

# Parasocial Relationships as a Mediator of YouTube Vlog Credibility and Gen Z Travel Intentions

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## Abstract

This study examined the influence of message credibility in educational travel vlogs on Generation Z's travel intention, with parasocial relationships as a mediating variable. Using a quantitative descriptive approach and SEM-PLS analysis, data were collected from 400 active viewers of the YouTube channel @leonardoedwin. The results showed that message credibility had a significant effect on travel intention ( $\beta = 0.783$ ) and parasocial relationships ( $\beta = 0.186$ ). Parasocial relationships also significantly influenced travel intention ( $\beta = 0.512$ ) and partially mediated the effect of message credibility ( $\beta = 0.401$ ). These findings supported the Two-Step Flow Communication Theory, where content creators act as opinion leaders who influence audience behavior through emotional connection. The study concluded that a combination of informational credibility and parasocial engagement played a crucial role in shaping persuasive communication, particularly in fostering travel intention among Gen Z audiences in the digital era.

**Keywords:** Message Credibility, Parasocial Relationship, Travel Intention, Generation Z, Opinion Leader

## Introduction

The development of digital technology has fundamentally changed the way Generation Z (born 1997-2012) obtains information and forms travel preferences. Generation Z, who were born and raised in the internet era, are highly familiar with social media and tend to rely on digital platforms as their primary source of inspiration and reference when planning travel. Recent studies indicate that approximately 39% of Gen Z use social media as their primary source for planning vacations, even surpassing recommendations from family and friends (Armielia et al., 2023; Robinson, 2022). According to Hariyani et al. (2025), users' activities on social media encompass various levels of engagement, from passive activities such as simply viewing and reading, to active activities such as sharing, commenting, and producing content. Among various forms of digital content, educational vlogs and travel vlogs are among the most influential media in building travel intentions.

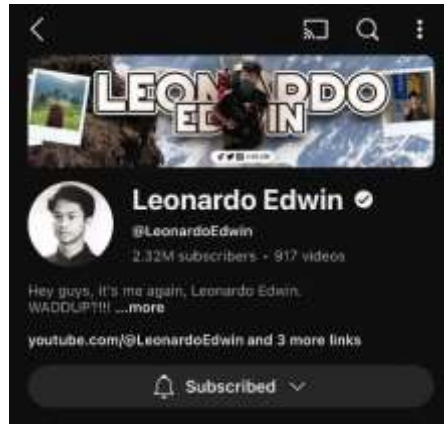
One key factor influencing the effectiveness of educational vlogs in fostering travel intent is the credibility of the messages conveyed. This credibility encompasses aspects of expertise, trustworthiness, and appeal, which have been empirically proven to increase audience trust and encourage the adoption of the information conveyed (Cheng et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2023). According to Appelman and Sundar (2016) in Balaban and Nedelcu (2021) Message credibility is an individual's assessment of the truthfulness of the content of a communication statement. There are two factors according to Li and Suh, (2015) Argument strength and information quality. Recent research confirms that information quality and message credibility play a crucial role in shaping perceptions and visit intentions among tourists, particularly among Gen Z, who are highly selective about digital information sources (Irfan et al., 2022; Islam et al., 2024; Silaban et al., 2022).

In addition to credibility, the parasocial relationship between the message and the audience is also an important determinant in building travel intentions. Parasocial relationships, which are the virtual bonds formed between viewers and public figures on social media, can enhance emotional engagement and audience trust in the message being conveyed (Hartmann et al., 2024). Recent studies indicate that parasocial relationships significantly mediate the influence of message credibility on attitudes and intentions to visit tourist destinations (Lusianingrum et al., 2024; Zahara et al., 2025; Zheng et al., 2022). Additionally, the primary previous study used as a comparison in this research was conducted by Orhan Can Yılmazdoğan, Rana Şen Doğan, and Emre Altıntaş (2021) Titled "The Impact of the Source Credibility of Instagram Influencers on

Travel Intention: The Mediating Role of Parasocial Interaction,” the study found that the dimensions of trustworthiness and expertise of source credibility significantly influence travel intention, with parasocial interaction as a full mediator. However, the attractiveness dimension did not show a significant influence.

Although the study makes an important contribution to explaining the role of parasocial interaction in the context of travel intentions, there are several gaps that need to be addressed. First, the study focused solely on the Instagram platform, which differs significantly from YouTube, particularly in terms of content duration, visual narrative, and audience engagement depth. Second, the study did not consider the element of message credibility in the consumed content, which is a crucial aspect in shaping audience perceptions, especially among Generation Z, who are known to be critical of digital information. Therefore, this study offers a new contribution by examining YouTuber credibility and vlog message credibility simultaneously, and positioning parasocial relationships as mediators of Gen Z's travel intentions, thereby expanding understanding of cross-platform digital communication dynamics and the factors influencing travel intentions among young audiences.

Emotional engagement and perceptions of authenticity built through parasocial interactions encourage Gen Z to be more responsive to travel invitations and recommendations conveyed through educational vlogs. The Two-Step Flow Communication Theory serves as the primary framework for this study. The Two-Step Flow Communication Theory was developed by Lazarsfeld (1944) in Littlejohn et al., (2021) Emphasizes that the process of information dissemination does not occur directly from the media to the public but through individuals known as opinion leaders. This study selected YouTuber Leonardo Edwin as the opinion leader disseminating information, and the credibility of the “travel vlog” message is crucial in shaping audience perceptions. Additionally, the role of parasocial relationships is explained as a mediating mechanism that forms a one-way emotional bond between YouTubers and audiences, influencing Gen Z's intention to travel, as they increasingly seek new experiences amid the rapid growth of the tourism sector. Based on this, the following is the YouTube channel @leonardoedwin.



**Figure 1.** YouTube Profile Leonardo Edwin

Leonardo Edwin, better known by his nickname Leo or Lele, is a content creator from Batam who is widely recognized for presenting travel content with an educational approach. He is known through his YouTube channel, which focuses on sharing travel experiences, particularly in the form of solo travel to various countries. As a graduate of the Information Systems program at the University of Washington, Leonardo frequently shares in-depth information about local culture, flight routes, and various travel tips. His ability to present travel vlogs goes beyond simply showcasing destinations; he also conveys educational and entertaining information. This is one of the key factors behind the success of the YouTube channel @leonardoedwin, which, as of May 25, 2025, has 2.32 million subscribers, with a total of 931 videos uploaded and reaching 460.9 million views overall. Here is a glimpse of the uploads on the YouTube channel @leonardoedwin.



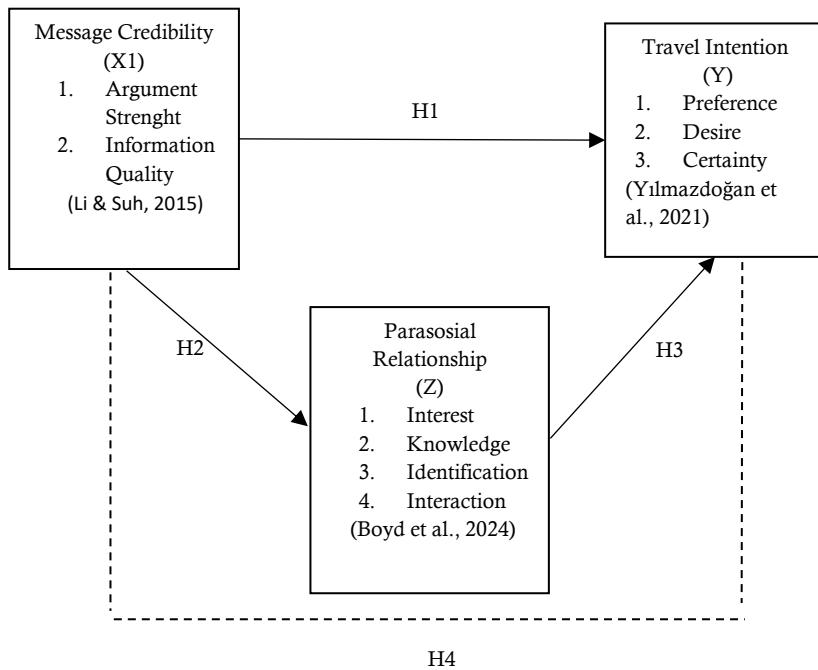
**Figure 2.** YouTube Feeds Leonardo Edwin

Leonardo Edwin's content is known for combining travel with in-depth explanations of history, culture, and philosophy, presented in a smart and interactive narrative style. The credibility of his vlogs is reinforced by strong research behind the content, visual support, and a polite yet informative delivery style, enabling him to build emotional and intellectual connections with his audience. This has led to the emergence of a high level of parasocial relationships, evidenced by the existence of an active fanbase account and a personal WhatsApp channel that demonstrate cross-platform loyalty. This strength positions Leonardo Edwin not only as a YouTuber but also as a relevant opinion leader within the context of the Two-Step Flow Communication Theory (Littlejohn et al., 2021). With a strong content approach and broad influence on Gen Z audiences, selecting the YouTube channel @leonardoedwin as the research object is highly appropriate, particularly in examining the credibility of educational travel vlog messages on travel intentions through parasocial relationships.

This phenomenon underscores the importance of understanding persuasive communication mechanisms in the digital age, particularly in the context of tourism marketing targeting Gen Z. Collaboration between tourist destinations and credible educational vlog messages that can build strong parasocial relationships is an effective strategy for increasing the travel intentions of young tourists. Thus, research on the role of parasocial relationships and the credibility of educational vlogs in building Gen Z's travel intentions is highly relevant and strategic for the development of digital-based tourism marketing. The research question in this study focuses on the influence of the credibility of educational travel vlogs on Gen Z's travel intentions, as well as testing whether parasocial relationships act as mediators in this relationship.

Based on this research question on figure 3, a series of hypotheses were formulated: (H1) there is a positive and significant influence between the credibility of educational travel vlogs and Gen Z's travel intentions; (H2) There is a positive and significant influence between the credibility of educational travel vlogs and the parasocial relationship between vloggers and Generation Z; (H3) There is a positive and significant influence between the parasocial relationship and Generation Z's intention to travel; and (H4) The parasocial relationship mediates the positive and significant influence of the credibility of educational travel vlogs on Generation Z's intention to travel. Thus, this study develops a conceptual framework that describes the relationship between the credibility of educational travel

vlogs and Generation Z's travel intentions, with parasocial relationships as the key mediating variable.



**Figure 3. Conceptual Framework**

## Research Method

This study uses a quantitative method with a quantitative descriptive approach, which aims to describe and explain phenomena systematically, factually, and accurately regarding the relationship between variables. The quantitative paradigm is based on positivism, which emphasizes objectivity, empiricism, and the ability to generalize results through scientifically measurable data (Ali et al., 2022; Hasibuan et al., 2022). With this foundation, the study seeks to present structured and statistically testable data to understand the behavior and perceptions of respondents on a large scale. The main focus of this study is to analyze the influence of the credibility of messages in educational travel vlogs on Gen Z's intention to travel, with parasocial relationships as a mediating variable. The survey method was chosen because it is suitable for collecting quantitative data from a large population using a questionnaire instrument, allowing researchers to objectively measure perceptions of source strength, message quality, and the intensity of one-way emotional bonds between YouTubers and their audiences (Silalahi, 2018)

This study uses the Slovin approach, with the sample size (n) obtained from the total population of subscribers to the YouTube channel @leonardoedwin (2.32 million people) and a precision level (d) of 0.5%, resulting in the following:

$$= \frac{2.320.000}{1 + 2.320.000 \times 0,5\%^2}$$

$$n = \frac{2.320.000}{1 + 2.320.000 \times 0,05^2}$$

$$n = \frac{2.320.000}{187.326}$$

$$n = 399,93$$

The calculation resulted in a sample size of 399.93 respondents, which was then rounded up to 400 to simplify the analysis process. The initial sample selection was conducted through a screening process of followers using three screening questions. The first question identified whether the respondents were within the age range of 17–26 years old, which falls under the Gen Z category. The second question ensured that the respondents were active viewers or subscribers of the YouTube channel @leonardoedwin. The third question evaluated whether the respondents were aware of the channel's content focus, which is related to educational travel vlogs. Respondents who passed all three screening stages were considered valid and met the criteria as research samples. This study was conducted over a period of six months.

Furthermore, to analyze the collected data, this study employed both descriptive and inferential analysis using the Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) approach. Descriptive analysis aimed to illustrate respondents' perceptions regarding the credibility of educational travel vlog messages (X), which include the dimensions of argument strength and information quality; parasocial relationships (Z), which cover the dimensions of interest, knowledge, identification, and interaction; and Gen Z's intention to travel (Y), which consists of preference, desire, and certainty. These perceptions were measured using a Likert scale questionnaire. To ensure the precision of the measurement process, the researcher also developed an operational table based on a predetermined framework outlining the indicators for each research variable. Table 1 served as a reference in designing the necessary measurement instruments for the study.

**Table 1.** Operasional Variabel

No	Variable	Dimension	Statement	No Item	Scale
1	Message Credibility (X)  (Li & Suh, 2015)	Argument Streght	The arguments and information in this educational travel vlog convinced me to visit the destination.	X1	Likert
			The information presented in this educational travel vlog was persuasive enough to spark my interest in visiting.	X2	Likert
			The information presented in this educational travel vlog is accurate and reliable.	X3	Likert
		Information Quality	The reasoning or logic used in conveying information in this educational travel vlog is reasonable.	X4	Likert
			The information in this educational travel vlog is completely accurate.	X5	Likert
			The information presented in this vlog is objective (unbiased, based on data).	X6	Likert
			The style of presenting information in @leonardoedwin's educational travel vlog is easy to understand.	X7	Likert



No	Variable	Dimension	Statement	No Item	Scale
2	Parasocial Relationships (Z)	Interest	I always gain new knowledge from @leonardoedwin's educational travel vlogs.	X8	Likert
			I always look forward to seeing new posts or videos from YouTuber @leonardoedwin.	Z1	Likert
		Interest	If YouTuber @leonardoedwin's videos appear on other channels, I will watch them.	Z2	Likert
			I hope that by watching videos from YouTuber @leonardoedwin, I will obtain the appropriate information.	Z3	Likert
		Knowledge	I feel that YouTuber @leonardoedwin understands the things I want to know as well.	Z4	Likert
		Identification	I feel like YouTuber @leonardoedwin makes me feel comfortable, like I'm spending time with a friend.	Z5	Likert
		Identification	When I watched YouTuber @leonardoedwin's vlog video, I felt like I was participating in his journey.	Z6	Likert

No	Variable	Dimension	Statement	No Item	Scale
3	Travel Intention (Y)  (Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021)	Identification	If something happens to YouTuber @leonardoedwin, I will feel sad.	Z7	Likert
		Interaction	I look forward to the opportunity to meet YouTuber @leonardoedwin in person.	Z8	Likert
		Interaction	If @leonardoedwin creates another social media account, I will interact with his content.	Z9	Likert
		Preference	I plan to visit the places recommended by @leonardoedwin, whom I follow on YouTube.	Y1	Likert
		Desire	I prefer visiting destinations shared by YouTuber @leonardoedwin over other tourist destinations.	Y2	Likert
		Certainty	If everything goes as I expect, I will go to the destination shared by YouTuber @leonardoedwin.	Y3	Likert

The table above shows the operationalization of the variables used in this study, which consists of three main variables: the credibility of educational vlog messages (X), parasocial relationships (Z), and Gen Z's intention to travel (Y). Each variable is measured through several specific

dimensions, which are then broken down into a number of statements (items) as measurement indicators. All items are measured using a Likert scale, which allows researchers to assess the intensity of respondents' perceptions and attitudes toward each statement provided. Furthermore, to facilitate the interpretation of results, the assessment was classified into five categories using a continuum based on percentage (Kasmadi & Sunariah, 2013). This operationalization not only serves as a reference in the development of the questionnaire instrument but also forms the basis for the process of collecting and analyzing quantitative data. With clear and measurable indicators, this study ensures that each construct being examined possesses both validity and reliability that can be scientifically accounted for.

Building upon this foundation, the SEM-PLS approach was selected as the main analytical method due to its effectiveness in evaluating complex models and its tolerance for non-normally distributed data (Hair et al., 2019). In contrast to the covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) method commonly used in software such as AMOS, SEM-PLS offers greater flexibility, particularly for models with numerous latent constructs and indicators. It also does not demand large sample sizes, making it more accessible for studies with moderate respondent numbers. Additionally, the use of SmartPLS 4 was motivated by its efficiency and ability to analyze mediation models, an essential feature for this study. Thus, SEM-PLS was considered the most appropriate approach to assess both direct and indirect effects of message credibility on Gen Z's travel intentions via parasocial relationships.

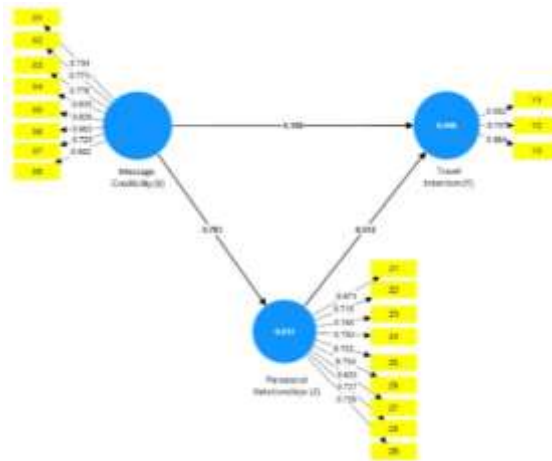
To implement this analysis, the research process in SmartPLS 4 was structured into two main components: the measurement model (outer model) and the structural model (inner model). The outer model was evaluated to ensure construct validity and reliability, through convergent validity (loading factor  $\geq 0.70$  and AVE  $\geq 0.50$ ) and discriminant validity, which included cross-loading, the Fornell-Larcker criterion, and the HTMT ratio (threshold  $< 0.85$ ) (Hair et al., 2019). Subsequently, the inner model was used to test the strength and significance of relationships between latent variables, using indicators such as  $R^2$ ,  $F^2$ ,  $Q^2$ , and path coefficients.

Finally, to test the proposed hypotheses, the bootstrapping technique was applied with a two-tailed approach at a 5% significance level ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ). A hypothesis was deemed accepted if the t-statistic exceeded 1.96 and the p-value was below 0.05 (Hair et al., 2019; Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Through this procedure, the study was able to provide a comprehensive evaluation of how the credibility of educational vlog

messages affects Gen Z's travel intentions, both directly and indirectly through the mediating role of parasocial relationships.

## Results and Discussion

As part of the quantitative analysis process, this study relied on SmartPLS software to process and test the collected data. The analysis was conducted through two crucial stages in the Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) approach. The analysis process was carried out through two main stages, namely evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) and evaluation of the structural model (inner model).



**Figure 4.** Outer Loading

The outer model evaluation was conducted to measure convergent validity based on outer loading values with a threshold of  $\geq 0.70$ . In the Message Credibility (X) construct, six of the eight indicators met the criteria, while the other two (X6 and X8) were below the threshold. The Parasocial Relationships construct (Z) also showed similar results, with seven valid indicators and two (Z1 and Z7) with low values. Meanwhile, in the Travel Intention construct (Y), all indicators had outer loading values above 0.70, indicating a strong contribution. Overall, most indicators in this study met convergent validity, although some still need further evaluation.

**Table 2.** Construct Reliability and Validity

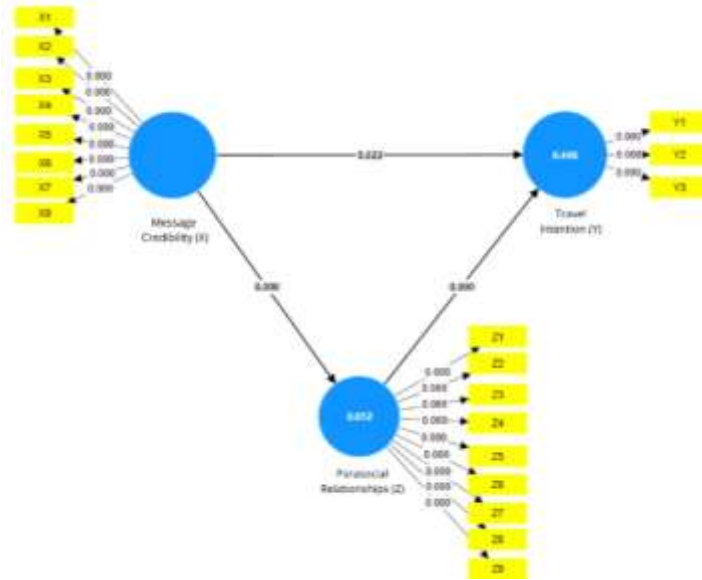
<b>Variable</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>	<b>rho_A</b>	<b>Composite Reliability</b>	<b>AVE</b>
Message Credibility (X)	0.889	0.896	0.912	0.565
Parasocial Relationships (Z)	0.884	0.886	0.907	0.520
Travel Intention (Y)	0.732	0.757	0.848	0.652

All constructs in this study were found to have strong internal consistency, as indicated by Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.7. This indicates that the indicators within each construct are stably correlated with one another. Additionally, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for each construct are also above 0.5, indicating that the proportion of variance explained by the indicators for their respective constructs is sufficiently high. Therefore, it can be concluded that all constructs in the model meet the criteria for validity and reliability, making them suitable for use in the structural model analysis phase.

**Table 3.** R Square

<b>Variable</b>	<b>R Square</b>	<b>R Square Adjusted</b>
Parasocial Relationships (Z)	0.612	0.612
Travel Intention (Y)	0.446	0.443

Based on Table 2, the Parasocial Relationships (Z) construct has an R Square value of 0.612, which means that 61.2% of its variability is explained by Message Credibility (X). Meanwhile, the Travel Intention (Y) construct has an R Square value of 0.446, indicating that 44.6% of its variability is explained by the combination of Message Credibility (X) and Parasocial Relationships (Z). The Adjusted R Square value, which is not significantly different, indicates a stable model with sufficient explanatory power.



**Figure 5.** Output Bootstrapping

The structural model was evaluated using the bootstrapping technique implemented using SmartPLS software. This process aimed to test the strength and significance of the relationships between variables in the model. The visualization of the analysis results is shown in Figure 3, while a summary of the hypothesis testing results, including path coefficient values, t values, and p values, is presented more systematically in Table 3.

**Table 4.** Path Coefficients

Variable	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standar Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (IO/STDEVI)	P values
X -> Y	0.783	0.784	0.027	28.977	0.000
X -> Z	0.186	0.186	0.081	2.296	0.022
Z-> Y	0.512	0.513	0.072	7.144	0.000
X -> Z - > Y	0.401	0.403	0.063	6.388	0.000

The bootstrapping results in Table 3 show that all paths in the model are statistically significant with p-values < 0.05. Message Credibility has a direct and significant effect on Travel Intention ( $\beta = 0.783$ ) and Parasocial Relationships ( $\beta = 0.186$ ). Additionally, Parasocial Relationships also significantly influence Travel Intention ( $\beta = 0.512$ ). The

indirect effect of Message Credibility on Travel Intention through Parasocial Relationships as a mediator is also significant ( $\beta = 0.401$ ). Thus, all hypotheses in the model are supported by the data.

The results of the structural model estimation indicate that message credibility has a significant effect on Gen Z's travel intentions, both directly and indirectly through parasocial relationships. Specifically, the  $R^2$  value of 0.446 for the travel intention construct suggests that the model explains approximately 44.6% of the variance in Gen Z's travel behavior. In comparison, the parasocial relationship is explained by message credibility at 61.2%, highlighting the substantial influence of communication quality on the emotional bonds between audiences and content creators. These statistical values are presented in Table 3, while Figure 4 provides a visual representation of the mediation model, illustrating the direction and strength of the relationships among variables. Furthermore, the indirect effect through parasocial relationships, with  $\beta = 0.401$ , reveals that more than half of the total influence (51.2%) of message credibility on travel intention is mediated by parasocial interaction. This finding confirms that Gen Z does not merely respond to credible content on a rational level but also engages emotionally through their connection with content creators. Such a dynamic reinforces the principles of the Two-Step Communication Theory and is consistent with the findings of (Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021) Who demonstrated that one-way emotional bonds can enhance persuasive effects in the realm of digital tourism marketing.

Despite these insights, several limitations of the study must be acknowledged. First, the reliance on self-report data may lead to perception bias or social desirability bias. Second, the study's focus on a single YouTuber, @leonardoedwin, may limit the generalizability of the findings, as the personal traits and communication style of the vlogger could influence the intensity of parasocial relationships. Moreover, the absence of control variables such as peer influence, social trends, or external factors like FOMO and peer recommendations may have left out other important determinants of travel intentions. In light of these limitations, future research is encouraged to test the model across multiple platforms (e.g., TikTok, Instagram) and involve various types of content creators, including those with different personas such as comedic, spiritual, or adventure-based travel vloggers. Additionally, incorporating variables such as perceived authenticity, user engagement behavior, or influencer–audience value congruence may provide deeper theoretical insights into the mechanisms of digital persuasion.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that the credibility of messages in educational travel vlogs has a significant effect on Generation Z's intention to travel, both directly and through parasocial relationships as a partial mediator. These findings indicate that the combination of information quality and emotional attachment to content creators plays an important role in persuasive digital communication. The main contribution of this study is to reinforce the relevance of the Two-Step Communication Theory in the context of digital video platforms and highlight parasocial relationships as an effective psychological pathway.

Practically, these results can be utilized by tourism marketers and content creators by enhancing credibility through informative narratives and fostering interactions that promote emotional bonds with the audience. The limitations of this study lie in the use of self-reported data and the focus on a single YouTuber, which limits generalizability. Further research is recommended to compare across digital platforms and demographic subgroups, as well as explore user engagement indicators such as viewing duration or interaction frequency to deepen understanding of the influence of content on audience behavior.

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