INVESTIGATING SOURCE CREDIBILITY FOR TRAVEL PLANNING ON FACEBOOK GROUPS

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Abstract

Purpose – This research explores the underexamined media-related factors influencing source credibility and its relationship with the intention to use Facebook groups for travel planning. It aims to investigate social media preferences, attitudes, and perceived privacy control as predictors of perceived source credibility (source expertise and trustworthiness) and their impact on the intention to use Facebook for travel planning.
Design – To better understand the influence source credibility for travel planning on Facebook groups, an extensive literature review was followed by primary research using a survey method.
Methodology – A structured questionnaire, based on previous studies, was distributed via Facebook, collecting data from 207 respondents. Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to examine the relationships between variables.
Findings – Results suggest that preferences and attitudes towards social media significantly predict perceived source expertise and trustworthiness. Perceived privacy control is significantly linked only to perceived source trustworthiness. Both perceived source expertise and trustworthiness are significant predictors of the intention to use Facebook for travel planning.
Originality of the research – This study investigates specific media-related perceptions of consumers that have not been empirically tested before. It also includes the concept of perceived privacy control, which has not been used in existing studies from the source credibility perspective.
Keywords Facebook groups, Source Credibility, Travel Planning, Attitudes, Preferences, Privacy control

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INTRODUCTION

Social media has significantly transformed the way people plan their travel, with over 84% of the population aged 18 or above using social media (DataReportal, 2024), making it one of the most important channels for travellers to exchange information, communicate, and make travel-related decisions in the smart tourism era (Chung et al., 2015; Oliveira et al., 2020). Travellers now extensively use social media platforms for various purposes such as creating their itineraries, booking accommodation, reading reviews, sharing experiences, and seeking recommendations from other travellers. Studies have shown that social media influences travellers' decision-making processes by providing a wealth of information through a diverse range of user-generated content (UGC) (Rathore, 2020). UGC implies the information created and shared by users on the internet and can appear in the form of reviews, ratings, photographs, videos, forums, or blogs (Oliveira et al., 2020). In the tourism context, social media is frequently used for exchanging information, sharing experiences, and discussing various concerns, primarily stemming from the uncertain nature of travel products, including their intangibility, perishability, heterogeneity, and simultaneous production and consumption (Ayeh, 2015). Travel, being a high-risk form of consumption due to the challenge in evaluating service goods prior to purchase, drives consumers to seek information from various sources including experienced individuals. The widespread availability of UGC significantly enhances opportunities for evaluating service goods during travel planning (Savolainen, 2014).

Numerous specialized travel social networks have emerged to help travellers in making informed decisions. Among these platforms, TripAdvisor has particularly gained significant attention in research (Xin et al., 2023; Filieri et al., 2021; Rita et al., 2022). However, non-travel-specific social media platforms like Facebook have also experienced growing popularity in usage across all stages of travel planning, notably during the pre-trip phase in consideration stage (Sakshi et al., 2020; Jadhav et al., 2018). Although Facebook is considered a general social network, its utility and profound significance in travel planning should not be underestimated (Mariani et al., 2019). With over 3 billion monthly active users, it remains the largest social networking site globally (DataReportal, 2024). Despite some claims that younger users are leaving Facebook, data indicates that young people remain among the most frequent users globally, particularly in developing economies. The 25-34 age group is the largest, and together with those aged 18 to 24 years, they represent over 54% of Facebook users (Oberlo, 2024). Research shows that nearly 30% of younger Facebook users primarily use the platform for searching for ideas on things to do and buy (DataReportal, 2024), indicating that Facebook remains a vital information source and one of the most popular social media platforms for travel planning (Sharma et al., 2023; Sakshi et al., 2020).

Mariani et al. (2019) observe that the cognitive and affective mechanisms influencing the usage of such platforms may significantly differ from travel-specific consumer-generated media platforms like TripAdvisor and third-party commercial websites such as Booking.com. For example, existing literature in the tourism field has underscored the significance of online

communities like Facebook groups and has examined travellers' motivations for engaging in these communities (Kol & Lissitsa, 2024). Furthermore, the unique features of these communities and their high level of topic specificity make them a convenient platform for seeking travel-related information (Kol & Lissitsa, 2024). Group members gather around a shared interest such as travel and exchange information within their virtual space (Pi et al., 2013). Every month, 1.8 billion individuals engage with Facebook Groups, with over half of the platform's users participating in five or more active groups (Facebook, 2021). Studies indicate that online communities can facilitate social interactions and support (Chiu et al., 2015). In the context of travel, it is recognized that support helps alleviate the impact of stressful travel experiences on functional risks (Whalen & Belarmino, 2023). From the consumer perspective, the value of using social media largely stems from the opportunities they offer for personal experiences and trustworthy electronic word-of-mouth (Xiang et al., 2015). These virtual communities function as an "information hub" for tourists, providing access to valuable information that helps users make informed travel purchases (Liu et al., 2024). In travel Facebook groups, UGC primarily focuses on hospitality services, travel, and individuals' personal experiences (Tung et al., 2023). While non-travel-specific social media platforms are becoming increasingly important as sources of information for travel planning, understanding the factors driving their usage remains unclear and needs further attention (Sakshi et al., 2020; Tung et al., 2023). There is limited theoretical understanding about the cognitive and affective mechanisms that predict social media usage for travel planning, with research in this area still emerging (Mariani et al., 2019; Sakshi et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2023; Kol & Lissitsa, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024).

According to dual-processing theories such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM), individuals process information on social media through two distinct pathways: a central or systematic route, involving deep, analytical evaluation, and a peripheral or heuristic route, relying on superficial cues (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Chaiken, 1980). While the former focuses on the message itself, such as the quality of arguments, the latter is contextually driven, based on simple decision rules to form judgments, considering factors like source credibility (Cheung et al., 2012; Rabindranath & Singh, 2024). In an online environment, Fu et al. (2020) show that recipients tend to seek contextual cues rather than focusing solely on the information itself. Due to Facebook's high social presence, Chung et al. (2015) highlight that information adoption often occurs through the peripheral or heuristic route. Consequently, in the context of social media, credibility emerges as a key construct (Onofrei et al., 2022; Ayeh, 2015; Whalen & Balermino, 2023; Tsai & Men, 2013). It is generally regarded as a result of source, message, and receiver characteristics (Wathen & Burkell, 2002), playing a crucial role in shaping users' behavioral intentions (Saima & Khan, 2020; Besbes et al., 2016). Despite the importance of credibility in assessing social media information, there is a lack of research focused on users' behaviors in this area (Keshavarz, 2021). Therefore, this research focuses on source credibility as the primary cue influencing information adoption on social media (Onofrei et al., 2022; Whalen & Balermino, 2023; Tung et al., 2023). While many studies have addressed the issue of credibility, they usually consider it as an independent or exogenous variable influencing user behavior (Sharma & Aggrawal, 2019). However, certain platform-related factors that shape the perception of source credibility within specific media remain underexplored (Verma et al., 2023; Xiao et al., 2018). Earlier studies have suggested that credibility research should incorporate more features of social media sources, such as platforms (Abbasi & Liu, 2013), as the evaluation of the media itself plays a crucial role in assessing source credibility (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). According to Social Judgment Theory, individuals use their own attitudes as reference points when evaluating others' communication (Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Lee & Chun, 2016). This suggests that users' pre-existing positive views of a platform like Facebook create a latitude of acceptance, making them more likely to perceive sources within Facebook groups as credible, and vice versa. However, very few studies have examined these platform-related factors affecting the perception of credibility, leaving them unclear (Verma et al., 2023; Von Hohenberg & Guess, 2023).

Therefore, this research focuses on the underexplored platform-related perceptions that shape the credibility of sources within social media platforms. Specifically, it aims to investigate social media preferences, attitudes, and perceived privacy control as predictors of perceived source credibility and their influence on the intention to use Facebook groups for travel planning. Understanding these factors clarifies how media-related views shape the credibility users assign to content and sources in social media environments, enhancing the platform's role in decision-making contexts like travel planning. By identifying how these factors influence credibility perception and intention to use Facebook, this research not only expands existing theories by identifying heuristic media-related perceptions that shape credibility but also equips practitioners with insights to support social media utilization for travel planning.

The following section presents the literature review and outlines the hypotheses. It is followed by sections that provide a detailed explanation of the research methodology, present the study's results, and discuss the findings. The final section highlights key theoretical and practical insights, along with recommendations for future research.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Various studies sought to understand travellers' online behaviour concerning social media credibility (Ayeh, 2015; Rahaman et al., 2022; Mariani et al., 2019; Leung et al. 2021). Source credibility refers to the perceived believability, competence, and trustworthiness of an information provider as judged by the recipient, particularly crucial in evaluating cognitive authority within UGC on social media platforms (Chung et al., 2015; Ohanian, 1990; Sharma & Aggrawal 2019). Hovland et al.'s (1953) Source Credibility Theory suggests that the perceived credibility of a source significantly influences the persuasiveness of communication, impacting consumer behavior. Source credibility factors are particularly important on social networking platforms. In terms of sources, non-travel specific social networking sites differ from other review platforms like TripAdvisor

or Booking.com because they feature both known and unknown individuals, occur in real-time, and disclose more information about the sender (Onofrei et al., 2022). Consumers tend to view information from similar peers as more relevant due to shared preferences, experiences, and values, and once they perceive the information as knowledgeable and trustworthy, they use it to improve their travel planning (Oliveira et al., 2020; Onofrei et al., 2022).

There are three common dimensions of source credibility observed in marketing studies, namely trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness (Eisend, 2006; Ohanian, 1990). However, researchers agree that the key source-related dimensions that underscore the concept of credibility are trustworthiness and expertise (Hovland et al., 1953; Wathen & Burkell, 2002; Mariani et al., 2019; Sharma & Aggrawal, 2019), making them the most relevant to the context of social media (Ayeh, 2015). Therefore, this study focuses on these two variables to measure source credibility. Expertise of a source refers to the degree to which the source is viewed as knowledgeable, skilled, and experienced in a certain domain (Han & Balabanis, 2024). Research demonstrates that individuals are more likely to comply with messages from sources perceived as highly expert, indicating the influential power of expertise in shaping attitudes and behavioral intentions of recipients (Muda & Hamzah, 2021; Al-Emadi & Yahia, 2020). The dimension of trustworthiness reflects the recipient's view of the source's perceived believability, honesty, fairness, integrity, and sincerity (Han & Balabanis, 2024; Eisend, 2006). It is seen as the most effective predictor of electronic word-of-mouth credibility moderated by platform type (Verma et al., 2023). It should be noted that the importance lies not in whether the information source is an expert, but rather in how users perceive them (Hovland et al., 1953; Saima & Khan, 2020). Therefore, the constructs of perceived expertise and perceived trustworthiness are used to capture the concept of perceived source credibility on Facebook.

Given that the evaluation of media itself plays an important role in assessing source credibility (Wathen & Burkell, 2002; Verma et al., 2023), and that credibility judgments may be influenced by media scepticism (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007) as well as social media interactions (Onofrei et al., 2022), this study focuses on understudied antecedents related to social media judgment that may affect perceived source expertise and trustworthiness. Research shows that both cognitive and emotional responses to Facebook significantly influence its usage (Junaidi et al., 2020), while users' attitudes and perceptions of online communities are key factors shaping their behaviour on social media platforms (Zhou et al., 2021). Preferences towards social media emerge as a crucial factor in the model of message diffusion in social media marketing (Chang et al., 2015). As many younger consumers have had profiles on Facebook from an early age, they tend to display a strong preference for interacting with organizations on Facebook (Duffett, 2017a). Preferences refer to the interest and favourable feelings towards social media (Chang et al., 2015), reflecting the affective response of users and their favouritism of a particular social media platform over others (Duffett, 2017b). Considered an important aspect of the attitude stage, which is related to cognitive and behavioural attitudinal responses (Duffett, 2017b; Duffett, 2020), preferences towards social media are expected to influence the perception of source expertise and trustworthiness, leading to the following hypotheses:

H1a: Preferences towards Facebook are positively related to perceived source expertise.

H1b: Preferences towards Facebook are positively related to perceived source trustworthiness.

Consumer attitude is a central point of interest in many studies related to marketing communication and source credibility. Recent research has also highlighted its importance in virtual travel communities (Zaidi et al., 2023). While most research consider attitudes as an outcome variable affecting behavioural intention, this study focuses on general attitudes towards social media platforms as predictors of perceived source credibility. Earlier research suggest that attitudes towards the platform itself could influence the judgment of source credibility (Wathen & Burkell, 2002)., and recent studies call for further exploration of the still unclear effects of attitudes on media credibility (Von Hohenberg & Guess, 2023). Attitude refers to the tendency to evaluate a certain entity favourably or unfavourably (Muda & Hamzah, 2021). While preferences are shaped by the range of available options, attitudes are related to the specific attributes of those options (Liebe et al., 2021). In this study, attitudes reflect respondents' overall views and feelings towards Facebook content. Individuals' beliefs about dependability and reliability of social media are important factors in the information-seeking process (Junaidi et al., 2020). Since the perception of credibility is based on knowledge and feelings towards the source, a higher match of the source with consumers' attitudes will lead to higher perceived credibility (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: Attitude towards Facebook is positively related to perceived source expertise.

H2b: Attitude towards Facebook is positively related to perceived source trustworthiness.

Privacy concern is one of the main influential factors in technology and social media usage (Wang & Herrando, 2019; Ayaburi & Treku, 2020; Zhong et al., 2024). Ensuring information credibility and minimizing privacy risks are essential for the success of online communities, as consumers are more likely to return when they trust the information and feel their privacy is protected (Tseng, 2023). The misuse of entrusted information by organizations can lead to various privacy and trust issues for consumers, especially considering the complexities and risks associated with personal information shared on social media. These risks and concerns negatively influence engagement and information exchange on social media platforms (Wang & Herrando, 2019; Bugshan & Attar, 2020). Although users often have little knowledge and control over their data usage (Jozani et al., 2020), social media platforms address users' concerns through enhancement of their perceived privacy control (Ayaburi & Treku, 2020). In this context, perceived privacy control refers to consumers' feeling of control over privacy settings management on social media platforms (Zarouali et al., 2018). Facebook has recently faced several privacy issues and has adopted new policies to increase users' privacy; however, their effectiveness remains unclear (Ayaburi & Treku, 2020). When a social media platform actively addresses users' privacy concerns by ensuring that its actions align with its promises, users are likely to maintain trust in the platform's products or services (Ayaburi & Treku, 2020). Previous research in the advertising context has shown that

increasing privacy control leads to increased message persuasiveness (Zarouali et al., 2018). For example, when given privacy control, Tucker (2014) revealed that Facebook users are almost twice as likely to react positively to a targeted ad. Privacy concerns are negatively related to heuristic information processing (Gao et al., 2022). On the other hand, the perception of privacy control mitigates privacy concerns and, by instilling trust, encourages users to engage on social media platforms (Jozani et al., 2020; Ayaburi & Treku, 2020). Therefore, it is expected that perceived privacy control will be related to perceived source expertise and trustworthiness, leading to the following hypotheses:

H3a: Perceived privacy control is positively related to perceived source expertise.

H3b: Perceived privacy control is positively related to perceived source trustworthiness.

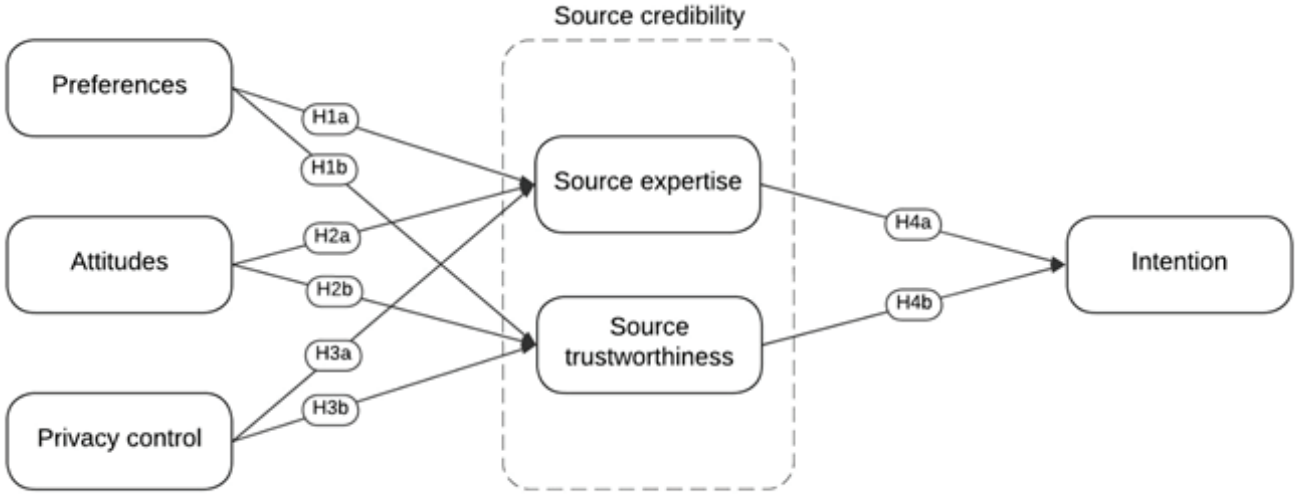
Behavioural intention, the ultimate endogenous element in the proposed model, reflects the conative reactions of online travelers towards using Facebook for travel planning (Ayeh, 2015). Recipients are more inclined to adopt information when they are confident it comes from a credible source (Khan et al., 2024), and this adoption is positively related to their behavioural responses (Verma et al. 2023). Research suggests that both trustworthiness and expertise positively influence behavioural intention (Saima & Khan, 2020; Besbes et al., 2016; Hayes & Carr, 2015). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4a: Perceived source expertise is positively related to intention to use Facebook for travel planning.

H4b: Perceived source trustworthiness is positively related to intention to use Facebook for travel planning.

Based on the hypotheses developed above, the conceptual model of the study is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. **Conceptual model of the study**



2. METHODOLOGY

An empirical investigation was undertaken employing the survey methodology to test the formulated hypotheses. A self-administered structured questionnaire was used as a measurement instrument. The construction of the measurement instrument drew upon pertinent literature, with questions tailored to suit the requirements of this study. Structured into four groups, the questionnaire follows the funnel principle. Utilizing a five-point Likert scale, anchored at 1 = not at all important/strongly disagree and 5 = very important/strongly agree, participants rated their agreement levels with the questionnaire items. To measure Attitude towards Facebook and Perceived source expertise, statements sourced from Arora and Lata (2020) were employed. Preferences towards Facebook was evaluated using statements from Duffett (2020). Perceived source trustworthiness is taken from Chung et al. (2015). Perceived privacy control was used from Chang et al. (2018), while Intention to use Facebook for travel planning from Ayeh (2015).

The survey spanned from March to September 2023 using an online survey distributed via email and social media. The sample was drawn using the simple random sampling method. The survey distribution involved targeting specialized travel groups on social networks, ensuring a focused approach to sample selection. Additionally, questionnaires were randomly disseminated across various platforms to capture a diverse range of perspectives. At the onset of the questionnaire, all participants were briefed on the subject matter and objectives of the study. A screening question enquired whether the respondents had an active Facebook account. Following rectification for inaccuracies and missing data, a sum of 207 accurately completed questionnaires was deemed suitable for subsequent analysis.

According to the "10-times rule" method for estimating minimum sample size (Hair et al., 2011), the minimum sample size for this study is 80. Exceeding this threshold, a total of 207 correctly completed questionnaires were collected and used for further analysis.

The evaluation of the outer model, inner model, and hypothesis testing was performed utilizing SmartPLS 4.0, employing the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach, which is favored for studies emphasizing prediction and theory advancement (Henseler et al., 2016). The PLS-SEM was applied instead of covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) because it allows for the simultaneous analysis of the interrelationship of several latent variables, that is, the analysis of complex models with many manifest variables and theoretical constructs. It has no problems with identifying relations between individual theoretical constructs in small samples (Reinartz et al., 2009). In addition, PLS-SEM has no special requirements tied to the distribution of manifest variables because it is a non-parameter method.

Out of 207 valid questionnaires, 54.6% of respondents were female and 45.5% were male. The majority of respondents were younger, with 36.7% aged between 18 and 25 years and 57% between 26 and 35 years. Fewer respondents belonged to the "36-45" (3.4%), "46-55" (2.4%), and "over 65" (0.5%) age groups. Although predominantly young, the respondent structure corresponds to the selected data collection media. In terms of education, most respondents had a bachelor's degree (55.1%) and a master's degree (39.6%), followed by those with a high school diploma (3.9%), postgraduate education (1%), and elementary school (0.4%). Correspondingly, they were predominantly students (55.6%) and full-time employees (33.3%). Only a few respondents worked part-time (9.1%), were unemployed (1%), or retired (0.5%).

3. RESULTS

All manifest variables were checked for outliers, and none were identified. A two-step analytical approach was used to examined the eight hypotheses. In the first step, reliability, internal consistency, and convergent validity of the measurement scales were assessed. Secondly, the research model was evaluated, which involved testing hypotheses, estimating path coefficients, determining the variance explained, and assessing statistical significance.

3.1. Measurement model results

This model is evaluated using an analysis of convergent validity (including factor loadings and average variance extracted - AVE), internal consistency (measured by Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability), and discriminant validity (Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio - HTMT), with the values presented in Table 1.

Table 1: **Outer model evaluation**

Code of constructs/variables	Outer loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Preferences		0.820	0.869	0.813
PREF1	0.749			
PREF2	0.713			
PREF3	0.766			
PREF4	0.765			
PREF5	0.783			
Attitudes		0.784	0.875	0.784
ATT1	0.795			
ATT2	0.874			
ATT3	0.838			
Privacy control		0.932	0.941	0.926
PRIV1	0.843			
PRIV2	0.829			
PRIV3	0.842			
PRIV4	0.840			
Source expertise		0.755	0.858	0.753
EXP1	0.813			
EXP2	0.813			
EXP3	0.827			
Source trustworthiness		0.850	0.896	0.844
TRUST1	0.765			
TRUST2	0.786			

Code of constructs/variables	Outer loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
TRUST3	0.893			
TRUST4	0.855			
Intention		0.931	0.944	0.921
INT1	0.846			
INT2	0.911			
INT3	0.927			
INT4	0.912			

The values from the outer model evaluation indicate satisfactory levels for all metric attributes. Manifest variables have outer factor loadings ranging from 0.713 to 0.927 and were all included in the further analysis (Hair et al., 2017). With both Cronbach's alpha and CR coefficients surpassing 0.75, internal consistency across all factors is deemed satisfactory (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The average variance extracted (AVE) surpasses the minimum threshold of 0.5, indicating that, on average, constructs explain more than half of the variance of their respective indicators (Malhotra, 2010).

The discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT), presented in Table 2.

Table 2. **Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio**

	Attitudes	Intention	Preferences	Privacy control	Source expertise
Intention	0.525				
Preferences	0.677	0.631			
Privacy control	0.157	0.069	0.092		
Source expertise	0.559	0.540	0.651	0.092	
Source trustworthiness	0.611	0.509	0.501	0.316	0.659

The Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) ranges from 0.092 to 0.677, which is below the recommended threshold of 0.9. Therefore, the measurement model achieved discriminant validity. Table 3 presents the results of the variance inflation factors (VIF).

Table 3: **Variance inflation factor inner model matrix**

	Intention	Preferences	Privacy control	Source expertise	Source trustworthiness
Attitudes				1.461	1.461
Intention					
Preferences				1.435	1.435
Privacy control				1.023	1.023
Source expertise	1.375				
Source trustworthiness	1.375				

Variance inflation factors (VIF), with all values below 5, indicate that no multicollinearity can be detected.

3.2. Testing hypotheses

The bootstrapping procedure with a sample of 5000 subsamples was applied to test the hypotheses. By observing the coefficient of determination (R^2), the endogenous variable Source expertise is moderately explained by the exogenous variables Attitudes, Privacy control and Preferences for 30.4%. The endogenous variable Source trustworthiness is moderately, for 34.1% from the same exogenous variables. The R^2 value of 27.4% indicates that the variance of the endogenous construct Intention is weakly explained by the exogenous variables Source expertise and Source trustworthiness. The PLSpredict was conducted to test the predictive relevance (Q^2predict) of the research model. The Q^2 values are all greater than zero, for Intention is 0.245, for Source expertise 0.275 and Source Trustworthiness 0.311. That means that the exogenous variables are good enough to predict the endogenous variables, and the predictive relevance of the model is acceptable (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 4 presents the estimated path coefficients, standard deviations, t-values, p-values and confident intervals of the research model.

Table 4. **Structural model assessment**

	β	STDEV	t- statistics	p-value	Confidence interval 95%	Supported
H1a Preferences → Source expertise	0.405	0.073	5.462	0.000	0.257- 0.543	✓
H1b Preferences → Source trustworthiness	0.240	0.067	3.513	0.000	0.109- 0.372	✓
H2a Attitudes → Source expertise	0.222	0.073	3.024	0.003	0.079- 0.365	✓
H2b Attitudes → Source trustworthiness	0.342	0.065	5.320	0.000	0.210- 0.467	✓
H3a Privacy control → Source expertise	-0.056	0.069	0.824	0.410	-0.188- 0.079	X
H3b Privacy control → Source trustworthiness	0.237	0.057	4.024	0.000	0.120- 0.344	✓
H4a Source expertise → Intention	0.302	0.079	3.793	0.000	0.144- 0.452	✓
H4b Source trustworthiness → Intention	0.301	0.077	3.915	0.000	0.147- 0.449	✓

The results of the structural model show that the constructs Preferences (β=0.405; $p<0.05$), and Attitudes (β=0.222; $p<0.05$), have a significant and positive effect on Source expertise. Therefore, H1a and H2a are supported. The constructs Preferences (β=0.240; $p<0.05$), and Attitudes (β=0.342; $p<0.05$), have a significant and positive effect on Source trustworthiness, thus supporting H1b and H2b.

Privacy control has a non-significant and negative relationship with Source expertise (β=-0.247; $p>0.05$) but a positive, significant relationship with Source trustworthiness (β=0.237; $p<0.05$), confirming hypothesis H3b. Source expertise (β=0.302; $p<0.05$) and Source trustworthiness (β=0.301; $p<0.05$) have significant and positive relationship with Intention, confirming hypotheses H4a and H4b.

4. DISCUSSION

Social media has become increasingly significant in travel planning, prompting scholars to call for a deeper investigation into peripheral and heuristic cues, such as source credibility, within virtual communities in the hospitality and tourism industry (Zhou et al., 2021; Verma et al., 2023). While much of the existing research has treated source credibility as an independent variable influencing user behavior, this study builds on recent work emphasizing the role of platform-specific factors in shaping users' perceptions of source credibility within a given medium (Verma et al., 2023; Xiao et al., 2018). Grounded in the concept of experienced credibility (Wathen & Burkell, 2002) and based on data collected from actual Facebook users, this study explores how media-related perceptions impact source credibility in Facebook groups and, in turn, influence users' intentions to use these groups for travel planning. Unlike previous studies (Ayeh, 2015; Filieri et al., 2021; Mariani et al., 2019), which primarily focused on source credibility as an independent factor, this research examines the dimensions of source credibility as outcomes influenced by platform-related factors such as preferences and attitudes toward Facebook as well as perceived privacy control.

The findings from the structural model provide valuable insights into how Facebook users' preferences and attitudes toward the platform influence their perceptions of source credibility. The study highlights the importance of social media preferences and attitudes, showing that favorable general attitudes and preferences toward Facebook as a social media platform positively affect perceived source expertise and trustworthiness. Specifically, users with a positive attitude toward Facebook and a strong preference for it as a platform are more likely to perceive sources within its groups as both expert and trustworthy. This finding supports the notion that platform-related factors are integral to the formation of credibility judgments, as indicated by previous studies (Verma et al., 2023). Furthermore, the study underscores the role of perceived privacy control on Facebook in shaping judgments of source credibility dimensions. Perceived privacy control is significantly associated with perceived source trustworthiness, indicating that users who feel they have greater control over their privacy on Facebook are more likely to trust the information shared within groups. In contrast, the findings suggest that perceived privacy control does not directly influence

users' perceptions of expertise in the content shared within groups. This distinction implies that trustworthiness and expertise may operate independently in users' cognitive processes, with perceived expertise being evaluated based on broader views of social media rather than privacy control. On information-focused platforms such as Facebook, Han and Balabanis (2024) also emphasize the dominant role of trustworthiness, which may stem from the open nature of social media, where anyone can post, making expertise more challenging to assess (Mariani et al., 2019). Finally, the study confirms the critical role of both perceived expertise and trustworthiness in shaping users' behavioral intentions to use Facebook groups for travel planning. It highlights the central role of source credibility in driving user engagement with social media platforms for specific purposes, such as travel planning. These findings align with and extend previous research, which has consistently demonstrated a significant relationship between dimensions of source credibility and behavioral intentions across various contexts (Onofrei et al., 2022; Saima & Khan, 2020; Besbes et al., 2016).

CONCLUSION

This study improves the understanding of how platform-related perceptions, such as preferences, attitudes, and privacy control, shape users' evaluations of credibility and their behavioral intentions within the context of travel planning in Facebook groups, offering several implications for both theory and practice. The study contributes to the Source Credibility Theory by explaining consumers' media-related perceptions as antecedents of credibility, which have not been empirically tested before. It underscores the role of attitudes and preferences toward Facebook in shaping dimensions of perceived source credibility, particularly expertise and trustworthiness. The findings can be interpreted within the broader framework of dual-processing theories, which explain how individuals process information, either through detailed, analytical evaluation (central processing) or by relying on surface-level cues to make quicker judgments (peripheral processing). The results reveal that users with favorable attitudes and preferences toward Facebook are more likely to perceive sources as trustworthy and knowledgeable, suggesting that these factors function as peripheral cues in credibility judgments. This demonstrates how media perceptions can serve as cognitive shortcuts or heuristics for evaluating source credibility, particularly in social media contexts where directly assessing expertise and trustworthiness may be more challenging. As proposed by Social Judgment Theory, individuals evaluate new information by comparing it to their pre-existing attitudes, beliefs, and values. These results demonstrate that preferences, attitudes, and perceived privacy control serve as anchor points or reference standards in assessing the credibility of sources on Facebook, highlighting that individuals are more likely to trust sources that align with their favorable perceptions of the platform. The inclusion of the concept of perceived privacy control introduces a novel perspective within the framework of Source Credibility Theory. The findings suggest that users' perceptions of privacy control also act as a significant heuristic in determining whether to trust sources in Facebook groups. This is particularly relevant in the context of social media, where privacy concerns are prevalent and trust is often more fragile (Onofrei et al., 2022; Saima & Khan, 2020). The findings also highlight the differential role of privacy control in shaping the two core dimensions of credibility. The fact that perceived privacy control is significantly related to trustworthiness but not to expertise suggests that users cognitively separate these two constructs when evaluating sources. This distinction refines Source Credibility Theory, showing that privacy concerns, often emphasized in digital contexts, affect perceptions of a source's trustworthiness, but not necessarily their expertise.

Upon reflection of the study's outcomes, several practical implications emerge. It is evident that users' preferences and attitudes towards social media significantly influence their perception of source credibility, particularly in terms of expertise and trustworthiness. For social media managers and platform developers, this means that fostering positive attitudes and preferences towards the platform can enhance user trust and behavioral intention. Businesses and organizations involved in travel planning should understand the general perception of their target audience toward particular social media, as it may influence views of source credibility. This emphasizes the importance of aligning content with users' values and platform perceptions to ensure credibility is built. It also underscores the necessity for maintaining active and engaging social media profiles and ensuring that content reflects expertise and reliability, as users are more likely to trust and engage with sources that align with their own platform perceptions. Moreover, the positive relationship between privacy control and perceived source trustworthiness highlights the importance of transparency and security measures within social media platforms, especially Facebook. As privacy concerns continue to be a significant issue for social media users, ensuring that platforms provide clear and comprehensive privacy settings is essential for fostering user trust. Therefore, efforts should be made to enhance privacy settings and provide users with more control over their personal information, ultimately fostering trust and increasing engagement with travel-related groups. By offering users customizable privacy features, a safer and more transparent environment could be created. Empowering users with more control over their privacy not only reduces perceived privacy risks but also strengthens the credibility of the information shared within the platform. This, in turn, increases the likelihood that users will engage with and rely on the platform for travel planning, as they feel more secure in sharing their personal experiences and receiving trusted information. Finally, the study's findings emphasize the crucial role of source credibility in shaping users' intentions to use Facebook for travel planning. For travel businesses, knowing that source credibility influences behavioral intentions means they should prioritize maintaining a credible presence in Facebook groups. In addition to demonstrating expertise on social media platforms, they should focus on building trust. For example, encouraging authentic reviews and using verified accounts could help establish credibility within online travel communities. Businesses should actively engage in discussions, share accurate and valuable travel information, and interact with users in ways that strengthen their reputation as a reliable and authoritative source of travel advice. In practical terms, stakeholders, including destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and travel agencies, should collaborate to create an environment conducive to the development and innovation of Facebook groups for travel

planning. This entails understanding and addressing users' attitudes, preferences, and privacy concerns, thereby enhancing the overall user experience and fostering trust in the platform.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study, such as its focus on a specific demographic and the reliance on intention rather than actual behavior. Future research should aim to address these limitations by including a more diverse sample and incorporating measures of actual behavior. Considering the lower explanatory power for Intention, further research could explore additional variables or constructs that might augment the model's comprehensiveness and explanatory capability. This could involve investigating factors such as perceived usability, perceived usefulness, security, or social influence, which could potentially enrich the understanding of users' behavioral intentions regarding Facebook for travel planning. Additionally, examining the interplay between individual characteristics, such as personality traits or past experiences, and their influence on perceived source credibility and behavioral intentions could provide valuable insights into the social media-mediated decision-making processes. Additionally, comparing attitudes across different social media platforms, could provide further insights into users' behavior and decision-making processes in the context of travel planning. Employing mixed methods approaches and conducting cross-country comparisons would also enrich our understanding of the dynamics at play in social media-mediated travel planning.

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