

The Influence Of Social Media Content On Vietnamese Gen Z's Domestic Tourism Intention: The Mediating Roles Of Flow Experience And Destination Envy¹

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Abstract

Given the rapid digitalization of the tourism industry, the internal psychological mechanisms converting social media consumption into actual travel intention remain a critical black box. Based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, this study investigates how specific social media content characteristics (interactivity, entertainment, and informativeness) influence the domestic travel intentions of Vietnamese Generation Z. Specifically, it examines the competing dual mediating roles of flow experience and destination envy, alongside the moderating effect of social media usage intensity. Employing a quantitative cross-sectional design, data from 474 respondents were analyzed using PLS-SEM. The findings reveal that

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entertainment is the most potent stimulus, fostering both cognitive immersion (flow) and upward social comparison (envy). Notably, destination envy emerges as the dominant mediator directly driving travel intention, whereas flow experience and usage intensity show no significant impact. Theoretically, this study advances digital tourism literature by demonstrating that socio-emotional benchmarking (benign envy) acts as a significantly stronger behavioral catalyst than passive cognitive escapism (flow) within a collectivist context. Practically, the findings signify that destination marketers must pivot from merely informative or immersive strategies to entertainment-driven content that actively triggers aspirational social comparison to effectively stimulate youth travel intent.

Keywords: Vietnam, gen z, digital tourism communication, S-O-R framework, destination envy, flow experience, travel intention.

The rapid growth of the digital economy has fundamentally transformed the tourism industry, positioning social media as a primary driver of travel decision-making. In Vietnam, where the digital economy is projected to reach USD 39 billion by 2025 (Google, Temasek, & Bain & Company, 2025) and 79% of users make travel decisions based on social media content (Klook, 2025), understanding how this influence operates psychologically has become a pressing concern for both researchers and destination communicators. Despite this documented influence, a critical question remains inadequately answered: through what internal psychological mechanisms does social media content translate passive content consumption into active domestic travel intention among Generation Z?

Vietnamese Gen Z represents a particularly strategic yet psychologically complex audience segment. Unlike prior generations, Vietnamese Gen Z's travel behaviors are heavily

shaped by digital content, with 91% relying on content creator recommendations, far exceeding the Asia-Pacific average (Van, 2024). Their travel motivations are deeply emotional and often driven by aspirations for “healing” experiences, as well as susceptibility to the fear of missing out (FOMO) (AppotaPay, 2024). Critically, Vietnam’s collectivist cultural context, in which social evaluation, peer influence, and the desire for social validation carry considerable weight (Hofstede, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991) amplifies the role of social comparison in shaping travel decisions. This cultural dimension suggests that psychological constructs rooted in social emotion, particularly destination envy, may exert stronger behavioral influence among Vietnamese Gen Z than cognitive or immersive mechanisms such as flow experience. Understanding which internal psychological mechanisms bridge content exposure and travel intention is, therefore, not only a theoretical imperative but a practical necessity for destination communication.

Despite the increasing importance of social media in tourism, notable research gaps remain. First, existing research predominantly adopts technological acceptance or economic perspectives, leaving the psychological mediators connecting content features to behavioral intention underexplored (Wang & Lahad, 2025). Second, Vietnamese-context studies examine social media influence broadly, without distinguishing how specific content attributes, including interactivity, entertainment, and informativeness, differentially activate distinct psychological responses (Truong et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2024). Third, no study has empirically compared flow experience and destination envy as simultaneous psychological pathways to travel intention within a collectivist cultural context where social comparison may function distinctively.

Addressing these gaps, this study employs the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework to examine how social media content characteristics (specifically interactivity,

entertainment, and informativeness) influence Vietnamese Gen Z's domestic travel intention. It specifically examines the mediating roles of flow experience and destination envy, as well as the moderating effect of social media usage intensity, to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding youth travel behavior in the digital era.

Literature review and hypothesis development

Social Media Content Features And Flow Experience

Flow experience refers to a psychological state in which individuals are fully absorbed in an activity, characterized by high concentration, enjoyment, and a loss of awareness of time and surroundings (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In digital contexts, flow is considered a key outcome of media consumption, reflecting deep engagement and immersion driven by intrinsic motivation (Hoffman & Novak, 1996; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

Within the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, flow serves as a central “Organism” construct explaining how external digital stimuli (tourism content) convert passive exposure into profound cognitive immersion. In digital tourism settings, flow manifests through deep absorption states such as telepresence, focused attention, and time distortion. Recent critical reviews argue that its drivers and processes must be analyzed synergistically rather than treated as isolated effects (An et al., 2021; deMatos et al., 2021). This underscores that social media content does more than merely inform; it actively structures the user's experiential state while navigating tourism-related digital environments.

Interactivity serves as the most dynamic stimulus for flow by fostering participation, responsiveness, and reciprocal exchange. Digital tourism communities attract and sustain user engagement, specifically when content curators facilitate timely, two-way interactions (Camilleri, 2022). Empirical evidence from short-video platforms demonstrates that

interactivity significantly enhances telepresence and time distortion, indicating that reciprocal communication pulls users into an immersive state rather than merely delivering passive information (Liu et al., 2024). Furthermore, social network interaction heightens spatial presence, which subsequently amplifies impulsive travel intention, reinforcing the premise that interactive environments intensify experiential absorption (Li et al., 2024). Consequently, interactive content acts as a crucial catalyst for cognitive immersion. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1a: The interactivity of social media content has a positive impact on flow experience.

Entertainment refers to the enjoyment and positive emotions experienced during content consumption (Ducoffe, 1996). It is considered a key driver of user engagement, as it sustains attention and creates positive emotional responses, which facilitate immersive experiences (Mustafi & Hosain, 2020; Liu et al., 2022). Research on algorithmic short videos reveals that entertainment significantly drives various flow dimensions, operating alongside perceived usefulness (Liu et al., 2024). This aligns with behavioral studies on Generation Z, indicating that escapism, vicarious pleasure, and hedonic gratification are not peripheral but intrinsic motivations for consuming travel-related media (Chavez et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2024). The implication is profound: entertaining tourism content does not simply make destinations visually attractive; it actively constructs the attentional and affective conditions required for flow to emerge. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2a: The entertainment of social media content has a positive impact on flow experience.

Informativeness refers to the extent to which social media content provides accurate, relevant, and timely information that users perceive as useful (Hoffman & Novak, 1996).

Informativeness presents a more complex, dual-pathway relationship with flow. On one hand, high-quality information directly deepens user engagement in virtual travel environments, demonstrating that cognitively useful content facilitates, rather than interrupts, digital immersion (An et al., 2021). Specifically, informativeness strongly contributes to the focused attention dimension of flow, acting as the cognitive scaffolding that keeps users engaged with the content (Liu et al., 2024). On the other hand, informative content also operates through deliberative mechanisms, shaping travel intention via trust and self-congruity (Wang et al., 2022). Despite spanning both experiential and rational pathways, the synthesis of current literature firmly supports a positive informativeness-flow link, as relevant information prevents cognitive overload and sustains seamless browsing. Therefore, this study proposes:

H3a: The informativeness of social media content has a positive impact on flow experience.

Social Media Content Features And Destination Envy

Envy is a negative emotion arising from social comparison, where individuals feel inferior when others appear to have more desirable experiences (Smith & Kim, 2007). Although often unpleasant, envy can motivate individuals to improve their situation, particularly in consumption contexts (Hill & Buss, 2008). Envy is a complex emotion triggered by upward social comparison when individuals perceive peers possessing desirable experiences (Festinger, 1954). While FOMO is fundamentally an anxiety about being left out of a momentary social event, envy in tourism predominantly manifests as “benign envy”, which is an active, aspirational desire to elevate oneself to the peer’s level, distinct from malicious resentment (van de Ven et al., 2009; Zheng et al., 2023). Unlike passive inspiration, “benign envy” contains a degree of psychological frustration stemming from a perceived social gap, effectively acting as a motivational catalyst (e.g., the drive to work harder to afford a similar trip). Consequently,

this study posits that specific social media features systematically activate this benign, action-oriented envy.

For interactivity, the mechanism operating through upward social comparison is highly persuasive. Social media allows users to share, comment on, and visibly endorse one another's travel experiences, making peer consumption highly salient (Camilleri, 2022). From a social facilitation perspective, interactive environments heighten visibility and status signaling. When users actively engage with travel posts, they are not merely consuming content. They are participating in a social evaluative space where peers' experiences become relevant benchmarks (Li et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2022). By continuously exposing users to curated peer achievements, high interactivity amplifies the psychological pressure of the social gap, thereby stimulating destination envy. The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

H1b: The interactivity of social media content has a positive impact on destination envy.

The evidence for informativeness becomes particularly robust when analyzed through the lens of attainability. Social media platforms provide abundant, timely travel information and realistic user-generated viewpoints that do more than educate; they make destinations cognitively vivid and practically accessible (Gretzel, 2017). In tourism envy research, perceived similarity and attainability are identified as the critical boundary conditions for envy judgments (Zheng et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022). When travel content is highly informative (e.g., providing itineraries, costs, and authentic reviews), it bridges the psychological distance between the viewer and the destination. Rather than passively admiring an unattainable luxury (inspiration), the user realizes the experience is achievable, which intensifies the self-evaluative pressure and triggers benign envy. The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

H2b: The informativeness of social media content has a positive impact on destination envy.

Entertainment value possesses the most direct and potent link to destination envy, as emotionally vivid and aesthetically curated posts instantly intensify affective comparison. Experimental evidence strongly indicates that highly entertaining, visually captivating, or luxury-oriented travel posts generate significantly stronger feelings of envy and subsequent visit intention compared to purely rational content (Ahmad et al., 2024). Entertaining content provides the hedonic cues necessary for users to vicariously imagine the pleasure of the trip, thereby exacerbating the emotional contrast between their current state and the idealized destination (Liu et al., 2019). Broadly, the literature synthesizes that the passive consumption of highly engaging user-generated content bypasses rational filtering, directly striking at the socio-emotional core of the user to foster aspirational longing (Nguyen et al., 2022). The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

H3b: The entertainment value of social media content has a positive impact on destination envy.

Mediation Effects Of Flow Experience And Destination Envy

Evaluating flow experience and destination envy as simultaneous, yet theoretically distinct, organism-level mediators provides critical insights into the intention-behavior gap. Current digital tourism literature is bifurcated. On one hand, cognitive-centric studies conceptualize flow as a primary mechanism, arguing that immersive states (telepresence and time distortion) seamlessly translate into evaluative and behavioral outcomes (An et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2024). Specifically, deep immersion is theorized to reduce decision-making friction, fostering continuous engagement and immediate behavioral intentions. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Flow experience has a positive effect on domestic travel intention.

On the other hand, Social Comparison Theory introduces a competing, socio-emotional pathway. Domestic tourism is an offline, high-involvement service requiring significant financial and temporal commitments, leading to a sharp contrast to low-involvement digital interactions (e.g., app usage or impulse online shopping). In such contexts, scholars argue that transient cognitive absorption (flow) may be insufficient to trigger offline action. Instead, the psychological pressure generated by destination envy acts as a far more potent and direct behavioral catalyst. A robust stream of recent literature confirms that travel-related envy, driven by peer visibility and self-presentation on social networks, fully or partially mediates the transition from digital exposure to definitive destination selection (Guan et al., 2024; Hajli et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2023). Because benign envy embodies an active aspiration to resolve a perceived social deficit, it inherently drives goal-oriented behavior. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: Destination envy has a positive effect on domestic travel intention.

The theoretical novelty of combining these mediators lies in shifting the paradigm from isolated mechanisms to competitive analysis. Prior scholarship has largely operated in silos, either emphasizing the cognitive immersion of flow (Liu et al., 2024) or the emotional arousal of envy (Zheng et al., 2023). By integrating both within a single S-O-R model, this study directly addresses a critical gap: it tests whether modern travel intention among Gen Z is primarily an outcome of passive cognitive escapism (becoming absorbed in content) or active socio-emotional benchmarking (comparing oneself to others).

Moderating Role Of Social Media Usage Intensity

Within the S-O-R framework, the transition from internal psychological states (Organism) to behavioral outcomes (Response) is rarely uniform; it is often contingent upon

individual behavioral patterns. To conceptualize this boundary condition, this study integrates Dual-Process Theory (Chaiken, 1980) and Social Identity Theory (Hogg & Terry, 2000) to propose Social Media Usage Intensity (SMUI) as a critical moderator.

Dual-Process Theory suggests that frequent users develop ingrained heuristic processing patterns. As usage intensity increases, users are disproportionately exposed to travel content, which theoretically amplifies the "stickiness" and behavioral conversion of cognitive immersion (Chavez et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2024). Consequently, heavy users experiencing flow are traditionally posited to be more likely to translate this transient immersion into concrete travel intentions due to their habituated engagement with digital platforms (Ismail et al., 2025; Li et al., 2024).

Similarly, from a social identity perspective, intense social media usage fundamentally heightens a user's embeddedness within virtual peer networks. This deep embeddedness amplifies the salience of social comparison, visibility, and self-presentation pressures (Gretzel, 2017; Sharma et al., 2022). Therefore, the psychological friction generated by destination envy should theoretically exert a much stronger behavioral pull on high-intensity users, who rely heavily on social validation, compared to casual users. Testing this "dosage effect", which is the assumption that greater digital exposure exponentially amplifies psychological mechanisms, is crucial for understanding Gen Z, a cohort characterized by near-constant connectivity. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

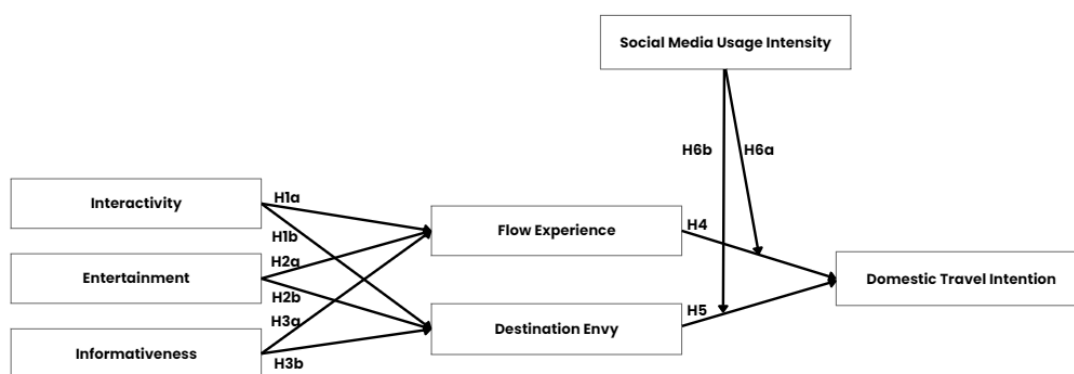
H6a: Social media usage intensity positively moderates the relationship between flow experience and domestic travel intention.

H6b: Social media usage intensity positively moderates the relationship between destination envy and domestic travel intention.

After reviewing and synthesizing prior domestic and international studies and drawing on findings related to how social media content influences domestic travel intention through flow experience and destination envy, alongside social media usage intensity, the study proposes a refined model. By removing overlapping constructs, the final framework includes three independent variables, two mediators, one dependent variable, and one moderating variable, as illustrated below.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model



Research methodology

Research design

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. To ensure consistency and comparability across respondents, data were collected using a structured self-report questionnaire. As a result, the findings should be interpreted as associative relationships rather than causal effects.

Measurement scales

All measurement items were adapted from established scales in prior studies. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

The study includes seven constructs: interactivity, informativeness, entertainment, flow experience, destination envy, domestic travel intention, and social media usage intensity. All items were adapted from validated sources, including Liu et al. (2024), Lin et al. (2024), Zheng et al. (2023), Lam and Hsu (2006), Lu et al. (2016), and Ellison et al. (2007), with minor modifications to fit the context of domestic tourism and social media. The measurement items are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1.

Measurement Constructs and Sources

Construct	Items	Source (adapted from)
Interactivity (INT)	INT1: I can easily interact and communicate with the content creators in a timely manner. INT2: I often feel motivated to share tourism videos with others (e.g., friends, family). INT3: I like expressing my opinions or leaving comments on tourism-related videos. INT4: I can receive quick feedback or responses from content creators when I ask questions.	Liu et al. (2024)
Informativeness (INF)	INF1: Social media provides accurate information about domestic travel destinations. INF2: Social media gives me timely details about domestic travel (e.g. opening times, weather, festivals, costs). INF3: Travel content on social media is updated frequently with new information. INF4: Social media provides complete and sufficient information to help me plan domestic trips.	
Entertainment (ENT)	ENT1: Watching domestic travel content on social media is entertaining. ENT2: I enjoy spending time viewing travel-related videos or posts on social media. ENT3: I find travel content on social media fun and emotionally pleasing to watch. ENT4: Travel content on social media helps me relax or feel good.	

Table 1.

Measurement Constructs and Sources (Contd.)

Construct	Items	Source (adapted from)
Flow experience (FE)	FE1: When viewing travel content on social media, I am highly focused on it. FE2: I am completely immersed in travel content on social media. FE3: When viewing travel content on social media, I hardly think about anything else. FE4: I lose track of time when watching travel content on social media. FE5: Travel content on social media makes me forget my personal problems.	Lin et al. (2024)
Destination envy (DE)	DE1: I wanted to work hard so that I can travel domestically. DE2: I noticed that many social media users had travel domestically. DE3: Seeing other social media users travel domestically has inspired me. DE4: It is somehow disturbing when I see on social media that many people could travel domestically and I could not.	Zheng, et al. (2023)
Domestic Travel Intention (DTI)	DTI1: Likelihood of travelling domestically in the next 12 months. DTI2: Intention to travel domestically in the next 12 months. DTI3: Plan to travel domestically in the next 12 months.	Lam & Hsu (2006) Lu et al. (2016)
Social Media Usage Intensity (SMUI)	SMUI1: Social media is part of my everyday activity. SMUI2: I feel out of touch when I haven't logged onto social media for a while SMUI3: Social media sites have become part of my daily routine. SMUI4: I feel I am part of the social media community SMUI5: I would be sorry if social media shut down SMUI6: I am proud to tell people I'm on social media.	Ellison et al (2007); Roberts & David (2020)

Sampling and data collection

A non-probability sampling approach combining convenience and snowball techniques was used to access digitally active Gen Z, though it may introduce selection bias and limit generalizability. Screening criteria ensured respondents were aged 18-27, active on social media, and exposed to domestic travel content.

While this approach enabled efficient access to the target population, it may introduce sampling bias by disproportionately representing highly educated, urban, and digitally connected individuals who are more likely to participate in online surveys and share them within similar social networks. As a result, the findings may not fully represent Gen Z individuals in rural areas or those with lower digital engagement. Caution is therefore required in generalizing the results.

A pilot test with 102 respondents was conducted to ensure measurement clarity and reliability. One item (DE4) was removed due to low loading, improving construct reliability.

The final survey (Oct-Dec 2025) yielded 474 valid responses (response rate: 94.6%). All participants provided informed consent, and anonymity was guaranteed.

To reduce common method bias, procedural remedies were applied, including assuring anonymity, emphasizing that there were no right or wrong answers, and using previously validated scales with clear wording.

Non-response bias was mitigated through careful survey design and administration procedures aimed at maximizing response completeness. The questionnaire was kept concise and clearly structured to reduce respondent burden and minimize survey fatigue. Clear instructions and accessible wording were provided to ensure ease of understanding and completion.

Ethical standards were strictly followed. Participation was voluntary, respondents could withdraw at any time, and no personally identifiable data were collected. All data were analyzed in aggregate form to ensure confidentiality.

Data analysis techniques

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to test the research model and hypotheses, as it is suitable for exploratory studies with complex relationships and fewer distributional assumptions than CB-SEM (Hair et al., 2017; Hair et al., 2019). Data were analyzed using SmartPLS 3.0 following a two-step approach: the measurement model assessed reliability (Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability) and validity (AVE, Fornell–Larcker, HTMT), with VIF for collinearity. The structural model examined path coefficients and tested hypotheses via bootstrapping (5,000 resamples), ensuring robust estimates for direct, indirect, and moderating effects.

Result

Measurement model

The measurement model was assessed following Hair et al. (2017, 2019), confirming satisfactory reliability and validity. All indicator loadings exceeded 0.70, while Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values were above 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency. Convergent validity was supported, with all AVE values exceeding 0.50.

Discriminant validity was established using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and HTMT, as the square roots of AVE surpassed inter-construct correlations and all HTMT values were below 0.90. In addition, VIF values ranged from 1.000 to 3.699, indicating no multicollinearity concerns.

Overall, the measurement model demonstrates adequate reliability and validity, providing a solid basis for subsequent structural analysis. Detailed results are reported in the Table 2, 3, 4 and 5 below.

Table 2

Reliability And Validity Results

Constructs	Items	Mean	S.D	Loadings	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Interactivity (INT)	INT1	3.546	1.081	0.820	0.829	0.887	0.662
	INT2	3.907	0.976	0.739			
	INT3	3.137	1.281	0.843			
	INT4	3.346	1.152	0.849			
Informative ness (INF)	INF1	3.738	0.883	0.802	0.857	0.903	0.700
	INF2	3.992	0.829	0.872			
	INF3	3.954	0.853	0.830			
	INF4	3.876	0.911	0.839			
Entertainment (ENT)	ENT1	3.983	0.895	0.871	0.905	0.934	0.779
	ENT2	4.032	0.853	0.879			
	ENT3	3.880	0.916	0.866			
	ENT4	3.922	0.896	0.913			
Flow Experience (FE)	FE1	3.593	0.986	0.817	0.879	0.907	0.661
	FE2	3.308	1.052	0.869			
	FE3	3.095	1.135	0.824			
	FE4	2.901	1.171	0.784			
	FE5	3.063	1.177	0.769			
Destination Envy (DE)	DE1	3.840	1.023	0.836	0.820	0.893	0.736
	DE2	3.897	0.968	0.852			
	DE3	3.844	0.942	0.885			

Table 2

Reliability And Validity Results (Contd.)

Constructs	Items	Mean	S.D	Loadings	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Domestic Travel Intention (DTI)	DTI1	4.224	0.937	0.935	0.891	0.932	0.822
	DTI2	4.188	0.962	0.932			
	DTI3	4.019	1.064	0.849			
Social Media Usage Intensity (SMUI)	SMUI1	4.165	0.908	0.816	0.883	0.908	0.621
	SMUI2	3.686	1.044	0.752			
	SMUI3	4.036	0.933	0.876			
	SMUI4	3.631	1.056	0.781			
	SMUI5	3.641	1.132	0.762			
	SMUI6	3.591	1.118	0.736			

Notes: S.D = Standard Deviation; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted.

Table 3.

Construct correlations

	SMUI	DE	ENT	FE	INT	INF	DTI
SMUI	0.788						
DE	0.506	0.858					
ENT	0.436	0.549	0.882				
FE	0.358	0.493	0.546	0.813			
INT	0.197	0.389	0.499	0.576	0.814		
INF	0.440	0.516	0.619	0.487	0.509	0.836	
DTI	0.353	0.530	0.488	0.262	0.343	0.431	0.906

Notes: SMUI = Social Media Usage Intensity; DE = Destination Envy; ENT = Entertainment; FE = Flow Experience; INT = Interactivity; INF = Informativeness; DTI = Domestic Travel Intention.

Table 4.

HTMT of all constructs

	SMUI	DE	ENT	FE	INT	INF	DTI
SMUI	-						
DE	0.573	-					
ENT	0.468	0.637	-				
FE	0.419	0.535	0.549	-			
INT	0.248	0.469	0.575	0.643	-		
INF	0.478	0.615	0.703	0.507	0.599	-	
DTI	0.360	0.618	0.544	0.252	0.402	0.493	-

Notes: SMUI = Social Media Usage Intensity; DE = Destination Envy; ENT = Entertainment; FE = Flow Experience; INT = Interactivity; INF = Informativeness; DTI = Domestic Travel Intention.

Table 5.

Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) results

Constructs	Items	VIF
Interactivity (INT)	INT1	1.906
	INT2	1.412
	INT3	2.164
	INT4	2.245
Informativeness (INF)	INF1	1.703
	INF2	2.356
	INF3	2.057
	INF4	1.986

Table 5.

Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) results (Contd.)

Constructs	Items	VIF
Entertainment (ENT)	ENT1	2.545
	ENT2	2.660
	ENT3	2.585
	ENT4	3.327
Flow Experience (FE)	FE1	1.900
	FE2	2.446
	FE3	2.577
	FE4	3.256
	FE5	2.704
Destination Envy (DE)	DE1	1.721
	DE2	1.822
	DE3	2.108
Domestic Travel Intention (DTI)	DTI1	3.699
	DTI2	3.660
	DTI3	1.992
Social Media Usage Intensity (SMUI)	SMUI1	2.111
	SMUI2	1.945
	SMUI3	2.897
	SMUI4	2.408
	SMUI5	2.281
	SMUI6	1.890

Notes: SMUI = Social Media Usage Intensity; DE = Destination Envy; ENT = Entertainment; FE = Flow Experience; INT = Interactivity; INF = Informativeness; DTI = Domestic Travel Intention.

Structural model

The structural model was assessed to examine the hypothesized relationships among constructs. Path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values were estimated using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples in SmartPLS 3.0. Details are in Table 6.

Table 6.

Hypotheses and their significance

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coefficients (β)	p-value	Result
H1a	INT $\rightarrow$ FE	0.372	0.000	Supported
H1b	INT $\rightarrow$ DE	0.085	0.084	Rejected
H2a	ENT $\rightarrow$ FE	0.286	0.000	Supported
H2b	ENT $\rightarrow$ DE	0.347	0.000	Supported
H3a	INF $\rightarrow$ FE	0.120	0.021	Supported
H3b	INF $\rightarrow$ DE	0.258	0.000	Supported
H4	FE $\rightarrow$ DTI	0.003	0.950	Rejected
H5	DE $\rightarrow$ DTI	0.440	0.000	Supported
H6a	Moderating Effect 1 (FE $\star$ SMUI) $\rightarrow$ DTI	-0.086	0.144	Rejected
H6b	Moderating Effect 2 (DE $\star$ SMUI) $\rightarrow$ DTI	-0.034	0.576	Rejected

Notes: SMUI = Social Media Usage Intensity; DE = Destination Envy; ENT = Entertainment; FE = Flow Experience; INT = Interactivity; INF = Informativeness; DTI = Domestic Travel Intention.

The analysis yielded several critical findings. All three content characteristics, including Interactivity, Entertainment, and Informativeness, significantly enhance Flow Experience

(supporting H1a, H2a, and H3a). Meanwhile, only Entertainment and Informativeness positively influence Destination Envy (supporting H2b, H3b), whereas Interactivity shows no significant effect (rejecting H1b).

Most importantly, the results concerning the mediators revealed a stark contrast. Destination Envy strongly predicts Domestic Travel Intention ($\beta = 0.440$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H5, while Flow Experience has no significant impact ($\beta = 0.003$, $p = 0.950$), leading to the rejection of H4. Additionally, Social Media Usage Intensity does not moderate these relationships, resulting in the rejection of H6a and H6b.

Discussion

Effects of social media content characteristics on travel content consumption habits among Vietnamese Generation Z

The findings reveal a clear hierarchy in how Gen Z engages with travel content, with entertainment and interactivity playing central roles. Interactivity is the strongest predictor of flow experience ($\beta = 0.372$, $p < 0.001$), supporting the view that digital immersion relies on active user participation, such as commenting or interacting with content (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). However, interactivity does not significantly influence destination envy, suggesting that engagement alone is insufficient to trigger upward social comparison.

In contrast, entertainment emerges as the most influential content feature, significantly affecting both flow ($\beta = 0.286$) and destination envy ($\beta = 0.347$). This aligns with Uses and Gratifications Theory, indicating that Gen Z primarily consumes travel content for enjoyment and emotional stimulation. Entertaining content not only captures attention but also creates aspirational images that encourage comparison and desire.

Informativeness also plays an important role, particularly in shaping destination envy ($\beta = 0.258$). Practical information, such as costs and travel details, helps make destinations appear attainable, thereby strengthening users' desire to travel.

Overall, these findings suggest a three-stage process in Gen Z's content consumption: entertainment attracts attention, interactivity sustains engagement, and informativeness reinforces intention by making travel seem feasible.

Effects of flow experience and destination envy on domestic travel intentions of Vietnamese Generation Z

The findings reveal a clear divergence between cognitive immersion (flow experience) and social emotion (destination envy) in shaping domestic travel intention among Vietnamese Gen Z. Contrary to existing literature, which generally identifies flow as a significant predictor of behavioral intention in online and experiential settings (Wang et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2022), this study finds that flow experience has no significant effect on domestic travel intention ($\beta = 0.003$, $p = 0.950$).

This discrepancy may be explained by the distinct nature of tourism consumption and the social media environment examined in this study. Previous studies have primarily investigated flow in contexts such as online shopping, e-commerce platforms, and tourism livestreaming, where users are exposed to transaction-oriented environments and can make immediate purchase decisions. For example, Liu et al. (2022) found that flow positively influenced purchase intention in tourism e-commerce livestreaming, where real-time interaction, instant feedback, and direct purchasing opportunities facilitate the conversion of immersive experiences into behavioral outcomes. Similarly, studies in online consumer behavior have shown that flow can enhance purchase intention by increasing engagement and reducing decision barriers.

In contrast, domestic travel intention involves a more complex and longer-term decision-making process. Tourism is an experiential, high-involvement service characterized by greater perceived risk, higher financial and time commitments, and a substantial temporal gap between content exposure and actual consumption. Consequently, although users may become highly absorbed while viewing travel-related content, such immersion may remain a hedonic response rather than developing into a concrete intention to travel. This finding suggests that flow may be more effective in predicting immediate consumption behaviors than future-oriented decisions requiring additional planning and resource considerations.

Moreover, the nature of short-form social media content may further weaken the influence of flow on travel intention. Unlike interactive digital environments examined in prior studies, platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and Facebook Reels are characterized by rapid content consumption, fragmented attention, and algorithm-driven exposure. In such contexts, users may experience temporary immersion without engaging in the deeper cognitive processing necessary for intention formation. Therefore, flow may function primarily as a mechanism for sustaining attention and enjoyment rather than motivating subsequent travel decisions.

In contrast, destination envy emerges as the strongest predictor of domestic travel intention ($\beta = 0.440$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that social-emotional responses play a more influential role than cognitive immersion in shaping travel intentions among Vietnamese Gen Z.

This finding is consistent with Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and aligns with previous studies highlighting the motivational role of travel-related envy in tourism decision-making (Şeker et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2023). Exposure to visually curated travel content on social media encourages upward social comparison, prompting individuals to evaluate their own experiences against those of others and generating a desire to attain similar

experiences (Lewis, 2020). Unlike flow experience, which primarily reflects an internal state of engagement during content consumption, destination envy is inherently action-oriented because it emphasizes the gap between one's current situation and desirable experiences enjoyed by others. Consequently, it serves as a more effective mechanism for translating social media exposure into travel intention. This result also resonates with Ding et al. (2024), who found that benign envy positively influences conspicuous travel consumption through self-enhancement motives. In the context of tourism, where travel experiences often symbolize lifestyle, personal achievement, and social status, exposure to others' travel experiences may motivate users not only to admire such experiences but also to pursue them for self-improvement and social recognition.

The Vietnamese context may further strengthen this mechanism. In a society characterized by relatively collectivist values and strong interpersonal orientation (Hofstede, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), social evaluation and peer influence play important roles in shaping attitudes and behavioral intentions. For Vietnamese Gen Z, who are highly active on social media, travel-related content may therefore function not only as a source of information or entertainment but also as a benchmark for social comparison. This helps explain why destination envy exerts a stronger influence on travel intention than flow experience, highlighting the growing importance of comparison-based and self-enhancement motivations in digital tourism consumption.

The moderating role of social media usage intensity on Generation Z's domestic travel intentions

Contrary to expectations (H6a, H6b), Social Media Usage Intensity (SMUI) does not significantly moderate the effects of Flow Experience ($\beta = -0.086$, $p > 0.05$) or Destination Envy ($\beta = -0.034$, $p > 0.05$) on domestic travel intention.

These findings challenge the “dosage effect” assumption that greater social media exposure automatically strengthens behavioral influence (Arad et al., 2023). A plausible explanation is the “ceiling effect” among Vietnamese Gen Z, who are already heavy social media users. According to Kemp (2025), Vietnamese Gen Z spend more than six hours daily on digital platforms, making social media exposure a normalized part of everyday life. As a result, differences in usage intensity may no longer generate meaningful psychological or behavioral differences (Mendonça et al., 2025).

Furthermore, growing evidence suggests that excessive social media exposure may not always strengthen behavioral outcomes. Phenomena such as content saturation, information overload, and social media fatigue can reduce users’ responsiveness to online content over time (Mao et al., 2022; Ou et al., 2023). As digital platforms become increasingly crowded with travel-related posts, repeated exposure may normalize rather than intensify emotional reactions, weakening the moderating role of usage intensity. This interpretation is particularly relevant for Gen Z users, who are continuously exposed to large volumes of short-form content across multiple platforms.

The results further suggest that the quality of psychological responses is more important than the amount of time spent online. Emotional triggers such as envy appear to have a stronger impact on travel intention than exposure frequency. Excessive exposure may even contribute to social media fatigue and reduced responsiveness to travel content (Zhu & Yao, 2025). Therefore, marketers should prioritize emotionally engaging content over high-frequency exposure strategies.

Interrelationships between content characteristics, flow experience, destination envy, and domestic travel intentions

Combining the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework with Social Identity Theory reveals that social comparison plays a more important role than cognitive immersion in shaping travel intentions among Vietnamese Gen Z.

Entertainment and Informativeness serve as key stimuli that enhance both Flow Experience and Destination Envy, whereas Interactivity only strengthens Flow Experience ($\beta = 0.372$) without affecting Destination Envy or travel intention. This indicates that interactive features can retain user attention but are insufficient to motivate action.

Most importantly, Destination Envy has a strong direct effect on Domestic Travel Intention ($\beta = 0.440$), while Flow Experience remains insignificant ($\beta = 0.003$). These findings suggest that immersive content consumption functions primarily as passive escapism, whereas benign envy acts as the main behavioral trigger. Consequently, the dominant pathway is not Content $\rightarrow$ Flow $\rightarrow$ Travel Intention, but rather Content (Entertainment/Informativeness) $\rightarrow$ Destination Envy $\rightarrow$ Travel Intention, highlighting the central role of social comparison in shaping Gen Z's travel decisions.

Implications

Theoretical implications

This study extends the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework in the context of digital tourism by highlighting the role of psychological mechanisms in shaping travel intention. Notably, the findings identify destination envy as a stronger predictor of travel intention than flow experience, suggesting that Gen Z behavior is more influenced by social comparison and emotional responses than by cognitive immersion. In addition, the study shows that entertainment is the most influential content attribute in triggering these psychological states.

The non-significant moderating role of social media usage intensity offers an additional contribution, indicating a possible “ceiling effect” among digital natives, where high levels of usage are normalized and no longer differentiate behavioral outcomes.

Finally, by focusing on the Vietnamese domestic context, this study extends predominantly Western-based theories and highlights the importance of cultural factors and social validation in shaping digital consumption. Overall, the integration of flow experience and destination envy provides a more comprehensive understanding of the internal processes underlying Gen Z’s travel decision-making.

Practical implications

This study provides several practical implications for tourism stakeholders seeking to engage Generation Z in domestic tourism through social media.

First, the findings highlight destination envy as the key psychological driver of travel intention. This suggests that content strategies should go beyond information provision and focus on triggering aspirational emotions through relatable and experience-based storytelling. User-generated content, influencer narratives, and peer experiences that emphasize social value and memorable moments are likely to be particularly effective.

Second, although flow experience does not directly influence travel intention, it remains important for capturing user attention. Practitioners should therefore treat flow as a supporting mechanism that facilitates emotional responses rather than as a final objective. Content should not only be engaging but also include cues that encourage real travel consideration.

Third, the non-significant moderating role of social media usage intensity indicates that content effectiveness is relatively consistent across different usage levels. As a result, segmentation based on usage frequency may be less useful. Instead, marketers should prioritize

content quality and emotional resonance, addressing common psychological needs such as self-expression, social belonging, and fear of missing out.

From a destination management perspective, social media should be used not only for promotion but also for creating emotional and symbolic value. Campaigns that highlight lifestyle alignment and shareable experiences can increase users' connection with destinations.

Finally, content creators should balance aspiration with practicality. Combining emotionally appealing content with useful information, such as travel tips or cost estimates, can reduce psychological distance and help convert destination envy into actual travel intention.

Overall, the findings emphasize the importance of emotion-driven content strategies, showing that activating social and emotional responses, particularly destination envy, is more effective than focusing solely on immersive engagement.

Limitations And Future Research

Despite achieving its research objectives, this study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged and addressed in future research.

First, the study employed a non-probability sampling approach, combining convenience and snowball sampling via online surveys. While this method facilitated access to Generation Z respondents with high levels of social media usage, it limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader Gen Z population in Vietnam. As the sample was not randomly selected, the observed relationships may reflect the characteristics of the surveyed group rather than the entire generational cohort.

Second, the sample may be demographically biased toward urban, highly educated, and digitally active individuals, while underrepresenting those from less connected backgrounds. This may restrict the diversity of perspectives captured in the study.

Third, the reliance on self-reported data raises concerns about common method bias and social desirability. In addition, the study examines travel intention rather than actual behavior, making it difficult to assess whether intentions translate into real travel actions.

Future research should consider probability-based or stratified sampling methods to improve representativeness. Qualitative approaches, such as interviews or focus groups, could provide deeper insights into psychological processes. Moreover, longitudinal or experimental designs are recommended to examine the gap between intention and behavior. Comparative studies across different generations or tourism contexts may also help validate and extend the proposed model. Also, future studies may extend contextual generalizability by comparing different generational cohorts or tourism settings.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process:

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT and Gemini to refine language and verify citation formatting, and Grammarly to improve linguistic accuracy. All outputs were carefully reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final content. The authors confirm that the manuscript was not generated autonomously by any AI system.

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