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Navigating Trust and Authenticity: To what extent do Influencer Marketing and Word-of-Mouth Shape Backpacker Travel Choices?

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Abstract

Backpacking has become a prominent form of travel among young adults, yet little is known about influencer marketing (IM) and peer Word-of-Mouth (WOM) jointly. Existing research typically examines IM and WOM separately, overlooking how trust and authenticity operate across communication channels. The study investigates the impact of influencer marketing (IM) versus peer word-of-mouth (WOM) on the behavioural intentions of backpackers aged 18 to 35. Using a two-phase design, the study first conducted a preliminary scenario-based manipulation check with 270 valid responses, followed by a main SEM analysis based on 159 valid follow-up responses from eligible participants. The design combines manipulation checks with structural equation modelling to test both direct and indirect relationships. Results indicate that neither authenticity nor trust directly predicted behavioural intention. Instead, their effects operated through different communication modes of IM and WOM. IM positively mediated the effects of both authenticity and trust, while WOM positively mediated authenticity but negatively mediated trust. These findings suggest that IM and WOM should not be treated as interchangeable communication mechanisms in backpacker tourism marketing.

Keywords: Backpacker Behaviour, Authenticity, Trust, Influencer Marketing, Word of Mouth

Introduction

Tourism marketing research has rarely examined Influencer Marketing (IM) and Word-of-Mouth (WOM) within a single integrated framework (Hampton and Hamzah, 2016; O'Regan, 2021; Munar and Jacobsen, 2014; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). Nevertheless, this approach is insufficient to understand Gen Z behaviours, as this generation intensively uses digital platforms (Noy, 2021; Reichenberger, 2017). Gen Z behaviours are often characterised by high awareness, low tolerance, scepticism and conditional engagement (Madya, 2017; Massi et al., 2023).

In this aspect, decision makers (including tourism boards, destination marketers, hostel chains, Online Travel Agencies, SMEs, and tour operators) face the challenge of allocating budgets across marketing channels, which conditions and what type of behavioural mechanisms are followed by backpackers (Wang, 1999; Canavan et al., 2021). Existing literature offers limited insight into whether WOM and IM work harmoniously neither eradicate each other's effects neither specify a solid psychological mechanism that led to behaviours as backpackers actively construct authenticity and trust through both peer and digital sources (Hampton and Hamzah, 2016; O'Regan, 2021). Hence, the current research is designed to fill this gap by implementing an integrated structural model.

Trust and authenticity are included as their effects remain uncertain, as prior studies show that both authenticity and trust are context-dependent drivers of behaviour (Rickly et al., 2025; Reichenberger, 2017). The study contributes literature in two ways. First, it tests whether authenticity and trust directly influence behavioural

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intention to backpackers' destination selection. Second, rather than treating IM and WOM as isolated or interchangeable communication mechanisms, it compares how authenticity and trust operate through both channels within a single integrated model. The contribution is that people react differently to the same message depending on whether it is shared by an influencer or by a peer. From a resource-based perspective (Barney, 1991; Day, 1994), authenticity and trust represent intangible marketing assets that contribute to competitive advantage.

Influencer marketing and WOM differ in their ability to transmit these assets, allocation of communication resources (Trust and authenticity) across these channels becomes a strategic decision rather than merely a tactical one. Moreover, linking customer-based metrics (e.g., CLV and customer equity) to firm performance is indicative for marketing resource allocation in that decisions in marketing-mix has direct implications in selecting marketing channel, investing appropriately and allocation strategies (Drèze and Bonfrer, 2008; Reinartz et al., 2005). Thus, this study extends prior IM/WOM research by demonstrating that authenticity and trust vary in their effects across communication channels, with implications for marketing resource allocation.

In this study, trust and authenticity are conceptualised as antecedent evaluations that may shape behavioural intention either directly or through mediated communication channels (Ajzen, 1991; Jalilvand et al., 2012). To examine how trust and authenticity transform the intention behaviour in destination selection, the current study draws on the Theory of Planned Behaviour, behavioural control dimensions, and parasocial interaction theory (Horton and Wohl, 1956), offering a more comprehensive explanation of how digital vs interpersonal influences (IM vs WOM) shapes backpacker decision-making (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014).

Literature Review

Cohen (1972) and Pearce (2007) stated that backpackers have been recognised primarily as non-institutionalised tourists seeking unusual and authentic experiences and interactions away from the 'traditional' tourism style that embodies, luxury and relaxation. Backpacking has a positive impact on various economies including job creation, support for small businesses, and cultural preservation, some further argues that conventional tourism is only contribute mass tourism organisations (Sudana et al., 2020; Hampton, 2013). In the modern world, backpacking has emerged as one of the most popular forms of travel globally among young travellers, scholarly attention has shifted towards understanding traveller's motivations, decisions and behaviours (Loker-Murphy and Pearce, 1995; Hannam and Diekmann, 2010; Chen, Bao and Huang, 2014; Iaquinto, 2015; Reichenberger and Iaquinto, 2022).

Within this context, authenticity emerges as a central construct. Constructivist and postmodern theories conceptualise authenticity as socially constructed rather than objectively inherent (Rickly et al., 2025). Authenticity functions as an evaluative perception shaped through social interaction and interpretation. Backpackers seek validation of experiences through interpersonal exchanges and shared narratives (Canavan et al., 2021), while actively scrutinising both information and its source. These processes suggest that authenticity may influence behavioural intention as an evaluative driver of destination choice.

Similarly, trust plays a fundamental role in backpacker decision-making. Research indicates that hostels and communal travel spaces function as environments where peer-to-peer advice is exchanged and validated (Reichenberger, 2017). According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), such evaluative beliefs may contribute to behavioural intention. Trust, therefore, may operate as a psychological mechanism influencing destination selection.

If authenticity and trust function as evaluative drivers of destination choice, it should positively relate to behavioural intention. Thus, this study proposes first hypothesis as follows:

H1: Perceived authenticity is positively associated with backpackers' behavioural intention.

Noy (2021) also supports this referring to the nature of backpacking as 'frequent social interactions and networking' (p.2), highlighting how communal backpacker spaces facilitate trust in shared experiences. According to Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), trust could impact on behavioural intention (Jalilvand et al., 2012). The notion of trust further proposed as an emerging and reinforcing element by O'Regan (2021) who explains backpackers are fastened to social structures like hostels due to their 'need for proximity, solidarity, co-presence and sociability' (pp.45-56), recognising that backpackers form the trust in shared experiences. Hence, the current research has offered second hypothesis.

H2: Perceived trust is positively associated with backpackers' behavioural intention.

In details of prior tourism research frequently models authenticity and trust as direct predictors of behavioural intention (e.g., Liang et al., 2018; Jalilvand et al., 2012; Abubakar and Ilkan, 2016). These relationships are typically examined within singular communication settings (e.g., WOM platforms or destination contexts). Although it is evident social interaction through hubs like hostels are integral in backpacker motivations, any type of external interactions such as IM and WOM has become more institutionalised raising questions around authenticity and trust in backpacker communities (Hampton and Hamzah, 2016; O'Regan, 2021). This shows that backpackers do not passively receive authenticity (Wang, 1999; Canavan et al., 2021; and Massi et al., 2023) and trust (e.g. constructivist theory from Reichenberger, 2017, O'Regan, 2021; Singh et al., 2020); they actively seek and validate it through peer interactions and digital content.

The literature gives that Authenticity and Trust are sometimes reviewed through different perspectives. For instance, the research of Hampton and Hamzah (2016) found that whilst backpackers embody trust in social familiarity through 'backpacker enclaves', there is now less trust in modern backpacker communities than there previously was as it becomes more popular. O'Regan (2021) additionally recognised that as backpacking has become more mainstreamed complexities that challenge the trust in authenticity of the community arise. Therefore, first two hypotheses would be able to enlighten the behaviour of backpacker in this empirical more as a predecessor of O'Regan (2021) and Hampton and Hamzah (2016). Moreover, recent digital developments further might shape how authenticity and trust are negotiated in travel decision-making, even though these dynamics fall outside the scope of the present study. Emerging work on AI-generated destination imagery and virtual influencers shows that digitally produced content introduces new forms of mediated authenticity, influencing how tourists evaluate credibility and persuasion (Bui et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025).

At the same time, younger travellers increasingly report algorithmic saturation, performative influencer content and digital fatigue, which should heighten their preference for genuine, experience-based communication (Rajput et al., 2025), and may also encourage temporary disengagement from digital media during travel (Gong et al., 2023). These developments do not alter the constructs examined in the current study, but the recent studies highlight that IM and WOM operate within evolving digital environments where authenticity and trust are continuously renegotiated.

Parasocial interaction theory (Horton and Wohl, 1956) refers to the illusion of interaction with media figures. It is applicable to influencer marketing context. As the popularity of backpacking has increased, we have been a witness of advancement of social media influencers are actively posting their stories. This raise question in that how backpackers connect their own decision to the social media under reconfiguring social interaction through different platforms, namely Tik Tok and Instagram (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). The new way of interaction and gaining knowledge raise the question over authenticity and trustworthiness that influencing in decision-making of backpackers. Given that authenticity and trust are validated through communication processes, their behavioural influence may depend on whether they are transmitted through influencer marketing or peer WOM, therefore following hypotheses are given.

H3a and H3b: Influencer Marketing (IM) mediates the relationship between perceived authenticity (a), perceived trust (b) and the travel behaviour of backpackers aged 18–35.

H4a and H4b: Word of Mouth (WOM) mediates the relationship between authenticity (a), perceived trust (b) and the travel behaviour of backpackers aged 18–35.

As recognised in Munar and Jacobsen (2014) and Zeng and Gerritsen (2014), social media platforms, like TikTok and Instagram, facilitate visually driven media, allowing for ‘real time’ recordings and sharing of tourist experiences, noting an observed preference by tourists for visual media when sharing experiences since it presumably boosts a feeling of authenticity. This point was expanded on by Madya (2017) with their findings showing that all study participants engage with content online before and throughout their travel trips, noting it as an integral part of the journey. However, the research of Madya also highlights the issue of increased visual media in backpacking diminishing experience authenticity, thus weakening trust in influencer driven media, stating it can create a ‘digital idealisation’ that ruins expectations once visited- the online portrayal of travel becomes more polished, aspirational, and emotionally resonant than the actual experience. This point was additionally recognised by Zeng and Gerritsen (2014), identifying visual media can obscure authenticity by promoting idealised experiences.

There are phenomena in social media in that influencers (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). The awareness of interaction extended on digital environment which raises questions around the shift in trust of recommendations, and how peer WOM and Influencer recommendations influence backpacker expectations and behaviours in the modern community. As a result of this extension, H3 and H4 would allow the current research to highlight the critical gap, thus emphasising the contribution to the literature.

Conceptual Framework

From the underpinning discussion related to the literature between peer WOM and IM recommendations and the effect on backpacker behaviour, the following conceptual framework has been developed to visually represent the hypothesised theories (Figure 1) surrounding the research question ‘between the ages of 18-35, what is the impact of IM vs peer WOM recommendations on the decision-making process of backpackers.

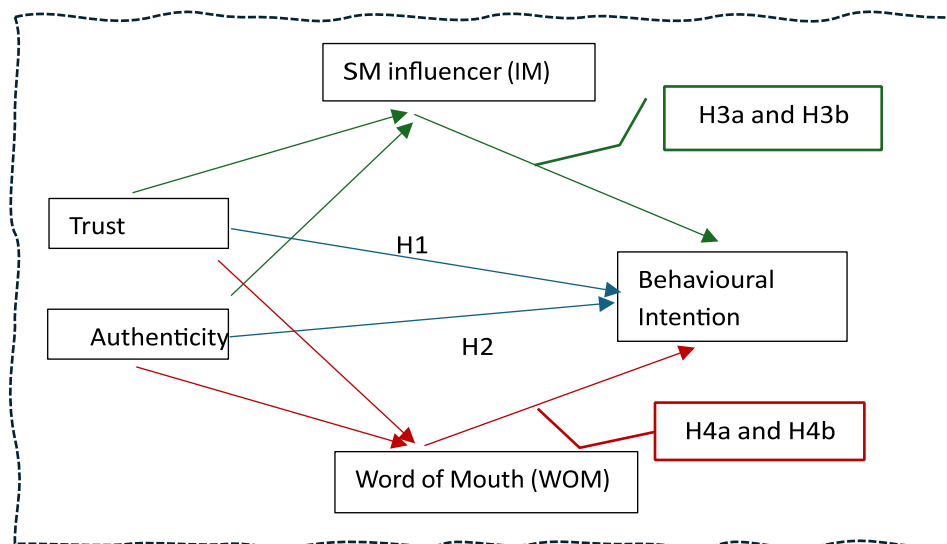


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of current research integrates three theories TPB (Ajzen, 1991), Constructivist and Postmodern (Rickly et al., 2025) and Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton and Wohl, 1956). At this point, the framework allows authenticity and trust to operate both as direct antecedents as well as channel-activated mechanisms (Figure 1). In this way, it enables examination of whether their influence is unconditional or evident over communication mode. Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) provides the foundational base on behavioural intention- backpacker’s intention to destinations. In this context, Influencer Marketing (IM) and Word-of-Mouth

(WOM) act as social referents that influence these components. Constructivist and postmodern perspective have included authenticity and trust as a social constructed experience. Parasocial Interaction Theory further explains the emotional dynamics of IM. Influencers, through consistent and personal content, foster one-sided emotional relationships with their followers. These relationships might create a sense of intimacy and trust as well as authenticity. However, it should be considered that it might lead to digital idealisation.

Methodology

Within current study, the sample universe is consisted of people aged between 18 and 35. Participants responds are included if they have been identified as having engaged in backpacking travel within the past five years. All respondents were informed that the research was conducted for academic purposes and participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Preliminary study has been conducted to maintain a solid conceptual framework. Within this prior investigation, six scenarios are disseminated over 300 participants. After filtering irrelevant participants, the number of participants has reduced down to 270. Within the first study, participants were invited to read short stories in each of them, and they have been asked for rating how their intention might like effected by these stories. Two group of scenarios for trust and authenticity has been split 3 more scenarios. For example, first one did not have manipulated with IM nor WOM. Then, no manipulate scenarios is followed by two have more one IM-manipulation and WOM-manipulation. These scenarios have been inspired from Hui et al. (2000) and Bai et al. (2020) who have studied “*obtain benefits or rewards associated with high status, or status incentives*”.

The nature of current study is based on two-phased research and its insights. Therefore, the second phase of data collection involved a follow-up questionnaire distributed to participants who had completed the preliminary study and continued to meet the eligibility criteria. After removing incomplete or ineligible responses, 159 valid responses were retained for the main SEM analysis. The main study has conducted SEM to check fitness of model as well as to test hypotheses. To measure latent factors, measurements constructs have been created from a variety of pre-validated items from published peer-reviewed studies. Items are formed by Influencer Marketing (IM) from Zaman *et al.* (2023), Word-of-Mouth (WOM)- Jalilvand *et al.* (2012), Trust measures are selected from Kitsios *et al.* (2022), Authenticity questions are from Liang *et al.* (2018), and the item of Behavioural Intention is picked from Agyeiwaah *et al.* (2023). Additionally, minor wording adaptations were made to ensure conceptual clarity and avoid overlap with trust and behavioural intention constructs. However, as noted by Hyman et al. (2006), applying validated items in new contexts may limit their fit and compromise data quality. To mitigate this, a pilot test was conducted after 50 responses were collected. Items demonstrating poor reliability or construct validity were removed prior to full-scale analysis.

Data Analysis

Preliminary Study Data Analysis

Manipulation Checks. To verify that the WOM and IM manipulations were perceived as intended by participants, separate one-way ANOVAs were conducted for trust (TR) and authenticity (AU) under manipulated and non-manipulated conditions. Thus, the preliminary study tested the mediating effects of trust and authenticity through Influencer Marketing (IM) and Word-of-Mouth (WOM), revealing that their involvement significantly alters the relationship between these constructs and behavioural intention.

For trust (TR) (Table 1), the WOM manipulation yielded a statistically significant effect, $F(4, 265) = 3.711$, $p = .006$, indicating that trust levels differed meaningfully across WOM manipulation scenarios. Similarly, the IM manipulation produced a significant result, $F(4, 265) = 3.667$, $p = .006$, showing that the IM scenarios also elicited significantly different trust responses from participants.

Table 1. Trust (TR) with No Manipulation over Behaviour Intention

Cases	Sum of Squares	df.	Mean Square	F	p
TR manipulated with WOM	7.929	4	1.982	3.711	0.006
TR manipulated with IM	7.835	4	1.959	3.667	0.006
Residuals	144.232	270	0.534		

Note. Type III Sum of Squares

For authenticity (AU) (Table 2), the WOM manipulation produced a significant effect, $F(4, 265) = 2.927$, $p = .021$, indicating meaningful variation in perceived authenticity across WOM scenarios. The IM manipulation effect was even more pronounced, $F(4, 265) = 9.827$, $p < .001$, demonstrating substantial differences in authenticity ratings depending on the IM scenario presented. These findings confirm that the manipulations for WOM and IM were effective in producing measurable differences in both trust and authenticity, indicating that participants engaged with the scenarios in a manner consistent with the experimental design.

Table 2. Authenticity (AU) No Manipulation over Behaviour Intention

Cases	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
AU with WOM Manipulation	5.582	4	1.395	2.927	0.021
AU with IM Manipulation	18.741	4	4.685	9.827	< .001
Residuals	128.728	270	0.477		

Note. Type III Sum of Squares

Main Study Data Analysis

Following the preliminary study, a second questionnaire was distributed to the same group of participants. After filtering for eligibility and completeness, a total of 159 valid responses were obtained for the main analysis. Data analysis has started with Fornell-Larker criterion test. Fornell-Larker matrix confirms discriminant validity of scales (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Fornell-Larker has facilitated to show if the discriminant validity is established through the AVE square root value, if it is greater than its correlation with the other constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The table matrix highlights that discriminant validity is supported across all constructs (even though BINT is extremely close with 0.628 vs 0.625, but still technically passes criteria), as each diagonal value exceeds its corresponding off-diagonal correlations. Also, the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio is suggested to use as an alternative criterion postulate that the values should be below 0.85 that indicating adequate discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 3. Fornell-Larcker Criterion Table

	TR	Authenticity	IM	WOM	BINT	AVE	CR/ ω (composite reliability)	Cronbach Alpha
TR	0.720					0.518	0.665	0.653
Authenticity	0.647	0.716				0.513	0.838	0.679
IM	0.348	0.215	0.683			0.466	0.768	0.761
WOM	0.586	0.535	0.137	0.708		0.501	0.791	0.832
BINT	0.222	0.509	0.625	0.385	0.628	0.394	0.603	0.574

Note. Diagonal values are equal to $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted with maximum likelihood method that has yielded sufficient results according to Hu and Bentler (1998) criteria; CMIN/F = 1.383 (good fit), RMSEA = 0.049 (good fit), PCLOSE = 0.519 (support RMSEA adequacy > 0.05), CFI = 0.937 (good fit). TLI, GFI and AGFI values are within acceptable level 0.922, 0.880, and 0.838 respectively. Also, we have investigated whether common method bias is presented within model according to Harman's single factor. Podsakoff et al. (2003) explained that if the variance explained by one factor exceeds 50%, it may indicate common method bias. The current model has been tested under one factor with principal axis factoring extraction. Percent of variance is yielded 18.6%. Therefore, common bias method issue is dismissed. Convergent validity was partially supported in Table 3. In this sense, although Cronbach alpha value slightly exceeds only 0.57 and AVE for behavioural intention (BINT) is below the recommended threshold (0.50), composite reliability ($\omega = 0.603$) exceeds the minimum acceptable level for exploratory research (Hair et al., 2019). As suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981), with AVE below the recommended 0.50 threshold and relatively low internal reliability. Therefore, it is clear that the composite reliability value was acceptable for exploratory research. However, the findings involving behavioural intention should be interpreted cautiously.

Results

The hypotheses are tested based on sample consisted of 159 respondents. All participants had previously been backpacking or travelled for a prolonged period of one month or more, and all reported that they regularly use social media. In terms of age, many participants were aged 18–24 (84 respondents; 52.8%), followed by those aged 25–29 (46 respondents; 28.9%), while the smallest group was aged 30–35 (29 respondents; 18.2%). Overall, the sample was largely made up of younger adults with backpacking experience and regular social media use.

The research used composite values for each construct that has been built by computing average value of each scale in Jamovi. Also, Jamovi Software has automatically calculated direct and Indirect effects in Table 4. Indirect hypotheses for H3a, H3b, H4a and H4b are based on 1000 bootstrap (BC) representation on Jamovi. Firstly, although the relation between authenticity and behavioural intention did not have a meaningful statistical relation or authenticity did not directly predict behavioural intention (H1: $\beta = 0.1482$, $p = .058$), influencer marketing (H3a) and word of mouth (H4a) made this relationship to significant level means that mediates IM and WOM are mediators. Furthermore, the mediation effects are positively directed. Secondly, direct relationship (H2: $\beta = 0.0291$, $p = .765$), between trust and behavioural intention again was not significantly predicted. In detail of trust and its mediators, effect of IM and WOM is distinct in terms of their directions: positively ($\beta = 0.2542$, $p < .001$) for Influencer marketing, but negative for WOM account ($\beta = -0.0868$, $p = .009$). Furthermore, although

all of these mediation effects are significant and conceptually important, they are empirically weak due to Cohen's rule thumbs (Cohen, 1988).

Table 4. Results for Hypotheses

	Effect	Estimate	SE	Lower	Upper	β	z	P	Hypotheses
Indirect	AU* $\Rightarrow$ IM* $\Rightarrow$ BINT*	0.1945	0.0555	0.0858	0.3032	0.1424	3.507	<.001	H3a accepted
	AU* $\Rightarrow$ WOM* $\Rightarrow$ BINT*	0.0856	0.0367	0.0137	0.1576	0.0627	2.332	0.020	H4a accepted
	TR* $\Rightarrow$ IM* $\Rightarrow$ BINT*	0.2479	0.0598	0.1308	0.3650	0.2542	4.148	<.001	H3b accepted
	TR* $\Rightarrow$ WOM* $\Rightarrow$ BINT*	-0.0847	0.0324	-0.1481	-0.0213	-0.0868	-2.617	0.009	H4b accepted
Direct	AU* $\Rightarrow$ BINT*	0.2025	0.1068	-0.0068	0.4118	0.1482	1.896	0.058	H1 rejected
	TR* $\Rightarrow$ BINT*	0.0284	0.0948	-0.1574	0.2141	0.0291	0.299	0.765	H2 rejected

Note. Confidence intervals computed with method: Bias corrected bootstrap- Bootstrapping performance = 1000, 95%. Betas represent standardized effect sizes.

Discussion

H1 – Direct Effect of Authenticity on Behavioural Intention

Hypothesis Recap: H1 proposed that authenticity would directly predict backpackers' behavioural intention when selecting travel options. This was not supported ($\beta = 0.1482$, $p = .058$).

Interpretation: Contrary to many studies that link authenticity directly to stronger behavioural intention (e.g., Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022; Munar and Jacobsen, 2014). These differences could be reasoning because Cuesta Valiño et al. have taken authenticity with slightly different meaning in a small retail environment. While Munar and Jacobsen (2014) do not explicitly measure authenticity, their findings suggest that motivations for sharing travel experiences — such as altruism and social capital — may mediate the influence of perceived authenticity on behavioural intention. The current study results suggest that authenticity alone does not directly trigger behavioural change in this demographic. Instead, authenticity's influence appears to operate indirectly, through other mechanisms — in this case, IM and WOM. Many prior studies model authenticity as a direct antecedent of behavioural outcomes. The present findings point to the need for reconceptualising authenticity's role as potentially conditional on marketing channels such as interpersonal influence, or within digitally connected backpackers.

H3a & H4a – Authenticity Mediated by IM and WOM

Hypothesis Recap: H3a and H4a tested whether IM and WOM mediate the relationship between authenticity and behavioural intention. Both were supported, with positive indirect effects (IM: $\beta = 0.1424$, $p < .001$; WOM: $\beta = 0.0627$, $p = .020$).

Interpretation: These findings indicate that authenticity becomes behaviourally relevant when communicated through IM or WOM. In other words, authentic content or experiences gain influence when they are channelled via personal interaction or influencer-driven environment (probability values is compared in this argument). The delivery channels can amplify or diminish the value of authenticity, it could be echoed with Massi et al. arguments in which signal congruency across omnichannel touchpoints significantly enhances perceived brand authenticity, while fragmented delivery undermines it (2023). Existing research rarely distinguished between the source of authenticity and its delivery mechanism. Also, the discussion should have delicate balance that as the current

survey has items that operationalised authenticity not as a static trait. The present study's evidence suggests that for backpackers, authenticity is inert without being embedded in socially mediated communications, but it is differentiated according to the mode of delivery.

H2 – Direct Effect of Trust on Behavioural Intention

Hypothesis Recap: H2 proposed that trust would directly predict behavioural intention. This was also not supported ($\beta = 0.0291$, $p = .765$).

Interpretation: This finding over trust that does not lead any purchase or travel intentions (e.g., Reichenberger, 2017; Yang, 2022; Abubakar and Ilkan, 2016). It suggests that trust, similar to authenticity, requires an intermediary mechanism to convert perception into action. In literature, Yang (2022) has proven that cognitive and contextual touches would boost effect of Trust (institutional and service-based) in travel intention. Although Yang's term is trust that is unlike the current study examines how trust in travel influencers and peer backpackers affects behavioural intention. Moreover, Abubakar et al. (2016) have found that electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) influences destination trust, which in turn might affects travel intention. However, their conceptual understanding different as they have included trust acts as a mediator, not a direct predictor.

While trust has been consistently framed as a cornerstone of decision-making in both IM and WOM contexts, these results call for deeper examination of why trust might fail to directly influence travel decisions in younger backpackers, potentially due to their information-sourcing behaviours and scepticism toward single-source recommendations.

H3b & H4b – Trust Mediated by IM and WOM

Hypothesis Recap: H3b and H4b examined whether IM and WOM mediate the relationship between trust and behavioural intention. H3b was supported, while H4b showed a significant but negative mediation effect: IM showed a significant *positive* mediation ($\beta = 0.2542$, $p < .001$), while WOM showed a significant *negative* mediation ($\beta = -0.0868$, $p = .009$).

Interpretation: This result is asymmetric for trust. This is a notable outcome in that while IM strengthens the behavioural effect of trust, WOM has opposite impact, and it appears to weaken it. One plausible explanation might be that trusted peer recommendations introduce more critical reflection, comparison, or risk awareness, although this interpretation should be treated cautiously because the outcome of current study did not directly measure why WOM produced a negative effect. This outcome contrasts on survey (Baer et al., 2018), who found that American consumer are more likely to shop if they get recommendation from their peers (Ibid). However, it is worth to emphasise that this outcome nuances growing concern of consumer scepticism for commercial and institutional mercantilism of the influencer marketers that might be perceived less trusted (Singh et al., 2020). By contrast result in study in that trust in peer recommendations appears to negatively reduce the behavioural outcomes. The findings indicate that for backpackers, IM recommendations have a positive and significant mediating effect, whereas WOM demonstrates a more complex pattern.

Authenticity and trust do not directly predict backpackers' behavioural intention; instead, their influence emerges only when channelled through IM or WOM. IM acts as a positive mediator for both constructs. In the meanwhile, WOM acts in a distinctive way; as WOM positively mediates authenticity, it negatively mediates trust. This asymmetry contrasts with authenticity outcome in that it suggests peer communication may enhance the behavioural relevance of authenticity, while high trust in peer WOM may also introduce caution, risk awareness or alternative evaluations that reduce immediate behavioural intention.

Theoretical and Practical contributions

The current study findings align with TPB (Ajzen, 1991) in that attitudes, subjective norms and perceptual control are predictor for behavioural intention. The results help clarify how the Theory of Planned Behaviour

works for backpackers. Even though authenticity and trust can be seen as beliefs that might influence intention, the fact that H1 and H2 were not supported shows that these beliefs do not automatically lead to a decision to travel. Instead, authenticity and trust only matter when they are confirmed through specific communication channels. In this way, influencer marketing and word-of-mouth act as channel-based processes that shape how authenticity and trust affect backpackers' decisions. The outcome of authenticity is also in line with Constructivist and Postmodern Theory of Authenticity (Rickly et al., 2025) due to social interaction of influencer marketing (IM) and word of mouth (WOM). Lastly, Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton and Wohl, 1956) could be translated as supporting theory on how audiences form one-sided relationships with media figures who have inverse impact- according to empirical outcomes; while influencers (IM) strengthen trust, WOM is weakened. Therefore, the structured and constantly available resources might boost trust and credibility.

Theoretical alignment and the contribution of current study could be summarised under two groups: Firstly, this study contributes as it practices and propose integrated framework by reconceptualising how authenticity and trust operate within digitally and peer networks mediated channels over backpackers' behavioural intention. While prior literature often treats online channels through influencers constructs as direct predictors of behavioural intention, the recent findings suggest their influence is conditional or relatively distinct in terms of channels such as influencer marketing (IM) and word-of-mouth (WOM).

Secondly, the contribution could be reflected under an actionable recommendation for marketers, tourism boards, and influencers who might be seeking to engage either digital oriented or traditional motivated. The findings underscore the importance of delivery channels in shaping behavioural outcomes and guiding strategic and structured communication choices as there is a case in particularly on the distinct mediation effects of word-of-mouth (WOM) versus influencer marketing (IM) on trust.

Overall, these outcomes and yielded patterns show that previous literature and discussions have not been widely documented in similar context. Therefore, these findings suggest that IM and WOM should not be treated as interchangeable communication mechanism. Future research could further examine the cognitive processes that how trust, or authenticity led to increase and decrease on backpackers' intention.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study has limitations those should be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to backpackers who had engaged in backpacking within the previous five years. Although age, backpacking experience and social media use were reported, the study did not collect sufficiently detailed demographic indicators such as nationality, gender, education or travel frequency. This limits the ability to assess sample representativeness. The absence of detailed demographic limits the generalisability of the findings.

Second, convergent validity for behavioural intention was marginal, with AVE below the recommended 0.50 threshold and relatively low internal reliability. Although composite reliability was acceptable for exploratory research, the behavioural-intention findings should be interpreted with caution. Future studies should refine the behavioural-intention scale and consider adding further items that better capture backpackers' destination-choice intentions.

Finally, the study examined IM and WOM as mediated communication channels but did not directly measure emerging digital conditions such as AI-generated travel content, virtual influencers, algorithmic recommendation systems, social media fatigue or digital disengagement. These issues are increasingly relevant to backpacking culture and should be incorporated into future models.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

During the preparation of this work the authors used Microsoft Co-Pilot to polish language and grammar into academic level. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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