

Analyzing Gen Z's Travel Influence in the Digital Age: The Correlational Effect of Social Media



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ABSTRACT: This study explores the impact of social media on the travel decision-making process of Generation Z, utilizing the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) model as a framework. Generation Z, comprising individuals born between 1997 and 2012, is characterized by their high level of digital fluency and reliance on social media for gathering information and making informed travel choices. Conducted with 350 Generation Z travellers in Santa Fe, Bantayan Island, Cebu, Philippines, this research employs a descriptive-correlation design and a survey questionnaire to gather insights. The findings reveal that social media significantly influences three key stages of the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) model: need recognition, information search, and post-purchase behavior. In the need recognition stage, travel content on social media sparks Generation Z's desire for exploration. During the information search phase, users seek reviews and recommendations from peers and influencers to better understand their travel options. After making their travel decisions, Generation Z shares their experiences on social media, influencing their peers and encouraging ongoing engagement. While social media's impact on the alternative evaluation and purchasing stages is recognized, it appears less pronounced than in the earlier stages. This underscores the critical role that social media plays in shaping the travel decision-making process for Generation Z, highlighting the need for engaging content and authentic interactions to effectively influence their choices. These insights underscore the essential role of social media in shaping travel preferences among Generation Z. To effectively engage this demographic, travel and tourism businesses should craft targeted marketing strategies that emphasize authentic content and influencer partnerships, thereby fostering brand loyalty and driving purchasing decisions.

KEYWORDS: Social Media, Generation Z, Purchase Decision, Engel-Kollat-Blackwell Model, Travel Influence, Correlation

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of technology and easy access to the internet have significantly transformed how people shop and make decisions (Cavlak, 2021). On average, individuals spend around 2 hours and 27 minutes online daily (Chaffey, 2022), with social media becoming a crucial tool, particularly for Generation Z. Generation Z, or Gen Z, represents individuals born approximately between 1997 and 2012, positioning them as the generation that comes after Millennials (Generation Y). Presently, they are in the age range of early teens to mid-20s. Known for being highly tech-savvy, Generation Z uses social media more than any other age group, which greatly influences their buying habits (Al Masud, 2023).

Brands have recognized the potential of influencers and content marketing to connect with consumers by sharing engaging and informative content (Pulizzi, 2020). Major companies like P&G, Microsoft, and John Deere have effectively employed content marketing to reach their target audiences. As Generation Z frequently turns to social media to discover new products, seek advice, and check reviews, content marketing exerts a powerful influence on their purchasing decisions. In fact, a study found that social media impacts the buying decisions of 81% of consumers (Forbes, 2021).

Content marketing serves as a "pull" strategy, focusing on creating valuable content that aligns with consumers' interests and needs (Liu & Huang, 2015, as cited by Ho Zhen et al., 2021). Ansari et al. (2021) found that social media content marketing has a moderately positive and significant impact on consumer purchase decisions. Moreover, a Forbes (2021) study highlighted that 81% of consumers are influenced by social media posts from friends when making purchasing decisions. Similarly,

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GlobalWebIndex reported that 54% of social media users utilize these platforms for product research, and 71% are more likely to purchase products or services based on social media referrals (Barysevich, 2020).

Content marketing has emerged as the foundation for internet marketing campaigns, with social media marketing becoming a subsequent step (Chris, 2021). As social media continues to gain traction, it plays an increasingly important role in promoting websites and brands, often surpassing traditional link-building methods.

In the tourism industry, social media has proven to be an influential factor in tourists' destination selection (Tham et al., 2020). While social media consistently impacts destination choices, its influence can vary depending on when tourists are exposed to such content. This contextual influence suggests that social media's role in decision-making can be valuable under specific conditions.

Abdullaev and Anggraini (2023) further emphasized that globalization and the rapid evolution of communication technologies have revolutionized the way individuals connect worldwide. Consequently, social media marketing (SMM) has gained popularity across various industries to enhance customer interactions, word-of-mouth marketing, brand value, and recognition. Travelers, in particular, are increasingly turning to social networks to make decisions, highlighting the growing influence of social media in tourism marketing.

Despite these developments, industries have not fully explored the potential of social media marketing for branding purposes (Sundaram et al., 2020). A limited understanding of digital marketing strategies poses a risk to long-term brand viability. Dwivedi et al. (2021) echoed this sentiment, stressing the need to expand the literature on digital and social media marketing as it continues to be an integral part of organizational marketing strategies.

While research has explored how social media affects consumer behavior in general, there remains a need to understand its specific impact on Generation Z's travel decisions. Gen Z interacts with online content differently from other generations, relying heavily on online reviews, influencers, and trends. It is essential for businesses to understand how these factors shape Gen Z's buying patterns to develop more effective marketing strategies.

This study examines how social media influences Generation Z's travel behavior, providing insights that help travel industry create targeted marketing strategies tailored to this demographic. The findings also offer valuable information for students and professionals in fields such as hospitality, tourism, and marketing, contributing to a clearer understanding of the factors that shape Gen Z's buying decisions in today's digital world.

II. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

To support this investigation, the Engel Kollat Blackwell (EKB) model, also known as the consumer decision process model, was employed. The EKB decision-making model, proposed by Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell in 1968, organizes and describes consumer behavior by illustrating how decisions are made when selecting from a range of available options (Osei & Abenyin, 2016). This model is particularly relevant to Generation Z's travel and destination choices, as it highlights how social media influences each stage of their decision-making process.

The EKB model identifies five key stages of consumer decision-making: need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase behavior (L.M, 2021). For Generation Z, who are tech-savvy and spend significant time on social media, these stages are heavily influenced by online content marketing, particularly in their travel-related decisions. Figure 1 illustrates how social media content marketing influences each dimension of the EKB model, demonstrating how Gen Z interacts with social media to make informed travel decisions.

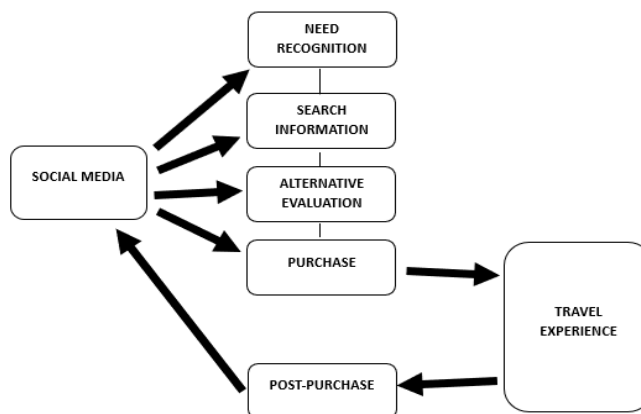


Figure 1: Conceptual Model (Source: Author's work)

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Need Recognition. For Generation Z, the need for travel is often triggered by exposure to social media content, such as influencer posts, travel vlogs, or destination photos. According to Milner and Rosenstreich (2013), the consumer's journey begins when a need or problem is identified. In this case, the desire to explore new places is often sparked by social media stimuli, which play a significant role in creating a sense of wanderlust. This aligns with Grimsley's (2021) idea that marketing is centered on identifying needs and creating products or services to meet them. Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok are prime examples of where Gen Z consumers often first recognize their need for travel. When they see peers or influencers visiting a particular destination, they become aware of their own desire to experience similar adventures, thus beginning their decision-making process.

Information Search. Gen Z actively searches for travel information through social media platforms, blogs, and travel review websites. According to GlobalWebIndex, 54% of social media users conduct product research on the platform (Barysevich, 2020). In the context of travel, Gen Z relies on user-generated content, reviews, and travel tips shared by influencers or fellow travelers. This stage is crucial as it helps them gather information about various destinations, accommodations, and travel experiences. The study by Volo & Irimiás (2022) supports this, indicating that online travel information searches play a vital role in shaping travel choices. Generation Z's reliance on smartphones and social media apps for information makes this stage even more prominent in their travel decision-making.

Alternative Evaluation. At this stage, Generation Z evaluates different travel options by comparing destinations, accommodations, and travel packages, often using social media as a reference. They assess factors like price, quality, reviews, and the unique experiences each destination offers. According to Mishra (2018), this evaluation process is based on criteria such as price, product quality, and offers, all of which are heavily influenced by social media marketing. For Gen Z, visual content such as destination photos, travel itineraries, and user reviews play a significant role in shaping their preferences. They often create comparison lists based on social media content, enabling them to make informed travel decisions.

Purchase. When it comes to purchasing travel services, Generation Z often relies on online platforms to book flights, accommodations, and experiences. According to GlobalWebIndex (2020), 71% of consumers are more likely to purchase products and services based on social media referrals. Therefore, engaging and authentic content on social media platforms is crucial in converting Gen Z from potential travelers into actual customers. Brands that successfully leverage social proof, positive testimonials, and influencer endorsements are more likely to influence Gen Z's purchasing decisions for travel experiences.

Post-Purchase Behavior. After making travel purchases, Generation Z continues to engage with social media by sharing their experiences, leaving reviews, or engaging with brands. Their satisfaction or dissatisfaction can influence future travel choices and the choices of their peers. According to Butkouskaya et al. (2021), customer satisfaction significantly mediates the relationship between marketing communications and post-purchase behavior.

Positive travel experiences often result in Gen Z sharing their journey on social media, which, in turn, influences others within their network to consider similar destinations. Conversely, negative experiences may lead to unfavorable reviews or posts, impacting the brand's reputation and future travelers' choices.

The EKB model provides valuable insights into how Generation Z's travel and destination choices are influenced by social media content marketing. The model's stages—need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase behavior—are all impacted by the extensive use of social media in Gen Z's decision-making process.

In line with the study's objectives, the research sought to understand the influence of social media content marketing on Generation Z's travel decisions across the different stages of the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) model. The EKB model provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing consumer decision-making processes, which include need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchasing, and post-purchase behavior. Using this model, the study conceptualized the influence of social media on each stage of Generation Z's travel decision-making process.

To guide the investigation, the following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at a 0.05 level of significance:

- H1:** There is no significant relationship between social media and Gen Z's need recognition in travel decisions.
- H2:** There is no significant relationship between social media and Gen Z's information search for travel destinations.
- H3:** There is no significant relationship between social media and Gen Z's evaluation of alternative travel options.
- H4:** There is no significant relationship between social media and Gen Z's purchasing decisions for travel.
- H5:** There is no significant relationship between social media and Gen Z's post-purchasing behavior in travel decisions.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a descriptive-correlation research design to explore the relationships between social media and the travel decision-making processes of Generation Z. This research was conducted in Santa Fe, Bantayan Island, Cebu, Philippines, a location renowned for its vibrant tourism industry and beautiful attractions.

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To gather data, the researchers employed convenience sampling, which involved selecting 350 respondents from the target demographic of Generation Z travellers. Participants were chosen based on their proximity to the researchers and their willingness to engage in the study. This method was deemed appropriate given the challenges in identifying a specific population of Generation Z travellers in the area.

Before the main survey, a dry run of the questionnaire was conducted to ensure its reliability and effectiveness. The internal consistency of the survey items was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, a widely accepted measure for reliability in research instruments. The results yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.914, indicating a very high level of internal consistency. As noted by George and Mallery (2003), a score above 0.90 reflects excellent reliability (Saidi and Siew, 2019). This affirms that the questionnaire is a credible tool for investigating how social media content marketing influences Generation Z's travel decisions.

Moreover, the data management plan was created which included an accurate recording of collected data, data documentation, storage, and proper disposal of data. These were important considerations for the researchers to ensure the privacy of the data collected for this study.

IV. RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The study began with a descriptive analysis of how Generation Z respondents engaged with social media and its impact on their consumer decision-making processes. This analysis offered valuable insights into their digital behaviors and preferences. Subsequently, the study examined the significance of the relationship between social media and the decision-making process for selecting a travel destination. This part emphasized how social media influenced decision process stages, including need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase decisions, and post-purchase behavior.

Table 1: Gen Z's Social Media Engagement

Indicators	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. I used social media daily.	4.5	0.68
2. I engage with content on social media (likes, comments).	4.3	0.69
3. I share posts or updates on my social media accounts.	4.1	0.91
4. I follow trends and topics on social media.	4.4	0.82
5. I feel connected to others through social media.	4.6	0.85
TOTAL	4.38	0.64

The findings indicate that Generation Z respondents are very active on social media, with many using it daily and feeling connected to others through these platforms. They regularly engage with content by liking and commenting, follow trends, and often share their own posts. The overall mean of 4.38 reflects a high level of social media engagement among the respondents.

Table 2: Normality Test

	Statistic	p
Kolmogorov-Smirnov	0.236	> .005

Normality Test. The normality of the data was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated that the p-values for each variable were above the significance level of 0.05, suggesting that we failed to reject the null hypothesis of normality for the variables examined. This result support the appropriateness of using Pearson's correlation to analyze the relationships between social media engagement and the stages of the EKB model.

Table 3: Correlation Results and p-Values

	Social Media Pearson's r	p-value
Need Recognition	0.68	0.043
Information Search	0.87	0.008

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	Social Media Pearson's r	p- value
Alternative Evaluation	0.79	0.064
Purchase	0.74	0.110
Post-Purchase	0.77	0.007

Test of Significance. The analysis shows that social media influences how Gen Z makes travel decisions in different ways. For H1, which said there would be no link between social media and recognizing travel needs, the results showed a moderate connection ($r = 0.68$, $p = 0.043$). This means social media does play a role, so H1 is rejected. The same goes for H2, where a strong link was found between social media and how Gen Z searches for travel information ($r = 0.87$, $p = 0.008$), leading to the rejection of this hypothesis. For H3, which claimed there was no link between social media and evaluating travel options, the results did not show a strong connection ($r = 0.79$, $p = 0.064$), so this hypothesis is accepted. Similarly, H4 found no strong link between social media and Gen Z's purchasing decisions ($r = 0.74$, $p = 0.110$), so this hypothesis is also kept. Finally, H5 is rejected because there was a strong link between social media and post-purchase behavior ($r = 0.77$, $p = 0.007$).

These findings suggest that social media has a significant impact on specific stages of the decision-making process, especially in Need Recognition, Information Search, and Post-Purchase behavior, while its influence is less evident in the Alternative Evaluation and Purchase stages.

V. DISCUSSIONS

The results of the analysis highlight the significant role that social media plays in Gen Z's travel decision-making process. The data indicated that social media greatly affects all dimensions of this process (need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase behavior). This extensive influence suggests that social media is a key factor for Gen Z when selecting travel destinations.

For Gen Z, social media is not just a platform for social interaction; it is a primary source of information and inspiration. According to Varkaris & Neuhofer (2017), social media assists consumers in gathering information about products and services, evaluating different options, and making informed decisions. Potential travelers often turn to social media content at various stages of their trips, including planning, during the trip, and after returning home. This aligns with Gen Z's tendency to seek authentic experiences and rely on digital content for guidance in their decision-making.

Furthermore, Shu and Scott (2014), as cited by Saito et al. (2018), emphasize that influencers in travel choices are not limited to close friends but also include social media personalities and content creators. This is particularly relevant for Gen Z, who often trust influencers more than traditional advertising. Social media platforms shape their perceptions of destinations, creating impressions that can either entice or deter them from choosing a particular location.

These insights emphasize that Gen Z not only uses social media to discover and search for travel options but also continues to be influenced by it after making travel decisions. Therefore, marketers should focus on creating content that resonates with Gen Z's preferences, such as influencer collaborations, user-generated content, and real-time engagement, to maintain a significant presence throughout their travel journey.

V. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that social media significantly influences Gen Z's travel decision-making process across multiple stages. From the initial stage of need recognition to information search, alternative evaluation, purchase decisions, and post-purchase behavior, social media emerges as a vital tool that guides this generation in shaping their travel preferences. Gen Z relies heavily on social media platforms not just for discovering travel destinations but also for validating their choices through the experiences, reviews, and recommendations shared by others.

This reliance on social media reflects Gen Z's preference for authenticity, real-time engagement, and user-generated content when making travel decisions. Influencers, online reviews, and social media communities play a substantial role in forming their perceptions, building trust, and ultimately influencing their travel behaviors. As a result, businesses in the travel and tourism industry must recognize the power of social media as a strategic tool for reaching Gen Z travelers.

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