

Exploring the travel motivations of Gen Z students in the context of digital media: a qualitative study in Thai Nguyen

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ABSTRACT:

This study explores the travel motivations of Gen Z students in the context of digital media in Thai Nguyen. The article adopts an exploratory qualitative approach, with data collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 university students aged between 18 and 22. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The research findings identify six prominent groups of travel motivations among Gen Z students, including: exploration and new experiences; relaxation and escape from academic pressure; check-in and the pursuit of aesthetic value; social connection; following trends and influence from digital communities; and self-expression on social media. The findings show that digital media does not replace traditional travel motivations, but contributes to making these motivations more visual, specific, and shareable. Digital content such as short videos, reviews, destination images, and friends' sharing helps stimulate inspiration, shape destination images, and extend travel experiences into online spaces. The study contributes to a better understanding of Gen Z travel behavior and suggests implications for destination communication, tourism businesses, and media organizations when approaching young travelers.

KEYWORDS: *Gen Z; travel motivation; digital media; social media; qualitative study; Thai Nguyen.*

Date of Submission: 06-06-2026

Date of acceptance: 16-06-2026

I. INTRODUCTION

Digital media is transforming the way tourists imagine, choose, and share travel experiences. Through social media, short videos, check-in images, online reviews, and user-generated content, destinations are no longer known merely as geographical spaces, but are also represented as experiences that can be seen, felt, and desired even before the trip takes place (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Leung et al., 2013). This change is particularly evident among Gen Z, a generation that has grown up with the internet and social media, for whom watching travel videos, reading reviews, saving places, following trends, and sharing experiences have become familiar parts of the process through which the desire to travel is formed (Dimitriou & AbouElgheit, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2021).

Travel motivation has long been regarded as an important factor in explaining why individuals develop the desire to leave their usual place of residence in search of different experiences. Classic studies have shown that travel motivation may be associated with the need to escape from familiar environments, rest, seek novelty, engage in social interaction, learn, and affirm oneself (Dann, 1977; Crompton, 1979). However, travel motivation is not an immutable phenomenon; it may change according to tourists' experiences, age, living context, and socio-technological conditions (Pearce & Lee, 2005). In the context of digital media, the travel motivations of Gen Z students may therefore both inherit traditional motivations and manifest themselves in new ways, such as check-ins, content creation, following trends, experiencing places that are being widely circulated, or constructing a personal image on social media.

Although many studies have addressed the role of digital media in information search, destination choice, and travel intention, studies that examine in depth how Gen Z students themselves interpret their travel motivations in the digital media environment remain limited (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Dimitriou & AbouElgheit, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2021). In particular, in Thai Nguyen, a locality with a large student population but not a major tourism center, understanding the travel motivations of this group can provide additional noteworthy practical insights.

Based on the above research gap, this study aims to explore the travel motivations of Gen Z students in the context of digital media in Thai Nguyen. The study focuses on clarifying the prominent travel motivations of Gen Z students, how digital media stimulates or shapes these motivations, and which types of digital content play a notable role in fostering the desire to travel. The research findings are expected to contribute to a better understanding of Gen Z travel behavior, while also suggesting several implications for destination communication and the design of travel experiences suited to young travelers.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Travel motivation

Travel motivation is one of the fundamental concepts in tourist behavior research and is used to explain why individuals develop the desire to leave their usual place of residence, choose destinations, and participate in tourism activities. In essence, travel motivation reflects the needs, desires, or internal driving forces that lead individuals to seek different experiences through travel (Dann, 1977; Crompton, 1979).

Classic studies show that travel motivation is not only associated with the need for rest or recreation, but also includes various psychological and social dimensions. Dann (1977) emphasized the role of internal push factors within individuals, particularly the need to escape from the familiar state of everyday life and to seek self-affirmation. Crompton (1979) further identified groups of motivations such as escape from the everyday environment, self-exploration, relaxation, prestige seeking, regression, enhancement of kinship relationships, social interaction, and novelty seeking. These approaches indicate that tourism is not merely an activity of movement, but also a process through which individuals seek meaning, emotions, and social experiences by leaving their familiar living spaces.

However, travel motivation is not a fixed phenomenon. Tourists' motivations may change according to travel experience, life stage, generational characteristics, and social context. Pearce and Lee (2005) argued that travel motivation develops according to each individual's "travel career," in which accumulated experience may change the priority levels among needs such as relaxation, stimulation, personal development, social relationships, and the search for meaning. This perspective is consistent with the present study, as the travel motivations of Gen Z students need to be examined in relation to the context of digital media, where travel experiences are continuously observed, evaluated, shared, and reproduced on online platforms.

2.2. Gen Z students in the context of digital media

Gen Z is often viewed as a generation born and raised in a digital environment, where the internet, mobile devices, and social media have become familiar parts of everyday life. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z accesses information, communicates, engages in entertainment, and expresses itself through online platforms with greater frequency, thereby forming distinct characteristics in consumption behavior and experience selection (Dimitriou & AbouElgheit, 2019).

In the field of tourism, Gen Z students are a group clearly connected with digital media. Watching travel videos, reading comments, consulting reviews, saving favorite places, or following trends on social media may become part of the process through which the desire to travel is formed. Studies on Gen Z show that the travel decision-making process of this group is significantly influenced by the online environment, user-generated content, and social interactions on digital platforms (Dimitriou & AbouElgheit, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2021).

For students, generational characteristics are also associated with specific conditions related to time, finances, peer groups, and the need for experience. Travel is not only regarded as a recreational activity, but also as an opportunity to explore, expand social relationships, seek inspiration, record personal images, and share experiences with online communities. Therefore, Gen Z students in the context of digital media are an appropriate group for exploring the intersection between traditional travel motivations and new manifestations of travel behavior associated with the digital environment.

2.3. Digital media and the travel motivations of Gen Z students

Digital media in tourism can be understood as a system of online platforms, tools, and content used to transmit, share, evaluate, and disseminate information about destinations, products, services, and travel experiences. In the current context, digital media includes not only the official channels of businesses or destinations, but also social media, short videos, reviews, comments, check-in images, user-generated content, and sharing by influential individuals in the online environment (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Leung et al., 2013).

The role of digital media does not stop at providing information to tourists. Online content can make destinations become more familiar, attractive, and easier to imagine, thereby stimulating emotions, generating inspiration, and promoting the desire for experience. Fotis et al. (2012) suggested that social media may influence tourists before, during, and after the trip. This indicates that digital media participates in the entire tourism process, from the formation of ideas and destination choice to on-site experiences and post-trip sharing.

Recently, the development of short-video platforms, especially TikTok, has made the role of digital media in tourism more evident. The short, visual, easily disseminated, and algorithmically personalized characteristics of short videos enable them to quickly bring a destination, dish, activity, or travel experience to young users (Boeker & Urman, 2022; Ling et al., 2021). In this context, content from KOLs/KOCs, travel bloggers, and ordinary users may create a sense of closeness and trustworthiness compared with official promotional information, because recipients often pay attention to personal experiences, practical evaluations, and the authenticity of the sharer (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Leung et al., 2013). Therefore, when studying the travel motivations of Gen Z students, it is necessary to pay attention not only to the information-providing role of

digital media, but also to its ability to inspire, spread trends, and reinforce trust through short, visual, and experience-oriented content.

For Gen Z students, digital media may highlight or reshape travel motivations. In addition to familiar motivations such as relaxation, exploration, social interaction, and novelty seeking, this group may be motivated by the desire to check in, create content, share experiences, follow trends, or express themselves on social media. A destination may become attractive not only because of its tourism resources or service quality, but also because of the way it is narrated, seen, and circulated in the digital environment. Therefore, research on the travel motivations of Gen Z students in the context of digital media should pay attention to both the need for real-life experiences and the need for self-expression in online spaces.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed an exploratory qualitative approach to clarify the travel motivations of Gen Z students in the context of digital media. This approach is appropriate for the research objective because the article does not aim to test relationships among variables, but rather focuses on understanding how students perceive, interpret, and explain their desire to travel when exposed to tourism-related content on digital platforms.

The research participants were 30 Gen Z students studying at several higher education institutions in Thai Nguyen Province. In this study, Gen Z is understood as the group born between 1997 and 2012; the actual interview sample included students aged between 18 and 22, corresponding to those born approximately between 2004 and 2008. The research sample was selected using purposive sampling combined with convenience sampling. The selection criteria included: being a Gen Z student; studying at higher education institutions in Thai Nguyen Province; using social media or digital media platforms; having searched for, viewed, or consulted online tourism content; having travel experience or a desire to travel; and voluntarily participating in the interviews. The number of 30 participants was determined to ensure relative diversity in travel experiences, digital media use habits, and the ways students explained their travel motivations. The interview process was stopped when the data tended to become repetitive and no substantially new themes emerged.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This form allowed the study to ensure that the main contents were covered in each interview, while still creating space for participants to share their personal experiences naturally. The interview content focused on four groups of issues: habits of accessing tourism information through digital media; reasons why students developed the desire to travel; the role of short videos, images, reviews, KOLs/KOCs, online friends, and social media trends in inspiring travel; and the ways students stored, shared, or expressed their travel experiences on digital platforms. The interviews were conducted with the consent of the participants, notes were taken during the interview process, and the participants were coded using symbols from SV01 to SV30 to ensure anonymity.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the suggestions of Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the interview transcripts were read several times to become familiar with the data. Next, statements related to travel motivations and the role of digital media were coded. Codes with similar content were grouped into main themes, which were then reviewed, named, and interpreted by comparing them with the original data. Representative quotations from participants were used to illustrate the themes identified.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, the analysis process was conducted by comparing data across multiple participants, rather than relying on isolated statements. In addition, the study maintained an audit trail of the coding process, reviewed the themes several times, and used direct quotations to clarify the basis for interpretation. Regarding research ethics, participants were informed about the research objectives, had the right to refuse to answer any question, and could stop participating in the interview at any time. Personal information was kept confidential and used only for research purposes.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1. Characteristics of interview participants

The study conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 Gen Z students studying at several higher education institutions in Thai Nguyen Province. The participants were aged between 18 and 22, of whom the 20–22 age group accounted for 60.0%, higher than the 18–19 age group, which accounted for 40.0%. In terms of gender, the research sample consisted of 18 females, accounting for 60.0%, and 12 males, accounting for 40.0%. Regarding year of study, third- and fourth-year students accounted for 53.3%, while first- and second-year students accounted for 46.7%. This structure indicates that the interview sample was relatively diverse in terms of gender, age, and year of study, thereby enabling access to different travel experiences and patterns of digital media use among Gen Z students.

In terms of travel frequency, 50.0% of the participants reported traveling 1–2 times per year; 30.0% traveled three times per year or more; and 20.0% traveled less than once per year. This shows that most participants had a certain level of travel experience, which was appropriate for the objective of exploring travel

motivations rather than merely examining hypothetical desires. At the same time, the presence of participants who traveled infrequently also helped the study capture additional barriers or conditions affecting students' travel motivations.

Regarding digital media platforms, TikTok was mentioned by 26 out of 30 participants, equivalent to 86.7%; Facebook was mentioned by 24 participants, accounting for 80.0%; YouTube accounted for 56.7%; and Instagram accounted for 43.3%. This result shows that the tourism content accessed by Gen Z students was not concentrated on a single platform, but was distributed across various media spaces. Among these, TikTok and Facebook played more prominent roles, reflecting the combination of short, visual, and easily disseminated content with review-based and experience-sharing information. This provides an important basis for explaining why digital media can participate in the process of inspiring travel, shaping destination images, and promoting the travel motivations of Gen Z students.

Table 1. Overview of the Characteristics of Interview Participants

Characteristic	Group	Number	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	12	40.0
	Female	18	60.0
Age	18-19 years old	12	40.0
	20-22 years old	18	60.0
Year of study	First-second year	14	46.7
	Third-fourth year	16	53.3
Travel frequency	Less than once per year	6	20.0
	1-2 times per year	15	50.0
	Three times per year or more	9	30.0
Platforms commonly used to view tourism content*	TikTok	26	86.7
	Facebook	24	80.0
	YouTube	17	56.7
	Instagram	13	43.3

(Source: Compiled by the author from interview data)

Note: *Participants could use multiple platforms; therefore, the total percentage in this group exceeds 100%.

4.2. Themes of travel motivation among Gen Z students in the context of digital media

From the interview data, the study identified six themes reflecting the travel motivations of Gen Z students in the context of digital media. These themes both represent familiar motivations such as exploration, relaxation, and social connection, and reveal clearer manifestations in the digital environment, such as check-ins, following trends, and self-expression on social media.

Table 2. Themes of Travel Motivation Derived from the Interview Data

Theme	Main manifestations	Role of digital media	Number of participants mentioning the theme
Exploration and new experiences	Wanting to visit new places, try new activities, and experience different cuisines, cultures, and landscapes	Videos, images, and reviews make destinations more concrete, familiar, and attractive	24/30
Relaxation and escape from academic pressure	Wanting to change the atmosphere, reduce stress, and restore mental energy	Content about nature, camping, resorts, and "healing" stimulates the need to leave the rhythm of everyday life	21/30
Check-in and the pursuit of aesthetic value	Wanting to visit beautiful places with photo spots, unique spaces, and images that look good when posted	TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook highlight the visual appeal and shareability of destinations	23/30
Social connection	Wanting to travel with friends, romantic partners, family, or classmates to create shared memories	Friends' posts, group chats, and online reviews encourage invitations, planning, and experience sharing	20/30
Following trends and influence from digital communities	Wanting to visit places that are popular, frequently reviewed, or widely circulated on social media	Viral content, KOLs/KOCs, travel bloggers, and community comments create a sense of curiosity	19/30
Self-expression on social media	Wanting to record, share, and express lifestyle, personality, and aesthetic taste	Photos, stories, reels, and vlogs extend travel experiences into online spaces	17/30

(Source: Compiled by the author from interview data)

Note: The number of participants mentioning each theme only reflects the frequency of theme occurrence in the interview data and is not intended to statistically generalize to the entire population of Gen Z students.

4.2.1. Exploration and new experiences

Exploration and new experiences were the most frequently mentioned theme in the interview data. Many students stated that travel helped them leave the familiar spaces of school, rented accommodation, and everyday

life to come into contact with different landscapes, cuisines, people, and lifestyles. This motivation was often stimulated when students watched short videos, images, or reviews about a new destination on social media.

“There are places I did not know about before, but when I saw videos on TikTok showing beautiful scenery, strange food, or interesting ways people experienced the place, I saved them. I think that when I have time and money, I will try going there”. (SV07)

This statement shows that digital media makes destinations more familiar and easier to imagine. For Gen Z students, the desire to explore often begins with seeing, saving, and imagining an experience before the actual trip takes place.

4.2.2. Relaxation and escape from academic pressure

Another prominent theme was the desire to relax and escape from academic pressure. Many students viewed travel as a way to change the atmosphere and reduce stress after periods of studying, examinations, or part-time work. The trips mentioned were often short, moderately priced, and easy to organize with friends.

“Whenever studying becomes stressful or exams are coming, I often watch videos about camping, going to streams, or going to the mountains. After watching them, I really feel like leaving the city for a day so that my mind can feel lighter”. (SV12)

This finding indicates that digital media not only stimulates the desire to visit a specific place, but also evokes the emotional state that students wish to achieve through travel, such as relief, relaxation, and energy recovery.

4.2.3. Check-in and the pursuit of aesthetic value

Check-in and the pursuit of aesthetic value were motivations mentioned by many students. Participants were often attracted to destinations with beautiful landscapes, unique spaces, striking colors, or many suitable photo spots for recording and sharing experiences. In the context of digital media, the beauty of a destination is often perceived in advance through online images and videos.

“I am often attracted to places with beautiful scenery or good photo spots. Sometimes, when I see a café, homestay, or some place on TikTok that looks very pretty, I save it so I can go there later”. (SV18)

This result shows that check-in is not only a post-trip activity, but can also become a motivation from the stage at which the desire to travel is formed. However, in students’ narratives, check-in was also associated with the need to preserve memories and aestheticize personal experiences.

4.2.4. Social connection

Social connection is an important motivation in the travel desires of Gen Z students. Many participants stated that they preferred traveling with friends, romantic partners, family members, or classmates. For them, the value of a trip lies not only in the destination, but also in the process of traveling together, talking, eating, taking photos, and creating shared memories.

“I think the most enjoyable part of traveling is going with friends. Sometimes the destination does not need to be very special, but if I go with the right group, the trip is still very memorable”. (SV05)

Digital media contributes to promoting this motivation through friends’ posts, planning group chats, itinerary sharing, and the posting of images after the trip. Therefore, social connection among Gen Z students takes place simultaneously in real-life spaces and online spaces.

4.2.5. Following trends and influence from digital communities

Some students developed a desire to travel when a destination or experiential activity appeared frequently on social media. “Hot” destinations, new cafés, camping sites, or homestays that were continuously reviewed often created a sense of curiosity and a desire to verify the experience for themselves.

“There are places I did not know about at first, but when I saw many people making videos and reviewing them continuously, I naturally became curious. I wanted to go and see whether they were the same in real life as they appeared online”. (SV21)

This finding shows that viral content can generate initial attention and promote the desire for experience. However, participants still considered cost, distance, and the reliability of reviews before making decisions, indicating that trend-following motivation among Gen Z students is selective.

4.2.6. Self-expression on social media

The interview data also show that travel is a way for Gen Z students to express themselves in digital spaces. Posting photos, stories, videos, or sharing reflections after a trip is not only intended to announce that they have visited a destination, but also serves as a way to preserve experiences and express lifestyle, aesthetic taste, and personal identity.

“I do not think posting travel photos is about showing off. For me, it is like keeping a memory. Later, when I look back at my stories or albums, I can remember where I went, whom I went with, and how I felt at that time”. (SV14)

This statement indicates that the travel experiences of Gen Z students do not end at the destination, but continue to be represented and preserved on digital platforms. Therefore, the motivation for self-expression should be understood as the intersection of experience, memory, and personal identity in the online environment.

Taken together, the above findings show that the travel motivations of Gen Z students in Thai Nguyen are multidimensional. Traditional motivations such as exploration, relaxation, and social connection continue to play important roles, but they are expressed in a new context, where digital media makes destinations more visual, accessible, and shareable. At the same time, motivations associated with check-ins, following trends, and self-expression show that the travel experiences of Gen Z students are closely intertwined between real life and digital life.

V. DISCUSSION

The research findings show that the travel motivations of Gen Z students in Thai Nguyen both continue traditional travel motivations and present new manifestations in the context of digital media. Motivations such as exploration, relaxation, and social connection reflect needs that have been discussed in classic studies on travel motivation, including escape from familiar environments, novelty seeking, rest, social interaction, and self-affirmation (Dann, 1977; Crompton, 1979). However, a noteworthy point is that these motivations are no longer formed entirely from individuals' internal needs, but are often stimulated, concretized, and reinforced through exposure to tourism content on digital platforms.

From this perspective, digital media can be regarded as an intermediary environment between the desire to travel and destination images. Short videos, check-in images, reviews, user comments, friends' sharing, and content from KOLs/KOCs help students imagine experiences in advance, assess attractiveness, and consider the feasibility of taking a trip. This is consistent with studies suggesting that social media plays an important role in information search, travel planning, and the sharing of tourism experiences (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Fotis et al., 2012; Leung et al., 2013). At the same time, the findings of this study show that new media formats such as short videos and content from influencers/consumers may increase inspirational appeal among Gen Z students due to the visual nature, virality, and sense of closeness of the shared experience (Boeker & Urman, 2022; Ling et al., 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

A notable contribution of this study is that it clarifies motivational manifestations associated with digital life, such as check-ins, following trends, and self-expression on social media. These motivations should not be understood simply as following images or trends, but rather as reflecting the way Gen Z assigns meaning to travel experiences in the online environment. For Gen Z students, a trip is valuable not only because it involves going to another place, but also because it can be recorded, shared, and incorporated into their personal narratives. Therefore, tourism becomes an extended process: it is stimulated by digital content, carried out in real-life spaces, and then continuously represented on social media after the trip.

The findings also show that the travel motivations of Gen Z students are clearly practical. Although they are attracted by beautiful content, popular destinations, or positive reviews, participants still consider cost, time, distance, transportation, and the reliability of information. This reflects the characteristics of the student group: they have a need for experience and exploration, but their travel choices remain constrained by financial conditions and academic schedules. Therefore, digital media may generate initial interest, but travel motivation is only reinforced when the destination is perceived as suitable, feasible, and trustworthy.

From a practical perspective, the research findings suggest that destinations and tourism businesses seeking to approach Gen Z students should pay attention to how destination stories are told in the digital environment. Communication content should be visual, concise, authentic, and emotionally evocative, while also providing specific information about costs, itineraries, transportation, travel time, and practical experiences. For students, the factors of being “beautiful” and “widely shared” may create initial attention, but clarity and reliability of information are what help transform inspiration into specific travel desires and plans.

In addition, the findings also imply that destination communication targeting Gen Z should not focus only on idealized images. If real experiences differ greatly from communicated content, students may lose trust in the destination or the source of reviews. Therefore, destinations need to combine visual appeal, authenticity of experience, and shareability on digital platforms. This is a more suitable approach for Gen Z students, a group that is sensitive to images, trends, and online communities, while also being capable of comparing and evaluating information from multiple sources.

VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explored the travel motivations of Gen Z students in the context of digital media in Thai Nguyen through semi-structured interviews with 30 students and data analysis using thematic analysis. The

findings show that the travel motivations of Gen Z students are multidimensional, including motivations closely related to traditional theories, such as exploration, relaxation, and social connection, while also showing clearer manifestations in the digital environment, such as check-ins, following trends, and self-expression on social media. This indicates that digital media does not replace traditional travel motivations, but contributes to making these motivations more visual, more easily stimulated, and more shareable.

Theoretically, this study adds a qualitative perspective on how Gen Z students interpret their own travel motivations in the context of frequent exposure to digital content. The findings show that the travel experiences of this group are not only formed at the destination, but begin with the process of exposure to videos, images, reviews, and online sharing, and then continue to be represented through posting and interaction activities on social media. This approach contributes to expanding the understanding of young people's travel motivations in the context where real life and digital life are increasingly intertwined.

Practically, the research findings suggest that destinations, tourism businesses, and media organizations need to design content that is more suitable for Gen Z students. Communication content should be visual, concise, emotionally rich, and easy to share, while also ensuring authenticity and providing specific information about costs, itineraries, means of transportation, appropriate travel time, and practical experiences. For students, beautiful images may create initial attention, but the reliability of information and the feasibility of the trip are the important factors that help transform online inspiration into a specific travel desire.

In the context of Thai Nguyen, destinations and tourism businesses may focus on developing products suitable for Gen Z students, such as short trips, nature-based tourism, community-based tourism, culinary experiences, check-in spaces, and group activities. Cooperation with students, young content creators, or local KOCs may help destination images become more relatable and authentic. However, communication activities should not only emphasize being "beautiful" or "hot," but also ensure consistency between online images and real-life experiences.

This study has several limitations. First, the study was conducted with 30 students in Thai Nguyen; therefore, the findings are not intended to be generalized to the entire population of Gen Z students in Vietnam. Second, the data were collected through semi-structured interviews and therefore depend on participants' ability to share and self-interpret their experiences. Third, the study has not deeply analyzed the differences among digital media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

Future studies may expand the research scope to other localities, compare different groups of students, or combine qualitative and quantitative methods to test the relationships among digital media, travel motivation, and Gen Z's travel intention. In addition, the roles of short videos, KOLs/KOCs, user-generated content, and review authenticity in shaping young people's travel behavior are also noteworthy directions for future research.

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