2016).

Additionally, social proof, which is operationalized through visible metrics such as likes, shares, and comments, acts as a heuristic that influences user judgments about content credibility and popularity (Cialdini, 2001). High social endorsement can enhance message persuasiveness by signaling collective approval, which reduces uncertainty and promotes engagement. Prior studies suggest that people tend to align their responses with socially endorsed content, making such cues highly influential in shaping user interaction (Hilverda et al., 2018; Borah & Xiao, 2018). Even brief or indirect approval signals, such as comment valence or like counts, can affect how content is evaluated and shared, subtly reinforcing social norms without explicit persuasion (Kim et al., 2023; Walther et al., 2022). Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1. Gratification type (information vs. entertainment) influences content engagement, such that entertainment gratification leads to higher content engagement than information gratification.

H2. Social proof (low vs. high) moderates the effect of gratification type on content engagement, such that the effect of entertainment gratification on content engagement is stronger under high social proof.

2.2. Content engagement, platform attitude, and continues use

Engagement is widely recognized as a key precursor to behavioral outcomes in digital media use (Florenthal, 2019). While UGT provides the foundation for understanding initial engagement based on content gratification, MGB contributes an affective lens, emphasizing that attitude and desire translate engagement into behavioral intention. Specifically, continued use of a platform is not only a result of momentary engagement but is also shaped by users' evaluations

of the platform itself. A positive attitude toward TikTok, particularly when it is perceived as a useful tool for travel planning, can serve as a critical link between content consumption and sustained platform use (Mäntymäki & Riemer, 2014). We therefore expect a sequential process in which content engagement leads to platform attitude, which in turn drives continued use intention (CUI). In addition, the interaction between gratification type and social proof is expected to influence this pathway by shaping initial engagement levels. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3a. Content engagement and attitude toward TikTok for travel planning serially mediate the relationship between gratification type and CUI.

H3b. Content engagement and attitude toward TikTok for travel planning serially mediate the relationship between the interaction of gratification type and social proof and CUI.

2.3. Content engagement, desire, and destination visit intention

Beyond platform engagement, short-form travel content can also influence users' intentions toward visiting a destination. MGB posits that behavioral intentions are shaped not only by evaluations (e.g., usefulness) but also by desire, which captures the motivational force driven by anticipated emotions. Desire has been shown to play a crucial role in translating digital exposure into travel-related action, particularly when content is aspirational, immersive, and emotionally stimulating (Franks, 2022; Koo et al., 2016). In this context, content engagement functions as a trigger for desire toward the featured destination that culminates in behavioral intention. This pathway is expected to be more pronounced when entertaining content is reinforced by high social proof, as the perceived popularity of content may further validate emotional responses. Hence, both content gratification and social proof contribute to behavioral shaping through engagement and desire. Therefore, we propose:

H4a. Content engagement and desire toward destination serially mediate the relationship between gratification type and BI.

H4b. Content engagement and desire toward the destination serially mediate the relationship between the interaction of gratification type and social proof and BI.

[Fig. 1]

3. Methods

3.1. Data collection and sampling

Based on the hypotheses developed, the research model is presented in Fig. 1. We recruited 345 respondents via CloudResearch. Eligibility criteria required participants to (1) reside in the United States and (2) be social media users. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions in a 2 (Gratification type: information-focused vs. entertainment-focused) \times 2 (Social proof: low vs. high) between-subjects design: an information-focused TikTok video with low social proof (N = 173), the same video with high social proof (N = 172), an entertainment-focused TikTok video with low social proof (N = 173), or the same video with high social proof (N = 172). In terms of respondent demographics, women comprised 53.62% of participants and the overall age breakdown was 18-29, 29.86%; 28-37, 45.80%; 38-47, 16.81%; 48-57, 5.8%, and 58-67, 1.45%, 68+, 0.29%. Respondents also indicated their ethnicity (60.58% Caucasian, 15.65% African-American, 11.01% Hispanic, 9.86% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 2.03% others) and household income (less than \$34k, 14.49%; \$35-49k, 15.07%; \$50-74k, 20.29%; \$75-99k, 15.07%; \$100-149k, 20%; and \$150k or more, 15.07%).

[Fig. 2]

[Table 1]

3.2. Manipulation and measures

Cancún, Mexico was selected as the study site due to its strong appeal to the target sample of U.S. travelers, its consistent ranking among top global tourist destinations, and its frequent positive media coverage (Olmos-Martínez et al., 2024). Unlike country-level comparisons (e.g., France or Italy), Cancún’s city-level focus allowed for more consistent content characteristics across creators. Furthermore, the application of MGB to Cancún remains underexplored in existing literature. We conducted a focused review of 98 TikTok videos specifically tagged or titled with Cancún travel references. From this pool, we shortlisted 10 candidate videos—five primarily informational and five primarily entertaining—based on visual inspection and engagement characteristics. Three scholars independently rated each video on a 5-point scale for both information and entertainment gratification. Ratings were averaged, and the videos with the highest scores in each category were selected for experimental stimuli. Disagreements in rating were discussed and resolved through consensus to ensure content alignment with the intended gratification type. The information-focused video (summeronthegeaux, 2023) runs for 26 seconds and the entertainment-focused counterpart (montana.darby, 2023) lasts 27 seconds. To eliminate the influence of original and fluctuating engagement metrics (e.g., follower count, likes, shares) associated with TikTok video links, template images were used to manipulate these metrics and establish social proof conditions. These images were shown prior to each video clip, which was stored separately in cloud-based storage and embedded via links in Qualtrics. Therefore, we developed four different conditions based on two gratification types and two social proof levels.

Measurement items were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale and were adopted from previous studies: four items investigated information gratification ($\alpha = 0.94$) (Hur et al., 2017),

five items addressed entertainment gratification ($\alpha = 0.97$) (Mäntymäki & Riemer, 2014; Aluri et al., 2016), four items assessed social proof ($\alpha = 0.98$) (Kim et al., 2023), four items were about content engagement ($\alpha = 0.95$) (Dessart et al. 2016; Vivek et al., 2014; Hollebeek et al., 2014), three items addressed attitude toward TikTok for travel planning ($\alpha = 0.94$) (Wang et al., 2022), two items were about destination preference ($\alpha = 0.89$) (Beerli & Martin, 2004), four items of desire ($\alpha = 0.96$), three items of behavioral intention ($\alpha = 0.91$), four items of perceived behavioral control ($\alpha = 0.89$), and one item of frequency of past visits were adapted from MGB studies (Kim et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2020). Overall, the reliability tests revealed high internal reliability with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.89 to 0.98 (Table 1). Discriminant validity was supported, as each construct's square root of the AVE exceeded its correlations with other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), with values ranging from 0.919 to 0.949.

[Table 2]

4. Results

We conducted manipulation checks using ANOVA, confirming they were successful: information gratification ($F(1, 343) = 5.30, p = .022, M_{\text{info}} = 3.67$ vs. $M_{\text{ent}} = 3.42$), entertainment gratification ($F(1, 343) = 33.15, p < .001, M_{\text{info}} = 3.04$ vs. $M_{\text{ent}} = 3.71$), and social proof ($F(1, 296) = 1804.39, p < .001, M_{\text{high}} = 1.44$ vs. $M_{\text{low}} = 4.36$). To examine Hypotheses 1 and 2, we performed a two-way MANCOVA with gratification type and social proof as the independent variables, and content engagement as the dependent variable. Considering younger generations' preference for short-form videos (Bossen & Kottasz, 2020), we controlled for age. The results revealed significant main effects of gratification type ($F(1, 340) = 37.41, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.099$) and social proof ($F(1, 340) = 37.04, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.098$), providing support for H1. Participants exposed to the entertainment-focused content reported higher content engagement ($M_{\text{ent}} = 3.53$)

than those who viewed the information-focused content ($M_{\text{info}} = 2.811$). Additionally, the interaction between gratification type and social proof was significant ($F(1, 340) = 4.01, p = .046, \eta^2 = 0.012$), supporting H2. The results indicated that social proof moderates the effect of gratification type on content engagement. Specifically, content engagement was highest when entertainment gratification was paired with high social proof ($M_{\text{ent-high}} = 4.005$), followed by entertainment with low social proof ($M_{\text{ent-low}} = 3.055$), then information gratification with high social proof ($M_{\text{info-high}} = 3.051$), and lowest for information with low social proof ($M_{\text{info-low}} = 2.572$). These findings suggest that both entertainment-based content and strong social validation independently enhance engagement, and their combination yields the most pronounced effect.

Subsequently, we performed bootstrap tests of mediation using Model 6 (Hayes, 2017) to assess both parallel and serial mediation effects—one pathway predicting social media behavior intention and another predicting destination behavior intention (Table 2). In the first path, the serial mediation effect of content engagement and attitude toward TikTok on the relationship between gratification type and CUI was significant ($\beta = 0.146, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.067, 0.242]$), providing support for H3a. The indirect effect was stronger for participants exposed to entertainment-focused content, indicating that such content led to greater engagement and more favorable attitudes toward TikTok for travel planning, which in turn enhanced CUI. Furthermore, the serial mediation effect of engagement and attitude toward TikTok for travel planning on the relationship between the interaction of gratification type and social proof and CUI was significant ($\beta = 0.146, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.023, 0.248]$), supporting H3b. To further understand this effect, we examined conditional indirect effects at different levels of social proof. The indirect effect was notably stronger under the high social proof condition ($\beta = 0.273, 95\% \text{ CI} [0.188, 0.374]$) than under the low social proof condition ($\beta = 0.146, 95\% \text{ CI} [0.067, 0.242]$). This

pattern indicates that the combination of entertainment gratification and high social proof generates a more robust pathway through which engagement and attitude shape CUI. Thus, social proof not only moderates the initial effect but also amplifies the strength of the indirect relationship, offering further support for the moderating role.

For the second path, predicting destination behavior intention, we controlled perceived behavior control, frequency of past visits, and destination preference to examine the effect of the given social media content on destination related perception and behavior related patterns. The serial mediation effect of content engagement and desire toward the destination on the relationship between gratification type and BI was significant ($\beta = 0.187$, 95% CI [0.088, 0.298]), providing support for H4a. The indirect effect was stronger for participants exposed to entertainment-focused content, suggesting that such content enhanced engagement and subsequently increased desire toward the featured destination, thereby promoting stronger behavioral intentions compared to information-focused content. The serial mediation of engagement and desire on the relationship between the interaction of gratification type and social proof to BI was also significant ($\beta = 0.164$, 95% CI [0.027, 0.314]), supporting H4b. To further explore this effect, we examined conditional indirect effects at different levels of social proof. The indirect effect was substantially stronger under the high social proof condition ($\beta = 0.350$, 95% CI [0.248, 0.457]) than under the low social proof condition ($\beta = 0.187$, 95% CI [0.088, 0.298]). This likelihood suggests that the combination of entertainment gratification and high social validation produces a more compelling psychological pathway, driving engagement and desire, and ultimately motivating behavioral intention toward the destination. These findings highlight the amplifying role of social proof in strengthening the indirect effects of content type on destination-related decision-making.

5. Discussion and implications

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study advances the theoretical understanding of social media-based travel planning behaviors through the integration of UGT and MGB. By examining the influence of gratification type and the moderating role of social proof on user engagement, attitude, and behavioral outcomes, this research extends existing literature in meaningful ways. This study refines the application of UGT by focusing specifically on TikTok, a platform characterized by rapid content consumption and social interaction. While prior studies within the UGT tradition have recognized various user motivations, few have systematically compared how two core gratification types translate into digital engagement and the parallel behavioral outcomes of continued social media use and travel intention. Our findings confirm that entertainment gratification more strongly enhances content engagement than informational gratification, suggesting that users are more drawn to the experiential and emotionally evocative content supported by the short video format when planning travel. This insight extends UGT by demonstrating how content valence (e.g., entertaining vs. factual) operates in tandem with media format (short-form videos) to influence engagement.

Additionally, by incorporating social proof as a moderator, the study highlights the role of social validation cues in digital environments. This points to an overlooked aspect of UGT, namely, how platform design influences the effect of user motivations. The indirect effects further suggest that social cues guide not only engagement but also users' intentions to continue using the platform and to consider travel. The study also extends MGB by showing that both emotional and cognitive responses connect content exposure to intended action. These results

support the idea that digital behavior is shaped by a combination of internal motivations and reactions to the surrounding platform environment.

5.2. Managerial implications

This study offers strategic insights for tourism marketers, social media content creators, and platform designers aiming to enhance engagement and influence user behavior through short-form video platforms like TikTok. The findings highlight the power of entertainment-driven content in boosting engagement and travel-related desire and intentions indicating that tourism marketers and organizations should prioritize visually rich, imaginative, immersive, and story-driven formats over information-focused ones. This direction is especially relevant given the advancement of the digital age and audiences that increasingly seek content that feels personal, immersive, and culturally vibrant. High social proof strengthens the effect of entertainment content, underscoring the value of visibility and credibility. Marketers should invest in strategies that enhance social validation through algorithmic promotion, influencer collaborations, calls to action, and trending hashtags to foster engagement.

The dual-pathway structure of outcomes offers strategic insights for various stakeholders. For instance, social media platforms and travel-tech companies can improve user retention by optimizing content algorithms to prioritize entertaining travel content that drives continued platform engagement. Meanwhile, tourism stakeholders can guide travelers from casual interest to active trip planning by leveraging compelling digital content. The findings suggest that marketing efforts aimed at evoking positive emotions and enjoyable user experiences are more effective than simply conveying travel knowledge and information. Content that fosters desire toward destinations through aspirational imagery and narrative elements can increase conversion rates for travel intent while simultaneously building a favorable attitude towards the media

platform that reinforces long-term usage. Therefore, this study provides a roadmap for harnessing the psychological and social dynamics of short-form video platforms to influence tourism-related decision-making. By aligning content strategies with more appealing user gratification and leveraging the power of social validation, marketers can enhance both platform loyalty and destination appeal in an increasingly competitive digital space.

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Table 1 Measurement items.

Item	Mean	SD	α
Frequency of TikTok use			
How many times have you used TikTok?	4.4	0.924	
Frequency of past visits			
How many times have you traveled to Cancun?	1.412	0.787	
Pre-existing destination preference			
I have a positive impression of Cancun	3.519	1.03	
Cancun seems like a good place to visit.	3.719	1.038	
Information gratification			0.942
This video is informative.	3.539	1.024	
This video is useful.	3.606	1.056	
This video enhances my knowledge.	3.487	1.132	
Information obtained from this video is helpful.	3.557	1.084	
Entertainment gratification			0.965
This video is enjoyable.	3.51	1.16	
This video is fun.	3.409	1.176	
This video is entertaining.	3.336	1.21	
This video is exciting.	3.238	1.261	
This video is cool.	3.383	1.21	
Social proof			
The number of likes on the TikTok video is high.	2.899	1.757	
The number of shares of the TikTok video is high.	2.809	1.68	
The TikTok video has a lot of positive comments.	2.881	1.544	
Given the high number of likes on this video, people on TikTok like it.	3.035	1.629	
Content engagement			0.949
I feel I could watch this video again since it captured my attention.	3.014	1.397	
I found this video engaging.	3.2	1.305	
Watching this video satisfied me.	3.136	1.277	
I felt good while watching this video.	3.33	1.185	
Attitude toward TikTok for travel planning			0.94
I think using social media with videos of a similar length for travel planning is positive.	3.997	0.985	
I think using social media with videos of a similar length for travel planning is beneficial.	3.988	0.981	
I think using social media with videos of a similar length for travel planning is favorable.	3.881	1.033	
Continuous use intention			0.944
I intend to continue using TikTok with videos of a similar length during the next three months.	3.481	1.223	
I will keep on using TikTok with videos of a similar length in the future.	3.73	1.139	
I prefer to continue using TikTok with videos of a similar length.	3.545	1.184	
Desire			0.957
I want to travel to Cancun.	3.464	1.164	
I wish to travel to Cancun.	3.441	1.176	
I am enthusiastic about traveling to Cancun.	3.281	1.164	
I am eager to travel to Cancun.	3.171	1.186	
Perceived behavior control			
I am confident that if I want, I can travel to Cancun.	3.638	1.276	
I am capable of traveling to Cancun.	3.701	1.279	
I have enough financial resources to travel to Cancun.	3.035	1.444	
I have enough time to travel to Cancun.	3.217	1.396	
Behavioral intention			0.907
I plan to visit Cancun in the near future.	2.626	1.352	
I will make an effort to travel to Cancun in the near future.	2.635	1.319	
I am willing to travel to Cancun in the near future.	3.217	1.245	

Table 2 Mediation and moderated mediation effects.

Path	β	SE	t	LLCI	ULCI
Gratfn. → Engage. → Att. → CUI	0.146	0.052	2.782	0.067	0.242
Gratfn. → Engage. → Desire → BI	0.187	0.064	2.935	0.088	0.298
Gratfn. × SocProof → Engage. → Att. → CUI	0.128	0.068	1.885	0.023	0.248
Gratfn. × SocProof → Engage. → Desire → BI	0.164	0.086	1.9	0.027	0.314
Gratfn. → Engage. → Att. → CUI at low SocProof	0.146	0.052	2.782	0.067	0.242
Gratfn. → Engage. → Att. → CUI at high SocProof	0.273	0.056	4.901	0.188	0.374
Gratfn. → Engage. → Desire → BI at low SocProof	0.187	0.064	2.935	0.088	0.298
Gratfn. → Engage. → Desire → BI at high SocProof	0.35	0.063	5.523	0.248	0.457

Note. LLCI: lower limit confidence interval, ULCI: upper limit confidence interval; Estimates are based on bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5000 resamples.

Fig. 1 Research model.

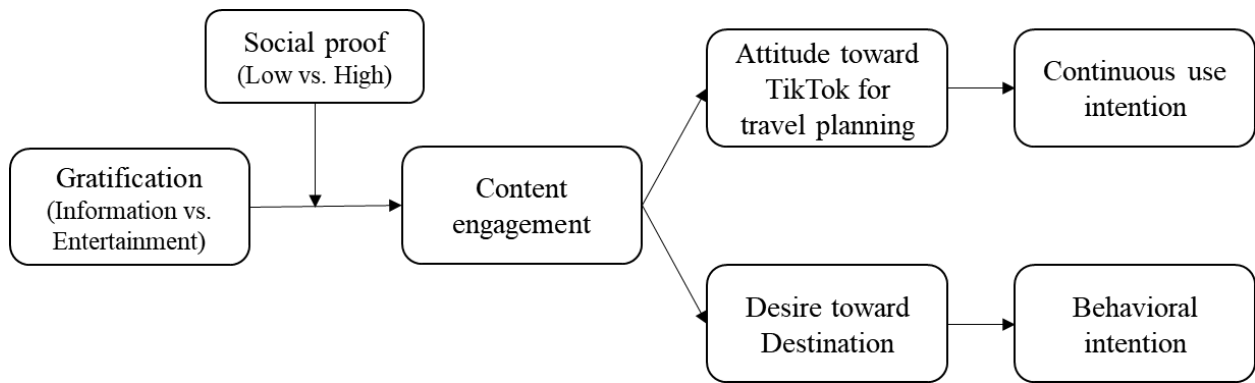
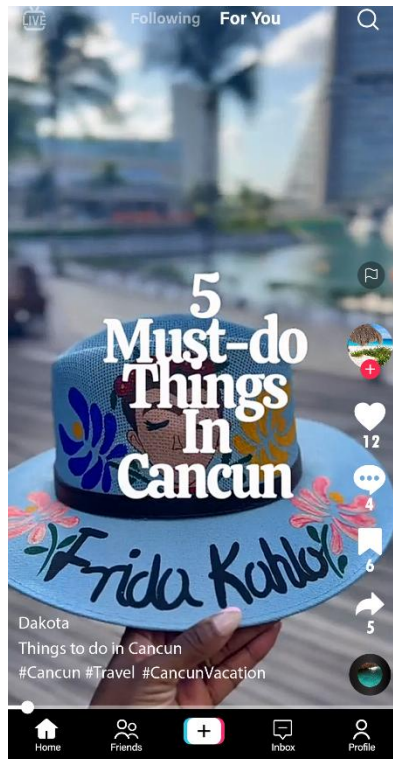


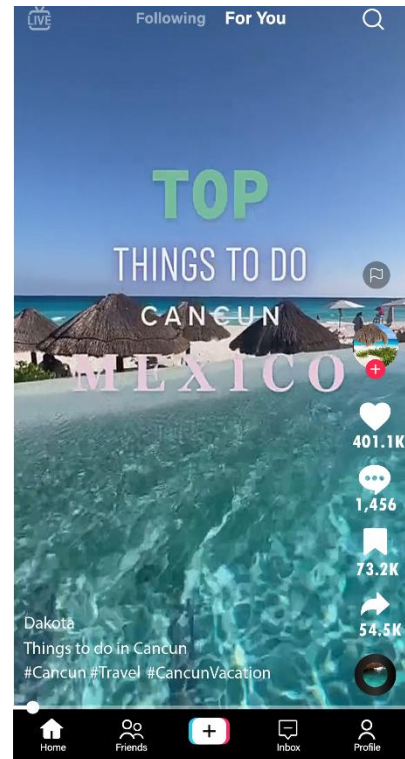
Fig. 2 Examples of visual stimuli



Cover page



Information-focused video with low social proof



Entertainment-focused video with high social proof