

Visual Design as a Strategic Driver of Engagement and Brand Perception in Tiktok Automotive Marketing in Malaysia: A Qualitative Inquiry

Saiful Hairul Tan¹, Mustaffa Halabi Azahari^{1*}

¹Faculty of Creative Industries, City University Malaysia, Malaysia

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100701131>

Received: 06 August 2026; Accepted: 12 August 2026; Published: 22 August 2026

ABSTRACT

The rise of TikTok as a dominant short-form video platform has reshaped digital marketing practices, particularly in visually driven industries such as automotive. This study examines how visual design elements influence audience engagement and brand perception in TikTok automotive campaigns in Malaysia. Using a qualitative research design, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected stakeholders representing managerial, marketing, content creation, and user perspectives. Thematic analysis revealed six key themes: (1) visual clarity, (2) authenticity, (3) professional visual quality, (4) visual consistency, (5) interaction and purchase consideration, and (6) TikTok's strategic role as a supporting platform. The findings suggest that visual design operates as an integrated communicative system influencing perceptual processing, emotional response, and behavioural intention. This study contributes to digital marketing and visual communication literature by extending Gestalt theory and visual grammar into short-form video contexts. Practical implications highlight the importance of clarity, realism, and structured visual communication in high-involvement product marketing.

Keywords: TikTok marketing, visual design, automotive industry, brand perception, audience engagement, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of short-form video platforms has significantly transformed digital marketing strategies, particularly in visually driven industries. Among these platforms, TikTok has emerged as a powerful tool for brand communication, driven by algorithmic content distribution and high user engagement (Montag et al., 2021; Zeng et al., 2021). In Malaysia, TikTok adoption has grown rapidly, with over 18 million users, while more than 80% of consumers rely on social media for product discovery (DataReportal, 2024; MCMC, 2023). Unlike traditional media that depend on static visuals or text, TikTok emphasises fast-paced, immersive, and algorithm-driven content, reshaping how users process and respond to information (Kaye et al., 2021). This shift elevates visual design from a supportive element to a critical mechanism for capturing attention and influencing behaviour.

In the automotive industry, where products are high-involvement and decision-making processes are complex, visual communication plays a crucial role in shaping consumer perception and trust (Hudders et al., 2021; Zaichkowsky, 1985). Purchasing a vehicle requires careful evaluation, making credibility and reliability essential (Gefen et al., 2003). Although prior studies have examined influencer marketing and engagement on TikTok (De Veirman et al., 2017; Walsh et al., 2024), limited research has focused on how visual design elements influence audience perception and behaviour in this context.

Furthermore, TikTok has transformed marketing practices by fostering engagement, trust, and cultural relevance, particularly among younger audiences, despite challenges such as authenticity concerns and content saturation (Tan & Azahari, 2025). Addressing these gaps, this study investigates how visual design shapes

audience engagement and brand perception in TikTok automotive campaigns in Malaysia, guided by semiotics, Gestalt theory, emotional design, and visual grammar.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Visual Communication and Digital Marketing

Visual communication plays a pivotal role in digital environments, shaping how audiences interpret, process, and respond to content. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that visual design operates through a structured grammar in which elements such as colour, composition, framing, and salience guide meaning-making processes. Complementing this, Barthes (1977) highlights that images function on both denotative (literal representation) and connotative (cultural and symbolic meaning) levels, allowing visuals to communicate complex messages beyond textual information. In digital marketing contexts, these semiotic layers are critical in influencing perception and engagement.

Empirical studies demonstrate that visual content significantly enhances user engagement, brand recall, and message retention (De Veirman et al., 2017). For instance, Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) found that visually appealing and relatable content increases interaction and trust, particularly among younger audiences. In the Malaysian context, research by Rahim and Zainuddin (2021) indicates that visual storytelling on social media platforms plays a crucial role in influencing consumer attitudes and purchase intention, especially among Gen Z users. Similarly, Hassan, Hashim, and Rahman (2022) found that visual clarity and aesthetic consistency positively affect engagement levels in Malaysian digital campaigns.

TikTok as a Marketing Platform

TikTok differs from traditional social media platforms due to its algorithm-driven content discovery system, which prioritises engagement metrics rather than follower-based reach (Montag et al., 2021). This mechanism allows brands to achieve rapid visibility but also intensifies competition for audience attention. Research suggests that TikTok users prefer authentic, relatable, and entertaining content over highly polished advertisements (Zeng et al., 2021).

In Malaysia, TikTok has emerged as a key platform for digital marketing, with over 18 million active users (DataReportal, 2024). Studies by Azmi et al. (2023) highlight that Malaysian users are more responsive to content that reflects real-life experiences and cultural relevance. However, the balance between authenticity and professional quality remains underexplored, particularly in high-involvement industries such as automotive, where credibility and trust are essential.

Visual Design, Trust, and Consumer Behaviour

Trust is a fundamental determinant of consumer decision-making, especially for high-value products such as automobiles (Gefen et al., 2003). Visual cues—including realism, clarity, and professional execution serve as heuristic signals that influence perceived credibility (Kim & Peterson, 2017). Emotional design theory further explains that visual elements evoke affective responses, which shape user attitudes and behavioural intentions (Norman, 2004).

Gestalt principles provide additional insight into how users process visual information holistically, favouring simplicity, coherence, and organisation (Ware, 2021). In the Malaysian context, Ismail and Nguyen (2022) found that visual consistency and clarity significantly influence online trust and engagement in e-commerce environments. Despite these contributions, there remains a lack of integrated research examining how visual design, emotional response, and trust interact within TikTok's short-form video environment, particularly in Malaysia's automotive marketing sector.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design using in-depth semi-structured interviews to examine how visual design influences audience engagement and brand perception in TikTok automotive marketing in Malaysia. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the research sought to understand participants' interpretations, experiences, and perceptions of visual communication rather than establish causal relationships or measure actual purchasing behaviour. This approach enabled the researchers to examine how visual characteristics such as clarity, authenticity, professionalism, and consistency are interpreted by both industry practitioners and TikTok users. The semi-structured design further provided sufficient flexibility to explore emerging issues while maintaining consistency across the principal areas of investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Participants and Participant Profiles

Five participants were purposively selected to represent different perspectives within the automotive marketing and TikTok communication ecosystem. The sample consisted of one CEO/owner (TCO), one marketing executive (TME), one social media manager/content creator (TMC), one male TikTok user (TUM), and one female TikTok user (TUF). Purposive sampling was employed because the study required participants capable of providing information-rich perspectives concerning automotive marketing strategy, visual content production, social media management, and audience responses.

Table 1 Profile of Interview Participants

Code	Participant Category	Role in the Study	Selection Basis
TCO	CEO/Owner	Managerial/strategic perspective	Direct involvement in automotive business and marketing decisions
TME	Marketing Executive	Marketing perspective	Experience in planning or implementing automotive marketing
TMC	Social Media Manager/Creator	Content-production perspective	Experience creating/managing social media content
TUM	Male TikTok User	Audience perspective	Exposure to automotive-related TikTok content
TUF	Female TikTok User	Audience perspective	Exposure to automotive-related TikTok content

Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling based on their relevant experience and involvement in automotive marketing, social media content creation, and TikTok usage. Potential participants were identified

through professional networks and direct contact. Each participant was approached individually and informed about the purpose of the study, interview procedures, and voluntary nature of participation. Those who agreed to participate provided consent before the interview was conducted.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews focusing on visual design preferences, perceptions of TikTok automotive content, audience engagement, trust, and brand perception. The interview format allowed participants to describe their experiences and opinions freely while ensuring that all key areas related to the research objective were addressed.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted face-to-face. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the accuracy of participants' responses.

Data Saturation

Given the exploratory nature of this study and the focused multi-stakeholder sample, the five interviews were intended to provide rich and relevant insights rather than to claim full thematic saturation. The participants represented different perspectives within the automotive marketing ecosystem, allowing the study to capture varied views on visual design, engagement, and brand perception. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory qualitative evidence that identifies important patterns and themes within the selected sample. Further studies involving a larger and more diverse group of participants are recommended to confirm and extend these findings.

Data Analysis and Thematic Coding

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Analysis involved familiarisation with the transcripts, generation of initial codes, identification of potential themes, review and refinement of themes, definition and naming of themes, and preparation of the final analytical narrative.

Initial coding focused on recurring statements concerning visual characteristics and audience responses. Related codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories from which six themes were developed: visual clarity, authenticity, professional visual quality, visual consistency, behavioural engagement and purchase consideration, and TikTok's strategic role as a supporting platform.

The thematic interpretation was additionally informed by four theoretical lenses. Barthes' (1977) semiotics supported analysis of denotative and connotative visual meaning; Gestalt principles informed interpretations of visual organisation and perceptual clarity; Norman's (2004) Emotional Design supported interpretation of affective responses; and visual grammar informed understanding of how composition, framing, salience, and other visual structures communicate meaning.

Reflexivity and Analytical Trustworthiness

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis, this study carefully reviewed the interview transcripts throughout the coding and thematic analysis process. Emerging codes and themes were repeatedly compared with the original responses to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected participants' views and experiences.

The themes were also reviewed and refined to maintain consistency with the research objective. Representative quotations from participants were included to provide clear evidence supporting each theme and to strengthen the transparency of the findings. This process helped minimise potential interpretive bias and ensured that the analysis remained closely grounded in the original interview data.

Ethical Considerations

It is significant to note that participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before each interview and audio recording. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality of their responses, their right to decline questions, and their right to withdraw from participation. Participant identities were protected through anonymous codes: TCO, TME, TMC, TUM, and TUF which were used throughout the analysis and reporting.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table 2 Thematic Matrix of Visual Design, Audience Engagement and Brand Perception

Theme	Key Codes	Representative Interview Evidence	Theoretical Interpretation	Main Outcome
Visual Clarity	Clarity; lighting; simple message; neat composition	“Videos with clear visuals, good lighting, and simple messages work best” (TCO). “If the visuals look neat, clear and interesting, I usually watch until the end” (TUM).	Gestalt/Prägnanz: organised visual information facilitates perceptual processing and reduces cognitive effort.	Attention and sustained viewing
Authenticity	Actual product; realism; minimal editing; transparency	“Showing the actual car... without too much editing helps build trust” (TCO). “If the video looks too edited... I don’t trust it as much” (TUF).	Semiotics and Emotional Design: realistic representation functions as a cue of honesty and reduces perceived artificiality.	Trust
Professional Visual Quality	Clean execution; editing quality; technical competence	“Clean and professional videos... make the brand appear more serious” (TUM). “Professional editing shows effort and professionalism” (TMC).	Visual quality acts as a signal of organisational competence, although excessive polish can conflict with authenticity.	Credibility
Visual Consistency	Colours; typography; visual style; repetition	“Using the same colours, fonts, and style makes the brand easier to recognise” (TME). “Inconsistent visuals look like they have no strategy” (TMC).	Repetition and visual coherence facilitate recognition and reinforce brand associations.	Brand identity and recognition
Behavioural Engagement and Consideration	Like; save; product search; price checking	“If the design looks strong and clear, I’m more likely to like or save it” (TUM). “Clean visuals make me check the price or search more” (TUF).	Hierarchy-of-effects perspective: visual communication may facilitate movement from attention toward information seeking and consideration.	Engagement and purchase consideration—not purchase

Strategic Role of TikTok	Awareness; younger audience; supporting channel	“TikTok is not our main platform... but it helps reach younger audiences” (TCO).	Integrated marketing communication: TikTok fulfils awareness and engagement functions alongside other marketing channels.	Awareness and early-stage consumer journey
---------------------------------	---	--	---	--

Interpretation of the Thematic Matrix

Based on **Table 2**, the matrix demonstrates that the six themes do not represent isolated design characteristics. Rather, they form an interconnected visual communication process. Visual clarity facilitates initial perceptual access to content; authenticity contributes to trust; professional execution influences credibility; and consistency strengthens brand recognition. These processes subsequently contribute to engagement behaviours and product-related exploration. Importantly, the evidence supports purchase consideration, such as searching for prices or additional information, but does not demonstrate completed automotive purchases.

CRITICAL DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that visual design effectiveness in TikTok automotive marketing should not be conceptualised as a direct relationship between attractive content and purchasing behaviour. Instead, the evidence supports a more differentiated process involving perceptual processing, engagement, affective brand evaluation, and behavioural consideration. Visual clarity operates primarily at the perceptual level by enabling audiences to recognise and process information efficiently. Gestalt principles help explain why organised composition, clear hierarchy, and simplicity are particularly important within TikTok's rapid content environment. However, attention alone does not necessarily generate favourable brand responses. Authenticity and professional visual quality introduce evaluative processes through which audiences assess whether content and, indirectly, the brand is trustworthy and credible.

The findings also reveal an important tension between professionalism and authenticity. Professional production communicates competence, yet excessive visual refinement may create perceptions of artificiality. This challenges a simplistic assumption that increasing production quality necessarily improves communication effectiveness. Instead, automotive marketers may need to achieve what can be described as credible professionalism: technically competent visual communication that retains sufficient realism to remain trustworthy. Visual consistency operates differently because its effect is cumulative. Repeated colours, typography, composition, and stylistic characteristics function as visual anchors that enable audiences to associate individual TikTok videos with a coherent brand identity. Therefore, visual design contributes not only to immediate content engagement but potentially to longer-term brand recognition.

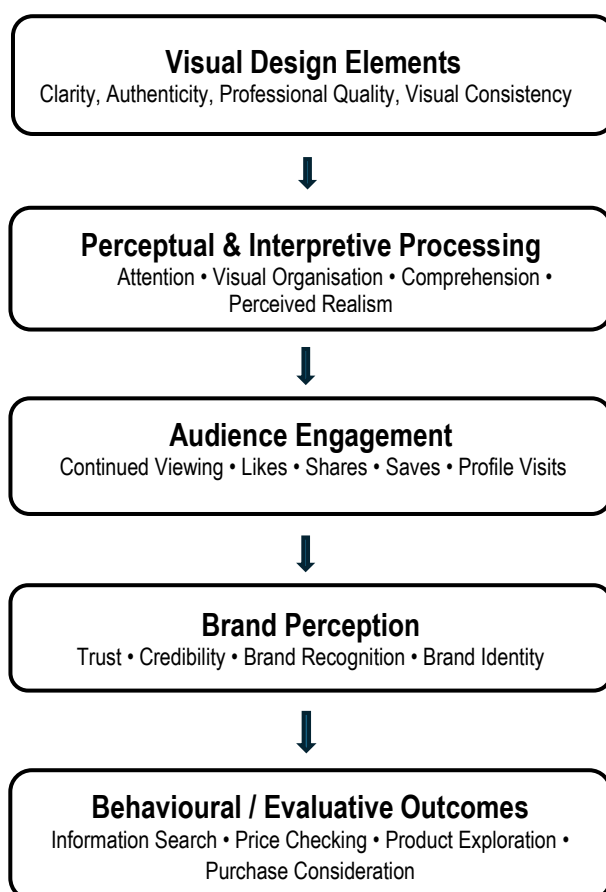
Engagement, Purchase Consideration and Actual Purchase Behaviour

A particularly important analytical distinction must be made among audience engagement, purchase consideration, and actual purchase behaviour. Audience engagement refers to observable or reported interaction with content, including continued viewing, likes, shares, saves, profile visits, and related information seeking. These behaviours demonstrate attention and interest but should not automatically be interpreted as purchasing intention. Purchase consideration represents a more advanced evaluative response. In this study, statements such as checking vehicle prices or searching for further product information indicate that TikTok content can stimulate product exploration and consideration. These behaviours suggest progression within the consumer decision process but remain distinct from an actual transaction. Actual purchase behaviour involves verified actions such as dealership enquiries that lead to purchase, test-drive conversion, bookings, deposits, or completed vehicle purchases. These outcomes were not directly measured in this study. Consequently, the research should not claim that visual design generates actual automotive sales.

The contribution of the study is therefore more precisely expressed as demonstrating how visual design may facilitate a progression from perception → engagement → brand evaluation → product exploration → purchase consideration, rather than establishing a causal pathway to actual purchasing.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of Visual Design Influence in TikTok Automotive Marketing



Based on **Figure 1**, the framework proposes that visual design elements operate as initial communication stimuli that influence how TikTok automotive content is perceptually processed and interpreted. Clarity facilitates attention and comprehension, while authenticity and professional quality contribute to perceived realism and evaluative judgement. These perceptual processes support audience engagement through viewing and interactive behaviours.

Engagement subsequently provides opportunities for audiences to develop brand-related evaluations, particularly trust, credibility, recognition, and identity. Positive brand perception may then encourage higher-order exploratory behaviours, including information search, price checking, product comparison, and purchase consideration.

Critically, the framework does not equate purchase consideration with actual purchase behaviour. Actual automotive conversion was not measured in this qualitative study. TikTok is therefore positioned as a supporting communication platform that primarily contributes to awareness, engagement, brand evaluation, and consideration within a wider consumer journey.

CONCLUSION

It is important to highlight that this study demonstrates that visual design functions as a strategic communication mechanism in TikTok automotive marketing rather than merely an aesthetic component. The findings identify visual clarity, authenticity, professional quality, and consistency as interconnected factors shaping perceptual processing, audience engagement, trust, credibility, and brand recognition.

The study further demonstrates that engagement should not be treated as equivalent to purchase behaviour. While visually effective TikTok content may encourage users to continue viewing, interact with content, search for information, examine prices, and consider automotive products, the evidence does not establish direct sales conversion. TikTok should therefore be understood primarily as an awareness, engagement, and pre-purchase evaluation platform within an integrated marketing ecosystem.

The study contributes to visual communication and digital marketing literature by demonstrating how established theoretical perspectives including Gestalt principles, semiotics, Emotional Design, and visual grammar can explain audience responses within short-form automotive video communication.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study is exploratory and based on five purposively selected stakeholders representing managerial, marketing, content-production, and audience perspectives. Although this multi-stakeholder structure provides diverse qualitative insights, the small sample limits the transferability of the findings to Malaysia's wider automotive market.

Future research should therefore examine larger and more diverse multi-stakeholder samples involving automotive manufacturers, dealerships, marketing agencies, content creators, influencers, and different demographic groups. Comparative studies across automotive brands would also be valuable in determining whether visual design effectiveness differs between premium and mass-market brands, established and emerging manufacturers, or local and international automotive brands.

A mixed-methods approach represents an important next stage. The qualitative themes identified in this study could be operationalised into measurable constructs and tested quantitatively using larger samples. Future research could examine relationships among visual clarity, authenticity, professionalism, consistency, engagement, trust, brand perception, and purchase consideration using regression analysis or structural equation modelling.

Finally, future behavioural research should incorporate measurable conversion indicators including website visits, dealership enquiries, test-drive bookings, leads, deposits, and verified purchases to determine whether engagement and purchase consideration generated through TikTok ultimately translate into actual automotive purchasing behaviour.

REFERENCES

1. Azmi, N. A., Rahman, M. N. A., & Karim, S. A. (2023). Social media engagement and consumer behaviour among Malaysian TikTok users. *Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 39(2), 45–60.
2. Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, music, text* (S. Heath, Trans.). Fontana Press.
3. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
4. Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage.
5. DataReportal. (2024). *Digital 2024: Malaysia*. <https://datareportal.com>

6. De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through Instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. *International Journal of Advertising*, 36(5), 798–828.
7. Djafarova, E., & Rushworth, C. (2017). Exploring the credibility of online celebrities' Instagram profiles in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 68, 1–7.
8. Gefen, D., Karahanna, E., & Straub, D. W. (2003). Trust and TAM in online shopping: An integrated model. *MIS Quarterly*, 27(1), 51–90.
9. Hassan, S., Hashim, N. H., & Rahman, N. A. (2022). The role of visual content in enhancing social media engagement in Malaysia. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 38(1), 120–135.
10. Hudders, L., De Jans, S., & De Veirman, M. (2021). The commercialization of social media stars: A literature review and conceptual framework on the strategic use of social media influencers. *International Journal of Advertising*, 40(3), 327–345.
11. Ismail, A. R., & Nguyen, B. (2022). The impact of visual design on trust and engagement in e-commerce platforms. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, 34(6), 1345–1362.
12. Keller, K. L. (2013). *Strategic brand management: Building, measuring, and managing brand equity* (4th ed.). Pearson.
13. Kim, Y., & Peterson, R. A. (2017). A meta-analysis of online trust relationships in e-commerce. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 38, 44–54.
14. Koffka, K. (1935). *Principles of Gestalt psychology*. Harcourt, Brace & Company.
15. Köhler, W. (1947). *Gestalt psychology* (2nd ed.). Liveright.
16. Lavidge, R. J., & Steiner, G. A. (1961). A model for predictive measurements of advertising effectiveness. *Journal of Marketing*, 25(6), 59–62.
17. Montag, C., Yang, H., & Elhai, J. D. (2021). On the psychology of TikTok use: A first glimpse from empirical findings. *Addictive Behaviors Reports*, 14, 100354.
18. Norman, D. A. (2004). *Emotional design: Why we love (or hate) everyday things*. Basic Books.
19. Rahim, M. H. A., & Zainuddin, N. (2021). Visual storytelling and consumer engagement on social media platforms in Malaysia. *Journal of Marketing Advances*, 10(2), 89–102.
20. Schultz, D. E., Patti, C. H., & Kitchen, P. J. (2016). Integrated marketing communications: Contemporary issues and future directions. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 56(2), 139–143.
21. Tan, S. H., & Azahari, M. H. (2025). The impact of TikTok on product promotion and marketing strategies: A review with special reference to Malaysia. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Analysis*, 8(10), 5689–5694. <https://doi.org/10.47191/ijmra/v8-i10-20>
22. Vrontis, D., Makrides, A., Christofi, M., & Thrassou, A. (2021). Social media influencer marketing: A systematic review, integrative framework, and future research agenda. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 45(4), 617–634.
23. Ware, C. (2021). *Information visualization: Perception for design* (4th ed.). Morgan Kaufmann.
24. Wertheimer, M. (1938). Laws of organization in perceptual forms. In W. D. Ellis (Ed.), *A source book of Gestalt psychology* (pp. 71–88). Routledge & Kegan Paul.
25. Zeng, J., Abidin, C., & Schäfer, M. S. (2021). Research perspectives on TikTok and its legacy apps. *Social Media + Society*, 7(3), 1–5.