

Title: Exploring the Potential of the Pratfall Effect in Travel Influencer Marketing

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Abstract

This study introduces the use of the pratfall effect as a novel concept in increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of social media influencers (SMIs) in tourism. Drawing on the stereotype content model, the study examines whether the pratfall effect can be associated with perceived warmth and competence and ultimately relates to the travel intentions of customers through its link to travel inspiration. The study also investigates the moderating roles of central and peripheral processing routes based on the elaboration likelihood model. Using a scenario-based survey design, data were collected from 234 Turkish Instagram users who actively follow SMIs. Findings reveal that pratfall-induced perceived warmth and competence toward the SMI **are** associated with travel inspiration, which mediates their travel intentions. The strengths of these effects vary according to the message processing routes of the followers. While peripheral processing corresponds with increased warmth perceptions, central processing relates to enhanced competence perceptions of the SMI. These findings extend the SMI literature and offer practical implications for tourism practitioners **to develop** efficient and effective influencer marketing strategies

Keywords: Customer inspiration, Elaboration likelihood model, Pratfall effect, Social media influencers, Stereotype content model

Highlights

- First study to integrate the pratfall effect with the stereotype content model and elaboration likelihood model in travel influencers.
- The pratfall effect can associate with higher perceived warmth and competence of travel influencers.
- Travel inspiration mediates the relationships between the pratfall-induced perceived warmth and competence and travel intentions.
- Peripheral processing corresponds with higher perceptions of warmth, whereas central processing shows greater competence perceptions.

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Abstract

This study introduces the use of the pratfall effect as a novel concept in increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of social media influencers (SMIs) in tourism. Drawing on the stereotype content model, the study examines whether the pratfall effect can be associated with perceived warmth and competence and ultimately relates to the travel intentions of customers through its link to travel inspiration. The study also investigates the moderating roles of central and peripheral processing routes based on the elaboration likelihood model. Using a scenario-based survey design, data were collected from 234 Turkish Instagram users who actively follow SMIs. Findings reveal that pratfall-induced perceived warmth and competence toward the SMI are associated with travel inspiration, which mediates their travel intentions. The strengths of these effects vary according to the message processing routes of the followers. While peripheral processing corresponds with increased warmth perceptions, central processing relates to enhanced competence perceptions of the SMI. These findings extend the SMI literature and offer practical implications for tourism practitioners to develop efficient and effective influencer marketing strategies.

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1. Introduction

The widespread influence of social media has forced marketers to leverage their vast user communities, leading to the rise of influencer marketing as a strategic cornerstone for most brands' digital marketing efforts (Aldlimi et al., 2025; Huang et al., 2024; Ong et al., 2024; Shi et al., 2024). Based on the growing popularity and its increased use as a dominant marketing strategy (Aldlimi et al., 2025; Ye et al., 2021), the global influencer marketing market is projected to exceed \$44 billion in 2025 and reach \$56 billion by 2029 (Statista, 2024a). This growth is largely attributed to the significant impact of influencer marketing on consumer behavior, as 80% of social media influencer (SMI) collaborations tend to influence purchasing decisions directly (Kim & Kim, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2022). Previous research shows that about 49% of users trust recommendations made by SMIs, which subsequently generates a 5.2-fold increase in their purchase intentions (Rao Hill & Qesja, 2023). In addition to its direct influence on purchase behavior, influencer marketing tends to generate about 3.8 times greater brand recall than the conventional TV commercials (Vrontis et al., 2021).

In the context of tourism and hospitality, influencer marketing represents a strategic partnership between brands and the content creators who leverage their personalities to deliver efficient and effective marketing messages to target audiences (Huang et al., 2024; Ong et al., 2024; Polat et al., 2024). SMIs are increasingly used in the promotion of destinations and the marketing of hotels to attract visitors or guests and to increase positive attitudes among them (Bastrygina et al., 2024). Studies report that SMIs have a substantial influence on travel behavior and destination selection (Polat et al., 2024; Ong et al., 2024; Vinoi et al., 2025). Notably, 70% of travel and tourism businesses appear to employ SMIs to build brand recognition and increase reservations (West, 2024). Recent data underscores their growing

impact. For instance, 84% of adults rely on SMIs for travel inspiration (Statista, 2024b), 78% of American consumers tend to discover new destinations through SMIs, and globally, 35% of travelers appear to get their travel inspiration from social media platforms (Woolf, 2025).

Despite the pervasive influence of SMIs, the underlying mechanisms of how they may shape tourist decision-making remain underexplored. While existing research documents the effects of SMIs on tourist followers (Bastrygina et al., 2024; Manthiou et al., 2024), less is known about the processes through which tourists are inspired by and how they engage with the SMIs. The rapid transformation of tourism marketing through social media has created a theoretical gap in understanding these mechanisms. Current research in this emerging field appears to remain inconclusive (Polat et al., 2024), highlighting the need to address this knowledge gap. Understanding these mechanisms may guide strategic marketing decisions in tourism, generating potential benefits for industry practitioners and destination managers.

The effectiveness of influencer marketing may be intrinsically linked to the SMIs' ability to establish authentic, sincere, and natural connections with consumers in line with their interests and objectives (Belanche et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2022). SMIs' success tends to largely depend on their online persona, encompassing credibility, trustworthiness, authenticity, expertise, competence, and physical/social attractiveness (Yuan & Lou, 2020; Polat et al., 2024; Ong et al., 2024; Zabel, 2024). Evidence suggests that perceived competence and warmth emerge as the two main determinants of SMI effectiveness (Crisafulli & Singh, 2022; El Hedhli et al., 2023; Ren et al., 2023). These two determinants correspond with the stereotype content model (SCM) (Fiske et al., 2002), which posits that individuals are evaluated along two fundamental dimensions: warmth (reflecting perceived intent, sincerity, intimacy, and friendliness) and competence (indicating perceived ability, experience, efficiency, and expertise) (Kervyn et al., 2022). These dimensions, shaped through interpersonal and intergroup interactions, influence how followers perceive SMIs, while a high level of warmth

fosters likability, and a high level of competence enhances influence (Fiske et al., 2002). The SCM provides a theoretical framework for understanding how followers form initial impressions of travel SMIs through their warmth and competence evaluations (Kervyn et al., 2022; Rojas-Méndez & Davies, 2024). However, research examining the antecedents of perceived competence and warmth, particularly within the travel and tourism SMI context, remains largely limited (Polat et al., 2024).

The pratfall effect, a fundamental phenomenon in social interaction, posits that a highly competent or attractive person's, i.e., an expert's, likeability increases after displaying 'a clumsy blunder' (Aronson et al., 1966). Operating as a heuristic device—a mental shortcut in decision-making (Arnold et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2024)—the pratfall effect causes individuals to develop trust and closeness towards experts who demonstrate vulnerability through **clumsy blunders**. This vulnerability creates perceptions of authenticity and warmth, ultimately causing the establishment of interpersonal comfort and rapport (Aronson et al., 1996). The emotional responses evoked by the pratfall effect—warmth, likeability, authenticity, trust, and competence—tend to closely mirror the characteristics associated with successful SMIs. Given this alignment, we propose that the pratfall effect influences how individuals form warmth and competence perceptions of SMIs (Luo et al., 2025).

The manifestation of the pratfall effect, characterized by feelings of warmth, trust, closeness, authenticity, and competence, may vary depending on how individuals process information and make decisions. The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984) suggests that persuasion occurs through distinct routes based on the cognitive effort expended in message processing (Kitchen et al., 2014). The ELM acknowledges that there are stable individual differences in terms of how people process information (Chen & Lee, 2008; Dedeoğlu et al., 2020). Individuals with high levels of elaboration typically appear to process

information through the central route, while those with low elaboration levels tend to favor the peripheral route (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984).

Central route processors employ logic-driven approaches, relying on data and facts for persuasion. On the other hand, peripheral route processors tend to avoid in-depth information processing and are inclined to make their decisions through heuristics or mental shortcuts (Cacioppo et al., 1986). Through the peripheral route, individuals tend to reach quick conclusions—such as developing feelings of comfort and warmth—i.e., without processing rational or factual information. Given that the pratfall effect operates as a heuristic device (Arnold et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2024), where warmth perceptions develop following a **clumsy blunder**, peripheral route processors may be more susceptible to its influence. Conversely, central route processors, who typically avoid shortcuts and seek rational arguments, may focus more on evaluating an SMI's genuine competence (Ong et al., 2024).

Drawing upon the pratfall effect and the SCM, we propose that perceived warmth and competence relate to tourists' travel inspiration, subsequently leading to the formation of behavioral intentions. This research addresses recent calls to examine how perceptions of warmth and competence, elicited by content characteristics such as the pratfall effect, may trigger moments of inspiration and influence tourist intentions (Dai et al., 2023). Furthermore, responding to Fang et al.'s (2023) call to investigate individual factors' moderating roles in travel inspiration and intention formation, we explore how central and peripheral processing routes, as conceptualized in the ELM, moderate the relationships between perceived warmth, competence, travel inspiration, and intention.

Our research objectives are twofold. First, we examine how pratfall-induced perceived warmth and competence relate to tourists' travel intention indirectly through travel inspiration in the travel SMI context. Recent tourism and hospitality research emphasizes the crucial

mediating role of inspiration (e.g., Fang et al., 2023; Kwon & Boger, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2025), as it sparks curiosity and creativity, bridges perceptions to actions, and guides individuals' tourism journeys, ultimately transforming travel desires into actual experiences (Dai et al., 2022).

Second, we investigate how central and peripheral processing routes moderate the relationships between perceived warmth, competence, travel inspiration, and intention in the context of the pratfall effect. While the ELM has been extensively studied in SMI research (e.g., Moradi & Zihagh, 2022; Park et al., 2024), the integration of the SCM and the pratfall effect with the ELM, particularly their collective associations with SMIs and tourist behavior, remains unexplored. Our research advances a novel conceptualization of the pratfall effect by demonstrating that its relationships are contingent upon different routes of information processing, where peripheral processing is associated with stronger perceptions of warmth, and central processing is with stronger perceptions of competence, each of which eventually corresponds with consumer responses on travel inspiration and intentions. The investigation of these theoretical relationships promises significant contributions to tourism and hospitality literature while providing practitioners with valuable insights into their SMI marketing strategies. This study also offers a methodological contribution by demonstrating a robust, quantitative approach to validating vignette-based scenarios in influencer marketing research without undermining induced effects and affective states (Aronson et al., 1966; Schwarz and Clore, 1983). This is possible by the use of an expert panel and analyzing their scenario evaluation through Rust and Cool's (1994) Proportional Reduction in Loss (PRL) method for inter-judge agreement, alongside Bagozzi et al.'s (2016) criteria for assessing scenario validity in research. We thus provide a replicable template for enhancing the methodological transparency and rigor of future survey-based cross-sectional and experimental studies, making use of scenarios, where manipulation checks might undermine intended effects.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Pratfall effect

First conceptualized by Aronson et al. (1966), the pratfall effect is a psychological heuristic describing how a highly competent individual's likeability and perceived warmth may increase after a clumsy blunder, such as spilling coffee (Deaux, 1972). When experts display and acknowledge such **blunder**, they are perceived as more authentic, which in turn fosters feelings of closeness, warmth, and comfort in observers. Conversely, **when non-experts commit such blunders**, both liking and respect tend to diminish significantly (Aronson et al., 1966). Theoretically, these tend to make competent individuals appear more relatable (Montoya & Horton, 2012), and their momentary and self-acknowledged incompetence may be perceived as humorous, causing a rise in their appeal (Tang Poy & Woolhouse, 2020).

The pratfall effect may significantly influence SMI-follower dynamics, underpinned by several theoretical perspectives. Source credibility theory suggests that minor errors enhance an influencer's credibility, relatability, and authenticity, subsequently strengthening audience attitudes and behavioral intentions (Han & Balabanis, 2024; Ong et al., 2024). Parasocial interaction theory demonstrates how such self-acknowledged imperfections strengthen emotional bonds by humanizing SMIs (Han & Balabanis, 2024; Ong et al., 2024). Congruity theory also posits that audiences connect more deeply with SMIs whose attitudes and behaviors align with their values, with mistakes serving to humanize SMIs and strengthen this alignment (Massi et al., 2024). Further, social exchange theory suggests that SMIs' self-acknowledgement of flaws elicits reciprocal responses from followers, fostering deeper emotional connections and amplifying influence through mutual trust and authenticity (Kim & Kim, 2021).

However, this perspective needs to be situated within the broader 'authenticity paradox' that characterizes influencer marketing (Duffek et al., 2025; Steils et al., 2022). The central

challenge is that while followers demand genuine and intrinsically motivated content, the commercial nature of influencer marketing can lead to perceptions of inauthenticity, especially in paid partnerships where brand collaborations may compromise an influencer's perceived sincerity (Audrezet et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2023). Therefore, the success of a pratfall is not guaranteed, as it is contingent upon the followers' perception of the blunder as a moment of genuine vulnerability rather than a contrived or strategic performance designed to appear authentic (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Despite these theoretical underpinnings, empirical investigation of the pratfall effect in influencer marketing remains scarce, leaving a knowledge gap regarding how minor flaws may relate to audience perceptions and behavioral responses. This study proposes that the pratfall effect, when strategically incorporated into travel SMIs' online personas, may correspond with higher perceptions of warmth and competence, and ultimately become linked to followers' travel inspiration and intention.

2.2. Stereotype content model

The SCM establishes warmth and competence as fundamental dimensions in social evaluation (Fiske et al., 2002). Perceived warmth shapes emotional responses through traits like friendliness, enthusiasm, and sincerity, fostering intimacy and personal connections. Conversely, perceived competence influences cognitive assessments through recognition of expertise and execution ability, encompassing intelligence, skill, and efficiency (Cheng et al., 2024; Fiske et al., 2002; Güntürkün et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2025; Xue et al., 2020). While warmth reflects social intentions, competence indicates the capability to fulfill these intentions (Cheng et al., 2024). These dimensions also represent universal elements within the social cognition approach (Fiske et al., 2007), explaining how individuals process information about

others through observed behaviors and contextual cues to form attitudes and intentions (Fernandes et al., 2025; Fiske et al., 2007).

The SCM has been extensively researched across various domains, including brand management (Kervyn et al., 2022; Ren et al., 2023), live-streaming commerce (Gao et al., 2025), e-retailing (Cheng et al., 2024), hospitality and tourism (Feng et al., 2022; Pinto et al., 2020; Rojas-Méndez & Davies, 2024), and influencer marketing (El Hedhli et al., 2023; Ren et al., 2023). However, research specifically examining travel SMI stereotypes within tourism remains limited (Luo et al., 2025). The warmth and competence dimensions offer valuable applications at the intersection of tourism and influencer marketing (El Hedhli et al., 2023; Pinto et al., 2020). Recent research reinforces this perspective, highlighting the SCM as a crucial framework for understanding how SMIs' perceived warmth and competence shape tourist responses through diverse content strategies (Luo et al., 2025).

While the SCM has been extensively applied in influencer marketing (El Hedhli et al., 2023; Ren et al., 2023), the relative importance and function of warmth and competence in shaping consumer outcomes remains a subject of ongoing discussion, with conflicting findings in the literature. For example, some studies in service contexts suggest warmth is the primary driver of outcomes like satisfaction, at times even showing competence has no significant effect (Gao & Mattila, 2014; Smith et al., 2016). Conversely, other research highlights that competence-related factors are the key determinant of credibility and behavioral intentions (Crisafulli & Singh, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2025). This tension highlights a critical gap in understanding how these two dimensions interact, especially in the nuanced context of travel influencer marketing, where both relational (warmth) and informational (competence) appeals are blended. Our research contributes to this debate by examining how a single stimulus—the pratfall effect—may simultaneously be associated with both perceptions.

Drawing on the SCM framework, we argue that the pratfall effect operates through distinct and complementary perceptual processes that together shape followers' overall impression (Fiske et al., 2002; Russell & Fiske, 2008). For an already established travel SMI, a high level of perceived competence—reflecting attributes such as capability, confidence, and efficiency (Fiske et al., 2007; McKee et al., 2023)—serves as a foundational prerequisite. However, high competence alone may create psychological distance, making the influencer seem unrelatable (Montoya & Horton, 2012). The pratfall's primary function is therefore to inject perceived warmth, inferred through traits like sincerity and trustworthiness (McKee et al., 2023), serving as a humanizing element that fosters a stronger social connection (Aronson et al., 1966; Han & Balabanis, 2024; Ong et al., 2024). This dynamic illustrates the unique roles of the two dimensions. While competence may serve as a rational anchor of credibility and show a relationship with followers, the influencer's expertise, warmth may function as an emotional bridge that is linked to making the expertise more accessible and appealing (Cheng et al., 2024). Thus, the pratfall is associated with persuasive appeal through the phenomenon of warmth enhancing the full potential of pre-existing competence (Aronson et al., 1966; Fiske et al., 2002). Crucially, the pratfall's effect on perceived competence depends on the nature of the incident. Unlike performance failures that diminish perceived expertise, a clumsy blunder (e.g., spilling coffee) should be unrelated to perceived expertise of a travel influencer's core knowledge (Aronson et al., 1966; Deaux, 1972). Instead, managing such mishaps with humor signals high self-efficacy and emotional stability (Tang Poy & Woolhouse, 2020). This allows the audience to infer that the influencer possesses professional composure to handle real-world imperfections, thereby not undermining perceived competence (Cheng et al., 2024; Luo et al., 2025). This is a combination that is particularly potent for the pratfall effect becoming associated with travel inspiration and intention.

2.3. Travel inspiration

The concept of customer inspiration, which underpins travel inspiration, examines how marketing stimulus elicit motivation and influence consumer behavior, providing a valuable framework for understanding inspiration's role in tourism studies (Böttger et al., 2017; Fang et al., 2023). While inspiration has emerged as a significant focus in tourism research (Fang et al., 2023), marketing literature has extensively explored this concept over the past decade (Böttger et al., 2017), yielding context-specific definitions (Thrash et al., 2014). In marketing, customer inspiration represents “a temporary motivational state that facilitates the transition from the reception of a marketing-induced idea to the intrinsic pursuit of a consumption-related goal” (Böttger et al., 2017, p. 116). Within travel influencer marketing, inspiration specifically denotes the intrinsic motivation aroused by travel SMIs, driving potential tourists to transform travel ideas into concrete plans (Dai et al., 2023; Fang et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2025).

Travel inspiration encompasses three fundamental theoretical propositions (Dai et al., 2023; Thrash & Elliot, 2004). First, evocation emphasizes inspiration's initially passive nature, triggered by external **stimuli**—such as followers encountering an influencer's travel content while scrolling. Second, transcendence involves discovering novel possibilities, exemplified by exposure to unique destinations through influencer posts. Third, approach motivation catalyzes action, where influencer content not only generates interest but also prompts followers to initiate travel planning and booking (Dai et al., 2023; Meier & Schäfer, 2018; Thrash & Elliot, 2004).

Drawing from customer inspiration, travel inspiration manifests through two sequential states (Böttger et al., 2017; Fang et al., 2023). The initial inspired-by state emerges when followers encounter a travel SMI's recommendations, characterized by passive engagement behaviors such as consuming additional SMI content (travel vlogs, destination reviews) and following for continued inspiration. During this state, followers contemplate destination possibilities without immediate action (Tiwari, 2024).

The subsequent inspired-to state represents a goal-driven phase where followers transition from passive interest to active decision-making (Tiwari, 2024). In this state, followers, influenced by SMI content actively evaluate suggested destinations against alternatives and develop concrete travel intentions, including trip planning, accommodation booking, and travel-related purchases (Böttger et al., 2017; Dai et al., 2022; Thrash & Elliot, 2004). This “inspired-to” state plays a crucial role in travel influencer marketing by transforming initial inspiration into actionable travel intentions, motivating individuals to actualize the experiences shared by SMIs (Böttger et al., 2017; Dai et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2025). The present study specifically examines this inspired-to state as travel inspiration.

2.4. Elaboration likelihood model

As mentioned earlier, individual persuasion patterns vary based on personal characteristics, personality traits, involvement levels, and motivational factors (Xu & Shi, 2024). The ELM, introduced by Petty and Cacioppo (1984), distinguishes between two persuasion routes. The central route involves a high level of elaboration, where individuals process information through facts, data, and logical arguments, particularly focusing on the competence of the communicator. In contrast, the peripheral route involves a low level of elaboration, where individuals rely on heuristic cues such as the communicator’s attractiveness and warmth (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984).

The selection of the routes depends on several key factors, such as motivation to expend cognitive effort, need for cognition, and capacity to process detailed information (Cacioppo et al., 1986). While motivation may stem from attitudes and personal relevance, processing ability may be influenced by cognitive capacity, cognitive load, environmental distractions, multitasking demands, and prior knowledge (Park et al., 2024).

Given the varied ways consumers process content, the ELM is a crucial framework for understanding influencer effectiveness (Ong et al., 2024; Park et al., 2024; Xie-Carson et al., 2023; Wei et al., 2025). This framework posits that such processing is not merely situational, as it may also reflect a stable individual difference, predisposing some consumers toward more effortful cognitive elaboration than others (Chen & Lee, 2008; Dedeoğlu et al., 2020). Accordingly, audience interpretation differs based on their processing approach. While the central route may involve a careful evaluation of content quality and expertise to assess competence, the peripheral route relies on heuristic cues like language and emotion to foster warmth (Lee & Theokary, 2021). Although the ELM has been extensively studied in mainstream SMI contexts (e.g., Lee & Theokary, 2021; Park et al., 2024), its application to travel SMIs remains limited (Ong et al., 2024; Xie-Carson et al., 2023). Previous research demonstrates that both central route factors (argument quality) and peripheral route factors (SMI attractiveness and credibility) shape young consumers' attitudes towards travel SMIs and domestic travel intentions (Chang et al., 2020; Ragab, 2022). Wei et al. (2025) further illustrate this distinction. While highly attractive SMIs tend to trigger peripheral route processing, leading to superficial content engagement and influencing hotel booking intentions, less attractive SMIs prompt central route processing, where rational, evidence-based messages prove more persuasive (Wei et al., 2025).

Drawing from the ELM, followers process travel SMI information through distinct cognitive routes, yielding varying outcomes (Hu et al., 2024). Accordingly, this study positions the ELM as a moderating mechanism that is associated with how the pratfall effect relates to perceived warmth and competence, which in turn becomes associated with travel inspiration and intentions.

3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

Integrating the SCM (Fiske et al., 2002) and the phenomenon of travel inspiration (Böttger et al., 2017; Fang et al., 2023), we hypothesize that the pratfall effect of SMIs (**stimuli**¹) is associated with consumers' perceptions of warmth and competence, thereby relates to enhanced travel inspiration and intentions. Furthermore, drawing from the ELM, we propose that central and peripheral processing routes moderate the relationships between these variables.

Fig. 1 presents the conceptual model guiding this study.

The pratfall effect, as previously described, demonstrates that minor mistakes by competent individuals enhance their likeability and relatability (Aronson et al., 1966). This phenomenon may hold particular significance in SMI contexts where, aligned with source credibility and parasocial interaction theories, such imperfections may humanize influencers, strengthening their credibility and emotional bonds with followers (Han & Balabanis, 2024). The SCM elucidates how these perceptions form through two fundamental dimensions: warmth and competence (Fiske et al., 2002), which prove crucial for SMIs as their influence stems from audience perceptions of these qualities (Crisafulli & Singh, 2022; El Hedhli et al., 2023; Ren et al., 2023). Within this framework, the pratfall effect serves as a catalyst: an SMI's acknowledgement of minor mistakes evokes warmth-related perceptions (friendliness, sincerity) while simultaneously reinforcing competence attributes (expertise, effectiveness) (Cheng et al., 2024; Luo et al., 2025). This dynamic extends beyond SMI contexts, as evidenced in hospitality research where the hotels' acknowledgement of service failures tended to enhance

¹ Following Casaló et al. (2021), pratfall **stimuli** in this study were presented as a scenario with text.

trust and future booking intentions, underscoring how admission of flaws may form positive perceptions and attitudes (Koc et al., 2023).

Perceived warmth and competence generally exert positive influences on consumer attitudes and behavior (Güntürkün et al., 2020; Xue et al., 2020; Koay & Lee, 2024). SMI research consistently supports this relationship, demonstrating that followers' perceptions of warmth and competence significantly shape their behavioral intentions (Luo et al., 2025). El Hedhli et al. (2023) reveal that these perceptions enhance consumers' willingness to follow virtual influencers' recommendations, while Li et al. (2023) show how both dimensions positively influence endorser-product fit, strengthening endorsement attitudes. These perceptions foster parasocial relationships, ultimately enhancing SMIs' persuasive impact (Conde & Casais, 2023). However, research examining how travel SMIs' perceived warmth and competence specifically impact travel inspiration and intention remains limited (Luo et al., 2025). Previous studies have primarily focused on related traits such as sincerity and expertise rather than directly examining these constructs (Seçilmiş et al., 2022; Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021). Recent evidence suggests that travel vloggers' sincerity (perceived warmth) and professionalism (perceived competence) positively influence inspiration, subsequently affecting travel planning behavior (Nguyen et al., 2025). Similarly, travel SMIs' perceived warmth and competence are expected to enhance travel inspiration and intention (Polat et al., 2024).

Travel SMIs function as pivotal sources of inspiration, transforming abstract travel ideas into tangible plans through their experience-based recommendations (Nguyen et al., 2025). Manthiou et al. (2024) emphasize inspiration's crucial role within the travel influencer framework, highlighting SMIs' growing influence in cultivating travel inspiration. Follower engagement metrics—likes, shares, and comments—provide empirical evidence of SMIs' capacity to be associated with travel inspiration (Fang et al., 2023). The perceived warmth of

SMIs, being linked to the pratfall effect's demonstration of sincerity, may show a relationship with travel inspiration. To put it another way, **their** warmth fosters trust and emotional connections, inspiring tourists to explore destinations based on SMIs' authentic shared experiences (Nguyen et al., 2025). **The pratfall effect is associated with perceptions of SMI competence through a mechanism of confident vulnerability** (Aronson et al., 1966; Patry-Beaudoin et al., 2025). Unlike errors that signal a lack of skill (e.g., giving incorrect travel advice), the clumsy blunder in our study is domain-irrelevant (Aronson et al., 1966). By acknowledging the clumsiness that is unrelated to their professional expertise, the SMI demonstrates that their core capabilities remain intact. Furthermore, the capacity to laugh at oneself implies a high level of self-assurance and control (Tang Poy & Woolhouse, 2020). This psychological resilience signals to followers that the SMI is sufficiently competent to handle imperfections without losing professional standing, thereby reinforcing credibility rather than diminishing it (Cheng et al., 2024; Luo et al., 2025).

Tourism and hospitality research demonstrates inspiration's positive influence on multiple customer behaviors, including travel intention (Fang et al., 2023), citizenship behaviors (Izogo et al., 2020), tourist engagement (He et al., 2023), travel planning (Nguyen et al., 2025), and WOM (Cheng et al., 2020). We assume that travel inspiration may mediate the relationship between perceptions of warmth and competence and travel intention, extending Fang et al.'s (2023) findings. This mediating role of inspiration between perceptions and behavioral intentions has been consistently documented in tourism studies (e.g., Fang et al., 2023; Kwon & Boger, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2025; Xie et al., 2022). Specifically, we propose that perceived warmth and competence, being linked to the pratfall effect, show a relationship with travel inspiration by fostering emotional connections and credibility with followers. This inspiration subsequently mediates the relationship between these perceptions and travel intentions,

motivating concrete travel decisions. Based on this theoretical background, we propose the following hypotheses:

H_1 : The pratfall-induced perceived warmth is associated with travel intention indirectly via travel inspiration.

H_2 : The pratfall-induced perceived competence is associated with travel intention indirectly via travel inspiration.

3.2. Moderating roles of central and peripheral processing routes

Travel SMIs' content effectiveness and its impact on travel inspiration and intention vary according to followers' information processing patterns. While the SCM establishes warmth and competence as fundamental dimensions in social evaluations (Fiske et al., 2002), the ELM distinguishes between central and peripheral processing routes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). When the pratfall effect triggers perceptions of warmth and competence, their influence on travel inspiration and intention likely differs based on these distinct processing routes.

Research demonstrates that individual characteristics moderate both the relationship between inspiration sources and inspiration itself and between inspiration and behavioral outcomes (Fang et al., 2023). Tourism studies have identified several individual-level moderators, including openness to experience (Fang et al., 2023), cultural orientation (Izogo et al., 2020), service value perceptions (Khoi et al., 2020), and personality traits (Khoi et al., 2021). Extending this established framework, we propose that information processing styles—central and peripheral routes from the ELM—represent fundamental individual characteristics that shape how followers process SMI content to develop inspiration and translate this inspiration into behavioral intentions. This proposition aligns with the ELM's core tenet that processing routes significantly influence message effectiveness and subsequent behavioral responses (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

When followers employ central processing, they systematically evaluate message content, prioritizing content quality and factual evidence over emotional or social cues (Lee & Theokary, 2021; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This analytical approach may reduce the relationship between pratfall effect-linked warmth perceptions and travel inspiration and intention, as followers focus predominantly on substantive travel information rather than SMIs' relational qualities (Ragab, 2022; Wei et al., 2025). Conversely, peripheral processing emphasizes emotional connections and superficial cues, showing a stronger relationship with followers' receptivity to warmth signals (Park et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2025). In this context, the humanizing effect of pratfall-linked warmth may be more strongly associated with both travel inspiration and intention (Wei et al., 2025). Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H_{3a} : When individuals process the message via the central route, the positive relationship between perceived warmth linked to a travel SMI's pratfall and travel intention will be weaker.

H_{3b} : When individuals process the message via the peripheral route, the positive relationship between perceived warmth linked to a travel SMI's pratfall and travel intention will be stronger.

H_{4a} : When individuals process the message via the central route, the positive relationship between pratfall-induced perceived warmth and travel inspiration will be weaker.

H_{4b} : When individuals process the message via the peripheral route, the positive relationship between pratfall-induced perceived warmth and travel inspiration will be stronger.

When followers employ central processing, they systematically evaluate SMIs' expertise and capabilities through detailed assessment (Ren et al., 2023). In this context of thorough evaluation, the pratfall effect's minor imperfections may be associated with perceived competence by demonstrating authentic expertise and professional self-awareness,

subsequently becoming associated with travel inspiration and intention (El Hedhli et al., 2023).

This analytical approach shows a relationship with perceived competence as followers recognize that genuine expertise encompasses the acknowledgement of limitations. Conversely, peripheral processing leads to superficial judgements where imperfections may be linked to competence deficits, without consideration of their authenticity value (Park et al., 2024).

Accordingly, we propose:

H_{5a}: When individuals process the message via the central route, the positive relationship between pratfall-induced perceived competence and travel intention will be stronger.

H_{5b}: When individuals process the message via the peripheral route, the positive relationship between pratfall-induced perceived competence and travel intention will be weaker.

H_{6a}: When individuals process the message via the central route, the positive relationship between pratfall-induced perceived competence and travel inspiration will be stronger.

H_{6b}: When individuals process the message via the peripheral route, the positive relationship between pratfall-induced perceived competence and travel inspiration will be weaker.

The relationship between travel inspiration and intention varies with information processing depth, as conceptualized in the ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). While inspiration fundamentally serves as a motivational force driving action (Fang et al., 2023; Jhawar, 2024), its impact differs based on how individuals process inspirational content. Central route processing involves systematic content evaluation, prioritizing logical coherence and substantive travel information (Lee & Theokary, 2021). This cognitive investment, though demanding, yields more robust intention formation (Dai et al., 2022). Research demonstrates

that central route processing generates more enduring attitudinal changes and associated behaviors compared to peripheral route outcomes (McNeill & Stoltenberg, 1989). This deep cognitive engagement is associated with inspiration's influence on intention as individuals transform inspirational cues into concrete travel plans, which is then linked to deliberate travel decisions (Ren et al., 2023).

Conversely, peripheral processing relies on emotional resonance and heuristic cues, where limited cognitive investment renders inspiration more transient and less likely to manifest as concrete intentions (Park et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2025). While warmth and relatability may show a relationship with immediate inspiration, the absence of systematic processing often results in superficial, temporary effects (Böttger et al., 2017; Cacioppo et al., 1986; Fang et al., 2023). Additionally, attitudinal changes through peripheral processing can typically be linked to limited impact on behavioral outcomes (McNeill & Stoltenberg, 1989). Thus, we propose that travel inspiration's transformative power on intention is more strongly associated with central processing, where cognitive elaboration creates an enduring bridge between inspirational moments and actionable intentions. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H_{7a} : When individuals process the message via the central route, the relationship between travel inspiration and intention will be stronger, as inspiration is evaluated through logical and substantive content.

H_{7b} : When individuals process the message via the peripheral route, the relationship between travel inspiration and intention will be weaker, as inspiration is linked to emotional or superficial cues.

Table 1 provides a summary of all hypotheses, including the proposed relationships, effect types, and expected directions.

*****INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE*****

4. Methodology

4.1. Research design and context

A scenario-based survey approach employing vignettes (Alexander & Becker, 1978; Wason et al., 2002) was adopted (see Gursoy et al., 2025; Huang et al., 2025; Rasouli et al., 2025). As noted by Gursoy et al. (2025), vignette designs, unlike conventional surveys, reduce measurement error by offering detailed contextual cues, thereby enhancing response accuracy, realism, and ultimately ecological validity. Such designs are particularly valuable for examining complex or future-oriented issues by situating responses within specified conditions. In line with prior research, this study integrates vignettes with structural equation modeling (SEM) (e.g., Barnet et al., 1996; Gursoy et al., 2025; Rasouli et al., 2025). The scenario featured a female travel SMI in Cappadocia, Türkiye—a destination highly popular among domestic and international visitors—and incorporated a pratfall condition to foster realistic decision-making (see Appendix for full scenario). The expertise of the SMI—crucial for eliciting the pratfall effect—was signaled by describing who a travel SMI is in terms of competence and expertise in various aspects of tourism and social media and how the SMI in the scenario is a travel SMI as such (Kim et al., 2011; Kołodziej et al., 2018). Moreover, when the female SMI spoke in the scenario, she did so with logically coherent and well-structured sentences, a generic hallmark of expertise in any domain (Tiberius et al., 1998; Kim et al., 2011). Furthermore, the **clumsy** nature of the blunder presented in the scenario was achieved by a generic and common mishap (i.e., spilling coffee) that would not encroach on the topic expertise of the SMI, followed by a self-acknowledgement that exudes humor. This specific scenario is considered adequately

effective in testing the basic pratfall effect of spilling coffee, as in many previous studies (e.g., Aronson et al., 1966; Mettee & Wilkins, 1972; Nisbett & Bellows, 1977). All these aspects of the scenario were developed by the authors and then externally validated through the evaluations of an independent expert panel in marketing and tourism (see Section 5.1 for the detailed validation analysis). These components of the scenario therefore collectively operationalize the pratfall effect by pairing clearly established competence with a **clumsy** blunder confirmed to be outside the influencer's area of expertise (see the Appendix for text in bold in the scenario highlighting these components).

The Instagram platform serves as the study's social media context (De Cicco et al., 2024; Rao Hill & Qesja, 2023), with two billion monthly active users (Statista, 2024c). As the leading platform for influencer marketing globally (Sands et al., 2022), Instagram attracts 89% of marketers for influencer marketing initiatives (Rao Hill & Qesja, 2023). Following previous research (El Hedhli et al., 2023; Pittman & Abell, 2021), we selected a female SMI stimulus, reflecting the gender distribution in influencer marketing (77% female) (Gesenhues, 2019). The focus on travel SMIs aligns with their prominence in the industry (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025) and their transformative impact on tourism marketing communications (Manthiou et al., 2024).

Türkiye, as the context of the study, offers particular relevance for both the SMI scenario and participant selection. The country's SMI advertising market projects substantial growth, with spending expected to reach US\$ 61.70 million in 2025 and US\$ 90.46 million by 2029 (Statista, 2024d), indicating increasing reliance on local SMIs for audience engagement. Additionally, Türkiye's Instagram user base of approximately 58.3 million in 2024 represents a significant portion of the population (Statista, 2024e), providing a robust context to examine SMI dynamics and digital engagement mechanisms.

4.2. Data collection procedures and sample

After obtaining ethical approval for the study, the data were collected over a period of about one week in January 2025. The survey screened for eligible participants meeting four criteria: age (≥ 18 years), Türkiye residency, Instagram account ownership, and following at least one SMI on Instagram. Participants received comprehensive study information via the survey cover page, including purpose, scope, scenario details, completion time, and confidentiality provisions. Given the absence of participation incentives, the study implemented an attention-check question to mitigate the increased likelihood of careless responses, ensuring data quality and validity (Gursoy et al., 2019; Kung et al., 2018).

Following recent studies (Fang et al., 2023; Rasouli et al., 2025), the online survey link created via Qualtrics was disseminated through multiple social media platforms. The participants were encouraged to share the survey further to extend reach beyond the researchers' direct control. Voluntary and anonymous participation reduced social desirability bias and supported authentic responses (Dhir et al., 2021). Compared to conventional convenience samples such as university students, this sampling approach allowed us to generate a random sample, thereby yielding a more heterogeneous pool of respondents. Accordingly, the diversity of the sample, enabled by the wide and uncontrolled distribution across platforms, is expected to mitigate potential biases linked to SMIs' perceived demographic and personality traits (e.g., attractiveness, age, personality), as well as scenario-specific factors such as the selected destination (Daryanto, 2025).

Sample size determination employed Soper's (2024) SEM calculator, incorporating parameters from recent influencer marketing research (Lim & Lee, 2023; Rao Hill & Qesja, 2023). The calculation specified a power of 0.90, a significance level of 0.05, a medium effect size of 0.30, six latent variables, and 21 observed variables. This analysis indicated a minimum requirement of 200 participants to ensure adequate statistical power while maintaining methodological rigor.

From 364 initial survey respondents, 130 were excluded (29 lacking Instagram accounts, 53 not following SMIs, and 48 careless respondents), yielding 234 valid responses—above the minimum sample requirement. The sample comprised 71.8% female and 28.2% male participants, aged 18-50 years ($M=24.50$, $SD=6.86$). Specifically, gender was included as a control variable due to the uneven distribution of our sample to account for potential gender-based response variations in the model. Educational distribution showed bachelor's (67.5%), associate's (16.7%), and postgraduate degrees (13.7%). Regarding daily Instagram use, slightly more than half of the participants spent 1-3 hours on the platform, followed by 28.6% at 3-5 hours and 10.3% at less than 1 hour.

4.3. Measures

The survey structure encompassed four distinct sections: participant eligibility screening, a travel SMI scenario featuring the pratfall effect, construct measurement scales, and demographic data collection. The study employed validated scales from prior research. Bernritter et al.'s (2016) three-item scales measured perceived warmth and competence, while Nguyen et al.'s (2025) four-item scale assessed travel inspiration. The ELM measurement included central (five items) and peripheral routes (three items) from Dedeoğlu et al. (2020), while travel intention was measured using three items from Hsu et al. (2006). All constructs used 7-point Likert scales anchored by "strongly disagree" (1) and "strongly agree" (7). Scenario realism employed modified anchors: "extremely unbelievable/unrealistic/unlikely" (1) to "extremely believable/realistic/likely" (7).

Prior research demonstrated that gender can significantly influence social media engagement patterns and responses to influencer content (Hudders & Jans, 2022; Ooi et al., 2023; Rao & Qesja, 2023). Notably, studies have shown differences in how males and females perceive influencer credibility and process persuasive messages in social media contexts (Hudders & Jans, 2022; Ooi et al., 2023). Additionally, research indicates that travel behaviors

and tourism preferences may vary between males and females (Kim et al., 2007; Meng & Uysal, 2008). Therefore, following established methodological practices, we included gender as a control variable to account for potential variations in our model and ensure the accuracy of our findings (Memon et al., 2024).

The measurement scales followed Brislin's (1970) back-translation process for Turkish adaptation. This procedure involved English-to-Turkish translation by one expert, Turkish-to-English back-translation by a second expert, and comparative analysis by a third expert to verify linguistic and contextual equivalence.

Acknowledging the importance of stimulus verification, this study opted for expert validation of the vignette rather than a traditional post-hoc manipulation check with main study participants. This approach was chosen to avoid the risk of making the manipulation salient, which can neutralize the intended affective response, a concern noted in foundational research (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). This methodological precedent was also established in the pioneering study on the pratfall effect, where Aronson et al. (1966) similarly omitted a manipulation check to preserve the naturalness of the manipulation. To this end, a formal scenario validation study was conducted with a panel of 29 academic experts. As detailed below, the results provided robust evidence for the vignette's construct validity, with the expert panel demonstrating perfect reliability ($PRL = 1.00$) in their judgment that the scenario successfully operationalized the pratfall effect.

5. Analysis and Findings

5.1. Assessment of scenario validation

To address potential limitations regarding the vignette's construct validity in terms of the pratfall effect, and highlight the scenario's realism, a validation study was conducted with a panel of 29 academics who have expertise in marketing and tourism and are active Instagram

users. The reliability of their qualitative judgments was assessed using the PRL method developed by Rust and Cooil (1994), which provides a rigorous measure of inter-judge agreement directly comparable to Cronbach's alpha. As detailed in Table 2, the overall agreement rate across the four validation criteria was 87.07% ($A \approx 0.87$). Following the procedure outlined by Rust and Cooil (1994, Table 3) and using the N=20 column, as our sample size exceeded the table's maximum, this calculation yielded a PRL reliability of 1.00. This result indicates perfect agreement among the expert panel and confirms the scenario's high content validity.

*****INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE*****

Moreover, the scenario's realism was evaluated using three criteria (Bagozzi et al., 2016): realism ($M=5.86$, $SD=1.19$), believability ($M=5.86$, $SD=1.16$), and likelihood of Instagram encounter ($M=6.17$, $SD=0.89$). These ratings indicate that the experts perceived the travel SMI scenario as credible and representative of typical Instagram content.

5.2. Descriptive statistics

Table 3 presents construct-level descriptive statistics and intercorrelations. All correlations were positive and statistically significant ($0.322 \leq r \leq 0.753$, $p < 0.01$). Mean values on the 7-point Likert scales ranged from 3.67 ($SD=1.39$) to 4.76 ($SD=1.19$). Skewness and kurtosis values for all constructs were within the ± 1.5 threshold, indicating univariate normality (Tabachnick & Field, 2013). Similarly, Table 4 indicates item-level descriptive statistics. Item means ranged from 3.44 ($SD = 1.55$) to 5.45 ($SD = 1.36$), with skewness and kurtosis values falling within acceptable limits (± 1.5), which also supports the assumption of univariate normality at the item level.

*****INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE*****

While univariate normality does not ensure multivariate normality (DeCarlo, 1997), we evaluated the dataset's adherence to multivariate normality assumptions using Mardia's (1970) coefficient to measure multivariate skewness and kurtosis. The results revealed that the dataset did not meet the assumption of multivariate normality. Although the kurtosis value ($\beta=18.66$) fell below the accepted threshold of ± 20 , the skewness value ($\beta=2799.35$) significantly exceeded the acceptable range of ± 1 . Both values were statistically significant ($p<0.001$), indicating deviations from multivariate normality.

5.3. Measurement model

We applied a structured analytical approach to evaluate our research model using the lavaan package in R Studio software (Rosseel, 2012), guided by Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step approach (i.e., measurement model and structural model). In the first step, a comprehensive assessment of the measurement was conducted to establish construct reliability, validity, and robustness. To achieve this, the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed. Since the dataset violated the assumption of multivariate normality, the maximum likelihood estimator with robust standard errors (MLR) **was used**, which corrects for non-normality. The MLR provides Satorra-Bentler scaled chi-square (S-B χ^2) statistics, adjusted standard errors, and robust fit indices (Cheung et al., 2024; Finney & DiStefano, 2006). Analysis revealed **that** two items related to the central route had factor loadings below the threshold of .600 (Hair et al., 2019) and were subsequently removed. The revised analysis yielded factor loadings ranging from .633 to .935 ($p<.001$), as reported in Table 4. The CFA model met all cutoff criteria proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999), indicating excellent fit: S-B $\chi^2(137, N=234)=238.219$, $p<.001$; S-B $\chi^2/df=1.738$; R-CFI=0.971; R-TLI=0.964; R-RMSEA=0.060 (90% CI [0.046, 0.073]); SRMR=0.042.

*****INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE*****

Then, the convergent validity using composite reliability (CR) was evaluated, and the average variance was extracted (AVE). According to Hair et al. (2019), CR values above 0.70 and AVE values exceeding 0.50 indicate acceptable convergent validity. As shown in Table 3, all constructs met these thresholds, confirming strong convergent validity.

Additionally, we assessed discriminant validity using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, a widely adopted method in recent literature (Henseler et al., 2015; Voorhees et al., 2016). As shown in Table 5, all HTMT ratios fell below the 0.850 threshold, indicating strong discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2019; Henseler et al., 2015). Moreover, inter-construct correlations below 0.800 (see Table 3) provided additional support for discriminant validity (Kline, 2016). Finally, Cronbach's alpha and CR values for all constructs exceeded 0.700 (see Table 4), confirming the internal consistency reliability of constructs (Hair et al., 2019). These results collectively support the validity of our measurement model.

*******INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE*******

5.4. Common method bias

Given that our data collection relied on a single-source survey method, we acknowledge the potential for common method bias (CMB) (Gilal et al., 2021). Following Podsakoff et al.'s (2003) recommendations, we first applied several procedural remedies: providing clear instructions with an informative cover page explaining the academic nature of the study (Memon et al., 2023), ensuring participant anonymity and voluntary participation (Lo et al., 2022), keeping the survey short and concise to maximize respondent participation, and positioning demographic questions at the end (Sharma et al., 2021).

To further ensure the absence of CMB, we conducted a series of statistical tests. First, a single-factor model (all items loading onto one factor) was compared to the above-validated multifactor model using CFA (Tajdini et al., 2022). The single-factor model indicated poor fit:

S-B χ^2 (152, $N=234$)=1043.059, $p<.001$; S-B χ^2/df =6.862; R-CFI=0.720; R-TLI=0.686; R-RMSEA=0.172 (90%CI[0.163,0.182]); SRMR=0.115. A chi-square difference test confirmed the single-factor model fit significantly worse than the multifactor model ($\Delta\chi^2=804.84$, $\Delta df=15$, $p<.001$). Additionally, we conducted a common latent factor (CLF) test, comparing standardized factor loadings from models with and without the CLF (Archimi et al., 2018; El Hedhli et al., 2023). The differences were all below the threshold ($\lambda>0.200$), indicating no evidence of CMB (Archimi et al., 2018). Finally, we tested a full collinearity test using the variance inflation factor (VIF) approach (Kock, 2015). As Table 3 shows, VIF values for all constructs were well below the cut-off point of 5.0, indicating that collinearity is not a concern (Kock, 2015). Consequently, these results suggest that the CMB does not exist in the data set.

5.5. Structural model and hypotheses testing

To simultaneously test the first two hypotheses, the SEM with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% confidence intervals were used. The model, which included gender as a control variable, explained 48.4% of the variance in travel inspiration and 65.3% of the variance in travel intention, indicating strong predictive power for the endogenous latent variables (Hair et al., 2019). The model demonstrated excellent fit, meeting all recommended cutoff criteria (Hu & Bentler, 1999): S-B $\chi^2(158, N=234)$ =270.217, $p<0.001$; S-B χ^2/df =1.710; R-CFI=0.969; R-TLI=0.962; R-RMSEA=0.058 (90% CI [0.045,0.070]); SRMR=0.052.

As shown in Table 6, mediation analysis revealed significant indirect effects of perceived warmth ($b=0.242$, 95% CI [0.068,0.416]) and perceived competence ($b=0.322$, 95% CI [0.111,0.534]) from a travel SMI's pratfall on travel intention through travel inspiration, supporting H₁ and H₂, respectively. These findings highlight the critical role of travel inspiration as a mediator serving as an intervening mechanism between perceived warmth and competence from a travel SMI's pratfall and travel intention.

*****INSERT TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE*****

Moderation analysis examined central and peripheral processing routes' effects on relationships between perceived warmth, competence, travel inspiration, and intention (see Table 7). For perceived warmth-travel intention relationships, the central route showed no significant moderation ($b=-0.070, p>0.05, f^2=0.009$), failing to support H_{3a}. The peripheral route demonstrated significant positive moderation ($b=0.126, p<0.05, f^2=0.020$), supporting H_{3b} and indicating that consumers with higher perceived warmth show a stronger relationship with travel intentions when using the peripheral processing route.

*****INSERT TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE*****

To probe the nature of this significant interaction, a simple slope analysis was conducted using the pick-a-point approach (Hayes, 2022), examining conditional effects at the 16th (low), 50th (medium), and 84th (high) percentiles of the moderator (see Fig. 2). The relationship between perceived warmth and travel intention was non-significant at both high ($b=0.560, p>0.05$) and low ($b=0.307, p>0.05$) levels of peripheral processing, suggesting that the moderating effect operates broadly across the continuum rather than producing sharply differentiated effects at specific points.

*****INSERT FIG. 2 ABOUT HERE*****

Moreover, analysis revealed no significant moderation by the central route on warmth-inspiration relationships ($b=0.002, p>0.05, f^2=0.000$), failing to support H_{4a}. On the contrary, the peripheral route demonstrated positive moderation ($b=0.047, p<0.05, f^2=0.028$), supporting H_{4b}, indicating a stronger relationship between travel perceived warmth and travel inspiration among consumers with higher peripheral processing. A simple slope analysis further probed this significant interaction (see Fig. 3). The relationship between perceived warmth and travel inspiration was significant for high peripheral processing ($b=0.334, p<0.05$) and non-significant for low peripheral processing ($b=0.240, p>0.05$). This suggests that pratfall-induced warmth is

associated with travel inspiration significantly, particularly among individuals who tend to depend more heavily on the peripheral route.

***** INSERT FIG. 3 ABOUT HERE *****

For competence-related relationships, neither processing route showed significant moderation of intention (central: $b=-0.121$, $p>0.05$, $f^2=0.014$; peripheral: $b=0.054$, $p>0.05$, $f^2=0.002$), failing to support H_{5a} and H_{5b} . These findings suggest competence effects on travel intention remain consistent across processing routes. However, the pattern differed for travel inspiration. The central route strengthened the competence–inspiration pathway ($b=0.072$, $p<0.01$, $f^2=0.051$), whereas the peripheral route weakened it ($b=-0.080$, $p<0.001$, $f^2=0.078$), providing support for H_{6a} and H_{6b} . As depicted in Fig. 4, simple slope analysis indicated a strong association between perceived competence and travel inspiration under both high ($b=0.786$, $p<0.001$) and low ($b=0.617$, $p<0.001$) levels of central processing, suggesting that competence-related inspiration is amplified consistently, regardless of central processing intensity.

***** INSERT FIG. 4 ABOUT HERE *****

In contrast, the relationship under peripheral processing was not significant at either high ($b=-0.048, p>0.05$) or low ($b=0.112, p>0.05$) levels (see Fig. 5), indicating that the peripheral route is associated with gradual moderation of the relationship rather than creating abrupt differences at specific thresholds.

***** INSERT FIG. 5 ABOUT HERE *****

For the inspiration–intention relationship, the central route positively moderated the relationship ($b=0.169, p<0.001, f^2=0.067$), whereas the peripheral route exerted a negative moderating influence ($b=-0.126, p<0.05, f^2=0.025$), supporting both H_{7a} and H_{7b}. These findings suggest that travel inspiration tends to show a stronger relationship with intention among

individuals engaging in central processing, whereas its association appears weaker among those relying on peripheral cues. As illustrated in Fig. 6, simple slope analysis revealed that travel inspiration is strongly associated with travel intention at both high ($b=1.255, p<0.001$) and low ($b=0.960, p<0.001$) levels of central processing, suggesting a consistent strong level of association between inspiration and intention.

*****INSERT FIG. 6 ABOUT HERE*****

Conversely, under peripheral processing, the relationship was nonsignificant at high ($b=-0.289, p>0.05$) and low ($b=-0.037, p>0.05$) levels (see Fig. 7), implying that the moderating influence of the peripheral route is associated with gradual changes in the relationship rather than inducing sharp contrasts at specific points.

*****INSERT FIG. 7 ABOUT HERE*****

6. Discussion

This study addresses recent calls in tourism literature by examining travel SMIs' pratfall effect in two ways. First, we examine how pratfall-induced perceived warmth and competence can be associated with travel intention through inspiration, responding to Dai et al.'s (2023) call to investigate how content characteristics show a relationship with travel inspiration. Second, following Fang et al.'s (2023) call to explore individual-level moderating factors in travel decision-making, we investigate how tourists' information processing routes (central and peripheral) moderate these relationships. Drawing on data collected from Turkish Instagram users who follow SMIs, this study bridges critical gaps in travel and tourism influencer marketing literature.

The findings demonstrate that pratfall-induced perceived warmth and competence toward travel SMIs **foster** travel inspiration, **which in turn drives** travel intention, confirming

inspiration's mediating role. This finding supports recent tourism literature emphasizing inspiration's mediating role in translating perceptions into behavioral outcomes (e.g., Fang et al., 2023; Kwon & Boger, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2025; Xie et al., 2022). Specifically, our findings align with the study of Nguyen et al. (2025), which demonstrated that the sincerity (warmth) and professionalism (competence) of travel vloggers positively influence travel planning behavior by inspiring potential travelers. Additionally, these results are consistent with the broader literature on consumer responses to SMIs, where perceived warmth and competence have been shown to be associated with followers' parasocial relationships, and increase persuasiveness (Conde & Casais, 2023; El Hedhli et al., 2023). Moreover, the findings of this study are in line with those of similar studies in the hospitality field. For instance, Gao and Mattila (2014) showed that perceived warmth and perceived competence are positively associated with increased trust and satisfaction with hotels that claimed to be green. A recent experimental study indicates that the perceived warmth and competence of intelligent customer service agents positively impact consumer trust and affect (Cheng et al., 2024). Another study found that perceived warmth is associated with service satisfaction, whereas perceived competence is not (Smith et al., 2016). These findings suggest that both warmth and competence not only influence initial perceptions but also play a crucial role in sustaining long-term relationships (Fiske et al., 2007). This research also extends Koc et al.'s (2023) study in hospitality contexts, demonstrating that acknowledging flaws is associated with enhanced trust and positive behavioral intentions in the future. This confirms that travel SMIs' strategic disclosure of imperfections (pratfall effect) can turn into strengthened persuasive impact on followers' travel decisions, reinforcing the positive role of showing human fallibility in social media (Cheng et al., 2024; Han & Balabanis, 2024; Luo et al., 2025).

Our findings also reveal complex moderating effects of information processing routes on the relationships between pratfall-induced perceptions and travel responses. For peripheral

processing, results indicate that the pratfall is associated with strengthened positive relationships between perceived warmth and travel intentions and inspiration. This aligns with ELM, which suggests that the peripheral route requires minimal cognitive effort and is more receptive to emotional and social cues, such as visuals, social proof, and SMIs (Najar et al., 2024; Park et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2025). Since the pratfall effect operates as a cognitive shortcut or heuristic that is associated with warmth perceptions in a short period of time following the minor imperfections (Arnold et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2024), peripheral processors, who naturally favor such mental shortcuts over detailed analysis, are particularly susceptible to its influence. This demonstrates how secondary experiences correspond to passive consumption of digital narratives (Seeler et al., 2019). These individuals, often characterized as casual followers with limited personal investment in the content, show a stronger relationship with SMIs' charisma, relatability, and authentic storytelling of realistic experiences rather than detailed factual analysis (Banik et al., 2025). Their judgments are primarily based on emotional responses and attention-grabbing elements like relatable characters and eye-catching imagery (Banik et al., 2025; Cacioppo et al., 1986), explaining why pratfall-induced warmth is more strongly associated with their inspiration and intention to travel.

However, contrary to our expectations, central processing did not weaken the relationship between perceived warmth and its downstream associations with travel intention and inspiration. While ELM suggests that central route processing emphasizes argument quality over emotional cues (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984), our findings reveal that warmth remains to be associated with travel responses even during systematic content evaluation. This unexpected result can be interpreted in several ways. First, as travel is an inherently emotional and aspirational domain, warmth perceptions may transcend the traditional processing dichotomy, functioning as a fundamental social dimension that is associated with enhanced persuasion regardless of the processing route (Fiske et al., 2002). This aligns with San José-Cabezudo et

al.'s (2009) critique of traditional ELM assumptions, suggesting that in high-involvement contexts like travel, central and peripheral routes may be linked in a synergistic manner. Alternatively, this finding may reflect a methodological limitation in our operationalization of the ELM's processing routes. Our measurement, while grounded in prior studies (Chen & Lee, 2008; Dedeoğlu et al., 2020), may capture perceptions of the SMI's profile usability and appeal rather than the pure cognitive elaboration central to the theory, thus failing to fully isolate followers who are immune to affective cues. Ultimately, the resilience of warmth suggests that in travel SMI contexts, pratfall-linked warmth is associated with travel decisions across different processing conditions.

As expected, the findings revealed that central route processing enhanced, while the peripheral processing weakened, the effect of perceived competence on travel inspiration. This suggests that an SMI's utilitarian message content may align with linear narratives and the systematic elaboration typical of central route processing (Liu et al., 2024). The enhanced inspirational effect through central processing emerges as individuals carefully evaluate the SMI's competence through systematic elaboration (Lee & Theokary, 2021; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), focusing on argument quality, which then turns into stronger and more enduring attitudinal changes that better predict actual behaviors (McNeill & Stoltenberg, 1989). Conversely, peripheral processing may weaken the relationship between competence and travel inspiration as individuals tend to rely on superficial cues rather than evaluating competence signals systematically, resulting in temporary attitudinal changes with limited behavioral influence (McNeill & Stoltenberg, 1989; Park et al., 2024).

Interestingly, neither central nor peripheral processing appeared to moderate the relationship between perceived competence and travel intention. This finding contradicts previous research; for instance, Banik et al. (2025) found that both information quality (central route) and source credibility (peripheral route) influenced behavioral outcomes, while Filieri

and McLeay (2014) demonstrated significant effects of both processing routes on travelers' information adoption. Our initial expectation was that central processors, through systematic evaluation, would notice the clumsy nature of the blunder, and therefore interpret the influencer's confident handling of it as a sign of authentic expertise (Aronson et al., 1966; Ren et al., 2023). Conversely, we anticipated that peripheral processors might perceive it simply as a competence deficit (Park et al., 2024). The null finding for intention, when juxtaposed with the significant moderation effect observed for inspiration, suggests the presence of a more complex underlying mechanism in shaping followers' behavioral responses. We predict that this discrepancy may stem from the conceptual gap between these two responses, as customer inspiration is a sequential process that may not always show a direct relationship with action (Böttger et al., 2017; Fang et al., 2023). While a competent SMI may effectively spark an initial, passive 'inspired-by' state, the transition to a firm, goal-driven 'inspired-to' intention requires overcoming practical barriers—such as perceived cost or risk—that perceived competence alone cannot address (Dai et al., 2023; Tiwari, 2024). The moderating influence of processing routes on perceived competence therefore appears to dissipate at the final intention stage, suggesting that inspiration is associated with subsequent behaviour as a crucial but often insufficient mediating step in the path from perception to behaviour (Fang et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2025).

Finally, central processing tended to strengthen while peripheral processing weakened the effect of inspiration on travel intention, confirming that deeper cognitive engagement shows a stronger relationship with the conversion of inspirational experiences into travel decisions (Ren et al., 2023). This finding aligns with established research showing that central route processing tends to produce more enduring attitude changes and stronger behavioral intentions, as individuals process travel-related content more thoroughly and critically, rather than relying on superficial cues (McNeill & Stoltenberg, 1989; Park et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2025). When

travellers engage through the central route, they show a stronger relationship with subsequent travel intentions by evaluating inspirational content systematically, leading to more robust links between initial inspiration and subsequent intention (Wei et al., 2025). Conversely, attitudinal changes formed through peripheral processing tend to be temporary and exert limited influence on subsequent behavioral outcomes, thus reducing the translation of inspirational content into concrete travel intentions, particularly when individuals rely primarily on superficial cues rather than engaging deeply with the travel-related content (McNeill & Stoltenberg, 1989; Park et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2025).

Beyond their statistical significance, a critical evaluation of the moderation effects requires consideration of their practical significance, which is defined as whether the magnitude of the effect is substantial enough to be meaningful in a real-world context (Lim, 2024). Our analysis indicates that the calculated Cohen's f^2 values for the significant interactions are small to negligible in magnitude (Cohen, 1988; Lim, 2024) (see Table 7). While this suggests that the individual-level impact of these moderation effects may be limited, their implications in the saturated and competitive domain of influencer marketing should not be understated. As highlighted by Lim (2024), statistically significant relationships with small effect sizes may translate into meaningful outcomes in large-scale applications. For instance, the peripheral route's moderating effect on the inspiration-intention link ($H_{7b}, f^2=0.067$), while modest, may be associated with influencing a substantial number of potential travelers in a digital campaign reaching a large audience. Nevertheless, it is plausible that these small effect sizes are also a function of our study's methodological characteristics, indicating a relationship that warrants further investigation with larger, more diverse samples (Fern & Monroe, 1996).

6.1. Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to travel and tourism literature by revealing how Instagram travel SMIs' pratfall-induced perceived warmth and competence **are** associated with travel inspiration and intention. Additionally, it extends our understanding of how processing routes moderate the strength of the relationships between SMI-induced perceptions and tourist behaviour.

First, the study makes a novel contribution by extending the pratfall effect (Aronson et al., 1966) to influencer marketing contexts. This is the first study to systematically investigate how minor flaws can be associated with shaping followers' perceptions of travel SMIs. We argue that SMIs' characteristics and behaviors, such as pratfalls, are linked to followers' emotional appraisals (perceived warmth) and cognitive assessments (perceived competence) (Luo et al., 2025), and the findings demonstrate that the pratfall effect operates through these dual pathways of warmth and competence, emphasizing that the display of imperfections may not actually be negatively associated with expert travel SMIs' persuasiveness. Specifically, we show that when travel SMIs reveal minor flaws, this becomes associated with enhanced perceived warmth while maintaining perceived competence. These ultimately relate to enhanced travel inspiration and intention. Our theoretical integration of the pratfall effect with social media influence not only improves the understanding of persuasion mechanisms in influencer marketing, but also supports other SMI-related theories, including source credibility theory (Han & Balabanis, 2024), parasocial interaction theory (Han & Balabanis, 2024), congruity theory (Massi et al., 2024), and social exchange theory (Kim & Kim, 2021).

Second, the study extends current understandings of the SCM in the context of travel SMIs. While this model has been applied in various domains such as live-streaming commerce (Gao et al., 2025), hospitality and tourism (Feng et al., 2022; Pinto et al., 2020), and influencer marketing (El Hedhli et al., 2023; Ren et al., 2023), research examining how warmth and competence stereotypes, which are considered as two important elements of the SCM (Fiske et al., 2002) operate specifically in travel SMI contexts remains limited (Luo et al., 2025; Nguyen

et al., 2025). The SCM establishes a theoretical basis for examining how individuals perceive others, particularly SMIs during first interactions, while providing a practical framework that scholars and practitioners can employ to assess and comprehend these perceptions (Kervyn et al., 2022; Rojas-Méndez & Davies, 2024). In the context of SMIs, warmth manifests as perceived intimacy, whereas competence is closely linked to perceived expertise (Luo et al., 2025). For SMIs, perceived warmth tends to encompass sincerity, friendliness, good-naturedness, and social intent, fostering emotional connections, while competence reflects experience, skillfulness, intelligence, and efficiency, shaping cognitive judgments (Gao et al., 2025; Kervyn et al., 2022; Luo et al., 2025). We demonstrate how the pratfall effect is associated with a distinctive interplay between warmth and competence—enhancing warmth while maintaining competence—and how this interplay is related to higher travel inspiration and, ultimately, travel intention. This insight enriches our understanding of how fundamental social cognition dimensions function in travel-specific influencer contexts, and extends the SCM's theoretical reach into digital travel marketing (Fiske et al., 2002; Fiske et al., 2007).

Third, the study can help advance the phenomenon of customer inspiration by shedding light on the mediating mechanism of travel inspiration in SMI contexts. While previous research has established inspiration's mediating role in travel and tourism (Fang et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2025), this study demonstrates how pratfall-linked perceptions of warmth and competence are associated with influencing travel intentions through inspiration. This finding **extends** our current understanding of customer inspiration by revealing how minor flaws are linked to a psychological chain reaction—from enhanced perceptions of warmth and competence to heightened travel inspiration, ultimately leading to stronger travel intentions (Dai et al., 2023; Manthiou et al., 2024). This theoretical advancement provides a more nuanced explanation of why some SMIs have greater effectiveness in converting their content into actual travel behaviour through its inspiration-to-action process in digital travel marketing.

Fourth, responding to Fang et al.'s (2023) call, we make a significant contribution to the ELM by uncovering the complex moderating effects of information processing routes in travel SMI contexts. While prior research has examined processing routes in general SMI contexts (Lee & Theokary, 2021; Park et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2025), understanding of how central and peripheral processing shape travel SMI effectiveness remains limited and fragmented (Ong et al., 2024; Ragab, 2022; Xie-Carson et al., 2023). Our findings reveal several novel insights into the processing routes. Initially, we demonstrate that peripheral processing is associated with amplifying pratfall-induced warmth effects on both travel inspiration and intention, as individuals employing heuristic processing are more likely to respond to emotional cues and authentic storytelling (Banik et al., 2025; Wei et al., 2025). Then, we uncover an unexpected resilience of warmth effects under central processing, contradicting the traditional ELM assumptions by showing that warmth can help transcend the central-peripheral dichotomy in travel contexts (SanJosé-Cabezudo et al., 2009). Next, we confirm that central processing strengthens, while peripheral processing weakens the impact of competence on travel inspiration (McNeill & Stoltenberg, 1989). Following that, we identify a processing-dependent mechanism wherein central processing is associated with enhancing, while peripheral processing attenuating the inspiration-intention relationship, establishing the cognitive elaboration depth as a critical boundary condition in the transformation of travel inspiration into behavioural intentions (McNeill & Stoltenberg, 1989; Park et al., 2024; Ren et al., 2023). These results contribute to the ELM by demonstrating how different processing routes may uniquely moderate both pratfall-induced perceptions and the inspiration-intention link in travel SMI contexts, and thereby advance our understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying influencer marketing effectiveness in the travel domain.

Lastly, this study contributes a robust methodological template for the validation of vignette-based scenarios in influencer marketing and tourism research. While vignettes are

widely used to enhance ecological validity, their construct validity is often assumed rather than empirically demonstrated, creating a potential gap in methodological rigor. Our research addresses this by showcasing a two-pronged validation process conducted with an expert panel. Initially, we established the reliability of the scenario's theoretical components using the PRL method (Rust & Cool, 1994). This analysis yielded a perfect reliability score (PRL = 1.00), confirming exceptional inter-judge agreement on the content validity. Then, we assessed the scenario's realism and believability, adhering to the criteria of Bagozzi et al. (2016), which confirmed the vignette's credibility and contextual relevance. We recommend that future researchers adopt this comprehensive validation approach to enhance the transparency, replicability, and overall credibility of their vignette-based findings. This is ever more relevant for studies that employ vignettes to explore induced effects and affective states where manipulation checks are shown to spoil such effects (Schwarz & Clore, 1983).

6.2. Practical implications

The findings of this study suggest several implications for SMIs, destination managers, and tourism marketers seeking to **refine their communication strategies**. As the first study to link the pratfall effect with SMIs, it offers preliminary insights into how perceptions of warmth and competence are likely to be associated with enhanced SMI effectiveness. **However, given the modest effect sizes observed, these insights should be interpreted as complementary tactics rather than standalone solutions for influencer marketing.** To bridge theoretical insights with managerial practice, Table 8 summarizes several potential recommendations alongside their theoretical foundations.

First, the findings suggest **nuanced** implications for the SMIs' content strategies. Normally, the development of feelings of credibility, trustworthiness, authenticity, expertise, competence, attraction, friendliness, and rapport requires time, repeated efforts, and consistency (Klein & O'Brien, 2017; Nault et al., 2023). Our findings, in line with previous research

(Aronson et al., 1966; Mirnig et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2024), indicate that the pratfall effect can serve as a subtle cue associated with enhanced perceptions of warmth and competence. Through the measured disclosure of minor imperfections, SMIs could potentially support the development of authentic connections. Moreover, destination managers might consider encouraging SMIs to incorporate authentic imperfection disclosures, as this approach may contribute to travel inspiration compared to maintaining an artificially perfect image. However, this approach requires careful execution. As our study implies, SMIs need to be cautious, as major errors (such as repeatedly mispronouncing destination names) could undermine perceived competence and credibility.

Second, our findings offer considerations for fostering travel inspiration, particularly through immersive content. Given that tourism decisions are often driven by hedonic motivations, authentic imperfection disclosures in formats like videos and live streams may be associated with enhanced audience engagement (Dai et al., 2023). Moreover, this video-centric approach is noteworthy as distinct video content is related to increased forwarding behavior (Wu & Li, 2025), potentially supporting the message's reach.

Third, the application of the pratfall effect in tourism marketing can be strategically tailored to different segments by aligning incidental imperfections with segment-specific authenticity needs. For example, in brand collaborations, an adventure tourism influencer might showcase a minor, unrelated blunder—such as a humorous slip of the tongue or a minor logistical mishap—that does not compromise their perceived technical expertise in challenging environments. Conversely, SMIs promoting family holidays could highlight warmth-enhancing, off-task moments, such as a playful interaction or a candid, non-critical mistake during travel, to foster emotional connection and trust. This differentiated approach ensures that perceived flaws serve as authenticity cues without undermining core competence, which may ultimately facilitate the conversion of followers into potential tourists (Dai et al., 2023).

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Fourth, this study highlights potential avenues for effectively engaging a significant segment of the population currently not participating in tourism activities. UNWTO (2024) estimates that only 7% of the world's population would be participating in tourism activities by 2025. While our study focused on existing followers, the pratfall effect's demonstrated ability to enhance warmth and cultivate authentic connections may serve as a minor but meaningful mechanism to lower psychological barriers among hesitant or passive consumers. For individuals who are inspired by travel content but have not yet formed a concrete intention, a travel SMI's relatable imperfection may help increase perceived attainability and reduce perceived risk, rendering travel more approachable. In this context, destination marketers might consider leveraging this subtle effect to help engage passive observers, potentially contributing to their transition toward travel planning.

Finally, this study offers a potential implication regarding the dual-route processing of travel SMI content on Instagram. This platform's unique nature often benefits from content that strategically engages both central and peripheral processing routes simultaneously (Chung et al., 2015). Perceived warmth can engage peripheral processing by presenting a sincere and friendly demeanor, while perceived competence engages central processing through the demonstration of expertise (Ren et al., 2023). However, since peripheral processing may typically lead to short-lived attitude changes (McNeill & Stoltenberg, 1989), SMIs might consider regularly refreshing both warmth and competence perceptions through carefully designed content. This may be particularly important for engaging casual viewers who primarily process SMIs through peripheral cues such as charisma, visual appeal, and relatability (Banik et al., 2025). Therefore, content combining emotional storytelling with demonstrated expertise may support engagement with both processing routes, potentially contributing to more

lasting attitudinal changes and associations with travel consideration (Banik et al., 2025; McNeill & Stoltenberg, 1989). This is because audience responses show relationships with both affective and cognitive components (Wu & Lai, 2025). This synergistic approach appears to support SanJosé-Cabezudo et al.'s (2009) view that in high-involvement contexts like travel, central and peripheral routes **can** work complementarily rather than independently.

6.3. Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study has certain limitations that need to be noted. First, a primary limitation arises from the study's focus on a single, ecologically valid scenario. Although this design reflects a realistic context in which an SMI represents a composite of multiple traits (e.g., attractiveness, personality), it inevitably introduces confounding factors that constrain internal validity and limit the ability to isolate the pratfall's precise effect. The specific scenario was intentionally designed to capture a **clumsy** blunder, consistent with the original conceptualization of the pratfall effect (Aronson et al., 1966). This narrow operationalization, however, restricts the generalizability of findings to alternative contexts or more varied manifestations of pratfalls. Accordingly, future research could employ experimental designs that systematically vary the severity of the blunder (e.g., minor vs. major) and include no-pratfall control conditions, thereby strengthening causal inference. Furthermore, adopting a 2 (Expertise: High vs. Low) x 2 (Pratfall: Present vs. Absent) factorial design would be a particularly powerful approach to test the effect's boundary conditions and provide definitive causal evidence. Complementary qualitative investigations would further enrich these insights by uncovering how followers tend to sense influencers' vulnerability and by informing the design of more nuanced experimental treatments. Second, we acknowledge a methodological limitation concerning the operationalization of the ELM routes. Our approach, which measured processing preference as an individual trait, is grounded in prior methodological operationalizations (Chen & Lee, 2008; Dedeoğlu et al., 2020) but diverges from the model's classic conceptualization. Specifically, the

scale may capture perceptions of an SMI's profile usability and appeal rather than the cognitive elaboration central to the theory. Against this backdrop, we advocate for two complementary avenues for future research. The first involves developing and validating new instruments designed to more precisely measure individual processing preferences. The second calls for employing experimental designs to directly manipulate central and peripheral cues. Pursuing both pathways is believed to significantly enhance the theoretical clarity and empirical rigor of research in this domain.

Third, our study is constrained by a significant gender imbalance in the sample, which was predominantly female (71.8%). We included gender as a control variable and found no significant effect, but we should interpret this null finding with caution. The small size of the male subgroup may have provided insufficient statistical power to detect genuine differences. This limitation is particularly salient given the extensive literature demonstrating that gender can be a critical variable in social media contexts. Prior research indicates that males and females can differ in how they perceive influencer credibility and process persuasive messages (Hudders & Jans, 2022; Ooi et al., 2023). Furthermore, gender-based stereotypes could lead to different attributions for an influencer's blunder (e.g., perceiving a female SMI's mistake differently than a male SMI's). Consequently, we strongly advocate for future research to employ balanced samples and experimental designs (e.g., a 2 [SMI Gender: Male/Female] x 2 [Follower Gender: Male/Female] factorial design) to systematically explore potential interaction effects on the pratfall phenomenon.

Fourth, this study relied on the SCM to examine travel SMI perceptions. Future studies may further extend this model by utilizing the tourist stereotype model (Tung et al., 2020) to examine travel SMI perceptions. The tourist stereotype model can provide a more comprehensive understanding of tourism-specific stereotypes, as its unique dimensions (positive: competent and approachable; negative: rude and boastful) could complement the

SCM's warmth and competence framework in the travel SMI context. Fifth, this study focused solely on travel SMIs, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other influencer types. Future research could explore whether similar effects occur in other domains, such as food, sustainability, technology, fashion, beauty, fitness, and health. Additionally, with the rise of AI and virtual influencers, research in this area has grown rapidly (Jhawar, 2024; Liu et al., 2024; Xie-Carson & Benckendorff, 2024; Xie-Carson et al., 2023). Further studies could investigate how the pratfall effect applies to virtual ones.

Sixth, the efficacy of the pratfall effect is likely to be contingent upon critical contextual and cultural boundary conditions. The consumption context, for instance, may determine whether an SMI's blunder is perceived as endearing or incompetent. For instance, a pratfall may enhance perceived warmth in hedonic consumption settings but could undermine the crucial perception of competence in utilitarian ones (Paramita & Septianto, 2021; Roccapirore & Pollock, 2023). This distinction extends to cultural frameworks, which can predispose audiences toward different cognitive processing routes. Drawing on the ELM, it appears that individuals from low-context, individualistic, and masculine cultures tend to favor central-route processing, where logic and competence are paramount, potentially causing a pratfall to backfire (Hofstede, 1987). Conversely, individuals from high-context, collectivistic cultures may prefer peripheral-route processing, which emphasizes relational cues and intuition, making them more receptive to a **clumsy** blunder that humanizes a public figure (Masuda & Nisbett, 2003; Chatterjee, 2020). Our study was conducted in Türkiye (a high-context culture), which may have contributed to the observed positive effect. Consequently, future research may test these propositions by replicating the study in low-context cultural settings (e.g., Western Europe or North America), where a higher value may be placed on precision and perfectionism, to establish the broader generalizability of the phenomenon.

Finally, while this study examined human SMIs, future research should explore how the pratfall effect functions with service robots in tourism and hospitality (Ayyildiz et al., 2022). Given the challenges service robots face in conveying emotional and authentic social connections, researchers may explore whether strategic imperfection disclosure, grounded in the pratfall effect, could alleviate the uncanny valley effect (Mori, 1970; Xie-Carson & Benckendorff, 2024), thereby enhancing robots' perceived warmth and competence and facilitating more natural human-robot interactions.

7. Conclusion

This research shows that travel SMIs do not need to maintain a facade of perfection, as strategic disclosure of minor imperfections (pratfall effect) is associated with higher perceptions of warmth and competence and relates to enhanced travel inspiration and intention on the part of followers. The effectiveness of these psychological mechanisms varies depending on followers' processing routes, with peripheral processing associated with reinforced perceptions of warmth, and central processing associated with the transformation from inspiration to intention. Integrating multiple theoretical perspectives, including the pratfall effect, the SCM, and the ELM, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how imperfection disclosure corresponds with travel decision-making in the digital age (see Fig. 8).

*******INSERT FIG. 8 ABOUT HERE*******

Fig. 8. Research framework progression from gaps to solutions. Inspired by Lyu et al. (2025).

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

This article has been reviewed, edited, and refined with the assistance of Claude AI 3.5 Sonnet (2025) and DeepL, complementing the human editorial process. The authors then critically evaluated and verified the content to preserve academic rigor. They also assessed and validated

potential biases inherent in AI-generated content. The last version of the article is the sole responsibility of the human authors.

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Appendix

Pratfall scenario with text

Travel influencers are **experts** who guide their **social media followers** on **travel plans, sharing insights on destinations, hotel reviews, local experiences, and travel tips.**

Now, imagine a **female travel influencer in her 30s**. She's sitting at a café in **Cappadocia**, enjoying the **breathtaking morning view** as **colorful hot air balloons float across the sky**. On her table, there's a small **travel journal**, a pair of sunglasses, and her phone. The waiter gently brings her coffee, and she thanks him as she takes the cup.

As she **slowly sips her coffee**, a notification sound from her phone catches her attention. She turns her head to check the notification, **placing the cup back on the table a bit hastily**. At that moment, **a few drops of coffee spilled from the rim, spreading across the table and leaving a small stain on the corner of her travel journal.**

Startled for a moment, she grabs some napkins and smiles, **murmuring to herself**, "I guess Cappadocia's enchanting morning view got to me a little too much! A little coffee spill is just part of the experience, right?"

As she cleans up the spill with the napkins, she examines the stain on her journal and adds with a **chuckle**,

"Well, this can be Cappadocia's signature in my travel journal!"

Note: The text in bold highlights the core components required to operationalize the pratfall effect, consisting of the influencer's topic expertise, a **clumsy** blunder, and the blunder being outside the influencer's area of expertise, all of which were validated by our expert panel.

Table 1. Summary of Hypotheses and Proposed Relationships

Hypothesis	Path/Relationship	Type	Moderator	Expected Direction
H ₁	The pratfall-induced perceived warmth → Travel inspiration → Travel intention	Mediation	-	Indirect (+)
H ₂	The pratfall-induced perceived competence → Travel inspiration → Travel intention	Mediation	-	Indirect (+)
H _{3a}	The pratfall-induced perceived warmth → Travel intention	Moderation	Central route	Weaker
H _{3b}	The pratfall-induced perceived warmth → Travel intention	Moderation	Peripheral route	Stronger
H _{4a}	The pratfall-induced perceived warmth → Travel inspiration	Moderation	Central route	Weaker
H _{4b}	The pratfall-induced perceived warmth → Travel inspiration	Moderation	Peripheral route	Stronger
H _{5a}	The pratfall-induced perceived competence → Travel intention	Moderation	Central route	Stronger
H _{5b}	The pratfall-induced perceived competence → Travel intention	Moderation	Peripheral route	Weaker
H _{6a}	The pratfall-induced perceived competence → Travel inspiration	Moderation	Central route	Stronger
H _{6b}	The pratfall-induced perceived competence → Travel inspiration	Moderation	Peripheral route	Weaker
H _{7a}	Travel inspiration → Travel intention	Moderation	Central route	Stronger
H _{7b}	Travel inspiration → Travel intention	Moderation	Peripheral route	Weaker

Table 2. Expert Agreement on Pratfall Effect Criteria (N=29)

Criterion (Question)	'Yes' Count	'No' Count	Agreement Rate (A)
1. Does the scenario have the potential to create a pratfall effect?	25	4	86.21%
2. Is the emphasis on the influencer's expertise clear?	25	4	86.21%
3. Is the mistake (spilling coffee) a minor blunder?	27	2	93.1%
4. Is the blunder outside the influencer's area of expertise?	24	5	82.76%
Overall Average Agreement Rate			87.07%

Table 3. Inter-construct correlations and descriptive statistics

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	VIF
1. Perceived warmth	-						3.78	1.52	-0.041	-0.816	3.665
2. Perceived competence	.714**	-					3.67	1.39	-0.114	-0.823	3.524
3. Travel inspiration	.562**	.582**	-				4.23	1.59	-0.418	-0.791	3.448
4. Central route	.337**	.351**	.322**	-			4.76	1.19	-0.675	0.118	2.573
5. Peripheral route	.428**	.371**	.354**	.571**	-		3.97	1.20	-0.324	-0.129	3.017
6. Travel intention	.510**	.485**	.753**	.326**	.406**	-	4.38	1.57	-0.450	-0.633	3.005

Note: ** $p < .01$, SD: Standard deviation, VIF: variance inflation factor

Table 4. Descriptive statistics, confirmatory factor analysis results, and indicators of convergent validity and internal consistency reliability

Constructs	Items	Factor loadings	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	AVE	CR	Cronbach Alpha
Perceived warmth	I find that the influencer is warm.	0.805	3.83	1.78	-0.010	-1.181	0.69	0.87	0.87
	I find that the influencer is generous.	0.839	3.72	1.75	0.084	-1.148			
	I find that the influencer is friendly.	0.845	3.78	1.59	-0.113	-1.053			
Perceived competence	I find that the influencer is competent.	0.798	3.44	1.55	0.108	-0.945	0.68	0.86	0.86
	I find that the influencer is efficient.	0.871	3.69	1.56	-0.035	-0.998			
	I find that the influencer is effective.	0.798	3.86	1.61	-0.115	-1.044			
Travel inspiration	I find inspiration when I see the Instagram posts of this travel influencer.	0.873	3.91	1.84	-0.062	-1.234	0.73	0.91	0.91
	This travel influencer inspires me and makes me want to travel more.	0.923	4.10	1.88	-0.242	-1.243			
	I am inspired to seek out more travel information from this travel influencer.	0.751	4.43	1.69	-0.698	-0.659			
Central route	I am inspired to travel, but not necessarily to the specific place mentioned by this travel influencer.	0.852	4.49	1.74	-0.680	-0.684			
	This message provided by the influencer is easy to understand.	0.705	4.54	1.48	-0.509	-0.323	0.50	0.75	0.74
	This influencer is appealing.	0.679	5.45	1.36	-1.272	1.446			
Peripheral route	This influencer can be quick to interact with*	0.727	4.28	1.56	-0.458	-0.649			
	This influencer can help me process and retain message quickly.								
	My privacy is protected when interacting with this influencer*								
Travel intention	The message from this influencer can put me in a receptive and positive mood.	0.756	4.04	1.33	-0.426	-0.234	0.50	0.75	0.75
	This influencer provides message from credible sources.	0.633	3.75	1.51	-0.032	-0.826			
	This influencer has a fine reputation.	0.731	4.13	1.56	-0.291	-0.652			
	I intend to visit one of the destinations recommended by this influencer in the future.	0.881	4.54	1.59	-0.503	-0.536	0.84	0.94	0.94
	I want to visit one of the destinations recommended by this influencer in the future.	0.926	4.37	1.69	-0.341	-0.900			
	It is likely that I will visit destinations recommended by this influencer in the future.	0.935	4.23	1.70	-0.334	-0.812			

Notes: Standardized values, all items = $p < .001$, *: Two items were removed from the final scale following the CFA due to low factor loadings.

Table 5. Discriminant validity findings

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Perceived warmth	-					
2. Perceived competence	0.824	-				
3. Travel inspiration	0.620	0.640	-			
4. Central route	0.411	0.436	0.404	-		
5. Peripheral route	0.541	0.471	0.429	0.766	-	
6. Travel intention	0.557	0.531	0.800	0.385	0.482	-

Table 6. Regression coefficients for direct, indirect, and total effects

Paths	b	β	SE	t	p	95% CI		Hypothesis Status
						LL	UL	
Direct effect								
Perceived warmth → Travel intention	0.174	0.178	0.092	1.893	0.058	-0.006	.355	
Perceived competence → Travel intention	-0.112	-0.099	0.114	-0.984	0.325	-0.335	0.111	
Perceived warmth → Travel inspiration	0.369	0.327	0.134	2.747	0.006	0.106	0.631	
Perceived competence → Travel inspiration	0.491	0.375	0.151	3.246	0.001	0.195	0.787	
Travel inspiration → Travel intention	0.656	0.755	0.070	9.397	0.000	0.520	0.793	
Gender* → Travel intention	0.055	0.018	0.118	0.466	0.641	-0.176	0.286	
Gender* → Travel inspiration	-0.660	-0.184	0.159	-4.140	0.000	-0.973	-0.348	
Indirect effect								
Perceived warmth → Travel inspiration → Travel intention	0.242	0.247	0.089	2.720	0.007	0.068	0.416	H_1 was supported.
Perceived competence → Travel inspiration → Travel intention	0.322	0.283	0.108	2.991	0.003	0.111	0.534	H_2 was supported.
Total effect								
Perceived warmth → Travel intention	0.416	0.425	0.133	3.123	0.002	0.155	0.678	
Perceived competence → Travel intention	0.210	0.185	0.156	1.348	0.178	-0.095	0.516	

Notes: * = control variable, CI: Confidence Interval, LL = Lower level, UL = Upper level

Table 7. Regression coefficients of the moderating effects of the central and peripheral routes

	Outcomes								Effect Size (f^2)	Hypothesis Status		
	Travel inspiration				Travel intention							
	Effect	SE	LL	UL	Effect	SE	LL	UL				
Predictors												
Perceived warmth	0.099	0.138	-0.171	0.370	-0.072	0.241	-0.545	0.401				
Perceived competence	0.352*	0.146	0.065	0.638	0.777**	0.279	0.230	1.323				
Gender ^a	-0.612***	0.048	-0.706	-0.518	0.065	0.150	-0.229	0.358				
Travel inspiration	-	-	-	-	0.339***	0.061	0.220	0.459				
Central route	-0.204**	0.064	-0.329	-0.079	0.005	0.219	-0.423	0.434				
Peripheral route	0.235***	0.054	0.130	0.340	0.401	0.210	-0.010	0.812				
Interaction effects												
Perceived warmth \times Central route	0.002	0.016	-0.030	0.034	-0.070	0.050	-0.169	0.028	0.009	H _{3a} was not supported.		
									0.000	H _{4a} was not supported.		
Perceived warmth \times Peripheral route	0.047*	0.019	0.010	0.083	0.126*	0.059	0.010	0.243	0.028	H _{4b} was supported.		
									0.020	H _{3b} was supported.		
Perceived competence \times Central route	0.072**	0.021	0.031	0.114	-0.121	0.068	-0.254	0.013	0.014	H _{5a} was not supported.		
									0.051	H _{6a} was supported.		
Perceived competence \times Peripheral route	-0.080***	0.019	-0.116	-0.043	-0.054	0.075	-0.201	0.093	0.002	H _{5b} was not supported.		
									0.078	H _{6b} was supported.		
Travel inspiration \times Central route	-	-	-	-	0.169***	0.043	0.086	0.253	0.067	H _{7a} was supported.		
Travel inspiration \times Peripheral route	-	-	-	-	-0.126*	0.053	-0.229	-0.022	0.025	H _{7b} was supported.		
	R ² : 0.427				R ² : 0.564							

Notes: *.05, **.01, ***.001, ^a = control variable. CI: Confidence Interval, LL = Lower level, UL = Upper level

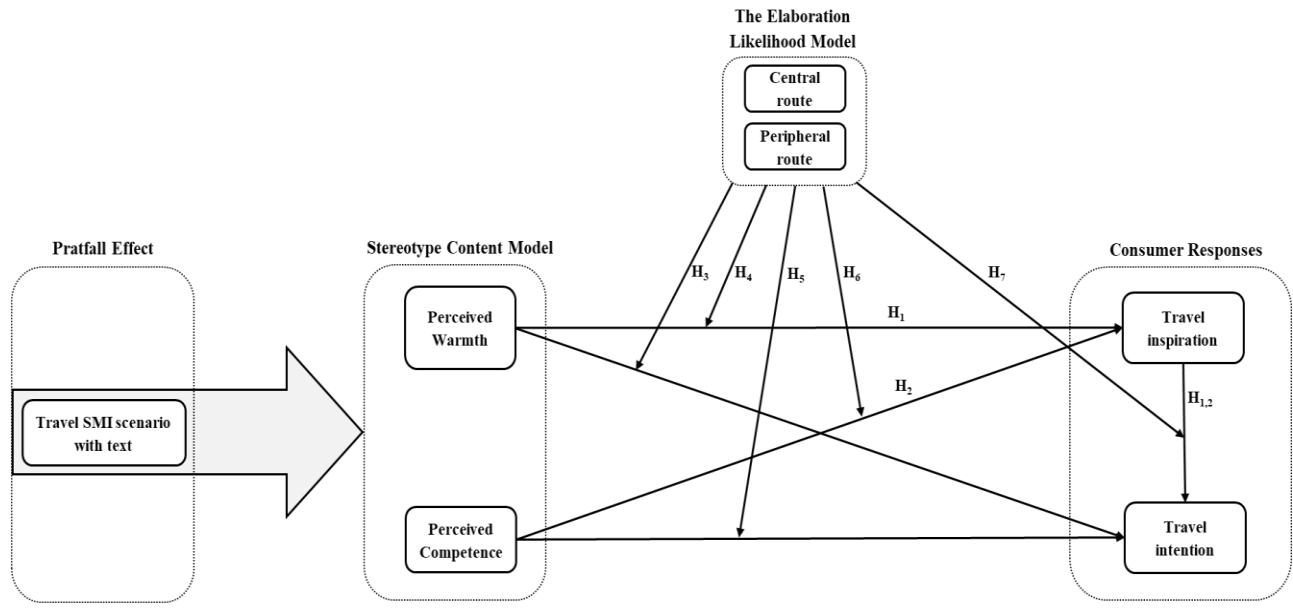
Table 8. Strategic recommendations for practitioners

Strategic Objective	Recommended Tactic/Action	Implementation of Guidance, Risk, and Mitigation	Theoretical Rationale
Enhance authenticity and expedite connections	Employ strategic imperfection via the pratfall effect.	<p><i>Guidance:</i> The blunder is associated with appearing natural and spontaneous, while the SMI's authentic reaction (e.g., humor) is linked to audience engagement more than the mistake itself.</p> <p><i>Risk:</i> The pratfall may be related to perceptions of a contrived or inauthentic marketing ploy.</p> <p><i>Mitigation:</i> Brands are related to granting SMIs creative freedom rather than scripting the 'mistake'. Frequent use of the pratfall is associated with reduced credibility. Different pratfall scenarios can be explored, and pre-tested scenarios showing stronger audience associations may be preferred by SMIs.</p>	The pratfall effect is associated with higher perceptions of both warmth and competence, which relates to the development of authentic connections that normally require time and effort.
Generate travel inspiration	Showcase pratfalls through immersive and dynamic formats (e.g., video, live streams).	<p><i>Guidance:</i> The blunder is recommended to be minor and not linked to the SMI's core expertise (e.g., travel logistics, safety advice).</p> <p><i>Risk:</i> The mistake may be perceived as genuine incompetence, potentially undermining credibility.</p> <p><i>Mitigation:</i> A travel SMI spilling coffee is likely perceived as harmless, whereas giving incorrect directions could be associated with lower competence.</p>	Tourism decisions are often pleasure-driven. Immersive content that includes humanizing moments is associated with heightened travel desire among followers.
Target different tourism segments	Tailor the type of pratfall to the specific tourism context (e.g., competence-focused for adventure tourism, warmth-focused for family holidays).	<p><i>Guidance:</i> This is about emphasis. The framing of the blunder can be adjusted. For family travel, framing it with humor may relate to enhanced perceptions of warmth. For adventure travel, framing recovery as a show of resilience may be linked to competence perceptions.</p> <p><i>Risk:</i> A one-size-fits-all approach to pratfalls may not resonate with all segments.</p> <p><i>Mitigation:</i> Pre-test content with small focus groups from the target segment.</p>	Aligning the authenticity signal with the specific needs of different market segments is associated with higher follower engagement and potential conversion.
Activate Passive Audiences & Expand Market	Using pratfall effect in influencer marketing efforts especially on people who are not planning to travel.	<p><i>Guidance:</i> The pratfall effect can be linked to engaging individuals who are not actively planning to travel, particularly in contexts where holidays are primarily spent at second or holiday homes.</p> <p><i>Risk:</i> There may be a wide variety of reasons (e.g., having insufficient funds) for people not participating in travel and tourism activities.</p> <p><i>Mitigation:</i> People using second homes and holiday homes may be targeted specifically.</p>	For those who are interested but hesitant, the warmth generated by a travel SMI's relatable imperfection is associated with a higher likelihood of translating latent inspiration into concrete travel intention, initiating the travel planning process.
Maximize persuasion across audience segments	Design synergistic content that engages both central and peripheral processors.	<p><i>Guidance:</i> Use the pratfall as an emotional hook (peripheral cue) that is associated with increased audience engagement with more substantive, credible information (central cues) within the same piece of content.</p>	Peripheral processors tend to show stronger responses to warmth, while central processors tend to relate more to credible insights when forming lasting attitudes.

Risk: Content can become unfocused or confusing.

Mitigation: The key is a seamless blend of emotional storytelling and factual expertise.

Note. These recommendations are based on correlational findings with small effect sizes. They should be extensively pilot-tested and validated through controlled experiments before considering full-scale implementation.



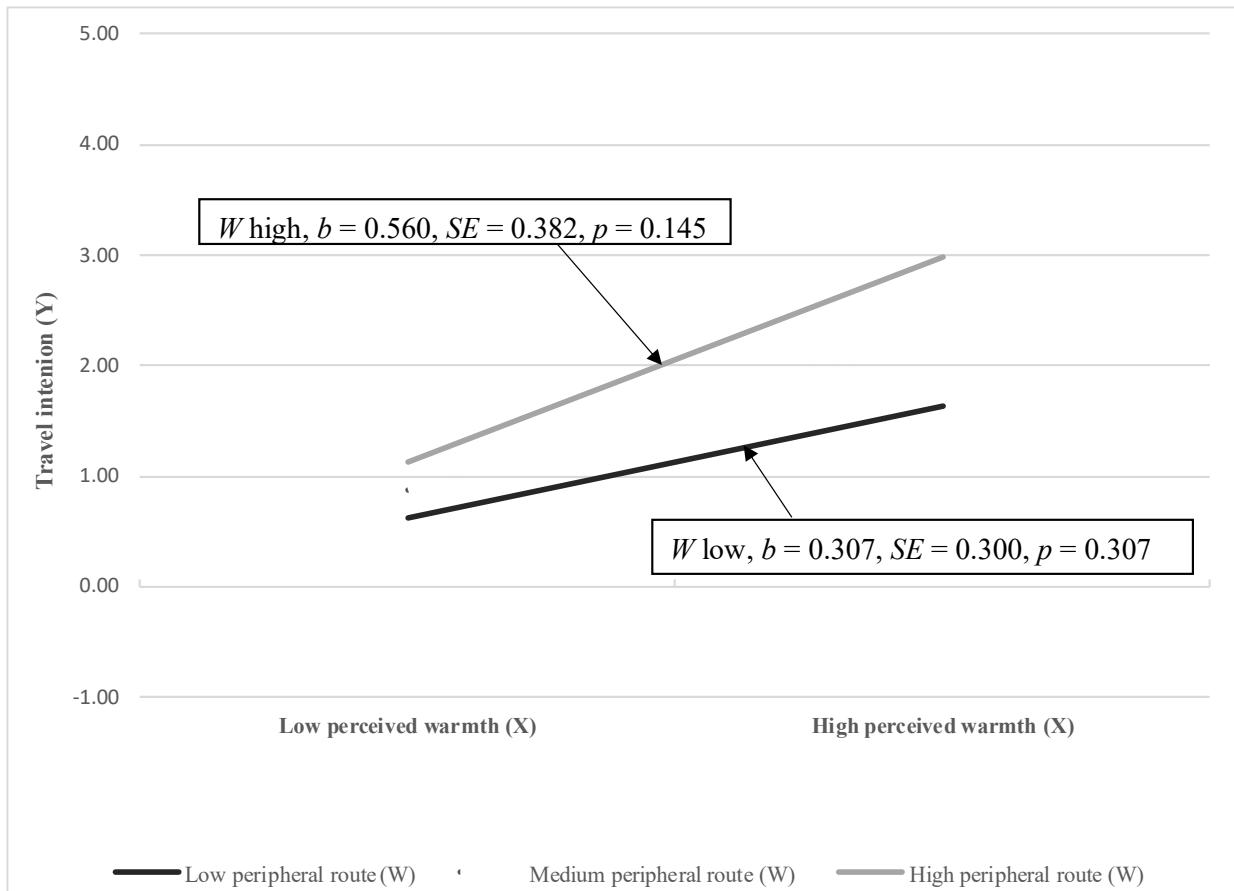


Fig. 2. The Moderating Effect of the Peripheral Route on the Relationship Between Perceived Warmth and Travel Intention

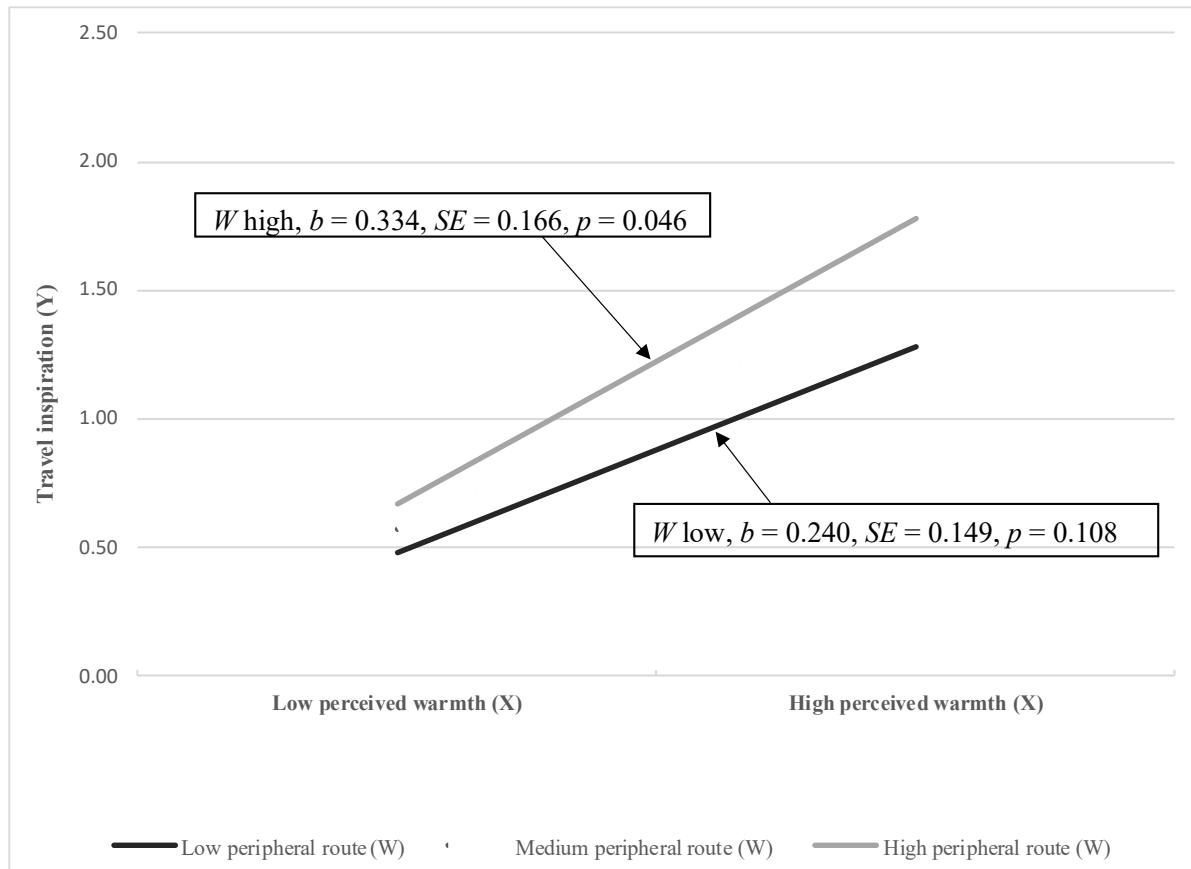


Fig. 3. The Moderating Effect of the Peripheral Route on the Relationship Between Perceived Warmth and Travel Inspiration

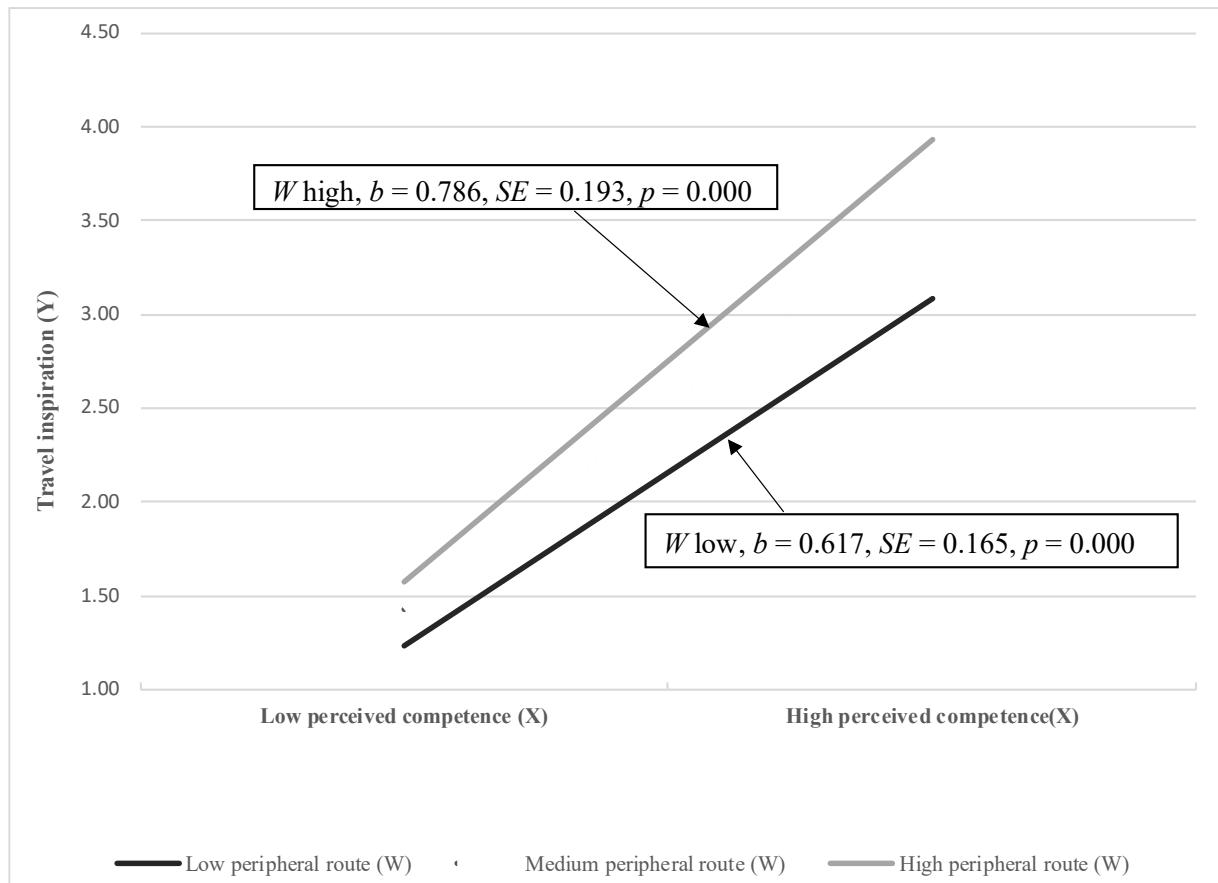


Fig. 4. The Moderating Effect of the Central Route on the Relationship Between Perceived Competence and Travel Inspiration

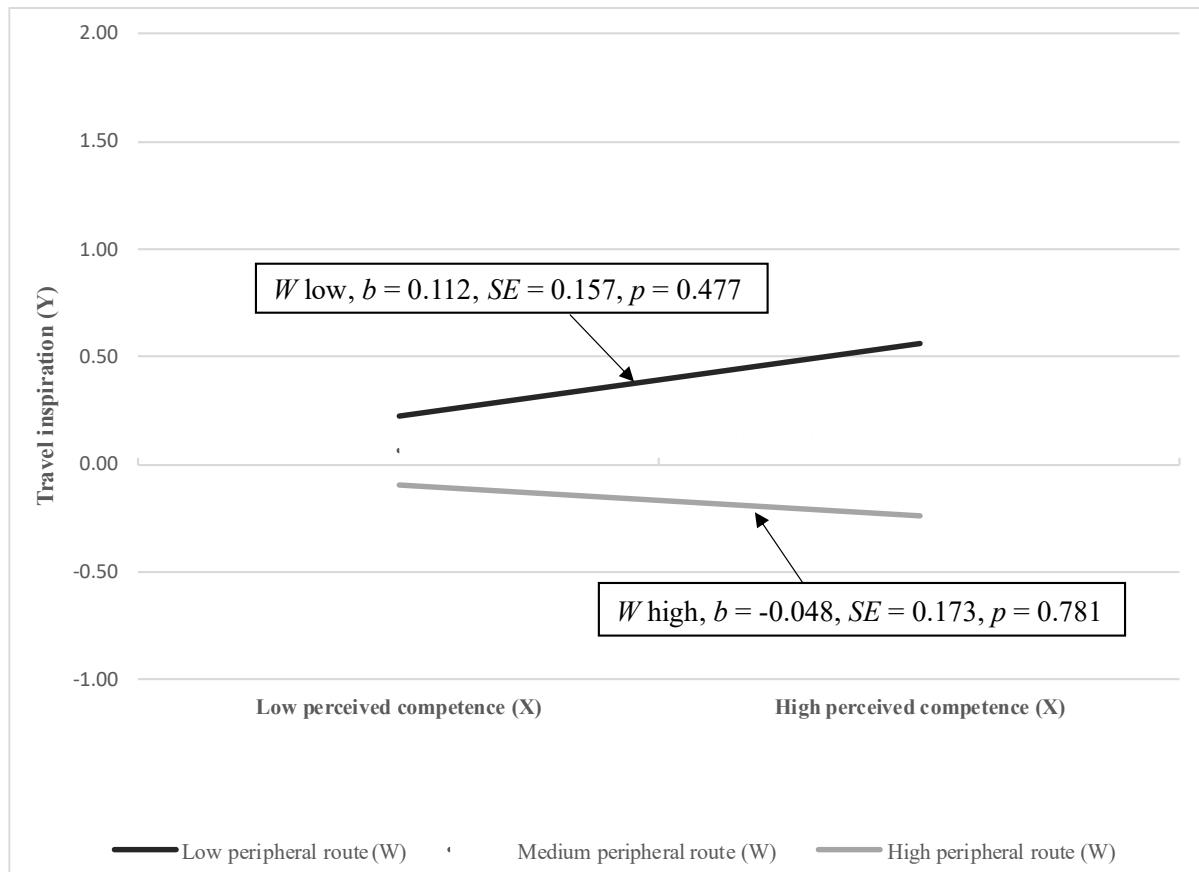


Fig. 5. The Moderating Effect of the Peripheral Route on the Relationship Between Perceived Competence and Travel Inspiration

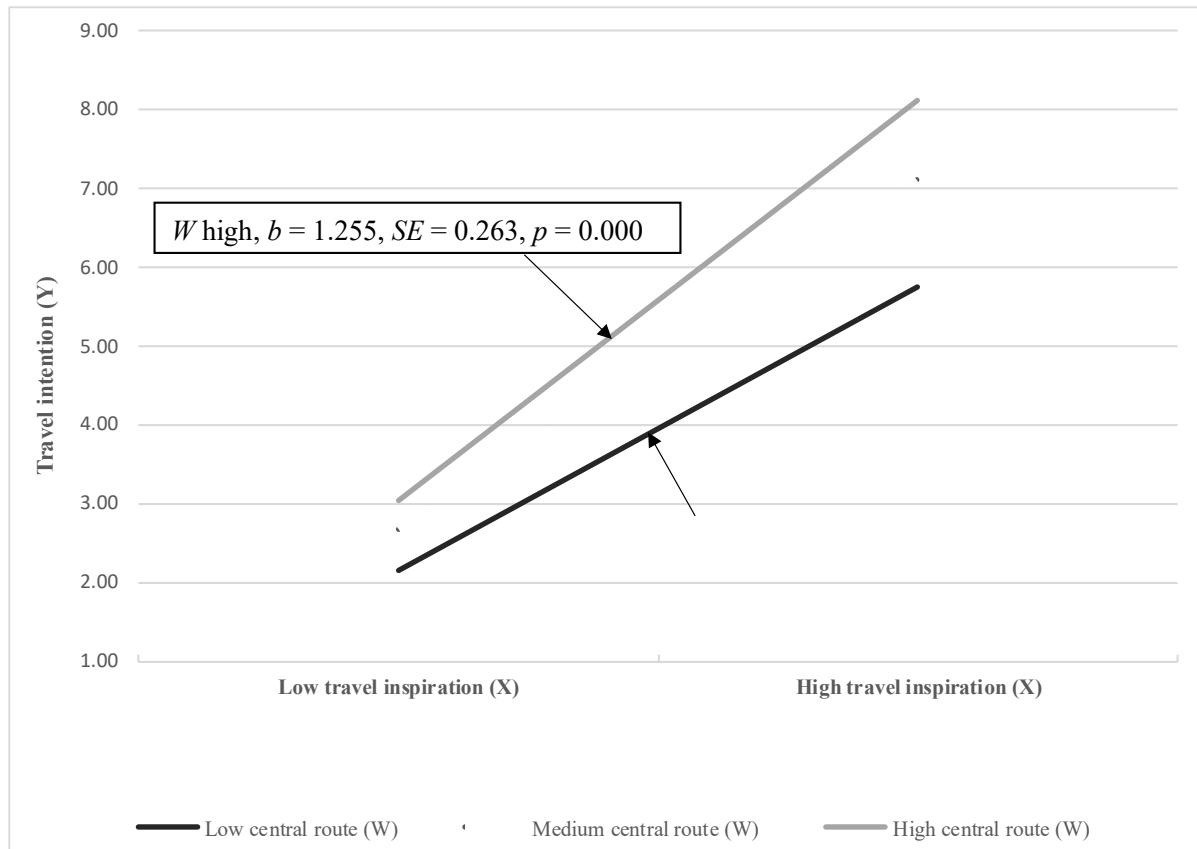


Fig. 6. The Moderating Effect of the Central Route on the Relationship Between Travel Inspiration and Travel Intention

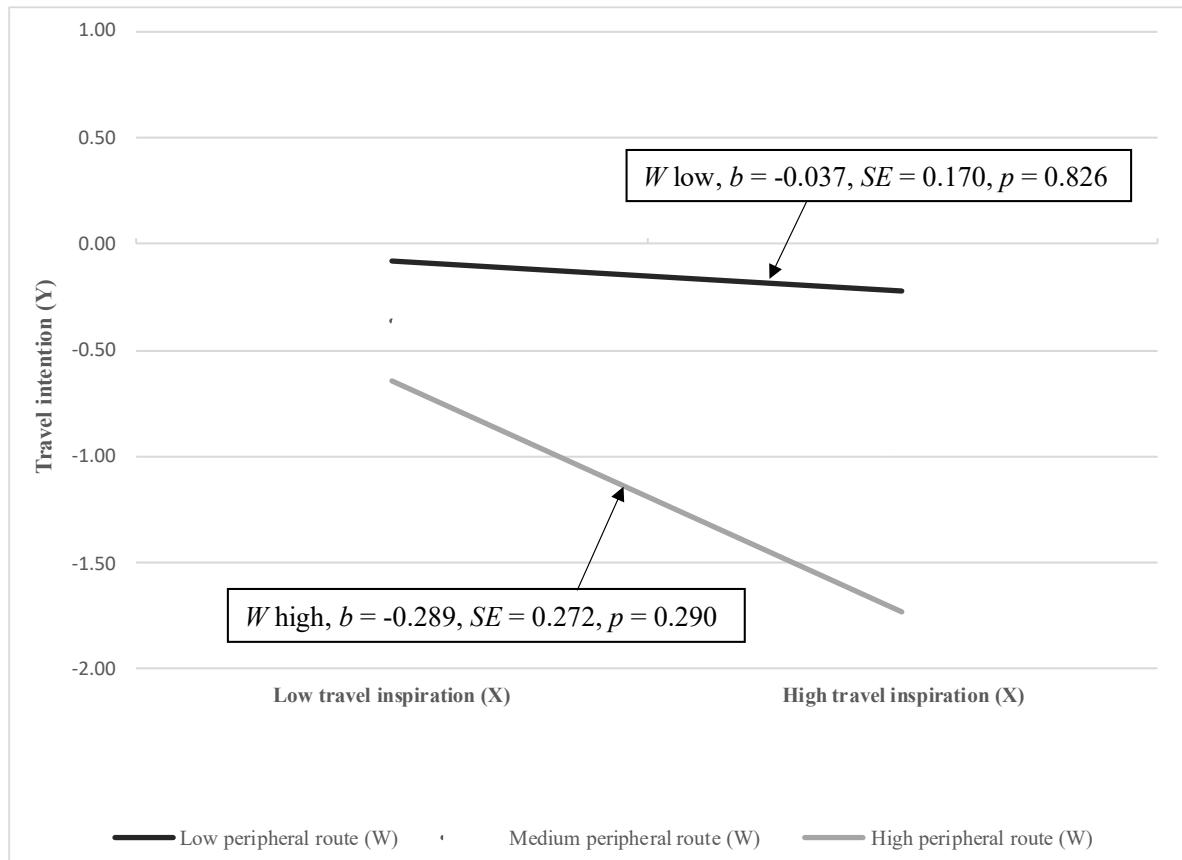


Fig. 7. The Moderating Effect of the Peripheral Route on the Relationship Between Travel Inspiration and Travel Intention

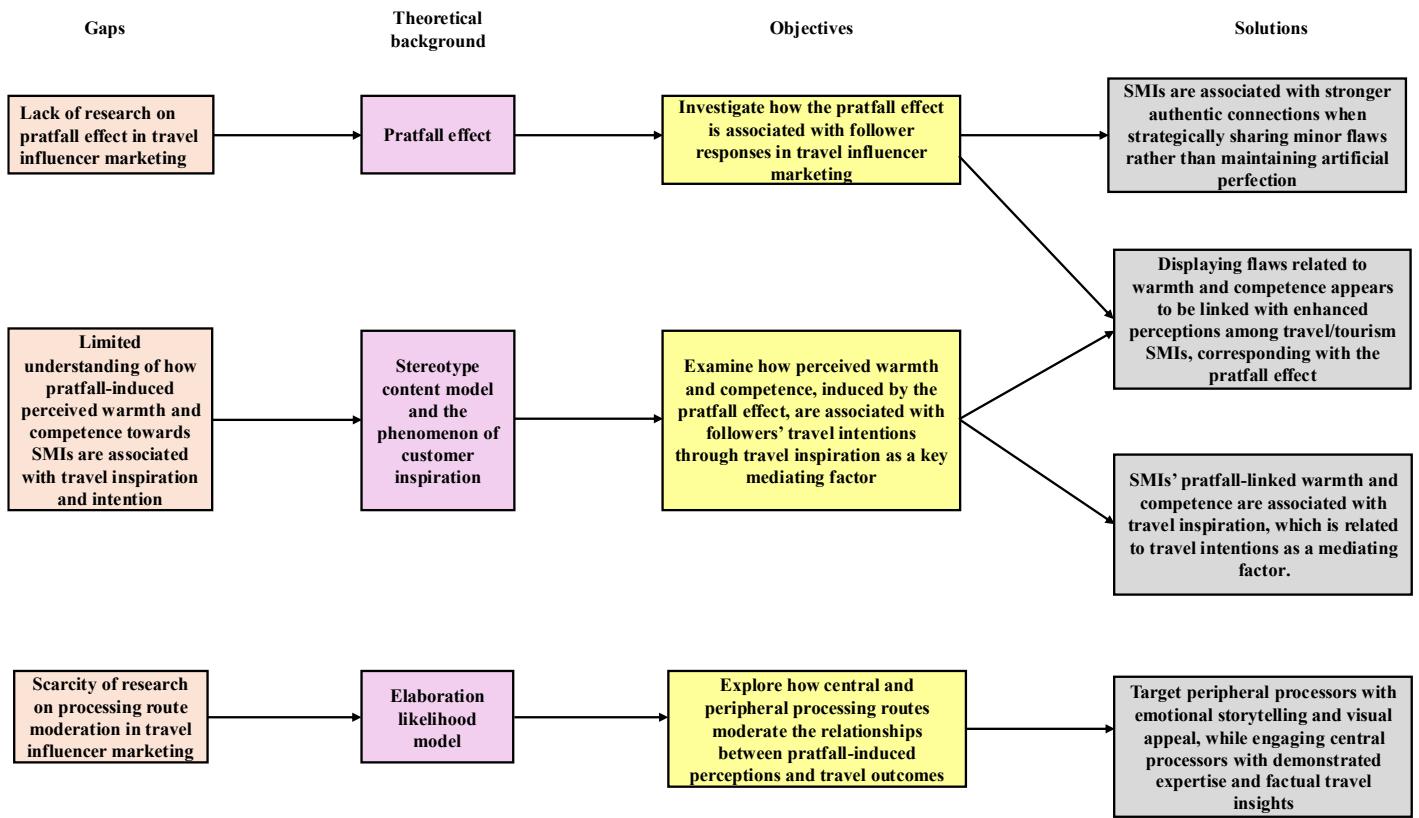


Fig. 8. Research framework progression from gaps to solutions. *Inspired by Lyu et al. (2025).*