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Digitally Constructed Expectations and Symbolic Competitiveness in Generation Z Ecotourism

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Abstract

This exploratory study examines how five Generation Z travellers in Malaysia describe the relationship between social media narratives, expectations, reported ecotourism experiences, and subsequent sharing. This interpretivist qualitative study used purposive sampling and semi-structured narrative interviews with participants aged 21 to 24. Interviews lasted 35 to 50 minutes, were recorded with consent, and were transcribed verbatim. The manuscript reports a thematic analysis that combined inductive coding with theoretically informed interpretation. Participants described TikTok and Instagram content as sources of destination discovery and practical preparation. Their preferred content included natural scenery, local lifestyles, and clear information. Accounts of absent digital features differed. One participant reported frustration, while another indicated that the visit matched expectations because immersive technology had not been promoted. Post-visit sharing illustrated participants' contribution to destination representation, although its influence on other travellers was not measured. The study proposes an interpretive framework linking digital expectations, physical experiences, reported evaluation, and content circulation. The study treats symbolic competitiveness as a tentative interpretation of perceived visibility and appeal, rather than an established destination outcome. Implications for community ecotourism enterprises concern accurate storytelling, practical visitor information, and selective digital support. The findings are limited to these retrospective accounts and do not establish causal effects or population patterns.

Keywords: Social media narratives; visitor expectations; ecotourism experiences; Generation Z; community tourism enterprises.

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Introduction

Ecotourism is widely recognised as a strategic mechanism for advancing sustainable development by integrating environmental conservation, community participation, and economic resilience (Bricker & Kariithi, 2024; Ramos & Byrne, 2024) . However, the emergence of digital platforms has significantly transformed how tourism experiences are constructed and evaluated. For Generation Z travellers, engagement with destinations increasingly occurs within digitally mediated environments, where user-generated content, short-form videos, and peer narratives shape expectations prior to physical visitation (Thong et al., 2022; Nogueira et al., 2024). These platforms function not merely as informational tools but as interpretive spaces where destinations are symbolically represented and socially validated.

This transformation challenges traditional notions of destination competitiveness, which have historically focused on tangible attributes such as infrastructure and service quality. Emerging research suggests that competitiveness is increasingly shaped by digital visibility, narrative appeal, and experiential representation (Aman et al., 2024; Dube & Ezeh, 2025). Consequently, tourism experiences are no longer confined to on-site encounters but are constructed through continuous interaction between digital narratives and individual interpretation. Despite this shift, limited research has examined how these mediated expectations influence perceived satisfaction and behavioural intention. This study addresses this gap by exploring how digital storytelling shapes the evaluative processes of Generation Z ecotourists.

Objective(s)

To explore how digitally mediated narratives construct expectation, evaluation, and perceived destination competitiveness in Generation Z ecotourism experiences

Literature review and conceptual framework

Digital narratives and expectation formation

Digital narratives refer here to online representations that communicate what a visitor might see, do, or need at a destination. They include short videos, photographs, and travellers' accounts. Digitally constructed expectations are the anticipated qualities or conditions that participants associate with those representations. These expectations can concern scenery or practical arrangements without including any expectation of immersive technology.

Social media content and immersive technologies require separate treatment. Yung and Khoo-Lattimore (2019) review virtual reality and augmented reality in tourism research. Their focus helps delimit the technological category from ordinary social media communication. Watching a video does not establish that a traveller used or expected an augmented reality service. In this study, immersive features enter the analysis through participants' accounts of their absence and differing evaluations of that absence.

Evaluation and behavioural accounts

Reported evaluation means a participant's retrospective description of an encounter and whether it matched what was anticipated. Satisfaction is interpreted only where an account contains evaluative language. It cannot be inferred from posting photographs alone. A digitally constructed expectation gap is defined provisionally as a participant described discrepancy between an expectation associated with online content and the reported encounter. An absent facility is not automatically such a gap. Evidence is needed that the participant expected it and regarded the absence as relevant.

Behavioural intention concerns an expressed future willingness to visit, revisit, or recommend. Reported destination choice and completed social media posting are accounts of past behaviour. These categories remain distinct because the supplied quotations do not establish a systematic pattern of future revisit intentions.

Destination representation and community enterprises

Symbolic competitiveness is used as a tentative term for the visibility, appeal, or distinctiveness attributed to a destination through circulating representations. It refers to perceived positioning. It does not establish comparative superiority, bookings, profitability, ecological performance, or community benefits. The supplied accounts support discussion of destination representation more directly than they support competitiveness as an outcome.

Community perspectives are essential to assessing business relevance. Kunjuraman et al. (2022) examine community ecotourism and social transformation in Sabah using interviews and observations involving local actors. Their focus contrasts with this study's visitor perspective. Local enterprise and community outcomes must therefore be examined directly before promotional visibility can be interpreted as community development.

Giraldo et al. (2024) investigate service design for augmented reality in ten ecotourism SMEs through an extended study. This provides a relevant enterprise perspective on technology design, but does not justify prescribing augmented reality to the destinations discussed by these five travellers.

Interpretive framework

Figure 1 organises the inquiry around social media narratives, pre visit expectations, reported evaluation, and post visit sharing. Physical experience informs evaluation alongside digital expectations. A possible feedback connection represents the circulation of posted content to future visitors. The framework is an organising interpretation of the accounts, not a tested causal model. Perceived destination appeal is considered within evaluation and sharing; comparative competitiveness remains unestablished.

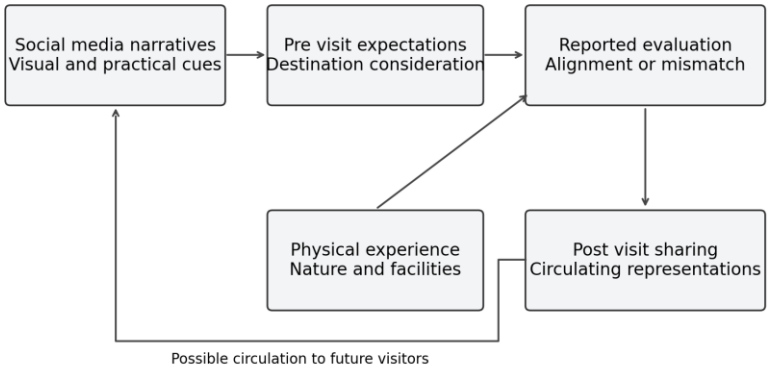


Figure 1 Proposed interpretive framework for digital expectations and reported experiences

Research methodology

Research design

A qualitative interpretivist design was adopted to explore how Generation Z travellers constructed and interpreted expectations, evaluated ecotourism experiences, and shared destination content through social media. The interpretivist orientation aligned with the research objective by focusing on the meanings participants attached to digital narratives and their destination encounters.Semi structured narrative interviews provided the primary data. Narrative interviewing facilitates the examination of how individuals organise and communicate experiences. Moenandar et al. (2024) explain the role of narrative construction within research interviews, providing methodological context for examining participants' accounts across different stages of an experience. Accordingly, the interviews addressed expectations before visiting, interpretation of the visit, and sharing afterwards.

Participants and sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit five participants in Malaysia between May and June 2026. Participants were aged 21 to 24 and comprised four women and one man. Selection focused on travellers with prior ecotourism experience and active social media engagement. These characteristics ensured that participants had experiences relevant to discussing digital destination representations, travel expectations, and subsequent evaluations.

Participants reported two to three domestic ecotourism trips within the preceding year. Their destination histories included Gunung Ledang, Kampung Sungai Melayu, Air Papan, Tujuh Puteri Waterfall, Gunung Angsi, Bukit Mor, Bukit Batu Sawa, Lata Changkah, and Taman Negara Pulau Pinang. These experiences encompassed waterfalls, mountain trails, coastal areas, and mangrove environments, providing contextual variation within the sample. Gunung Ledang appeared in four participants' travel histories, offering a shared destination reference for comparison across accounts. Participant characteristics and travel histories are presented in Table 1.

Participants' social media engagement included destination discovery, practical preparation, and post-visit sharing. TikTok and Instagram appeared in their accounts, making the sample relevant for exploring how digital narratives shaped interpretations of ecotourism experiences.

Sample justification and thematic saturation

The sample was selected for its relevance to the focused research objective. Participants shared experience of ecotourism travel and engagement with social media while differing in their destination histories and evaluations. This combination supported comparison of recurring patterns alongside variation in individual accounts.

Sample sufficiency was assessed through the authors' determination of thematic saturation within the scope of the inquiry. The reported thematic structure encompassed social media influence, content preferences, digital infrastructure gaps, expectations in relation to experience, and sharing after visits. Saturation referred to whether these themes were sufficient to interpret the research question within the participant group.

Variation within themes added analytical depth. For example, frustration with absent digital features and acceptance of their absence represented contrasting interpretations within the theme concerning expectations and experience. These differences allowed the analysis to examine how participants evaluated similar destination conditions differently based on their expectations.

Each interview lasted between 35 and 50 minutes and covered three stages: expectation formation, destination experience, and subsequent sharing. The focused participant selection and interview coverage provided a basis for developing a detailed, contextually bounded interpretation of the experiences studied.

Interview guide and data collection

A semi-structured narrative interview guide was developed around the research objective. The guide addressed participants' engagement with digital travel content before visiting, their interpretation of destination experiences, and their sharing practices after the visit.

The guide was reviewed for alignment with the research objective and pre-tested with one participant to refine question clarity and sequencing. This preparation helped organise the interviews around participants' travel experiences and digital engagement.

Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts retained participants' wording and provided the textual material for thematic analysis. Interview accounts connected the digital representations encountered before travel with participants' descriptions of their visits and subsequent sharing.

Data analysis

The data were analysed thematically through inductive coding combined with theoretically informed interpretation. Inductive coding supported identifying patterns within participant accounts, while interpretation connected these patterns with expectations, experiential evaluation, and destination representation. Qualitative interviews and thematic analysis have also been applied in tourism technology research to explore experiential value (Cranmer et al., 2020).

The analysis identified five themes comprising social media influence, content preferences, digital infrastructure gaps, expectations in relation to experience, and sharing after visits. Coding

was cross-checked among researchers to support scrutiny of the interpretations. A thematic network was produced using ATLAS.ti to show how the themes were organised.

Participant quotations linked the findings to the interview material. For example, P1's statement, "A TikTok video about a beautiful waterfall at Gunung Ledang influenced me to go there," illustrated social media influence on reported destination choice. P5's statement, "There was no mention of immersive digital technology online, so the experience matched," illustrated alignment between expectations and the reported encounter.

The interpretation preserved distinctions between destination choice, experiential evaluation, and subsequent sharing. Contrasting accounts were retained to represent variation in participants' expectations and responses to digital provision.

Trustworthiness

Researcher cross-checking supported the examination of coding and thematic interpretation. Quotations provided a direct link between participant accounts and the findings, keeping the analysis's evidential basis visible.

Attention to contrasting accounts strengthened the interpretation. The findings incorporated differences between participants who expressed frustration with absent digital features and those who considered their experiences consistent with expectations. This approach preserved variation within the sample and supported a nuanced account of digitally constructed expectations.

Participant profiles and destination histories provided contextual information for interpreting the accounts. Together with the quotations and thematic organisation, this information supported the coherence of the findings with the research objective.

Ethical considerations

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before recording interviews. Confidentiality was maintained through participant identifiers P1 to P5. Interview quotations were attributed to these identifiers rather than participants' names

Findings

Profile of Participants

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics and travel exposure of the five Generation Z participants in this study. Participants ranged from 21 to 24 years old and represented a mix of rural, suburban, and semi-urban backgrounds. This variation matters, as rural-origin travellers often engage with ecotourism differently from their urban peers, particularly in accessibility expectations and cultural familiarity with natural landscapes (Bricker & Kariithi, 2024; Duong et al., 2024). Each participant reported between two and three domestic ecotourism trips within the past year, indicating a shared behavioural pattern of frequent nature-based travel, consistent with trends in youth-led sustainable tourism (Dube & Ezeh, 2025).

The destinations visited span a wide ecological spectrum: highland trails (Gunung Angsi, Bukit Mor), waterfalls (Tujuh Puteri, Lata Changkah), mangrove ecosystems (Kampung Sungai Melayu), and island-based parks (Taman Negara Pulau Pinang). This diversity underscores the

need for inclusive infrastructure strategies that cater to varied terrain, climatic conditions, and site management levels (Abdurakhmanova & Ahrorov, 2025). Moreover, the recurrence of Gunung Ledang as a focal site among four participants highlights both the site's symbolic status and its digital prominence, particularly through visual content on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram.

The composition of this sample reflects what Aman et al. (2024) describe as the "digitally conditioned tourist gaze", where destination choices are influenced by aesthetics, peer validation, and platform visibility. Although the participants differ in origin and specific site exposure, they exhibit a common reliance on social media for destination discovery, content evaluation, and post-trip sharing, supporting existing research on digital influence within Gen Z travel ecosystems (Batala & Slevitch, 2024)

Table 1: Profile of Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Place of Origin	No. of Domestic Trips	Ecotourism Sites Visited
P1	22	Female	Suburban	2	Gunung Ledang Waterfall, Kampung Sungai Melayu Ecotourism (Johor)
P2	22	Male	Rural	2	Gunung Ledang, Tujuh Puteri Waterfall, Gunung Angsi, Bukit Mor, Bukit Batu Sawa
P3	24	Female	Rural	3	Air Papan Village (Mersing), Gunung Ledang, Lata Changkah (Terengganu)
P4	23	Female	Jitra, Kedah	2	Taman Negara Pulau Pinang
P5	21	Female	Suburban	2	Gunung Ledang, Kampung Sungai Melayu Ecotourism (Johor)

Research Objective One

To explore how digitally active Generation Z travellers construct their satisfaction, behavioural intentions, and perceptions of the competitiveness of ecotourism destinations through engagement with immersive technologies and social media platforms. The findings in Table 2 illustrate that the thematic analysis of interviews with Generation Z ecotourists in Malaysia revealed five key themes: social media influence, content preferences, digital infrastructure gap, expectation versus reality, and post-visit sharing. These themes illustrate the nuanced role of digital platforms in shaping satisfaction, behavioural intention, and destination competitiveness in ecotourism contexts.

Social media platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram, have emerged as dominant sources for pre-trip decision-making. Participants consistently mentioned that destination videos and influencer posts influenced their travel intentions. For instance, P1 shared, "*A TikTok video about a beautiful waterfall at Gunung Ledang influenced me to go there*." Similarly, P2 highlighted, "*TikTok helps us choose the destination if the video gives a positive impression,"* supporting

findings that digital storytelling and visual content drive emotional engagement and cognitive appraisal in travel choices (Nogueira et al., 2024). Content preferences among Gen Z travellers revolved around authentic visuals, ambient sounds, and personal narratives. These attributes align with experiential marketing strategies that resonate with younger demographics, as described by Aman et al. (2024). Participant P3 noted a preference for content that "*highlights natural beauty, local culture, and peaceful environments*," confirming the value of sensory-rich, relatable narratives.

The findings from this study illustrate a critical paradox in the digital engagement of Generation Z within ecotourism, revealing both opportunities and limitations in how immersive technologies and social media marketing shape satisfaction, behavioural intention, and perceptions of destination competitiveness. The strong influence of social media platforms on pre-trip decision-making affirms the central role of digital storytelling in guiding tourist choices. As noted by Nogueira et al. (2024), experiential marketing thrives on emotionally resonant narratives and sensory-rich content, which was reflected in participants' emphasis on authenticity, natural beauty, and local culture. This alignment underscores that social media does not merely serve as an information channel but rather as a dynamic ecosystem in which affective and cognitive appraisals converge to drive behavioural intention. Aman et al. (2024) further argue that branding strategies rooted in authenticity and experiential resonance are essential for sustainable competitiveness, a point substantiated by participants' preference for relatable and immersive narratives over polished promotional content.

The narratives of Generation Z travellers reveal a complex interplay between digital mediation and the construction of ecotourism experiences. Participants consistently framed their encounters with nature through the lens of digital platforms, using social media not only as a space for representation but also as a structuring agent of expectations and satisfaction. This aligns with broader findings in tourism scholarship, which argue that digital platforms no longer operate merely as post-visit communication tools but also shape pre-visit imaginaries and on-site orientations (Cranmer, Tom Dieck, & Fountoulaki, 2020; Yung & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019). The interviews suggest that the boundary between information search and experience consumption has become increasingly blurred for this cohort. A recurring theme was the reliance on peer-generated content rather than official promotional channels. Participants described browsing TikTok videos and Instagram reels to evaluate whether an ecotourism site offered "Instagrammable" spots, smooth mobility, or digital interpretation opportunities. This aligns with recent studies indicating that user-generated content often holds a higher trust value than formal destination branding among younger travellers (Imbert-Bouchard, 2023; Chanda, Sajnani, & Gowreesunkar, 2022). Such dependence on peer content underscores a shift in authority from institutional actors to networks of digitally active peers. In addition, it also exposes a vulnerability, as content often highlights spectacular rather than infrastructural aspects, leaving accessibility, queuing, or sustainability conditions underrepresented in pre-visit decision-making.

However, a noticeable gap in digital infrastructure persisted across ecotourism sites. Most participants reported a lack of immersive tools such as AR trails, QR guides, or gamified experiences. As P3 stated, "*There were no advanced or modern digital features,"* reflecting the tension between digital expectations and infrastructural limitations, which previous research attributes to the uneven nature of digital adoption in nature-based tourism (Chanda et al., 2022). This digital mismatch also influenced satisfaction levels. While some visitors accepted the absence

of tech features as part of the nature-centric appeal, others expressed frustration. P2 commented, "*There is none, so it is frustrating,"* pointing to a divergence between perceived competitiveness and actual onsite experiences. Another prominent finding was the expectation of layered digital engagement during the on-site experience. Several respondents indicated disappointment when their visit did not align with the immersive cues established through social media previews. For example, they anticipated QR-based storytelling, interactive signposting, or digital trail guides, but found only static signage and limited interpretation. This expectation gap aligns with evidence from the smart tourism literature, which suggests that uneven digital adoption poses reputational risks and undermines competitiveness (Chowdhary, Dasgupta, Jamader, & Kumar, 2025; Wahab & Akintade, 2025). It illustrates how young travellers' perception of value is partly contingent on the degree of digital responsiveness they encounter on-site.

Ghaderi et al. (2025) highlight the gap between virtual promotion and real-world experience as a risk to brand authenticity in smart tourism cities. The absence of immersive technological infrastructure within ecotourism sites revealed a significant disconnect between digital expectations and physical delivery. The lack of augmented reality trails, QR-linked guides, and interactive features reported by participants echoes earlier concerns raised by Chanda et al. (2022) regarding uneven adoption of smart tourism technologies in rural and nature-based contexts. This mismatch is not merely a technical limitation but one that directly impacts destination competitiveness, as perceptions of innovation and authenticity are increasingly intertwined. Ghaderi et al. (2025) caution that when digital promotion raises expectations that are not matched on-site, brand credibility risks erosion, undermining the very competitiveness destinations seek to cultivate. In this sense, the frustration expressed by participants highlights a deeper structural challenge in which ecotourism providers are caught between preserving the natural essence of destinations and responding to the digital immersion demands of a technology-savvy generation.

Post-visit reflections revealed a strong inclination toward content creation. Participants actively shared their experiences to inspire others and enhance their personal memories. P5 shared, "*I posted a photo dump on TikTok to share my visit and promote ecotourism*." This supports the idea that user-generated content is not merely expressive but also contributes to destination branding (Dube & Ezeh, 2025). The findings also highlight tourists' active role as co-creators of branding through post-visit content sharing. The inclination to document and disseminate experiences through platforms such as TikTok or Instagram reflects the transition from tourists as passive consumers to active marketers, reinforcing Dube and Ezeh's (2025) argument that user-generated content has become integral to ecotourism marketing. This form of digital advocacy is particularly valuable in contexts where financial or infrastructural resources for professional marketing are limited, as it extends the reach of destinations while embedding them in the authentic voices of travellers. Nevertheless, such reliance on user-generated narratives also raises concerns about representational bias, since viral content may prioritise aesthetic appeal over sustainability principles, a concern that Kesavan and Polisetty (2025) address in their call for a balanced integration of technology with ecological stewardship.

Behavioural intention also emerged as closely linked to the social performativity of ecotourism. Respondents often tied their likelihood of revisiting or recommending a site to its capacity to provide "shareable moments." This aligns with research suggesting that experiences with strong narrative and visual qualities have a multiplier effect in digital ecosystems because

they encourage re-circulation through networks (Baldeón, Cazorla, Díaz, & Acosta, 2025; Cabeleira & Vaz de Carvalho, 2025). Importantly, satisfaction was not described solely in terms of ecological beauty or physical infrastructure, but also in terms of the site's ability to support content creation that resonated with their digital persona. This finding complicates traditional satisfaction models in tourism that emphasise service delivery and facility adequacy (Aman, Papp-Váry, Kangai, & Odunga, 2024). For Generation Z, satisfaction is relational, combining ecological encounter with digital affordances that enable identity expression.

A further point of tension arises in the extent to which digital infrastructures should be integrated into ecotourism without compromising its ecological principles. Bricker and Kariithi (2024) emphasise that ecotourism must remain grounded in sustainability and community well-being, warning against over-technologization that risks commodifying natural landscapes. The present findings reinforce this caution, as some participants perceived the lack of immersive technology as congruent with the nature-centric authenticity of ecotourism rather than a deficiency. This illustrates a nuanced differentiation within Generation Z, where digital affinity does not necessarily translate into universal demand for technological augmentation. Instead, it points toward a more context-sensitive expectation: technology should enhance interpretation and accessibility without diluting the destination's core ecological and cultural value.

Table 2: Inductive Thematic Analysis

Code	Theme	Quote 1	Quote 2	Quote 3	Participants
Social Media Influence	Trip Planning and Destination Choice	*A TikTok video about a beautiful waterfall at Gunung Ledang influenced me to go there.*	*Using TikTok as a guide, like how they prepare equipment, food and how to get there.*	*I came across a viral TikTok video showcasing breathtaking scenery and clear river waters.*	P1, P2, P3
Content Preferences	Digital Aesthetics and Storytelling	*I like clear photos or videos with natural sounds or peaceful background music.*	*What attracts me most is authentic visuals and storytelling that highlight the natural beauty.*	*I'm most attracted to digital content that shows hidden nature spots, eco-friendly activities, and local lifestyles.*	P1, P3, P5
Lack of Immersive Features	Digital Infrastructure Gap	*There were no immersive digital*	*No. Just a map trail as a signboard at the*	*No, unfortunately, the place did not have any*	P1, P2, P3

Code	Theme	Quote 1	Quote 2	Quote 3	Participants
		features at both Gunung Ledang and Kampung Sungai Melayu.	*entrance but there is an online guide from the internet.*	*immersive digital features or guided tech.*	
Digital Mismatch	Expectation vs. Reality	*Yes, what I saw online mostly focused on nature experiences, not on digital tools.*	*Some facilities like internet connection or navigation apps didn't always work smoothly.*	*There was no mention of immersive digital technology online, so the experience matched.*	P1, P3, P5
Post-Visit Sharing	Social Media Expression and Influence	*I posted photos and videos on Instagram and TikTok to share the experience.*	*Yes, I did post it on my Instagram story because I think that place should be known.*	*Yes, I posted a photo dump on TikTok to promote ecotourism.*	P1, P4, P5

Taken together, these insights advance the discourse on ecotourism competitiveness by suggesting that the challenge lies not simply in adopting immersive technologies but in embedding them within user-centred and sustainable frameworks. Das et al. (2025) underscore the importance of strategic digital investment to avoid obsolescence in tourism, while Kesavan and Polisetty (2025) propose integrative models that reconcile technology, sustainability, and visitor satisfaction. The evidence from this study supports these perspectives, indicating that the future of ecotourism in Malaysia depends on moving beyond promotional reliance on social media toward infrastructural innovations that bridge the gap between expectations and experiences. However, such adoption must be carefully calibrated, ensuring that ecological preservation and cultural authenticity remain at the heart of competitive positioning.

Continuation of Findings Objective 1

The thematic mapping, Illustrative 1, from Atlas.ti reveals five central domains that interlock to explain how immersive digital technologies and social media marketing influence the satisfaction and behavioural intention of Gen Z tourists in Malaysian ecotourism.

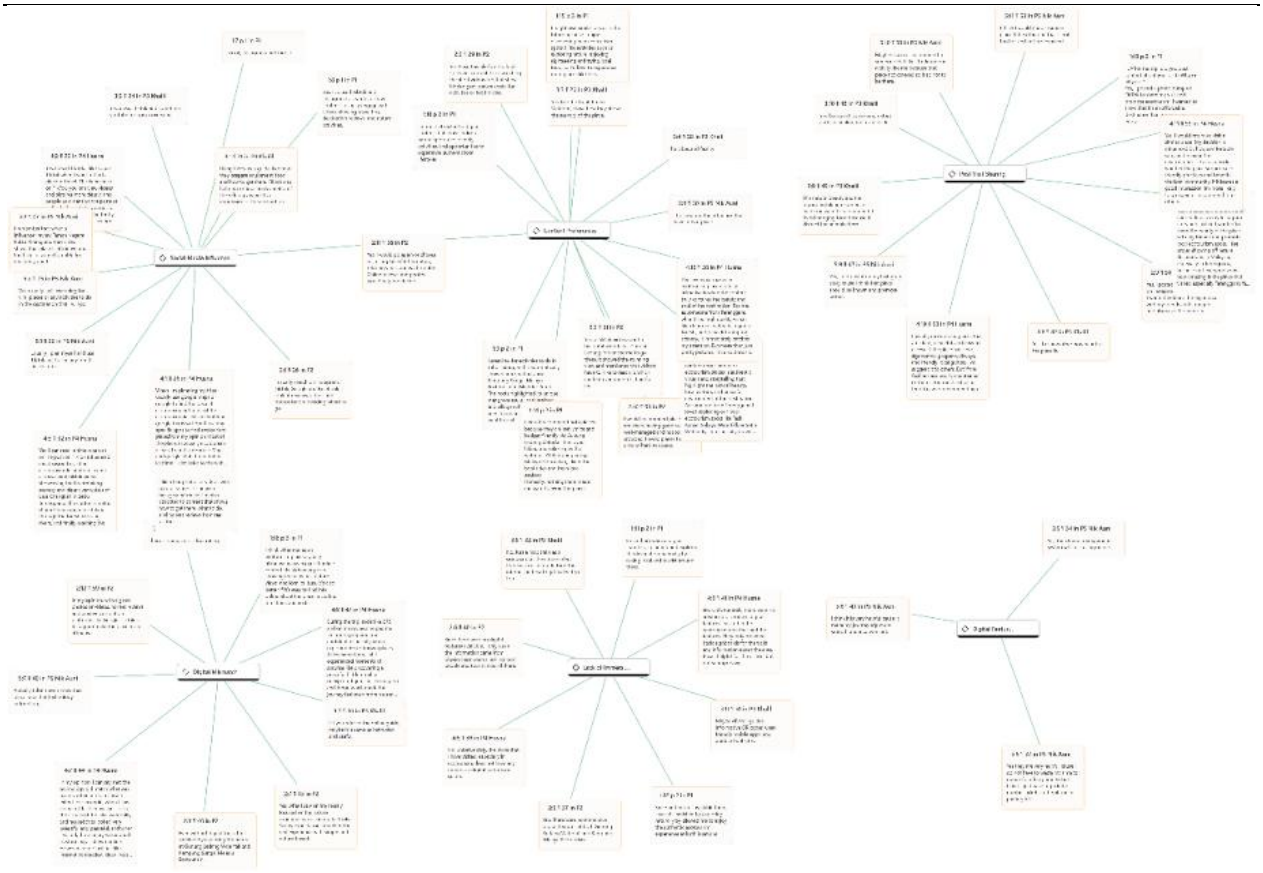
Content Preferences and Digital Curation

The node Content Preferences clusters participant expectations around clarity, emotional appeal, and functional relevance. Short-form videos with high visual fidelity, ambient music, and personal storytelling were most cited. For instance, P4 observed, "*The vibes and facility are what attract me the most in travel content*." This confirms previous research on experiential marketing in ecotourism, which indicates that emotionally resonant visuals directly influence both cognitive and affective responses (Nogueira et al., 2024). Participants showed an affinity for curated narratives that simultaneously inform and emotionally engage, echoing findings by Aman et al. (2024) on destination branding through digital storytelling.

The thematic mapping indicates that immersive digital technologies and social media exert influence on Generation Z ecotourists through five interconnected domains. Content preferences highlight the importance of authentic and emotionally resonant visuals. Participants valued short-form videos that were clear, featured ambient sounds, and had narrative depth, supporting earlier work that positions experiential marketing as central to shaping both affective and cognitive responses (Nogueira et al., 2024; Aman et al., 2024).

Social Media as Decision Trigger

Across interviews, Social Media Influence emerged as the strongest determinant for destination choice. TikTok, Instagram, and Google functioned as layered filters for pre-trip decisions. P3 reflected, "*A TikTok video about Gunung Ledang really made me want to go. It showed how to get there and how beautiful it was*." These affective impressions, supported by social proof in the comment sections, operate as a trust proxy in the absence of formal destination websites, paralleling the observations by Thong et al. (2022) on social media as a gateway to ecotourism engagement in protected areas. Social media as a decision trigger underscores the authority of platforms such as TikTok and Instagram in pre-trip planning, where social proof and peer validation substitute for institutional sources, reflecting similar findings on ecotourism engagement in protected areas (Thong et al., 2022; Dube & Ezeh, 2025).



Illustrative 1:Thematic Network View Atlas.ti

Research Discussions

The findings indicate a substantive shift in how ecotourism experiences are constructed and evaluated among Generation Z, in which digitally mediated narratives serve as primary reference points for expectation formation and post hoc evaluation. Rather than grounding satisfaction in material attributes such as infrastructure or service quality, participants relied on socially circulated representations to interpret their experiences. This supports emerging arguments that digital storytelling functions not merely as a promotional tool but as a constitutive force in shaping cognitive and affective engagement (Nogueira et al., 2024; Thong et al., 2022) . In this context, destination competitiveness becomes increasingly symbolic, derived from visibility, relatability, and narrative resonance rather than from objectively verifiable conditions (Aman et al., 2024).

However, this shift raises critical tensions. The privileging of user-generated content introduces representational bias, where highly aestheticised narratives may obscure ecological realities or sustainability constraints. As highlighted in recent tourism discourse, such distortions risk undermining authentic destination positioning and long-term sustainability objectives (Dube & Ezeh, 2025; Chowdhary et al., 2025) . Moreover, the expectation gap identified in this study suggests that satisfaction is no longer a direct outcome of service delivery but a negotiated alignment between imagined and interpreted experiences. This complicates traditional satisfaction

models and calls for a re-evaluation of how tourism value is conceptualised in digitally saturated environments.

Summary of Research Results

This study demonstrates that ecotourism experiences among Generation Z are increasingly shaped by digitally mediated narratives rather than direct engagement with physical destination attributes. Social media platforms function as primary spaces for expectation formation, influencing how travellers interpret satisfaction and behavioural intention. The findings highlight the emergence of a digitally constructed expectation gap, where imagined experiences derived from user-generated content shape evaluative judgement more strongly than objective conditions. This suggests that perceived destination competitiveness is no longer determined solely by infrastructure or service quality but is increasingly constructed through narrative visibility and digital engagement (Aman et al., 2024; Dube & Ezeh, 2025) .

Overall, the study contributes to a growing body of literature that reconceptualises tourism as a socially constructed and digitally mediated phenomenon. It underscores the need for destination stakeholders to critically engage with digital storytelling practices to ensure that promotional narratives align with sustainable tourism principles and authentic visitor experiences.

Recommendations

Destination stakeholders should move beyond conventional promotion strategies and engage more strategically with digital storytelling ecosystems. Rather than relying solely on curated marketing content, destinations need to facilitate authentic user-generated narratives that reflect both experiential value and sustainability principles. This includes encouraging participatory content creation while ensuring that representations do not distort ecological realities or create unrealistic expectations. In line with contemporary destination branding discourse, narrative consistency between digital representation and experiential delivery is critical for maintaining credibility and long-term competitiveness (Aman et al., 2024)

Additionally, policymakers and practitioners should adopt a more reflexive approach to digital engagement by monitoring how destinations are portrayed across platforms and identifying gaps between expectation and experience. Integrating digital literacy into tourism management practices may also help mitigate representational bias and enhance responsible content dissemination. Future research should expand the empirical scope by incorporating larger samples and mixed-method approaches to strengthen generalisability and theoretical robustness.

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