The impact of social media influencers' credibility on tourist behavior: The mediating role of trust

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Abstract

This study examines how social media influencers' (SMIs) credibility affects tourist behavior in Saudi Arabia, with trust serving as a mediating mechanism. Understanding influencer marketing dynamics is crucial for destination branding, especially as Saudi Arabia advances its Vision 2030 tourism diversification goals. Using Source Credibility Theory, this research investigates how influencer expertise and attractiveness influence tourist behavior through trust formation. A quantitative cross-sectional design employed structural equation modeling to analyze data from 550 domestic tourists across six major Saudi regions who actively follow SMIs. The measurement model demonstrated excellent psychometric properties, with composite reliability scores ranging from 0.94 to 0.96. Results revealed that both expertise ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.01$) and attractiveness ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.01$) significantly predicted trust, which in turn strongly influenced tourist behavior ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.001$). Trust partially mediated the relationships between credibility dimensions and tourist behavior, accounting for 13% and 14% of total effects, respectively. The model explained 58% of the variance in trust and 56% in tourist behavior, demonstrating strong predictive relevance. These findings provide actionable insights for tourism stakeholders seeking to optimize influencer collaborations within Saudi Arabia's rapidly developing tourism sector.

Keywords: Credibility, Destination branding, Digital marketing, Social media influencers, Tourist behavior, Trust.

1. Introduction

The rapid evolution of social media has fundamentally transformed how individuals consume information, make decisions, and engage with brands, particularly in the tourism sector. SMIs have emerged as pivotal in shaping consumer behavior, leveraging their credibility to influence travel decisions through sophisticated psychological mechanisms [1]. In Saudi Arabia, where tourism is a key pillar of Vision 2030's economic diversification strategy, understanding the Nuanced role of SMIs in influencing tourist behavior through credibility-trust pathways is particularly critical for sustainable tourism development [2].

Tourism marketing has shifted from traditional advertising to digital platforms, where influencers are trusted intermediaries between destinations and potential visitors [3]. Their ability to generate authentic, engaging content positions them as powerful agents in shaping perceptions and travel intentions, with trust emerging as the critical psychological mechanism that potentially transforms influencer credibility into tangible behavioral outcomes [4]. However, while previous research has explored influencer marketing in various contexts, limited empirical investigation has been conducted in Saudi Arabia, where unique cultural and economic transformations are reshaping the tourism landscape [5].

This study examines how influencers' credibility, expertise, and attractiveness affect tourist behavior, with trust as a hypothesized mediating factor. The research is grounded in Source Credibility Theory, which posits that knowledge and attractiveness enhance an influencer's persuasiveness [6]. Expertise reflects an influencer's knowledge and authority in travel-related content, while attractiveness encompasses physical appeal, likability, and charisma [7]. Both dimensions are theorized to contribute to trust formation, which is a crucial determinant of tourist decision-making processes [8].

Trust is the psychological bridge that potentially translates influencer credibility into behavioral outcomes, such as destination visits and engagement with promoted services [9]. The theoretical framework suggests that trust mediates the relationship between credibility dimensions and tourist behavior. However, each credibility dimension's specific mechanisms and relative importance remain underexplored in the Saudi context.

Saudi Arabia's tourism sector presents a unique and timely setting for this research. The country has invested heavily in promoting religious, heritage, and entertainment tourism, with SMIs increasingly central in destination branding initiatives [10]. Despite these developments, empirical studies examining how SMIs influence tourist behavior in the Kingdom remain scarce, particularly regarding the specific pathways through which credibility builds trust and drives behavioral outcomes [11].

The research employs a quantitative approach, utilizing structural equation modeling (SEM) to test hypothesized relationships between influencer credibility dimensions, trust, and tourist behavior. Data will be collected from social media-active tourists in Saudi Arabia, ensuring relevance to the local cultural and economic context. The findings are expected to contribute to academic discourse on digital marketing while providing actionable strategies for tourism stakeholders. By elucidating the mechanisms through which social media influencers (SMIs) shape tourist behavior, this study aims to align with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 goals, supporting the nation's transition toward a diversified, knowledge-based economy.

2. Literature Review

2.1. SMIs and Tourism Marketing

Social media has revolutionized tourism marketing by enabling real-time engagement and user-generated content, transcending traditional advertising limitations [12]. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube serve as visual havens for travelers, offering immersive destination previews that significantly influence travel planning processes [13]. SMIs, as independent content creators, wield considerable power in shaping tourist perceptions through curated narratives and personal endorsements that appear more authentic than traditional marketing communications [14].

The role of SMIs as digital word-of-mouth agents has fundamentally altered destination marketing strategies, with their recommendations often carrying greater weight than official tourism campaigns [15]. This shift reflects broader changes in consumer behavior, where individuals increasingly rely on peer recommendations and influencer endorsements when making travel decisions. The authenticity and relatability of influencer content create parasocial relationships that traditional advertising cannot replicate, making influencer marketing a cornerstone of modern tourism promotion strategies.

In Saudi Arabia, SMIs have become instrumental in promoting the country's cultural and natural attractions, particularly in alignment with Vision 2030's tourism objectives [16]. Religious tourism, centered around Mecca and Medina, has long been a cornerstone of the sector, but recent initiatives have expanded into leisure and entertainment tourism [17]. SMIs amplify these efforts by showcasing Saudi Arabia's heritage sites, luxury resorts, and entertainment festivals, thereby attracting diverse visitor demographics and challenging traditional perceptions of the Kingdom as solely a religious destination [18].

However, the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns hinges critically on influencers' perceived credibility and the trust they inspire among followers [19]. This dependency highlights the importance of understanding the specific dimensions of credibility that contribute to trust formation and subsequent behavioral outcomes in the context of Saudi tourism.

2.2. Dimensions of Influencer Credibility

Credibility represents a cornerstone of effective influencer marketing, traditionally conceptualized as comprising two primary dimensions: expertise and attractiveness [6]. This theoretical framework has been extensively validated across various marketing contexts, though its application to tourism marketing in non-Western settings requires further empirical investigation.

Expertise refers to an influencer's perceived knowledge, competence, and authority in travel-related content domains [20]. This dimension encompasses factual knowledge about destinations, demonstrated experience, authenticity of recommendations, and the ability to provide valuable insights that enhance travel planning. Tourists are theoretically more likely to trust recommendations from influencers who demonstrate firsthand experience and in-depth destination knowledge [21].

Empirical studies suggest that expertise significantly enhances trust formation, with expert influencers positively affecting travel intentions by providing reliable, actionable information that reduces perceived risk and uncertainty [8]. For instance, Raafat et al. [1] found that influencers' expertise in specific travel domains enhanced followers' confidence in their recommendations, increasing their intention to visit promoted destinations.

Attractiveness, the second dimension of credibility, encompasses physical appeal and social attractiveness, including likability, relatability, and charisma [7]. While physical attractiveness can capture initial attention, social attractiveness, rooted in relatability and approachability, appears more influential in building sustained trust relationships [22]. This dimension operates through emotional and aesthetic pathways, with visually appealing content and charismatic presentation styles enhancing destination desirability and evoking emotional responses that drive travel decisions [9].

Research by Ariffin and Pratiwi [23] indicates that attractiveness can account for substantial variation in tourists' interest in visiting promoted destinations, highlighting its significant marketing potential. However, the relative importance of attractiveness versus expertise in building trust and driving behavioral outcomes remains context-dependent and requires empirical investigation in specific cultural settings.

2.3. The Mediating Role of Trust

Trust emerges as the critical psychological mechanism through which influencer credibility potentially translates into tourist behavior [24]. It serves as a risk-reduction mechanism that mitigates uncertainties associated with travel, particularly in post-pandemic scenarios where safety and reliability concerns have intensified [25]. Trust development occurs through consistent, authentic engagement, where influencers demonstrate transparency, responsiveness to follower inquiries, and genuine concern for their audience's well-being [26].

The theoretical foundation for trust as a mediator draws from social psychology and relationship marketing theories. Studies suggest that trust partially mediates the relationship between influencer characteristics and tourist reactions, though this mediation's magnitude and specific pathways require empirical validation [4]. The mediating role of trust is particularly relevant in tourism contexts, where the intangible nature of travel experiences and the temporal separation between decision-making and consumption create inherent uncertainty.

Parasocial interaction theory further explains the trust-building dynamic, positing that followers develop one-sided relationships with influencers, perceiving them as trustworthy friends rather than commercial entities [27]. This emotional bond amplifies the impact of influencer endorsements, making trust a critical driver of travel intentions. The theory suggests that repeated exposure to influencer content creates familiarity and emotional attachment, translating into trust and subsequent behavioral influence.

In Saudi Arabia, where cultural norms emphasize personal recommendations and relationship-based decision-making, trust in SMIs may be particularly influential in shaping tourist behavior [11]. The cultural context suggests that trust-building mechanisms may operate differently from Western ones, necessitating empirical investigation of these relationships within Saudi tourism.

2.4. Tourist Reaction Behavior

Tourist behavior encompasses various outcomes, including behavioral intentions, travel decisions, spending patterns, and post-travel behaviors such as social media engagement and word-of-mouth recommendations [28]. SMIs theoretically shape these outcomes by providing aspirational content that aligns with travelers' desires for unique experiences and authentic destination encounters [29].

The influence of SMIs on tourist behavior operates through multiple psychological pathways. Cognitive pathways involve information processing and rational evaluation of influencer recommendations, while affective pathways engage emotional responses to visually appealing content and charismatic presentation styles [30]. For example, visually striking posts showcasing Saudi Arabia's Red Sea resorts or historical Diriyah sites can trigger immediate emotional responses that translate into booking intentions.

The digital age has also heightened the importance of user-generated content in shaping post-travel behavior. Tourists often share their experiences online, creating a cyclical influence that impacts future visitors through sustained community engagement [24]. This phenomenon underscores the long-term value of influencer marketing, where positive interactions foster repeat visits and destination loyalty while generating organic content that extends the influence beyond the original influencer's reach [31].

2.5. Research Gaps and Theoretical Contributions

Despite growing academic and practical interest in influencer marketing, several gaps remain in understanding its application to tourism contexts, particularly in non-Western settings. Few studies have empirically examined how influencer credibility influences tourist behavior in Saudi Arabia's unique cultural and economic context [11]. This gap is particularly significant given the Kingdom's rapid tourism development and the central role of SMIs in destination branding initiatives.

The relative importance of expertise versus attractiveness in building trust and driving behavioral outcomes remains underexplored, with most studies focusing on individual dimensions rather than comparative analysis. Additionally, while

theoretically established, the mediating role of trust requires empirical validation in the Saudi tourism context, where cultural factors may influence trust formation and behavioral pathways differently than in Western contexts.

This study aims to address these gaps by providing a comprehensive empirical analysis of the relationships between influencer credibility dimensions, trust formation, and tourist behavior in Saudi Arabia. The research extends Source Credibility Theory by validating its applicability in non-Western settings while contributing to the growing literature on digital marketing in tourism. Practical contributions include actionable insights for tourism marketers seeking to optimize influencer collaborations within Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 framework.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design and Population

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional design utilizing structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the relationships between SMIs' credibility dimensions, tourist trust, and behavioral outcomes. The research design was selected to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of both direct and indirect effects while testing the hypothesized mediation model. The target population comprised domestic tourists in Saudi Arabia who actively engage with SMIs when making travel-related decisions. According to official tourism data, Saudi Arabia receives millions of domestic tourists annually, with key destinations such as Makkah, Madinah, Riyadh, and the Eastern Province attracting the most visitors. The sampling frame consisted of individuals who met specific inclusion criteria: domestic tourists within Saudi Arabia, active followers of SMIs, having traveled domestically within the past year, and maintaining an active presence on social media platforms where influencers are prevalent.

A cluster sampling approach was implemented across six major regions of Saudi Arabia to ensure geographical representativeness. The selected areas included Makkah (20 million estimated tourists), Madinah (10 million), Riyadh (15 million), Eastern Province (12 million), Hail (5 million), and Tabuk (7 million), collectively representing 69 million domestic tourists. This sampling strategy minimized selection bias while enhancing the sample's representativeness by capturing the diversity of Saudi tourism across different geographical areas and tourist attractions.

3.2. Participants

The final analyzed sample consisted of 550 respondents after data cleaning and the exclusion of incomplete responses. Participants were proportionally distributed across the selected clusters, with Makkah contributing 120 respondents, Madinah 100, Riyadh 110, Eastern Province 90, Hail 60, and Tabuk 70. The demographic composition revealed a predominantly male sample (57.1%, n = 314), with females representing 42.9% (n = 236). The age distribution showed the largest group falling within 35-44 years (32.5%, n = 179), followed by 45-54 years (28.4%, n = 156), 25-34 years (15.6%, n = 86), 55 years or more (12.7%, n = 70), and 18-24 years (10.7%, n = 59). All participants confirmed active following of SMIs, satisfying the primary screening criterion. Regional representation was balanced, with the Western Region contributing 23.5% (n = 129), the Central Region 22.5% (n = 124), the Eastern Region 22.2% (n = 122), Southern Region 18.0% (n = 99), and the Northern Region 13.8% (n = 76). Monthly income distribution showed concentration in middle-income brackets, with 35.6% (n = 196) earning 10,001-15,000 SAR, 31.6% (n = 174) earning 5,000-10,000 SAR, 12.2% (n = 67) earning less than 5,000 SAR, 11.6% (n = 64) earning 15,001-20,000 SAR, and 8.9% (n = 49) earning more than 20,000 SAR. YouTube emerged as the most popular platform for travel information (21.3%, n = 117), followed by Twitter/X (19.3%, n = 106), Facebook (18.5%, n = 102), Instagram (15.6%, n = 86), TikTok (15.5%, n = 85), and Snapchat (9.8%, n = 54).

3.3. Instruments

The study utilized a structured questionnaire comprising validated scales adapted from established literature. The expertise dimension was measured using five items (Cronbach's α = 0.93) assessing participants' perceptions of influencers' knowledge, competence, and authority in travel-related content. The attractiveness dimension employed five items (Cronbach's α = 0.93) evaluating both physical appeal and social attractiveness, including likability and charisma. Trust was measured using five items (Cronbach's α = 0.95) examining participants' confidence in influencers' recommendations and perceived reliability. Tourist behavior was assessed through six items (Cronbach's α = 0.92) measuring behavioral intentions, travel decisions, and engagement patterns. All constructs demonstrated excellent reliability, with composite reliability scores ranging from 0.94 to 0.96 and average variance extracted values between 0.72 and 0.84, confirming strong convergent validity. The questionnaire was developed in Arabic and English to ensure broad comprehension and accessibility across Saudi Arabia's diverse population.

3.4. Procedures

Data collection was conducted through online survey platforms to reach the target population of social media-active tourists efficiently. The questionnaire introduction provided detailed information about the study's purpose, voluntary participation, risk-free nature, and researcher contact details for inquiries. A pilot study was initially conducted with 38 participants to assess questionnaire clarity and identify potential issues. The pilot results confirmed satisfactory internal consistency across all constructs, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.815 to 0.922. Following pilot testing and minor modifications, the main survey was distributed through social media platforms, travel agencies, and online travel communities. Strict data screening protocols were implemented to identify and exclude irrational, inconsistent, or incompatible responses, ensuring data integrity and reliability.

3.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis employed a two-stage approach utilizing SPSS Version 23 for preliminary analysis and SmartPLS 4 for advanced structural equation modeling. Initial screening included assessment of missing data, outliers, and response consistency. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize demographic characteristics and primary variables. Exploratory factor analysis was conducted to examine underlying factor structures, with Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin values and Bartlett's tests confirming data suitability. Reliability testing utilized Cronbach's alpha coefficients, while correlation analysis examined inter-variable relationships. Structural equation modeling in SmartPLS assessed measurement and structural models, evaluating reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity through composite reliability, average variance extracted, and Fornell-Larcker criteria. Path coefficients were estimated using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples to determine relationship significance. Mediation analysis examined the indirect effects of trust between credibility dimensions and tourist behavior. Model fit was evaluated using standardized root mean residual (SRMR) values, with predictive relevance assessed through Stone-Geisser Q^2 statistics.

4. Results

The structural equation modeling analysis revealed significant relationships between SMIs' credibility dimensions, tourist trust, and behavioral outcomes. The measurement model demonstrated excellent psychometric properties, with all constructs exceeding recommended thresholds for reliability and validity. As shown in Table 1, the composite reliability scores ranged from 0.94 to 0.96, well above the 0.70 benchmark, while average variance extracted values (0.72-0.84) surpassed the 0.50 criterion, confirming strong convergent validity.

Table 1.
Measurement Model Reliability and Validity Indicators.

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability	AVE
Expertise	5	0.93	0.94	0.77
Attractiveness	5	0.93	0.95	0.79
Trust	5	0.95	0.96	0.84
Tourist Behavior	6	0.92	0.94	0.72

Descriptive statistics indicated generally positive evaluations across all constructs. The trust variable showed particularly strong endorsement from respondents, with mean scores for individual items ranging from 4.02 to 4.11 on the 5-point Likert scale. The highest-rated trust item was "I believe the influencers I follow have my best interests in mind when recommending travel options" (M = 4.11, SD = 1.05). Complete descriptive statistics for the trust construct are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Descriptive Statistics for Tourist Trust in SMIs.

Trust Items	Mean	SD
I trust the travel information provided by the influencers I follow.	4.09	0.93
The influencers I follow have earned my trust through their content.	4.02	1.00
I believe the influencers I follow have my best interests in mind.	4.11	1.05
The influencers I follow have a positive reputation in the travel community.	4.03	0.79
I feel confident recommending the influencers I follow to others.	4.04	1.00

The structural model exhibited strong explanatory power, accounting for 58% of the variance in tourist trust (R^2 = 0.58) and 56% of the variance in tourist behavior (R^2 = 0.56). Path coefficients revealed that both dimensions of influencer credibility significantly predicted trust, with attractiveness (β = 0.13, p < 0.01) showing a slightly stronger effect than expertise (β = 0.12, p < 0.01). Trust, in turn, demonstrated a substantial positive relationship with tourist behavior (β = 0.20, p < 0.001). The complete results of the hypothesis testing are presented in Table 3.

Table 3.
Structural Model Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing Results

	Relationship	β	SE	t-value	95% Confidence Interval	Supported
H1	Expertise → Trust	0.12	0.04	2.94**	[0.04, 0.20]	Yes
H2	Attractiveness → Trust	0.13	0.05	2.91**	[0.04, 0.23]	Yes
H3	Trust → Tourist Behavior	0.20	0.06	3.33**	[0.08, 0.31]	Yes
H4	Expertise → Tourist Behavior	0.13	0.05	2.57**	[0.03, 0.23]	Yes
H5	Attractiveness → Tourist Behavior	0.19	0.05	3.71**	[0.09, 0.29]	Yes

Note: **p < 0.01.

Mediation analysis confirmed the hypothesized indirect effects. Trust partially mediated the relationship between both credibility dimensions and tourist behavior, accounting for 13% of the total effect for expertise (indirect β = 0.02, p = 0.022) and 14% for attractiveness (indirect β = 0.03, p = 0.048). The total effects, combining direct and indirect paths, were

strongest for attractiveness (β = 0.22, p < 0.001), followed by expertise (β = 0.15, p < 0.001) Table 4 presents the detailed mediation analysis results.

Table 4.
Mediation Analysis: Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects.

Relationship	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	VAF	Mediation Type
Expertise → Trust → Behavior	0.13	0.02	0.15	13%	Partial
Attractiveness → Trust → Behavior	0.19	0.03	0.22	14%	Partial

The model demonstrated excellent predictive relevance, as evidenced by Stone-Geisser Q^2 values of 0.56 for trust and 0.53 for tourist behavior, both exceeding the 0.35 threshold for large predictive relevance. Additional robustness checks confirmed the absence of multicollinearity concerns (all VIF values < 2.5) and good model fit (SRMR = 0.042). The global goodness-of-fit index (0.67) surpassed the recommended threshold of 0.36 for large effect sizes.

These findings collectively support the theoretical model, demonstrating that SMIs' credibility dimensions significantly influence tourist behavior both directly and through the mediating mechanism of trust. The results highlight the particular importance of attractiveness in shaping trust perceptions and ultimately driving tourist behavior, while also confirming the complementary role of expertise in this psychological process.

5. Discussion

This analysis provides a comprehensive examination of the empirical findings and situates them within the broader theoretical framework of influencer marketing and tourist behavior. The discussion explores the significant relationships identified between SMIs' credibility dimensions, tourist trust, and behavioral outcomes, examining how these findings contribute to our understanding of digital marketing effectiveness in the Saudi tourism context. The analysis considers both the direct and indirect pathways through which influencer characteristics shape tourist decision-making processes, with particular attention to the mediating role of trust as a psychological mechanism that transforms perceived credibility into concrete behavioral outcomes.

The findings reveal that expertise significantly predicts tourist reaction behavior (β = .13, p < .05), providing strong empirical support for the theoretical foundations of Source Credibility Theory. This result aligns with extensive prior research demonstrating the critical importance of perceived influencer expertise in shaping consumer behavior. Al-Mu'ani et al. [32] similarly, it was found that influencer expertise significantly affects consumers' purchase intentions, with brand attitude serving as a mediating factor in this relationship. The consistency of these findings across different cultural contexts suggests that expertise represents a universal dimension of credibility that transcends geographical boundaries.

The significance of expertise in the Saudi tourism context reflects the importance of knowledgeable content creation in building consumer confidence. Charkhkard [33] demonstrated that expertise positively correlates with tourist trust and travel intentions, particularly in relation to destination image formation and affective responses. This finding is further supported by Raafat et al. [1] who identified expertise as one of three critical factors alongside trustworthiness and attractiveness that significantly influence travel intentions among millennials. The convergence of these findings suggests that Saudi domestic tourists, like their international counterparts, place considerable value on influencers who demonstrate genuine knowledge and authority in travel-related content domains.

Attractiveness emerged as the strongest direct predictor of tourist behavior (β = .19, p < .05), reinforcing the theoretical importance of both physical and social appeal in influencer marketing effectiveness. This finding resonates with Ariffin and Pratiwi [23] who found that attractiveness accounts for approximately 56.6% of the variation in tourists' visiting interests, highlighting its substantial impact on consumer engagement and decision-making processes. The strength of this relationship in the Saudi context may reflect the visual nature of popular social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, where aesthetic appeal and charismatic presentation styles play crucial roles in content consumption patterns.

The significance of attractiveness is further supported by Liu et al. [8] and Raafat et al. [1], who demonstrated that attractive influencers are more effective at building trust and influencing purchase intentions. These findings challenge the perspective offered by Ki et al. [34] who suggested that attractiveness may have a limited impact due to consumer skepticism about commercialized content. However, the current results suggest that in the Saudi tourism context, where visual storytelling dominates social media engagement, attractiveness remains a critical determinant of influencer effectiveness. Yuan and Lou [27] provide theoretical support for this finding through their work on parasocial relationships, demonstrating that attractiveness enhances the emotional connections between influencers and their followers, ultimately strengthening the persuasive impact of their recommendations.

The analysis confirms that trust serves as a significant mediator between both credibility dimensions and tourist behavior, with indirect effects of β = .02 (p = .022) for expertise and β = .03 (p = .048) for attractiveness. These findings provide empirical validation for the theoretical proposition that trust functions as a psychological bridge, transforming perceived credibility into concrete behavioral outcomes. The mediating role of trust aligns with relationship marketing theory and social psychology frameworks that emphasize the importance of trust in reducing perceived risk and uncertainty in consumer decision-making processes.

The partial mediation observed for expertise supports the findings of Mabkhot et al. [35] who demonstrated that credibility mediates the relationship between influencer characteristics and consumer purchase intentions. This suggests that while expertise can directly influence behavior through cognitive evaluation processes, its impact is significantly enhanced when it contributes to trust formation. Charkhkard [33] provides additional support for this mechanism, showing

that expertise fosters trust, which subsequently promotes positive destination image formation and travel behaviors. The Saudi tourism context, characterized by high levels of uncertainty and risk perception associated with travel decisions, makes trust particularly crucial as a mediating factor in converting expertise evaluations into behavioral intentions.

Similarly, the mediating role of trust in the attractiveness-behavior relationship confirms theoretical predictions from the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which suggests that peripheral cues such as attractiveness influence behavior through affective pathways. Yuan and Lou [27] demonstrated that attractiveness strengthens parasocial relationships, which serve as the mechanism through which attractiveness influences product interest and purchase behaviors. The current findings extend this understanding to the tourism context, showing that attractive influencers build trust through emotional connections, which translate into destination visits and travel-related purchases.

The direct effect of trust on tourist behavior ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.001$) represents one of the most significant findings of this study, highlighting trust as both a mediator and a direct predictor of behavioral outcomes. This dual role of trust reflects its fundamental importance in consumer psychology, particularly in high-involvement decision-making contexts such as tourism. Han and Chen [36] support this finding, demonstrating that source credibility and trustworthiness significantly enhance social media users' attitudes and intentions to visit endorsed destinations.

The strength of the trust-behavior relationship in the Saudi context may reflect cultural factors emphasizing personal relationships and word-of-mouth recommendations in decision-making processes. Alzaydi and Elsharnouby [11] noted that Saudi consumers particularly value trust-based relationships, making this psychological factor especially influential in shaping behavioral outcomes. The direct impact of trust suggests that, beyond superficial appeal or information quality, it is the perceived integrity, authenticity, and reliability of influencers that ultimately compel tourists to act.

This finding aligns with dual-process theories of persuasion, which propose that trust serves as a central route to persuasion, integrating rational evaluations of credibility with emotional responses to peripheral cues. The high explanatory power of the model, accounting for 56% of the variance in tourist behavior, suggests that trust effectively captures the complex psychological processes through which influencer characteristics translate into behavioral outcomes.

The findings have significant implications for tourism marketing strategies in Saudi Arabia, particularly in the context of Vision 2030's economic diversification goals. The strong effects of expertise and attractiveness suggest that destination marketing organizations adopt comprehensive influencer selection criteria that consider multiple dimensions of credibility. The importance of expertise indicates that influencers should demonstrate genuine knowledge and experience with promoted destinations, while the significance of attractiveness suggests that visual appeal and charismatic presentation remain crucial for audience engagement.

The central role of trust implies that long-term relationship building should be prioritized over short-term promotional campaigns. Influencers who consistently demonstrate authenticity, responsiveness, and genuine concern for their followers' well-being are more likely to build the trust necessary for effective behavioral influence. This finding suggests that Saudi tourism marketers should focus on developing sustained partnerships with credible influencers rather than pursuing transactional endorsement arrangements.

The cultural context of Saudi Arabia, with its emphasis on personal relationships and community-based decision-making, makes trust-building particularly important. The findings suggest that influencer marketing strategies should incorporate elements that foster authentic connections between influencers and their audiences, such as interactive engagement, personalized responses, and transparent communication about promotional relationships.

The results of this study provide comprehensive empirical support for the theoretical model linking influencer credibility dimensions to tourist behavior through trust mechanisms. The significant direct effects of expertise and attractiveness, combined with the mediating role of trust, demonstrate the complex psychological processes through which social media influencers (SMIs) shape tourist decision-making. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on digital marketing in tourism while providing practical insights for destination marketers seeking to leverage influencer partnerships effectively. The research extends Source Credibility Theory to the Saudi tourism context, validating its applicability across cultural boundaries while highlighting the universal importance of trust in consumer behavior.

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