# INFLUENCER CREDIBILITY AND TRAVEL DECISION-MAKING AMONG YOUNG GEN Z SOCIAL MEDIA USERS IN PENANG

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(Received 08th September 2026; revised 28th October 2026; accepted 02nd November 2026)

**Abstract.** Social media has become a significant influence on consumer decisions worldwide, including decisions about where and how to travel. Drawing on the source credibility model, this study examined the relationship between three influencer credibility dimensions, attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise; and travel decision-making among young Generation Z (Gen Z) social media users in Pulau Pinang, Malaysia. A total of 266 respondents aged 18 to 28 were recruited using non-probability purposive sampling, supported by online snowball distribution through university and young-adult networks. Data were collected through a self-administered online questionnaire adapted from established credibility scales and analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple linear regression. All three dimensions correlated positively and significantly with travel decision-making at the bivariate level. In the regression model, the three dimensions jointly explained 54.3 per cent of the variance, $F(3, 262) = 103.68$, $p < .001$. Expertise emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .49$, $p < .001$), followed by attractiveness ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$), while trustworthiness made no significant unique contribution ($\beta = .10$, $p = .165$), a result attributable to its strong correlation with expertise ($r = .80$). The achieved sample was predominantly female (82.0 percent), aged 18 to 24 (91.7 percent), and not in paid employment (83.8 percent); the findings therefore characterise this specific segment of young, highly engaged Gen Z social media users rather than the Gen Z population of Pulau Pinang as a whole. The study extends understanding of influencer credibility in a Malaysian travel context and indicates that destination marketers targeting young Gen Z audiences should prioritise demonstrable destination knowledge over visual appeal alone.
**Keywords**: *Generation Z, travel decision-making, social media influencers, source credibility, Malaysia*

## Introduction

The digital era has transformed the travel industry, and social media influencers have become a potent force shaping travel decisions. Influencers are third-party content creators who build relationships with consumers and impact organisational stakeholders (Enke and Borchers, 2021). With the rise of influencer marketing and visual storytelling, social media is now an important instrument for travel decisions (Leung et al., 2013), shaping viewers' intention to travel by instilling desire and shaping attitude (Nguyen and Tong, 2023). This is especially true of Generation Z (Gen Z), born between 1997 and 2012, the first generation raised in a digital environment, who trust influencer endorsements more than traditional advertisements. Visually appealing posts and user-generated experiences increasingly influence travel decisions in Malaysia, where Gen Z uses social media at high rates (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2023). As frequent users of digital platforms, Gen Z are

highly adept at navigating online environments and place great importance on digital content, requiring marketers to create engaging, relevant, and meaningful material (Wijoyo et al., 2021). Although Gen Z may lack the financial capacity to travel, being in education or early in their careers, they are more likely to trust influencers and user-generated content than traditional advertisements (Gentina and Parry, 2021) and often make or save booking decisions based on what they see on social media (Leung et al., 2013).

### *Research problem*

Although the role of influencers in travel decision-making is frequently discussed, few studies examine how specific influencer characteristics individually affect Gen Z's travel decisions in Malaysia, with most focusing broadly on social media usage. Studies that treat influencer credibility as a single undifferentiated construct cannot indicate which specific attribute marketers should prioritise. Disaggregating credibility into its dimensions and comparing their relative predictive strength, therefore, addresses both a theoretical and a practical gap. Prior research has also often focused on outdated platforms, yet Ivasciuc et al. (2025) call for studies on current platforms with high Gen Z engagement, such as Instagram and TikTok, which specialise in short visual videos that serve as Gen Z's key sources of travel inspiration and planning. The present study focuses on young Gen Z social media users in Pulau Pinang, Malaysia—that is, individuals aged 18 to 28 who actively engage with travel-related content online. This population is deliberately defined by digital engagement rather than by residence alone, because the mechanism under investigation operates only among those exposed to influencer content.

### *Research objectives and research questions*

The study is guided by four research objectives, each with a corresponding research question. RO1 and RQ1 concern the relationship between influencers' attractiveness and travel decision-making among young Gen Z social media users in Pulau Pinang. RO2 and RQ2 concern the relationship between influencers' trustworthiness and travel decision-making in the same population. RO3 and RQ3 concern the relationship between influencers' expertise and travel decision-making. RO4 and RQ4 ask which of the three credibility attributes contributes most strongly to travel decision-making among this group.

## *Literature review*

### *Theoretical foundation: The source credibility model*

The source credibility model provides the theoretical basis for this study. Ohanian (1990) developed and validated a scale identifying three dimensions through which a communicator's persuasiveness operates: attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise. The model holds that a message is more readily accepted when its source is perceived as appealing, honest, and knowledgeable. It has since been applied extensively to influencer marketing, including in tourism (Bogoevska-Gavrilova and Ciunova-Shuleska, 2023; Orabi, 2022; AlFarraj et al., 2021). Because the three dimensions are conceptually distinct but empirically correlated, testing them jointly allows their relative contributions to be compared, which is the analytical approach adopted here.

### *Social media influencers and travel decision-making*

Influencers are commonly described as those who have built a reputation in a field and have at least 10,000 followers, spanning celebrities, public figures, opinion leaders, specialists, and bloggers. They have evolved into a tool that promotes travel destinations and encourages viewers to explore, plan, and make travel decisions (Orabi, 2022; Pop et al., 2022). Travel decision-making itself involves investigating destinations, lodging, transportation, and activities (Saini et al., 2023), and consumers weigh psychological and behavioural factors including attitudes towards travel, destination image, and behavioural intentions (Ramesh Babu and Murugesan, 2025), alongside destination characteristics and marketing strategies (Janchai and Suvittawat, 2025). When selecting destinations, travellers rely on information from other travellers, influencers, and social media ratings (Chourasia, 2024), positioning platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok as crucial marketing tools that let consumers experience offerings virtually (Kamran and Dastgeer, 2025; Wahba et al., 2025). Younger generations are strongly affected by visually attractive travel content, which promotes experience tourism (Zorlu and Candan, 2023). Electronic word of mouth also shapes travel behaviour and is seen as more reliable than other promotion (Amagsila et al., 2022), and the social media influence model suggests that exposure to travel content leads to more reservations, planning, and travel preferences (Petrovská and Gaetaniello, 2024).

### *Attractiveness*

Attractiveness increases a message's appeal and encourages engagement, with attractive influencers often seen as more credible, positively affecting attitudes and purchase intentions. Sunggara et al. (2025) reported that attractiveness influences purchase intention, particularly when mediated by consumer attitudes, though Hadi et al. (2025) reported no significant role, leaving its effect inconclusive. In travel marketing, attractive influencer content heightens consumers' likelihood to make tourism purchases (Mohamed et al., 2025). Given the visual orientation of platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, the following hypothesis is proposed: (H1): Influencers' attractiveness has a significant positive effect on travel decision-making among young Gen Z social media users in Pulau Pinang.

### *Trustworthiness*

Consumers are more convinced by reliable, trustworthy sources (Bogoevska-Gavrilova and Ciunova-Shuleska, 2023). An influencer's perceived honesty, sincerity, and integrity determine their trustworthiness (Lawrence and Meivitawanli, 2023). The source credibility model holds that trustworthiness strongly affects persuasive power, which matters given the financial and experiential risk in tourism. Customers are more likely to remain loyal to and repurchase travel services from influencers seen as reliable and credible (Meng and Lin, 2023; Lin and Nuangjamnong, 2022). On this basis, the following hypothesis is proposed: (H2): Influencers' trustworthiness has a significant positive effect on travel decision-making among young Gen Z social media users in Pulau Pinang.

### *Expertise*

Expertise refers to the knowledge, experience, and proficiency an influencer is perceived to have regarding what they endorse. Information from perceived professionals is seen as more reliable and has greater impact on consumers' readiness to accept the message (AlFarraj et al., 2021). Expertise is especially important in travel, since followers are more likely to trust influencers with travel-related knowledge and experience (Asyraff et al., 2025). Well-informed influencers provide comprehensive schedules, safety tips, and insider information that minimise perceived risk. Because travel purchases involve substantial financial and experiential uncertainty, risk-reducing information is expected to carry particular weight: (H3): Influencers' expertise has a significant positive effect on travel decision-making among young Gen Z social media users in Pulau Pinang. Although these three attributes are consistently identified as credibility dimensions, evidence on their relative strength is mixed, and comparative tests within a single Malaysian Gen Z sample are scarce. A fourth hypothesis therefore addresses RO4 and RQ4 directly: (H4): Expertise contributes more strongly to travel decision-making than attractiveness or trustworthiness among young Gen Z social media users in Pulau Pinang.

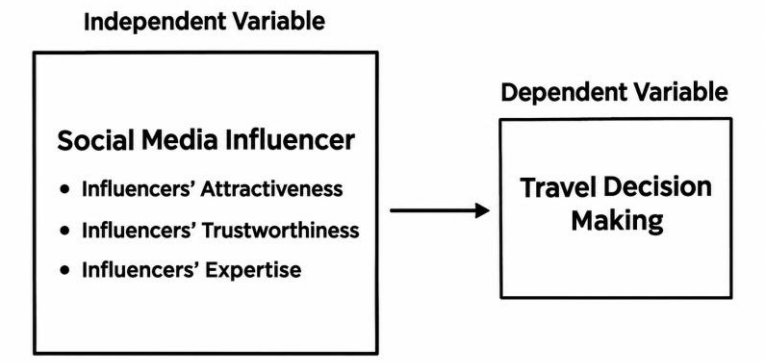



***Figure 1.*** *Conceptual framework.*
*Source: Orabi (2022); Ohanian (1990).*

## Materials and Methods

### *Research design and sampling*

This research used a quantitative methodology with an explanatory, cross-sectional design. The unit of analysis was the individual, specifically Gen Z social media users actively engaging with digital travel-related content. The target population comprised individuals aged 18 to 28 residing in Pulau Pinang who actively use social media and engage with travel content. In 2025, Malaysia recorded 15.5 million Instagram users and 19.3 million TikTok users (Kemp, 2025), and the population aged 18 to 28 in Pulau Pinang was estimated at 275,800 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2025). The study employed non-probability purposive sampling, supplemented by snowball referral arising from online distribution. Purposive sampling was selected because no accessible sampling frame lists Gen Z social media users in Pulau Pinang; without such a frame, random selection with known and non-zero inclusion probabilities is not possible, and probability sampling is therefore not feasible (Etikan et al., 2016). Respondents were selected against explicit eligibility criteria: aged 18 to 28 at the time of the survey; currently residing or studying in Pulau Pinang; an active user of at least one social

media platform; and having encountered travel-related influencer content in the preceding six months. Individuals aged under 18 were excluded because they are less likely to make independent travel decisions. Screening items at the start of the questionnaire confirmed eligibility before respondents proceeded.

Because the design is non-probabilistic, the sample is not statistically representative of the Gen Z population of Pulau Pinang, and results are not generalised to that population. The sample instead supports analytical inference about relationships among variables within the group studied. Two benchmarks informed the target sample size. The Raosoft calculator, applied to a population of 275,800 at a 95 per cent confidence level and 5 per cent margin of error, indicates a minimum of 384 respondents; this figure is reported for transparency but presupposes probability sampling and therefore functions as a reference point rather than a representativeness criterion. More directly applicable, Green (1991) recommends a minimum of $N \geq 50 + 8m$ for testing a multiple correlation, which for three predictors yields a minimum of 74 respondents. The achieved sample of 266 comfortably exceeds this threshold.

### *Instrument and data collection*

Data were gathered via a self-administered online questionnaire. As English and Bahasa Melayu are the most widely used languages among the target demographic, the questionnaire was constructed in both. It comprised five sections: demographics; attractiveness (five items); trustworthiness (five items); expertise (six items); and travel purchase decision (five items). Items used a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree and were adapted from Orabi (2022), whose instrument operationalises the three source credibility dimensions established by Ohanian (1990). The questionnaire was distributed via Telegram and WhatsApp and through university and young-adult online communities in Pulau Pinang. A pilot test confirmed the instrument's clarity, reliability, and appropriateness. Data were collected from October to December 2025. Participation was voluntary and anonymous; the opening page explained the study purpose, confirmed that responses would be used solely for research, and obtained informed consent before respondents could proceed. Ethical approval was granted under reference [INSERT ETHICS APPROVAL REFERENCE NUMBER]. Recruitment through online communities introduces self-selection, in that respondents more interested in travel content were more likely to respond; the demographic consequences are reported transparently below.

### *Data analysis*

Data were analysed using SPSS. Composite scores for each construct were computed as the mean of the constituent items. Nine individual item responses were missing across the dataset (0.16 percent of all data points), affecting seven respondents; these were handled by computing composites from available items, so all 266 cases were retained. Pearson correlation addressed RQ1 to RQ3 at the bivariate level, and multiple linear regression tested H1 to H3 while controlling for shared variance among predictors. H4 was assessed by comparing standardised regression coefficients. Collinearity diagnostics and the Durbin–Watson statistic were inspected to verify that regression assumptions were met.

## Results and Discussion

### *Reliability*

Internal consistency was assessed at two stages: a pilot test before full data collection and the full sample of 266 responses (*Table 1*). All four constructs exceeded the conventional 0.70 threshold in the full sample (Hair et al., 2019; Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994), so each scale can be treated as internally consistent in the analyses reported below.

***Table 1***. *Scale reliability for the pilot test and the full sample.*

| Variable | Items | α (pilot) | α (full sample) | n (full sample) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Attractiveness | 5 | 0.711 | 0.809 | 266 |
| Trustworthiness | 5 | 0.726 | 0.814 | 265 |
| Expertise | 6 | 0.664 | 0.804 | 262 |
| Travel purchase decision | 5 | 0.699 | 0.765 | 263 |

*Note: Full-sample alphas use listwise deletion within each scale, which accounts for the variation in n. Pilot n = 30*

### *Demographic profile*

*Table 2* presents the profile of the 266 respondents. The composition of the achieved sample is reported in full because it bears directly on how the findings should be interpreted. Note: N = 266; percentages may not total 100 due to rounding. Income and platform were free-text responses coded post hoc. The education variable should be treated with caution: the response options offered were bachelor's degree, trade/technical/vocational training, postgraduate, and no schooling completed, with no diploma, foundation, matriculation, or secondary-school option. Because 57.9 per cent of respondents are aged 18 to 20 and would typically hold or be pursuing a diploma or foundation qualification, many had no accurate option available. Cross-tabulation confirms the resulting distortion: 38 of the 44 respondents recording postgraduate are aged 18 to 20. This variable is reported for completeness but is not used in interpretation. Three features constrain interpretation. The sample is heavily skewed towards female respondents (82.0 per cent), far from the roughly balanced sex ratio of the Pulau Pinang population; respondents are concentrated at the younger end of the Gen Z range (91.7 per cent aged 18 to 24); and 83.8 per cent are not in paid employment, with 79.4 per cent reporting no income or less than RM1,000 monthly, indicating a predominantly student or pre-career sample with limited discretionary travel budgets. These characteristics follow directly from recruiting through university and young-adult online communities. The results are therefore presented as evidence about young, highly engaged, predominantly female Gen Z social media users, not as estimates for the Gen Z population of Pulau Pinang as a whole.

***Table 2***. *Demographic profile of respondents (N = 266).*

| Characteristic | n | % | Characteristic | n | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age | | | Monthly income | | |
| 18–20 years | 154 | 57.9 | No income | 31 | 11.7 |
| 21–24 years | 90 | 33.8 | Less than RM1,000 | 180 | 67.7 |
| 25–28 years | 22 | 8.3 | RM1,000–RM1,999 | 19 | 7.1 |
| Gender | | | RM2,000 and above | 15 | 5.6 |
| Female | 218 | 82.0 | Not stated | 21 | 7.9 |
| Male | 48 | 18.0 | Daily social media use | | |
| Education | | | More than 5 hours | 145 | 54.5 |
| Bachelor's degree | 138 | 51.9 | 1 to 3 hours | 109 | 41.0 |
| Trade/technical/vocational | 73 | 27.4 | Less than 1 hour | 12 | 4.5 |
| Postgraduate | 44 | 16.5 | Most – used platform | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| No schooling completed | 11 | 4.1 | Instagram | 120 | 45.1 |
| Marial status | | | TikTok | 103 | 38.7 |
| Single | 251 | 94.4 | Other/multiple/not stated | 43 | 16.2 |
| Married | 14 | 5.3 | Content field follewd | | |
| Married with children | 1 | 0.4 | Fashion and beauty | 73 | 27.4 |
| Employment status | | | Culture, art, celebrities | 60 | 22.6 |
| Not working | 223 | 83.8 | Travel and destinations | 56 | 21.1 |
| Full-time | 26 | 9.8 | Culinary, news, other | 46 | 17.3 |
| Part-time | 17 | 6.4 | Sports and lifestyle | 31 | 11.7 |
| | | | Device used | | |
| | | | Mobile device | 254 | 95.5 |
| | | | Other/not stated | 12 | 4.5 |

## *Descriptive statistics*

Perceptions were positive across all four constructs. Attractiveness recorded the highest composite mean (M = 3.95) and trustworthiness the lowest (M = 3.68): respondents readily credited influencers with persuasive skill and strategic use of voice while remaining more reserved about transparency (M = 3.52). Within expertise, the lowest and most variable item was preferring influencers' experiences over those of family and friends (M = 3.33, SD = 1.12), indicating that influencers have not displaced personal networks. For travel decisions, reliance on trustworthy sources scored highest (M = 4.11) (*Table 3*).

***Table 3****. Descriptive statistics for all scale items.*

| Item | N | Mean |
|---|---|---|
| Attractiveness (M = 3.95, SD = 0.63) | | |
| 1. Influencers are the best storytellers, using text, film, music, and photography. | 266 | 4.11 |
| 2. Influencers can interact successfully across several platforms. | 266 | 4.08 |
| 3. Influencers can reach large groups of targeted segments. | 266 | 4.00 |
| 4. Influencers have a social presence extending beyond their online presence. | 266 | 3.67 |
| 5. I am drawn to influencers as a travel source more than traditional sources. | 266 | 3.89 |
| Trustworthiness (M = 3.68, SD = 0.67) | | |
| 1. Influencers maintain transparency and authenticity in their field. | 266 | 3.52 |
| 2. Influencers are devoted to their work and their beliefs. | 266 | 3.68 |
| 3. Influencers have an uncanny power of persuasion. | 266 | 3.82 |
| 4. Influencers know when, how, and where to use their voice for impact. | 266 | 3.88 |
| 5. I trust influencers more than any traditional travel information source. | 265 | 3.50 |
| Expertise (M = 3.75, SD = 0.64) | | |
| 1. Influencers have good knowledge of their field. | 265 | 3.81 |
| 2. Influencers affect the behaviour and mindsets of followers. | 265 | 3.88 |
| 3. Influencers use innovative methods to show actual tourism experiences. | 265 | 3.91 |
| 4. Influencers have more destination information than traditional sources. | 265 | 3.74 |
| 5. I prefer influencers' experiences over family and friends' experiences. | 266 | 3.33 |
| 6. I follow influencers providing accurate, updated, high-quality content. | 265 | 3.86 |
| Travel purchase decision (M = 3.87, SD = 0.64) | | |
| 1. I read the best tourism experiences when making travel decisions. | 265 | 3.99 |
| 2. I am likely to visit places reviewed by others. | 266 | 3.99 |
| 3. I adjust my trip plans based on other people's opinions. | 266 | 3.69 |
| 4. I tend to capture the same photos I have seen others take. | 265 | 3.56 |
| 5. My final travel decision rests only on the most trustworthy sources. | 265 | 4.11 |

*Note: Five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Item labels follow the English version of the questionnaire. Attractiveness items 2 to 5 are affected by a translation misalignment in the bilingual instrument: the Bahasa Melayu text paired with each of these items corresponds to a different item in the same block, in a cyclic shift. The four propositions presented were identical in both language versions, so the composite attractiveness score is unaffected; item-level means for these four items, however, mix responses to two different propositions and should not be interpreted individually.*

## *Correlation analysis*

All three credibility dimensions correlate positively and significantly with travel purchase decisions, expertise most strongly (r = .706), followed by trustworthiness (r = .635) and attractiveness (r = .584), all p < .001. RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3 are therefore answered affirmatively at the bivariate level. The matrix also shows a substantial association between trustworthiness and expertise (r = .800), by a wide margin the strongest inter-predictor correlation, which proves important for interpreting the regression results (*Table 4*).

***Table 4***. *Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix.*

| Variable | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Attractiveness | 3.95 | 0.63 | - | | | |
| 2. Trustworthiness | 3.68 | 0.67 | .624 | - | | |
| 3. Expertise | 3.75 | 0.64 | .596 | .800 | - | |
| 4. Travel purchase decision | 3.87 | 0.64 | .584 | .635 | .706 | - |

*Note: N = 266; All correlations significant at p < .001 (two-tailed).*

## *Regression analysis and hypothesis testing*

The model is statistically significant, F(3, 262) = 103.68, p < .001. The three credibility dimensions together explain 54.3 per cent of the variance in travel decision-making, with an adjusted $R^2$ of .538 confirming that this is not inflated by the number of predictors. The Durbin–Watson statistic of 1.948 indicates no autocorrelation in the residuals. Expertise is the strongest predictor (B = 0.485, β = .488, t = 6.86, p < .001), carrying slightly more than twice the weight of attractiveness (B = 0.233, β = .229, t = 4.20, p < .001). Trustworthiness is not statistically significant (B = 0.096, β = .102, t = 1.39, p = .165) despite its strong bivariate correlation with the outcome. H1, H3 and H4 are therefore supported, and H2 is not. The resulting regression equation is: Travel Purchase Decision = 0.779 + 0.233 (Attractiveness) + 0.096 (Trustworthiness) + 0.485 (Expertise) (*Table 5* and *Table 6*).

***Table 5***. *Regression model summary and analysis of variance.*

| Source | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Regression | 58.031 | 3 | 19.344 | 103.679 | < .001 |
| Residual | 48.882 | 262 | 0.187 | | |
| Total | 106.913 | 265 | | | |

***Table 6***. *Regression coefficients and hypothesis testing.*

| Predictor | B | SE | β | t | Sig. | VIF | Hypothesis |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (Constant) | 0.779 | 0.183 | - | 4.247 | < .001 | - | - |
| Attractiveness | 0.233 | 0.055 | .229 | 4.195 | < .001 | 1.710 | H1 supported |
| Trustworthiness | 0.096 | 0.069 | .102 | 1.392 | .165 | 3.060 | H2 not supported |
| Expertise | 0.485 | 0.071 | .488 | 6.858 | < .001 | 2.902 | H3, H4 supported |

*Note: N = 266. Dependent variable: travel purchase decision. All VIF values fall below the conventional threshold of 5, so multicollinearity does not invalidate the model; the elevated values for trustworthiness and expertise reflect their strong intercorrelation (Table 4). H2 concerns the unique contribution of trustworthiness once the other predictors are controlled.*

## *Discussion*

Consistent with prior work, influencer characteristics shaped travel decisions among younger audiences (Wahba et al., 2025; Orabi, 2022), but the three credibility dimensions were not equally influential. H1 was supported. Attractiveness significantly improved travel decision-making, supporting findings that visually appealing influencers increase consumer interest and message effectiveness (Mohamed et al.,

2025; Zorlu and Candan, 2023). This is reinforced by the descriptive results, in which storytelling ability recorded the highest item mean in the study. Attractiveness appears to function primarily as an attention-capturing mechanism: it brings destinations into the consideration set, even if it does not by itself resolve the uncertainty attached to a travel purchase.

H2 was not supported. Although trustworthiness correlated positively and significantly with travel decision-making at the bivariate level, it made no significant unique contribution in the regression. The data identify the reason directly: trustworthiness and expertise correlate at r = .800, by a wide margin the strongest inter-predictor association in the model, with corresponding VIF values of 3.06 and 2.90. Respondents who judge an influencer to be knowledgeable overwhelmingly also judge them honest, so expertise absorbs most of the variance that trustworthiness would otherwise explain. This is conceptual overlap rather than irrelevance, and it is consistent with the source credibility model, in which the dimensions are distinct but correlated (Ohanian, 1990). The result contrasts with research positioning trust as central to persuasion (Lawrence and Meivitawanli, 2023; Meng and Lin, 2023) and suggests that in a low-cost information search, as opposed to a committed purchase, perceived competence may matter more than perceived honesty, particularly in a sample with limited discretionary income where travel content is consumed aspirationally rather than transactionally.

H3 and H4 were supported. Expertise had the strongest effect of the three dimensions, reflecting the importance of knowledge, experience, and information quality (Asyraff et al., 2025; AlFarraj et al., 2021). Gen Z's preference for accurate, up-to-date content supports the argument that knowledgeable influencers lower perceived travel risk, consistent with the social media influence model in which reliable content raises booking and planning intentions (Petrovská and Gaetaniello, 2024). Theoretically, the findings support the applicability of the source credibility model to influencer-mediated travel decisions in a Malaysian setting, with one qualification: studies that model credibility as a single composite or that test dimensions only bivariately risk overstating the role of trustworthiness. Expertise appears dominant in the travel context specifically, where perceived risk is high and information asymmetry is substantial. Practically, influencer selection should weigh demonstrable destination knowledge above follower count or visual appeal alone, favouring partners who supply itineraries, cost breakdowns, safety information, and firsthand experience over those producing only aspirational imagery. Attractiveness remains valuable at the awareness stage but works best as a gateway to expertise-driven content rather than a substitute for it. Given that 79.4 percent of respondents report no income or less than RM1,000 monthly, campaigns aimed at this segment may also be more effective when they emphasise affordability, domestic and regional destinations, and budget-conscious planning.

## Conclusion

This study examined the impact of influencer credibility on travel decision-making among young Gen Z social media users in Pulau Pinang, focusing on attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise. Attractiveness and expertise significantly influenced travel decisions, while trustworthiness made no significant unique contribution once the other dimensions were controlled. Expertise contributed the highest explanatory power, showing that critical, technologically fluent Gen Z values reliable, up-to-date, high-

quality information that lowers uncertainty, while attractiveness helped draw attention. The study underscores the importance of knowledgeable influencers in shaping Gen Z's travel habits and offers insight for travel marketers and content creators. Several limitations should be borne in mind. First, and most importantly, the study used non-probability purposive sampling, so respondents were not selected with known inclusion probabilities; the findings support analytical inference about relationships among the variables studied but do not constitute population estimates for Gen Z in Pulau Pinang. Related to this, self-selection is likely, in that respondents already interested in travel content were more inclined to complete the questionnaire, which may inflate the observed strength of influencer effects.

Second, the achieved sample is demographically skewed: 82.0 per cent female, 91.7 per cent aged 18 to 24, and 83.8 per cent not in paid employment. This composition reflects recruitment through university and young-adult online networks and means the results speak to young, highly engaged, largely pre-career Gen Z social media users. Since gender, age, and disposable income all condition responsiveness to influencer content, the relative weighting of the three credibility dimensions could differ in a more balanced sample; employed Gen Z with genuine booking capacity may weight trustworthiness more heavily, precisely because they bear real financial risk. The scope of the study, including its title, has been framed accordingly. Third, the study is cross-sectional and relies on self-reported measures collected through a single instrument, so causal direction cannot be established and common method bias cannot be ruled out (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Fourth, it is confined to a single Malaysian state and measures travel decision-making intentions rather than realised travel behaviour, a meaningful distinction in a sample with limited discretionary income. Finally, the translation misalignment affecting four attractiveness items, described in the note to *Table 3*, means those item-level means are not individually interpretable, although composite scores and all hypothesis tests are unaffected.

Future research could employ quota or stratified sampling to achieve a gender- and employment-balanced sample, permitting a direct test of whether the dominance of expertise holds across subgroups. Comparative designs across Malaysian states or generations would clarify the boundary conditions of these findings, while longitudinal or booking-data designs would establish whether influencer exposure translates into realised travel rather than intention alone. Finally, testing trustworthiness as a mediator or moderator of the expertise–decision relationship, rather than as a parallel predictor, may better capture how the credibility dimensions operate together.

## Acknowledgement

The authors acknowledge the support of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Cawangan Pulau Pinang, Kampus Permatang Pauh, and the Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management for providing the facilities for this research. This research is self-funded. An AI-assisted tool was used solely to improve the readability and grammatical flow of the manuscript; the authors reviewed and edited the final content and take full responsibility for its accuracy and integrity.

## Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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