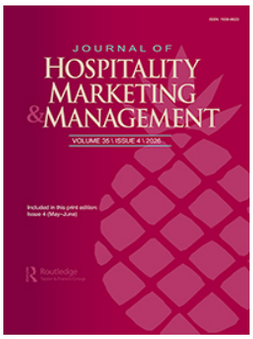

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The path to social license for data practices in tourism and hospitality: a sufficiency-necessity analysis of key antecedents

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, tourism and hospitality organizations (THOs) rely on consumer data to inform strategy and maintain competitiveness. This study investigates how travelers' interactional trust in THOs' data-handling practices influences the social license to use such data. Drawing on social license to operate and social exchange theories, we analyze survey responses from 875 travelers. Results show that trust, shaped by perceptions of fairness, usefulness, privacy control, and transparency, significantly enhances the social license granted. Fairness and usefulness also exert direct positive effects, while privacy concerns undermine both trust and social license. Additionally, fairness, usefulness, and transparency represent necessary conditions, meaning their absence cannot be compensated by other factors. This is the first empirical study to examine social license in the context of data use by THOs, and the first to assess both the sufficiency and necessity of key factors, providing strategic guidance for ethical data governance.

摘要

在数字时代, 旅游和酒店组织 (THO)依靠消费者数据来制定战略并保持竞争力. 本研究调查了旅行者对THO数据处理实践的互动信任如何影响使用此类数据的社会许可. 基于社会经营许可和社会交换理论, 我们分析了875名旅行者的调查反馈. 结果表明, 由对公平性、有用性、隐私控制和透明度的感知所塑造的信任, 显著增强了所授予的社会许可. 公平和有用性也会产生直接的积极影响, 而隐私问题会破坏信任和社会许可. 此外, 公平、有用性和透明度是必要条件, 这意味着它们的缺失无法通过其他因素来弥补. 这是首次在THO使用数据的背景下检验社会许可的实证研究, 也是首次评估关键因素的充分性和必要性, 为伦理数据治理提供战略指导.

KEYWORDS

Social license; trust; fairness; usefulness; transparency; privacy control; privacy concerns

Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid development and adoption of emerging technologies, consumer data have become an invaluable asset for tourism and hospitality organizations (THOs), enabling them to gain competitive advantages (Evans, 2020; Yallop & Séraphin,

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2020). Within the data-intensive context of the industry, consumer data are essential for personalizing traveler services and guiding business decisions made by THOs (Petrescu et al., 2020; Volchek et al., 2020). In today's digital era, THOs rely even more on such data to capture consumer insights and trends that inform strategic decision-making in a dynamic, volatile and time-sensitive industry (Niininen et al., 2007; Stylos et al., 2021).

However, THOs' increasing reliance on consumer data presents significant challenges. A recent report found that nearly one-third of THOs experience data breaches annually, with most affected multiple times within the same year (Trustwave, 2023). Furthermore, the growing integration of AI tools into THO operations amplifies the risks associated with consumer data privacy and confidentiality (Cicek et al., 2025; Shuqair et al., 2024). Additionally, data protection regulations impose strict requirements on data collection, processing, and storage, with severe penalties for noncompliance. For instance, in 2019, Marriott International faced a fine of $123 million, after failing to properly protect the personal information of hundreds of millions of customers over several years (Pipyros & Liasidou, 2025).

Against this background, previous studies have recognized the growing importance of responsible data practices and proposed the development of ethical data management and data governance frameworks to ensure ethical use and equitable exchange of consumer data. In tourism and hospitality, however, such frameworks for guiding the ethical and responsible use of traveler data remain limited. A notable example is the recent framework proposed by Yallop et al. (2023), which represents one of the first comprehensive frameworks to address ethical data management and data governance in THOs. This framework introduces critical dimensions centered on ethics and trust, extending beyond conventional concerns with data quality and regulatory compliance. By advocating for more ethical approaches to data management, it aims to foster a culture of integrity and accountability within THOs.

Yet, despite these theoretical advancements, empirical investigations into the implementation and impact of such frameworks are still limited (Lyu et al., 2022). Gursoy et al. (2025) further highlight this gap by calling for sustained scholarly attention to information privacy and security issues within THOs. Given the growing reliance on traveler data for strategic decision-making, the need for ethical conduct and the cultivation of consumer trust is more pressing than ever.

Central to traveler's willingness and openness to exchange personal data with THOs is their confidence in the ethical practices employed by these organizations, hence their acceptance of THOs data practices. This is effectively captured by the concept of *social license*, which reflects stakeholders' *acceptance* of business practices and procedures based on their perceived legitimacy (Demuijnck & Fasterling, 2016). The social license for THOs to access, analyze, and utilize travelers' data for strategic purposes depends on their ability to establish and maintain trusting relationships with key stakeholders, namely customers/travelers. This requires THOs to display high levels of ethical values and conduct to be perceived as trustworthy (Gupta & Kumar, 2018; Yallop et al., 2023). Therefore, to foster trusting relationships for the exchange of data and information with THOs, it is essential that travelers have a certain level of confidence and trust that their data and information will be used responsibly.

However, the literature on data ethics and the social license (SL) for data practices reveals significant gaps. First, the concept of SL has primarily been

examined from the perspectives of communities and industries such as mining (Boutilier, 2014), with limited research in the context of data practices. Most of existing studies in this area have focused on health and public sector contexts (Edwards & Trafford, 2016; Muller et al., 2021), leaving a significant gap in corporate and business contexts. There is a notable lack of studies addressing the SL perspective of consumers as key stakeholders in data interactions with organizations, particularly in the tourism and hospitality sector, and their engagement in personal data sharing.

Second, a critical gap remains in understanding the necessity of various antecedents for achieving SL. Prior research has primarily focused on assessing the extent to which various antecedents influence such outcomes (Aitken et al., 2020; Gulliver et al., 2018), while neglecting to determine whether these factors are necessary. Consequently, the current knowledge lacks a dual perspective that considers both sufficiency and necessity, resulting in an incomplete understanding of the fundamental elements driving SL in the context of data privacy.

To address these gaps, we investigate the SL for data practices of THOs, with a particular emphasis on travelers' acceptance of processes involved in collecting, analyzing, sharing, and utilizing personal data. Grounded in the *social license to operate* (Demuijnck & Fasterling, 2016) and *social exchange* (Blau, 1986; Homans, 1958) theories, our research extends the theoretical discourse on digital responsibility and social legitimacy of data practices in tourism and hospitality.

We propose a structural model in which perceived usefulness, transparency, privacy control, fairness and equity, and privacy concerns function as antecedents of travelers' trust in THOs' data-handling practices, with trust subsequently shaping the SL they confer. We tested the model using data from a cross-sectional survey administered to Romanian travelers who had interacted with a THO and shared personal data in that context. Drawing on a final sample of 875 respondents, we estimated the model using two complementary approaches: partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), to assess sufficiency and the relationships among latent variables, and necessary condition analysis (NCA), to identify the necessary conditions required for the outcome (i.e., SL) to occur.

Our study makes several key contributions to the literature on data ethics and SL in the context of THOs. This study is the first empirical investigation of the SL for data practices in tourism and hospitality, addressing a critical yet previously unexplored area in the field. It advances theory by extending the concept of SL to organizational data practices, a domain increasingly central to digital transformation but rarely examined through a legitimacy lens. And importantly, through a sufficiency-necessity analysis, our study reveals that (1) SL emerges from complex configurations of antecedents rather than from linear causal effects, and that (2) certain antecedents are "must-haves" rather than merely "nice-to-haves," thereby introducing a configurational perspective to stakeholder and data governance research.

This research supports future studies by identifying key determinants of SL and examining their potential impact on THOs' use of consumer data for service personalization and commercial decision-making. The findings offer THOs valuable insights into the key factors influencing travelers' willingness to share personal data. They guide managers in prioritizing transparency, privacy protection, and data value, while also informing strategy and public policy. By showing how responsible data governance enhances legitimacy, supports

digital transformation, and strengthens stakeholder relationships, the study translates the concept of SL into practical managerial and regulatory guidance.

Theoretical framework and research hypotheses

The concept of social license

Social license (or "social license to operate") refers to the often-tacit permission granted by stakeholders to organizations, reflecting an organization's ability to engage with its stakeholders to identify and address their demands and expectations (Dare et al., 2014; Hurst et al., 2020; Parsons & Moffat, 2014). It is defined as stakeholders' acceptance of business practices and procedures (Demuijnck & Fasterling, 2016). Within the context of data practices, this study conceptualizes SL as a legitimacy-based outcome that captures stakeholders' perceptions of whether an organization has the moral and ethical mandate to engage in data-related practices, thereby warranting their approval of such practices.

The concept of SL originated in the mid-1990s within the mining sector (Boutilier, 2014; Boutilier & Thomson, 2018; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2018) and has since been widely applied across resource-based industries, such as energy, aquaculture, forestry, and agriculture (Hurst et al., 2020; Sinner et al., 2020). Scholars have employed social legitimacy theory to explain why some organizations exceed voluntarily regulatory compliance to secure and maintain stakeholders' approval and trust (Gunningham et al., 2004; Yallop et al., 2023). Conceptually, SL is closely linked to the notion of legitimacy – stakeholders' acceptance of an organization's business activities – which is typically associated with adherence to rules and compliance. However, SL extends beyond the boundaries of legitimacy, recognizing that informal social expectations and norms often precede formal legal or regulatory obligations (Gehman et al., 2017). Accordingly, achieving SL requires organizations to exceed compliance requirements and to also demonstrate fairness, responsiveness, and accountability in their interactions with stakeholders (Jenkins, 2018; Yallop et al., 2023). Additionally, scholars suggest that SL serves as a pre-condition for long-term business success, particularly in industries where business activities are highly visible and subject to intense stakeholder scrutiny (Dare et al., 2014), such as the tourism and hospitality sectors.

Building upon its theoretical foundations, the concept of SL has gained increasing relevance in contemporary, data-intensive contexts (Aitken et al., 2020; Muller et al., 2021). The adoption of the SL concept by other data-intensive industries is unsurprising, given that consumers' personal data is similarly "mined" and utilized by organizations. Data generated through everyday transactions, digital interactions, and administrative systems are now central to organizational operations, raising comparable questions of legitimacy, trust, and accountability. Consequently, scholars have begun to explore the role of SL in diverse data-driven sectors such as healthcare (Muller et al., 2021), and fintech and banking (Aitken et al., 2020). Nevertheless, significant research gaps persist in other data-intensive industries, particularly tourism and hospitality, which rely heavily on data but remain underrepresented in SL scholarship. Within a data governance framework, the Australian Productivity Commission (2017) conceptualizes SL for data use as being achieved when customers have "a sound basis for believing in the integrity and accountability of institutions (public or private) managing data, [. . .] an inalienable ability to *choose* to participate in extracting benefit from data sharing, [. . .] control over how their data is used, [. . .] and

understand the potential benefits of data sharing and use" (2017, p. 169). This definition highlights the critical importance of transparency, ethical responsibility, and participatory control as the foundations of SL in the digital era.

In the tourism and hospitality context, the relevance of SL is particularly pronounced because organizations routinely collect, integrate, and analyze large volumes of personal and behavioral data across multiple touchpoints, including online booking platforms, loyalty programs, mobile applications, and on-site digital services (Gursoy et al., 2025; Lin et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2024). These data practices often extend beyond travelers' immediate awareness and comprehension, exacerbating perceived information asymmetries and increasing concerns related to privacy, surveillance, and data use (Martin et al., 2017). As a result, data-handling practices in tourism and hospitality extend beyond technical or legal compliance and have become a salient domain in which organizations must continually navigate social acceptance (Aitken et al., 2020; Martin, 2018; Yallop et al., 2023). SL therefore provides a theoretically robust lens for explaining why THOs may adopt more transparent and ethical customer-centric data practices as a means of sustaining stakeholder approval (Gehman et al., 2017; Muller et al., 2021). In this sense, SL operates not only as an outcome of customers' legitimacy judgments but also as a normative mechanism shaping organizational behavior, thereby informing the development of this study's hypotheses linking perceived trust, fairness and equity, and accountability – shaped through transparent, beneficial, and privacy-protective data-sharing practices – to the granting of SL.

Our study purposely adapts the construct of SL to the tourism and hospitality data context, where empirical assessment requires capturing perceptions at the individual/customer level. This adaptation inevitably shifts the focus from a collective, community-level construct of SL to an individual-level evaluation. Our rationale for doing so is twofold. First, prior work on SL has increasingly recognized that collective legitimacy judgments are constituted through the aggregation and negotiation of individual-level perceptions (Edwards & Trafford, 2016; Moffat & Zhang, 2014). Thus, operationalizing SL at the individual level provides an analytically tractable proxy that aligns with this foundational insight. Second, in the domain of consumer-data relationships, the relevant "community" often consists of customers and users whose voices are expressed through their personal judgments of fairness, trustworthiness, and acceptability of data practices. In this context, individual perceptions are essential precursors to the emergence (or withdrawal) of SL at the collective level.

Determinants of social license

Earlier studies attempted to methodologically frame and measure the concept of SL through a range of metrics. Boutilier and Thomson (2018) notably propose a progressive framework in which SL begins with "economic legitimacy," in which an organization's relationship with stakeholders is limited to financial or transactional exchanges; it then develops into "socio-political legitimacy," reflecting stakeholders' perceptions that the organization contributes positively to their quality of life and well-being and operates in alignment with their expectations of fairness; it then evolves into "interactional trust" and therefore an increased *trust in* organization's capacity for reciprocity and ethical engagement, wherein stakeholders grant the organization an SL (Boutilier & Thomson, 2018; Moffat & Zhang, 2014; Sinner et al., 2020). This conceptualization positions *trust as a key antecedent* enabling the granting

of a SL. It is this high-order form of SL, grounded in interactional trust (that extends beyond the more basic levels of economic or socio-political legitimacy) on which our study is anchored in.

Trust

Trust is widely recognized as a key antecedent of SL across various contexts (Boughen et al., 2014; Boutilier & Thomson, 2018; Thompson & Joyce, 2008). Prior research emphasizes that trust functions as a boundary condition, whereby achieving a sufficient level of trust enables the highest level of SL to emerge (Boutilier, 2014; Sinner et al., 2020). In this study, we operationalize this concept as the construct "Trust," specifically reflecting stakeholders' evaluations of an organization's behavior in relation to their expectations, consistent with the concept of interactional trust (Boutilier & Thomson, 2018).

Interactional trust refers to confidence in an organization's competence, benevolence, and integrity within a specific relational context (Mayer et al., 1995). Boutilier and Thomson (2018, pp. 4–5) define it as the "perception that relations between stakeholders and the organization are based on an enduring regard for each other's interests." Interactional trust differs from other forms of trust: cognitive trust is grounded in knowledge about an organization, and affective trust is based on emotional attachment (Moon et al., 2022). In contrast, interactional trust emphasizes relational expectations and behavioral consistency, which are critical for achieving and maintaining SL.

In the context of tourism and hospitality, trust is central to the relationship between THOs and key stakeholders, particularly customers (Stringam et al., 2023). SL extends beyond economic and legal dyadic relationships and legitimacy to broader social judgments about whether an organization operates transparently, ethically, and responsibly (Aitken et al., 2020; Hurst et al., 2020). Achieving SL in the domain of data practices depends on stakeholders perceiving that an organization will safeguard their personal information, respect privacy, and act ethically (Blut, 2016). Therefore, the SL for THOs' data practices depends on establishing and maintaining trusting relationships with travelers, ensuring that customers perceive them as trustworthy (Gupta & Kumar, 2018).

Consistent with Boutilier and Thomson's (2018) framework, we conceptualize trust as a necessary condition for SL, enabling the emergence of the highest level of legitimacy for THOs data practices. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H1: Trust in THOs' procedures for handling travelers' personal data positively influences the social license for THOs' data practices.

While trust is critical for achieving SL, it does not emerge spontaneously. Existing conceptual frameworks of ethical data management and governance within tourism and hospitality highlight key factors that foster trust between THOs and their customers (Ordóñez-Martínez et al., 2023; Yallop et al., 2023). Important factors include privacy and confidentiality, transparency, and perceived fairness and equity in personal data exchanges (Janssen et al., 2020; Morosan & DeFranco, 2015; Yallop et al., 2023). These factors are understood as the contiguous constructs of trust that, in turn, may enhance acceptance and approval of THOs' data practices (SL).

In the following sections, we examine these constructs in detail, exploring how each contributes to the establishment and reinforcement of trust, which is foundational for the

SL to operate effectively in the domain of data practices within tourism and hospitality (Ordóñez-Martínez et al., 2023; Yallop et al., 2023). Our study integrates these constructs within the theoretical framework of social exchange theory and social legitimacy theory, which together provide a sound conceptual basis for linking these antecedents to the attainment of SL. Specifically, social exchange theory explains why individuals evaluate the fairness, transparency, and usefulness of organizational practices when deciding whether to grant legitimacy. These judgments are grounded in the expectation of reciprocal benefits and the mitigation of risks (Blau, 1986). At the same time, legitimacy theory highlights that beyond relational trust, organizations must align with broader societal norms of fairness, equity, and responsible stewardship of personal data (Suchman, 1995). Thus, our model positions these selected factors (perceived usefulness, transparency, privacy control, fairness and equity, trust, and privacy concerns) not as an eclectic set but as complementary antecedents that collectively represent the core mechanisms through which organizations earn (or lose) social license.

Perceived usefulness of sharing personal data

Various studies highlight *perceived usefulness* as a critical construct for technology acceptance in tourism and hospitality (Lei et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2024). Grounded in the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the concept of perceived usefulness denotes the degree to which consumers believe a specific technology improves their performance or experience (Davis, 1989).

The relationship between the perceived usefulness (or value) of sharing data and trust in an organization's procedures for handling data has been examined in studies related to technology adoption, privacy and data management. These studies highlight that customers are more likely to trust organizations with their personal data when they perceive clear, tangible benefits from doing so (Aitken et al., 2020; Bansal et al., 2010; Pavlou, 2003). Trust in organizations' data procedures is often reinforced by the perception that sharing data will yield reciprocal value, such as improved personalization, enhanced service quality, or other meaningful benefits, hence consumers are more accepting of organizations collecting their personal data (Mican et al., 2020; Pavlou, 2003). For instance, research in hospitality contexts indicates that perceived usefulness (e.g., ease of booking, personalization) is strongly correlated with trust in data handling practices, which influences users' willingness to share personal data (Morosan & DeFranco, 2015).

Considering these arguments, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2. The perceived usefulness of sharing personal data with THOs positively influences (a) travelers' trust in THOs' procedures of handling personal data, and (b) the social license for THOs' data practices.

Transparency

Transparency refers to the degree of openness with which organizations communicate their data handling policies, procedures, and practices to stakeholders, particularly customers (Lin et al., 2023; Rawlins, 2008). Demonstrating transparency in data practices is considered critical for building trusting relationships with customers. This involves disclosing how data is collected, processed and used (Malhotra et al., 2004), as well as explaining how such information may benefit both the customers and other stakeholders (Yallop et al., 2023).

Several studies have shown that transparency reinforces trust (Bennett, 2019; Morey et al., 2015) by fostering positive perceptions and emotions in customers, which facilitates trust development (Lin et al., 2023; Nunkoo et al., 2018). Malhotra et al. (2004) argue that customers' awareness of data privacy practices incorporates interactional justice, which pertains to transparency throughout data management processes. Empirical evidence, such as that provided by Hoffman et al. (1999) and Phelps et al. (2000), indicates that customers are often reluctant to disclose personal data when they are uncertain about its usage. Instead, they demand greater transparency regarding how organizations intend to use their personal information. Importantly, research in hospitality contexts underscores that transparency regarding data usage to enhance customer experiences can positively influence both trust and the willingness to share data (Janssen et al., 2020; Morosan & DeFranco, 2015).

These findings suggest that transparency plays a critical role in cultivating trust in organizational data practices and, hence, more acceptance of such data practices. Based on this understanding, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3. Transparency positively influences (a) travelers' trust in THOs' procedures of handling personal data and (b) the social license for THOs' data practices.

Privacy control

Privacy control reflects an individual's ability to manage the release and dissemination of personal data and information (Xu et al., 2011). It concerns the assurance that consumers can exercise autonomy and ownership over their personal data (Culnan & Bies, 2003). This involves the implementation by organizations of mechanisms and procedures that empower consumers to determine what data is shared, with whom, and under what conditions. Such mechanisms are often supported by tools such as privacy-by-design approaches (Yallop et al., 2023), opt-in /opt-out options, and comprehensive data management solutions (Malhotra et al., 2004; Xu et al., 2011).

Extant research highlights the critical role of privacy control in enabling trust, which in turn affects consumers' willingness and acceptance to disclose personal data (Frik & Mittone, 2019; Liyanaarachchi et al., 2024). Studies suggest that when consumers perceive a high level of control over their information, their trust in the organization increases, reinforcing their confidence in the organization's ethical handling of data – this perception of trustworthiness positively correlates with consumers' readiness to share personal information (Frik & Mittone, 2019). Moreover, trust is strengthened when organizations respect consumers' autonomy and are perceived as safeguarding shared data from misuse (Xu et al., 2011).

Tourism and hospitality customers are more inclined to share personal data when organizations provide transparent and accessible privacy controls while clearly communicating the value proposition of data sharing, such as improved personalization and convenience (Janssen et al., 2020; Morosan & DeFranco, 2015; Yallop et al., 2023). For instance, Ioannou et al. (2021) found that when travelers' sense of control over their data increases trust in THOs, thereby encouraging data sharing.

Based on this evidence, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4. Privacy control positively influences (a) travelers' trust in (a) THOs' procedures of handling personal data and (b) the social license for THOs' data practices.

Fairness and equity

Fairness and equity in data practices refer to ethical principles that ensure the just and equitable treatment of consumers' data throughout its collection, sharing, and use by organizations (Martin et al., 2017). These principles are fundamental to building trust and establishing SL, particularly in industries that rely heavily on data.

Research indicates that consumers are more inclined to trust organizations that demonstrate fairness and equity in their data practices. For instance, studies on equity in exchanges and service transactions suggest that consumers evaluate both the nature and amount of personal data required in exchange for services (Morosan & DeFranco, 2015; Nunkoo et al., 2018). Consumers are also more likely to perceive such exchanges as fair and equitable when they retain control over the data and information they share, reinforcing their sense of agency in the exchange (Ashworth & Free, 2006). Similarly, Yallop et al. (2023) emphasize the value of fairness and equity as critical ethical aspects required from THOs, while Martin et al. (2017) argue that fairness is a key driver of consumer trust in firms.

Furthermore, fair and equitable data practices contribute to customers' perceptions of an organization's SL. When consumers perceive a fair and equitable exchange of value in sharing their data, such as receiving improved personalization or contributing to a public good, they are more inclined to share their data (Ioannou et al., 2021). Thus, fairness and equity not only build trust but also foster consumer willingness to engage in data-sharing practices.

Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H5. Fairness and equity in personal data exchanges positively influence (a) travelers' trust in THOs' procedures of handling personal data, and (b) the social license for THOs' data practices.

Privacy concerns

Privacy concerns reflect consumer's fears and anxieties regarding the potential risks and negative consequences associated with sharing personal data and the respective organizational data privacy practices (Hall & Ram, 2020; Malhotra et al., 2004; Xu et al., 2011). These concerns are multifaceted, encompassing apprehensions related to the collection, unauthorized use, inaccuracy, and improper access to personal information (Smith et al., 1996), as well as broader issues such as control over personal data and awareness of organizational data handling practices (Malhotra et al., 2004; Martin et al., 2017).

Privacy concerns influence trust in organizations and can pose challenges to achieving a SL by impeding consumer acceptance of data collection, sharing, and usage practices. Martin et al. (2017) argue that organizations' efforts to intensify data collection and utilization have heightened consumer privacy concerns, increasing anxieties about potential harm. Similarly, other studies found that higher levels of privacy concerns are associated with lower levels of consumer trust (Ozturk et al., 2017; Su et al., 2022). Customers perceiving a lack of equity, security, or transparency in data management practices often refrain from sharing data with organizations (Culnan & Bies, 2003; Lin et al., 2023). Conversely, consumers who perceive that organizations are proactively and transparently

addressing their privacy concerns are more likely to place trust in those organizations and engage in data-sharing (Bélanger & Crossler, 2011).

Accordingly, we propose the following research hypothesis:

H6. Travelers' privacy concerns negatively influence (a) their trust in THOs' procedures of handling personal data and (b) the social license for THOs' data practices.

Research model

Building on the social legitimacy theory, we framed our research model (see Figure 1), capitalizing on social exchange theory (Blau, 1986; Homans, 1958), which posits that social behavior is the result of an exchange process where individuals weigh potential benefits against associated costs, fostering relationships that are mutually beneficial.

Within this framework, we suggest that *perceived usefulness of data sharing, transparency, privacy control*, and *fairness and equity* represent positive aspects of the data exchange relationship that align with consumers' expectations for reciprocal value. These factors are thus expected to *enhance travelers' trust in THOs'* personal data handling procedures and to *increase their willingness to grant a SL* to these organizations.

Conversely, *privacy concerns* introduce a countervailing influence that social exchange theory identifies as a cost in the exchange process. The presence of privacy concerns disrupts the balance of the exchange, prompting travelers to question whether the risks

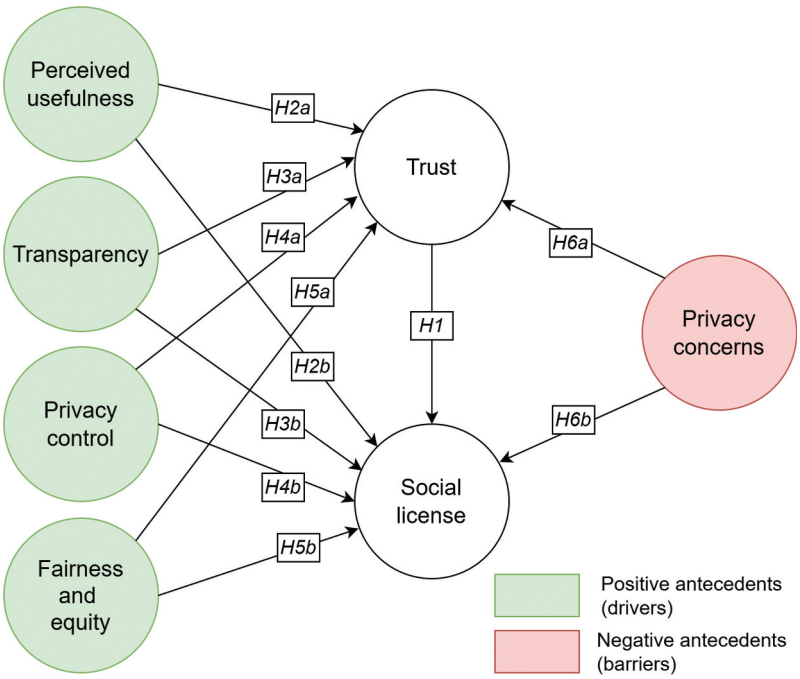

Figure 1. Research model.

outweigh the benefits, thus *undermining their trust* in THOs and *their willingness to extend a SL*.

Method

Sampling and data collection

To empirically test our model, we conducted an online survey targeting Romanian travelers who had interacted with a THO (e.g., hotel, travel agency etc.) and had shared personal data as part of that interaction.

In the context of our study, Romanian travelers represent a relevant population, for several reasons. First, Romania has a growing tourism sector, with travelers frequently engaging with various THOs. According to the Romanian National Institute of Statistics (2024), the number of Romanians traveling domestically or internationally in 2023 has exceeded pre-pandemic levels and is expected to grow significantly in the next years. This sustained growth creates a context in which data-intensive interactions between travelers and THOs are both frequent and diverse, thereby offering the empirical context necessary for examining trust and SL. Second, as an emerging market in the EU, Romania has seen rapid adoption of digital technologies, including online booking platforms, mobile travel applications, and digitalized service interfaces. Such an environment provides a realistic setting in which individuals are routinely required to make decisions about the disclosure of personal information, making Romanian travelers a relevant population for studying data-handling perceptions. Third, as an EU-member, Romania adheres to strict data protection regulations. This regulatory environment shapes travelers' expectations and behaviors regarding data privacy. Romanian travelers, like their counterparts across the EU, are embedded in a regulatory environment that heightens awareness of data rights and obligations. This context allows the examination of THOs' SL to use data within a governance regime widely considered a global benchmark in privacy protection. Finally, as an emerging EU market, Romania combines a mature regulatory structure with evolving market practices. Travelers interact with organizations that are still consolidating their data-handling practices while simultaneously being protected by strict legal standards. Such an environment provides a good opportunity for observing how interactional trust in data governance is formed, challenged, and transferred to perceptions of SL.

Data collection was carried out between April and May 2024 through invitations posted in various Facebook groups dedicated to travel and tourism (e.g., *Travel in Romania, Turism Romania* etc.), as well as through sponsored posts on Facebook, targeting users with traveling among their disclosed interests. Participants were instructed to respond with reference to their most recent experience in providing personal data to a THO. To ensure that respondents interpreted this consistently, the survey included a short definition and examples of personal data. Instructing participants to recall their most recent data-sharing encounters aligns with established practices in survey-based tourism research that seek to reduce recall bias while accommodating natural variation in travel frequency (Yüksel, 2017).

Respondents also indicated the type of THO and the channel through which they shared personal data (e.g., onsite form, website/app, instant messaging, e-mail, telephone), ensuring that all perceptions measured in the survey were tied to a clearly identifiable interaction

context. Although participants drew on experiences with different THO types and data-sharing channels, this heterogeneity does not compromise the validity of our measures because the constructs examined (e.g., transparency, privacy control, fairness) capture general perceptions of data-handling practices that can emerge in any context where personal data is shared. Moreover, because all respondents anchored their answers to a single, specific interaction, variation in THO categories and communication channels reflects natural contextual differences rather than measurement inconsistencies. Including this diversity ultimately strengthens the study's external validity by capturing the range of real-world situations through which travelers form perceptions of data practices.

Data collection yielded a total of 985 initial responses. To ensure data quality, we included a reversed item in the latter part of the questionnaire as an attention check. After applying this filtering criterium, the final validated sample consisted of 875 respondents.[1] Our data covers various types of THOs and means through which personal data were shared, as well as a wide variety of travelers in terms of gender, age, income, or education (sample characteristics are presented in Appendix Table A1).

Based on the data collected, we checked whether the heterogeneity in THO types and data-sharing channels might have affected the stability of the structural relationships included in our research model. We followed the guidelines of Sarstedt et al. (2022) and tested for heterogeneity using the finite mixture (FIMIX) procedure. We estimated solutions ranging from one to five potential segments and compared the relevant information criteria. The first pair of criteria used to identify the optimal number of segments – AIC3 (Akaike's Information Criterion Modified with Factor 3) and CAIC (Consistent AIC) – did not converge on the same solution. The second pair – AIC4 (AIC Modified with Factor 4) and BIC (Bayesian Information Criteria) – also produced conflicting indications. This lack of agreement across the information criteria suggested that heterogeneity was not a concern in our dataset. Consequently, the model was unlikely to yield substantively different estimates across subgroups.

Measurements

To measure the constructs in our study, we used previously validated scales (see Appendix Table A2), adjusting them to align with our specific research context. Participants provided their responses on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). In most cases, adapting the scales involved only minor modifications to the original wording.

Data analysis

To analyze the data, we employed partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) for several reasons. First, as a nonparametric technique, PLS-SEM is particularly effective in addressing non-normal data – a common challenge in social science research (Vaithilingam et al., 2024). Second, PLS-SEM is well-equipped to handle complex networks of constructs, enabling the simultaneous estimation of multiple relationships within such models (Hair et al., 2022). Third, PLS-SEM is particularly suitable for predictive modeling (Hair et al., 2024), making it an excellent fit for our study, which focuses on examining causal relationships and predicting travelers' trust in THOs' data-handling procedures and

the extent to which they grant a SL to THOs in this context. In terms of software, we used SmartPLS 4 (Ringle et al., 2025), a robust tool known for its versatility and reliability in handling complex models like ours.

Sample size adequacy

To ensure the adequacy of our sample size, we first applied the standard computation for SEM (Soper, 2024). Based on an anticipated medium effect size and taking into consideration the complexity of our model, this computation indicated a minimum required sample size of 170 participants. Next, we employed the more conservative inverse square root method, as recommended by Hair et al. (2022). Assuming a low path coefficient size (i.e., 0.05–0.1), this method suggested a minimum sample size of 619 participants. Thus, our sample of 875 participants exceeds these minimum requirements, ensuring the robustness and reliability of our SEM-based empirical tests.

Common method bias

To check for common method bias (CMB), we employed the measured latent marker variable (MLMV) technique proposed (Kock et al., 2021). Specifically, we measured an additional and unrelated latent variable (i.e., coffee love, using three items). We then introduced the MLMV as an antecedent to all other constructs in the model. The results indicated no substantial changes in explanatory power compared to the original model. Specifically, the R^2 values for trust and SL were 0.584 and 0.595 in the MLMV model, compared to 0.584 and 0.594 in the original model. Moreover, there were no notable changes in the path coefficients. Particularly, the differences between the path coefficients in the MLMV model and those in the original model were minimal, ranging from −0.002 to 0.002, with no change in statistical significance. Based on these results, we concluded that CMB does not pose a significant issue in this study.

Results

Measurements' assessment

Since all latent variables in the structural model were measured reflectively, we assessed their internal consistency, reliability and convergent validity following the guidelines outlined by Hair et al. (2022) (see Appendix Table A3). Composite reliability values (for both Rho_C and the more conservative Rho_A) exceeded the 0.7 benchmark for all constructs, indicating adequate internal consistency reliability. With average variance extracted (AVE) surpassing the 0.5 threshold for each latent variable, convergent validity was established as well. The very few indicators with loadings below 0.7 (but above 0.6) were retained in the model to preserve content validity, as their corresponding constructs demonstrated appropriate internal consistency reliability, as well as convergent validity (Hair et al., 2022).

Next, we evaluated discriminant validity, to make sure that the constructs included in our model are truly distinct (see Appendix Table A3). First, we applied the Fornell-Larcker criterion. The square root of AVE for each latent variable exceeded the correlations between that variable and any other construct, indicating discriminant validity. Second, we applied

the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations procedure, developed by Henseler et al. (2015). All HTMT values fell below the conservative threshold of 0.85, thereby confirming discriminant validity for all constructs in our model.

Structural model assessment

As no collinearity issues were detected in the inner model (i.e., variance inflation factor values ranging from 1.066 to 2.647), we next evaluated the structural model relationships using the bootstrapping procedure (see Table 1).

Our findings show that travelers' trust in THOs procedures of handling personal data has a positive and statistically significant effect on the SL granted to THOs for their data practices (H1; $\beta = 0.181$, $p < 0.001$). This finding suggests that as travelers' trust in THOs data-handling practices increases, they are more likely to grant a SL for these practices.

Our results reveal that the perceived usefulness of sharing personal data with THOs has a direct positive and significant effect on both trust (H2a; $\beta = 0.166$, $p < 0.001$) and SL (H2b; $\beta = 0.151$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, we find a statistically significant indirect effect of perceived usefulness on SL through trust ($\beta = 0.030$, $p < 0.001$), yielding a total effect of $\beta = 0.181$ on SL ($p < 0.001$). These results emphasize that travelers who perceive a tangible benefit in sharing their personal data are more inclined to trust THOs and, consequently, to grant them SL.

Our results also show that transparency positively influences travelers' trust in THOs procedures of handling personal data (H3a; $\beta = 0.085$, $p < 0.01$). However, its direct effect on SL is not statistically significant (H3b; $\beta = 0.047$, $p = 0.078$). Nevertheless, the indirect effect

Table 1. Structural model assessment.

Effects	β	p value
H1: Trust - > Social license	0.181	0.000
Perceived usefulness		
H2a: Direct effect on trust	0.166	0.000
H2b: Direct effect on social license	0.151	0.000
Indirect effect on social license through trust	0.030	0.000
Total effect on social license *(partially mediated by trust)*	0.181	0.000
Transparency		
H3a: Direct effect on trust	0.085	0.002
H3b: Direct effect on social license	0.047	0.078
Indirect effect on social license through trust	0.015	0.009
Total effect on social license *(fully mediated by trust)*	0.062	0.021
Privacy control		
H4a: Direct effect on trust	0.080	0.013
H4b: Direct effect on social license	0.060	0.075
Indirect effect on social license through trust	0.015	0.027
Total effect on social license *(fully mediated by trust)*	0.074	0.031
Fairness and equity		
H5a: Direct effect on trust	0.550	0.000
H5b: Direct effect on social license	0.436	0.000
Indirect effect on social license through trust	0.100	0.000
Total effect on social license *(partially mediated by trust)*	0.535	0.000
Privacy concerns		
H6a: Direct effect on trust	−0.056	0.014
H6b: Direct effect on social license	−0.119	0.000
Indirect effect on social license through trust	−0.010	0.029
Total effect on social license *(partially mediated by trust)*	−0.130	0.000

Note: Results generated via bootstrapping with 10,000 subsamples.

of transparency on SL, mediated by trust, is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.015$, $p < 0.01$), yielding a total effect of $\beta = 0.062$ on the SL for THOs' data practices ($p < 0.05$). These findings indicate that transparency is not a direct determinant of SL but becomes impactful by increasing trust.

We find privacy control to positively and significantly impact trust (H4a; $\beta = 0.080$, $p < 0.05$), while its direct effect on SL is not significant (H4b; $\beta = 0.060$, $p = 0.075$). However, the indirect effect of privacy control on SL, mediated by trust, is significant ($\beta = 0.015$, $p < 0.05$), with a total effect of $\beta = 0.074$ ($p < 0.05$). As in the case of transparency, these results suggest that while privacy control does not influence directly the SL for THOs' data practices, its impact is indirect by increasing travelers' trust in THOs procedures of handling personal data.

Fairness and equity in personal data exchanges yield the strongest effects among all the antecedents of trust and SL. Our results demonstrate that fairness and equity have significant positive effects on both trust (H5a; $\beta = 0.550$, $p < 0.001$) and SL (H5b; $\beta = 0.436$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, they exhibit a significant indirect effect on SL through trust ($\beta = 0.100$, $p < 0.001$), with a substantial total effect of $\beta = 0.535$ ($p < 0.001$). These results highlight that fairness and equity in data practices are critical determinants of travelers' trust and their willingness to grant SL for THOs' data practices.

Lastly, our findings reveal that travelers' privacy concerns negatively impact trust and SL. Particularly, privacy concerns exhibit a significant negative effect on trust (H6a; $\beta = -0.056$, $p < 0.05$) and a more substantial negative direct effect on SL (H6b; $\beta = -0.119$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, we observe an indirect negative effect on SL, mediated by trust ($\beta = -0.010$, $p < 0.05$), yielding a total negative effect on SL of $\beta = -0.130$ ($p < 0.001$). These results suggest that travelers' privacy concerns detract from both trust and SL.

Among the investigated antecedents, fairness and equity emerge as the most influential, followed by perceived usefulness. Both constructs have a positive direct effect on SL, as well as an indirect positive effect through trust. Travelers' privacy concerns represent another important antecedent of SL, although its negative impact is weaker than the positive impact of perceived usefulness and substantially smaller than the positive effect of fairness and equity. Furthermore, while privacy control and transparency impact SL indirectly by increasing trust, their overall effect is relatively minor compared to the other antecedents considered in our study.

Having established the model relationships, we next assessed the explanatory and predictive power of our model. First, the R^2 values demonstrate very good explanatory power, with the examined antecedents accounting for 58.4% of the variance in travelers' trust in THOs' handling of personal data, and 59.4% of the variance in the SL granted to THOs for their data practices.

Second, given the predictive focus of our research model, we assessed its predictive capability using the cross-validated predictive ability test (CVPAT), introduced by Liengaard et al. (2021). The CVPAT results reveal that our PLS-SEM model significantly outperforms the naïve indicator-average (IA) benchmark in terms of predictive accuracy, with statistically significant lower average prediction errors (trust: $PLS_{error} = 1.100$; $IA_{error} = 2.097$; $p < 0.001$; social license: $PLS_{error} = 1.032$; $IA_{error} = 1.669$; $p < 0.001$). At the same time, there are no significant differences in prediction errors between our model and the conservative naïve linear model benchmark. These findings indicate a reasonable capability for

predicting both travelers' trust in THOs' data handling procedures, and the level of SL granted to THOs for their data practices.

Necessary condition analysis

Recognizing that some antecedents may be necessary to achieve a certain level of SL, we adopted a complementary sufficiency approach to identify the factors that are not only sufficient but also necessary for travelers to grant THOs the SL for their data practices. To investigate this, we applied the Necessary Condition Analysis (NCA) developed by Dul (2020), within the typicality necessity perspective (Dul, 2024). This approach allowed us to explore whether the absence of key antecedents – such as perceived usefulness, transparency, privacy control, or fairness and equity – or extremely high privacy concerns would typically prevent travelers from granting the SL.

We began by running the PLS-SEM algorithm and calculating the unstandardized scores for the constructs in our model. Following established procedures within the typicality necessity framework (Dul, 2020; Frommeyer et al., 2022), we identified and removed the 1% most extreme outliers (8 out of 875 cases) for each antecedent-consequence pair before performing the NCAs. Since the NCA was performed separately for each antecedent, the outliers removed varied depending on the specific antecedent being analyzed. This step enabled us to reveal necessity effects that might otherwise be masked. In line with the recommendations provided by Troiville et al. (2025), we conducted the NCAs using ceiling regression-free disposal hulls, as the analyses relied on continuous data (i.e., PLS-SEM scores). The NCA results are summarized in Table 2.

According to Hair et al. (2024), a necessity condition is present when the necessity effect size (d) is 0.1 or greater and statistically significant. Our results reveal that fairness and equity, perceived usefulness, and transparency are necessary conditions for THOs to secure their SL. In other words, if any of these data privacy dimensions fall below a minimum threshold desired by travelers, they cannot be compensated. For example,

Table 2. Necessary condition analysis.

Antecedent of social license	d	p value	
Necessity effect sizes			
Fairness and equity	0.340	0.000	Necessary
Perceived usefulness	0.136	0.000	Necessary
Privacy control	0.079	0.000	NN
Transparency	0.178	0.000	Necessary
Privacy concerns	0.016	0.004	NN

Bottleneck tables (based on unstandardized values, corresponding to the Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7)

Social license	Fairness and equity	Perceived usefulness	Privacy control	Transparency	Privacy concerns
1	NN	NN	NN	NN	NN
1.6	NN	NN	NN	NN	NN
2.2	NN	NN	NN	NN	NN
2.8	1.600	NN	NN	1.329	NN
3.4	2.250	NN	NN	1.665	NN
4	2.901	NN	NN	2.000	NN
4.6	3.552	1.528	NN	2.336	NN
5.2	4.202	2.258	1.512	2.671	NN
5.8	4.853	2.987	2.177	3.006	NN
6.4	5.504	3.716	2.842	3.342	1.444
7	6.154	4.446	3.507	3.677	2.150

Note: d = necessity effect size; NN = not necessary. For privacy concerns, we reversed the scoring to simulate a variable with a positive impact; hence, a higher value depicts lower privacy concerns.

based on the NCA bottleneck tables, travelers will not grant a full SL (i.e., a score of 7) unless they perceive THOs' fairness and equity in personal data exchanges as high (i.e., a score of at least 6.154), the usefulness of sharing personal data with THOs as adequate (i.e., a score of at least 4.446), and transparency in data practices as at least decent (i.e., a score of at least 3.677).

In contrast, privacy control and privacy concerns do not represent necessary conditions. That is, a full SL can still be granted even if travelers have very high privacy concerns or if the privacy control offered by THOs is very low, if these shortcomings are offset by high levels of fairness and equity, perceived usefulness, and/or transparency.

By combining the results of the sufficiency and necessity approaches, we can summarize our findings, as shown in Table 3.

Discussion

Drawing on the *social license to operate* and *social exchange* theories, our study offers valuable insights into the SL for data practices within THOs. It examines key determinants of consumer trust and the resulting SL for data practices through the dual lens of sufficiency and necessity (Aitken et al., 2020; Gulliver et al., 2018). While trust is well-established in literature, SL provides a broader lens by positioning legitimacy as the outcome of data governance practices. This reframing moves the discussion from "Can consumers trust the organization?" to "Does the organization have the societal legitimacy to operate with personal data?" – a question of growing significance in the era of data-intensive tourism and hospitality services. Consequently, organizations should be attentive to SL, as it directly influences their long-term legitimacy, resilience, and capacity to sustain data-driven strategies.

Consistent with Martin et al. (2017) and Nunkoo et al. (2018) who emphasize the significance of fairness and equity in personal data exchanges, our findings indicate that fairness and equity play the most crucial role in achieving SL, exhibiting both a high total effect and a necessary minimum threshold. Similarly, in alignment with Morosan and DeFranco's (2015) research in hospitality contexts, the perceived usefulness of sharing personal data is also a significant contributor, though, its overall effect on SL in this study is moderate. Transparency, despite having a lower total effect, remains essential for SL, reinforcing previous research highlighting its pivotal role in trust-building (Yallop et al., 2023) and travelers' willingness to share data (Lin et al., 2023). Finally, privacy control was found to have a lower effect on SL and does not constitute a necessary condition, while privacy concerns negatively affect SL but are not critical determinants.

Table 3. Overview of the antecedents of THOs' social license for data practices.

	Sufficiency logic	Total effect on social license	Necessity logic	Minimum threshold for full social license
Fairness and equity	More is better	High	Must have	High
Perceived usefulness	More is better	Moderate	Must have	Moderate
Privacy control	More is better	Low	Not necessary	N.A.
Transparency	More is better	Low	Must have	Moderate
Privacy concerns	Less is better	Moderate	Not necessary	N.A.

Theoretical implications

This study offers several important theoretical implications for hospitality marketing and management scholarship.

First, by extending the concept of SL to organizational data practices, the study broadens the theoretical boundaries of social legitimacy theory in hospitality. It implies that SL is not confined to physical or operational domains but also applies to digital and informational practices that influence consumer perceptions of fairness, trust, and responsibility. This reframing encourages future research to examine legitimacy as a multidimensional construct encompassing ethical data management alongside traditional service quality and CSR dimensions. As such, our study makes important theoretical contributions to social legitimacy theory by addressing critical gaps in the existing literature on data privacy and SL for data practices. While most of the research on SL for data practices has concentrated on health and public sector contexts (Muller et al., 2021), this study shifts focus to the underexplored realm of business contexts, specifically THOs. In doing so, it addresses the growing significance of data-driven decision-making in industries characterized by frequent data exchanges and interactions, thereby filling a notable gap in the application of SL within the context of tourism and hospitality.

Second, while previous research has been predominantly conceptual (Lyu et al., 2022; Yallop et al., 2023), providing limited empirical evidence, this study advances knowledge by empirically examining key antecedents that strengthen interactional trust between travelers and THOs – an essential determinant of SL for data practices. Notably, this study provides empirical evidence that extends previous research on other forms of trust, such as cognitive and affective trust (e.g., Moon et al., 2022), that influence travelers' willingness to share personal information. Unlike cognitive and affective trust, interactional trust reflects travelers' perceptions that THOs' data practices prioritize their interests (Sinner et al., 2020) through transparent, confidential, fair, and equitable exchanges of data and information – critical elements in fostering trust between both parties. Furthermore, by examining these factors alongside consumers' perceived value of data sharing and their privacy concerns, this research advances the understanding of the constructs essential for achieving SL (e.g., Bélanger & Crossler, 2011; Martin et al., 2017).

Third, methodologically, the study advances theoretical discourse by employing a sufficiency-necessity analytical framework, which challenges traditional linear and additive approaches common in tourism and hospitality research. By examining antecedents of SL not only through the lens of sufficiency (i.e., assessing the extent to which these factors can increase/decrease SL) but also through the lens of necessity (i.e., assessing whether the factors are necessary for SL to occur), our study provides insights into the indispensable role of specific antecedents in achieving SL. This dual perspective advances theoretical understanding by distinguishing between factors that merely contribute to SL and those that are strictly required to secure it, offering opportunities for refining existing theoretical frameworks in hospitality research. The approach is particularly novel, as it highlights the configurational and context-dependent nature of SL, revealing multiple pathways through which legitimacy can be established.

Managerial implications

Our findings provide strategic insights for THOs seeking to enhance travelers' trust and secure SL for their data-handling practices. Beyond highlighting key determinants, we translate our study's findings into actionable guidance for managers responsible for data governance and customer experience.

Fairness and equity

Ensuring fairness and equity in data management is essential, as it is both a key driver and a necessary condition for SL. Accordingly, THOs should clearly communicate what data is collected, why it is collected, how it will be used, and what benefits and risks travelers can expect. To operationalize fairness, THOs should explicitly demonstrate how travelers receive equitable benefits in return for their data, such as improved service quality, meaningful personalization, or tangible rewards. For example, hotels can link preference data to concrete outcomes such as room upgrades, customized in-room amenities, or personalized dining suggestions, while airlines can show how passenger data enables tailored seating offers, smoother boarding, or individualized travel alerts.

Fairness also requires providing proportional value in return for data, preventing perceptions of exploitation. Aligning data use with traveler expectations is essential. THOs must not only disclose how data will be used but also deliver on those promises. For instance, if data is collected to personalize services, the outcomes should match expectations. Failure to do so – such as providing generic rather than personalized recommendations – can undermine trust. For instance, a travel agency collecting traveler interests should ensure that proposed itineraries genuinely reflect those preferences rather than defaulting to standardized packages.

These benefits should be monitored and communicated through feedback mechanisms that visibly link shared data to received value. For instance, customer-facing dashboards within mobile apps can show how shared preferences led to faster check-ins, tailored recommendations, or exclusive offers, making the data – value exchange tangible. Such transparency enables travelers to see how data-driven outputs demonstrably reflect the information they provided.

Beyond operational fairness, embedding ethical considerations in data management fosters long-term trust. THOs should establish ethical guidelines that prioritize customer welfare and data privacy, going beyond legal compliance. This can be operationalized through the creation of internal data ethics committees, advisory boards, or designated data governance roles tasked with reviewing data collection, algorithmic outcomes, and data-sharing arrangements. Regular audits should not only detect compliance issues but also proactively prevent data misuse or discriminatory outcomes.

Fairness should also be upheld throughout the entire data transaction process. Clear procedures must ensure responsible data use, with safeguards against exploitation. THOs should make these procedures easily accessible through FAQs, help centers, or explainer videos, reassuring travelers about ethical data handling. Visual tools, such as infographics or short animations explaining what happens to travelers' data after booking, can make fairness claims more credible and understandable. Additionally, publishing periodic

summaries of data practices (e.g., an annual "fair data report") can further demonstrate accountability by outlining safeguards, consumer benefits, and audit outcomes.

Finally, THOs can reinforce their commitment to fairness by participating in industry initiatives or obtaining certifications related to data privacy and ethics (e.g., ISO/IEC 27,001). Such external validation provides a credible signal of accountability and ethical commitment, helping travelers assess the trustworthiness of THOs' data practices.

Usefulness

The perceived usefulness of data sharing is essential, as it strongly influences SL. THOs must clearly communicate the tangible benefits travelers gain from sharing data, which can enhance trust even amid privacy concerns. Rather than abstract claims about "better services," THOs should explicitly link specific data inputs to concrete service improvements.

Operationalizing this requires a shift toward explicit utility messaging. For example, hotels can explain that floor or room-type preferences are used to prioritize real-time room assignments, while travel agencies can show how dietary or accessibility data are used to vet excursion options. Similarly, airlines can demonstrate how physical comfort preferences inform optimal seating recommendations during booking. By clearly connecting data entry to service outcomes, THOs validate travelers' decisions to share information and reinforce its usefulness.

Streamlined experiences further highlight the practical benefits of data sharing. Examples include mobile check-ins and digital keys in hotels, one-click rebooking for complex itineraries in travel agencies, and biometric boarding in airlines, all of which reduce friction and save time. These applications reposition personal data as an enabler of convenience rather than a source of risk.

Data sharing also enables improved customer support, allowing THOs to anticipate traveler needs based on past preferences. For hotels, this may involve preparing rooms with preferred amenities prior to arrival, while travel agencies can use disruption data to automatically rebook transfers during delays. Such anticipatory services transform data from a passive record into an active value-creation tool.

Finally, offering exclusive deals or loyalty rewards, such as room upgrades or personalized packages, further incentivizes data sharing by providing immediate value. Examples include ancillary service discounts for completed guest profiles, personalized tour access based on traveler interests, or dynamically bundled airline offers tailored to specific traveler segments.

Transparency

Transparency, a necessary condition for SL, plays a crucial supporting role in building trust. THOs should adopt clear, jargon-free privacy policies outlining data collection, usage, and storage. Layered disclosure designs, offering concise summaries alongside more detailed explanations, allow travelers to access information at their desired depth.

In practice, this requires moving away from legalistic "all-or-nothing" disclosures toward contextualized, point-of-interaction transparency. Hotels can provide privacy-at-a-glance explanations within mobile check-in apps (e.g., briefly explaining that location data is used only for digital key functionality and room-service proximity), while travel agencies can use data intent badges next to sensitive form fields to clarify why specific data is requested and who will receive it (e.g., (e.g., a "Why we ask this" tooltip next to passport or health data).

Similarly, airlines can present brief, layered notices explaining biometric data use before travelers consent to facial recognition boarding.

Transparency must be proactive and verifiable, with THOs openly communicating data practices at the point of collection rather than waiting for traveler inquiries. Transparency dashboards shared within apps or e-mail can serve as central hubs showing what data is collected, how it is used, and which partners have access. For example, hotels can allow guests to view stored preferences and exercise selective deletion rights, while travel agencies can provide summaries listing audited partners and data-sharing activities.

Privacy control

While privacy control does not appear to be a critical factor for SL, offering some degree of customization or opt-out options can enhance trust and perceptions of THOs' integrity. THOs should therefore provide intuitive, user-friendly privacy settings that allow travelers to manage data sharing without cognitive overload.

This entails moving away from binary "accept all" options toward contextual, just-in-time permissions embedded within the traveler journey. Hotels can allow guests to opt into room personalization while opting out of third-party recommendations, travel agencies can provide permission matrices for different data uses, and airlines can offer separate toggles for operational versus marketing-related data sharing.

These small but meaningful choices empower travelers and encourage a positive attitude toward THOs' data practices. By embedding privacy controls directly into booking platforms or mobile apps, THOs demonstrate a commitment to privacy-by-design rather than symbolic compliance.

Privacy concerns

Finally, THOs must address travelers' privacy concerns, particularly fears of data misuse, unauthorized sharing, or security breaches, as these concerns undermine trust and SL. Clear communication of data policies is essential, including assurances that personal data will not be sold without consent and that third-party partners adhere to strict privacy standards.

To operationalize this, THOs should explicitly list categories of third-party recipients and the specific purposes of data sharing within accessible disclosures. For example, hotels can provide data maps clarifying that guest information is shared only with specific service providers (e.g., transport or spa partners) for clearly defined purposes. Similarly, travel agencies can display third-party accountability badges confirming that booked vendors have passed standardized data protection assessments.

Additionally, THOs should implement and regularly update robust security measures, such as encryption and secure data storage, to prevent breaches and reinforce their commitment to data protection. To make these safeguards visible and reassuring, THOs should engage in security signaling. Hotels can display brief confirmations that mobile keys or Wi-Fi connections are encrypted, while travel agencies can use secure client-facing data vaults for sensitive documents, showing when and by whom files were accessed. Such visible security practices help translate abstract protections into concrete signals of trustworthiness for travelers.

Limitations and future research

The empirical approach employed in this study provides a robust foundation for advancing both theoretical and practical understandings of data privacy and the SL for data practices. However, the research is not without limitations, which, while posing certain constraints, also offers valuable opportunities for further scholarly exploration.

Our operationalization represents an early-stage effort to conceptualize and measure the notion of SL within the context of data practices in the tourism and hospitality sector. As such, we acknowledge that this initial approach provides only a partial representation of the multifaceted nature of SL in this domain. Given that existing studies have not yet established comprehensive measures that fully capture the complexity of SL specific to data-driven interactions, particularly in the rapidly evolving data and technology landscape, our study represents a first, meaningful effort to address this gap. The dynamic and fluid nature of data practices highlights the need for ongoing refinement and validation to enhance the content validity of SL measures in future research. Developing a more comprehensive and contextually grounded operationalization of SL for data practices therefore remains an important agenda for future studies.

Second, the scope of our research model is confined to examining factors influencing consumer trust and SL for data practices within the context of data exchanges and interactions between consumers and THOs. Future research could broaden this scope by adopting overarching theories of trust and exploring adjacent constructs of trustworthiness to extend the model. For instance, incorporating organizational factors such as reputation and credibility (Khodyakov, 2007), values, ethical standards, and integrity (Mouzas et al., 2007), as well as service quality, organizational competence, and referrals (Yallop & Mowatt, 2016), may reveal additional antecedents of trust and SL for data practices. These expanded perspectives could contribute to a more holistic understanding of the mechanisms underpinning trust-building and attainment of SL in the tourism and hospitality sector.

Third, this study is grounded in a single-country context. Expanding future research to include diverse cultural contexts could offer critical insights into the applicability of the proposed research model across different cultural settings. Cross-cultural theory, including Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions, and cultural value frameworks, such as Schwartz's (1994) value orientations, suggest that the interpretation of privacy, trust, and legitimacy may vary across cultures. For instance, cultures characterized by higher uncertainty avoidance may place greater emphasis on procedural safeguards in data handling, whereas collectivistic cultures may prioritize relational trust over formal protection. Examining such cultural contingencies may improve the proposed research model and enhance its relevance in different socio-cultural environments.

Fourth, investigating other business contexts may reveal new insights into factors leading to ethical consumer data transactions and antecedents necessary for the achievement of SL in data practices. Different business contexts such as healthcare, financial services, or retail exhibit distinct data sensitivities, regulatory pressures, and consumer expectations. From the perspective of institutional theory and risk-trust frameworks, these sectors may vary in perceived risk and normative assumptions about responsible data protection. Comparative research across such sectors could

reveal how industry specifics influence the development of trust and SL for data practices.

Finally, while the quantitative approach employed in this study – designed to test hypotheses derived from established theory – enables rigorous empirical validation of the proposed model, it does not capture the potential richness of insights that could emerge from qualitative investigation. Future research could adopt a mixed-methods design, integrating qualitative data to uncover new dimensions of SL and provide a deeper understanding of its theoretical underpinnings. Such an approach would complement quantitative validation and provide a more comprehensive perspective on the evolving conceptualization of SL. In addition, future studies are encouraged to employ complementary quantitative methods, such as follow-up field experiments or the collection of behavioral trace data, to rigorously examine the stability and generalizability of the observed effects.

Conclusion

The *social license to operate* and *social exchange* theories provide a robust foundation for examining the factors that enhance consumer trust and acceptance of THOs' data practices. Building on this theoretical groundwork, this study offers valuable insights into trust-building mechanisms within the tourism and hospitality industry. Our study facilitates future conceptual and empirical research on ethical consumer data transactions and further exploration of the intersection between data practices and ethics in tourism and hospitality.

Note

1. The dataset can be downloaded from the OSF at https://osf.io/cq8f5/overview?view_only=c21a815d385a4ec195c819abc55a98bd.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix

Table A1. Sample characteristics

Gender	
Male	30.1%
Female	69.9%
Age	
18–24 years	29.7%
25–34 years	46.6%
35–44 years	12.6%
45+ years	11.1%
Monthly income	
Under 2000 RON	13.9%
Between 2000 RON and 5000 RON	42.6%
Between 5001 RON and 10,000 RON	31.9%
More than 10,000 RON	11.6%
Education	
Secondary/post-secondary education	26.6%
Higher education, undergraduate level	40.2%
Higher education, graduate or doctoral level	33.2%
Frequency of tourism traveling	
Up to two trips per year	49.4%
Between 3–5 trips per year	40.8%
More than 5 trips per year	9.8%
THO category	
Accommodation	29.5%
Travel agency	29.9%
Online booking platform	29.9%
Transportation	9.9%
Food and beverages	0.7%
Means of sharing personal data with the THO	
Onsite, at the THO's premises	33.3%
Online, via website or app	45.3%
Online, via instant messaging	7.4%
Online, via e-mail	11.1%
By telephone	3.0%

Table A2. Measurements

Construct	Wording	Source
Perceived usefulness	Sharing my personal data with the THO was useful for enhancing my travel experience.	Davis (1989)
	Sharing my personal data with the THO enabled me to receive recommendations and personalized services during my travel.	
	Sharing my personal data with the THO improved my overall satisfaction and enjoyment during my travel.	
Transparency	The THO disclosed the way the data were collected, processed, and used.	Malhotra et al. (2004)
	The THO's customer data privacy policy was disclosed clearly and conspicuously.	
	It was very important to me that I was aware and knowledgeable about how my personal information would be used.	
Privacy control	I believe I have control over who can get access to my personal information collected by the THO.	Xu et al. (2011)
	I believe I have control over what personal information is released to third parties by the THO.	
	I believe I have control over how my personal information is used by the THO	
	I believe I can control my personal information provided to the THO.	
Fairness and equity	I believe the THO accesses my information in a fair way.	Martin et al. (2017)
	I believe the THO's use of my information is ethical.	
	The THO manages my information in an equitable way.	
	I believe the THO's use of my customer information is fair.	
Privacy concerns	I am sensitive to the way THOs handle my personal information.	Martin et al. (2017)
	It is important to keep my privacy intact from THOs.	
	Personal privacy is very important to me, compared to other subjects.	
	I am concerned about threats to my personal privacy.	
Trust	I trust the THO to keep my personal information safe.	Blut (2016)
	I trust the THO's administrators will not misuse my personal information.	
	The THO protects the information about my purchasing behavior.	
Social license	I have a positive attitude towards the THO's handling of my personal information.	Sinner et al. (2020)
	I trust that the THO acts responsibly when managing my personal information.	
	I accept the THO's operations related to my personal information.	
	I approve the THO's operations related to my personal information.	

Table A3. Measurements' assessment

Internal consistency reliability and convergent validity

Construct	Item loadings' range	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (Rho_A)	Composite reliability (Rho_C)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Perceived usefulness	[0.878; 0.925]	0.891	0.891	0.933	0.822
Transparency	[0.631; 0.913]	0.619	0.775	0.791	0.565
Privacy control	[0.684; 0.922]	0.868	0.906	0.910	0.720
Fairness and equity	[0.903; 0.929]	0.934	0.935	0.953	0.836
Privacy concerns	[0.677; 0.871]	0.805	0.880	0.859	0.607
Trust	[0.885; 0.924]	0.894	0.895	0.934	0.825
Social license	[0.795; 0.888]	0.872	0.898	0.910	0.718

Discriminant validity

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Fairness and equity (1)	**0.914**	0.589	0.134	0.633	0.778	0.592	0.805
Perceived usefulness (2)	*0.538*	**0.907**	0.132	0.515	0.603	0.495	0.605
Privacy concerns (3)	*-0.148*	*-0.131*	**0.779**	0.093	0.231	0.230	0.151
Privacy control (4)	*0.585*	*0.470*	*-0.076*	**0.848**	0.548	0.550	0.575
Social license (5)	*0.725*	*0.545*	*-0.233*	*0.509*	**0.847**	0.515	0.720
Transparency (6)	*0.483*	*0.385*	*0.084*	*0.433*	*0.412*	**0.752**	0.555
Trust (7)	*0.736*	*0.540*	*-0.158*	*0.522*	*0.654*	*0.445*	**0.909**

Note: Under diagonal (italics) = correlations; On diagonal (bold) = square root of AVE; Above diagonal (regular) = HTMT ratios of correlations.