

THE TRANSFORMATION OF HERITAGE TOURISM MARKETING THROUGH TIKTOK: A STUDY OF GEN Z'S INTEREST IN SURABAYA'S OLD TOWN

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines how TikTok transforms heritage tourism marketing by influencing Generation Z's interest in Surabaya's Old Town. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through interviews, observation, and content analysis of TikTok content related to the site. The findings show that TikTok's short-form videos, enhanced by music, visuals, and storytelling, effectively attract Gen Z by presenting heritage as both educational and entertaining. Interactive features such as challenges and comment engagement further strengthen user participation. The study contributes to tourism communication research by demonstrating how digital platforms reshape heritage narratives for younger audiences. Limitations include the single-case focus and reliance on self-reported perceptions. Future research should explore cross-platform comparisons and longitudinal impacts.



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1. Introduction

Heritage tourism is increasingly reliant on digital communication strategies to remain relevant in the social media era. Among these platforms, TikTok has emerged as a powerful medium for cultural promotion, particularly among Generation Z, whose learning and consumption patterns are shaped by short, visually engaging content. With over 100 million active users in Indonesia, TikTok not only entertains but also functions as a vehicle for education, lifestyle influence, and tourism marketing.

Globally, short-form video platforms have disrupted traditional marketing approaches by enabling instant engagement through personalized algorithms. In destinations such as Europe, North America, and East Asia, heritage sites are increasingly leveraging

TikTok to appeal to younger visitors. However, studies on Southeast Asia remain limited, and Indonesian heritage tourism has been slower to adopt these innovations. This creates an important research space, particularly given Indonesia's demographic profile in which Gen Z forms a significant proportion of the digital population.

Surabaya's Old Town represents a unique yet underdeveloped heritage destination. Despite its historical significance and potential for cultural tourism, visitor growth has stagnated in recent years. Traditional promotional methods have struggled to attract younger audiences, creating an urgent need for innovative marketing approaches. TikTok's popularity among Gen Z offers an opportunity to revitalize interest in Surabaya's Old Town by presenting heritage as dynamic, shareable, and personally relevant.

Previous research has examined the role of social media in tourism promotion, yet limited studies have focused specifically on TikTok as a tool for heritage marketing. Moreover, while Instagram and YouTube have been widely studied, TikTok's unique algorithm, storytelling style, and participatory culture remain underexplored in the context of heritage destinations. This study addresses that gap by investigating how TikTok influences Gen Z's perception and engagement with Surabaya's Old Town.

The objectives of this research are threefold: (1) to analyze the communication strategies used in TikTok content related to Surabaya's Old Town; (2) to examine how Gen Z perceives and responds to these strategies; and (3) to evaluate TikTok's effectiveness in transforming heritage tourism marketing. By doing so, the study contributes to both theoretical discussions of digital communication and practical insights for heritage destination managers.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how TikTok is used to promote heritage tourism in Surabaya's Old Town and how Generation Z perceives this content. A multi-method strategy was adopted, combining interviews, participant observation, and content analysis to ensure data triangulation and validity.

Three complementary techniques were used for data collection:

- a. Content Analysis – Thirty TikTok videos featuring Surabaya's Old Town were purposively selected between January and March 2025. Selection criteria included: (a) relevance to Surabaya's Old Town, (b) high engagement (likes, comments, shares), and (c) use of trending sounds or hashtags. Each video was analyzed for themes such as visuals, music, storytelling, and interactivity.
- b. Interviews – Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 informants: 10 Gen Z TikTok users, 3 local content creators, and 2 representatives of Surabaya's tourism office. Questions focused on perceptions of TikTok's effectiveness, motivations for engagement, and attitudes toward heritage tourism.
- c. Observation – The researcher observed online interactions within TikTok comment sections and conducted offline visits to Surabaya's Old Town to compare digital portrayals with the physical site. Field notes were taken to document audience behavior and local tourism dynamics.

Data were analyzed thematically following Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Codes were first generated inductively from TikTok content and interview transcripts, then grouped into categories such as 'visual appeal,' 'storytelling,' 'engagement features,' and 'perceived tourism value.' Patterns across

these categories were compared to identify communication strategies and their influence on Gen Z perceptions.

Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources (videos, interviews, observations) and methods (qualitative coding, thematic analysis, member checking). Member checking involved sharing preliminary interpretations with two content creators and three informants to verify accuracy. Reflexive notes were also maintained to minimize researcher bias.

Participants provided informed consent before interviews. Identities were anonymized to protect confidentiality, and TikTok comments were cited without personal identifiers. As the study involved publicly available content, ethical guidelines for digital ethnography were followed.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings are presented in three parts: (1) demographic overview of participants, (2) communication strategies used in TikTok content, and (3) Generation Z's perceptions of Surabaya's Old Town.

a. Demographic Overview

The 15 interview participants consisted of 10 Gen Z TikTok users (ages 18–24), three local content creators, and two tourism officials. Among Gen Z respondents, 70% were university students and 30% were early-career professionals. All reported daily TikTok use, averaging 2–3 hours, with most following at least one travel- or heritage-related account.

b. Communication Strategies in TikTok Content

Analysis of 30 selected TikTok videos revealed four dominant strategies:

- Visual Storytelling – Cinematic shots of colonial architecture, street views, and local activities portrayed Surabaya's Old Town as attractive and "Instagrammable." Use of filters and transitions enhanced visual appeal.
- Music and Trending Sounds – Popular audio tracks were integrated into nearly all videos, boosting algorithmic visibility and relatability.
- Interactive Features – Challenges, polls, and hashtag campaigns (#SurabayaHeritage, #OldTownChallenge) were widely used to spark user participation and peer-to-peer sharing.
- Personal Narratives – "Day in the life" stories and first-person narrations made heritage experiences relatable, presenting Old Town not only as a historical site but also a social and lifestyle destination.

c. Gen Z Perceptions and Tourism Interest.

The findings reveal that TikTok content has significantly reshaped how Generation Z perceives heritage tourism, particularly in the case of Surabaya's Old Town. Unlike traditional approaches that often emphasize historical facts or static imagery, TikTok presents heritage sites as dynamic, engaging, and socially relevant spaces. This reframing aligns with Gen Z's preference for experiences that combine entertainment with education.

Firstly, TikTok content redefines heritage as *trendy and accessible*. Through visually appealing storytelling and popular music, Old Town is portrayed not as a distant historical site but as an aesthetic and enjoyable destination. This perspective encourages Gen Z to view heritage visits as compatible with their lifestyle and social media practices, such as posting photos or videos that reinforce personal identity.

Secondly, TikTok exerts a direct influence on *travel intentions*. A majority of respondents reported feeling motivated to visit Surabaya's Old Town after watching engaging content. For many, the decision to travel was strengthened by peer interaction, where users tagged friends in comments or planned group visits. This reflects the social dimension of Gen Z tourism behavior, where decisions are often collective and mediated by digital platforms.

Thirdly, TikTok fosters a sense of *virtual community*. Active comment sections, hashtag challenges, and interactive features create spaces for dialogue and shared enthusiasm. These interactions not only build anticipation for visits but also strengthen emotional ties between individuals and heritage narratives. The process transforms heritage from a passive learning subject into a participatory experience where Gen Z feels ownership and involvement.

Taken together, these perceptions indicate that TikTok is more than a promotional channel; it is a platform that integrates heritage tourism into the social and cultural lives of younger audiences. By aligning with Gen Z's values of connectivity, interactivity, and authenticity, TikTok has the potential to convert digital engagement into real-world tourism interest.

d. Broader Theoretical and Practical Implications

From a **theoretical perspective**, the study demonstrates how TikTok reshapes heritage communication through the principles of participatory culture and identity construction. The use of short-form video, trending sounds, and interactive challenges illustrates Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) notion of social media as a co-creative space where cultural narratives are not only disseminated by institutions but also actively reshaped by audiences. Moreover, the tendency of Gen Z to frame heritage visits as lifestyle expressions aligns with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, highlighting how self-presentation in digital spaces contributes to the redefinition of cultural experiences. This suggests that heritage marketing research must move beyond traditional promotional models to account for digital performativity and community-driven engagement.

The study also contributes to the growing body of work on **experiential tourism**. By highlighting how TikTok integrates entertainment and learning, the results affirm that younger audiences seek meaningful experiences that combine education with enjoyment. This supports Richards' (2018) view that cultural tourism is increasingly defined by experience-based consumption rather than passive observation. In this sense, heritage sites are not merely consumed as historical spaces but are transformed into interactive environments that resonate with contemporary youth identities.

From a **practical perspective**, the research provides several insights for tourism stakeholders. First, destination managers and local governments should recognize TikTok as a strategic communication tool, not simply an entertainment platform. By collaborating with content creators, they can craft campaigns that emphasize visual storytelling, authenticity, and interactivity. Second, content should be designed to align with Gen Z values, such as inclusivity, creativity, and community participation. Third, tourism boards must anticipate the risks of overexposure and superficial engagement by ensuring that digital campaigns are supported with on-site educational resources and sustainable visitor management strategies.

Finally, the findings highlight the importance of integrating **cross-platform strategies**. While TikTok is effective in generating initial interest, it should complement other platforms like Instagram and YouTube that allow for longer-form storytelling and

deeper engagement. A holistic approach would ensure that digital marketing not only drives visitation but also nurtures long-term appreciation of cultural heritage.

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The findings confirm TikTok's role as a transformative medium for heritage tourism marketing among Gen Z.

a. TikTok as a Driver of Heritage Reframing:

By aestheticizing Old Town through visual storytelling, TikTok repositions heritage as fashionable and engaging. This supports Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) theory that social media enables the co-creation of cultural narratives. Unlike static promotional materials, TikTok's immersive short videos align with Gen Z's preference for dynamic, entertaining information (Prensky, 2001).

b. Interactivity and Community Engagement:

Challenges, hashtags, and comment-based interaction highlight TikTok's participatory culture. Rather than functioning solely as a broadcasting tool, the platform facilitates

- collaborative marketing. This aligns with Richards' (2018) notion that tourism communication increasingly depends on co-creation between institutions and audiences.
- c. **Personal Narratives and Identity Performance:**
The use of first-person storytelling links heritage tourism to Gen Z's identity construction in digital spaces. This reflects Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical view of self-presentation, where TikTok enables users to frame heritage visits as part of their social and lifestyle identity.
 - d. **Critical Considerations:**
While effective for visibility, TikTok also poses risks. The platform's algorithm prioritizes entertainment, which can lead to superficial engagement with heritage, echoing Smith's (2021) critique of digital heritage marketing. There is also the risk of commodifying cultural assets as lifestyle backdrops rather than fostering appreciation of historical value. Moreover, increased visitation driven by viral content could strain local infrastructure, underscoring the need for sustainable tourism management (UNESCO, 2019).
 - e. **Positioning in Broader Scholarship:**
Compared with earlier research on Instagram and YouTube tourism promotion (Utami, 2022; Yuliana, 2021), this study highlights TikTok's unique advantages: short-form storytelling, algorithmic discoverability, and viral interactivity. Nonetheless, the platform should complement, rather than replace, broader digital strategies to maximize long-term effectiveness.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that TikTok plays a transformative role in heritage tourism marketing by reshaping how Generation Z perceives and engages with Surabaya's Old Town. Through strategies such as visual storytelling, trending sounds, interactive features, and personal narratives, TikTok reframes the site as both culturally significant and socially appealing. The findings indicate that this digital engagement not only enhances awareness but also motivates travel intentions and fosters online communities that support heritage promotion.

Theoretically, the research contributes to digital communication studies by showing how social media platforms co-create cultural narratives and influence identity performances in tourism contexts. Practically, the study provides insights for tourism managers and content creators to adopt creative, participatory, and Gen Z-oriented approaches in heritage promotion.

Nevertheless, the study has limitations. Its scope was confined to a single case study with a small sample size, which may limit generalizability. In addition, reliance on self-reported perceptions does not capture long-term behavioral changes. Future research could expand this study by conducting cross-platform comparisons, integrating quantitative measures of engagement, and examining longitudinal impacts of digital campaigns on actual visitation patterns.

In conclusion, TikTok should not be viewed as a replacement for traditional or other digital platforms but as a complementary tool within integrated heritage marketing strategies. When used responsibly and supported by sustainable tourism planning, TikTok has the potential to revitalize heritage destinations and bridge the gap between cultural preservation and youth engagement.

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