

## Factors Influencing TikTok Video Advertisements on Intentions to Enroll in Higher Education Institutions Among Generation Z's Middle Eastern Students in Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper explores the influence of TikTok video advertisements on the enrollment intentions of Middle Eastern Generation Z students in Malaysia. As social media becomes increasingly central to student recruitment, TikTok's dynamic, short-form content offers new opportunities for higher education institutions to engage tech-savvy, digital-native audiences. Despite its growing popularity, limited research has examined how specific elements within TikTok ads influence international students' decision-making processes. Grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), this study proposes a framework that incorporates both the core TPB constructs, attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, and advertising-specific attributes such as emotional appeal, entertainment value, and informativeness. The aim is to conceptually examine how these factors interact to shape students' behavioral intentions to enroll in Malaysian higher education institutions. By extending TPB to include advertising elements, this paper addresses a key gap in current literature on digital marketing in higher education. The findings of this conceptual discussion are expected to provide theoretical insight and practical guidance for institutions seeking to optimize their TikTok marketing strategies to attract international students. This study contributes to the broader understanding of social media's role in shaping consumer behavior in the educational sector, particularly within the context of international student recruitment. The proposed framework lays the foundation for future empirical research and offers marketing professionals a clearer direction for creating impactful, student-centered advertising content on emerging platforms.

**Keywords:** TikTok video advertisements, Gen Z, Middle Eastern students, Theory of Planned Behavior

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### INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has emerged as a prominent hub for international higher education, drawing a significant number of students from the Middle East (Fadhli, 2025). In 2022 alone, Malaysia recorded over 51,270 international student applications, a 27.5% increase from the previous year, with more than 3,400 applicants coming from Arab nations such as Yemen and Egypt (ICEF Monitor, 2023). By 2023, this number had grown to approximately 6,000 Middle Eastern students enrolled across Malaysian universities, accounting for over 11% of the international student population (Husain, 2023). Middle Eastern students represent a growing and diverse segment of Malaysia's international student

population. Drawn by cultural and religious compatibility, they find Malaysia's Muslim-majority context, complete with halal food, prayer facilities, and a socially familiar environment, highly appealing (Al Aghbas & Kasmani, 2024). The country's globally recognized, English-medium programs, coupled with its affordability and political stability, further enhance its attractiveness (Husain, 2023). For students from collectivist societies such as Middle Eastern (Bawardi et al., 2022), where family approval and religious values heavily influence decision-making, Malaysia offers a unique blend of academic quality and socio-cultural comfort that aligns with their personal and familial expectations. Effective recruitment, therefore, requires culturally sensitive messaging that addresses both their educational needs and their socio-cultural context. This growing influx is attributed to Malaysia's high-quality academic standards, English-medium instruction, Islamic-friendly environment, and strong cultural compatibility. These factors position Malaysia as a preferred destination for Arab students seeking tertiary education opportunities.

Increasingly, this international student cohort includes members of Generation Z or Gen Z, those born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019; Wilson, 2021), who are distinguished by their digital nativity and deep integration with technology and social media platforms (Moffitt, 2024; Stahl & Literat, 2023). Among these popular social media platforms, TikTok has rapidly gained traction as one of the most popular and influential platforms among Gen Z users, due to its algorithmically curated short-form video content and its ability to capture attention through visual storytelling, entertainment, and emotional engagement (Trisasetianto & Ali, 2025). This rise of TikTok as a dominant platform presents a unique opportunity for Malaysian institutions to reach potential students through targeted and culturally resonant advertising. In particular, TikTok advertising formats such as In-Feed Ads and Branded Hashtag Challenges (Kim & Yoo, 2021) offer compelling ways to engage prospective Middle Eastern students in a format they find relatable and enjoyable.

Despite this potential, there remains a significant gap in understanding the role TikTok plays in shaping educational decisions, especially within multicultural settings like Malaysia. While TikTok has been widely studied in the context of consumer behaviour and purchase intention, its impact on students' decisions to pursue higher education remains underexplored (Al Balushi et al., 2022; Dali & Aziz, 2024). Furthermore, studies show that emotional content on TikTok significantly influences Gen Z decision-making and impulse behaviour (Araujo et al., 2022), yet this has not been sufficiently examined in the context of educational aspirations (López-Carril et al., 2024).

Given TikTok's fast-paced, emotionally engaging content style and its ability to deliver targeted messaging, it becomes imperative to study its influence on students' educational intentions. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) has long served as a foundational framework in understanding intention and decision-making across diverse context (e.g.: Boucif et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025). However, classic TPB models fall short in accounting for platform-specific features and culture-bound variables relevant to high-context societies such as the Middle East. Therefore, this paper puts a strong emphasis on advertising attributes by extending the TPB framework to include three critical constructs, emotional appeal, entertainment value, and informativeness, which represent the defining features of TikTok video advertisements and are expected to significantly influence students' enrollment intentions.

This conceptual paper seeks to address how these components affect the enrolment intention of Gen Z Middle Eastern students in Malaysian higher education institutions. Specifically, this study investigates the direct influence of key advertising attributes, emotional appeal, entertainment value, and informativeness, on students' attitudes toward TikTok advertisements, and subsequently, how these attitudes, along with subjective norms and perceived behavioral control, shape their intention to enroll. Furthermore, it investigates whether attitudes mediate the relationship between the content attributes of TikTok ads and enrolment intention.

The overarching research questions guiding this study are: (1) How do advertisement attributes (emotional appeal, entertainment value, and informativeness) in TikTok ads influence student attitudes? (2) How do attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control affect enrolment intention? (3) Do attitudes mediate the effects of TikTok content features on enrolment intention? By addressing these questions, this paper not only aims to develop a deeper understanding of Gen Z's decision-making process in the digital age but also to provide practical insights for higher education institutions seeking to innovate their international student recruitment strategies.

The study is particularly relevant in the current educational climate, where universities are compelled to adapt their outreach efforts to better align with the behaviours and expectations of digitally savvy students. As the use of social media becomes integral to institutional marketing (Islam & Shah, 2025), insights from this research can guide the creation of culturally sensitive, emotionally resonant, and platform-tailored marketing campaigns aimed at attracting Middle Eastern students. Moreover, understanding how TikTok influences this demographic can help universities create more inclusive digital environments that honour cultural identity while delivering educational value. In doing so, this paper contributes to the growing body of literature on digital marketing in higher education, bridging gaps in both theory and practice and offering a roadmap for institutions navigating the complexities of international student recruitment in an increasingly competitive and digitalized global education market.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provides a relevant foundation for understanding how Gen Z students from the Middle East form intentions to study abroad based on digital advertising. TPB, proposed by Ajzen (1985), asserts that intention is influenced by attitude toward the behavior, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms. For Gen Z, who value autonomy and self-reliance (Al-Twal et al., 2025) but are also deeply influenced by peer and family expectations (Dwidienawati et al., 2025; Shorey et al., 2024), TikTok video advertisements can shape both personal attitudes and perceived social endorsement. Middle Eastern Gen Z, in particular, place strong emphasis on family approval, religious values, and cultural alignment when making decisions (Aljayyousi et al., 2019). These cultural orientations, such as the importance of family approval, religious values, and cultural alignment, are likely to influence Middle Eastern Gen Z students' attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms when making educational decisions. TikTok advertisements that highlight cultural compatibility, showcase alumni success stories, and feature student testimonials (Sarder & Mustaqeem, 2024) can help foster positive attitudes, reinforce socially accepted norms, and enhance perceived behavioral control by addressing practical concerns such as affordability, accessibility, and application procedures.

In addition to the core components of the TPB, this study incorporates advertisement attributes, namely emotional appeal, entertainment value, and informativeness, as additional factors expected to influence educational decision-making. This expansion is consistent with Ajzen's (2011) recommendation to strengthen the TPB by integrating context-specific variables relevant to the behavior under investigation. By doing so, this study aims to offer a more comprehensive understanding of how digital advertisements influence enrollment intentions among Middle Eastern Gen Z students.

### Digital Advertising in Higher Education

Traditional higher education marketing strategies, such as printed brochures and static websites, are becoming less effective with Generation Z, a cohort known for its strong digital literacy, short attention spans, and tendency to become easily distracted (Hammad, 2025). This generation prefers fast, interactive, and visually engaging content that aligns with their tech-savvy and impatient media

consumption habits. Digital marketing, particularly through social media, offers a more dynamic and interactive approach (Krishen et al., 2021). Malaysian institutions must adapt to these evolving communication habits to remain competitive, especially in the recruitment of international students from the Middle East. Culturally sensitive and visually engaging digital content not only broadens audience reach but also fosters trust and emotional connection with prospective students (Chalipah et al., 2024). Platforms like TikTok, which promote real-time engagement and user-generated content, present a unique opportunity to convey institutional offerings in more relatable and persuasive ways. By leveraging such platforms, universities can more effectively utilize digital technology to attract, engage, and build meaningful connections with a diverse student population.

### **Generation Z**

Generation Z or Gen Z, typically defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019; Wilson, 2021), is characterized by digital fluency, short attention spans, and a preference for fast, visually engaging content (Celestin & Vanitha, 2017; Moreno et al., 2023). They are known to be impatient, easily distracted, and highly selective about the content they consume, often seeking authenticity, emotional relevance, and peer validation in their decision-making processes (Nawaz, 2020; Ridwan et al., 2025). Gen Z is also pragmatic and value-driven, placing emphasis on real-world outcomes such as employability, flexibility, and relevance when evaluating educational opportunities (Krishna & Agrawal, 2024). Their comfort with technology and reliance on social media platforms (Tjiptono et al., 2020) like TikTok means that traditional marketing methods may fall short, as they expect interactive, personalized, and culturally resonant information. In the context of educational decisions, these traits suggest that institutions must adopt digital marketing strategies that are not only informative but also emotionally appealing, entertaining, and aligned with their values and social influences to effectively capture their interest and drive enrollment intentions.

### **Advertisement Attributes**

In addition to the core components of the TPB, this study incorporates additional factors expected to influence enrollment intentions through the medium of TikTok. Given the platform's growing role in shaping student perceptions, key advertisement attributes, namely emotional appeal, entertainment value, and informativeness, are included as potential drivers influencing Gen Z Middle Eastern students' intention to enroll in Malaysian higher education institutions. These attributes have been examined in previous studies (e.g.; Abbas Naqvi et al., 2020; Ambran et al., 2024; Goh et al., 2020; Ho Nguyen et al., 2022; Oscarius Yudhi Ari Wijaya et al., 2021; Souki et al., 2022; Vrtana & Krizanova, 2023) with mixed and inconsistent findings, highlighting the need for further investigation. Therefore, this study seeks to explore how these advertisement characteristics specifically influence enrollment decisions within the cultural and digital context of Middle Eastern Gen Z students.

### **Emotional Appeal**

Schiffman and Kanuk (2007) describe emotional appeal as a method that generates desire and interest in a brand, while Keshari and Jain (2014) define it as an attempt to evoke emotions, positive or negative, such as love, pride, guilt, or fear, that can motivate decision-making. In this study, emotional appeal refers to a psychological strategy used to influence audience perception and engagement with TikTok advertisements in the context of higher education choices. Middle Eastern students, who often make educational decisions in consultation with family and within cultural norms, respond well to emotionally resonant content that emphasizes personal stories, values, and community. Testimonials, alumni narratives, and culturally grounded storytelling enhance emotional connection and trust, making institutions appear more welcoming and aligned with students' aspirations (Sarder & Mustaqeem, 2024). Previous studies (Japutra et al., 2022; Vrtana & Krizanova, 2023) have shown that

emotional appeal significantly influences behavioral intention. In line with this, the current study posits that emotional appeal within TikTok video advertisements is likely to influence the intention of Middle Eastern Generation Z students to enroll in Malaysian higher education institutions.

### **Entertainment Value**

Entertainment in advertising refers to the extent to which an advertisement is perceived as enjoyable, engaging, and amusing by its audience (Xu et al., 2009). It involves content that is lively, imaginative, or clever, capturing attention and enhancing viewer engagement (Aaker & Bruzzone, 1981). Entertainment is a core element of TikTok's appeal, and educational content must incorporate elements of fun, creativity, and relatability to maintain attention (Rahayu et al., 2025). Humorous or visually appealing videos, often created by student ambassadors or influencers, can make institutional messages more memorable (Hsieh et al., 2012; Sewak et al., 2025). For Generation Z, content that entertains is more likely to be shared and engaged with, thereby increasing visibility and reach. However, entertainment alone is insufficient if it lacks alignment with educational objectives. Studies have shown that entertainment value positively influences intention (Abbas Naqvi et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2025); therefore, this study similarly expects that the entertainment aspect of TikTok advertisements will have a significant impact on Middle Eastern Gen Z students' intention to enroll in Malaysian higher education institutions.

### **Informativeness**

Informativeness in advertising is defined as the extent to which an advertisement delivers useful, relevant, and resourceful information to its viewers (Ducoffe, 1996), reflecting the marketing message's ability to enhance consumer understanding and satisfaction with the promoted product or service (Waldt et al., 2009). While TikTok's format favors brevity (Yang, 2024), informative content remains crucial, especially for prospective international students who need details about programs, scholarships, application processes, and campus life. Clear, concise messaging that communicates value and addresses key concerns (e.g., visa requirements, accreditation) can enhance credibility and influence intention. Therefore, higher education institutions must balance eye-catching visuals with substantive content to ensure students not only engage but also retain essential information. Past studies have identified informativeness as a significant predictor of behavioral intention (Ali et al., 2025; Shao et al., 2025). Accordingly, this study posits that, within the context of TikTok video advertisements, informativeness is expected to influence the intention of Middle Eastern Generation Z students to enroll in higher education institutions in Malaysia.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Based on the discussion of past studies, Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of this study. It integrates the core constructs of the TPB (attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control) with additional advertisement attributes, emotional appeal, entertainment value, and informativeness, as extended predictors of enrollment intention. This framework reflects the theoretical grounding and empirical gaps identified in previous research, particularly in the context of TikTok's influence on Gen Z students from the Middle East considering higher education in Malaysia.

In line with the TPB, attitude is posited as a central psychological mechanism through which external factors shape behavioral intentions. In this study, attitude is expected to mediate the influence of TikTok advertisement attributes, namely emotional appeal, entertainment value, and informativeness, on the enrollment intention of Middle Eastern Gen Z students. This mediating role reflects how individuals cognitively and emotionally process persuasive content, forming evaluations (attitudes) that subsequently inform their intention to act. Prior research in advertising and behavioral science has consistently highlighted the role of attitude as a key mediator in decision-making processes

(e.g., Handranata & Kalila, 2025; Hasim et al., 2025), thus justifying its inclusion in this conceptual framework.

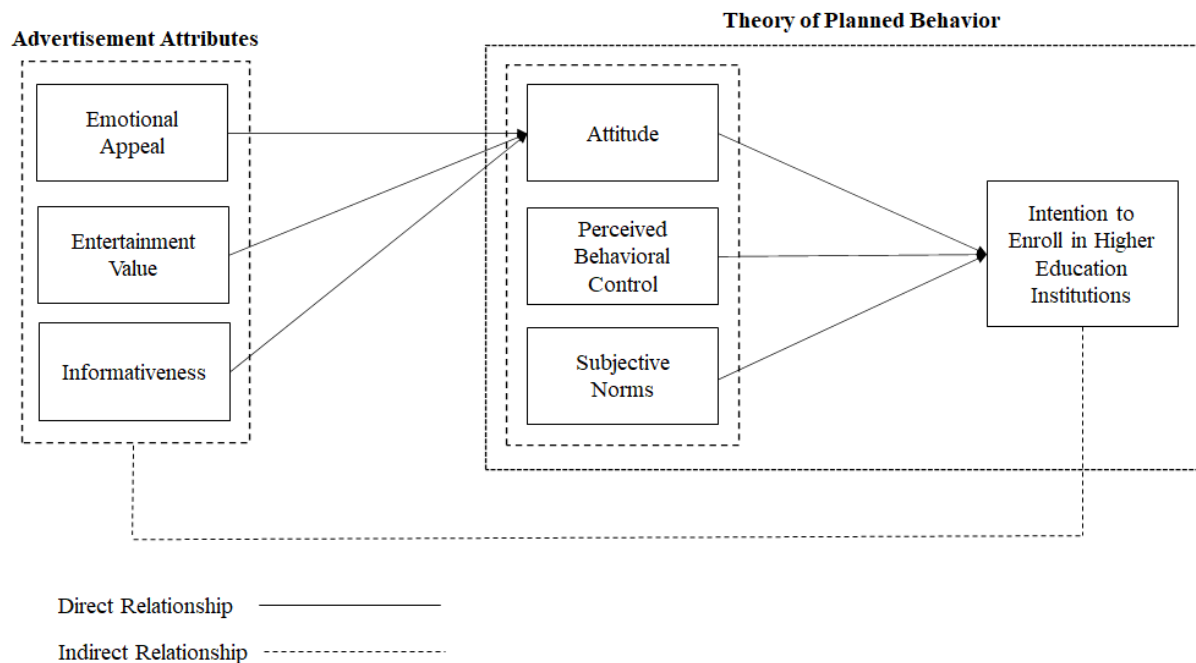


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This conceptual study extends the TPB by incorporating advertising-specific attributes, emotional appeal, entertainment value, and informativeness, into its traditional constructs of attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Within the context of TikTok, these additional variables offer a deeper understanding of how Middle Eastern Generation Z students form enrolment intentions in response to digital advertising. The model positions attitude as a mediating factor, demonstrating that students' evaluations of TikTok video advertisements significantly shape the influence of ad content on their actual intention to enrol in Malaysian higher education institutions. Emotional, entertaining, and informative advertisements, especially those featuring influencer credibility, high engagement metrics, and culturally aligned messaging, are likely to foster positive attitudes, which in turn strengthen behavioural intention.

Theoretically, this integrated model enriches TPB by adapting it to the realities of social media-driven decision-making, making it more relevant in digital advertising and international educational recruitment. By acknowledging platform-specific factors like social proof and user-generated content, the study bridges psychological theory with modern digital behaviour. Practically, it offers universities strategic guidance to develop culturally sensitive and persuasive TikTok campaigns that resonate with collectivist values and Gen Z expectations. For institutions seeking to increase their appeal among Middle Eastern students, especially in a competitive global education market, this model provides both a roadmap for engagement and a foundation for future empirical validation.

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