



Social Media as a Search Engine: the Use of TikTok by Gen Z to Search for Brand Information

by

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Research

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Abstract

Video-based apps like TikTok are gaining traction among Gen Z, surpassing Google in relevance due to their preference for quick, consumable information. This study proposes to evaluate the functionality of social media platforms as search engines for Gen Z, considering their unique behaviours and preferences. Functionality is crucial in determining the effectiveness of social media platforms like TikTok in serving as search engines for this generation. Gen Z often relies on user-generated media (UGM) and Uses and Gratification (U&G) theory, which emphasises the gratification derived from media interaction, to access and consume brand information. TikTok's advantages over traditional search engines, such as authenticity, creativity, personalisation, community, and entertainment, make it an appealing platform for Gen Z's brand information needs.

Keywords: Gen Z, TikTok, Social media, Search engine, Brand information, User-generated media (UGM), U&G theory

Declaration

I hereby declare that the research report submitted for the Bachelor of Arts Honours in Strategic Brand Communication to The Independent Institute of Education (The IIE) is my own work and has not previously been submitted to another University or Higher Education Institution for a postgraduate qualification.

Signature



Date 20 November 2023

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Title

Social Media as a Search Engine: the Use of TikTok by Gen Z to Search for Brand Information

Contextualisation

A recent study conducted by Google found that nearly 40% of young people prefer to use social media platforms like TikTok to discover new information instead of traditional search engines like Google Maps or Search (Perez, 2022). According to Senior Vice President Prabhakar Raghavan - who oversees Google's Knowledge & Information Organisation - this is being seen in Gen Z who prefer using social media platforms like TikTok as a primary means for many types of brand information, rather than relying on traditional search engines (Perez, 2022).

Gen Z, often referred to as the 'digital natives,' represents the first generation to grow up with the internet as an integral part of their daily lives (Perez, 2022). Also known as the "outgoing" generation, Gen Z exhibits notable differences from millennials, who currently form the largest consumer generation and are highly tech-savvy (Marcus, 2022). Moreover, Gen Z's preference for visual and peer-driven content sets them apart from previous generations, potentially influencing their brand information-seeking behaviour and driving their perceptions of the world and news (Perez, 2022).

Unlike previous generations, they have been immersed in a digital world since birth, shaping their behaviours and preferences in unique ways. In light of Gen Z's shifting preferences, Aimee Earlam, a Savanta executive in research, insight, and consulting, raises a pertinent question about the suitability of TikTok as an alternative to Google (Earlam, 2022). Gen Z's quest for rapid access to diverse information aligns well with video-based platforms like TikTok (Earlam, 2022).

TikTok's surge can be attributed partly to its algorithm, which delivers tailored content, fostering a distinct sense of community (Torabi, 2023). TikTok serves as a dynamic search tool (Earlam, 2022). Users exchange knowledge, opinions, reviews, and advice, spanning workout tips, location insights, relationship guidance, and information on brands (Earlam, 2022). The allure lies in the platform's authenticity and immediacy, unlike the relative detachment experienced with Google's search results (Torabi, 2023). As TikTok gains traction, it emerges as the go-to platform for Gen Z's brand seeking needs. Gen Z is increasingly interacting with TikTok more than Google when searching for brand information (Perez, 2022).

In 2020 TikTok reached 2 billion downloads, and saw its biggest surge of popularity (Milmo, 2022). Building upon the insight that TikTok is the fastest-growing platform among Gen Z, a notable UK statistic provided by the country's communications watchdog (Milmo, 2022), and a recent research by Hassoun, Beacock, Consolvo, Goldberg, Kelley, and Russell (2023) further supports the notion that Gen Z seeks information through concise, easily digestible formats (Hassoun *et al.*, 2023; Milmo, 2022). Many participants elaborated on their tendency to find lengthy articles, often prioritised by search engines, overwhelming to absorb (Hassoun *et al.*, 2023). As an alternative, they gravitated towards short-form content on social media platforms, allowing them to swiftly transition to the next video or scroll through when confronted with information overload or lack of interest (Hassoun *et al.*, 2023).

However, this inclination for rapid consumption transcends the traditional video/text divide, and is actually challenging the prevailing assumption that Gen Z universally favours video content (Hassoun *et al.*, 2023; Milmo, 2022). Notably, several participants in the Hassoun study expressed a preference for quick news articles over extended 10-minute videos, citing their ability to quickly skim through the articles and not the videos (Hassoun *et al.*, 2023). Particularly when encountering unfamiliar brands from websites or creators they were not intimately familiar with, participants displayed a preference for short text-based news snippets and compact video formats over lengthier video explanations or in-depth articles (Hassoun *et al.*, 2023).

This Gen Z, also known as Generation Z, Zoomers, iGen-ers, or post-millennials will soon become the largest cohort of consumers, being born between 1996 and 2012 (Katz, 2021). Access to the digital age has left room for exploring how and why Generation Z interacts with various forms of media.

Rationale

Over the past decade, there has been a significant generational shift in how individuals, particularly Gen Z, gather information (Katz, 2021). Unlike previous generations, Gen Z has grown up in a digital age characterised by easy access to technology and an abundance of online content (Katz, 2021). As a result, their information-seeking behaviour differs greatly from those of earlier generations. A study conducted by Alison Head and Michael B. Eisenberg delves into the brand information-seeking strategies and research challenges faced by college students in the US (Head & Eisenberg, 2010). The participants' research techniques were diverse, primarily utilised for writing papers, while fewer engaged with Web 2.0 applications for brand or product collaborative assignments (Head & Eisenberg, 2010). Despite considering themselves skilled at finding and assessing web-based information on brands or products, students encountered obstacles when initiating research tasks and defining their scope (Head & Eisenberg, 2010). Echoing Hassoun, Beacock, Consolvo, Goldberg, Kelley, and Russel's research findings, research reveals that students adopt an efficiency-driven approach, aiming to manage and control the vast information available while prioritising efficiency (Hassoun *et al.*, 2023; Head & Eisenberg, 2010).

While existing research has delved into various facets of Gen Z's interactions with digital platforms, this study serves to carve a unique niche by specifically investigating how TikTok functions as a search engine for brand information purposes within this demographic. This research endeavours to explore and compare the intricate landscape of brand information-seeking behaviours among Gen Z users on both TikTok and traditional search engines, with a focus on search engine platforms like Google. In an environment marked by the proliferation of digital platforms, this research seeks to fill the gap in existing knowledge surrounding the brand information-seeking behaviours of Gen Z, particularly in the context of the disjunction between TikTok and traditional search engines.

What sets this research apart from its predecessors is its focus on the emergent role of TikTok as a distinctive platform for Gen Z's brand discovery practices. While previous studies have predominantly centred on the consumption of social media content as a form of entertainment and self-expression, this study shifts the lens to explore how Gen Z utilises TikTok as a means of brand information retrieval, akin to a search engine. By delineating the factors that drive this transition from traditional search engines to social media-based information discovery, this research adds a new dimension to the understanding of Gen Z's digital consumer behaviour.

Moreover, this study contributes insights by shedding light on the preference of Gen Z for short, easily consumable forms of information, as established by Hassoun recent research (Hassoun *et al.*, 2023). By examining how this preference aligns with TikTok's format and content dynamics, this research seeks to uncover the mechanisms that make TikTok an appealing brand information-seeking tool for this generation.

Problem Statement

Research outlines Gen Z's distinct traits as multitasking, short attention spans, and heightened advertisement recall rates (Marcus, 2022). Literature consistently underscores social media's transformative role in reshaping brand information, with TikTok as a potent example (Torabi, 2023). Previous studies suggest broader shifts in digital interactions, indicating Gen Z's transition towards relying on social media, a noteworthy transition in Gen Z's reliance on social media platforms for accessing information (Earlam, 2022). Notably, Gen Z's preference for TikTok over conventional search engines marks a pronounced trend, fueled by their unique digital behaviours (Katz, 2021).

This trend, rooted in the behavioural patterns of the digital-native Gen Z, reflects a broader shift in brand information consumption, such as TikTok's attributes to cater to their preferences, that could potentially revolutionise traditional brand seeking behaviours. Consequently, an in-depth investigation into this transformational trend within the context of social media's evolution as a search engine is important to understand its underpinnings and to pave the way for informed strategies that resonate with Gen Z's distinct brand seeking patterns.

Research Aim

The aim of this research is to comprehensively investigate and analyse the brand seeking behaviour of Gen Z within the context of social media as a search engine, with a primary focus on TikTok. By examining the shifts in preference and engagement patterns among Gen Z users, this study seeks to uncover the nuances of their information consumption dynamics and the implications for traditional search engines and brands. As digital landscapes transform, the dynamics of brand seeking and brand information evolve in tandem. The existing body of research echoes the transforming role of social media in shaping communication patterns, consumer behaviours, and knowledge dissemination. The research further aims to explore how platforms like TikTok can be strategically harnessed to align with Gen Z's distinctive digital behaviours and preferences, thereby contributing to a deeper

understanding of the evolving landscape of brand information-seeking behaviours among this demographic.

Research Question

What are the underlying motivations and preferences that drive Gen Z users to choose TikTok as their preferred avenue for brand information over conventional search engines?

Sub-Questions:

- In what ways does TikTok's format and content delivery influence Gen Z users' interaction with and perception of brands, in contrast to more traditional search engine experiences?
- How do Gen Z users perceive the authenticity, accessibility, and engagement of brands on TikTok compared to traditional search engines?
- What implications does the increasing reliance on TikTok for brand information seeking have for the broader landscape of digital information consumption patterns among Gen Z users?

Research Objectives

O1: To explore the patterns and motivations underlying Gen Z's utilisation of TikTok as a platform for brand information.

O2: To understand the unique features of TikTok that attract Gen Z users and contribute to their preference for the platform as a brand information source, compared to conventional search engines.

O3: To investigate the perceived authenticity, accessibility, and engagement of brands on TikTok in the eyes of Gen Z users and how these factors influence their decision to rely on TikTok for brand information over traditional search engines.

O4: To assess the broader implications of Gen Z's growing reliance on TikTok for brand information.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Conceptualisation

Among social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, TikTok has risen as a dominant platform amongst Gen Z and is raising questions about its influence on Gen Z's brand information-seeking behaviour (Gesmundo et al., 2022; Torabi, 2023). Having gained significant traction in 2020 with over 2 billion mobile downloads, research on TikTok as a branding tool is relatively new (Milmo, 2022). Current research lacks a comprehensive understanding of TikTok's integration within social media and its impact on conventional search engines, such as Google. This research landscape offers grounds for questions that bridge these gaps, particularly through the lens of key theories like the Uses and Gratifications theory and Understanding the Appeal of User-Generated Media (UGM) (Katz et al., 1974; Shao, 2009). A significant research gap exists in understanding Gen Z's brand information-seeking behaviour in the South African market.

By exploring the role of Gen Z within the South African social media marketplace, numerous promising avenues for future research are available. By gaining a deeper understanding of TikTok's role in shaping brand information-seeking behaviour, researchers and marketers can develop newfound strategies to help social media brands interact with Gen Z, thereby optimising their digital presence and branding effectivity.

Theoretical Foundation

Uses and Gratification (U&G) Theory

This primarily started off as a theoretical approach to understanding why and how people actively seek out specific media to satisfy needs by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch in "The Use of Mass Communication" publication (Katz et al., 1974). Developed in

the mid-20th century, the theory emphasises the active role of individuals in seeking out and using media to satisfy their specific needs, motivations, and gratifications (Katz et al., 1974).

At its core, the U&G Theory suggests that individuals are not just passive recipients of media messages; instead, they are active decision-makers who purposefully select and use media content to fulfil various psychological and social needs (Katz et al., 1974; Vinney, 2019). These needs can encompass entertainment, information, social interaction, personal identity, relaxation, and more (Katz et al., 1974; Vinney, 2019).

User-Generated Media (UGM) Theory

Guosong Shao's study, "Understanding the Appeal of User-Generated Media (UGM)" published in 2009, provides valuable insights into the realm of user-generated content in the context of social media (Shao, 2009). Shao's research delves into the motivations and appeals behind user-generated media, shedding light on why individuals actively engage with and contribute to content creation on platforms — like this research's social media topic TikTok (Shao, 2009).

People have various needs that they seek to fulfil through their media consumption (Shao, 2009; Vinney, 2019). Gen Z's ability to multitask suggests that they value media platforms that allow them to engage in multiple activities simultaneously (Marcus, 2022). This trait aligns with the gratification of entertainment-social as they seek platforms that entertain them while enabling social interaction (Shao, 2009). This selection process is influenced by personal preferences, attitudes, and past experiences. TikTok's short, visually engaging videos provide a platform for quick entertainment and the potential for social interaction through comments, likes, and shares (Perez, 2022).

People expect that the media they choose will provide gratification and satisfy their specific needs; the level of satisfaction they derive from media consumption influences their continued engagement (Katz et al., 1974; Vinney, 2019). Gen Z's short attention spans correspond with the gratification of diversion and cognitive needs (Marcus, 2022). They are drawn to content that captures their attention quickly and is easily digestible. Gen Z's ability to recall advertisements suggests that they engage with media content in a way that leads to effective advertisement exposure (Marcus, 2022). This trait aligns with the gratification of surveillance as they seek information to stay updated (Shao, 2009). TikTok's content delivery, including sponsored videos and influencer content, can provide both entertainment and informational value

A Literature Review and Hypotheses Development by Xueming Luo looked at and created a model of the attitude of users of the internet to understand consumers' motivations between media (Luo, 2002).

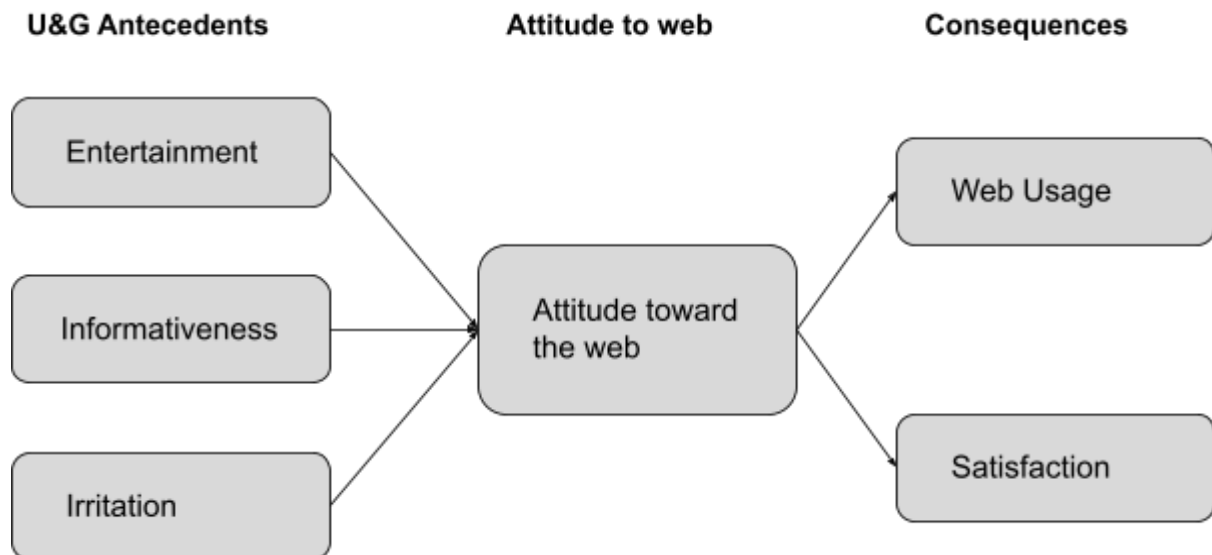


Figure 1 Online Consumer Behaviours to the Web (Luo, 2002).

Incorporating Shao's research into the discussion allows for a comprehensive examination of the broader landscape of social media and its influence on user behaviour, providing a richer context for understanding the motivations and preferences of Gen Z users in their interactions with TikTok.

Theme 1 Gen Z's Brand Seeking Behaviour in Contrast to Other Generations

As opposed to other generations, Gen Z is unique in that they have never experienced a world without the aid of technology (Katz, 2021). As a result, there has been a fundamental change in the way they interact and connect socially, with the Internet providing vast amounts of information and connectivity through various networks and mediums/devices (Shao, 2009; Vinney, 2019). TikTok, which merged with Musical.ly in 2018, is the fastest-growing social media app in the world and is particularly popular among this current Gen Z who spend twice as much time on the app compared to other social media platforms (Earlam, 2022; Katz, 2021).

In Dirir's (2022) study investigating the impact of TikTok on Generation Z's buying behaviour and their insight into selecting brands, a critical analysis is conducted to examine the distinctive brand seeking behaviour of Gen Z in comparison to previous generations. This

analysis sheds light on how this behavioural shift influences the generation's preference for specific channels and platforms, providing insights into their brand patterns (Dirir, 2022). The results of the study indicate a noteworthy correlation between TikTok usage and consumer behaviour contributing to the understanding of how social media, particularly TikTok, influences the behaviours of younger consumers (Dirir, 2022). The insights gained from this research offer an understanding of the role social media platforms play in shaping the preferences and behaviours of the younger generation.

Omar and Dequan (2020), make similar observations in their study of the influence of personality traits and user motivation on TikTok mobile video usage, as Gen Z is the first generation to grow up fully immersed in the digital age, the relationship and socialisation to the internet is different from that of previous generations (Omar & Dequan, 2020).

Understanding these analyses is relevant to the study because it helps researchers and marketers in their approaches to engaging and studying Gen Z preferences and behaviours on social media and how they use social media as a search engine.

Theme 2 Functionality of Search Engines in Shaping Brand Information

On the Internet, users rely on search engines like Google, Yahoo or Bing to locate, organise, store and rank authoritative information for public use (Mitchell, 2020). Uses and Gratification theory (U&G) explores the concept of social media's use for obtaining information on brands and creators (such as following celebrities online) or for self-education and research (Mitchell, 2020; Shao, 2009; Whiting & Williams, 2013).

In an article presenting data from BrandVue, Google, although a long-standing iconic search tool, is facing competition as the UK's favourite search engine among Gen Z (Earlam, 2022). While it remains highly regarded by other generations, its position drops to 4th among Gen Z (Earlam, 2022). Gen Z's inclination for accessing a wide range of information is noteworthy. Video-based apps like TikTok are gaining prominence and outperform Google in terms of relevance for Gen Z, aligning with their desire for quick access to information (Earlam, 2022; Shao, 2009; Whiting & Williams, 2013).

The significance of this study's proposal lies in the need to assess functionality when investigating the role of social media as a search engine, and in understanding how Gen Z's behaviour impacts brand information practices. Functionality is a key aspect that determines

how effectively social media platforms, like TikTok, serve as search engines for this generation.

Theme 3 Gen Z's Utilisation of Social Media Platforms for Brand Information

Ofcom's findings report on 2021/2022 news consumption in the UK revealed that TikTok is a growing source of news among Gen Z, with half of its users seeking news aged between 16 and 24 (Jigsaw, 2022). The report's findings also revealed that Gen Z are more likely to use the internet and social media for news, while older generations prefer print, radio, and TV (Jigsaw, 2022).

According to the magazine New Scientist, TikTok stands out among other social media apps and web pages popular among the youth, with a focus on short-form content (Stokel-Walker, 2020). Shao divides social media usage into three categories: consuming, participating, and producing (Shao, 2009). On TikTok, users are not merely passive consumers of content; they are active participants and producers, shaping the platform's dynamic ecosystem. This participatory nature of TikTok is evident in its abundance of user-generated content, ranging from creative dance challenges to insightful product reviews. The article by Perez reviews how TikTok is eating into Google's core products which is tied to Shao's use of social media usage — Gen Z's increasing reliance on TikTok for brand information and recommendations has disrupted traditional search patterns, forcing Google to adapt and innovate in order to maintain its position as a leading search engine. (Perez, 2022; Shao, 2009).

In essence, TikTok's impact on Gen Z's brand information-seeking behaviour is linked to Shao's categorisation of social media usage. As Gen Z engages with content on TikTok, their perceptions and preferences regarding brands are shaped by a combination of user-generated content, peer recommendations, and personalised content curation (Shao, 2009). Many TikTok videos are created by ordinary users who share information, opinions, and experiences (Torabi, 2023). Gen Z tends to find this user-generated content authentic and relatable, which aligns with their desire for content that resonates with their personal experiences (Katz et al., 1974). The role of U&G in shaping Gen Z's brand seeking behaviour can be highlighted within this theme. Gen Z are more likely to trust information and recommendations from peers and content creators they can relate to on a personal level (Katz et al., 1974). In addition, platforms like TikTok allow users to have control over what content they see based on their interactions, likes and follows (Torabi, 2023).

Theme 4 Social Media's Influence on Generation Z's Brand Behaviour

A study by Omar and Dequan (2020) found the most common motivation for media use has been escapism. The study suggests that enjoyment can be derived from media engagement and attributed to the distinct characteristics of profile creation and anonymity (Omar & Dequan, 2020). The need for this behavioural impact stems from the stress of day-to-day activity and escaping on the internet relieves that stress (Omar & Dequan, 2020). Rather than solely attributing Gen Z's social media use to stress relief, it's important to recognise the broader social and cultural context that shapes their digital habits. Social media platforms like TikTok have become integral to Gen Z's communication, entertainment, and self-expression, providing a space to connect with peers, explore interests, and share their experiences (Torabi, 2023). While stress may be one contributing factor, it is not the sole driving force behind Gen Z's social media engagement; other key factors play influential roles. Their preference for short-form, engaging content, their desire for authentic and relatable interactions, and their ability to create and participate in online communities are all significant factors that influence their social media usage.

TikTok allows passive consumption by the videos appearing and scrolling without interaction, just watching concludes the experience (Hern, 2022). TikTok's algorithm has multiple areas for participation from favouring videos, liking videos, commenting on videos, and sharing to other platforms (Hern, 2022). The pass-over into user-generated content production comes from users' "stitching" of videos alternatively users can upload their own videos in which people can react or respond to videos as a video of the user's own (Hern, 2022). This feature makes producing highly likely on the platform as another form of response to content on the social media app. This aligns with the concept that certain platform features, possibly related to content creation or interaction, have a substantial impact on user behaviour and serve as an alternative way for users, particularly Gen Z, to engage with the content they come across on the social media app.

The For You Page (fyp) works to place content similar to the user's profile the more they interact with the site (Hern, 2022). The more accurate and relatable the content the higher the chances of participation and production (Hern, 2022).

In a Journal article 'Discussing the Business Model of TikTok' by Majdouline Mhalla, Jiang Yun, and Alireza Nasiri, the focus that TikTok puts forward to the consumer around the content they encounter on the app is that even though TikTok can be used to search for information, videos, and friends or even operate as a messaging app, the primary goal is

entertainment (Mhalla *et al.*, 2020). The shorter videos stimulate a shorter attention span and cause a “snowball effect” where the user spends more time than necessary on the app due to its short clips, feeling like it doesn’t take much time (Mhalla *et al.*, 2020).

An additional perspective to the study of Gen Zers on TikTok and their behaviour - New Scientist, a magazine in the UK, wrote a piece on how TikTokers fall into the Gen Z spectrum which also showcased a lack of attention span as another behaviour anecdote (Stokel-Walker, 2020).

According to a survey by Morning Consult (2023), nearly 40% of Gen Z say they have purchased a product or service they first saw on social media (Tran, 2023). TikTok’s rise in fame makes it a strong player towards the Gen Z demographic (Tran, 2023). Rounding back to Shao’s social media usage pattern the content that users engage with on TikTok has the power to shape their perceptions and create positive associations with particular concepts or ideas presented through these platforms. This, in turn, holds the potential to exert an influence on the way Gen Z seeks and processes information on brands, ultimately impacting their behaviours and decisions (Shao, 2009; Tran, 2023).

The problem addressed in this study is the shifting trend among Gen Z users, who are increasingly relying on TikTok instead of Google when seeking brand information (Earlam, 2022). This notable trend intersects with their unique digital behaviour, marked by multitasking across multiple screens and an enhanced capacity for advertisement recall (Marcus, 2022). Overall, TikTok has the potential to significantly influence brand information selection among Gen Z users, especially when it comes to content or topics that are explored through the platform.

Theme 5 Social Media as a Source of Information for Gen Z

Social media platforms have evolved into powerful information hubs, transforming the way Gen Z seeks and consumes information. These platforms, particularly TikTok, have become an integral part of their daily lives, providing a dynamic and engaging space for learning, exploration, and brand discovery.

Social media as an information source enables the sharing and circulation of information across various platforms, even if not from the original source (Hern, 2022). Consumers of social media can utilise this information for reviews, education, or to learn about products, services, or brands both online and offline (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Gen Z users of TikTok

are said to use the app an average of 121 times per week and spend nearly 27 minutes a day on the app in 2018, indicating its increasing popularity (Stokel-Walker, 2020).

Gen Z's preference for social media as an information source is evident in their usage patterns. TikTok, with its short-form videos and personalized For You Page, has become a popular destination for Gen Z to learn about products, services, and brands. (Omar & Dequan, 2020). Users perceive these videos as measures of online success, and this idea is supported by other studies that highlight the gratification users experience through the media they interact with which is also highlighted in this study's key theory - U&G Theory (Katz et al., 1974). The app's algorithm, designed to serve users content that aligns with their interests, further enhances their ability to discover relevant information. Users will feel a sense of satisfaction, fulfilment, or pleasure when they engage with media content that resonates with them, whether it's informative, entertaining, or emotionally resonant (Bucknell, Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Whiting & Williams, 2013).

The spread of information on viral videos is made possible by the frequency with which they are shared, and the different methods used by users (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Lurkers, individuals who do not actively post on social media but engage in passive consumption, are another key factor in the dynamics of social media information sharing. They often rely on user-generated media (UGM) and U&G theory, which highlights the gratification users derive from interacting with media, to access and consume brand information (Omar & Dequan, 2020; Shao, 2009).

The transformation of social media, as observed in the shift from platforms primarily connecting friends to becoming information-sharing hubs, has implications for the discourse on attention spans (Marcus, 2022). This evolution suggests that platforms like TikTok, catering to Gen Z's preferences for engaging visual content, could be influencing attention patterns. The theme of visual content's impact aligns with the discourse on attention spans, exploring how platforms like TikTok utilise concise, visually appealing videos, potentially catering to Gen Z's ability to engage with content in shorter, impactful bursts (Earlam, 2022; Mhalla *et al.*, 2020). These dynamics signify a connection between the transformation of social media platforms and their alignment with Gen Z's brand information consumption behaviours, offering insights into the potential effects on attention spans and engagement (Gesmundo *et al.*, 2022; Marcus, 2022).

Key Terms

Key Concepts	
TikTok	Social Media Application
Google	Search Engine
Generation Z	Young adults born between the year 1996 - 2012
Social media usage	Different applications and their intended use/purpose
Uses and gratification	Theory for why and how people seek media to satisfy needs
Information retrieval	Seeking and searching for information
Web-searching	Using the internet and its forums/websites to search
Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)	A concept to improve website traffic and visibility on the internet

Table 1 Key Concepts

TikTok has been described by The Guardian (Milmo, 2022) as a social media platform, and Bloomberg Africa (Mulinda & Niasse, 2022) has it as a social media application (Milmo, 2022; Mulinda & Niasse, 2022). Since TikTok is an app downloaded onto devices the concept fits into a social media platform.

Google offers inter alia a search engine and expands its products and services outside the search engine domain (Mitchell, 2020). The study will focus on Google's intended use as a search engine so conceptually it will remain a search engine.

Generation Z is a generation born between the years 1996 and 2012 but Katz, Ogilvie, Shaw and Woodhead (2021) add the description of Gen Z being navigators of the digital world (Katz, 2021).

Social media usage was largely researched by Omar and Dequan (2020) who discuss the degree of social media exposure and media use in everyday life (Omar & Dequan, 2020).

Uses and gratification is a theory that explores audiences' motives for media or mass communication usage, it can be used to view how people seek media to satisfy needs or perceived needs (Whiting & Williams, 2013).

Information retrieval is when there is the search for information in a document or metadata that carries data or any databases of text, image or sound (Cooper. C, Lorenc, T. and Schauberber, U. 2021)

Web searching is more focused on the previous definition of the Internet specifically and zones into the databases, while also adding forums and archival pieces found on the Internet and the social media platforms that can be accessed on the Web (Cooper et al., 2021).

Search Engine Optimisation SEO works as a tool to showcase information and improve website traffic based on the Expertise, Authoritativeness and Trustworthiness of sites that need to be displayed on search engines, such as Google (Perez, 2022).

Chapter 3

Research Design and Methodology

Research Paradigm

Due to TikTok's function as a social media application, a user's ability to access and profile creation makes it difficult to ascertain sure results and honest data (Hern, 2022). Qualitative research methods, a hallmark of interpretivism, provide the tools to explore these complexities, the exploration of the social media platform as a growing interest of one generation and market can be researched with qualitative means in order to gain insight into the reason and motivation of the user's interaction with media (Chowdhury, 2014).

A paper by Muhammad Faisol Chowdhury on Interpretivism in Aiding Our Understanding of the Contemporary Social World interpretivism as a paradigm refers to the emphasised approaches to meaningful nature in people's character and participation in social and cultural life (Chowdhury, 2014). By emphasising the meaningful nature of individuals' character and their active participation in society, interpretivism challenges the research methods that solely rely on objective measurements and treat people's knowledge as an absolute reality (Chowdhury, 2014). This paradigm recognises the complexity and diversity of human perspectives, acknowledging that individuals' interpretations and experiences shape their understanding of the world in alignment with the interpretivist paradigm, this research seeks to delve into the world of Gen Z's brand information-seeking behaviour on social media platforms. In an aim to uncover the nuanced motivations, preferences, and perceptions that drive Gen Z's interactions with social media as sources of information Interpretivism and qualitative methods can help gain insights.

Interpretivism, as an approach, assumes that human behaviour is complex and multifaceted and cannot be fully understood or measured through purely objective or quantitative methods (Chowdhury, 2014). Through interviews and content analysis, we will gain insights into the personal meanings and interpretations that Gen Z associates with their engagement on social media platforms with theories like U&G and UGM (Chowdhury, 2014; Katz et al., 1974; Shao, 2009). This aligns seamlessly with interpretivism's focus on capturing the depth and richness of participants' perspectives, allowing the suggested study to move through observations and underlying motivations.

Interpretivism has been influential in many fields, including sociology, anthropology, psychology, and education, and is often used in research settings where understanding the meanings and perspectives of individuals is central to the research question or goal (Chowdhury, 2014). Some of the key concepts associated with interpretivism include subjectivity, reflexivity, context, and interpretation (Chowdhury, 2014).

In Dudovskiy's paper on Interpretivism Research and Research Philosophy, this method is typically used as a qualitative research method (Dudovskiy, n.d). It would make more sense to use this instead of positivism because of how the TikTok algorithm is made to centre around the individual and not encourage the masses (Dilon, 2020). As the interpretive approach is based on data collection centred around interviews and observations, the study shows meaning subjectively (Dudovskiy, n.d).

Schultz (1967), a prominent sociologist who contributed to the development of interpretivism focused his work on understanding the importance of subjective meaning, one concept to highlight is the "lifeworld", which is in reference to the everyday world of lived experience (Schultz, 1967). Schutz argued that individuals' experiences are shaped by their social and cultural contexts and that understanding these contexts is key to understanding their experiences (Schultz, 1967). Gen Z's brand information-seeking behaviours are influenced by the digital landscape they inhabit and the sociocultural dynamics that shape their interaction with it as Gen Z is typically not passive recipients of media messages (Katz *et al.*, 1974)(Vinney, 2019).

Relativist ontology, in which the approach perceives reality as intersubjectively, is based on meanings and understandings on social and experiential levels (Dudovskiy, n.d). These social situations can happen on a varied basis with any TikTok user, making their data relative to the person observed or interviewed.

According to Dudovskiy ([n.d]), subjectivist epistemology is more about people not being separated from their knowledge.

Axiology in interpretivism emphasises the need for cultural sensitivity and an understanding of how participants' values and cultural backgrounds can influence their perspectives (Dudovskiy, n.d).

Assumptions	Interpretivism
Nature of Reality	Socially constructed, multiple
Goal of research	Understanding
Focus of interest	What is specific, unique, and deviant
Knowledge generated	Meanings Relative (time, context, culture, value bound)
Subject/Researcher relationship	Interactive, cooperative, participative
Desired information	What some people think and do, what kind of problems they are confronted with, and how they deal with them

Table 2 of Interpretivism (Dudovskiy, n.d).

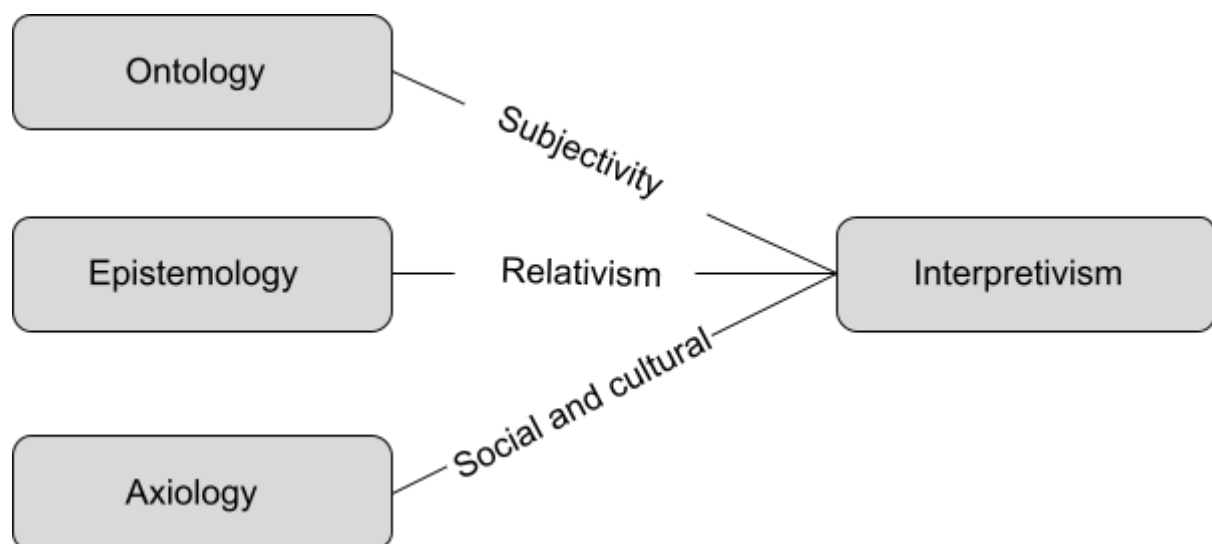


Figure 2 Research Paradigm (Dudovskiy, n.d)

Research Design

Qualitative research is an approach to research that focuses on understanding the meaning and experiences of individuals or groups (Geertz, 1973). It is a type of research that uses non-numerical data, such as interviews, observations, and documents, to gain insight into social phenomena (Geertz, 1973).

Qualitative research is characterised by its focus on the subjective experiences and perspectives of participants, and its emphasis on understanding the context and meaning of

social phenomena (Geertz, 1973). Unlike quantitative research, which seeks to measure and quantify phenomena in numerical terms, qualitative research seeks to uncover the complexity and richness of social life through detailed analysis of qualitative data (Geertz, 1973).

Qualitative research designs may vary, but common approaches include ethnography, case studies, grounded theory, phenomenology, and narrative analysis (Geertz, 1973). Qualitative research designs align seamlessly with the interpretivist paradigm and aim to understand Gen Z's brand information-seeking behaviour. By utilising methods like interviews and open-ended surveys, the study captured the contextual nuances of how Gen Z interacts with information on social media platforms (Chowdhury, 2014). These designs emphasised different aspects of the research process, such as participant observation, data analysis, and theory development, but all shared a commitment to understanding social phenomena from the perspective of the individuals or groups being studied (Geertz, 1973).

Population

Population parameters included South Africans within the age range of Gen Z, typically born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, aged 27 to 13. This decision was in alignment with the research focus on understanding how Gen Z utilises TikTok as a search engine for brand information. Regarding the accessible population, only Gen Z with the TikTok app installed had been considered for participation. Participants represent a mix of genders. This age group has unique digital habits and preferences, as pointed out in The Drums' survey of TikTok as an alternative to Google, with making it important to explore their unique behaviours and perceptions when seeking information online (Earlam, 2022).

Sampling

The researcher used non-probability snowball sampling, to recruit participants for the study. According to Mahin Naderifar, Hamideh Goli, and Fereshteh Ghaljaei (2017) non-probability sampling is a method of sampling in which every member of the population does not have an equal chance of being selected (Naderifar *et al.*, 2017). Snowball sampling is a type of non-probability sampling in which participants are recruited through their existing social networks (Naderifar *et al.*, 2017). The sample involved four female and six male participants aged 27 to 13 who use TikTok in South Africa. In this particular case, snowball sampling was chosen to tap into the existing social networks of Gen Z TikTok users in South Africa, a demographic often difficult to reach through traditional methods due to their high online and mobile engagement (Earlam, 2022). The initial step involved recruiting two participants who

met the study's criteria. These individuals were then asked to refer other potential participants from their social circles, creating a chain of referrals that expanded the sample size. This approach not only facilitated access to a wider pool of participants but also fostered rapport with them, as they were more likely to participate when recommended by a trusted friend or family member (Naderifar *et al.*, 2017).

Data Collection

Structured Interviews

The participants were sent a Participant Consent Form (see Annexure A) prior to interviewing. The contents of the form were clarified with the participants on the day they were each interviewed. The form explained that they had been invited to participate in the research because they were Gen Z TikTok users.

The Consent Form explained that the researcher was an online student at Vega School conducting research on Social Media as a Search Engine.

The Consent Form established each participant's voluntary participation in the study under conditions of anonymity and their right to remove themselves from the study at any point. This information was repeated verbally by the researcher at the start of each interview to introduce the focus of the interviews and their participation. In addition, signed consent to record the interview was obtained from each participant (see Annexure B).

The researcher used structured interviews to collect data for the research study. Structured interviews are a type of interview in which the interviewer asks a predetermined set of questions in a specific order (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2020). Structured interviews provide a consistent framework for gathering data from multiple participants, allowing researchers to compare and contrast responses across individuals and identify common themes or patterns (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2020).

Questions

A structured interview guide was developed for the study. The interview guide included open-ended questions which allowed the researcher to learn more about participants' experiences, motivations, and thoughts on social media as a search engine. Questions

were divided into 5 categories, an icebreaker, role clarity, a deep dive, reflection, and problem solving.

Area of Interest	Question
Icebreaker	When searching for information on brands, do you ever use social media?
Role Clarity	Why would you want to search for brand information on TikTok?
Deep dive	Are there any examples of times you searched for brands on TikTok, what was that/those stand-out experience/s?
Reflection	Do you find TikTok more convenient to use than Google, Why?
Problem-Solving	What do you feel is TikTok's biggest feature to keeping you searching on their platform?

Table 3 Structured Interview Guide

This line of questioning permitted exploration of the research question, How do Gen Z users construct experiences about brands based on the information they find on TikTok?

Recording of Responses

The interviews were conducted online via Discord and Microsoft Teams (see Figures 3 and 4), and recorded with the participant's permission. Each participant was identified in the transcript of their interview by a letter (e.g., Interviewee A) so that participants' real identities remained confidential. The interviews were audio recorded, the recordings were transcribed, and the transcriptions were then further checked for accuracy and mistaken wordings.

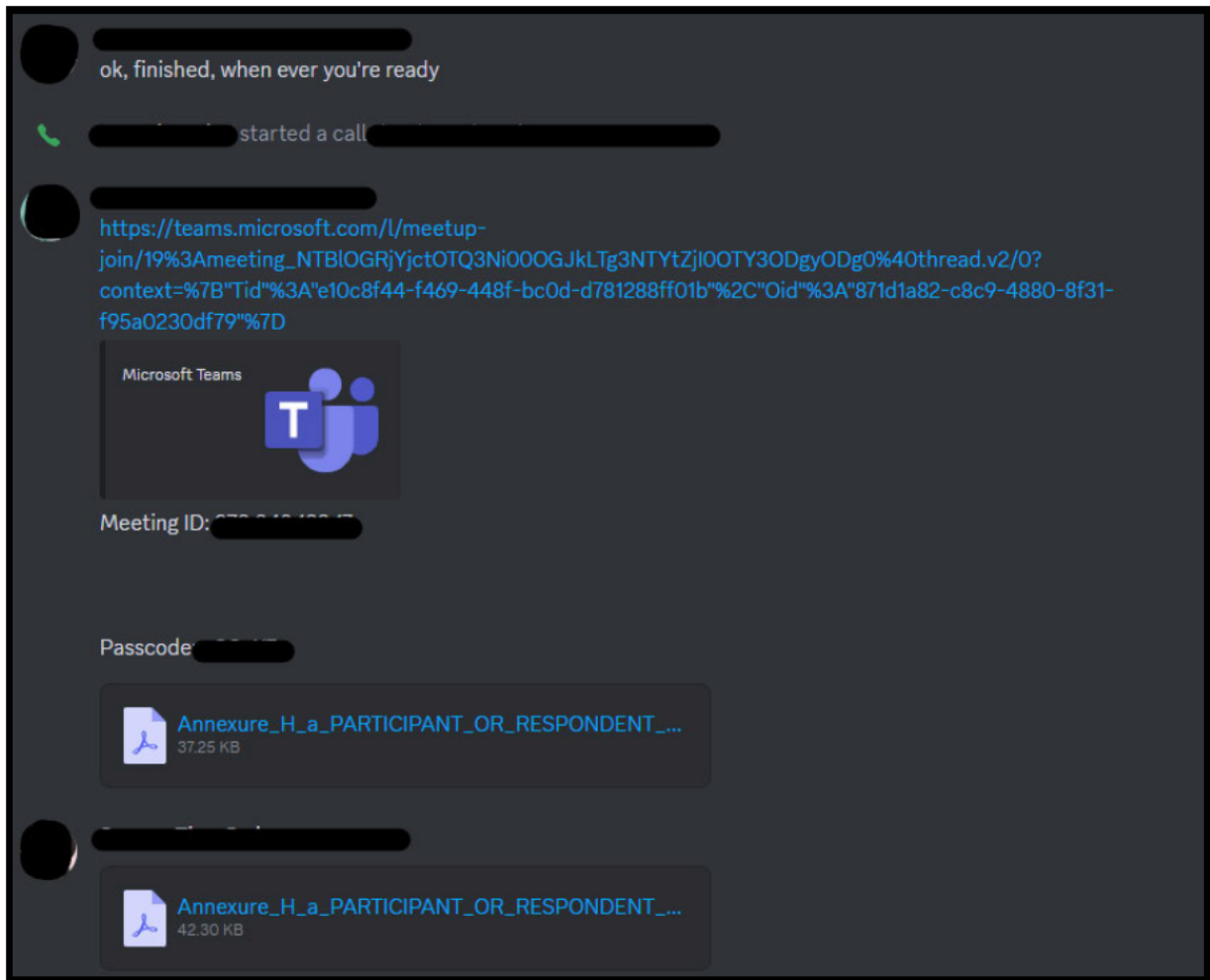


Figure 3 First contact with participant leading to Microsoft Teams meeting to conduct the interview.

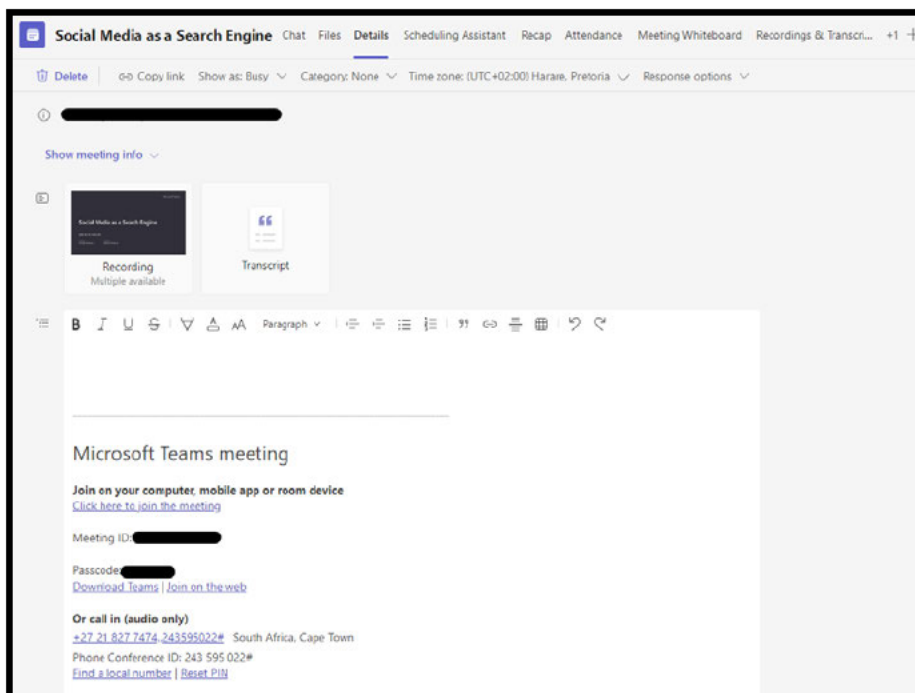


Figure 4 Microsoft Teams meeting details and recording.

A summary of the data collection process:

- Developed a structured interview guide.
- Recruited participants using snowball sampling.
- Contacted participants for scheduled interviews.
- Conducted the interviews online via Microsoft Teams.
- Recorded the interviews with the participant's permission.
- Transcribed the interviews.
- Analysed the transcripts to identify patterns and themes.

The structured interview guide is designed to collect data on the following topics:

- Participants use of TikTok
- Participants use of TikTok to search for brand information
- Participants' experiences with constructing experiences about brands based on the information they find on TikTok
- Participants' motivations for using TikTok as a search engine
- Participants' thoughts on social media as a search engine

The structured interview guide allowed the researcher to collect data on all of the topics that are relevant to the research problem and question. This data helped the researcher understand how Gen Z users construct experiences about brands based on the information they found on TikTok.

Data Analysis Method

Qualitative data analysis aims to analyse meaningful and symbolic content found in the data through the use of systematic coding methods (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis, and Bezuidenhout (2020) describe thematic analysis in the deductive research approach as a data analysis method focusing on the researcher grouping data into “textual units” of “related meanings”, which will eventually assemble into meaningful codes and concepts using a preconceived conceptual framework (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2020).

Thematic coding is relevant to the study as the conversations taken from the structured interview are open-ended, leading to topics that were not predetermined by the initial five questions. It is also worth noting that the choice in analysis aligns with the interpretivist

paradigm and seeks to unearth underlying meanings and constructs of human behaviours, beliefs, attitudes and opinions in order to gain an in-depth understanding rooted in human-centred design, in Dudovskiy's paper on Interpretivism Research and Research Philosophy this method is typically used as a qualitative research method (Dudovskiy, n.d).

The researcher used thematic analysis aimed to identify any common themes prevalent in participants' experiences with brands on TikTok that highlight the influence of social media and its use by Gen Z as a search engine.

Through transcription, the researcher reduced the volume of raw data taken from structured interviews discussions, and recordings which were converted into the written responses of participants in a concise format (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2020). Participant answers taken from the interviews were typed out into a Word document following the Microsoft Teams meetings and as mentioned above they were then further checked for accuracy and mistaken wordings.

The thematic analysis in this study followed the five-step framework described by Villegas (2023):

Step 1: Familiarise with the data

Firstly the researcher began re-reading the automated transcripts while listening to the audio from the interview to correct spelling. The reading of the transcripts and the audio were listened to multiple times in order for the researcher to develop a deep understanding of it and identify any initial patterns or themes (Villegas, 2023).

Familiarising with the data, the research utilised the Microsoft Team transcription and recording feature for a live voice-to-text conversion of the interview recordings (Microsoft, 2023). Collectively 3 hours and 10 minutes of recording were completed, and the transcriptions were re-read and checked comparatively to the recordings line-by-line for accuracy accumulating to 62 pages of work, totalling 19,141 words (Gibbs, 2012).

Step 2: Segment the data

Once familiar with the data, the researcher segmented it. This involves identifying meaningful segments of text, such as sentences, paragraphs, or in this case entire transcripts. These segments are then coded based on their content or meaning (Villegas, 2023). The researcher then moved through all the re-read textual transcripts once more. Initially, codes were made from the familiarisation to search for deeper context and commonalities between the 10 participants. These were underlined or italicised often in groups of words, in order to create quotes or key phrases during the interview (see Figure 5).

Interviewer:

Why would you want to use TikTok to search for brand information?

B:

Yeah, no. Yes. I mean, technically, *I am a bit uncomfortable with TikTok*, you know, because of their whole because of the nonsense that they do. And you know, it's not like YouTube and Google are any better but *it feels like there's more there's less likelihood* of there being nonsense perpetrated by Google through YouTube than they would be by TikTok and their whole situation in China and data breaches.

Interviewer:

Oh so you're talking about data breaches, so you feel you wouldn't say that TikTok is very security-based for you?

B:

nah, nah, I wouldn't say that they're not a secure company that *I wouldn't trust them* with any amount of my data outside of like a username you know?

Figure 5 Interview transcript segmentation

These codes provided the foundation for the analysis of social media as a search engine.

Step 3: Categorise the commonalities

This involves grouping together codes that are related to each other. For example, the code for “peer/followers content” and “influencer content” grouped into a broader theme of “community” (Villegas, 2023).

Step 4: Finalise the themes

This involves reviewing the themes to ensure that they are well-defined, supported by the data, and relevant to the research question. (Villegas, 2023). The themes were checked

once again to the dataset and was re-evaluated as relevant to the research question and its previous coding.

The researcher then made a summary of the content which was used as a structure for the themes. Categorising the commonalities in data, the researcher line-by-line coded the text to further evaluate the themes, this would be paying attention to the views of the respondents and reflected their experiences with brands on TikTok. These themes and keywords formulate the 4 recurring themes in the interviews by the 10 participants. Authenticity and Engagement (red), Personalisation (purple), Community (green), and Creativity (blue) (See Table 4 Theme).

Theme	Keywords
Authenticity and Engagement	real, genuine, honest, transparent, relatable, genuine
Personalisation:	relevant, tailored, relevant, customised, individualised, targeted
Community	connection, interaction, belonging, support, engagement, sharing
Creativity	unique, original, expressive, imaginative, visual

Table 4 Themes

Step 5: Describe the findings

Finally, the analysis was taken into a report on examples from interviews, related themes, connections to the research question of the study, and relevant literature and theories. The next chapter showcases these findings.

Validity, reliability or trustworthiness

The reason reliability was important in this research proposal is because reliability refers to the extent to which a study accurately measures or reflects the concept it was intended to explore or reflect, in this case, it is in regard to Gen Z's use of social media as search engines (DeVellis, 2017). A study is considered valid when the results accurately represent what they are intended to represent, without any biases, this proposed study is aiming to do that to close the gaps that have been reviewed with social media apps like TikTok and Gen Z's use of TikTok as a source of brand information.

In terms of reliability, it can refer to the consistency or stability of research findings over time and across different contexts (DeVellis, 2017). Proposed for this study - collecting data sources, such as interviews helped to get a more complete and accurate picture of social media as a search engine among Gen Z TikTok users.

Trustworthiness is a broader concept that encompasses both validity and reliability, it can also include and explore other factors such as credibility, dependability, and transferability (DeVellis, 2017).

Reflexivity involves acknowledging and addressing the researcher's own biases, assumptions, and perspectives throughout the research process, the researcher may look into the TikTok search engine's topic because they fall into the demographic themselves and noted certain experiences in their own media bubble (Ho & Limpaecher, 2023). Reflexivity can help establish the researcher's credibility and reduce the impact of personal biases on the research findings (Ho & Limpaecher, 2023).

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent: It is essential to ensure that all participants have a clear understanding of the purpose and scope of the research, as well as any potential risks or benefits (Bhandari, 2023). This can include explaining how data will be collected, stored, and used, and obtain explicit consent from participants (Bhandari, 2023).

Privacy: TikTok users may share personal information or data as part of their interactions on the platform (Bhandari, 2023). Any data collected and shared with the researcher is kept confidential and used only for the purposes of the study and all necessary measures are taken to protect participants' privacy (See annexure).

Representation: It is crucial to ensure that the research accurately represents the perspectives and experiences of Gen Z TikTok users and that their voices are not misrepresented or taken out of context (Bhandari, 2023).

Transparency: Transparency about research methods, findings, and any potential conflicts of interest (Bhandari, 2023). This can include providing clear documentation of the research process, making data and results publicly available, and acknowledging any sources of funding or support.

Respect: Cultural norms and values of Gen Z TikTok users must be respected and avoid any behaviours or actions that could be interpreted as exploitative or disrespectful (Bhandari, 2023).

Limitations

Small sample size: A small sample size can make it difficult to generalise the researches findings to a larger population.

Self-selection bias: If participants are self-selected to participate in the study, they may not be representative of the population interested in researching. As this research is an interpretivism study, interpretivism is a subjective approach to research, which means that the researcher's own interpretation of the data can influence the findings (Chowdhury, 2014).

Participant bias: The participants' own biases can also influence the results of the study.

Transferability: The findings of the study may not be transferable to other settings or populations outside of the South African landscape .

Rigidity: Interpretivism can be a rigid approach to research, which can make it difficult to change the research design or methods as the study progresses (Chowdhury, 2014).

Chapter 4

Findings and Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study have several implications for how Gen Z users on TikTok search with social media platforms. Concluding the thematic analysis process referenced by Villegas (2023), deductive theorising (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2020) and thematic coding the researcher revealed the existence of four patterns: Authenticity and Engagement, Personalisation, Community, and Creativity (see Table 5).

Themes	Findings	Implications
Authenticity and Engagement	Gen Z users on TikTok value authenticity and engagement.	Brands need to be authentic and genuine and show that they are interested in what Gen Z users have to say.
Personalisation	Gen Z users value personalised brand content.	Brands who want to understand how Gen Z searches for brand information need to take the time to understand the interests and needs of Gen Z users and create content that is relevant to them.
Community	Gen Z users value being part of communities.	Brands need to find ways to foster a sense of community among their followers on TikTok.
Creativity	Gen Z users are creative and expressive.	Brands need to create content that is visually appealing and engaging when trying to create information that Gen Z looks to discover on platforms like TikTok.

Table 5 Themes, Findings and Implications

To further strengthen the research findings and expand future studies that are larger by scale, the researcher suggests conducting more direct testing with a larger sample of participants. This approach would allow for a more comprehensive and generalisable understanding of TikTok's use as a search engine by Gen Z. While qualitative research is

valuable for exploring the nuances of individual experiences, it is limited in its ability to fully represent the broader population. Therefore, future studies should aim to bridge this gap by conducting quantitative research that can provide broader insights and statistical generalisations (Chowdhury, 2014).

Authenticity and Engagement

Social Media as a Connection Tool

Research found that Gen Z users are eager to learn new things. They want to see content that is informative and educational, even if it is about a brand's products or services. This was mentioned by 5 participants who brought up screen time, endless scrolling, "low brain capacity", "attention span", and "addiction" when speaking specifically about TikTok as a platform, this mainly was answered in the Problem Solving question (see Table 1) when asked about a feature that made them want to stay on TikTok.

"videos that I watch, it's mostly like edutainment stuff, you know, like, you know, multi-hour Discovery documentaries...I am usually looking for a specific answer to a question or something something I saw online. I will scroll through [Google] results until I find what I am looking for, and then I will stop. However, TikTok, using social media, I can easily spend hours scrolling through my feed, even if I am not really interested in any of the content." (Interviewee B)

The readings by Marcus (2022) Gen Z is the first generation to grow up with the internet and social media, and the findings from the research suggest that they see these platforms as a way to connect with people (Marcus, 2022).

Search engines, on the other hand, are seen as tools for finding information, not for connecting with people, which the findings also agree with (Hassoun *et al.*, 2023). Gen Z users are more likely to turn to social media when they want to feel connected to others because it allows them to have two-way conversations and interactions (Marcus, 2022).

Because on traditional search engines, Gen Z users typically have to search for brands to find information about them. Interviewees C, D and J spoke about experiences where a traditional search engine like Google was a place to search for very specific things they would not need to scroll on, but TikTok was "endless" but still showed them results for things like recipes or tutorial videos. On TikTok, brands can discover Gen Z users by creating engaging content that shows up on their For You Page. This means that Gen Z users can learn about new brands without even having to search for them. One of the prompts used in the interviews in the Deep Dive (see Table 1) was whether or not they felt they were finding brands often on TikTok. The majority felt yes they were, with a few contradicting findings which spoke to scepticism of TikTok's algorithm.

This links to the segmentation of Gen Z users who value authenticity, and they are more likely to trust brands that are authentic in their communications. Traditional search engines often return results that are paid for by brands, which can make it difficult for Gen Z users to know which brands are genuine interviewees G and H are quoted saying

"It will have like a little thing that says whether or not the post is sponsored, or if it's an ad and things like that.

And so I try to avoid looking for things that are sponsored or like.

And the kind of have like were given to the person by the brand.

And so there's this kind of like loyalty that the person has to the company." (Interviewee G)

TikTok, on the other hand, is a platform where brands can position themselves and connect with Gen Z users in a real and relatable way. Two interviewee's experiences quoted TikTok as more "human".

Here are some examples of specific types of brand information that Gen Z users were seeking on TikTok from the interviews:

How-to videos: "Oh, it was a Blender tutorial teaching you how to make hair and I used it and it was quite great. It got to the point and it didn't waste time so yeah." (Interview F)

Product demos: “So to see how they actually like they like physically use the brand of the product.” (Interview H)

Customer reviews: “I think the search engine sort of just gives me static responses whereas my TikTok is gonna be a bit more like reviewing like it's more of a human response on TikTok so I can physically see people who are interacting with it” (Interview J)

Behind-the-scenes tours: “So I think Porsche, the company has got like this project that they're trying to do, where they want to build a, like a hydrogen, fuel manufacturing plants. That was really interesting because I didn't realise that they were doing it. “ (Interview B)

Brand stories: “I would say the algorithm and the way that TikTok advertising things that are in your interest are actually a lot better than Instagram, because I know for a fact Instagram is for a business, like most things are but it it pushes what the majority of people like on to you whereas say TikTok it's very personalised as for you, as the for you page in the name indicates.” (Interview D)

TikTok is a platform where brands can be themselves and connect with Gen Z users in a real and relatable way. Contradicting this, many of the interviewees were incredibly apprehensive about their data or the workings of the algorithm. Some interviewees felt that TikTok should be regulated more heavily even though they would admit that TikTok was a secure platform. Another 2 participants stated that they felt it was too harsh to search on TikTok. Interviewee E felt that censorship and the engagement on the platform felt "pushed" and that it was "one-sided". Interviewee G spoke of an experience where the tagging system was being exploited to create content on the platform regarding the guidelines TikTok had in place

From the findings, there are a number of factors that influence Gen Z users' decision to use TikTok as a search engine for brand information.

In addition to these factors, the findings suggested that Gen Z users are also more likely to use TikTok as a search engine for brand information if they are familiar with the platform and if they trust the information that they find on the platform.

Personalisation

TikTok's Personalised Approach

From the study, Gen Z users were found to be using TikTok as a search engine for a variety of brand information including product and service information. The research findings suggested that Gen Z users wanted to learn about new products and services, as well as how to use them. They also want to see reviews of products and services from other users.

All participants from the study spoke about at least one other social media platform, such as Instagram and Reddit, and 3 participants mentioned TikTok not being their preferred platform. When the questions circled the topic of participation on the app TikTok in regards to brand information 2 respondents (B and D) mentioned quitting or deleting the app due to being uncomfortable with TikTok's content.

The other participants were very enthusiastic about the experiences they had with TikTok videos recommending products to them on their fyp. Some of the interview findings showed that if an app, either TikTok or another social media like Twitter or Instagram, showed them content they had flagged as "ignore" or "do not show me this" they would feel irritated or annoyed (Interviewees A, E, I and J).

Brand values for Gen Z users specifically were found to want to know what brands stand for and what they believe in. They are also interested in learning about brands' social and environmental impact. There was a lasting impression with all the participants about the values being shown to them on TkTok more than other apps, Interviewee I was very open about their views and how they felt about purchase decisions or viewing preferences.

Interviewee B spoke about sustainability being something they think about and that they felt missing on platforms like TikTok.

"It's not something that I think about often. But when I do think about it does become pretty important. ... I'm like, Oh, hey, this is really important. And it's something I should focus on, then inevitably I forget. " (Interviewee B)

While brand values such as authenticity, transparency, and customer focus are essential for success across all social media platforms, TikTok presents unique opportunities for brands to connect with Gen Z consumers due to its distinct features — like TikTok's focus on short, engaging videos that aligns perfectly with Gen Z's preference for quick, consumable content (Marcus, 2022). Because Gen Z is increasingly resistant to traditional advertising formats, the research findings showed that Gen Z are seeking more authentic and engaging experiences (Marcus, 2022). TikTok's organic and user-driven content provided an alternative to traditional ads with a focus on entertainment and discovery, recognised by the participants via personalisation.

Gen Z users want to be entertained. They are more likely to seek out information from brands that are entertaining, engaging and personalised to them specifically.

“So like I just any major care brands that I like that I use or that I'm like interested in using like all the normal ones I suppose off the top of my head probably like Mac, namely in all of those fancy one and then yeah fashion.” (interviewee H)

In previous literature, it was explored how Gen Z has grown up in a world of constant stimulation (Marcus, 2022). They are bombarded with information and entertainment from a variety of sources, including social media, streaming services, and video games. This research suggested that this had led them to develop shorter attention spans than previous generations (Marcus, 2022).

Interviewees themselves agreed and pointed to this in the findings as one of their annoyances with TikTok and its content.

Gen Z also has a high demand for entertainment. They want to be entertained all the time, and they are not afraid to switch between different forms of entertainment if they are not getting what they want (Marcus, 2022). Many of the participants were very happy to pick multiple social media platforms or search engines for information about the brand, especially if one platform suddenly tailored towards them more and with accuracy.

This was also suggested in the 'Gen Z Engagement with Online Information' study because they have grown up with a variety of entertainment options at their fingertips (Hassoun *et al.*, 2023).

As discussed above, Gen Z users want to see content that is relevant to their interests and needs. Traditional search engines often return results that are based on the keywords that users search for, which can be limiting. TikTok, on the other hand, has another way to personalise entertainment content which is to give them control over their experience. For example, TikTok allows users to create personalised playlists and watchlists. Interviewees cited this as a big portion of their experience with the platform and compared it to platforms like YouTube and Pinterest. In the literature, a survey done by Aimee Earlam, TikTok was eating into search engine Google as a preferred search engine for this precise reason (Earlam, 2022). Gen Z were far happier with content being personalised and controllable which the findings suggest isn't apparent with traditional search engines. The implication is that the search engines will need to adapt to the newer generations' preferences with these touches of personalisation.

Community and Creativity

TikTok's Organic Discovery

Gen Z users want to connect with brands on a personal level. They want to learn about the people behind the brands and the stories behind the products and services. This links in with the theme around personalisation, in the literature, we see Shao (2009) mention in theory that social media users are not passive consumers of media, but rather active participants in the production and dissemination of media content (Shao, 2009). For example, UGM theory suggests that media is no longer simply produced by a small number of professional media producers, but rather by a large number of users. This study found that Gen Z appreciates the platform's emphasis on shared interests, trends, and challenges, providing a space to connect with like-minded individuals. UGM theory also suggests that media is no longer simply consumed by a passive audience, but rather by an active audience that is engaged in the creation and sharing of content. TikTok is a hub for creative expression, fostering a culture of challenges, unique storytelling, and innovative trends. For brands, the research suggests that a brand can leverage this creativity to showcase their personality, engage with Gen Z's interests, and participate in viral trends.

Gen Z users are curious about how products are made, how brands operate, and how they interact with their customers. The interviews show that many of the ideas around seeing and experiencing brands, products or services even if it's through genres like music or makeup is a pivotal point for their engagement with the platform and the types of brand information they are seeking out. Social media allows Gen Z users to connect with friends and family, make new friends, and join communities that share their interests. Interviewees actively search for this connection (Perez, 2022).

“So on TikTok, makeup does come across like my page (fyp) quite often and a lot of times I'm not actively like looking for something then I'll just sort of save it to like a - it's like a collection and then like recently I had an event so then I went back to look at old stuff I had saved.” (Interview H)

Going back to the literature by Shao (2009) the UGM theory has a lot of connection with TikTok's algorithm. For example, many social media apps use UGM to recommend new friends, groups, and pages to users. Additionally, many social media apps use UGM to target users with relevant ads. The link between this theme and the Authenticity and Engagement section shows how the experiences of participants are influenced to use TikTok to search for brand information. The "For You" page is the main feed on TikTok where users see videos. The algorithm uses UGM to personalise the "For You" page for each user, showing them videos that they are likely to be interested in.

The "Trending" page shows users the most popular videos on TikTok. The algorithm uses UGM to determine which videos are trending, based on the videos that users are watching and interacting with.

When a user searches for a hashtag on TikTok, they will see a feed of videos that use that hashtag. Gen Z users value this created and curated community built on TikTok. They want to be part of communities where they can connect with others who share their interests and values. Interviewee E and I speak heavily on their experiences with TikTok recommending them videos that they feel don't inform them well enough on their crafts and having to search for a different video or more information within that community via the comments to

otherwise by linking from short-form content to longer form content. To them, TikTok is a platform where Gen Z users can connect with brands in a meaningful way. Interviewee F spoke about their hashtags being confused between their interest in HEMA and knives with dances and how that made them retract away from the content on the platform because of how videos they were not interested in were shown to them due to them seemingly becoming interested in it when they were not.

Gen Z users are creative and expressive. They are drawn to brands that are also creative and expressive. TikTok is a platform where brands can create unique and engaging content that resonates with Gen Z users. Two of the interviewees were artistic people. One building a brand and the other a hobbyist who spent the majority of their time looking up techniques and skill sets. The hobbyist (Interviewee D) was unhappy with the way they were having to wait for recommendations for crochet and knitting on the platform.

Traditional search engines are not designed to foster community. TikTok, on the other hand, is a platform where Gen Z users can connect with brands in a meaningful way.

“I think it can work - If TikTok is willing to create a space where it's easy for an artist to start and maintain an audience. TikTok does have potential depending on how or what business decisions they make.” (Interviewee F)

For Interviewee F, their major concern was that as they were an artist could they build brand awareness and community via the platform or be able to build an audience via TikTok.

Research Question, Problem, Objectives Addressed

Implications of Research

The research has shown that Gen Z users are increasingly using TikTok as a search engine for brand information (as mentioned in the Discovery Documentaries, Porsche campaigns, Mac Cosmetics, Blender software tutorials). This is because TikTok offers a number of advantages over traditional search engines, placed into the themes established using the

methods stipulated in the readings of Villegas (2023), and deductive theorising (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2020) these advantages are

Authenticity: Gen Z users value authenticity, and TikTok is a platform where brands can be themselves and connect with users in a real and relatable way.

“So it's kind of this weird disconnect in trying to bridge the gap for creators and users – I think YouTube is trying to copy bridging the gap by allowing like short form content, like the shorts to direct into long form content because they do that on TikTok by linking you to the actual content creator” (Interviewee F)

Creativity: Gen Z users are drawn to brands that are creative and expressive, and TikTok is a platform where brands can create unique and engaging content.

“So I am a hobbyist I like doing things like crocheting and knitting and so I will usually look for brands that do yarn works or making patterns or genuinely just creative brands so I could save video formats especially if I'm looking for patterns it's a lot more it's a lot more interactive it's a lot more I can see what's happening I can follow along it makes sense rather than with with web pages it's a lot more less personal” (Interviewee D)

Personalisation: Gen Z users value personalisation, and TikTok's algorithm is very good at personalising the content that users see.

“A feature that would keep me on that platform would probably be the, the addictive quality of the way that they've designed things...it was very easy for me to spend like multiple hours, just scrolling, scrolling through things... the little algorithm that they use and the type

of content that they encourage that is most likely to keep me on the platform.” (Interviewee B)

Community: Gen Z users value community, and TikTok is a platform where they can connect with others who share their interests and values.

“... when people are commenting, you know, people are not coming to you for the sake of only advertising, they're coming in to help other people visually, like cyber arts. People will say, “I made this, it worked really well”...” (Interviewee D)

The research has also shown that Gen Z users seek a variety of brand information on TikTok, including product and service information: Gen Z users want to learn about new products and services, as well as how to use them. They also want to see reviews of products and services from other users.

“OK, I'm more of a PC enthusiast so I'm very into brands that are affiliated with things like Nvidia, AMD, and Intel. So I'm always watching different like debates on which brand to choose based on either performance or price. (Interviewee I)

Brand values and mission: Gen Z users want to know what brands stand for and what they believe in. They are also interested in learning about brands' social and environmental impact.

“Porsche, the company has got like this project that they're trying to do, where they want to build a, like a hydrogen, fuel manufacturing plants...I found out about Porche's big project that they were doing to push a type of sustainability.” (Interviewee B)

Brand stories and experiences: Gen Z users want to connect with brands on a personal level. They want to learn about the people behind the brands and the stories behind the products and services.

“It's sort of that I'm just discovering the topic on TikTok and then I might look around on it a bit more, but I feel like it's really important to do a lot of research outside of it with any social media.” (Interviewee J)

Addressing Research Objectives

What types of brand information do Gen Z users seek on TikTok?

Gen Z users seek a variety of brand information on TikTok, including product and service information, brand values and mission, brand stories and experiences, behind-the-scenes content, and educational content.

What factors influence Gen Z users' decision to use TikTok as a search engine for brand information?

Gen Z users are influenced to use TikTok as a search engine for brand information by a number of factors, including authenticity, creativity, personalisation, community, and entertainment.

How do Gen Z users' experiences about brands on TikTok differ from their experiences about brands on traditional search engines?

Gen Z users' experiences of brands on TikTok are more authentic, personalised, and community-oriented than their experiences of brands on traditional search engines. This is because TikTok is a platform where brands can be themselves, connect with users in a real and relatable way, and create content that is relevant to users' interests and needs.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Anticipated Contribution

The anticipated contribution of this paper was to enhance and broaden the discourse on Gen Z's utilisation of social media platforms, specifically TikTok. By exploring their motivations, behaviours, and preferences, this study aimed to contribute to a wider narrative concerning Gen Z's use of social media and to explore brand information-seeking behaviour. It strives to offer valuable insights that can inform and cultivate a more comprehensive understanding of this generation's digital engagements.

The research has shown that Gen Z users are increasingly using TikTok as a search engine for brand information. This is because TikTok offers a number of advantages over traditional search engines, including authenticity, creativity, personalisation, community, and entertainment. If a deeper understanding of how Gen Z searches are wanted by brands that want to reach Gen Z users, the brands should consider creating content for TikTok that is authentic, creative, personalised, and entertaining.

The research has also shown that Gen Z users seek a variety of brand information on TikTok, including product and service information, brand values and mission, brand stories and experiences, behind-the-scenes content, and educational content.

Overall, the research has shown that TikTok is a valuable platform for brands to reach and engage with Gen Z users. Brands that want to be successful on TikTok should focus on creating content that is authentic, creative, personalised, entertaining, and informative.

Recommendations

Explore the long-term impact of TikTok's use on Gen Z's brand information-seeking behavior and decision-making processes. The researcher suggests to conduct longitudinal studies to track how Gen Z users' preferences and behaviours evolve over a longer time, examining how TikTok's influence on their brand perceptions and purchase decisions changes.

With companies trying to adapt to the new market and Gen Z's digital preferences, the researcher suggests to compare and contrast Gen Z's brand information-seeking behaviour across different social media platforms. Further research that conduct comparative studies to understand how Gen Z's preferences and behaviours vary when seeking brand information on TikTok versus other platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat.

Finally the researcher also suggests that a study that develops and tests interventions to enhance the quality and credibility of brand information on TikTok. Some study that would explore strategies to promote transparency, fact-checking, and ethical advertising practices on the platform.

Conclusion

This study has provided valuable insights into Gen Z's use of TikTok as a search engine for brand information. By understanding the motivations, behaviours, and preferences of this demographic, brands can tailor their TikTok strategies to effectively reach and engage with Gen Z consumers. The research findings highlight the importance of authenticity, creativity, personalisation, community, and entertainment in creating brand content that resonates with Gen Z users on TikTok. Additionally, the study emphasises the need for brands to be transparent, customer-focused, and aligned with Gen Z's values in order to build meaningful relationships with this influential generation.

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Annexure A – PARTICIPANT OR RESPONDENT CONSENT FORM

Explanatory information sheet and consent form for participants

To whom it may concern,

My name is Nicole Wickens and I am a student at The IIE's [REDACTED] I am currently conducting research under the supervision of Dr Michele O Hara about Social Media as a Search Engine: Exploring Gen Z's Information Seeking through TikTok. I hope that this research will enhance our understanding of adding to the body of knowledge on social media and digital culture.

I would like to invite you to participate in my study. In order to explain to you what your participation in my study will involve, I have formulated questions that I will try to fully answer so that you can make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. If you have any additional questions that you feel are not addressed or explained in this information sheet, please do not hesitate to ask me for more information. Once you have read and understood all the information contained in this sheet and are willing to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.

What will I be doing if I participate in your study?

I would like to invite you to participate in this research because (insert reason). If you decide to participate in this research, I would like to (explain exactly what participation will involve).

You can decide whether or not to participate in this research. If you decide to participate, you can choose to withdraw at any time or to decide not to answer particular interview questions.

Are there any risks/ or discomforts involved in participating in this study?

Whether or not you decide to participate in this research, there will be no negative impact on you. There are no direct risks or benefits to you if you participate in this study. You might, however, indirectly find that it is helpful to talk about your (insert what you are examining). If you find at any stage that you are not comfortable with the line of questioning, you may withdraw or refrain from participating.

Detail the potential risks and how it will be managed by the researcher. Indicate how the ethical considerations will be applied in the context of the study.

Do I have to participate in the study?

- Your inclusion in this study is completely voluntary;
- If you do not wish to participate in this study, you have every right not to do so;
- Even if you agree to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time without having to provide an explanation for your decision.

Will my identity be protected?

I promise to protect your identity. I will not use your name in any research summaries to come out of this research and I will also make sure that any other details are disguised so that nobody will be able to identify you. I would like to ask your permission to record the interviews, but only my supervisor, I and possibly a professional transcriber (who will sign a confidentiality agreement) will have access to these recordings. Nobody else, including anybody at IIE Vega School, will have access to your interview information. I would like to use quotes when I discuss the findings of the research, but I will not use any recognisable information in these quotes that can be linked to you.

What will happen to the information that participants provide?

Once I have finished all interviews, I will write summaries to be included in my research report, which is a requirement to complete my Bachelor of Arts Honours in Strategic Brand Communication. You may ask me to send you a summary of the research if you are interested in the final outcome of the study.

What happens if I have more questions about the study?

Please feel free to contact me or my supervisor should you have any questions or concerns about this research, or if there is anything you need to know before you decide whether or not to participate.

You should not agree to participate unless you are completely comfortable with the procedures followed.

My contact details are as follows:

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

The contact details of my supervisor are as follows:

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Participant or respondent consent	
I, _____, agree to participate in the research conducted by Nicole Wickens about Social Media as a Search Engine: Exploring Gen Z's Information Seeking through TikTok. This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve. I understand that: · I agree to be interviewed for this research. · My confidentiality will be ensured. My name and personal details will be kept private. · My participation in this research is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time. There will be no repercussions should I choose to withdraw from the research. · I may choose not to answer any of the questions that are asked during the research interview. · I may be quoted directly when the research is published, but my identity will be protected.	
Signature	Date

Annexure B - AUDIO OR VIDEO RECORDING CONSENT FORM

Consent Form for Participants	
I, _____, agree to allow Nicole Wickens to audio record my interviews as part of the research about Social Media as a Search Engine: Exploring Gen Z's Information Seeking through TikTok. This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve. I understand that: · My confidentiality will be ensured. My name, personal details or any other identifiable information will be kept confidential; · The recordings will be stored in a password-protected file on the researcher's computer; and · Only the researcher, the researcher's supervisor(s) and possibly a transcriber (who will sign a confidentiality agreement) will have access to these recordings.	
Signature	Date

Annexure C - Ethical Clearance Letter

Data Classification - Business General





Student name: Nicole Wickens
Student number: [REDACTED]
Brand and campus: Vega Online

Approval of BA Honours in Strategic Brand Communication Proposal and Ethics Clearance

Your research proposal and the ethical implications of your proposed research topic were reviewed by your supervisor and the campus ethics committee, a subcommittee of The Independent Institute of Education's Ethics Committee.

Your research proposal posed no significant ethical concerns and we hereby provide you with ethics clearance to proceed with your data collection.

There may be some aspects that you still need to address in your proposal. If this is the case, feedback will be provided to you in writing. You will need to address these aspects in consultation with your supervisor.

In the event that you decide to change your research topic or methodology in any way, kindly consult your supervisor to ensure that all ethical considerations are adhered to and pose no risk to any participant or party involved. A revised ethics clearance letter will be issued in such instances.

We wish you all the best with your research!

Yours sincerely,


Dr Tish Taylor
Supervisor


Dr Tish Taylor
Chair of the Campus Ethics Committee

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Annexure D - Concept Document

<u>Project details</u>		
Your Name: Nicole Wickens		Student Number: [REDACTED]
Supervisor: Michele O Hara	Date:20/11/2023	Version: 10

<u>Proposed Title</u>	
Title	Social Media as a Search Engine: the Use of TikTok by Gen Z to Search for Brand Information

<u>Research details</u>	
Problem statement	Gen Z is increasingly using TikTok as a platform for brand information seeking, rather than Google.
Purpose statement	This study aims to investigate the role of TikTok as a platform for brand information seeking among Gen Z users. This study will explore the factors that influence Gen Z users' decision to use TikTok for brand information seeking, as well as their perceptions of the credibility and usefulness of information found on the platform.
Research question/s	What are the underlying motivations and preferences that drive Gen Z users to choose TikTok as their preferred avenue for brand information over conventional search engines? Sub-Questions: In what ways does TikTok's format and content delivery influence Gen Z users' interaction with and perception of brands, in contrast to more traditional search engine experiences? How do Gen Z users perceive the authenticity, accessibility, and engagement of brands on TikTok compared to traditional search engines? What implications does the increasing reliance on TikTok for brand information seeking have for the broader landscape of digital information consumption patterns among Gen Z users?
Objectives	O1: To explore the patterns and motivations underlying Gen Z's utilisation of TikTok as a platform for brand information. O2: To understand the unique features of TikTok that attract Gen Z users and contribute to their preference for the platform as a brand information source, compared to conventional search engines. O3: To investigate the perceived authenticity, accessibility, and engagement of brands on TikTok in the eyes of Gen Z users and how these factors influence their decision to rely on TikTok for brand information over traditional search engines.

	O4: To assess the broader implications of Gen Z's growing reliance on TikTok for brand information.
Research rationale	Gen Z is the largest generation of “digital natives”, and they are increasingly using social media to find information. TikTok is a really popular social media platform among Gen Z users, and it has the potential to be a valuable source of information about brands. However, little research has been done on how Gen Z uses TikTok to search for brand information. Previous research has explored various facets of Gen Z's interactions with digital platforms. This study seeks to fill the gap in existing knowledge by exploring and comparing the brand information-seeking behaviours of Gen Z users on both TikTok and traditional search engines. This study is unique in that it focuses on the emergent role of TikTok as a distinctive platform for Gen Z's information discovery practices. It also contributes novel insights by shedding light on the preference of Generation Z for short, easily consumable forms of information.

<u>Literature overview</u>					
Key theories	Uses Generated Media (UGM) Theory User Generated Media Theory (UGMT) is a field of study that explores the creation, distribution, and consumption of media content by users. UGMT is based on the premise that users are not simply passive consumers of media, but active participants in the media landscape.				
Seminal authors/sources	User-Generated Media (Shao, 2009)				
Literature review themes	<u>Theme 1</u> Theme 1 Gen Z's Brand Seeking Behaviour in Contrast to Other Generations	<u>Theme 2</u> Theme 2 Functionality of Search Engines in Shaping Brand Information	<u>Theme 3</u> Theme 3 Gen Z's Utilisation of Social Media Platforms for Brand Information	<u>Theme 4</u> Theme 4 Social Media's Influence on Generation Z's Brand Behaviour	<u>Theme 5</u> Social Media as a Source of Information for Generation Z
Sources	Perception and communication (Broadbent, 1958) Uses and gratifications sought by pre-adolescent and adolescent TikTok consumers(Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020) Interpretivism in aiding our understanding of the contemporary social world (Chowdhury, 2014) What you see depends on where you sit: The effect of geographical location on web-searching for systematic reviews: A case study (Cooper et al., 2021) Interpretivism (interpretivist) research philosophy - research-methodology (Dudovskiy, n.d) Brainstorm Tech 2022: Organizing The World's Information (Google, 2022)				

	News Consumption in the UK: 2022 (Jigsaw Research, 2022)
	How TikTok's algorithm made it a success: 'it pushes the boundaries', The Guardian (Hern, 2022)
	Uses and gratifications research (Katz et al., 1973)
	Gen Z, explained: The art of living in a Digital age (Katz, 2021)
	Uses and gratifications theory and E-consumer behaviors (Luo, 2002)
	Video-Sharing Apps Business Models: TikTok Case Study (Mhalla et al., 2020)
	What are the functions of the search engines? (Mitchell, 2020)
	Gen Z Uses TikTok Like Google, Upsetting the Old Internet Order (Mulinda & Niasse, 2022)
	TikTok is fastest growing news source for UK adults, Ofcom finds, The Guardian (Milmo, 2022)
	Watch, Share or Create: The Influence of Personality Traits and User Motivation on TikTok Mobile Video Usage (Omar & Dequan, 2020)
	Understanding the appeal of user-generated media: A uses and gratification perspective (Shao, 2009)
	TikTok's global surge (Stokel-Walker, 2020)
	Why people use social media: A uses and gratifications approach (Whiting & William, 2013)
	Exploring selective exposure and confirmation bias as processes underlying employee work happiness: An intervention study (Williams et al., 2016)
	Online ethnographic methods, Handbook of Research on Methods and Techniques for Studying Virtual Communities (Behrendtz, 2011)
	Ethical considerations in research: Types & Examples (Bhandari, 2023)
	Member checking, Qualitative Health Research (Birt, et al. 2016)
	Are TikTok and YouTube the new Googles for Generation Z?, The Drum (Earlam, 2022)
	Savanta: BrandVue Media's Most Loved Media Brands (Earlham, 2023)
	Practicing information sensibility: How gen Z engages with online information (Hassoun, et al, 2023)
	Truth be told: How college students evaluate and use information in the Digital age (Head & Eisenberg, 2010)
	The importance of reflexivity in Qualitative Research, Delve (Ho & Limpaecher, 2023)

	Narrative analysis in qualitative research: Examples, methods & types, Narrative Analysis in Qualitative Research: Examples, Methods & Types (Kaluza, 2023) Snowball sampling: A purposeful method of sampling in qualitative research, Strides in Development of Medical Education (Naderifar, 2017)
Key concepts	Social media usage, TikTok, Google, Generation Z, Uses and gratification, information retrieval, web-searching, Search Engine Optimisation (SEO),

Provisional Research Approach

Paradigm	<u>Paradigm</u> Interpretivism	<u>Epistemology</u> Relativism	<u>Ontology</u> Subjectivity	<u>Axiology</u> Social or Cultural value
Approach/design	Interpretivism is a research methodology that is a qualitative study which would ideally use cross-sectional study (Observations at a single point in time). Primary research is then the interviews/detailed questionnaires. Cross-sectional studies are observational in nature and are known as descriptive research.			

Provisional Research Plan

Population	The population is defined as South African citizens born between 1995 and 2010. This is the age range of Gen Z, and the study is specifically interested in understanding how this generation uses social media as a search engine for information retrieval.
Sampling	Snowball sampling of 10 participants.
Data collection method(s)	Data will be collected through structured interviews.
Data analysis method(s)	Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that involves identifying patterns and themes in data. It is a flexible and versatile method that can be used to analyze a wide range of data types, including interviews, focus groups, documents, and social media posts.

Ethical considerations and limitations

Ethics	Informed consent: It is essential to ensure that all participants have a clear understanding of the purpose and scope of the research, as well as any potential risks or benefits (Bhandari, 2023). This can include explaining how data will be collected, stored, and used, and obtaining explicit consent from participants (Bhandari, 2023). Privacy: TikTok users may share personal information or data as part of their interactions on the platform (Bhandari, 2023). Any data collected and shared with the researcher is kept confidential and used only for the purposes of the study and all necessary measures are taken to protect participants' privacy (See annexure).
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	Representation: It is crucial to ensure that the research accurately represents the perspectives and experiences of Gen Z TikTok users and that their voices are not misrepresented or taken out of context (Bhandari, 2023). Transparency: Transparency about research methods, findings, and any potential conflicts of interest (Bhandari, 2023). This can include providing clear documentation of the research process, making data and results publicly available, and acknowledging any sources of funding or support. Respect: Cultural norms and values of Gen Z TikTok users must be respected and avoid any behaviours or actions that could be interpreted as exploitative or disrespectful (Bhandari, 2023).
Limitations	Small sample size: A small sample size can make it difficult to generalise the research findings to a larger population. Self-selection bias: If participants are self-selected to participate in the study, they may not be representative of the population interested in researching. As this research is an interpretive study, interpretivism is a subjective approach to research, which means that the researcher's own interpretation of the data can influence the findings (Chowdhury, 2014). Participant bias: The participants' own biases can also influence the results of the study. Transferability: The findings of the study may not be transferable to other settings or populations outside of the South African landscape. Rigidity: Interpretivism can be a rigid approach to research, which can make it difficult to change the research design or methods as the study progresses (Chowdhury, 2014).