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The Role of Instagram Influencers in Enhancing Yogyakarta's Appeal to Millennial and Gen Z Travelers

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Abstract

Background: Instagram influencer marketing is increasingly becoming a determining factor in the decision-making of Millennials and Gen Z regarding visits to tourism destinations. Although source credibility (attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise) has been widely studied, little is known about its direct influence on behavioral intention when mediated by affective mechanisms.

Purpose: This study examines how parasocial interaction (PSI) mediates the relationship between source credibility and travel intention, i.e., the tendency to visit Yogyakarta. In this context, PSI refers to the emotional connection that allows followers to feel attached to influencers.

Method: Data were collected via an online survey distributed via Google Forms to Indonesian Instagram users between January and March 2025. Purposive sampling was employed to obtain 213 responses from users who follow travel influencers. The data collected were analyzed using PLS-SEM.

Findings: The results show that attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise have no direct impact on travel intention. However, all these credibility dimensions show a strong positive correlation with PSI, which predicts travel intention. Therefore, PSI is identified as a complete mediator in the model.

Conclusions: Travel intention is mainly driven by emotional connection rather than by influencer traits alone. The appraisal mechanism mediates the process from perception to action.

Research Implication: It is recommended that tourism marketers adopt PSI-based strategies by recognizing actors who can build substantive, affective relations with the audience.

Keywords: destination marketing, influencer marketing, Instagram tourism, parasocial interaction, social media engagement, source credibility, travel intention

JEL Classification: M31, L83, Z33, C83

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Studying how Instagram influencers shape the interest of Millennial and Gen Z in visiting Yogyakarta presents several real-world challenges. The first challenge is authenticity versus advertising where social media feeds are filled with sponsored posts, making it difficult to separate genuine influence from paid promotion. Another challenge is the presence of algorithm noise and vanity metrics because likes and views do not always represent persuasion, and changes in platform algorithms can affect what users actually see.

Measuring emotions also becomes a challenge since the sense of closeness to influencers or parasocial interaction is subtle and often invisible. Yet, it may influence intention more than static credibility traits. Data quality and bias also need attention because self-reported intentions can be inflated and responses from less engaged participants can distort results. This study addresses these challenges by focusing on active Instagram users in the Yogyakarta context, using validated measures of credibility and parasocial interaction, and analyzing their relationships with travel intention. The findings provide practical insights for tourism marketers to prioritize authentic storytelling and sustained two-way engagement rather than relying solely on superficial reach.

1. Introduction

Social media has become one of the key platforms influencing the consumer behaviors of Millennials and Gen Z in Indonesia (Meliawati et al., 2023). In early 2024, Instagram had 100.9 million users in Indonesia, corresponding to approximately 36.2 percent of the total population (DataReportal, 2024). Yogyakarta, often regarded as a major center of cultural tourism, contributes about 34 percent of the region's economic output, making it a crucial driver of local growth (Nuryadin & Purwiyanta, 2023). The growing popularity of influencer marketing has presented challenges, particularly regarding credibility and consumer trust (Hernández-Méndez & Baute-Díaz, 2024; Pop et al., 2022). In destination marketing, source credibility significantly affects Millennials' attitudes toward influencers, thereby influencing their travel intentions. This effect is even greater among those who regularly consume influencer content (Ismarizal & Kusumah, 2023; Han & Chen, 2022).

According to the Source Credibility Theory (Ohanian, 1990), attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise are the main persuasive cues that shape the way individuals accept a message. These variables are central to structuring consumer brand choices, and empirical findings support this assertion (Hassan et al., 2021). However, previous studies have shown that these features do not always translate into tangible behavioral outcomes; instead, emotional processes, especially parasocial dynamics, often have a similar scale of impact on digitally native communities (Masuda et al., 2022). Credibility perceptions can be transformed into travel intentions through parasocial interaction (PSI), a one-sided emotional relationship that creates intimacy, trust, and perceived realism between audiences and influencers (Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2024). Although visual narratives on Instagram dominate engagement in contemporary tourism discourse, their relevance in the context of Southeast Asian heritage tourism remains largely unexplored. Existing studies have predominantly examined PSI outside Indonesia, leaving heritage tourism contexts understudied.

Yogyakarta is a rich asset and an intricate case study. The city is consistently ranked among the top tourist attractions on Java Island, with abundant cultural resources and a strong focus on cultural tourism. The industry has become a pillar of the local economy, creating municipal and national government revenues (Kristiana et al., 2020), creating employment and entrepreneurial opportunities (Rifai & Agustin, 2022), and sustaining small-scale businesses, e.g., those in agro-tourism-based farming communities (Sriyadi et al., 2021). Despite the fact that influencer-based marketing strategies remain at the top of the engagement pyramid, influencer content now faces increased audience skepticism and saturation, weakening persuasive power (Hernández-Méndez & Baute-Díaz, 2024; Majaliwa & Magasi, 2024; Pop et al., 2022). These dynamics highlight the need for communicative practices that enhance perceived authenticity and intimacy, especially among Millennials and Gen Z.

A significant body of research suggests that destination marketing exposure does not always lead to travel intention, with economic limitations, perceived inauthenticity, and irrelevant messaging common barriers to this process (Najar et al., 2024). In this regard, persuasive behavior cannot be linked solely to source attributes. Earlier studies have mostly focused on direct connections between source credibility and consumer behavior, without addressing the underlying emotional processes. There is a limited literature regarding empirical investigation of PSI in tourism in Southeast Asia, and the majority of research concentrated on China, Egypt, and Turkey, leaving a noticeable vacuum in Indonesian cultural settings (Raafat et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2022). This is evidenced by Labrecque (2014), who demonstrated that PSI enhances loyalty and emotional proximity in social media brand relationships, but the construct is seldom used in

destination selection. Despite its relevance, PSI remains underexplored in Indonesian heritage tourism.

The current study aims to address the existing research gaps by examining the degree to which influencer credibility determines the travel intentions of Millennial and Gen Z Instagram users in Indonesia in a direct and indirect manner (through PSI). According to the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory, as proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), the credibility of the influencer is regarded as an external stimulus, the PSI is regarded as the internal psychological condition, and the travel intention is regarded as the behavioral outcome. The introduction of the mediating construct of PSI is important to the study because it contributes to the explanation of the emotional process linking digital personalities and tourism-related decisions, and it expands on the traditional focus on source credibility. The novelty of this research lies in its application to Indonesian heritage tourism, offering a deeper understanding of how digital interaction shapes the cultural travel experiences of digital-native generations.

2.   Literature Review

2.1   Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Theory

Mehrabian and Russell (1974) introduced the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory, which explains how external stimuli shape internal psychological states and influence observable behaviors. In influencer marketing, stimulus (S) is a combination of extrinsic factors, i.e., credibility of the influencer. These characteristics generate organism-level reactions (O), which are typically manifested as PSI, the perceived relationship between audiences and hosts (Duong, 2023). Such psychological states are then reflected in responses (R), such as behavioural engagement and travel intentions (Sultan et al., 2021; Tandon et al., 2021). This framework is especially useful to understand the development of engagement in online consumers (Song et al., 2021; Soroya et al., 2021; Zahrudy & Rany, 2025). In the current study, the model is employed to illustrate how influencer credibility (S) triggers PSI (O), thus, facilitating travel intentions (R) in the case of Indonesian Millennials and Gen Z.

2.2   Source Credibility

According to Han and Chen (2022), source credibility refers to the audience's ability to trust both the offered information and its originators. Trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness as a three-part model proposed by Ohanian (1990) has been the major standard to measure the efficacy of influencers in recent research (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021). In the context of digital ecosystems, particularly Instagram, these factors shape how consumers interpret influencer speech. Trustworthiness expresses feelings of honesty and dependability. Expertise is defined as the sense of competence that is determined by the relevance of content, depth, and consistency, instead of the official qualification (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). The latter two qualities are complemented by attractiveness, which helps to make an emotional connection and look good. Empirical studies reveal that credibility increases message persuasion and triggers behavioural response, including the formation of intention and loyalty (Luarn et al., 2024). Influencers with credible personas are likely to create trust and compatibility with the values of their followers (Han & Balabanis, 2024). Credibility is created by the continuous production of authentic and well-informed content that meets the expectations of the audience (Leite et al., 2024).

2.3 Parasocial Interaction

Horton and Richard Wohl (1956) introduced parasocial interaction (PSI) as a concept that describes how media audiences develop emotional bonds with distant public figures through one-sided relationships. PSI represents an imagined emotional bond that becomes unreal yet generates similar feelings to genuine interpersonal attachments. PSI became more significant after social media arrived because viewers get close-ups of influencers' everyday practices and experiences through vlogs and Instagram Stories. Research has established that rapid and authentic presentation allows parasocial connections to strengthen substantially. The domain of tourism marketing heavily depends on PSI because it leads directly to crucial behavioral outcomes. According to Choi et al. (2019) and Han and Chen (2022), studies have shown that PSI creates better destination images and builds more reliable travel content and motivates visitors. Studies show that using PSI results in enhanced credibility and emotional connection between viewers and influencers, which leads to stronger persuasive effects on the content disseminated by influencers (Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2024).

2.4 Travel Intention

Travel intention, which is typically a proxy for behavioral intention, is an operationalization of people's psychological preparation and motivational inclination to travel to a destination (Jang et al., 2009). Existing studies show that exposure to digital materials has a significant impact on travel intention, where emotional appeals, authenticity, and trust are decisive factors (Pop et al., 2022; Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021). Travel intention, therefore, becomes the central finding of this research, combining both logical and emotional motivators influenced by social media influencers.

2.5 Attractiveness and Travel Intention

Attractiveness refers to the perceived physical appeal and likability of a communicator or influencer and has been shown to shape consumer behavior in visually driven digital spaces such as Instagram. Ohanian (1990) cites attractiveness in a list of the prime dimensions of source credibility. In the Instagram environment, whose aesthetic value reigns supreme, such influencers are expected to influence audiences more likely considered attractive (Gubalane & Ha, 2023). Previous studies also suggest that a beautiful communicator will have greater intentions by promoting message acceptance (Lou & Kim, 2019). In the context of tourism, Raafat et al. (2023) found that the perceived attractiveness of promotional materials positively affects the travel intentions of Egyptian millennials. This aesthetic value often causes admiration and increased interest in the advertised destination. Therefore, the attractive trait is known to have a positive relationship with the desire to travel.

H1: Attractiveness has a positive effect on travel intention

2.6 Trustworthiness and Travel Intention

Trustworthiness is the value with which an influencer is viewed as truthful, dependable, and genuine. When traveling, it becomes more important to find a reliable source of information that can be used when making decisions related to travel because more and more services can be described as experiential and intangible. According to Hassan et al. (2021), members of Generation Z and Millennial generations prioritize authenticity over authority, and thus trustworthiness becomes one of the most significant factors that influences influential status. Raafat et al. (2023) and Yılmazdoğan et al. (2021) also show that trustworthiness has a positive relationship with destination choice. Influencers

perceived as credible are regarded as more trustworthy, thereby exerting greater influence on their audience.

H2: Trustworthiness has a positive effect on travel intention

2.7 Expertise and Travel Intention

In the context of tourism marketing, expertise is the perceived knowledge and competency an influencer demonstrates in a particular field. Previous studies indicate that followers place greater trust in influencers perceived to have extensive experience or information about travel destinations. Ohanian (1990) asserts that the knowledgeability of a source increases the persuasiveness of a message, especially when it has relevant content and is informative. Yılmazdoğan et al. (2021) stated that the role of expertise is limited to its authenticity and domain specificity. Han and Balabanis (2024) support this claim and demonstrate that message credibility is reinforced as perceptions of expertise promote positive intentions more strongly, especially when other cues, such as attractiveness, are present.

H3: Expertise has a positive effect on travel intention

2.8 Attractiveness and Parasocial Interaction

Visual attractiveness serves as a prominent signal. It draws attention and enables audiences to build an emotional connection with an influencer. During such cases in the social media marketing world, where visual content is the primary mode of communication, beautiful influencers tend to establish some sense of intimacy and emotional connection with their followers (Gubalane & Ha, 2023). This experience is closely related to what is known as parasocial interaction (PSI), in which the audience develops a one-sided emotional connection with media personalities (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956). Lou and Kim (2019) have demonstrated that the attractiveness of the source has a significant impact on PSI development, particularly among adolescent users. The perceived closeness between adolescents and the influencer is further enhanced by appreciation of the influencer's appearance and fashion sense, suggesting that the appeal of beauty plays a significant role in PSI.

H4: Attractiveness has a positive effect on parasocial interaction

2.9 Trustworthiness and Parasocial Interaction

Credibility positively shapes how audiences perceive influencers' sincerity and authenticity, thereby fostering emotional bonds. Therefore, PSI is ubiquitous when the audience is psychologically secure and receptive to media personalities. In the setting of the influencer marketing, trustworthiness will enable this kind of interaction by encouraging audiences to interact at a higher degree (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). According to Tran et al. (2024)The more reliable the influencers are, the easily they form parasocial relationships with their followers.

H5: Trustworthiness has a positive effect on parasocial interaction

2.10 Expertise and Parasocial Interaction

Expertise is defined as perceived competence; when audiences regard influencers as competent, cognitive credibility is established. In terms of social media, perceptions of competence can also inform emotional involvement, especially when information is

presented by influencers in content that is both helpful and personal (Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021). It was found that perceived expertise enhances both the informational and relational aspects of communication between influencers and their followers, suggesting that expertise plays a dual role in influencing PSI, specifically in terms of logical and emotional appeal (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

H6: Expertise has a positive effect on parasocial interaction

2.11 Parasocial Interaction and Travel Intention

PSI does not occur in isolation, as its formation relies on several key attributes present in the source. Gong and Li (2017) conducted preliminary research demonstrating that attractiveness and authenticity serve as fundamental signals for the development of parasocial interaction. Lou and Kim (2019) Research showed that credibility, together with perceived realism, helps develop emotional closeness, which magnifies the power and duration of PSI. The presence of powerful parasocial relationships leads to increased brand identification and content loyalty, which enhances customer equity (Yuan et al., 2016). Syarif et al. (2025) demonstrate that experts in the tourism sector share similarities with findings reported in other studies. Specifically, they show that parasocial ties with food influencers positively influence the intention to purchase local culinary products.

H7: Parasocial interaction has a positive effect on travel intention

2.12 Parasocial Interaction as a Mediator between Attractiveness and Travel Intention

The term PSI is used to refer to the one-sided audience media-figure relationships that are emotionally significant (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956). The likes, comments, and stories responses on Instagram are examples of exchanges that promote reciprocity and consolidate PSI (Chung & Cho, 2017). Previous studies show that the physical attractiveness of an influencer can evoke emotional closeness and, as such, enhance PSI, which impacts travel intentions (Lee & Watkins, 2016). The findings of Yılmazdoğan et al. (2021) supported the idea that beauty increases emotional involvement, leading to a preference for following destination recommendations.

H8: Parasocial interaction positively mediates the relationship between attractiveness and travel intention

2.13 Parasocial Interaction as a Mediator between Trustworthiness and Travel Intention

Based on H8, the concept of PSI serves as a causal agent linking source attributes and consumer behaviour. The literature aligns with the fact that the presence of confidence in an influencer strengthens the parasocial bonds (Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021). These emotional bonds facilitate the feeling of authenticity and consequently influence the destination preferences (Vu et al., 2024).

H9: Parasocial interaction positively mediates the relationship between trustworthiness and travel intention

2.14 Parasocial Interaction as a Mediator between Expertise and Travel Intention

The empirical literature shows that the influencer's expertise is positively correlated with informational credibility and, in turn, with increased audience engagement. According

to Yılmazdoğan et al. (2021), perceived expertise can strengthen parasocial relationships, thereby affecting behavioral intentions such as destination selection. In line with the existing literature, PSI has also been found to influence downstream behavior, such as e-word-of-mouth (eWOM) and bandwagon effects, as well as purchase intentions, indicating its pivotal role in consumer decision-making mechanisms (Nadroo et al., 2024).

H10: Parasocial interaction positively mediates the relationship between expertise and travel intention.

3. Conceptual Framework

This study employs the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model to explain how influencer credibility influences travel intention. In this framework, attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise are external stimuli that activate an inner psychological process, PSI, which in turn influences the behavioral outcome of travel intention. The direct relationships between source credibility and travel intention (H1–H3), the organismic pathways from credibility to PSI (H4–H6), and the subsequent effect of PSI on travel intention (H7) are included. In addition, the mediating role of PSI between the three credibility dimensions and travel intention (H8–H10) provides further psychological insight into how emotional bonds with influencers bridge the gap between perceived credibility and actual behavioral responses. As shown in Figure 1, the integrated conceptual framework presents all hypothesized relationships (H1–H10) in a single model.
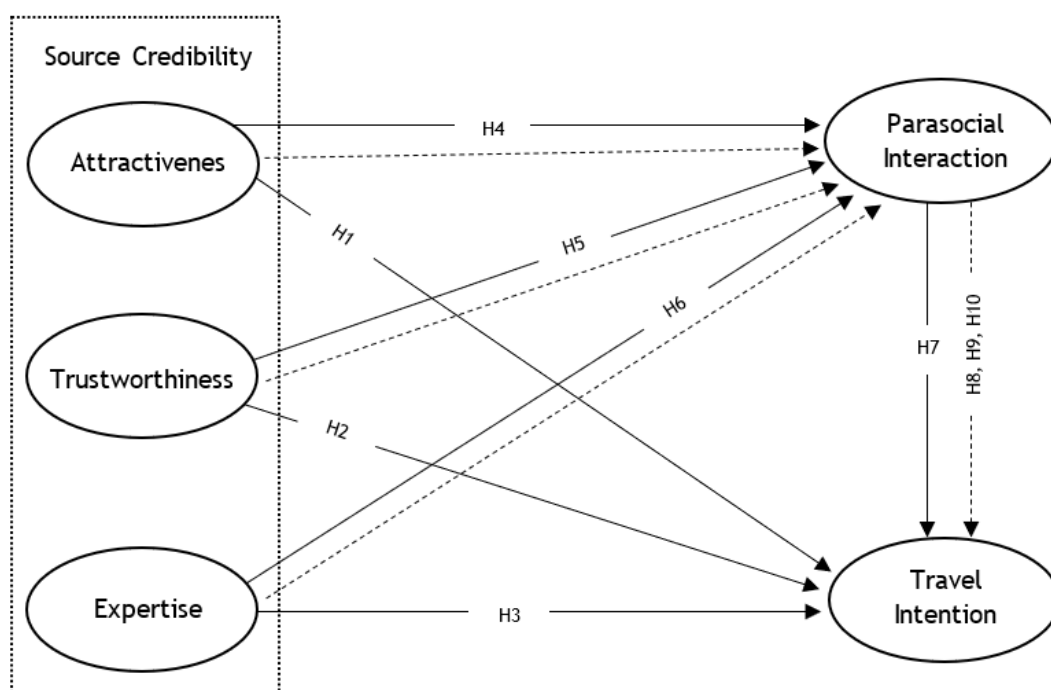

Figure 1. Conceptual framework: the role of Instagram influencers in enhancing Yogyakarta's appeal to millennial and Gen Z travelers

Based on the framework, the following hypotheses are proposed:
H1: Attractiveness has a positive effect on travel intention.
H2: Trustworthiness has a positive effect on travel intention.
H3: Expertise has a positive effect on travel intention.
H4: Attractiveness has a positive effect on parasocial interaction.
H5: Trustworthiness has a positive effect on parasocial interaction.
H6: Expertise has a positive effect on parasocial interaction.
H7: Parasocial interaction has a positive effect on travel intention.

H8: Parasocial interaction positively mediates the relationship between attractiveness and travel intention.

H9: Parasocial interaction positively mediates the relationship between trustworthiness and travel intention.

H10: Parasocial interaction positively mediates the relationship between expertise and travel intention.

4. Methods

4.1 Research Design

This quantitative study employed an online survey to determine the relationship between the source credibility of influencers on Instagram and travel intention to Yogyakarta, where PSI was used as a mediator. The direct and indirect pathways were measured using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The procedure is especially appropriate for analyses with latent constructs, non-normal distributions, and higher-order constructs (Hair et al., 2021; Sarstedt et al., 2017). Moreover, as this study has explanatory objectives, PLS-SEM is a suitable method because it facilitates testing causal relationships and extending theory with empirical evidence.

4.2 Sampling

This study adopted a purposive non-probability sampling method to select Indonesian individuals on Instagram aged 16 to 45 who were active consumers of the travel information propagated by influencers. A screening questionnaire was used to ask the participants regarding three factors: (1) active Instagram presence (i.e., daily usage), (2) frequent followership of an Instagram influencer who specializes in the field of tourism, and (3) consumption of tourism-related Instagram-generated content in the past. The final sample consisted of 213 valid respondents. The majority of the involved individuals lived in large cities outside Yogyakarta, namely Jakarta, Surabaya, and Bekasi. All respondents met the digital behavior criteria for the target study population, specifically active Instagram users who regularly follow and engage with content from tourism influencers. The adequacy of this sample was further evaluated using the inverse square root method recommended for PLS-SEM (Kock & Hadaya, 2018). With 213 valid responses, the present study therefore exceeds the recommended threshold and provides sufficient statistical power for hypothesis testing.

4.3 Measurement

The scales used in this research are adapted from previous studies. All constructs were operationalized and measured using a variety of indicators ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). The aspects that measure source credibility were based on three-dimensional models depicted by Ohanian (1990) and modified based on modern research on influencer cooperation, including attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise. PSI as the one-dimensional emotional attachment, perceived intimacy between followers and the individuals they are following on social media, was assessed based on variables by Nadroo et al. (2024). The travel intention was operationalized through questions based on previous research on tourism behavior. All the materials were translated into Indonesian and reviewed for content clarity and contextual relevance. Table 1 shows the operational definitions and measurement indicators.

Table 1. Operational definitions and indicators for source credibility, parasocial interaction, and travel intention

Variables	Operational Definition	Indicators
Attractiveness (Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021)	Attractiveness refers to the physical appeal that an individual possesses, as perceived by observers who consider that person to be attractive (Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021).	ATT1 – This influencer is physically attractive ATT2 – This influencer has an appealing style ATT3 – This influencer is good-looking ATT4 – This influencer appears elegant ATT5 – This influencer has a captivating charm
Trustworthiness (Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021)	The concept of trustworthiness can be understood as the perception of truthfulness, characterized by the belief that a particular source is honest, accurate, and possesses good character (Mattson, 2005).	TRU1 – This influencer is reliable TRU2 – This influencer is trustworthy TRU3 – This influencer is highly credible TRU4 – This influencer is sincere when providing information TRU5 – This influencer keeps their promises
Expertise (Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021)	Expertise can be defined as the perceived knowledge, experience, and competence that a source demonstrates in a given topic (Mattson, 2005).	EXP1 – This influencer is an expert in travel and tourism EXP2 – This influencer has extensive experience in traveling EXP3 – This influencer has broad knowledge about travel destinations EXP4 – This influencer is well qualified to give travel recommendations EXP5 – This influencer is competent in delivering travel-related information
Parasocial Interaction (Nadroo et al., 2024)	Parasocial interaction refers to a supposed interpersonal relationship that social media users develop with media personalities, although the connection is technically always one-sided and non-reciprocal (Labrecque, 2014).	PSI1 – I always look forward to the travel content shared by this influencer PSI2 – I feel like I am part of this influencer's community PSI3 – I trust this influencer when it comes to recommending tourist destinations PSI4 – I feel like this influencer is helping me choose a travel destination as if they were my friend PSI5 – When this influencer shares their opinion about a destination, it influences my decision to visit it
Travel Intention (Bilgin, 2024)	Travel intention is a psychological category that refers to the preparedness and impetus forming a psychological readiness to plan or decide on future travel (Jang et al., 2009).	TI1 – I plan to visit Yogyakarta in the near future TI2 – I consider visiting Yogyakarta when planning my travel budget

Table 1. Operational definitions and indicators for source credibility, parasocial interaction, and travel intention (Continue)

Variables	Operational Definition	Indicators
Travel Intention (Bilgin, 2024)	Travel intention is a psychological category that refers to the preparedness and impetus forming a psychological readiness to plan or decide on future travel (Jang et al., 2009).	TI3 – I am interested in searching for more information about Yogyakarta tourism after seeing this influencer's recommendation TI4 – I have the intention to visit the tourist destination in Yogyakarta promoted by this influencer

4.4 Data Collection

An online survey using Google Forms was distributed within a three-month timeframe, covering January to March 2025. The sample comprised Millennials and Gen Z users, the groups that are well-known to have a high level of engagement with Instagram (Cheng et al., 2020). A pilot test was conducted with 30 participants before the system was fully deployed to assess the clarity, readability, and logic of each item. Feedback from this step led to minor revisions. Data collection followed standard procedures consistent with prior research on influencer marketing (Lee & Watkins, 2016). All participants were provided with a digital informed consent form outlining the voluntary nature of participation and the principles of anonymity and confidentiality. No personally identifiable information was collected, and the study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for research involving human participants, consistent with the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

4.5 Data Analysis

This research used Structural Equation Modeling via PLS-SEM with Smart-PLS 4.1.0.9 to test a theoretical hypothesis that the dimensions of influencer credibility determine the effect of influence on travel intention through PSI. PLS-SEM is particularly suitable for exploratory studies involving complex relationships and is commonly used in empirical research characterized by moderate sample sizes (Hair et al., 2021). Additionally, the PLS model enables the simultaneous assessment of both measurement and structural components. The measurement model was analyzed, including the determination of convergent validity, construct reliability, and discriminant validity. Evaluation of the structural model was followed by inspection of the path coefficient, explained variance (R^2), and the mediating role of PSI. Collectively, the analyses described the direct and indirect relationships among the constructs and the model's overall predictive ability. The PLS-SEM method was selected based on the validation presented to ensure a robust operationalization of the theoretical framework and to elucidate the process by which the dimensions of influencers' learned credibility influence PSI and subsequent travel intention.

5. Findings

5.1 Respondent Characteristics

The survey yielded 213 usable responses from participants who met the purposive sampling criteria. In terms of gender composition, the results indicate a significant predominance of female respondents, who constituted 70.4% of the sample, while male respondents accounted for 29.6%. All participants were located outside Yogyakarta, with the largest group originating from Jakarta (17.4%), followed by Surabaya (7.5%), Bekasi

(5.6%), and other regions (69.5%). This distribution is deemed appropriate as it enhances the validity of assessing travel intention.

Age distribution analysis indicated that the majority of respondents belonged to the 19–24 age group (50.7%), followed by the 13–18 and 25–28 age brackets (21.1% and 17.8%, respectively). These demographics align well with the characteristics of the digital-native Generation Z and young Millennials. Regarding social media behavior, most respondents reported follower counts between 0 and 500 (42.7%), while another significant group reported follower counts between 501 and 1,000 (31.0%). This distribution underscores the prevalence of micro-level follower networks. The most common daily time spent on Instagram was 31–60 minutes, reported by 36.2% of respondents, followed by 1–2 hours, reported by 25.8%. Collectively, this data suggests a moderate yet stable level of digital engagement within the sample. A detailed list of the demographic and digital behavior characteristics is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Respondent characteristics

Profile	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	63	29.6
Female	150	70.4
Region		
Jakarta	37	17.4
Surabaya	16	7.5
Bekasi	12	5.6
Others	148	69.5
Age (yo)		
13-18	45	21.1
19-24	108	50.7
25-28	38	17.8
29-34	12	5.6
35-40	9	4.2
41-44	1	0.5
Number of Follower		
0-500	91	42.7
501-1000	66	31.0
1001-1500	38	17.8
1501-2000	8	3.8
More than 2000	6	2.8
Time spent on social media		
0-30 minutes	32	15.0
31-60 minutes	77	36.2
1-2 hours	55	25.8
2-3 hours	29	13.6
More than 3 hours	19	8.9

5.2 Measurement Model Assessment

The structural correlations were assessed following a comprehensive evaluation of the reliability and validity of the measurement models using the PLS-SEM framework developed by Hair et al. (2021). The analysis conducted with Smart-PLS 4.1.0.9 confirmed all reflective constructs in the model. Latent construct reliability was evaluated using two fundamental reliability tests: Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR). As

shown in Table 3, all five constructs exceeded the established criterion of 0.70 based on both indicators. Expertise exhibited the highest internal reliability, with scores of α = 0.886 and CR = 0.916, while trustworthiness and PSI followed closely, with α = 0.873 and CR = 0.908, and α = 0.837 and CR = 0.885, respectively.

Table 3. Measurement items

Variables Measurement	Outer Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Attractiveness (ATT)				
ATT1	0.763			
ATT2	0.724			
ATT3	0.771	0.821	0.875	0.584
ATT4	0.823			
ATT5	0.734			
Trustworthiness (TRU)				
TRU1	0.814			
TRU2	0.872			
TRU3	0.797	0.873	0.908	0.664
TRU4	0.751			
TRU5	0.835			
Expertise (EXP)				
EXP1	0.780			
EXP2	0.805			
EXP3	0.829	0.886	0.916	0.687
EXP4	0.863			
EXP5	0.863			
Parasocial Interactions (PSI)				
PSI1	0.758			
PSI2	0.742			
PSI3	0.790	0.837	0.885	0.606
PSI4	0.820			
PSI5	0.780			
Travel Intention (TI)				
TI1	0.772			
TI2	0.808	0.821	0.880	0.648
TI3	0.786			
TI4	0.853			

Reliability tests indicated that both the attractiveness and travel intention constructs were reliable, with Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.821 for each construct, and their Composite Reliability values of 0.875 and 0.880, respectively. The study results indicate that the utilized constructs exhibit both robustness and internal consistency. All items retained their reliability status through outer loading assessments, which exceeded the 0.70 benchmark recommended by Hair et al. (2021). These loadings ranged from 0.724 (ATT2) to 0.872 (TRU2). The complete set of indicators maintained their positive contributions to their respective constructs and displayed no cross-loadings; therefore, no modifications were made. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was used to assess convergent validity by evaluating the extent to which indicators explain the variability of the latent variables. The research findings demonstrate that all AVE values surpassed the minimum threshold of 0.50 established by Hair et al. (2021), with measurements ranging from 0.584 (attractiveness) to 0.687 (expertise). The study indicates that each concept effectively accounts for at least 50% of the variance in its measurement variables, thereby confirming appropriate convergent validity.

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This study investigated discriminant validity using supporting approaches such as the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). The values presented in Table 4 demonstrated appropriate discriminant validity, as all HTMT measurements fell below the 0.85 criterion recommended by Hair et al. (2021). The highest HTMT value was observed between trustworthiness and PSI at 0.780, while expertise and PSI exhibited a slightly lower yet acceptable level at 0.754. The psychometric properties of the measurement model appear robust when considered as a cohesive whole. The study confirms that each construct exhibits internal consistency, sufficient convergent validity, and empirical distinctiveness among its components. The measurement model meets both appropriateness and reliability standards for conducting hypothesis testing in the structural model.

Table 4. HTMT ratio analysis

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5
Attractiveness (1)					
Expertise (2)	0.621				
Parasocial Interaction (3)	0.730	0.754			
Travel Intention (4)	0.544	0.543	0.705		
Trustworthiness (5)	0.711	0.755	0.780	0.614	

5.3 Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural modeling procedures in Smart-PLS 4.1.0.9 identified several key causal relationships, summarized in Table 5 and confirmed graphically in Figure 2. Bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) was effective for evaluating the reliability of path coefficients, while coefficient of determination (R^2) measures were used to assess the model's explanatory power. The recorded R^2 values for parasocial interaction (PSI) and travel intention were 0.578 and 0.395, respectively, indicating moderate and significant levels of model accuracy in predicting variance in both endogenous constructs. Regarding the direct effects, the findings indicate no significant effects of attractiveness (ß = 0.082, p = 0.379), trustworthiness (ß = 0.179, p = 0.058), or expertise (ß = 0.073, p = 0.367) on travel intention. This tendency suggests that Millennial- and Gen Z-focused participants exhibit a minor inclination to travel solely because of social media influencers; rather, it is essential to understand their behavior through affective or relational processes.

Table 5. Results of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient (ß)	t-values	p-values	Decision
H1: Attractiveness → Travel Intention	0.082	0.879	0.379	Not Supported
H2: Trustworthiness → Travel Intention	0.179	1.898	0.058	Not Supported
H3: Expertise → Travel Intention	0.073	0.902	0.367	Not Supported
H4: Attractiveness → Parasocial Interaction	0.258	4.724	0.000*	Supported
H5: Trustworthiness → Parasocial Interaction	0.298	3.600	0.000*	Supported
H6: Expertise → Parasocial Interaction	0.330	3.635	0.000*	Supported

Table 5. Results of hypothesis testing (Continue)

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient (ß)	t-values	p-values	Decision
H7: Parasocial Interaction → Travel Intention	0.379	3.955	0.000*	Supported

Note: *Significant at p < 0.01

In contrast, all dimensions of source credibility showed strong positive correlations with PSI: attractiveness (ß = 0.258, p < 0.01), trustworthiness (ß = 0.298, p < 0.01), and expertise (ß = 0.330, p < 0.01). PSI significantly predicted travel intention (ß = 0.379, p < 0.01). Therefore, the emotional relationships established through PSI serve as the mechanism through which influencers' characteristics influence the actual intention to visit Yogyakarta. The empirical results support the relationship posited in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, indicating that PSI mediates the transformation of external stimuli into behavioral responses. Genuine and emotionally meaningful connections surpass superficial forms of advertising for Millennial and Gen Z consumers, suggesting that the development of truly significant relationships should be a strategic focus in destination marketing discussions.
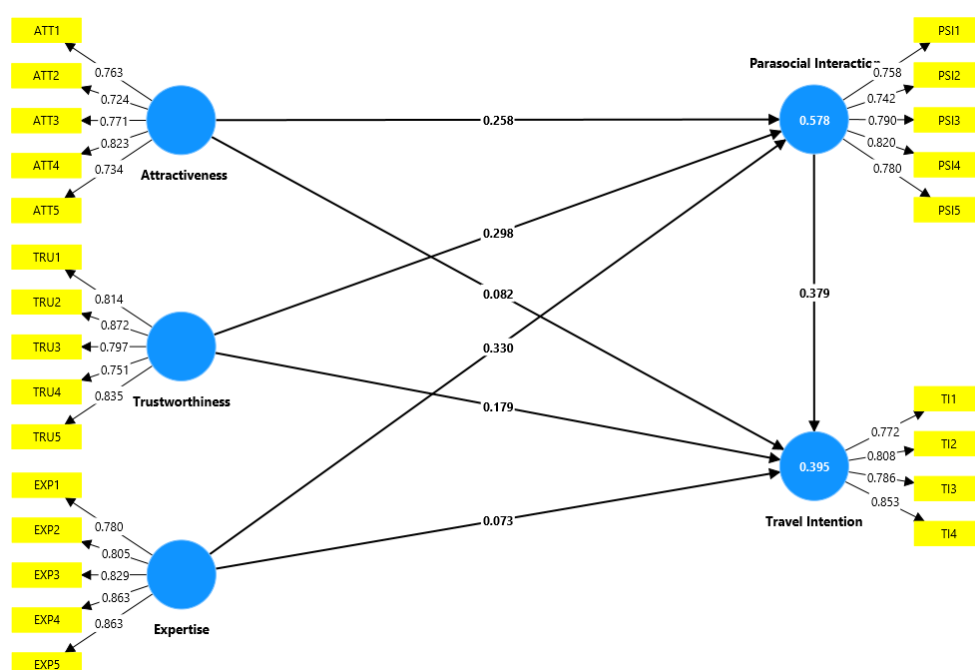

Figure 2. Structural equation model output

5.4 Mediation Analysis

The current paper has identified PSI as an intervening mechanism that facilitates the transfer of the impacts of influencer credibility dimensions on travel intention. To study this relationship, the present investigation employed 5,000 resample bootstrap samples with bias-corrected confidence intervals, and the findings are summarized in Table 6. The analysis reveals that three indirect pathways are significant, with p-values less than 0.01. Therefore, PSI can be described as an effective psychological pathway through which perceptions of influencer credibility are transformed into the willingness to travel. Although attractiveness does not exert a direct influence, it assists in the formation of emotional associations that lead to the development of behavioral intention. Similarly, trustworthiness and expertise reinforce the existence of emotional bonds, which enhance a sense of intimacy and loyalty among the audience, thereby increasing the readiness to travel. These findings affirm that affective involvement is a more salient factor in

influencing behavioral intentions related to tourism based on social media tourism hubs than simple rational assessments.

Table 6. Results of Mediation Analysis

Hypothesis	Mediation Path	Path Coefficient (ß)	t-Values	p-values	Decision
H8	Attractiveness → Parasocial Interaction → Travel Intention	0.098	2.774	0.006*	Supported
H9	Trustworthiness → Parasocial Interaction → Travel Intention	0.113	2.650	0.008*	Supported
H10	Expertise → Parasocial Interaction →Travel Intention	0.125	2.742	0.006*	Supported

Note: *Significant at $p < 0.01$

6.   Discussion

6.1   The Effect of Attractiveness on Travel Intention

Hypothesis H1 was not supported. The results show that influencer attractiveness can draw attention but does not necessarily translate into travel intentions, supporting the view that visual appeal alone is insufficient to induce behavior in a saturated digital environment (Raafat et al., 2023). According to modern studies, the younger generation, including millennials and Gen Z, cares more about authenticity and emotionality than about unnatural beauty standards (Han & Balabanis, 2024; Kim, 2023). In the context of Indonesian heritage tourism, attractiveness serves as a stimulus that necessitates PSI to function as the organismic bridge to intention (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Therefore, as Lee and Watkins (2016) found that attractiveness is more likely to foster parasocial closeness than behavioral outcomes, suggesting that aesthetic appreciation drives travel intentions only when situated within a relational context.

6.2   The Effect of Trustworthiness on Travel Intention

Hypothesis H2 was not supported. While trustworthiness creates favorable conditions, it did not independently predict travel intention, diverging from Ohanian (1990) Source Credibility model. For Millennials and Gen Z, emotionally engaging narratives are more significant than static credibility cues (Han & Balabanis, 2024; Kim, 2023). In the context of Indonesian heritage tourism, trust signals require relational mediation to be effective. Consistent with Yılmazdoğan et al. (2021), the effects of credibility often operate through parasocial bonding, and Vu et al. (2024) confirm that trust gains traction only when linked to emotional attachment. Thus, while trustworthiness is necessary, it is insufficient on its own, necessitating integration with interactive storytelling to foster intention.

6.3   The Effect of Expertise on Travel Intention

Hypothesis H3 was not supported. Although expertise reduces uncertainty, it did not directly predict travel intention. Expertise alone does not motivate action without emotionally engaging narratives. This finding aligns with Hassan et al. (2021), who

discovered that knowledge-based credibility is shaped by relatability for young consumers. Similarly, Zheng et al. (2022) and Vu et al. (2024) demonstrate that credibility cues influence attitudes primarily through parasocial bonding rather than through pure competence. Therefore, expertise is a necessary but insufficient condition, requiring affective or relational mediation to foster behavioral intention in tourism contexts (Raafat et al., 2023).

6.4 The Effect of Attractiveness on Parasocial Interaction

Hypothesis H4 was supported. Attractiveness, in the context of a visually oriented platform like Instagram, facilitates identification and perceived intimacy, which aligns with previous studies on emotional proximity (Labrecque, 2014; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Reciprocity and a sense of closeness are fostered by platform affordances such as likes, comments, and story replies, which help transform initial aesthetic attention into relational states within the organism stage of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) paradigm (Chung & Cho, 2017). Furthermore, attractiveness serves as symbolic capital that shapes self-representation and aspiration identification (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Collectively, these dynamics elucidate why followers ultimately perceive influencers as more than mere objects of visual stimulation, viewing them instead as partners in a relationship.

6.5 The Effect of Trustworthiness on Parasocial Interaction

Hypothesis H5 was supported. Trustworthiness contributes to the establishment of emotional safety and authentic presence, thereby strengthening parasocial relationships (Vu et al., 2024). This pattern correlates with findings that suggest cognitive credibility precedes affective attachment in staged accounts (Leite et al., 2024). Credibility also facilitates long-term, psychologically based connections similar to face-to-face trust (Zheng et al., 2022). In the context of tourism, where uncertainty is high, sincerity and transparency enhance reliance on the recommendations of influencers (Hassan et al., 2021). Thus, trust serves as both a rational basis and an emotional driver, becoming a key antecedent in the relational processes that form the foundation of persuasion in heritage tourism.

6.6 The Effect of Expertise on Parasocial Interaction

Hypothesis H6 was supported. Expertise, according to academic studies, enhances PSI by providing greater reality and credibility to the narratives presented by influencers (Vu et al., 2024). The more realistic and emotionally engaging the content is, the closer it aligns with the lived experiences of the followers (Han & Balabanis, 2024; Kim, 2023). Competence in tourism communication legitimizes the creation of experiential stories and positions influencers as embodied travel companions (Casaló et al., 2020). In the context of heritage destinations, expertise not only legitimizes cultural narratives but also alleviates uncertainty, enabling influencers to serve as brokers who bridge the gap between symbolic meaning and practical orientation, thereby increasing relational intimacy.

6.7 The Effect of Parasocial Interaction on Travel Intention

Hypothesis H7 was supported. PSI serves as the primary affective medium through which mediated information is transformed into travel intention. In contemporary digital tourism, symbolic proximity and emotional identification replace rational assessment (Labrecque, 2014; Masuda et al., 2022). PSI has become prominent on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, where followers perceive the stories shared by

influencers as experiences they have personally lived (Roy & Attri, 2024). Choi et al. (2019) demonstrate that PSI channels social capital, thereby enhancing travel satisfaction, while Zhou et al. (2024) indicate that it has a direct impact on travel intention. Indonesian Gen Z and Millennial users are more inclined to engage with authentic and vulnerable influencers within the collectivist cultures of Southeast Asia, which further fosters intimacy (Han & Balabanis, 2024; Vu et al., 2024).

6.8 The Mediating Effect of PSI between Attractiveness and Travel Intention

Hypothesis H8 was supported as full mediation. The findings indicate that influencer physical attractiveness, which is prominent on photo-based platforms such as Instagram, is insufficient to stimulate travel intention (Balaban et al., 2022; Lee & Watkins, 2016). Instead, it operates through PSI, which mediates the transition from initial visual attraction to affective relatedness and symbolic identification (Raafat et al., 2023; Vu et al., 2024). This aligns with the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model, in which attractiveness functions as an external stimulus that must be internalized via PSI before eliciting behavioral responses (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974).

Existing studies highlight that surface-level cues, such as physical beauty, are inadequate to produce persuasive outcomes; they need to be embedded in an authentic relational context among digital-native communities (Han & Balabanis, 2024; Masuda et al., 2022; Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021). For Indonesian Millennials and Gen Z, who value authenticity more than standardized beauty (Kim, 2023), PSI serves as the crucial link that facilitates the transition from admiration to perceived closeness (Meng et al., 2024). This explains the absence of a direct effect and the presence of a fully mediated effect (Lu & Lu, 2022). Physical attractiveness thus operates more as a symbolic entry point than as a direct driver of intention in collectivist cultural tourism settings, symbolizing pathways to relational mechanisms and demonstrating the primacy of affect-based processes in travel decisions (Dewantara et al., 2025).

6.9 The Mediating Effect of PSI between Trustworthiness and Travel Intention

Hypothesis H9 was supported as a full mediation. The findings reveal that trustworthiness, a critical feature of source credibility, does not directly influence the travel intentions of Indonesian Millennials and Gen Z but acts exclusively through PSI (Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2022). This is consistent with prior research indicating that trust cues function primarily as relational enablers rather than behavioral triggers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Vu et al., 2024). From an S-O-R perspective, trustworthiness serves as a cognitive cue that signals reliability; however, the organismic mechanism of PSI is necessary to transform this perception into emotional involvement and symbolic intimacy (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Meng et al., 2024). Perceived authenticity and relational safety are more persuasive for young digital audiences than static credibility claims (Han & Balabanis, 2024; Masuda et al., 2022). In collectivist cultural contexts such as Indonesia, audiences follow recommendations when influencers are perceived as trustworthy "friends" through PSI, rather than merely credible figures (Han & Chen, 2022; Labrecque, 2014). This accounts for the null direct effect and the fully mediated pathway: trust becomes behaviorally relevant when embedded in affective bonds that enable social contagion effects, such as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and community identification (Nadroo et al., 2024; Vu et al., 2024). Full mediation, therefore, underscores that trustworthiness is necessary but insufficient without the emotional impact provided by PSI (Raafat et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2024).

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6.10 The Mediating Effect of PSI between Expertise and Travel Intention

Hypothesis H10 was supported as a full mediation. These results imply that perceived expertise cannot, by itself, trigger travel intention without mediation by PSI (Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2022). Expertise serves as a rational cue that signals competence and information quality; however, Millennials and Gen Z tend not to act on knowledge alone (Hassan et al., 2021). Within the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, expertise functions as a stimulus that requires emotional internalization via PSI before becoming behaviorally persuasive (Han & Chen, 2022). Prior findings indicate that informational authority is effective only when couched in narratives that feel authentic and relational (Casaló et al., 2020; Han & Balabanis, 2024; Zheng et al., 2022). In the context of Indonesian heritage tourism, influencers are evaluated not merely as "experts" but as travel companions whose experiential storytelling constructs symbolic familiarity (Lou & Kim, 2019; Raafat et al., 2023). PSI helps audiences perceive competence as personally relevant, actionable, and trustworthy, thereby translating higher perceived competence into intention (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Vu et al., 2024). The absence of a direct effect reinforces the notion that knowledge-based credibility is necessary yet insufficient; it must be embedded within affective ties (Han & Balabanis, 2024; Zhou et al., 2024). Therefore, full mediation indicates that expertise is necessary but becomes behaviorally effective only when followers feel emotionally connected, with PSI serving as the underlying psychological mechanism that transforms informational credibility into actual travel behavior (Meng et al., 2024; Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2022).

6.11 Managerial Implication

Based on empirical data gathered from a managerial perspective, destination marketers and tourism agencies in Yogyakarta should avoid selecting influencers solely based on the quality of their followers or their professionalism. Instead, the selection criteria must focus on influencers who can establish authentic connections with their audience members, individuals who foster relatability, share personal stories, and engage with their followers. Tourism marketing should therefore move beyond typical advertisements and visually appealing images. Emotional narratives and authenticity in marketing methods are essential, as they cultivate parasocial relationships that directly influence travel intentions. Furthermore, educating influencers to enhance the effectiveness of their communications and perceptions of trustworthiness may further improve their performance.

6.12 Theoretical Contribution

The current study extends theoretical understanding by demonstrating that source credibility, which comprises attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise, does not directly predict travel intention but operates entirely through PSI. This finding refines Source Credibility Theory by introducing a boundary condition in which credibility cues are necessary but insufficient unless internalized through affective processes. The results also deepen the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework by confirming that source credibility functions as a stimulus, PSI represents the organismic state, and travel intention emerges as the response. In doing so, the study repositions PSI as a core construct and underscores that persuasive influence depends less on stable traits and more on emotional bonds.

Beyond theoretical refinement, this research situates PSI within Southeast Asian heritage tourism. It demonstrates how Millennials and Gen Z in collectivist societies rely less on rational credibility cues and more on emotionally mediated connections when forming

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intentions. By extending PSI theory from branding and celebrity studies to tourism decision-making, the findings enrich cross-cultural theorization of digital influence and establish PSI as the central mediating mechanism linking influencer credibility and consumer behavior. Collectively, these insights broaden the conceptualization of digital impact and provide a more nuanced perspective on how influencer marketing shapes consumer behavior across cultural contexts. This constitutes the study's key theoretical contribution.

6.13 Limitations

Despite the findings, this study has several methodological limitations. First, although the participant pool encompasses multiple regions of Indonesia, the geographical range is limited, and the sample may not fully represent the national population. A more comprehensive provincial distribution or inter-country comparisons would enhance external validity. Second, the study relies solely on self-reported data, which introduces the risk of response bias. Incorporating behavioral evidence, such as actual booking history or monitored social media behavior, would strengthen the evidence base. Third, the focus on Instagram raises questions about whether the same mechanisms apply to TikTok and YouTube, which operate within different cultural contexts and algorithmic frameworks. Addressing these limitations in future studies will improve the validity and robustness of conclusions regarding influencer credibility and PSI in digital tourism marketing.

7. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the credibility dimensions of Instagram influencers—attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise—do not directly influence travel intention among Millennials and Gen Z but operate entirely through PSI. PSI serves as a complete mediator, transforming credibility characteristics into emotional intimacy, trust, and symbolic attachment, which ultimately determine travel decisions. These findings contribute to Source Credibility Theory and PSI theory within the context of Southeast Asian cultural tourism, emphasizing the significance of affective processes in digital persuasion. For tourism practitioners, the results suggest that it is more effective to focus on authentic, emotionally engaging narratives rather than merely on the number of followers or the superficial beauty of a destination.

8. Recommendation

Future studies should employ longitudinal research methods to establish cultural diversity, allowing researchers to assess additional variables, including the nature of content and follower perceptions and motivations. Qualitative methods can enhance our understanding of the development of PSI over time. This research presents both theoretical value and practical applications by confirming the emotional drivers that influence travel behavior in contemporary culture. The study proposes an innovative approach to developing influencer strategies for tourism marketing. The framework provides practical insights for creating emotionally driven, relationship-based marketing strategies.

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