INFLUENCER POWER IN HOSPITALITY: INFORMATIONAL SOCIAL INFLUENCE AND PARASOCIAL INTERACTION IN ONLINE HOTEL BOOKING

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Abstract. In a digital age, social media influencers (SMIs) play the role of influential actors who influence consumer behavior in the hospitality industry, more specifically in the situation of online hotel booking. This research examines the condition in which the perception of power of SMIs with attractive and expert features, especially of their informational influence, has an impact on user parasocial interaction (PSI) in online hotel booking. It builds on the Social Influence Theory to study the links between the credibility of the source of information, informational social influence, and PSI among users of social media. The implemented survey, based on a dual-channel approach, offers two methods: the gathering of data in online travel communities through Facebook and the collection in Vietnamese hotels where the online travel agencies (OTAs) have partnerships. The structural equation modeling on the sample of 739 respondents who had both followed at least one SMI and booked online hotels in the recent six months was conducted. Conclusions indicate that the SMIs play a critical role in informational trust and emotional ties, which further determine consumers' engagement and decision-making in digital hotel bookings.

Keywords: informational social influence, social influence theory, online hotel booking, parasocial interaction, influencer power

1.   Introduction

In the digital age, consumers are overwhelmed by the number of options, and choice is gained through valuable information. This is even more exhibited in the hospitality business. The "buy before consuming" structure makes the role of information even more crucial. Travelers/bookers need to find trustworthy and applicable information to be willing to book their services. The credibility, quality, and trust strongly influence not only customers' immediate decisions but also their long-term loyalty in the online context [1]. The usage of social media platforms (SMPs) like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest, Twitter, Snapchat, and Weibo has transformed the way hospitality organizations communicate with

consumers [2, 3]. Social media, in contrast to traditional media, allows real-time interactions between customers [4] and information that they can process and naturally react to immediately [5]. Brand–influencer congruence is a crucial factor for marketing success [6], as customers tend to respond more positively when an influencer's personality traits closely align with their values and the brand's identity [7, 8]. In terms of a new marketing frontier (toward digital-first strategies), hotel brands have been seeking innovative ways to acquire new customers and engage long-term [8]. This has also made the marketers re-evaluate SMIs as a strategic marketing tool to sustain relationships [1]. Businesses should use SMIs, especially in the T&H business. They can build upon trust and loyalty due to their ability to share individual accounts and create a feeling of intimacy with their admirers. Celebrities or experts in a certain sphere, as well as relatable micro-influencers, humanize the travel experience and bring it considerably closer to audiences by sharing stories in direct communication.

With a rate of social media penetration among the highest in the world, Vietnam boasts around 76.2 million users of social media, representing more than three-quarters of the population [9]. The most popular of these, like Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram, own this space and have given rise to SMIs, like in the hospitality industry, where Facebook boasts the maximum number of Vietnamese users. SMIs in Vietnam, particularly Gen Y and Gen Z, tend to make use of visually appealing images, narrations, or events to create relatability and credence in Vietnam [10, 11]. The increased trend in the travel industry is the sponsorship of impactful influencers by hotels and OTAs (like Booking.com, Traveloka, and Agoda) in exchange for a stay or experience [12], then allowing them to promote it through their very prominent reach across their social media channels, which heavily affects booking behavior. Gradually turning into digital guidebooks, especially with SMP services, especially given the large database of SMI posts reviewing and advising travel destinations and promo codes/codes, a wide range of SMI is considered to be an exceptionally credible source of recommendation, especially when referring to the context of the situation where the consumer is unsure, as in the case of making a booking reservation in a hotel online [3].

In that uncertain context, the PSI between SMI and followers can help their followers. PSI is unidirectional, but it is a sequence of relationships of personal relevance that can be formed by users with media personalities as they are consumed through the Internet [13]. Whereas the popularity or professionalism of the influencers is supposedly one of the motivators of PSI, recent research suggests that the credibility of the influencers themselves and the value of the information received as the result of their activity also remain central variables that dictate the

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level of trust and reliance in terms of engagement development [14, 15]. Asymmetry of power informational influence is becoming more applicable in the discussion of SMI, yet most of the studies available have been constrained in the way they analyzed the influence, without further detail on how the information has been internalized by the SMI, thereby leading to other psychological factors like PSI. Moreover, in the Vietnamese setting, with a considerable level of social media use, where online tourism is flying high, there is a lack of empirical studies along this line of inquiry. Nevertheless, SMIs continue to become more popular, and it is impossible to predict the engaging behavior of their users. There is no direct relationship between a large number of followers and potent interaction or influence. In such a way, there is a need to research which variables impact the practical social connection of users with influencers [16]. The awareness of such operations comes as a competitive advantage that hospitality businesses require.

Furthermore, some studies, such as Wahab et al. [17], hold that the influence of influencers on the purchasing decision is a very indirect one and can be traced to more complex relations and psychological processes. It indicates that a deeper investigation into the mechanism of interactions and identification with the users in the long-term perspective will be required. Although the presence and role of SMIs in the process of making decisions related to travel continually increases, very little is actually known about the way that information disseminated by SMIs is psychologically internalized by its users and how it applies to accommodation booking processes made online. The majority of available studies do not investigate the cognitive or emotional processes behind such outcomes as brand perception or purchase intention but merely end at the brand perception or purchase intention level. This research gap is even more evident in Vietnam, where the use of social media continues to flourish, with the digital tourism economy expanding at a rapid rate. However, very few have used empirical studies to investigate the psychological basis through which SMI content generates user interaction and assumption of trust in the same.

It is against this background that the proposed study intends to fill this gap by investigating the role of the informational social influence in the development of parasocial relationships between SMIs and users when contacting online hotel reservations. We ultimately attempt to give a more prospective and situational mindfulness of what digital impact in the hospitality industry is about by focusing on how and why consumers act and transform as a consequence of their exposure to influencer content.

2.   Literature review

2.1.   Social Influence Theory (SIT)

Originally presented by Kelman [18], SIT describes how an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, along with their future intentions, can be influenced or shaped by another person at three levels: conformity, identification, and internalization. Instead of being a descriptive framework, more recent studies have used SIT to describe consumer behavior and online social interactions, especially in social media-mediated contexts [2, 5].

First, the compliance level is at which the acceptance/influencing happens, and the individual uses the behavior as a means of getting his or her rewards or avoiding punishment, hence deriving satisfaction out of the social effect of submission/acceptance to be influenced. In digital contexts, the mechanism is captured by the fact that consumers tend to act in accordance with group norms, including listening to the advice of influencers because they appear to be famous, receiving social acceptance, or feeling the fear of missing out [19]. SMI serves as a salient reference point, and also their endorsements usually serve as a form of social proof that motivates engagement behaviors like liking, commenting, or making a booking decision [20]. Second, the identification level is where one learns the behavior that has been practiced on them and embraces it in order to have or sustain a good relationship with others, hence deriving satisfaction from the action. SMIs contribute to identification through the sharing of personal stories, lifestyles, and values, which enhances emotional attachment and perceived similarity among followers [14]. Such perceived relational proximity amplifies the desire to use influencer-sponsored products and services because influencers are perceived as not only opinion leaders but also social confirmers and sources of normative stimuli [15].

Third, internalization level takes place when people accept influence because the resulting behavior is found rewarding and consistent with personal values; in this case, they experience satisfaction founded on the content of the new behavior [21]. SMIs with the endorsement or validation messages will have a high possibility of influencing the behaviors of their followers to engage with or use the product or service being endorsed or validated by the influencer, provided it is appropriate with their personal values. Combining a conceptualization by Kelman [18] with the recent social media studies [5, 20], SIT offers a strong theoretical base to comprehend the impact of influencer attributes and social influence processes on customer social interaction and engagement patterns during an online booking experience.

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2.2.   Hypothesis development

SMIs. The concept of the influencer originated from the notion of personal influence introduced by Lazarsfeld [22], which refers to somebody who is able to influence the attitudes and actions of another person within the concept of interpersonal communication [23]. SMIs refer to such people who generate content and promote it on this or that platform, primarily Instagram and Facebook, and follow the interaction with brands and the ability to influence specific people [24]. Because SMIs represent a modern form of marketing communication channel, many companies have implemented this tool to advertise goods and services in the digital realm [25, 26, 27].

PSI was first proposed by Horton and Richard Wohl [13] to explain the one-way relationship between media celebrities and media users, in which media users develop intimate feelings and a fictitious, one-way social relationship with the characters. PSI can lead to a quasi-social relationship between the audience and the media character, resulting in a "virtual intimacy relationship" [5]. This concept has been widely studied in the field of communication and media in various contexts. PSI has been viewed in the context of online consumer behavior [2]. In the hospitality experiment, Horng et al. [8] displayed that PSI is a descriptive term that explains the interactions between social media influencers and their followers.

Informational social influence (INFO) is the phenomenon of conforming to the opinions of others based on information used [28] as evidence in making decision choices [29]. Researchers have extensively studied the importance of information in consumer purchasing behaviors. Hu et al. [30] examined the mechanism of SIT and found that peer expertise was positively correlated with impulsive purchasing. The influence of online celebrities and digital influencers on online users' purchase intentions [3, 4]. Therefore, online users perceive that they are more trusting of information developed by influencers and peer customers. Ouvrein et al. [31] compared online celebrities and traditional celebrities and found that online influencers perform better than their peers because they continuously generate information that online shoppers demand.

Source credibility (CRE) is important in the marketing literature because it is essential for customer loyalty. According to Horng et al. [8], source credibility is a two-dimensional variable. First, it is based on competence, which indicates the source's ability to manage authentic information [32].

Under the SIT [18], the traits of the influencer on consumer behavior are largely influenced by the factors of attractiveness and expertise. Expertise as a persuasion concept implies that practitioners are those with knowledge, skills, and capability to provide accurate detailed information of goods and services, and trustworthiness is about the perceived honesty, authenticity, and ethical integrity of the practitioner [33]. Meanwhile, the attractiveness contributes to attracting and retaining the attention, which makes audiences more responsive to the message [34, 35]. Through the personal experience, review, and recommendations, SMIs are able to develop a feeling of authenticity [36] and relatability that supports PSI [37]. This intimacy creates trust and emotional connection, which minimizes uncertainty when deciding on booking hotels. In addition, the visual nature of storytelling and interactive aspects of the content of SMIs also create a feeling of social presence in the digital settings, so the audience is seemingly involved in a one-on-one conversation [38]. Compulsive exposure to PSI may become a kind of virtual intimacy relationship, and when people get to know details about influencers, have a sense of comfort and safety, and feel ready to implement interactive activities (commenting, sharing, and responding to influencer posts [39]), it leads to the development of a virtual relationship with influencers [8]. Within the hospitality industry, the perception of reduced risk and an increased desirability of influencer-promoted hotel booking venues are associated with such virtual intimacy [38, 2]. In view of these arguments, the argument presented below is postulated:

H1: SMIs have a positive effect on the PSI of online booking guests.

In the Fourth Industrial Revolution, consumers are more likely to trust the information created by influencers [40] and former customers compared to classic brand messages [30]. The latter trust is especially strengthened with the examples of SMIS sharing the first-person experience, spending time at a given hotel, utilizing its services, and recording the impressions on camera. This kind of experiential content not only translates factual information but also presents genuine accounts that make audiences realize that its content is not only credible but also very relatable [41]. To take advantage of these characteristics, brands have been cooperating more with influencers, securing broader coverage, encouraging positive online feedback, and encouraging involvement with the viewership. Studies indicate that digital influencers are superior in influencing buying behavior than traditional celebrities since they constantly update their content with respect to what is actively searched by online shoppers to make buying decisions [31]. Akhtar et al. [2] revealed in hospitality industries that the information through the experience expressed by the influencers on the hotel booking websites

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poses the potential of amplifying the social informational influence, which measures the level of dependence of individuals on the experience and opinion of others in making their respective decisions. This is in line with the SIT [18] that suggests that credible and socially validated information decreases risk in an otherwise risky transaction, like a hotel room or a hotel booking. Before the customers make a commitment to booking, they need to get both information relevant to booking and social validation against sources trusted by them. By sharing experience-rich content, SMIs are not limited to the delivery of product knowledge (that is merely descriptive). The social validation formally comes with the use of such content, effectively behaving as a reference point in decision-making by the audience. According to the social influence theory and the past research, the next hypothesis could be formulated:

H2: SMIs influence INFO of online hotel booking customers.

In online hotel booking, where consumers deal with service intangibility and possible damage, SMIs' information data is becoming a valid source of reference, particularly where the information is based on first-hand experience. This kind of information helps consumers assess hotel services, reduce perceived risks, and achieve a certain level of social gratification in their choices [3]. Customers assess this social information as credible, valuable, and consistent with perceived quality needs; the information is not only used by the customers to judge their cognitive evaluation but also develops their emotional attachment to the source of information. It is in line with SIT [18], which states that information that is credible and is related to can result in identification level and internalization level. INFO, in this process, extends to the relationship-bride role: the increasing feeling of familiarity and perceived closeness between the consumer and the influencer. This connection has already been proven by previous studies in the field of tourism and hospitality: credible travel information and social endorsement play a significant part in the development of such social ties as parasocial ones when viewers believe themselves to know the influencer as a person [38, 8]. Such a parasocial intimacy can enhance the level of acceptance of subsequent suggestions by a follower, loyalty, and support the persuasive abilities of an influencer. Thus, such an assumption can be made that greater social informational influence will positively impact PSI when it comes to booking hotels online.

H3: INFO positively influences their PSI towards online booking.

Furthermore, the relationship between SMIs and PSI can be understood as partly mediated by social informational influence. Although PSI can be promoted in a direct way by the SMIs through their attractiveness, expertise, and interpersonal interactions, most of this influence can work indirectly through the information that they release. The social validation of

experience-based and credible information acts as the bridge to the conversion of exposure by the influencer into a more socially accepted and strong parasocial relationship. The evidence helps to corroborate this mediation perspective by pointing to the fact that informational influence frequently serves as the means to transform social media communication into more extensive outcomes in the context of a relationship [26, 27].

H4: INFO mediates the relationship between SMI and PSI.

The informational influence embedded in SMIs does not uniformly contribute to the effectiveness of INFO but rather depends upon the audience's perceptions of source credibility on the part of the influencer, which is operationally defined as the blend of trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness [42]. When people believe that the influencer is very credible, there is a high likelihood that audiences will accept and internalize information that is presented to them, thereby increasing its influence on the social information processing. On the other hand, perceived credibility holds reduced strength or cancels this effect, even when the information is good or meaningful [40]. With strong pre-purchase uncertainty, intangible service quality in the hotel booking sector needs the key actions of the high-trust SMIs that may considerably boost the social information power by providing a verified, trustworthy recommendation. Such ability of competence is manifested not only in an assignment of factual and up-to-date information but also in authenticity and personal experience, which verifies their perceived reliability. The role of this moderating effect is empirically supported in studies. Baudier et al. [43] showed that the source credibility moderates the connection between the quality of recommendations and the perceived trustworthiness in forums on the Internet, while Akhtar et al. [2] affirmed its moderating influence between virtual influencers and social informational impact among users.

H5: Source credibility positively moderates the relationship between SMIs and online hotel booking social informational influence, depending on high trust and vice versa.
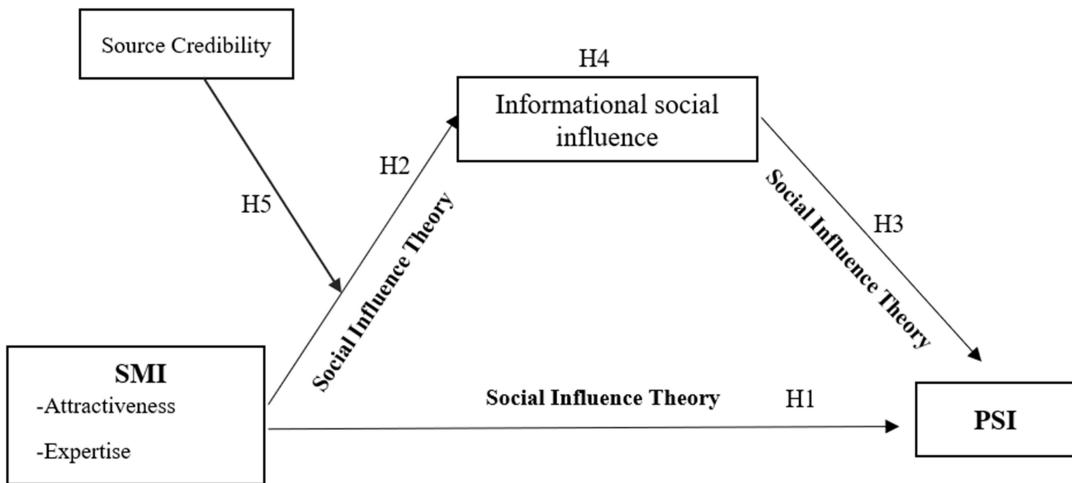
Figure 1. Proposed Model

Source: Authors, 2025

3.   Methodology

3.1.   Data collection procedure

The study was conducted in Ho Chi Minh City, one of the largest tourist cities in Vietnam, whose hospitality sector is booming, and the city has a vast supply of tourist attractions, cultural and food options, entertainment, and shows. A cross-sectional survey was used to investigate the implications of SMIs on PSI in the digital hotel booking behavioral environment. The framers of the targeted population would include people who had viewed SMI material and had booked a reservation in a digital hotel during the last six months. Two recruitment channels were used to collect the data successfully:

With channel 1, the recruitment of participants was carried out using popular Facebook groups dedicated to travel in Vietnam. The groups can be seen as platforms through which travel-related experiences are shared and discussed repeatedly between users, including posts by influencers, as exemplified by the following studies: [6, 4, 44]. Within these groups, a notice about the survey was published, where the main idea of the study, as well as its requirements, was brought up. Those respondents who had already encountered SMI materials on hospitality decision-making were also invited to participate in it by opening an online questionnaire that came with a link that was attached. Out of these, this study captures participants who have

recently been exposed to influencer content within a digital setup and is in line with the theoretical emphasis of content-driven engagement of the study.

To support the online interaction, the second channel was face-to-face data collection at the hotel level. Twelve three-star-plus staffed hoteliers in Ho Chi Minh City who worked with OTAs like Booking.com, Agoda, and Traveloka were willing to agree to take part, as exemplified by the following studies: [45]. These hotels were favorable in terms of their proximity and a large number of bookings on them through OTA. Front office employees (or staff), with the approval of the hotel management, approached guests during check-in to introduce the research to visitors. It went to only the guests using OTA platforms to make their bookings. Guests would get a link to an online survey through a QR code or messaging email when in agreement, and this would capture the data depending on the pre-verified behavior of booking near the time. As a point of motivation, the guests received benefits in terms of a direct discount on their accommodation bill or a free voucher for a service.

This combined recruitment strategy was aimed at a balance between proxies (1) exposure to influencer material in online groups and (2) real booking behavior in genuine hotel situations. The possibility of using the two channels simultaneously allowed the study to embrace a wider range of customer behavior, from the influence of the digital world to the real act, thus making the results harder to negate. The involvement in the two channels was not forced in any way. Respondents were made aware of their rights, such as the possibility of skipping questions or dropping out of it. Full anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and all data were used only to conduct academic research.

3.2. Instruments

This study was designed as a survey through a questionnaire. The content of the questions was determined in two parts: the survey part on demographic characteristics. The first section of the questionnaire focuses on gathering demographic information about the guests. These questions not only facilitate statistical analysis but also help define the characteristics of the target respondent group. This section includes screening questions (the authors use purposive sampling, which is a non-probability sampling technique) to identify participants who follow SMIs and have experience with online hotel booking through OTAs.

The second part surveyed the effect of SMI on PSI. The scales used as measurements based on prior research were identified and modified according to the proposed research model for the Vietnamese context. To be more exact, the SMIs construct was assessed with the

attractiveness and expertise constructs that consisted of three and five items, respectively [8, 34]. INFO comprised of 4 items taken over and modified according to Hu et al. [30]. Eight items (adapted by Agnihotri et al. [46] and Hong et al. [8]) were used to measure the parasocial interaction. Lastly, the domain of source credibility was comprised of four questions adjusted from Dedeoglu [32]. Overall, there were 24 items that were used in the research, and they were measured using a 5-point Likert scale of 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree, and some demographic variables were referenced from the results of social research.

3.3.   Pilot test and data analysis

The survey was carried out in the period of summer vacation, between 15th of May and the end of June 2025. A total of 1,015 questionnaires were distributed with 739 valid responses being achieved after some incomplete responses and responses that could not be used due to invalidity.

At the end of data screening, coding, data entry, and cleaning, the study analyzed the data using the SmartPLS program. The SMI was modeled as a high construct, with attractiveness and expertise specified as first-order dimensions while the measurement model will also be tested in terms of internal consistency reliability (outer loading factors with the values of 0.70 or higher and composite reliability (CR) of 0.7 or higher), convergent validity (AVE of 0.5 and more) [47], and discriminant validity based on the Fornell & Larcker index [48] and HTMT. The model fit indicators, VIF checks of multicollinearity, and R-squared values will then be examined in the second stage to evaluate the structural model and determine the explained variance. Lastly, the moderation variable will be tested using the bootstrap method to assess its impact on the modeling hypothesis.

4.   Results

4.1. Respondents' Profile:

The demography of the respondents illustrates that there is an equal number of males and females, with 52.5 percent of the respondents being female gender and 47.5 percent being male gender. Most of them are in the 28-43 age range (36.7%), then 16-27 (28.7%), 44-59 (25.8%), and those of and above 60 years (8.8%). The majority of the respondents are well educated, with 70.6% having a university or college degree, 17.2% with postgraduate qualifications, and a much smaller proportion with vocational training (7.0%) and high school education (5.1%). Beyond this, 53.5 percent of the respondents follow more than three influencers, with 26.4

percent following three, 14.1 percent following two, and a very low 6.1 percent following only one. It can be concluded that the sample is formed mainly of educated persons of working age who are actively interested in it right now, so it will be of considerable interest to investigate how the content of influencers affects online consumption.

Table 1. Respondents' characteristics

Features		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	388	52.5
	Female	351	47.5
Age	16-27	212	28.7
	28-43	271	36.7
	44-59	191	25.8
	>60	65	8.8
Education	High school	38	5.1
	Vocational training	52	7.0
	University/ Colleges	522	70.6
	Postgraduated	127	17.2
Influencers_Followed	1	45	6.1
	2	104	14.1
	3	195	26.4
	>3	395	53.5

Source: Authors analysis from data, 2025

4.2. Testing CMB

To check the possibility of common method bias (CMB), the collinearity test was carried out by using the variance inflation factors (VIFs). CMB can be viewed as a problem when the VIF of any construct reaches a value of more than 3.3 [49]. All the values of VIF in this research study were observed to lie between 1.148 and 1.511, which is well below the recommended

range. Moreover, Harman's single-factor test was conducted and all measurement items were loaded into an unrotated exploratory factor analysis. The findings show that the first factor observes 32.09% of the total variance, which is less than the critical percentage of 50%. This result further justifies the finding that common method variance is not a major threat to the measurement model validity. These factors indicate that there is no significant common method variance and multicollinearity does not present a problem in the measurement model [49].

4.3.   Measurement model evaluation

The measurement model is designed to assess feasibility by examining the relationship between each indicator and the latent variable, with a focus on evaluating validity and reliability. The authors examined the convergent validity, which involves assessing Cronbach's alpha (α), the CR, and the AVE of all constructs in Table 2. For good convergent validity, the recommended values for α, CR, and AVE are 0.70, 0.70, and 0.50, respectively [48, 50, 51]. Therefore, the data structure was sufficiently reliable for the analysis of the subsequent stages.

Table 2. Factor loadings, evaluating validity and reliability

	α	C.R. (rho_a)	C.R. (rho_c)	AVE
ATT	0.891	0.892	0.932	0.822
CRE	0.869	0.872	0.910	0.717
EXP	0.864	0.865	0.902	0.648
INFO	0.875	0.876	0.914	0.727
PSI	0.888	0.889	0.911	0.562

Source: Authors analysis from data, 2025

Fornell-Larcker criterion and the HTMT ratio of correlations are two indices used to evaluate discriminant validity, which was recommended by Hair et al. [47] for PLS-SEM. Tables 3 and 4 present the discriminant validity results for the first-order constructs and the second-order constructs, respectively. Moreover, the HTMT values among the constructs are also below the conservative cutoff value of 0.9 [52].

Table 3. Discriminant validity – First-order Constructs

	ATT	CRE	EXP	INFO	PSI
ATT	*0.898*	*0.130*	*0.062*	*0.356*	*0.465*
CRE	0.146	*0.847*	*0.154*	*0.407*	*0.322*
EXP	0.071	0.175	*0.805*	*0.358*	*0.435*
INFO	0.402	0.464	0.411	*0.852*	*0.634*
PSI	0.522	0.365	0.497	0.718	*0.749*

Note: Bold and Italic = Fornell–Larcker criterion; normal font = HTMT.

Source: Authors analysis from data, 2025

Table 4. Discriminant validity –Second-order Constructs

	CRE	INFO	PSI
CRE	*0.847*	*0.407*	*0.322*
INFO	0.464	*0.852*	*0.634*
PSI	0.365	0.718	*0.749*

Note: Bold and Italic = Fornell–Larcker criterion; normal font = HTMT.

Source: Authors analysis from data, 2025

4.4. Structural model evaluation

The output of the structural equation modeling, which evaluates the total effects as shown in the conceptual model, is presented in Table 5. The results of the hypothesis testing based on the proposed hypotheses such as direct effect hypotheses (H1, H2, H3), and one moderating influence hypothesis (H5) and one mediating hypothesis (H4).

The results of the total effects analysis indicate that all hypothesized relationships are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Specifically, CRE has a positive total effect on informational social influence ($\beta = 0.319$, t = 9.835) and PSI ($\beta = 0.202$, t = 10.418). Consistent with H3, INFO exerts a significant positive effect on PSI ($\beta = 0.311$, t = 11.124), highlighting its important role in shaping users' parasocial responses during hotel booking.

Furthermore, SMI demonstrate strong total effects on both INFO (β = 0.430, t = 14.795; H2 supported) and PSI (β = 0.580, t = 23.712), suggesting that influencer-related cues substantially enhance both cognitive information processing and emotional–social engagement. In addition, the interaction term CRE × SMI shows significant positive total effects on INFO (β = 0.257, t = 8.809; H5 supported) and PSI (β = 0.169, t = 9.206), confirming the moderating role of CRE in strengthening the influence of SMI on social influence and parasocial interaction outcomes.

Table 5. Total effects

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (｜O/STDEV｜)	P values
CRE -> INFO	0.319	0.319	0.032	9.835	0.000
CRE -> PSI	0.202	0.202	0.019	10.418	0.000
INFO -> PSI	0.311	0.311	0.028	11.124	0.000
SMI -> INFO	0.430	0.431	0.029	14.795	0.000
SMI -> PSI	0.580	0.581	0.024	23.712	0.000
CRE x SMI -> INFO	0.257	0.257	0.029	8.809	0.000
CRE x SMI -> PSI	0.169	0.169	0.018	9.206	0.000

Source: Authors analysis from data, 2025

The bootstrapping findings demonstrate that all indirect effects are statistically significant and positive because the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals do not overlap (Table 6). Particularly, the association between CRE and PSI is greatly mediated by INFO (0.099, 95% CI [0.074, 0.127]). Similarly, INFO moderates the impact of social media influencers on PSI (0.134, 95% CI [0.106, 0.164]. In addition, the indirect influence of the interaction term CRE x SMI on PSI via INFO is also significant (0.080, 95% well CI [0.059, 0.104]) which shows that SMI moderates the mediation effect; in that case, credibility plays an indirect role that works through the influence of informational social influence on the interaction between credibility and parasocial interaction.

Table 6. Confidence intervals (CI)

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	2.5%	97.5%
CRE -> INFO -> PSI	0.099	0.099	0.074	0.127
SMI -> INFO -> PSI	0.134	0.134	0.106	0.164
CRE x SMI -> INFO -> PSI	0.080	0.080	0.059	0.104
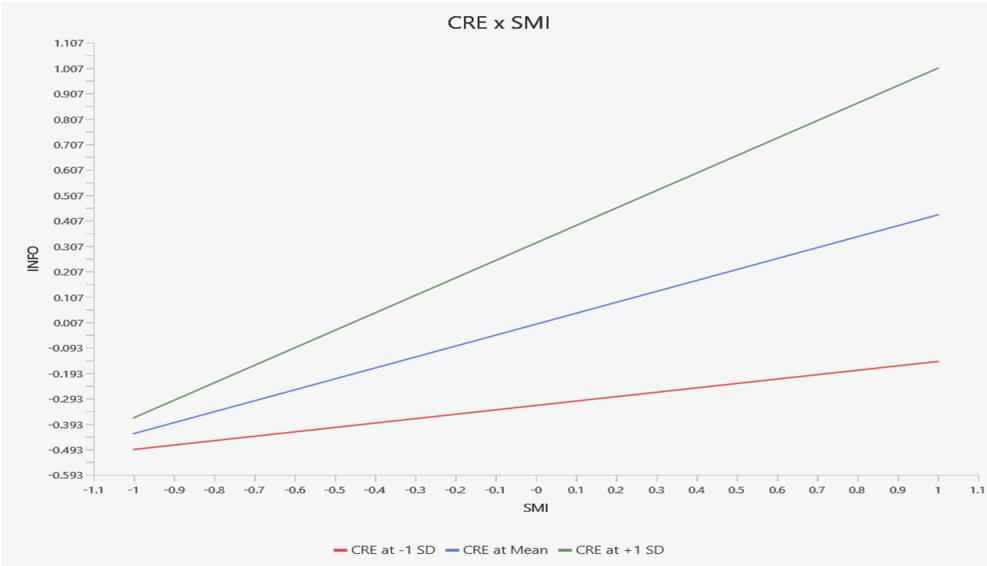
Figure 2. Exploration of credibility with SMI at three levels for INFO

Source: Authors analysis from data, 2025

5.   Implications

5.1.   Theoretical Implications

This empirical research shows the strong position of SMIs in influencing online consumer behavior, particularly in the hotel booking scenario. All the presented five hypotheses are confirmed by the results, underlining both direct and indirect influence mechanisms and the importance of source credibility.

First, the significant total effects of credibility on informational social influence and parasocial interaction indicate that credible information sources increase consumers' willingness to internalize information and engage socially with influencers [42]. Consistent with Kelman's [18] internalization process, individuals are more likely to be influenced when information is perceived as accurate and valid. In the online hotel booking context—characterized by high perceived risk and information asymmetry—credibility therefore plays a crucial role in shaping consumers' reliance on social sources.

Second, the findings confirm the mediating role of informational social influence. The significant indirect effects suggest that parasocial interaction does not emerge from influence cues alone. Rather, PSI in utilitarian, high-involvement service decisions is grounded in cognitive trust and perceived informational value. While earlier PSI studies have largely emphasized emotional attachment [18], this study highlights informational influence as a key underlying mechanism within SIT.

Third, the strong overall effect of social media influencers on PSI underscores their role as powerful social referents who combine expertise with social presence. According to SIT, individuals rely on influential others for guidance under conditions of uncertainty [28]. Accordingly, SMIs function as contemporary opinion leaders whose perceived credibility and authenticity facilitate both information acceptance and parasocial bonding, thereby extending influencer research beyond behavioral intentions. Notably, the moderated mediation effect shows that credibility is most effective when conveyed by a strong social source. Influential SMIs enhance the acceptance of credible information, increasing the likelihood that consumers will internalize it and develop stronger parasocial relationships [53].

Overall, these findings conceptualize parasocial interaction as a socially constructed, information-based outcome shaped by social influence processes, thereby extending the application of SIT to contemporary online hospitality contexts.

5.2. Practical Implications

Based on the findings, hospitality marketers can adopt a set of integrated strategies to enhance the effectiveness of social media influencer campaigns. First, hotels should deliver both emotional resonance and informational value through careful influencer selection. Identifying appropriate SMIs involves choosing individuals who are cultivating strong parasocial relationships with followers but also reinforcing these relationships with high-quality, relevant, and credible information. By combining compelling storytelling with practical booking

guidance, hotels can simultaneously stimulate emotional engagement and strengthen informational social influence.

Second, source credibility should still be made a priority of the influencer partnerships. Because the influence process was moderated by credibility, companies ought to collaborate with influencers who are always credible in terms of trust, knowledge, and reliability. It can be done by means of long-lasting partnerships, open disclosures, and the determined verification of the ability of the influencer to travel, which makes sense with the brand image.

Third, credibility can be and must be actively bolstered even to those people who already possess a positive popularity. Other strategies lie in sharing backstage experiences, offering proofs of travel plans, and interacting with questions of particular followers, which also secures notions of knowledge and authenticity. Fourth, hotels may go an extra mile and inject influencer content into booking engines to mitigate subjective risk and drive conversions in making decisions. Placing influencer reviews, travel videos or curated itineraries in the booking interface can be especially powerful to help a traveler that does not know a particular destination or property, step through the decision process with trusted sources behind them.

Hospitality businesses will benefit most by regulating such strategies as a complete entity: striking a balance in terms of both the emotional appeal and the intellective significance and credibility. The given, all-inclusive strategy does not only promote more significant booking intentions but also promotes long-term loyalty between consumers and the brand.

6.   Limitation and future research

This study primarily focused on the general relationship between SMIs and guests' PSI in the context of online hotel booking. Nonetheless, generation gaps, especially between Generations X, Y, and Z, have not been analyzed in detail. Further research needs to be carried out with comparative research on these generations to determine whether the role of SMIs and subsequent PSI differs significantly, and this may provide more specific approaches for marketing hospitality brands to their segments. The other limitation is that the study was constrained within one main social media platform, which might restrict the extent of its applicability to other social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube, where the style of engagement and the influencer tactics might vary. Lastly, the cross-sectional design will limit the possibility of drawing some causality between SMI characteristics and PSI. This may

be further understood by using longitudinal or experimental designs that would enable us to better understand the manner in which these relationships develop as time goes by.

APPENDIX

The measurement scale

Dimensions	Code	Items
Social media influencer (SMI)		
Attractiveness [34]	ATT1	I find (SMI's name)'s social media content good-looking.
	ATT2	I find (SMI's name)'s social media content attractive.
	ATT3	I find (SMI's name)'s social media content visually appealing.
Expertise [34, 8]	EXP1	When looking at (SMI's name)'s social media content, I find she/he is experienced.
	EXP2	When looking at (SMI's name)'s social media content, I find she/he is an expert in his/her field.
	EXP3	When looking at (SMI's name)'s social media content, I find she/he is qualified.
	EXP4	When looking at (SMI's name)'s social media content, I find she/he is knowledgeable.
	EXP5	When looking at (SMI's name)'s social media content, I find she/he is competent.
Informational social influence [30]	INFO1	I often follow an influencer to help choose the best hotel.
	INFO2	I frequently obtain hotel information from the influencer on the hotel booking platform.
	INFO3	To make sure I book the right hotel, I often observe what my friends on this hotel booking platform are booking.
	INFO4	If I have little experience with an influencer, I often ask my friends on this hotel booking platform
Parasocial	PSI1	I look forward to seeing the posts of the influencers I follow on

Interaction		Instagram/ other SMP
[46, 8].	PSI2	If the influencer I am following appears in another profile, I will look at that photo/profile
	PSI3	As I follow the influencer, I feel like part of his team.
	PSI4	The influencer I follow is like an old friend.
	PSI5	If there was content on a blog or magazine about the influencer that I follow, I would read it.
	PSI6	The way the influencer shares things on his/her account makes me feel comfortable as if I am with my friends
	PSI7	When influencers share how it feels about the place she/he is visiting, this sharing helps me create my own opinion
	PSI8	I would like to personally meet the influencer I follow.
	CRE1	An influencer who shares information on a hotel booking platform is authentic.
Source Credibility	CRE2	An influencer who shares information on the hotel booking platform is knowledgeable.
[32]	CRE3	An influencer who shares information on the hotel booking platform is trustworthy.
	CRE4	An influencer who shares information on a hotel booking platform is credible.

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