



Exploring Audience Motivation to Watch Isekai Anime for Escapism among Gen Z in Thailand

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Abstract

This study explored the escapism motivations behind isekai anime watching among Thai Gen Z, and examined whether viewing time had any connection to watching intention. The sample of respondents consisted of 410 at the age of 18 to 28 who completed the survey. There are 4 motivations that were examined, which are curiosity and absorption, which are considered cognitive escapism, and relaxation and psychological detachment, which represent the affective side. Results from multiple regression analysis indicated that all four motivations were significant predictors of watching intention, with the model explaining 68.4% of the variance. Curiosity showed the strongest predictive effect, with psychological detachment, relaxation, and absorption following respectively. When it comes to comparing the two pathways of cognitive and affective escapism, the result shows that both contributed to watching intention at nearly the same level, which points out that Thai Gen Z seek both fantasy world exploration and stress relief through the genre. However, Time Spending per work did not show a significant association with watching intention, which suggests that the amount of watching can be influenced by other external factors that constrain the situation, other than by having the motivation as a factor alone. Overall, the findings align with Uses and Gratifications Theory and support the dual-pathway escapism model.

Keywords: Isekai Anime, Escapism, Uses and Gratifications Theory, Thai Generation Z, Watching Intention

Introduction

As Dimock (2019) states that Gen Z are those who born from 1997 onward and in the current year of the study of 2025, the oldest Gen Z individuals are now 28 years old. However, this study focuses on adult Gen Z aged 18–28 as data collected in 2025 because



respondents must be legal adults to provide consent. When it comes to the situation of Gen Z, UNICEF Thailand (2022) states that Gen Z face many pressures from different aspects of life such as high academic competition, limited job opportunities, or the mental health impact from the COVID-19 pandemic. Also mentioned that with 7 in 10 Thai young people reporting increased stress, anxiety, and depression.

Upcoming till 2026, streaming platforms like Netflix and Crunchyroll have dramatically expanded anime accessibility worldwide. During this period, over 50% of Netflix's 325 million subscribers watched anime in 2025, while Crunchyroll expanded to 17 million dedicated subscribers by mid-2024 (Khan, 2026). This increased accessibility has been particularly significant for Gen Z audiences, with research indicating that 47% of Gen Z identify as anime fans (Sablah 2026). In Thailand, this streaming situation has made isekai anime readily available to Gen Z viewers in ways that previous generations relying on television broadcasts never experienced.

Scholars who study media and communication assume that people choose media based on the needs they want to satisfy (Katz et al., 1973). Research shows that escapism is one of the key reasons why people watch media, as it helps them temporarily forget about problems and relieve stress (Halfmann & Reinecke, 2021).

Isekai anime is one genre that has become especially popular among Gen Z in recent years. This type of anime has a pattern of telling stories about characters who end up in a fantasy world that is completely different from where they started, and they usually gain new powers and get their chance to begin their lives and start over again. Due to its story, isekai has become one of the prominent genre of Japanese animation which can be seen by its rapid expansion (Price, 2021). Lu (2020) notes that escapism is a central theme in isekai works, as the genre allows audiences to mentally disconnect from real-world problems by immersing themselves in fantasy worlds with different rules and possibilities.

Despite its growing popularity, most existing research on anime and also escapism approach in media that has been explored only in Japan or Western contexts. This shows the lack of attention to Thai audiences. Furthermore, current studies explore media use more in a general form of escapism (Halfmann & Reinecke, 2021; Katz & Foulkes, 1962), or either focus on a story and content angle of isekai rather than examining why audiences choose to watch the genre (Lu, 2020; Price, 2021). This gap is what the current study tries to address by looking at what escapism motivations drive Thai Gen Z to watch isekai anime, and whether how much time they spend watching has anything to do with those motivations.



Objectives

This study was done to understand the psychological reasons behind isekai anime watching among Thai Gen Z viewers. The objectives are:

1. To identify the specific escapism motivations that predict Gen Z in Thailand's intention to watch isekai anime for escapism.
2. To evaluate the relative contribution of cognitive escapism and affective escapism in predicting watching intention among Thai Gen Z viewers.
3. To examine the association between time spent watching isekai anime and watching intention among Thai Gen Z viewers.

Concept Theory Framework

This study applies Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) together with two-dimensional escapism model from Stenseng et al. (2012). UGT explains that audiences actively choose media to satisfy specific needs (Katz et al., 1973). In this study, escapism is examined through four audience motivations split into two pathways.

Cognitive escapism is an approach-motivated pathway operating through two intrinsic motivations. Curiosity, adapted from Loewenstein (1994) for the conceptualization of curiosity as a response to information gaps, is operationalized in this study as the desire to explore alternative worlds and discover how fantasy settings work. Absorption, adapted from Tellegen and Atkinson (1974) as the concept of absorption as openness to immersive experiences, is operationalized as the capacity to become fully immersed in isekai narratives so that the fantasy world feels real while watching.

Affective escapism is an avoidance-motivated pathway operating through two extrinsic motivations adapted from work recovery framework from Sonnentag and Fritz (2007). Relaxation refers to using isekai anime to unwind and reduce tension from daily life. Psychological detachment refers to mentally disconnecting from daily stressors by focusing on the fantasy world. The four motivations are proposed as independent variables predicting watching intention. Time spent watching isekai anime is also examined to determine whether it is associated with watching intention.

The rise of streaming platforms has changed how people watch shows, with binge-watching becoming a common pattern among young adults. Starosta and Izydorczyk (2020) describe binge-watching as watching multiple episodes of a series in one sitting, and this behavior has grown rapidly as platforms like Netflix and Crunchyroll make entire seasons available at once. Research shows that people often binge-watch because of loneliness, stress, or the need to mentally escape from daily problems, with extended viewing sessions providing both emotional relief and social connection through media characters (Gabbadini et al., 2021; Starosta et al., 2021). This also fits with what West and Turner



(2020) describe in UGT, where media can meet more than one psychological need at once. In the case of isekai anime, binge-watching may serve both cognitive purposes and affective purposes.

Conceptual Framework

The study has developed the following hypotheses and conceptual framework:

H1: Curiosity positively predicts watching intention toward isekai anime among Thai Generation Z viewers.

H2: Absorption positively predicts watching intention toward isekai anime among Thai Generation Z viewers.

H3: Relaxation positively predicts watching intention toward isekai anime among Thai Generation Z viewers.

H4: Psychological detachment positively predicts watching intention toward isekai anime among Thai Generation Z viewers.

H5: Time spent watching isekai anime is positively associated with watching intention among Thai Generation Z viewers.

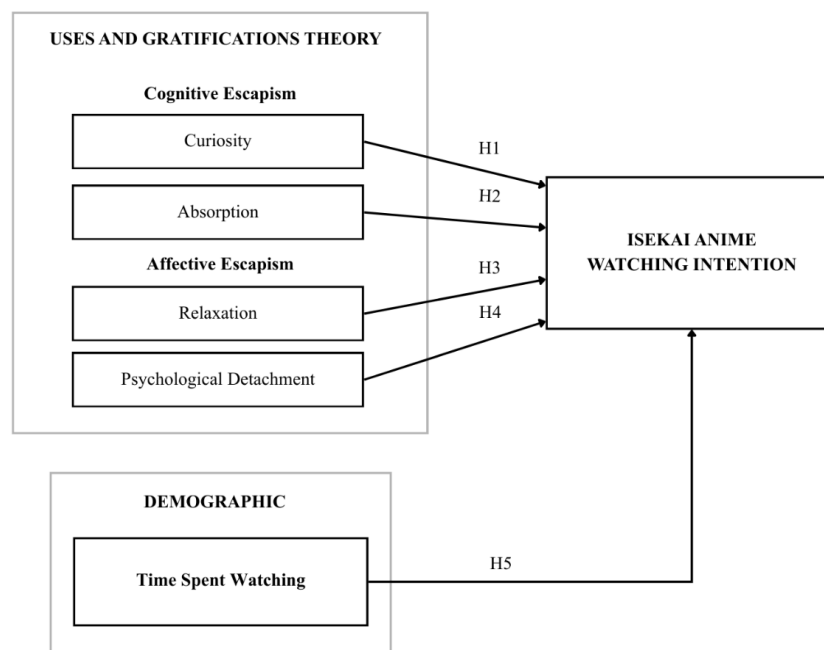


Figure 1: Conceptual framework adapted from Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973) and Dual-Pathway Escapism Model (Stenseng et al., 2012).



Materials and Methods

A quantitative survey was used for this study. The researcher created an online questionnaire through Google Forms and shared it with Thai Gen Z aged 18 to 28 years old who watch isekai anime. The survey was distributed through a multi-seed snowball sampling approach to minimize potential group bias. Recruitment was initiated through four distinct entry points as Thai anime Facebook groups (with admin approval), QR codes provided at anime convention events in Bangkok, university student communities, and initial respondents' personal networks. Participants were encouraged to share the survey link with other isekai viewers they knew. This multi-seed strategy ensured diverse representation across different anime fan communities rather than relying on a single network cluster. Based on formula from Cochran (1977) by using a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error which conclude at the sample of at least 385 responses were needed. In the end, 432 people completed the survey, but after the screening and see if those submitted responses met the criteria, only 410 samples were used in the analysis.

The questionnaire for this study has four sections. The first section screened respondents by age and how often they watch isekai anime. The second section asked about gender, age, occupation, weekly viewing hours, and which platforms they use. The third section measured the four escapism motivations through 16 items. Curiosity and absorption items were adapted from Litman and Spielberg (2003) and Tellegen and Atkinson (1974) respectively for the context of isekai anime viewing. Relaxation and psychological detachment items were adapted from Sonnentag and Fritz (2007) work recovery scales, reworded to apply to media consumption rather than recovery from work. The fourth section measured watching intention using 4 items adapted from Ajzen (1991) and Stenseng et al. (2012). All items used a 5-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Before the main study, three experts reviewed the questionnaire for content validity using the IOC method, giving an overall score of 0.869. A pilot test with 30 respondents showed Cronbach's α above .70 for all scales, and the full sample confirmed all scales above .80.

Results

Among the 410 respondents, 54.4% were male, with a mean age of 22.23 years (SD = 2.90). In terms of occupation, nearly half were students (49%), followed by early career workers at 25.1%. Viewing time of 3 to 5 hours per week was the most common pattern (31%). For platform use, illegal or pirated sites (49%) and Netflix (48.3%) were the top two, though since respondents could select more than one platform, the percentages add up to more than 100%. The platform options were selected based on known popularity among Thai anime viewers and included both legal streaming services (Netflix,



Crunchyroll, Bilibili, WeTV, Viu, YouTube) and an option for illegal or pirated sites to capture actual viewing behavior. This approach provided a realistic picture of how Thai Gen Z access isekai anime rather than only measuring socially desirable responses.

Descriptive statistics and reliability results are reported for all five variables ($N = 410$). Curiosity (CC) had a mean of 4.08 ($SD = 0.67$, $\alpha = .830$), followed by Relaxation (AR) at 4.01 ($SD = 0.69$, $\alpha = .809$), Absorption (CA) at 3.92 ($SD = 0.71$, $\alpha = .811$), and Psychological Detachment (AP) at 3.88 ($SD = 0.76$, $\alpha = .843$). Watching Intention (WI) recorded the highest mean overall at 4.12 ($SD = 0.65$, $\alpha = .842$). All Cronbach's α values exceeded .80, indicating strong internal reliability across all scales.

Pearson correlation analysis revealed strong positive correlations between all four motivations and watching intention: Curiosity ($r = .745$), Absorption ($r = .742$), Psychological Detachment ($r = .713$), and Relaxation ($r = .668$), all significant at $p < .01$. Time spent watching showed no significant correlation with watching intention ($r = .022$, $p = .654$) or with any of the four escapism motivations (all $r < .04$, $p > .05$).

Table 1: Multiple Regression Coefficients – Predictors of Watching Intention

Variable	B	Std. Error	β	t	Sig.
(Constant)	-.113	.152	–	-.741	.459
Curiosity (CC)	.302	.058	.282	5.207	.000*
Absorption (CA)	.200	.057	.196	3.499	.001*
Relaxation (AR)	.245	.045	.210	5.448	.000*
Psychological Detachment (AP)	.273	.043	.264	6.361	.000*

Note. $R^2 = .684$, Adjusted $R^2 = .681$, $F(4,405) = 219.096$, $p < .001$. * $p < .05$

Together, the four motivations accounted for 68.4% of the variance in watching intention ($R^2 = .684$). All four were significant predictors: Curiosity ($\beta = .282$, $p < .001$), Psychological Detachment ($\beta = .264$, $p < .001$), Relaxation ($\beta = .210$, $p < .001$), and Absorption ($\beta = .196$, $p = .001$).

To address the second objective of evaluating the relative contribution of cognitive versus affective escapism, the standardized beta coefficients and mean scores were compared. Both cognitive escapism dimensions (Curiosity: $\beta = .282$, $M = 4.08$; Absorption:



$\beta = .196$, $M = 3.92$) and affective escapism dimensions (Relaxation: $\beta = .210$, $M = 4.01$; Psychological Detachment: $\beta = .264$, $M = 3.88$) demonstrated significant effects on watching intention. The combined beta weights suggest that cognitive escapism and affective escapism contribute nearly equally to watching intention, with cognitive escapism showing a slightly stronger overall effect.

Table 2: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

H	Hypotheses Statement	Result
H1	Curiosity positively predicts watching intention toward isekai anime among Thai Generation Z viewers.	Supported ($\beta=.282$, $p<.001$)
H2	Absorption positively predicts watching intention toward isekai anime among Thai Generation Z viewers.	Supported ($\beta=.196$, $p=.001$)
H3	Relaxation positively predicts watching intention toward isekai anime among Thai Generation Z viewers.	Supported ($\beta=.210$, $p<.001$)
H4	Psychological detachment positively predicts watching intention toward isekai anime among Thai Generation Z viewers.	Supported ($\beta=.264$, $p<.001$)
H5	Time spent watching isekai anime is positively associated with watching intention among Thai Generation Z viewers.	Not Supported ($r=.022$, $p=.654$)

Conclusions and Discussion

This study come to conclude that escapism motivations play a strong role in predicting why Thai Gen Z watch isekai anime. Where four out of five hypotheses were supported, and the four motivations together explained 68.4% of the variance in watching intentions. From the result, curiosity appears to be the strongest individual predictor ($\beta = .282$). This suggests that Thai Gen Z are not watching isekai anime to escape stress only, but because they are also genuinely interesting in exploring the fantasy in isekai. This is consistent with Loewenstein (1994), by having curiosity as a motivation for engagement. Along with Price (2021) and Lu (2020), who noted that isekai anime's world-building gives viewers experiences very different from everyday life.

Psychological detachment being the second-strongest predictor which confirms that the genre also helps Thai Gen Z mentally recover from daily stress. This is consistent with the recovery framework of Sonnentag and Fritz (2007) and together with findings from



Gabbiadini et al. (2021) that loneliness and stress drive audiences to binge-watching behavior which considers as a form of escapism. The significant role of relaxation also fits with qualitative research from Flayelle et al. (2017) on binge-watching, which found that viewers describe long viewing sessions as a way to unwind from negative emotions.

Regarding for the second objective, by combining standardized effects of cognitive dimensions (Curiosity + Absorption = .478) and affective dimensions (Relaxation + Psychological Detachment = .474), it appears remarkably similar, suggesting that Thai Gen Z viewers seek both intellectual engagement with fantasy worlds and emotional relief from daily stresses when watching isekai anime. This supports the dual-pathway escapism model proposed by Stenseng et al. (2012) and demonstrates that isekai anime satisfies multiple psychological needs simultaneously (West & Turner, 2020).

H5 was not supported. The correlation results showed that time spent watching on isekai anime per week had no significant relationship with watching intention ($r = .022$, $p = .654$). This suggests that there is an intention-behavior gap, where even though respondents express strong intentions to continue watching isekai anime ($M = 4.12$) but their actual viewing time is not necessarily higher. This finding aligns with Schnauber-Stockmann et al. (2024), who argued that wanting to watch more does not always translate into actually watching more, because viewing time can be interrupted by external life factors rather than just desire alone such as daily schedules or work lives.

Recommendation based on the findings of this study, as for content creators should focus on both imaginative world-building and emotional comfort when making isekai anime for Thai Gen Z, since viewers value both curiosity-driven exploration and stress-relief relaxation. Streaming platforms could benefit from categorizing isekai titles by whether they lean more intellectually engaging or emotionally soothing, helping viewers find what they need at different times. For mental health professionals and educators, these results suggest that isekai anime watching works as purposeful stress management rather than simple avoidance. It is worth taking these findings as a reflection to a cultural nuance that specific to Thai Gen Z, who use isekai anime not just as passive escapism but as purposeful stress management adapted to contemporary digital platforms. This culturally-adapted approach to emotional regulation through media may differ from Western or Japanese contexts and deserves recognition as a legitimate coping strategy. This understanding is beneficial when building approaches to help Thai Gen Z develop healthier viewing habits.

This study has a few limitations worth noting. The data were collected in a short period of time, the sample came mainly from online anime communities and convention events, and the study measured only watching intention rather than actual behavior. For future research, it could use a longitudinal design with platform viewing data, compare



findings across different anime genres or countries, or even apply qualitative methods such as interviews to capture what surveys cannot.

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