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Algorithm-Driven Short Videos and Generation Z Travel Intention: An SOR Perspective

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Abstract

Tourism short videos have become an important force in the construction of destination images and can be used as strong tools for tourism promotion. However, there is little research concerning their impact on the travel intention of Generation Z. Based on the emotional evaluation theory and Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model, this study focuses on the effect of short video communication on the intention of Generation Z to visit Mount Emei through cognitive and emotional channels. Based on the data collected from 396 valid questionnaires and analyzed by using a structural equation model, the results show that short video communication directly improves travel intention. In addition, destination appeal and emotional arousal are partial mediators of this relationship. Destination appeal is also a significant predictor of emotional arousal and thus lends support to a continuous "evaluation-arousal" mechanism. From a theoretical perspective, this study promotes the study of tourism in the SOR framework by integrating two interrelated psychological processes, cognitive evaluation and emotional activation, and extends destination image theory to an algorithm-driven media environment. Practically, the results offer new insights into the dual-path persuasive mechanism of short video tourism marketing and provide valuable implications for the optimization of content targeted short video tourism marketing for digital native tourists.

Keywords: Short-Video Communication; Destination Appeal; Emotional Arousal; Generation Z's Travel Intention.

1. Introduction

The swift digitalization of tourism has fundamentally changed the way Generation Z travelers gather information about and choose destinations [1, 2]. Online platforms have transformed from mere sources of information into rich environments where users can interact mentally with destinations and develop perceptions and emotional connections even before visiting [3]. This transformation is especially evident in Generation Z, who are increasingly relying on mobile applications and algorithm-based short videos, user-generated content, influencer endorsements and interactive elements, to plan their travel [4]. Within these digital environments, short video consumption is not only a source of information that is related to travel but also actively triggers travel intentions and provokes emotional responses [5].

Although much attention has been paid to the marketing of short videos in the tourism sector, most studies have focused on the features of the platforms, the characteristics of the content, or user engagement in isolation. Less is known about the conversion of exposure to short videos into travel intentions via underlying psychological

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mechanisms [6]. In particular, how Generation Z travelers cognitively evaluate destination appeal and the sequence of developing emotional arousal is yet to be explored. This is a critical gap because cognitive and affective processes may interact differently, depending on whether they occur sequentially or simultaneously in algorithm-mediated environments [7]. Furthermore, previous studies have mainly focused on perceived value and information quality and have provided a limited understanding of the role of destination appeal and emotional arousal in shaping behavioral intentions in algorithm-driven digital contexts [8].

To fill these gaps, this study draws on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, which is particularly well-suited to capture the dual cognitive-affective pathways triggered by environmental stimuli, to develop and test an integrated model explaining the influence of short-video communication on Generation Z's travel intentions [9]. Specifically, we investigate whether short-video exposure (stimulus) produces destination appeal (cognitive evaluation) and emotional arousal (affective state) as mediating variables that exist in parallel and in sequence within the organism and influence travel intention (response) in the end.

This study is based in Mount Emei, a World Heritage Site in the Sichuan Province of China. This context was chosen not only because of its heritage value, but also because of its excellent theoretical fit to the proposed S-O-R mechanism. First, Mount Emei is a combination of natural beauty and dramatic landscapes and rich biodiversity and profound cultural significance as a sacred Buddhist mountain. This duality makes it particularly appropriate for triggering cognitive appraisals of destination appeal in the S-O-R framework because Generation Z travelers process both visual aesthetics and cultural narratives through short exposure to video [10]. Second, the idea of spiritual escape is strongly linked to Mount Emei. Short videos of its peaceful and majestic landscape are bound to cause strong emotional responses like awe and tranquility even before an actual visit. By analyzing the interaction between Generation Z and Mount Emei-related short video content, this study provides a good empirical context for understanding the cognitive and affective response created by algorithm-mediated visual stimuli in a culturally and environmentally significant context.

This study addresses three research questions:

- (1) How does short-video communication influence Generation Z's travel intention?
- (2) How do destination appeal and emotional arousal contribute to this process?
- (3) Do destination appeal and emotional arousal function as parallel mediators that translate media exposure into intention?

This study has three important contributions. First, it contributes to the development of S-O-R research in tourism communication by conceptualizing the organism layer in two mechanisms, destination appeal and emotional arousal, that are interrelated and empirically tested parallel and sequentially from cognitive appraisal to affective response [11]. Second, it brings destination image scholarship to the study of algorithmically curated short-video environments by theorizing destination evaluation as a digitally constructed, pre-visit judgment informed by content quality, interactivity, and opinion-leader cues [12]. Third, it contributes towards the understanding of intention formation among Generation Z in the context of mountain tourism by offering a testable framework for understanding the translation of platform-governed media stimuli into travel intentions [13]. Overall, the findings are expected to add to the psychology of digital tourism by explaining the interaction between cognitive and affective processes for algorithm-mediated travel inspiration and also to offer practical information to destination marketing organizations trying to optimize content strategies in the context of recommendation-based ecosystems.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Short-Video Communication

Short videos have become dominant tools in digital tourism marketing due to their brevity, speed of dissemination, and high level of accessibility, which all increase their potential to shape behavioral outcomes [14]. Typically running between 30 and 60 seconds in length, these videos are a combination of dynamic audiovisual elements and real-time interaction that enable fragmented but powerful storytelling that can help generate emotional resonance and reinforce behavioral intentions, particularly through vivid imagery and clear calls-to-action [15]. Moreover, in the face of social media ecosystems, short video formats can leverage the algorithm-based targeting and diffusion mechanisms that are often superior in reach and efficiency to traditional marketing approaches [16]. Despite these advantages, current studies have mainly regarded the short videos as communication mediums, without adequately explaining the underlying persuasive mechanisms [17]. Accordingly, this study investigates some key factors such as content quality, interactivity, and opinion leader influence to better understand the tourism decision-making of Generation Z, which is affected by short video communication.

2.2. Destination Appeal

Research on destination appeal is frequently based on Attention Restoration Theory and Person-Environment Compatibility, which focus on how destinations enable a psychological detachment and recovery through providing restorative experiences [18]. Measurement instruments, such as validated scales with 24 items covering dimensions

such as mystery, have shown significant impacts on the emotions, loyalty, and well-being of tourists [19]. Traditional studies of destination appeal have been mostly based on supply-demand evaluations, perception surveys, or online data analyses [20]. Moreover, most research has been conducted on urban destinations or famous scenic areas [14], and mountain destinations have remained relatively unexplored [21]. Given the growing propensity of young travelers to visit mountain resorts in search of "spiritual escape," exploring the topic of destination appeal in mountain contexts is timely and theoretically important.

2.3. Emotional Arousal

Emotional arousal can be conceived of in terms of psychophysiological mobilization, varying from Cannon's definition of sympathetic arousal in response to non-routine events to Duffy's concept of preparatory energy [22]. Dimensional theories conceptualize arousal in the context of a valence-arousal framework, distinguishing it from, but relating it to, emotional valence and differentiating it from intensity [23]. In tourism and consumer research, the Pleasure-Arousal-Dominance (PAD) model describes arousal as a fundamental dimension of attention and responsiveness [24]. Moderate arousal improves attention and responsiveness, whereas extreme arousal may impair judgment [4]. Within the communication of tourism, arousal is a stimulus-behavior link on a calmness-excitement continuum [25]. Despite its theoretical importance, there are few empirical studies on the role of arousal in pre-travel decision-making through algorithm-mediated short videos, especially among Generation Z and in culturally rich mountain destinations. Accordingly, this study conceptualizes arousal as affective activation caused by short video content and examines its mediating effect on travel intentions [26].

2.4. Generation Z's Travel Intention

As digital natives, Generation Z has been increasingly dependent on short-form video platforms for travel planning, focusing more on immersive experiential engagement rather than utilitarian evaluations [8]. Previous research has often used the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the S-O-R model to identify the determinants of travel intention. However, in destination marketing research, travel intention is frequently used as an overall outcome variable, with the cognitive, affective, and intention dimensions being analyzed separately [27]. To overcome this limitation, the current study conceptualizes Generation Z's travel intention as the result of a sequential process triggered by short video communication, which captures the continuous mechanism of information exposure to emotional arousal to behavioral intention [11].

3. Theory and Hypothesis

3.1. Theory S-O-R and Appraisal Theory

The S-O-R model states that external information affects behavior indirectly through changes in people's cognitive and affective states, which in turn influence behavioral intentions [28]. Specifically, the model consists of three parts: Stimulus (S), Organism (O, changes in cognitive and affective processes), and Response (R, observable behavior) [29]. In tourism research, the S-O-R framework is generally applied to study the effects of tourism stimuli (cognitive and affective impressions of a destination) on travel intentions [10]. Guided by this framework, the present study considers short-video communication as the Stimulus, investigates the way it shapes Generation Z travelers travel intention (Response) and identifies Destination Appeal perception and emotional arousal as mediators within the Organism component [30].

Complementing this approach, the Appraisal Theory of Emotion, which was developed by Arnold and Lazarus, describes the development of emotions as a result of individual cognitive evaluations of events in relation to personal concerns and previous experiences [31]. This process of appraisal, which is affected by both internal characteristics and external environmental factors, produces varied emotional responses to the same stimulus. Although widely used in tourism research to relate emotion and behavior, the so-called "emotion-behavior" pathway [32], previous studies often ignore some important antecedents, such as environmental perception [33]. To fill this gap, the current research constructs a "perception → emotional arousal → travel intention" pathway, which successfully validates the applicability of appraisal theory as a conceptual basis for understanding Generation Z's response on short video content [34].

3.2. Short-Video Communication and Generation Z's Travel Intention

Short videos have become an important source of information for traveling and an important channel to influence the generation Z's perception of the destinations [35]. Compared to traditional forms of travel information, the multimodal form, immersive storytelling, and high interactivity of short videos improve destination image formation and elicit stronger emotional responses, which in turn affect attitudes and behavioral intentions [36]. Factors like content quality, opinion leader endorsements, and platform interactivity contribute to the further interest of young travelers to visit a destination [37]. As digital natives, Generation Z in particular are particularly receptive to and easily influenced by such content [11]. Within the S-O-R framework, short video communication serves as an external stimulus that increases the intention to travel by influencing the cognitive evaluations as well as the emotional responses [38], resulting in the following hypothesis:

H1: Short-video communication positively influences Generation Z's travel intention toward Mount Emei.

3.3. Short-Video Communication and Emotional Arousal

Short-video communication heightens affective arousal due to the interaction of audiovisual and active participation [39]. Compared with static images, short videos, with their vivid visuals, rhythmic story-telling, music, and sound effects, are more effective in grabbing attention and eliciting emotional responses [40]. Elements such as narrative structure, portrayal of characters, and emotionally charged titles evoke high-arousal emotions, such as excitement and awe [2], while first-person perspectives help increase the sense of immersive presence for viewers [26]. Additionally, real-time platform interactions, such as likes, comments, and shares, add further stimulus to affective arousal. Collectively, these features form a "media stimulus → emotional arousal → behavioral tendency" pathway. Taking advantage of this mechanism in the context of tourism, the following hypothesis is put forward:

H2: Short-video communication positively influences emotional arousal

3.4. Short-Video Communication and Destination Appeal

Short videos are used in the marketing of tourism as they utilize the audiovisual characteristics that allow for higher immersion and enable a quicker evaluation of the destination [12]. Elements such as music, captions, and narration offer additional stimuli that enhance cognitive destination perceptions and generate positive emotions, which in turn increase perceived destination appeal [5]. The informational richness of short videos promotes the creation of cognitive images, and interactive features of the interface facilitate immersion and emotional arousal, which promotes the development of place identity [4]. The format lends itself to fragmented consumption, and user-generated content provides an additional level of credibility through peer representation [11]. Despite these advantages, how short videos influence destination image has not yet been sufficiently explored, and data-driven models for analyzing the effects of videos are still required [38]. Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is put forward:

H3: Short-video communication positively influences destination appeal

3.5. Destination Appeal and Emotional Arousal

Emotions can be conceptualized on two dimensions: valence (pleasure) and arousal (activation). Cognitive evaluations are important factors in eliciting emotional reactions: when people positively appraise destination attributes and images, their positive affect, arousal and behavioral tendencies are strengthened [41]. Destination appeal, including aesthetic, symbolic, and self-expressive values, offers an overall evaluation that is closely related to emotional arousal. According to appraisal theory, exposure to novel and significant stimuli increases arousal levels [42]. Consequently, when Generation Z sees destinations with high appeal as novel and meaningful, their emotional arousal is likely to rise and contribute to the development of the psychological processes that contribute to travel intention in the context of short-video content [43]. Based on this rationale, the following hypothesis is put forward:

H4: Destination appeal positively influences emotional arousal

3.6. Destination Appeal and Travel Intention

Destination appeal is a powerful antecedent of travel intention, as the cognitive appraisal and affective experience indicate that more attractive destinations are more likely to generate willingness to visit [4]. Social media and short-form videos have a special influence on Generation Z, with electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and algorithmic feeds increasing the assessment of destination appeal through content presentation [44]. Within the S-O-R framework, destination cues in short videos, narrative design, and audiovisual immersion lead to higher user involvement, flow, emotional arousal, and greater destination image, which transforms perceived appeal into travel intention [45]. Both immersion and arousal act as catalysts for travel inspiration in a chain effect [46]. Overall, the travel intention results from the combination of media channels, tourism characteristics, and video presentation, which results in the following hypothesis:

H5: Destination appeal positively influences Generation Z's travel intention

3.7. Emotional Arousal and Travel Intention

Emotional arousal is an important psychological connection between media stimuli and behavioral responses [28]. In terms of short videos, clear visual cues, narrative pacing, and music can increase the level of arousal of viewers, which helps to increase attention, involvement, and immersive experience [36]. Increased arousal brings salient and meaningful destination information to the forefront, which reinforces cognitive and affective responses and facilitates the translation of interest into travel intention [26]. Some studies indicate that there is an inverted-U relationship between travel intention and arousal (i.e., that travel intention is highest when arousal is moderate). For experience-seeking Generation Z, high-arousal positive emotions, such as excitement, increase memory retention and sharing behavior, which supports the shift of intention from an ephemeral interest to a more stable commitment [4]. Evidence from VR and social media contexts further supports this mechanism, leading to the following hypothesis:

H6: Emotional arousal positively influences Generation Z's travel intention

3.8. Mediation of Destination Appeal

Destination image, both cognitive and affective components, plays a significant role in the formation of travel intention [17]. The cognitive dimension, formed from integrated destination information, has an impact on affective impressions, the more comprehensive the information, the more positive the overall evaluation and the stronger the behavioral intentions [13]. Destination appeal generally acts as a crucial mediating mechanism, which translates media stimuli into behavioral responses [47]. In short videos, the narrative cues help to reconstruct the cognitive perceptions, which increases the perceived appeal and thus the travel intention [48]. Ultimately, high-quality content, interactive features, and opinion leader endorsements help improve Generation Z's perception of the attractiveness of a destination, which in turn strengthens the travel intention. Based on this rationale, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H7: Destination appeal mediates the relationship between short-video communication and Generation Z's travel intention

3.9. Mediation of Emotional Arousal

Emotional arousal is an important motivation for tourist behavior, which often has a greater influence than pleasure on memory, choice, and intentions such as revisiting or recommending a destination [20]. In the S-O-R framework, arousal is a psychological bridge between perceptions of destinations and approach behaviors [49]. There is some evidence that this relationship is in the form of an inverted-U, with travel intention peaking at optimal arousal levels [50]. For experience-seeking Generation Z, high-arousal states, such as excitement, increase memory retention, sharing behaviors, and travel intention [26]. Persuasive content presented in the form of videos, VR, and social media is especially effective for this group if presented with emotionally intense content. Although previous studies have shown the existence of emotional mediation in other media like live streaming [43], the role of arousal as a mediator in algorithmic short videos, and specifically in the context of mountain tourism, has been less explored [51]. Based on this rationale, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H8: Emotional arousal mediates the relationship between short-video communication and Generation Z's travel intention

4. Research Methodology

Figure 1 presents the overall research framework. The sequence of the study is outlined from the identification of research gaps and the formulation of hypotheses to research design, data collection, data analysis, and the final discussion and conclusions. The logical structure of the study is thereby clarified. Readers are also guided through the methodological flow of the research.

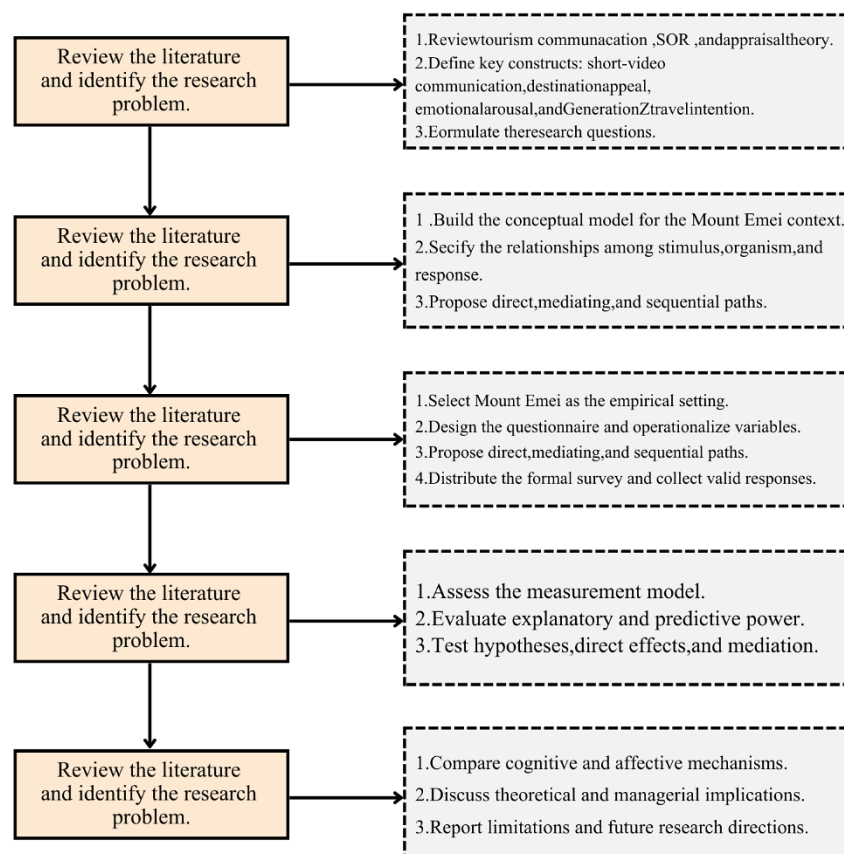


Figure 1. Flowchart of the research methodology

4.1. Sample and Data Collection

Mount Emei Scenic Area was selected as the empirical setting for the examination of Generation Z tourists' travel intentions. As a representative composite destination, ecological, geological, cultural, and religious resources are integrated within this site. It was therefore considered particularly suitable for the present study. Existing evidence has also indicated that composite destinations can support diverse research frameworks. The suitability of this site for addressing the core research questions was thus further confirmed. On this basis, Mount Emei was regarded as a valuable context for investigating the travel intentions of Generation Z tourists.

Both the recruitment of respondents and data collection were conducted carefully to ensure the collection of high-quality data. According to Cochran's formula [52], a minimum of 385 Generation Z participants was required. A total of 396 valid questionnaires were ultimately retained. Respondents were described across four aspects: gender, main sources of tourism information, highest educational level, and frequency of watching cultural-tourism short videos. In terms of gender, a balanced sample was obtained, with 52.8% male and 47.2% female participants. Short-video platforms were identified as the most common source of tourism information (38.4%). Most participants had attained a bachelor's degree or above (78.6%). In addition, more than 60% of the participants reported that cultural-tourism short videos were watched frequently or very frequently (Figure 2). Overall, a sample structure consistent with contemporary tourist profiles was obtained, and robust subsequent analyses were supported.

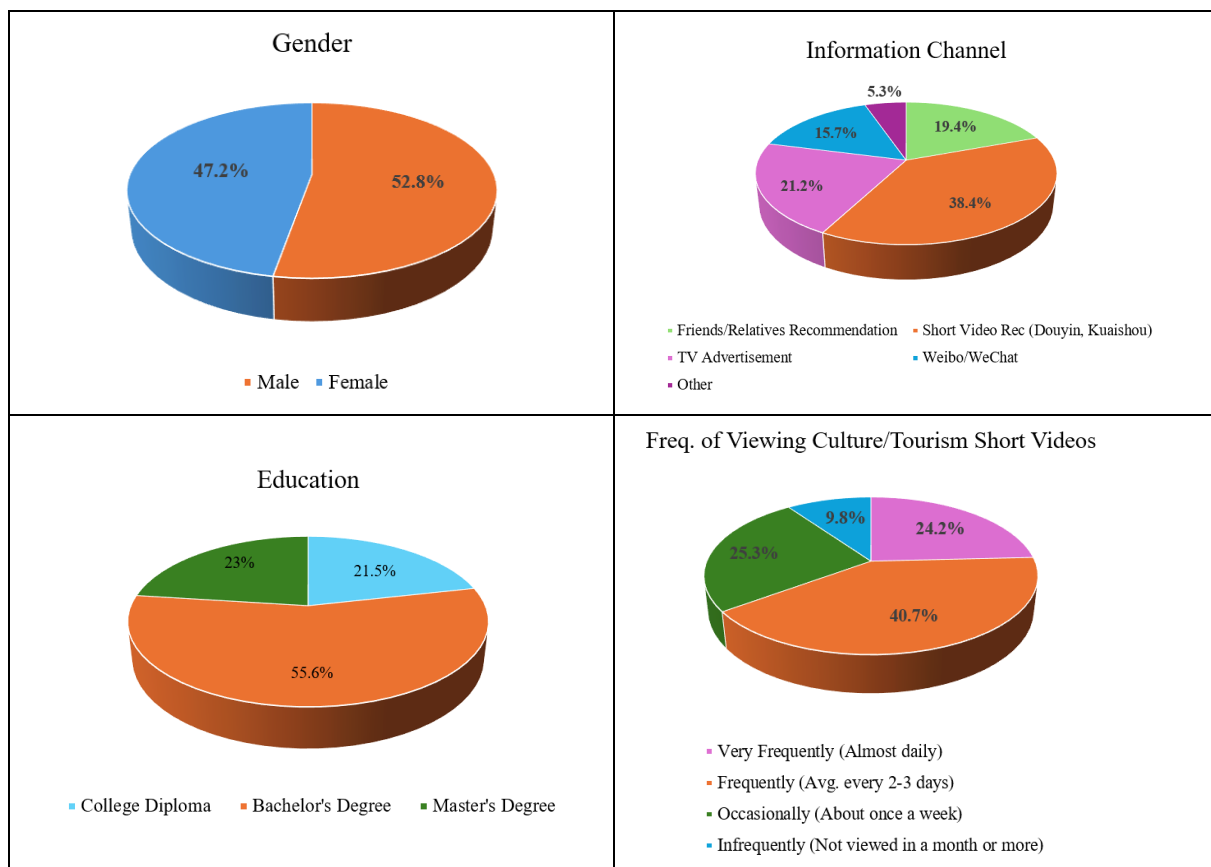


Figure 2. Basic information of respondents

4.2. Variable Measurement

The conceptual model of this study is shown in Figure 3. All constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Short-video communication was operationalized as a multidimensional construct consisting of content quality, opinion leader influence, and interactivity, and was measured with 11 items [12]. Destination appeal was measured across six dimensions, namely adaptability, friendliness, uniqueness, charm, mystique, and richness, using 19 items adapted from previous destination-related studies [17]. Emotional arousal was assessed with five items adapted from Wang et al. [13]. Generation Z tourists' travel intention was measured with three items adapted from Wang et al. [8]. All measurement items were derived from established scales and were revised where necessary to fit the context of short-video tourism communication and Mount Emei. Table 1 reports the item-level descriptive statistics used for preliminary data screening. The results indicate acceptable dispersion across items and no serious departure from normality, thereby supporting the suitability of the data for subsequent structural equation modeling.

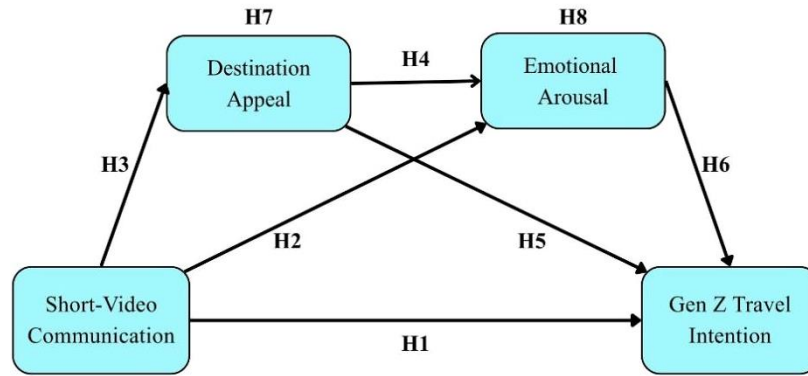


Figure 3. Structural model of the study

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of measurement items

Variable	Code	Sample Size	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Short Video Content Quality	A11	396	1	5	3.58	1.305	-.531	-.898
	A12	396	1	5	3.50	1.258	-.397	-.985
	A13	396	1	5	3.48	1.377	-.504	-.944
	A14	396	1	5	3.48	1.435	-.546	-1.024
Short Video Interactivity	A21	396	1	5	3.45	1.469	-.549	-1.115
	A22	396	1	5	3.52	1.532	-.675	-1.096
	A23	396	1	5	3.52	1.449	-.716	-.867
	A24	396	1	5	3.55	1.403	-.722	-.792
Opinion Leader Influence	A31	396	1	5	3.58	1.239	-.443	-.997
	A32	396	1	5	3.52	1.375	-.590	-.901
	A33	396	1	5	3.54	1.436	-.623	-.974
Destination Adaptability	B11	396	1	5	3.76	1.333	-.629	-.930
	B12	396	1	5	3.67	1.326	-.726	-.603
	B13	396	1	5	3.75	1.198	-.755	-.338
Destination Friendliness	B21	396	1	5	3.45	1.356	-.443	-1.004
	B22	396	1	5	3.54	1.402	-.696	-.833
	B23	396	1	5	3.53	1.328	-.479	-.972
Destination Uniqueness	B31	396	1	5	3.85	1.386	-.798	-.800
	B32	396	1	5	3.61	1.235	-.695	-.431
	B33	396	1	5	3.46	1.239	-.242	-1.071
Destination Charm	B41	396	1	5	3.35	1.233	-.155	-.859
	B42	396	1	5	3.53	1.204	-.385	-.748
	B43	396	1	5	3.44	1.282	-.306	-1.007
Destination Mystique	B51	396	1	5	3.63	1.332	-.609	-.798
	B52	396	1	5	3.64	1.315	-.551	-.918
	B53	396	1	5	3.58	1.371	-.611	-.885
	B54	396	1	5	3.48	1.317	-.499	-.788
Destination Richness	B61	396	1	5	3.48	1.358	-.448	-1.100
	B62	396	1	5	3.49	1.349	-.698	-.825
	B63	396	1	5	3.57	1.282	-.696	-.572
Emotional Arousal	C11	396	1	5	3.63	1.318	-.790	-.478
	C12	396	1	5	3.67	1.259	-.828	-.327
	C13	396	1	5	3.69	1.264	-.836	-.285
	C14	396	1	5	3.64	1.262	-.705	-.517
	C15	396	1	5	3.68	1.291	-.754	-.500
Gen Z Travel Intention	D11	396	1	5	3.52	1.379	-.503	-1.056
	D12	396	1	5	3.47	1.418	-.532	-1.078
	D13	396	1	5	3.30	1.320	-.298	-.936

Note: All skewness values are below 3 and all kurtosis values are below 8, indicating no serious departure from normality. SD = standard deviation

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Reliability and Validity Analysis

Cronbach’s alpha is widely used for the assessment of internal consistency. It is used to determine whether the items within a scale measure the same underlying construct. A summary of the reliability and convergent validity results is presented in Table 2. All Cronbach’s alpha values exceeded 0.80. All composite reliability values were also above 0.80. In addition, all average variance extracted (AVE) values were greater than 0.60. These results indicate that adequate internal consistency and convergent validity were achieved. The results of the Fornell–Larcker analysis are reported in Table 3. The square root of the AVE for each construct was found to be greater than its correlations with the other constructs. Evidence of discriminant validity was therefore provided.

Table 2. Construct reliability and convergent validity

Variable Name	Code	Factor Loading	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Cronbach's Alpha
Short Video Content Quality	A11	0.882	0.888	0.741	0.884
	A12	0.827			
	A13	0.865			
	A14	0.869			
Short Video Interactivity	A21	0.868	0.891	0.751	0.89
	A22	0.889			
	A23	0.874			
	A24	0.836			
Opinion Leader Influence	A31	0.861	0.86	0.779	0.858
	A32	0.884			
	A33	0.903			
Destination Adaptability	B11	0.864	0.811	0.725	0.810
	B12	0.817			
	B13	0.873			
Destination Friendliness	B21	0.850	0.829	0.743	0.827
	B22	0.866			
	B23	0.870			
Destination Uniqueness	B31	0.907	0.838	0.755	0.837
	B32	0.834			
	B33	0.880			
Destination Charm	B41	0.835	0.82	0.732	0.817
	B42	0.837			
	B43	0.894			
Destination Mystique	B51	0.782	0.829	0.661	0.828
	B52	0.845			
	B53	0.800			
	B54	0.823			
Destination Richness	B61	0.908	0.89	0.817	0.888
	B62	0.905			
	B63	0.897			
Emotional Arousal	C11	0.861	0.918	0.75	0.917
	C12	0.868			
	C13	0.865			
	C14	0.879			
	C15	0.858			
Gen Z Travel Intention	D11	0.908	0.872	0.793	0.869
	D12	0.887			
	D13	0.875			

Notes: AVE, average variance extraction; CR, composite reliability; Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.7$ indicates acceptable reliability

Table 3. Fornell-Larcker Discriminant Validity Test

Variables	D1	C1	A3	B6	B2	B4	B3	B5	B1	A2	A1
D1	0.890										
C1	0.494	0.866									
A3	0.425	0.448	0.883								
B6	0.321	0.398	0.327	0.904							
B2	0.398	0.415	0.253	0.442	0.862						
B4	0.427	0.458	0.344	0.504	0.422	0.856					
B3	0.445	0.481	0.289	0.456	0.442	0.531	0.869				
B5	0.369	0.424	0.266	0.447	0.431	0.393	0.468	0.813			
B1	0.399	0.422	0.288	0.48	0.444	0.42	0.478	0.44	0.851		
A2	0.472	0.383	0.506	0.299	0.257	0.333	0.312	0.273	0.217	0.867	
A1	0.460	0.454	0.502	0.301	0.292	0.384	0.304	0.242	0.33	0.533	0.861

Note: N=396. The numbers on the diagonal of the latent variable correlation matrix represent the square roots of the AVE values; the lower left part of the diagonal shows the standardized correlation coefficients between the variables. A1=Short Video Content Quality; A2=Short Video Interactivity; A3=Opinion Leader Influence; B1=Destination Adaptability; B2=Destination Friendliness; B3=Destination Uniqueness; B4=Destination Charm; B5=Destination Mystique; B6=Destination Richness; C1=Emotional Arousal; D1=Generation Z Travel Intention

5.2. Common Method Variance and Collinearity Checks

Common method variance was assessed using Harman’s single-factor test (Table 4). The first factor accounted for 34.04% of the total variance. This result suggests that common method variance is unlikely to have driven the findings. Collinearity at the indicator level was examined using outer variance inflation factors (VIFs) (Table 5). The outer VIF values ranged from 1.586 to 3.007. These results indicate that no critical multicollinearity was present.

Table 4. Common method bias analysis

Component	Initial eigenvalue			Extract the sum of squared loads		
	Total	Percentage of variance	Percentage of cumulative	Total	Percentage of variance	Percentage of cumulative
1	12.936	34.043	34.043	12.936	34.043	34.043
2	3.422	9.004	43.047	3.422	9.004	43.047
3	1.958	5.152	48.199	1.958	5.152	48.199
4	1.671	4.396	52.596	1.671	4.396	52.596
5	1.545	4.065	56.661	1.545	4.065	56.661
6	1.457	3.835	60.496	1.457	3.835	60.496
7	1.315	3.460	63.956	1.315	3.460	63.956
8	1.281	3.372	67.328	1.281	3.372	67.328
9	1.168	3.075	70.402	1.168	3.075	70.402
10	1.121	2.950	73.352	1.121	2.950	73.352
11	0.981	2.582	75.934			
12	0.681	1.793	77.727			
13	0.548	1.442	79.169			
14	0.514	1.354	80.522			
15	0.460	1.210	81.732			
16	0.455	1.199	82.931			
17	0.448	1.179	84.110			
18	0.422	1.111	85.221			
19	0.404	1.062	86.284			
20	0.382	1.006	87.289			
21	0.381	1.002	88.291			
22	0.363	0.955	89.246			
23	0.350	0.920	90.166			
24	0.327	0.859	91.025			
25	0.321	0.845	91.870			
26	0.307	0.807	92.677			
27	0.295	0.776	93.453			
28	0.281	0.739	94.191			
29	0.278	0.731	94.922			
30	0.266	0.699	95.621			
31	0.248	0.652	96.273			
32	0.240	0.633	96.906			
33	0.219	0.575	97.481			
34	0.214	0.564	98.045			
35	0.205	0.539	98.585			
36	0.190	0.501	99.086			
37	0.177	0.465	99.551			
38	0.171	0.449	100.000			

Note: Components 1-10 have eigenvalues > 1 (Kaiser criterion) and are retained. Components 11-38 have eigenvalues < 1 and are not considered substantial factors.

Table 5. External VIF Value Analysis

Code	VIF	Code	VIF	Code	VIF
A11	2.552	B11	2.164	B51	1.767
A12	1.974	B12	1.776	B52	2.12
A13	2.332	B13	2.149	B53	1.737
A14	2.56	B21	1.949	B54	1.988
A21	2.516	B22	1.917	B61	3.007
A22	2.718	B23	2.154	B62	2.865
A23	2.457	B31	2.084	B63	2.645
A24	2.036	B32	1.743	C11	2.559
A31	2.076	B33	2.263	C12	2.667
A32	2.229	B41	2.255	C13	2.631
A33	2.455	B42	1.874	C14	2.863
		B43	2.366	C15	2.528
				D11	2.582
				D12	2.289
				D13	2.12

Note: All item VIF values were below 5, indicating no severe multicollinearity

Common method bias was assessed using multiple procedures. In addition to Harman’s single-factor test and collinearity diagnostics, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted as a supplementary diagnostic test following Podsakoff et al. (2003) [53] (Table 6). Specifically, the baseline measurement model was compared with a model that included a common latent method factor. Only negligible changes in model fit indices were observed. These results suggest that common method variance was unlikely to have materially affected the findings. It should be noted, however, that this CFA-based procedure was used only for the supplementary assessment of common method variance and not for the estimation of the main model. The primary analysis was conducted using PLS-SEM in SmartPLS, which was appropriate given the reflective–reflective hierarchical component structure of the core constructs and the study’s prediction-oriented purpose.

Table 6. Testing of common method bias latent factors

Comparison model	χ^2 (df)	χ^2/df	GFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
Reference model	822.859(610)	1.349	0.902	0.973	0.976	0.030	0.057
Latent factor model	720.586(572)	1.260	0.912	0.980	0.983	0.026	0.052

Notes: CFI, comparative fit index; TLI, Tucker–Lewis index; RMSEA, root-mean-square error of approximation; SRMR, standardised root-mean-square residual

5.3. Structural Model Assessment

Given the multidimensional nature of short-video communication and destination appeal, both constructs were specified as reflective–reflective hierarchical component models (HCMs). A two-stage approach was applied in SmartPLS. In the first stage, the lower-order components were estimated to obtain latent variable scores. In the second stage, these scores were used to estimate the higher-order structural model. Measurement model assessment (loadings, CR, AVE, HTMT) was conducted for the lower-order components, while the structural model was evaluated using the higher-order constructs. The results show that the VIF values for all predictive paths ranged from 1.000 to 1.710. The vast majority were below the 3.3 threshold (Table 7). These findings indicate that there was no serious multicollinearity in the structural model, thereby ensuring the reliability and validity of the parameter estimates.

The coefficient of determination (R^2) reflects the explanatory power of the model. For example, an R^2 value of 0.20 indicates that 20% of the variance in the dependent variable Y is explained by the independent variable(s) X. In general, R^2 ranges from 0 to 1. In the present model, the R^2 values of the endogenous constructs were 0.234 for destination appeal, 0.412 for emotional arousal, and 0.406 for travel intention. These values indicate a moderate level of explanatory power. In addition, the predictive ability of the structural model for destination appeal and Generation Z tourists’ travel intention was evaluated (Table 8). All $Q^2_{predict}$ values were greater than 0. This result meets the criterion for predictive relevance and indicates that the model was capable of capturing the underlying relationships among the variables. Furthermore, in terms of prediction accuracy, most root mean square error (RMSE) values of the PLS-SEM model were lower. This finding indicates a clear advantage in the control of prediction errors and provides robust support for the testing of the proposed theoretical hypotheses.

Table 7. Internal VIF Values of the Structural Model

Path	VIF
Emotional Arousal → Gen Z Travel Intention	1.710
Destination Appeal → Gen Z Travel Intention	1.638
Destination Appeal → Emotional Arousal	1.309
Destination Appeal → Destination Richness	1.000
Destination Appeal → Destination Friendliness	1.000
Destination Appeal → Destination Charm	1.000
Destination Appeal → Destination Uniqueness	1.000
Destination Appeal → Destination Mystique	1.000
Destination Appeal → Destination Adaptability	1.000
Short Video Communication → Generation Z Travel Intention	1.468
Short Video Communication → Emotional Arousal	1.309
Short Video Communication → Opinion Leader Influence	1.000
Short Video Communication → Destination Appeal	1.000
Short Video Communication → Short Video Interactivity	1.000
Short Video Communication → Short Video Content Quality	1.000

Note: the VIF values are all below the conservative threshold of 3.3, indicating that there are no concerns of multicollinearity

Table 8. Predictive Power Results of Predictive Variables

Variable	Item	PLS-SEM		LM	Stone-Geisser's
		Q ² predict	RMSE	RMSE	Q ²
Destination Adaptability	B11	0.077	1.282	1.285	0.109
	B12	0.051	1.294	1.303	
	B13	0.110	1.131	1.135	
Destination Friendliness	B21	0.059	1.317	1.325	0.104
	B22	0.073	1.351	1.353	
	B23	0.099	1.262	1.286	
Destination Uniqueness	B31	0.119	1.289	1.309	0.131
	B32	0.071	1.192	1.192	
	B33	0.108	1.210	1.210	
Destination Charm	B41	0.115	1.161	1.176	0.177
	B42	0.121	1.130	1.145	
	B43	0.154	1.181	1.196	
Destination Mystique	B51	0.053	1.298	1.312	0.094
	B52	0.066	1.273	1.299	
	B53	0.059	1.332	1.351	
	B54	0.071	1.271	1.292	
Destination Richness	B61	0.141	1.260	1.275	0.136
	B62	0.103	1.279	1.295	
	B63	0.089	1.225	1.238	
Emotional Arousal	C11	0.180	1.196	1.217	0.263
	C12	0.190	1.135	1.152	
	C13	0.239	1.104	1.107	
	C14	0.203	1.129	1.145	
	C15	0.168	1.179	1.195	
Gen Z Travel Intention	D11	0.272	1.177	1.192	0.301
	D12	0.227	1.249	1.256	
	D13	0.216	1.171	1.176	

Note: Q² > 0 indicates predictive relevance. Lower RMSE values indicate better prediction accuracy

5.4. Hypothesis Testing

Bootstrapping results support all hypothesised direct effects (Table 9; Figure 4). Short-video communication positively predicts travel intention ($\beta = 0.337$, $t = 6.280$, $p < 0.001$), emotional arousal ($\beta = 0.305$, $t = 6.030$, $p < 0.001$), and destination appeal ($\beta = 0.486$, $t = 9.591$, $p < 0.001$). Destination appeal positively predicts emotional arousal ($\beta = 0.438$, $t = 8.422$, $p < 0.001$) and travel intention ($\beta = 0.275$, $t = 4.614$, $p < 0.001$). Emotional arousal also positively predicts travel intention ($\beta = 0.158$, $t = 2.589$, $p = 0.010$). Therefore, H1–H6 was supported.

These findings suggest that Generation Z tourists’ travel intention is influenced by short-video communication through both direct pathways and organism-based mechanisms. The strongest direct effect was observed from short-video communication on destination appeal. This result indicates that short-video content primarily shapes viewers’ cognitive evaluation of the destination. By contrast, although emotional arousal made a significant contribution to travel intention, its effect was comparatively weaker. Affective activation, therefore, appears to play a complementary rather than dominant role in the present context. Overall, the direct-effect results support the proposed stimulus–organism–response (SOR)-based mechanism and indicate that, in the case of Mount Emei, short-video communication is particularly effective in strengthening perceived destination attractiveness prior to actual visitation.

Table 9. Results of structural equation model testing

Hypothesis	Path relationship between variables (path)	β	Standard deviation	T	P	95% confidence interval		Results
						Lower limit	Upper limit	
H1	Short Video communication → Gen Z Travel Intention	0.337	0.054	6.280	< 0.001	0.234	0.443	Supported
H2	Short Video communication → Emotional Arousal	0.305	0.051	6.030	< 0.001	0.207	0.406	Supported
H3	Short Video communication → Destination Appeal	0.486	0.051	9.591	< 0.001	0.387	0.584	Supported
H4	Destination Appeal → Emotional Arousal	0.438	0.052	8.422	< 0.001	0.331	0.538	Supported
H5	Destination Appeal → Gen Z Travel Intention	0.275	0.060	4.614	< 0.001	0.165	0.398	Supported
H6	Emotional Arousal → Gen Z Travel Intention	0.158	0.061	2.589	0.010	0.038	0.276	Supported

Note: β , Standardised path coefficient; T, t-statistic; P, p-value; CI, Confidence Interval. Significance levels: $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.001$

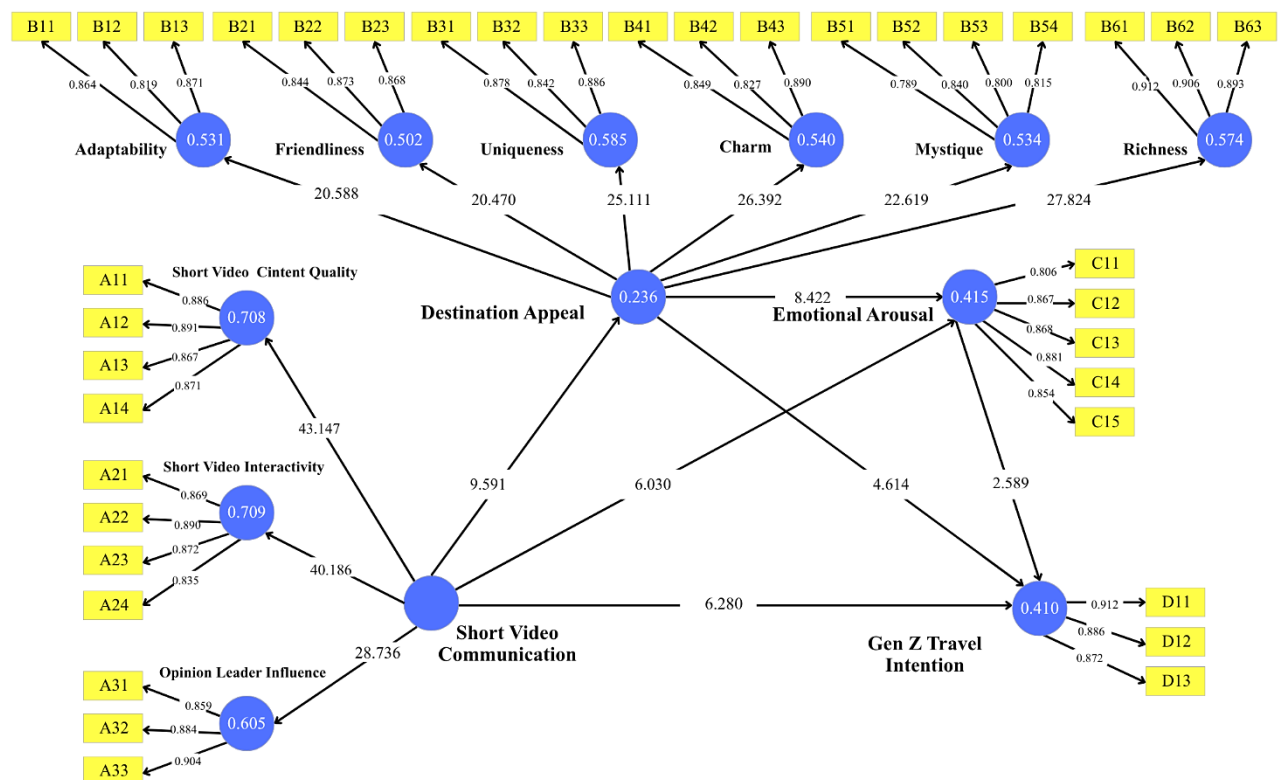


Figure 4. Hypothesis path relationship test results

5.5. Testing for Mediating Effects

To examine in greater detail the internal mechanisms through which short-video communication affects Generation Z tourists’ travel intention, the mediating roles of destination appeal and emotional arousal were tested in SmartPLS

using the bootstrapping procedure. The results show that destination appeal significantly mediated the relationship between short-video communication and travel intention ($\beta = 0.134, t = 3.906, p < 0.001$), and the 95% confidence interval did not include zero, thus supporting H7 (Table 10). Since the direct effect was still significant ($\beta = 0.337, t = 6.280, p < 0.001$), destination appeal could be regarded as a partial mediator. Similarly, emotional arousal significantly mediated the relationship between short-video communication and travel intention ($\beta = 0.048, t = 2.220, p = 0.026$), and the significant direct effect supports H8; however, the direct effect was also significant, indicating that emotional arousal is a partial mediator.

Overall, the mediating effect of destination appeal was greater than that of emotional arousal. This finding indicates that, although tourism short videos can influence viewers by activating affect, their persuasive effect is more strongly reflected in the extent to which the destination is perceived as attractive and meaningful. In other words, short-video communication appears to convert media exposure into travel intention more effectively through cognitive evaluation than through affective activation. The mediation results therefore provide further support for the conclusion that destination appeal plays a central role in shaping pre-visit behavioral intention in short-video tourism contexts.

Table 10. Mediating effect test

Effect	Path relationship between variables		β	Standard deviation	T	P	95% confidence interval		Results
	Hypothesis	Path					Lower limit	Upper limit	
Indirect effect	H7	Short Video Comm → Destination Appeal → Gen Z Travel Intention	0.134	0.034	3.906	0.000	0.076	0.210	Support
Direct effect		Short Video Comm → Gen Z Travel Intention	0.337	0.054	6.280	0.000	0.234	0.443	Support
Total effect			0.553	0.043	12.978	0.000	0.466	0.634	Support
Indirect effect	H8	Short Video Comm → Emotional Arousal → Gen Z Travel Intention	0.048	0.022	2.220	0.026	0.009	0.095	Support
Direct effect		Short Video Comm → Gen Z Travel Intention	0.337	0.054	6.280	0.000	0.234	0.443	Support
Total effect			0.553	0.043	12.978	0.000	0.466	0.634	Support

The results indicate that Generation Z tourists' travel intention is influenced by short-video communication through both direct and indirect pathways. Significant effects were observed on destination appeal, emotional arousal, and travel intention. Destination appeal was also found to increase both emotional arousal and travel intention. These findings suggest that short-video content functions as more than a source of destination information. It should also be regarded as a strong digital stimulus within the SOR framework. Pre-visit psychological responses are thereby shaped. This interpretation is consistent with previous studies. Those studies showed that short videos can strongly influence destination impressions by emphasizing authenticity, aesthetics, and distinctiveness. Travel intention and emotional involvement were thereby strengthened.

A key finding is that the cognitive pathway was more prominent than the affective pathway. The strongest direct effect was observed from short-video communication to destination appeal. The indirect effect through destination appeal was also greater than that through emotional arousal. These results suggest that, for Mount Emei, travel intention is more strongly driven by cognitive evaluation of destination attractiveness and value than by emotional activation. This pattern is consistent with the view that, at culturally significant heritage destinations, symbolic meaning, uniqueness, and experiential value are evaluated first. Emotional responses and visit intention are then formed.

The results also show that destination appeal significantly increased emotional arousal. A close relationship between cognition and emotion was therefore supported. This finding suggests that emotional responses in algorithm-driven media environments are generated not only by immediate sensory input but also by prior destination evaluation. Overall, the findings indicate that travel intention in short-video contexts arises from both cognitive and emotional factors. In the present setting, however, cognitive evaluation was found to play the more central role. A clearer explanation is therefore provided of how short-video tourism communication shapes pre-visit intention among Generation Z tourists.

Several theoretical implications are indicated for tourism communication research in digital media environments. First, the SOR framework is extended by specifying the organism layer as two related psychological mechanisms: cognitive evaluation and affective activation. Internal states are therefore not treated as a single broad construct. Instead, they are differentiated in the present study [28]. The findings suggest that psychological processing in short-video contexts is more complex than previously assumed. Both evaluative judgment and affective reaction were involved, even at the pre-visit stage [54-57]. A more detailed explanation is thus provided of how digital media stimuli are translated into travel intention. Second, the study contributes to destination-related research. It is shown that destination appeal can be formed before actual visitation through exposure to short videos in algorithm-driven media environments. In this context, destination evaluation functions not only as an outcome of the travel experience but also

as a digitally mediated pre-visit appraisal. This appraisal is shaped by audiovisual presentation, interactivity, and social endorsement cues [12]. Third, research on digital tourism communication is advanced. It is shown that short-video content influences viewers through both cognitive and affective pathways [58]. Travel intention should therefore not be understood as purely emotional or purely informational. Instead, it is produced through the joint influence of appraisal and arousal. A more integrated explanation is thus provided of how media exposure leads to behavioral intention among Generation Z tourists in visual, interactive, and algorithmically curated environments [4].

Numerous pragmatic consequences are proposed for destination managers and digital tourism marketers. First, short-video communication should be treated as a strategic tool for shaping pre-visit perceptions and intentions rather than merely as a promotional channel [59-61]. Since significant effects were found on both destination appeal and emotional arousal, content should be designed to present not only attractive destination attributes but also symbolic meaning, distinctive experiences, and emotionally engaging narratives [49, 62]. For culturally significant destinations such as Mount Emei, the integration of natural scenery, cultural heritage, and spiritual value should be highlighted clearly and distinctly. Second, because destination appeal was found to exert a stronger effect than emotional arousal on travel intention, priority should be given to content strategies that strengthen viewers' cognitive evaluation of the destination. Particular attention should be paid to thematic coherence, visual recognizability, and credible storytelling. Third, emotional design should still be maintained as a complementary mechanism. Audience engagement may be enhanced through emotionally resonant narratives, influencer participation, and immersive audiovisual formats. Effective connection and word-of-mouth communication may thereby be strengthened [57, 63-65]. Finally, digital technologies such as panoramic video, livestreaming, and other immersive media formats may further enrich the pre-visit experience. Destination intention may also be strengthened through the expansion of sensory and interactive affordances in tourism communication [27].

6. Conclusion

In the present study, an investigation was conducted into how short-video communication influences Generation Z tourists' travel intention toward Mount Emei. The SOR framework was integrated with appraisal theory. The analysis was based on 396 valid questionnaires and PLS-SEM. The findings confirmed that short-video communication exerted a significant positive direct effect on travel intention. In addition, short-video communication was found to significantly enhance destination appeal and emotional arousal. Destination appeal was also shown to strengthen both emotional arousal and travel intention. Emotional arousal likewise exerted a significant positive effect on travel intention. These findings indicate that travel intention in short-video tourism contexts is shaped by both cognitive evaluation and affective activation. It is therefore not explained by a single undifferentiated internal response.

The mediation analysis further showed that destination appeal and emotional arousal partially mediated the relationship between short-video communication and travel intention among Generation Z tourists. Compared with emotional arousal, destination appeal was found to play a more prominent role. This result suggests that the effectiveness of tourism short videos is not limited to the evocation of emotion. It also depends on the enhancement of viewers' cognitive evaluation of destination attractiveness. In addition, the significant path from destination appeal to emotional arousal suggests that a sequential appraisal-arousal mechanism may be involved. Emotional arousal may therefore be elicited by prior destination evaluation in algorithm-driven media environments. Overall, empirical support is provided for the conclusion that short-video tourism communication influences travel intention through intertwined cognitive and affective processes. The importance of destination appeal in converting digital media exposure into pre-visit behavioral intention among Generation Z tourists is also emphasized.

6.1. Limitations

Although this study makes a meaningful contribution, several limitations should be noted. First, the focus on Chinese Generation Z tourists and Mount Emei limits the generalizability of the findings. Further validation in other destination contexts is therefore required. Second, the use of cross-sectional questionnaire data limits the ability to capture long-term effects and causal mechanisms in the relationship between short videos and travel decision-making. Third, the model does not adequately account for several real-world moderating factors, such as economic constraints, social influence, and sustainability awareness. Several directions for future research are therefore suggested. Cross-cultural comparisons should be conducted to examine Generation Z tourists' responses to short-video communication across different countries. The model should also be tested in a wider range of tourism settings in order to assess its boundary conditions. Additionally, longitudinal and experimental designs should be adopted to reveal dynamic influence processes more clearly. More multidimensional variables should be incorporated so that travel decision models can better reflect real-world complexity. Finally, the role of emerging media technologies, such as AI-generated content and virtual reality, should be examined in order to understand how travel intention is shaped in the rapidly evolving context of tourism communication in the digital intelligence era.

7. Declarations

7.1. Author Contributions

Conceptualization, L.G. and O.C.; methodology, L.G. and O.C.; software, L.G. and O.C.; validation, L.G. and O.C.; formal analysis, L.G.; investigation, L.G.; resources, L.G.; data curation, O.C.; writing—original draft preparation, L.G. and O.C.; writing—review and editing, O.C., H.T., and S.K.; visualization, O.C.; supervision, H.T.; project administration, L.G. and O.C.; funding acquisition, L.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

7.2. Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available in the article.

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7.5. Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

7.6. Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

7.7. Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest concerning the publication of this manuscript. Furthermore, all ethical considerations, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancies have been completely observed by the authors.

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