

TikTok as a Travel Inspiration Engine: A Netnographic Study of Indonesian Tourism Content

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of TikTok as a travel inspiration engine in Indonesian tourism. Using a netnographic approach, data were collected from tourism-related TikTok videos and 30 representative user comments. The analysis explores how visual content, community interaction, emotional engagement, and electronic word-of-mouth shape travel inspiration and destination preferences. The findings indicate that TikTok influences tourism decision-making through visual storytelling, local narratives, cultural pride, community recommendations, and algorithm-driven engagement. The platform functions not only as a marketing channel but also as a collaborative digital environment where users exchange tourism knowledge and construct destination meanings collectively. The study contributes to the literature on digital tourism and social media by demonstrating how user-generated content and online interactions transform tourism inspiration into travel intentions. Practical implications highlight the importance of authentic storytelling, community engagement, and strategic content design for destination marketing organizations and tourism practitioners.

Keywords

TikTok, travel inspiration, tourism marketing, netnography, digital tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of digital technologies has transformed the tourism industry. Travelers increasingly rely on social media platforms to search for information, compare destinations, and obtain travel inspiration (Leung et al., 2013; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Among the available platforms, TikTok has emerged as one of the most influential channels due to its short-video format, personalized recommendation algorithm, and high engagement levels (Abidin, 2021; Quaedvlieg, 2024). Tourism destinations that gain visibility on TikTok can experience substantial increases in awareness and visitor interest.

Travel inspiration refers to a motivational state that encourages individuals to transform travel-related ideas into actual behavioral intentions (Thrash & Elliot, 2003; Dai et al., 2022). Previous studies have emphasized the importance of visual stimuli, emotional engagement, and social influence in shaping tourism decisions (Dai et al., 2022; Jani et al., 2024). TikTok combines these elements within a single platform. Videos featuring natural landscapes, local culture, culinary experiences, and hidden destinations are frequently shared and recommended to large audiences, thereby stimulating destination awareness and travel intentions (Mahendra et al., 2025).

Indonesia provides a particularly relevant context because it represents one of the largest TikTok markets globally. Tourism-related hashtags such as #WonderfulIndonesia, #LabuanBajo, and #HiddenGem attract millions of views and contribute to destination visibility (Anggreani et al., 2023). Viral content often

influences destination popularity and contributes to the development of digital tourism trends through electronic word-of-mouth and algorithmic amplification (Tarji & Wiharjo, 2025; Quaedvlieg, 2024). Nevertheless, existing research has focused primarily on destination promotion and marketing outcomes. Limited attention has been given to how interactions within TikTok communities contribute to travel inspiration.

Although previous studies have investigated the effectiveness of TikTok for tourism promotion (Anggreani et al., 2023; Mahendra et al., 2025), limited research has examined how user interactions and community engagement within TikTok contribute to travel inspiration. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining tourism-related comments and interactions through a netnographic lens. Specifically, the study investigates the role of TikTok as a source of travel inspiration, explores how user interactions influence destination perceptions, and identifies the social and cultural implications of tourism-related content.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative netnographic approach. Netnography adapts ethnographic principles to online communities and digital environments and is particularly suitable for investigating digitally mediated social interactions (Kozinets, 2020). The approach allows researchers to observe naturally occurring interactions among social media users and has been widely applied in tourism and social media studies (Gretzel, 2021).

Data were collected from tourism-related TikTok videos featuring Indonesian destinations such as Bali, Raja Ampat, Labuan Bajo, Ubud, Banyuwangi, and Belitung. The dataset consisted of 30 representative comments selected from highly engaged videos published between June 2024 and September 2025. Supporting information included captions, hashtags, likes, views, and interaction threads.

The research followed three stages. First, comments and contextual information were collected through non-participant observation. Second, open coding was conducted to identify recurring ideas, emotions, and interaction patterns. Third, codes were grouped into broader themes and interpreted using concepts from travel inspiration, digital communication, and tourism behavior literature (Kozinets, 2020).

To improve trustworthiness, the analysis involved repeated comparisons between comments, engagement metrics, and theoretical concepts. The goal was not statistical generalization but a deeper understanding of how tourism meanings are constructed within TikTok communities. This analytical procedure is consistent with thematic netnographic approaches commonly employed in online tourism research (Gretzel, 2021).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The thematic analysis revealed several interconnected themes that explain TikTok's role as a travel inspiration engine.

3.1 Visual Inspiration

Visual inspiration emerged as the most dominant theme. Users frequently expressed admiration toward landscapes, beaches, mountains, and cultural attractions. Comments describing destinations as “magical,” “beautiful,” and “incredible” indicated strong emotional reactions to visual content. These findings support the argument that tourism inspiration often begins with sensory and emotional stimulation. Many users stated that they intended to visit destinations after viewing TikTok videos. The transition from observation to intention demonstrates the power of visual storytelling. Carefully produced videos can create immersive experiences that allow users to imagine themselves within the destination environment.

This finding supports the concept of travel inspiration proposed by Dai et al. (2022), who argue that visual exposure serves as an important trigger for travel-related motivation and behavioral intentions. Similar

observations were reported by Gretzel (2021), who found that visually rich social media platforms stimulate destination dreaming and future travel planning.

3.2 Aesthetic Appeal

Aesthetic appeal refers to the perceived beauty and uniqueness of destinations. Users frequently highlighted distinctive characteristics such as the Pink Beach in Labuan Bajo, the landscapes of Raja Ampat, and the rice terraces of Ubud. These attractions function as unique selling points that differentiate destinations from competitors. The findings indicate that visual aesthetics contribute not only to attention but also to destination memorability. Destinations associated with unique visual features were more likely to generate enthusiastic comments and engagement. This finding is consistent with Jani et al. (2024), who emphasized the importance of visual attractiveness in influencing travel preferences and destination evaluation.

3.3 Local Narratives and Authenticity

Another important theme was the presence of local narratives. Users often shared contextual information, personal experiences, and destination-specific knowledge. Such narratives increased authenticity and enhanced credibility. Rather than relying solely on official promotional messages, viewers received information directly from travelers and local residents. The collaborative nature of comment sections enabled users to clarify information, answer questions, and provide practical advice. This process transformed audiences into active contributors to tourism knowledge production. These findings support Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) argument that social media users actively participate in generating and validating information through user-generated content.

3.4 Cultural Pride

Cultural pride was frequently expressed in comments celebrating Indonesia's natural beauty and cultural diversity. Many users compared Indonesian destinations favorably with international tourism locations. Such comments reflected a collective sense of identity and national pride. Cultural pride contributes to destination branding by encouraging positive word-of-mouth communication. This finding supports previous studies indicating that social media platforms facilitate destination promotion while simultaneously strengthening cultural identity and tourism branding (Tarji & Wiharjo, 2025).

3.5 Community Recommendations

Community recommendations represented a significant form of electronic word-of-mouth. Users shared destination suggestions, transportation advice, accommodation recommendations, and travel tips. These recommendations reduced uncertainty and increased confidence among prospective travelers. The practical value of peer-generated information was evident in question-and-answer interactions. Such findings are consistent with Xiang and Gretzel (2010), who identified social media as a critical source of travel information, and Jani et al. (2024), who found that peer recommendations strongly influence travel decision-making.

3.6 Community and Emotional Support

Emotional support appeared through expressions of excitement, nostalgia, admiration, and encouragement. Some users shared personal stories connecting destinations to meaningful life experiences. Others expressed a desire to revisit places or explore destinations they had previously overlooked. These emotional responses strengthen destination attachment and contribute to travel motivation. This finding aligns with the inspiration framework proposed by Thrash and Elliot (2003), which emphasizes the role of emotional experiences in motivating future actions.

3.7 Engagement Patterns

Engagement patterns revealed the importance of platform dynamics. Comments containing humor, emotional expressions, or comparative statements often received high numbers of likes and replies. Hashtags such as #WonderfulIndonesia and #HiddenGem contributed to content visibility and audience reach. The findings highlight the interaction between content quality and algorithmic amplification. TikTok's recommendation system increases the visibility of engaging content, thereby extending its influence on tourism perceptions and travel intentions. This observation is consistent with studies by Abidin (2021) and Quaadvlieg (2024), which highlight the importance of platform algorithms in shaping visibility and user engagement.

Overall, the results demonstrate that TikTok operates as an integrated ecosystem combining visual storytelling, social interaction, community participation, and algorithmic distribution. These elements work together to transform tourism content into travel inspiration and behavioral intentions.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that TikTok plays a significant role in shaping travel inspiration and tourism decision-making. Visual attractiveness, aesthetic appeal, local narratives, cultural pride, community recommendations, emotional support, and engagement patterns collectively influence destination perceptions and travel intentions. The findings suggest that travel inspiration is generated through the interaction of visual content, social influence, and community engagement. Unlike traditional promotional media, TikTok enables audiences to participate actively in destination image formation through comments, recommendations, and storytelling.

For tourism practitioners, the results emphasize the importance of authentic content, user-generated narratives, and community interaction. Destination management organizations should leverage TikTok not only as a promotional tool but also as a platform for engagement and relationship building. Future research should examine larger datasets, compare multiple social media platforms, and integrate qualitative and quantitative methods to enhance understanding of digital tourism behavior.

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