

Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research

ISSN: 1094-1665 (Print) 1741-6507 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rapt20

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To cite this article: Annette M. Mills , Luiz Mendes-Filho & Felix B. Tan (06 Oct 2026): From information to independence: understanding how online travel reviews shape traveller empowerment, Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research, DOI: 10.1080/10941665.2026.2740816

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10941665.2026.2740816

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ASIA PACIFIC JOURNAL OF TOURISM RESEARCH
https://doi.org/10.1080/10941665.2026.2740816

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From information to independence: understanding how online travel reviews shape traveller empowerment

Annette M. Mills[a], Luiz Mendes-Filho[b] and Felix B. Tan[c]

[a]UC Business School, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand; [b]Tourism Department, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN), Natal, Brazil; [c]Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Travellers frequently rely on online travel reviews (OTRs) to plan their trips independently, but how these reviews contribute to traveller empowerment is unclear. To address, this study draws on Psychological Empowerment Theory and Dual-Process Theory to examine how two aspects of OTRs, that is informational and normative attributes, shape travellers' sense of empowerment during travel planning. Our findings show that informational cues (e.g. argument quality, information consistency) and people's opinions (e.g. recommendation ratings, recommendation consistency) enhance traveller empowerment, which in turn contributes to satisfaction with OTR use. Further analysis shows that empowerment partially mediates the effects of information consistency and argument quality, while the effects of recommendation consistency and recommendation rating on satisfaction operate through empowerment. The findings highlight empowerment as an important outcome of engaging with OTRs and provide new insight into how online review environments influence travellers' confidence and autonomy in travel decision-making.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 29 March 2026
Accepted 17 September 2026

KEYWORDS
Online travel review; traveller empowerment; dual-process theory; satisfaction; budget travellers

Introduction

Today, digitalisation of the travel industry has significantly changed how people make their travel purchases. Studies show 72% of travellers prefer to book their travel online, with factors such as speed of organising a trip, easy price comparisons, and access to cheaper prices as reasons why people book online (Armstrong, 2023). At the heart of this shift also lies the increasing reliance on online information sources, particularly online travel reviews (OTRs), to provide access to quality, trustworthy information when making travel decisions. In 2024, over 31.1 million reviews were shared on the TripAdvisor platform (Tripadvisor, 2025). As a source of travel-related information, OTRs play a key role in providing information that supports travellers in the planning process (Assaker et al., 2020; Chuang et al., 2023; Filieri et al., 2021; Kozinets et al., 2021), with 3 out of 4 persons saying online reviews were "extremely or very important" when making travel decisions (Tripadvisor, n.d.-a). Even with growing use of Generative AI tools

CONTACT Annette M. Mills annette.mills@canterbury.ac.nz UC Business School, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, 8041, New Zealand

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/10941665.2026.2740816.

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for travel planning (Hinton, 2025) and search patterns changing, online reviews remain highly relevant sources of travel information (Choi et al., 2024; Tripadvisor, n.d.-b).

Since travellers cannot physically experience a travel product or service before purchasing or experiencing it, many rely on others' opinions for information about travel products such as destinations, accommodation, and attractions. As access to information through sources like online reviews increases, travel consumers are showing greater independence, autonomy, and satisfaction in the travel planning process (Baka, 2016; Hwang et al., 2018; Kozinets et al., 2021). Yet, despite substantial research on the credibility and helpfulness of reviews (Biswas et al., 2022; Cheung et al., 2009; Chuang et al., 2023; Liu & Park, 2015; Zhao et al., 2025), little is known about the characteristics of OTRs that help to foster travellers' sense of confidence, independence, and perceived control during travel planning. Nonetheless, access to information may not lead to greater control or independence. Travel planning can involve uncertainty, information overload, and difficulty in evaluating options prior to experiencing them, so travellers still need to determine which information they can trust and use (Broniarczyk & Griffin, 2014; Hu & Krishen, 2019). OTRs therefore become empowering when they can help travellers move beyond having access to information to feeling confident, independent, and capable of making their own travel decisions (Harrison et al., 2006; Wathieu et al., 2002). However, we have limited understanding of what OTR aspects are important in fostering confidence and independence in travel planning.

Research increasingly recognises the importance of digital platforms in reshaping how informational power is distributed between tourists and service providers (Booking.com, 2025; Sarangan et al., 2025) and of traveller empowerment (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017; Liu et al., 2025; Sarangan et al., 2025). Understanding how OTRs influence travellers' sense of empowerment contributes not only to the literature on electronic word-of-mouth but also to emerging discussions on impacts of personal agency in the online travel sector (Huang et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2025; Sarangan et al., 2025). This study therefore aims to provide insights into the role of OTRs in travel decisions, particularly the attributes that shape empowerment in the travel planning process.

Prior studies suggest two aspects of the OTR context that are important when evaluating review quality, which may impact travellers' perceptions of empowerment when planning their travel; these are informational aspects such as argument quality and source credibility, and normative aspects like review ratings (Biswas et al., 2022; Chong et al., 2018; Filieri et al., 2018; Hwang et al., 2018; Liang et al., 2021). Accordingly, the study addresses the following research question: What impact do informational and normative attributes of OTRs have on travellers' perceptions of empowerment in making travel decisions?

To address the research question, the study integrates Deutsch and Gerard's (1955) Dual-Process Theory with Psychological Empowerment Theory (Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Zimmerman, 1995). Specifically, it examines how informational and normative attributes of online reviews influence traveller empowerment and whether empowerment provides a mechanism through which these attributes are associated with satisfaction with OTR use. Dual Process Theory identifies the informational and normative cues that travellers may pay attention to when evaluating OTRs, while Psychological Empowerment Theory explains how these evaluations may influence competence and feelings of control (self-determination) in travel planning. Together, these theories provide a framework for examining how travellers assess review information and how these assessments in turn influence their sense of empowerment and being able to make travel decisions independently. By focusing on empowerment as

an outcome of engagement with OTRs, this study moves beyond understanding whether reviews are helpful to whether they enable travellers to feel more independent and in control during travel planning.

Research also recognises the significance of empowerment for outcomes like traveller satisfaction, which is important for increasing sales, travel bookings, and customer trust and loyalty, and justifying investments in online review platforms to support and improve access to information people need for travel planning (Anagnostopoulou et al., 2020; Ürgüplü & Hüseyinoğlu, 2021; Wathieu et al., 2002; Zhang et al., 2018). Given its importance, this study examines the impact of empowerment on traveller satisfaction with OTRs (Maynard et al., 2012)

Literature review and theoretical foundations

Online travel reviews (OTRs) comprise positive, neutral, or negative evaluations of a product, service, person, or brand posted by consumers on websites that host such reviews (Filieri et al., 2018). OTRs are one of the most common sources of travel information for the travel purchase decision, which enables travellers to be independent in making their travel plans (Wathieu et al., 2002). With other people's opinions influencing the travel consumer more than information provided by businesses or travel service providers, the popularity of OTRs has received significant attention. This ranges from studies examining the rise of OTRs and their role in travel planning (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008) to those investigating the impacts of attributes such as review credibility and usefulness of OTRs on factors such as satisfaction, word-of-mouth, purchase intention, and reputation management (Assaker et al., 2020; Baka, 2016; Biswas et al., 2022; Filieri et al., 2021; Su et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2025).

A large body of research has delved into understanding how people assess review quality, such as the credibility and helpfulness of the information provided. These studies show that attributes of the message, such as review length, positive/negative sentiment, and argument strength, influence people's evaluations of review quality (Biswas et al., 2022; Hwang et al., 2018; Liu & Park, 2015). Many platforms also capture normative evaluations such as review rating (as "likes"), which also help travellers assess review quality (Biswas et al., 2022). Taking a dual-process perspective, research further suggests that the relative impacts of various OTR attributes differ by context, with some studies showing normative aspects (like review rating) as more influential than informational aspects (like review content) for experience products (e.g. video game) that have to be sampled to be evaluated, compared with search goods (e.g. grocery item) where quality can be assessed prior to purchase (Majumder et al., 2022). Together, informational and normative attributes can help travellers evaluate the quality of the information provided through OTRs (Biswas et al., 2022; Chong et al., 2018; Zhang & Watts, 2003). However, it is not known which attributes are important for empowering travellers in their planning.

Empowerment, as a concept, has long been important in the consumer and human resource literatures (Broniarczyk & Griffin, 2014; Füller et al., 2009; Maynard et al., 2012; Spreitzer, 2008; Wathieu et al., 2002). The hospitality and tourism sectors also recognise the importance of empowerment. Indeed, Hjalager (2001, p. 289) describes the truly empowered tourist as "a person who, without much pain or intellectual effort, is able to make an informed choice of services and products in accordance with his/her own preferences." However, most studies focus on employees and residents, such as the impact of empowerment on job satisfaction, and the impact of employment and involvement in tourism development initiatives on residents' empowerment (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017; Aleshinloye et al.,

2022; Guo et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2021; Ro & Chen, 2011).

Studies that do examine traveller empowerment focus on its role in co-creating customer value and the customer experience (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017; Shin et al., 2020). A few have examined the empowering role of OTRs for travellers (Mendes-Filho et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2025; Sarangan et al., 2025) and enabling factors like perceived usefulness and service provider responses to online reviews (Shin et al., 2020). However, little is known about the attributes people focus on when evaluating OTR information and how this impacts empowerment.

Prior research on travel decisions has examined factors such as perceived usefulness, review credibility, information diagnosticity, and information adoption (Biswas et al., 2022; Cheung et al., 2009; Filieri, 2015; Filieri et al., 2018; Ranga et al., 2024). These primarily capture whether review content supports decision-making but do not address their role in relation to travellers' perceived control in travel planning. In contrast, psychological empowerment reflects a motivational state characterised by competence, meaningfulness, self-determination, and perceived impact (Spreitzer, 1995). In the context of travel planning, empowerment concerns not only whether online reviews provide helpful information, but also whether they enable travellers to feel capable of independently shaping their decisions. By distinguishing empowerment from usefulness-oriented outcomes, this study extends the online review literature by examining how OTRs influence travellers' agency in planning travel experiences.

This study integrates Dual Process Theory with Psychological Empowerment Theory to explain how travellers move from evaluating the quality of information they receive through OTRs to feeling empowered to plan their travel independently. Dual Process Theory identifies the informational and social attributes persons may use to evaluate OTRs, while Psychological Empowerment Theory helps to explain the dimensions that characterise empowerment (e.g. competence, self-determination) and the relationships between information and enabling independence in travel planning.

Dual-process theory

Prior research has drawn on models of persuasive communications like the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), and Deutsch and Gerard's (1955) Dual-Process Theory of normative and informational influences to understand the factors that people refer to when processing information provided by others. Of these, the Elaboration Likelihood Model has been widely used to provide insights into whether people focus more on peripheral factors (like source credibility) or central factors (like argument quality) to evaluate information that they receive. Deutsch and Gerard's Dual-Process Theory, on the other hand, aims to explain the influence of social factors (both informational and normative) on information processing, and has been used to provide insights into attributes that help people to evaluate reviews (Filieri, 2015; Filieri et al., 2018). It is useful for understanding normative and informational aspects of OTRs (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955) that people may draw on to assess the quality of the information provided in online reviews, and to help explain their role in empowering travellers (Filieri et al., 2018; Zimmerman, 1995).

Deutsch and Gerard's (1955) Dual-Process Theory identifies two types of social influences on the persuasiveness of received messages that typically occur together in group communications like online reviews: informational social influence and normative social influence. An informational social influence is defined "as an influence to accept the information obtained from another as evidence about reality" (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955, p. 629), whereas normative social influence refers to people's opinions about the received

information and how these opinions would affect others' choice preferences (Kaplan & Miller, 1987). Informational social influence therefore focuses on the content of the information received from others (e.g. argument quality), and normative social influence on people's opinions about information received from others (e.g. recommendation rating).

Dual-Process Theory has been useful in studies of online reviews to investigate informational attributes such as source credibility, source expertise, and argument strength, and normative attributes such as consumer rating (of a product), review rating, and review consistency and their impact on outcomes such as information diagnosticity, review credibility, and purchase intentions (Cheung et al., 2009; Filieri, 2015; Filieri et al., 2018; Majumder et al., 2022; Zhang & Watts, 2003). Given the importance of information for empowerment, understanding the attributes that people pay attention to is an important step in understanding the influence of OTRs on traveller empowerment. Dual-Process Theory is therefore suitable for investigating OTR attributes and their relative importance in empowering travel consumers.

Dual Process Theory identifies the cues that people may use when evaluating OTRs, but it does not explain how people move from having access to information to explaining how this fosters independence in travel decision-making. Psychological Empowerment Theory bridges this gap by explaining how access to information can help foster competence and feelings of control in travel planning. By integrating Dual Process Theory with Psychological Empowerment, the study examines how one's evaluation of informational and normative attributes of OTRs may contribute to and strengthen traveller empowerment and in turn, their satisfaction with OTR use.

Empowerment

Psychological empowerment as a term describes the enabling of individuals with decision-making abilities and autonomy in decision-making. Empowerment is both a process and an outcome (Zimmerman, 1995). Studies that view empowerment as a process focus on mechanisms through which people gain control and mastery over their goals and decisions that impact them (Rappaport, 1987). For travellers, these empowering processes include access to the information needed to achieve travel goals. Indeed, it can be argued that the ability of travellers to effectively discern quality information is fundamentally also an issue of empowerment. As such, OTRs can be viewed as mechanisms through which travellers gain access to the information they need to take charge of travel planning.

Empowerment as an outcome refers to consequences of the empowering process (Zimmerman, 1995), and is reflected in the control persons believe they have over actions and decision-making (Rappaport, 1987). Using Spreitzer (1995)'s conceptualisation of psychological empowerment, it is also described as an intrinsic task motivation (Conger & Kanungo, 1988) that is revealed in changes in four key cognitions or assessments. These are competence, meaningfulness, impact, and self-determination (choice) (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), where:

- *Competence* is the degree to which a person can perform a task skilfully when they try (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). In this context, reviews help travellers feel more capable of planning their travel.
- *Meaningfulness* (or "meaning") reflects the value a person places on a task goal or purpose as judged in relation to their own ideals or standards; it involves the individual's intrinsic caring about a given task (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). When reviews align with a person's interests or goals, they are more likely to engage with them and feel empowered in making travel plans.
- *Impact* is the extent to which an individual perceives their behaviour (actions) as

making a difference in accomplishing the purpose of the task (i.e. the intended outcomes) (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). This reflects the extent to which reviews reinforce one's beliefs or experiences such that the traveller is likely to be more proactive in planning their travel.

- *Self-determination* refers to an individual's sense of having choice in initiating and regulating actions (Deci & Ryan, 1987). When guided by travel reviews, this reflects the degree of control (autonomy) travellers believe they have over their travel decisions.

Empowerment is determined by its context and the extent to which people are enabled in a given task, such as travel planning. Taken together, these four dimensions shape a person's sense of empowerment and would, in the travel context, include their sense of choice and competence in travel planning, and the extent to which they believe that taking charge of their travel plans would produce the desired results (Liu et al., 2025; Sarangan et al., 2025; Werner et al., 2022). OTRs can therefore be a powerful enabler of traveller empowerment by acting as a vehicle that provides access to information people need to feel in control of their travel planning (Assaker et al., 2020; Baka, 2016; Harrison et al., 2006; Shin et al., 2020). Given the importance of access to quality information, an understanding of attributes that people pay attention to is important for understanding traveller empowerment.

Hypothesis development

This study integrates Deutsch and Gerard's (1955) Dual-Process Theory with Psychological Empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995). It investigates the relationship between two aspects of OTRs highlighted by Dual-Process Theory, informational social influence and normative social influence, and empowerment. Figure 1 shows the research model.

Empowerment and informational social influence

Informational social influence (ISI) focuses on the content of the received information. For

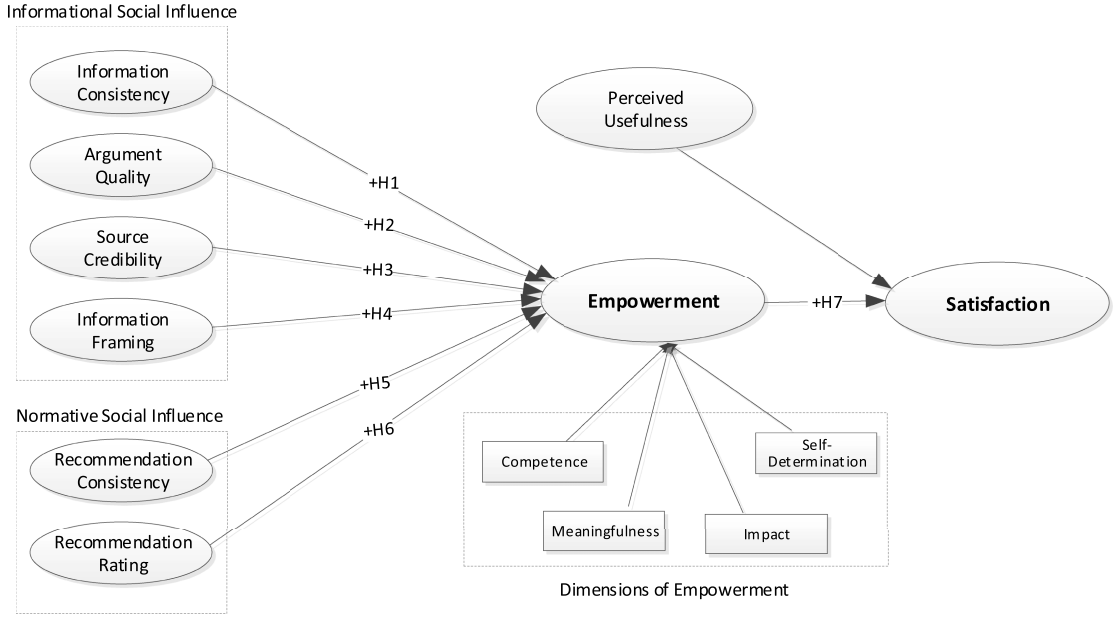


Figure 1. Research model.

OTRs, ISI involves acceptance of travel information, reviews, or advice from someone who is not known by the person, but who provides trustworthy evidence of reality (Gavilan et al., 2018). Given their importance in evaluating the quality of information provided through OTRs (Hovland et al., 1953), dimensions of ISI related to the message, source and audience (i.e. information consistency, argument quality, source credibility, and information framing) are examined (Angst & Agarwal, 2009; Cheung et al., 2009; Chong et al., 2018; Filieri, 2015; Hwang et al., 2018).

In travel planning, where products and services generally cannot be evaluated before consumption, informational cues that can reduce uncertainty and make information easier to assess (Broniarczyk & Griffin, 2014; Chong et al., 2018; Hu & Krishen, 2019) should help improve travellers' confidence in their own judgement. Psychological Empowerment Theory suggests that such conditions can enhance competence and self-determination by making travellers feel better able to evaluate alternatives and exercise control over their travel choices (Harrison et al., 2006; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). The following hypotheses therefore examine four informational attributes separately as distinct features of the OTR environment.

Information consistency, also referred to as confirmation of one's prior belief, reflects the degree to which a message aligns with existing knowledge held by the person accessing it (Cheung et al., 2009; Zhang & Watts, 2003). When travellers read reviews that confirm or resonate with their existing views, this is likely to reduce uncertainty and strengthen their perceptions of the review as credible and relevant (Cheung et al., 2009; Mumuni et al., 2020). Such confirmation not only validates the traveller's prior beliefs but can also reinforce beliefs in the value of their own experiences (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Zhang & Watts, 2003). Thus, when information received through OTRs is consistent with travellers' existing knowledge and beliefs, it provides informational validation that can reduce uncertainty and increase confidence in their own judgement. This greater confidence in evaluating OTR information can strengthen travellers' perceived control over the planning process and, consequently, their sense of empowerment (Cheung et al., 2009; Hu & Krishen, 2019; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Hence:

> H1: Information consistency is positively associated with perceived empowerment in travel planning.

Argument quality refers to the persuasive strength of the reasons embedded in an informational message (Bhattacherjee & Sanford, 2006). When review content is seen as logical and relevant, travellers are likely to judge it as higher quality (Biswas et al., 2022; Hwang et al., 2018; Sussman & Siegal, 2003). In the OTR context, the greater the perceived quality of the arguments, the more likely it is that people will use the information for making decisions (Kang et al., 2020; Liang et al., 2021; Qahri-Saremi & Montazemi, 2019). High-quality arguments therefore provide travellers with clearer and more diagnostic information on which to evaluate alternatives, reducing uncertainty and supporting greater confidence in decision-making. As travellers are better able to assess the available options and justify their choices, they are also likely to experience greater control over the travel planning process and hence greater perceived empowerment (Hu & Krishen, 2019; Liu & Park, 2015; Sussman & Siegal, 2003). Travel consumers are therefore expected to value more, information that will empower and help them to get the best out of their decisions (Harrison et al., 2006). It is expected:

> H2: Argument quality is positively associated with perceived empowerment in travel planning.

Source credibility captures a person's perception of the believability and trustworthiness of

the source of a review message, as opposed to the review content (Bhattacherjee & Sanford, 2006). Studies show that when travellers see the source as highly credible, they are more likely to use it than when the sources are seen as having low credibility (Chong et al., 2018; Filieri et al., 2018; Hwang et al., 2018; Liang et al., 2021). Persons also prefer travel reviews from sources with better reputations as these are seen as more trustworthy and reliable (Hwang et al., 2018; Kang et al., 2020; Liu & Park, 2015; Mumuni et al., 2020). So, when travellers are provided with trustworthy information, they are better positioned to make their own decisions so likely to feel more empowered in travel planning (Filieri et al., 2018; Harrison et al., 2006).

However, source credibility can be difficult to establish in OTR contexts where reviewers are not known or only partially identifiable. Prior research suggests that when source cues such as source identity or reputation are disclosed this can enhance the credibility of the reviews, but when information about the source is limited, aggregate agreement or review ratings even from unidentified sources can provide alternative cues (Kusumasondjaja et al., 2012; Liu & Park, 2015; Pooja & Upadhyaya, 2024). Source credibility therefore is expected to enhance perceived empowerment when it can be established, but its influence may be weaker if travellers rely more on collective validation such as recommendation ratings. As such:

> H3: Source credibility is positively associated with perceived empowerment in travel planning.

Information framing refers to whether a message is presented positively or negatively, reflecting its valence (Cheung et al., 2009). Positively framed information emphasises the strengths and potential benefits of a product or service, whereas negatively framed information highlights weaknesses or possible unfavourable outcomes (Angst & Agarwal, 2009; Grewal et al., 1994). Whether positive or negative, review framing can influence whether a review is seen as credible or helpful (Biswas et al., 2022; Kusumasondjaja et al., 2012; Su et al., 2022).

However, the effect of information framing may also vary, with prior research showing that positively and negatively framed messages can have differing effects. While some studies suggest that positively framed reviews may have a stronger influence on consumer evaluations, others show that negative information may sometimes be viewed as particularly diagnostic (Kusumasondjaja et al., 2012; Pooja & Upadhyaya, 2024; Sparks & Browning, 2011). Nevertheless, information framing may influence empowerment where it helps travellers evaluate the potential benefits and risks or a product or service. As an indicator of review credibility, information framing has therefore been shown to affect consumer decisions (Filieri et al., 2018) and may shape travellers' sense of empowerment in decision-making (Shin et al., 2020). Hence, this study proposes that:

> H4: Information framing is positively associated with perceived empowerment in travel planning.

Empowerment and normative social influence

Normative social influence refers to people's opinions about information that is received and how these opinions may affect choice preferences (Kaplan & Miller, 1987). Normative social influence is manifest when information on the position favoured by others is available during a communication and people respond by complying with others' expectations of what they should do (Kaplan & Miller, 1987). This normative influence is reflected in two attributes of the OTR context that information readers rely on to evaluate the credibility of online reviews (Biswas et al., 2022; Cheung

et al., 2009; Liu & Park, 2015): (i) the normative opinion on the review topic (i.e. recommendation consistency), which is concerned with whether the feedback provided by the review is consistent with other reviews, and (ii) the normative response to the opinion (i.e. recommendation rating), which reflects how others react to or evaluate the review. Both elements provide views that are evaluated by others and may act as normative cues for an individual's own information evaluation (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Kaplan & Miller, 1987).

Normative social influence therefore influences travel planning when travellers draw on the evaluations and reactions of others to support decision-making. In the OTR context, consistency across reviews and traveller evaluations of others' opinions can help reinforce one's evaluations and reduce uncertainty by signalling that the evaluation is shared by others. This collective enforcement can increase confidence in one's judgment and perceived control over the travel decision, thereby supporting perceived empowerment (Cheung et al., 2009; Gavilan et al., 2018). The following hypotheses therefore examine recommendation consistency and recommendation rating as distinct attributes of normative social influence.

Recommendation consistency refers to the extent to which a review aligns with other reviewers' evaluations of the same product or service (Zhang & Watts, 2003). When using reviews, consumers often assess whether others report similar experiences; when multiple consumers highlight similar issues, the evaluations are more likely to be perceived as credible or reasonable (Liang et al., 2021). When reviews are submitted by multiple consumers, users can also compare opinions and assess the degree of consistency across them (Cheung et al., 2009; Chong et al., 2018). Such agreement provides a normative cue that an evaluation is shared by others, thereby reducing uncertainty about whether one's own assessment is reasonable. This collective validation can increase confidence in one's judgement and strengthen perceived control over the travel decision, supporting greater empowerment (Cheung et al., 2009; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Gavilan et al., 2018). Thus, the consistency of others' opinions represents an important dimension of review quality (Qahri-Saremi & Montazemi, 2019) and is likely to influence empowerment. Hence:

> H5: Recommendation consistency is positively associated with perceived empowerment in travel planning.

Recommendation rating refers to ratings submitted by other users for a review (Cheung et al., 2009). The way this is signalled varies across platforms, for example, through the number of "likes" a review receives (e.g. TripAdvisor, YouTube), the number of users who indicate that a review was helpful (e.g. Booking.com) or qualitative responses such as replies to a review (e.g. YouTube). Recommendation ratings serve as an important source of information for consumers, substituting and complementing other forms of user-generated quality assessments (Gavilan et al., 2018; Liu & Park, 2015). When reading reviews, consumers often consider the ratings as indicators of a review's credibility and helpfulness (Biswas et al., 2022; Liu & Park, 2015). This visible indication of how others have evaluated and supported a review, offer travellers a form of social validation when assessing the information. This collective validation can increase confidence in using the review as a basis for decision-making, strengthening travellers' perceived control and sense of empowerment (Gavilan et al., 2018; Liu & Park, 2015). The stronger consumers' perceptions of the support provided by the ratings tool to make a decision, the more likely it is to enhance their sense of empowerment (Füller et al., 2009). Hence, it is expected that:

> H6: Recommendation rating is positively associated with perceived empowerment in travel planning.

Traveller satisfaction

Satisfaction as an outcome of empowerment has had significant attention in the broader consumer literature (Maynard et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2018), but limited attention in the travel context (Huang et al., 2025). However, studies show that when people feel in control of what they are doing, this increases satisfaction (Huang et al., 2025; Maynard et al., 2012; Ürgüplü & Hüseyinoğlu, 2021). Applied to travel planning, this suggests that when travellers feel in control of their travel plans and able to make informed choices, they are likely to choose options that align with their desires (Huang et al., 2025; Sarangan et al., 2025; Wathieu et al., 2002; Zhang et al., 2018) leading to increased satisfaction with OTR use for travel planning (Hwang et al., 2018; Ürgüplü & Hüseyinoğlu, 2021). Hence, we expect higher levels of empowerment to increase satisfaction with OTRs.

H7: Empowerment is positively associated with satisfaction.

Methodology

To assess the research model (Figure 1), survey data were collected from budget travellers who used OTRs when planning their travel. Budget travellers typically include younger travellers (like backpackers and hostellers) who aim to minimise expenses while maximising travel experiences. They represent an appropriate group for examining traveller empowerment, as they tend to rely heavily on user-generated information, like online reviews, and often make their travel plans independently (Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995). Studies show that for one-third of travellers, online reviews are a key source of information when making destination and accommodation decisions (Hostelworld, 2019). This makes budget travellers a relevant group for investigating how OTRs shape travellers' perceived control during travel planning. Ethics approval for the project was obtained from AUT Ethics Committee (EA Number 09/115).

Instrument development

Validated measures adapted from prior research were used to operationalise the research model. Traveller empowerment was assessed using a multi-dimensional scale adapted from Spreitzer (1995) and used in studies of traveller empowerment (e.g. Mendes-Filho et al., 2018; Sarangan et al., 2025). Items capturing information social influence (that is, argument quality, source credibility, information consistency, and information framing) and normative social influence (that is, recommendation consistency and recommendation rating) were adapted from Cheung et al. (2009), Bhattacherjee and Sanford (2006), and Sussman and Siegal (2003). Perceived usefulness and satisfaction were adapted from Davis (1989) and Spreng et al. (1996), respectively. All nine (9) constructs were assessed using 7-point Likert scales anchored as "(1) Strongly Disagree" to "(7) Strongly Agree" (see Appendix 1).

Prior studies show that perceived usefulness, that is, individuals' beliefs that use of OTRs enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of travel planning (Davis, 1989), is a key determinant of satisfaction (Filieri et al., 2021). Perceived usefulness was therefore included as a control variable to enable a better understanding of the relationship between empowerment and satisfaction, beyond the extent to which travellers regard OTRs as useful for travel planning (Chuang et al., 2023).

A pre-test and pilot study were carried out to evaluate the survey. First, five academic staff evaluated a draft of the survey questionnaire. Their feedback was incorporated, and the survey pretested with 54 students who had used OTRs for travel planning. Further changes were made to enhance the layout and wording, and the survey was then pilot tested with tourists (n = 54) at a local hostel.

The results showed adequate reliability and validity of the measures. Final adjustments were made to enhance clarity for non-native English speakers.

Data collection

Tourists staying in hostels in Auckland, New Zealand participated in the study, with self-administered survey questionnaires distributed to guests in the communal areas. A total of 355 completed questionnaires were returned; 87 were excluded for persons who had not used reviews for their travel plans, leaving 268 usable responses (73.4%).

To minimise common method bias, several recommended guidelines were followed (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This included selecting measures for the dependent and independent variables from different sources. Items were also reviewed to minimise vague terms, and ensure questions were simple, concise, specific, and understandable for non-native English speakers, and key terms such as OTR defined. During data collection, anonymity and confidentiality were assured to minimise evaluation apprehension and the likelihood of persons adjusting responses to make them more socially desirable. After data collection, Harman's one-factor test (Aleshinloye et al., 2022; Arora et al., 2025; Podsakoff et al., 2003) was applied. An unrotated exploratory factor analysis including all the measurement items showed that the first factor accounted for 37.8% of the total variance observed, well below the recommended threshold of 50% (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This indicates that no single factor accounted for more than 50% of the variance observed. Together with the procedural remedies, the results suggest that common method bias was not a significant issue.

The data were also checked for outliers – none were found, nor was there missing data in the usable responses. The normality assumptions were also met with results for skewness ranging from −0.092 to −1.079 and for kurtosis from −0.820 to 1.994 falling within acceptable ranges of −2 and +2 (Hair et al., 2022).

The participants

Of the respondents, 147 (54.9%) were female and 121 (45.1%) were male. Most respondents were under 35 years, with 42.9% aged 18–25 years and 46.3% aged 26–34 years. Most were from Germany (20.9%) and England (20.1%), followed by the USA (6.0%), France (5.6%), and Canada (5.2%). 66.8% used OTRs more than occasionally, with 16.4% using them for every trip; 72% spent more than 30 min looking up OTRs when planning their trips, with almost 40% spending one hour or more. The most used OTR sites were for HostelWorld (59%), LonelyPlanet (49.3%), TripAdvisor (42.2%), HostelBookers (31.3%), and Booking.com (21.6%).

Data analysis and results

The research model was assessed using Partial Least Squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) approach to path analysis. PLS-SEM was selected because the study focuses on prediction and theory development and includes a higher-order formative construct representing traveller empowerment, conditions for which PLS-SEM is considered particularly suitable (Hair et al., 2022). SmartPLS 4.1.0.6 with bootstrapping (using 2000 resamples) was used to assess the model (Ringle et al., 2024).

Measurement model

For the measurement model, all constructs were modelled as reflective at the first-order level. These were evaluated by examining the reliability and validity of the measures (Chin, 2010). For reliability, internal consistency was examined. The results (Table 1) showed composite reliability (CR) ranged from 0.880 to 0.955, exceeding recommended thresholds of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2022). For construct validity, convergent and discriminant validity were assessed.

Table 1. Descriptives, factor loadings/weights, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE).

	Factor Loadings	Factor Weights	Mean	SD	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Information Consistency (IC)			5.081	1.006	0.882	0.714
IC1	0.857	0.437				
IC2	0.868	0.403				
IC3	0.809	0.34				
Argument Quality (AQ)			5.409	0.830	0.885	0.720
AQ1	0.818	0.372				
AQ2	0.895	0.410				
AQ3	0.831	0.396				
Source Credibility (SC)			4.587	0.919	0.939	0.836
SC1	0.901	0.348				
SC2	0.923	0.384				
SC3	0.920	0.361				
Information Framing (IF)			4.787	0.920	0.880	0.710
IF1	0.762	0.255				
IF2	0.877	0.465				
IF3	0.883	0.451				
Recommendation Consistency (RC)			4.715	0.993	0.923	0.800
RC1	0.900	0.404				
RC2	0.916	0.394				
RC3	0.866	0.319				
Recommendation Rating (RR)			4.840	0.944	0.940	0.839
RR1	0.899	0.342				
RR2	0.933	0.387				
RR3	0.916	0.362				
Competence (COMP)			5.593	0.997	0.934	0.825
COMP1	0.919	0.375				
COMP2	0.922	0.365				
COMP3	0.883	0.361				
Impact (IMP)			4.235	1.509	0.959	0.887
IMP1	0.925	0.122				
IMP2	0.956	0.115				
IMP3	0.944	0.118				
Meaningfulness (MEAN)			4.459	1.397	0.939	0.837
MEAN1	0.876	0.116				
MEAN2	0.940	0.116				
MEAN3	0.927	0.111				
Self-Determination (SED)			5.197	1.049	0.945	0.812
SED1	0.879	0.110				
SED2	0.919	0.114				
SED3	0.914	0.104				
SED4	0.892	0.103				
Perceived Usefulness (PUSE)			5.225	1.012	0.912	0.721
PUSE1	0.881	0.299				
PUSE2	0.896	0.302				
PUSE3	0.777	0.271				
PUSE4	0.838	0.305				
Satisfaction (SATIS)			4.960	1.068	0.955	0.841
SATIS1	0.925	0.274				
SATIS2	0.953	0.294				
SATIS3	0.938	0.269				
SATIS4	0.848	0.252				

Convergent validity was assessed using average variance extracted (AVE); these ranged from 0.710 to 0.887 (Table 1) exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.50 (Hair et al., 2022). A further test of convergent validity involves examining the factor loadings – when these are high (above 0.70) and have a narrow range, such as 0.7–0.9, this gives greater confidence regarding convergent validity (Chin, 2010). All indicators returned factor

loadings ranging from 0.762 to 0.959 (at significance $p \leq 0.001$) exhibiting both high average loadings and a narrow range for each construct, satisfying this test (Table 1).

For discriminant validity, the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations was evaluated; this is considered more reliable than traditional methods such as the Fornell-Larcker criterion when indicator loadings vary only slightly (i.e. between 0.60 and 0.80) (Hair et al., 2022; Henseler et al., 2015). The HTMT ratio compares the mean value of item correlations to the mean of the average correlations of the items measuring the same construct. A low value (below 0.85) suggests discriminant validity. The significance of the HTMT values can also be assessed using bootstrapping; where this is below 0.85 for the upper bound of 97.5 per cent confidence interval, this signals adequate discriminant validity. The results (Table 2) show the ratio was below 0.85 for all constructs, and below 0.85 at the 97.5 per cent confidence interval, suggesting adequate discriminant validity.

Consistent with prior research (Maynard et al., 2012; Ro & Chen, 2011; Sarangan et al., 2025), empowerment was modelled as a second-order formative construct with four first-order reflective factors: meaningfulness, competence, impact, and self-determination. To determine the reliability and validity of the formative model, indicator weights and loadings, and collinearity were assessed (Table 3). Indicator weights signal the relative importance of the item, while loadings indicate its absolute importance to the construct, irrespective of the presence of the other indicators (Hair et al., 2022). Both assessments are important and indicate that even if an item is relatively low in its contribution to a construct its absolute importance may still be significant.

The results showed that indicator weights ranged from 0.164 to 0.441; all were significant at $p \leq 0.001$, except meaningfulness ($p = 0.054$). Factor loadings ranged from 0.656 to 0.844, and above recommended threshold of 0.50 (Hair et al., 2022). Relative to other indicators, the formative weight of meaningfulness was marginally significant (0.164, $p = 0.054$), with a loading of 0.787. This indicates that meaningfulness makes a modest unique contribution to empowerment, while remaining important in absolute terms (Hair et al., 2022). Meaningfulness was therefore retained.

Table 3. Empowerment – loadings, weights, VIF.

	Loadings	Weights	VIF
Competence	0.656	0.311	1.230
Impact	0.844	0.441	2.127
Meaningfulness	0.787	0.164	2.362
Self-Determination	0.806	0.365	1.662

Table 2. Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations.

	IC	AQ	SC	IF	RC	RR	COMP	IMP	MEAN	SED	PUSE
IC	-										
AQ	0.670										
SC	0.349	0.644									
IF	0.369	0.458	0.441								
RC	0.547	0.417	0.417	0.319							
RR	0.370	0.317	0.292	0.352	0.432						
COMP	0.402	0.354	0.216	0.187	0.331	0.356					
IMP	0.588	0.516	0.319	0.261	0.419	0.424	0.364				
MEAN	0.611	0.501	0.331	0.252	0.434	0.344	0.344	0.776			
SED	0.543	0.433	0.317	0.145	0.455	0.413	0.446	0.534	0.634		
PUSE	0.735	0.622	0.392	0.295	0.496	0.511	0.452	0.756	0.714	0.609	
SATIS	0.661	0.619	0.448	0.301	0.483	0.447	0.502	0.582	0.536	0.562	0.687

Key: AQ = Argument Quality; IC = Information Consistency; SC = Source Credibility; IF = Information Framing; RC = Recommendation Consistency; RR = Recommendation Rating; COMP = Competence; IMP = Impact; MEAN = Meaningfulness; SED = Self-Determination; PUSE = Perceived Usefulness; SATIS = Satisfaction.

Second, collinearity was assessed (Hair et al., 2022); here, a VIF value below 3 is desirable. VIF values ranged from 1.230 to 2.362, suggesting collinearity was not an issue. The results confirmed the importance of all four dimensions for traveller empowerment (Maynard et al., 2012; Sarangan et al., 2025; Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990).

Structural model

For the structural model, R-squared (R^2) values (i.e. explained variances) and the path coefficients (i.e. loadings and significance) were evaluated. R^2 values represent the amount of variance explained by the independent variables and indicate how well the data supports the research model (Chin, 2010). R^2 values of approximately 0.67 are considered substantial, values around 0.33 are average, and values of 0.19 are considered weak (Chin, 2010).

The model (Figure 2) explained 0.487 of the variance for empowerment. Two dimensions of informational social influence, that is, information consistency (H1, $\beta = 0.348$, $p \leq 0.001$) and argument quality (H2, $\beta = 0.193$, $p \leq 0.01$) and both dimensions of normative social influence, recommendation consistency (H5, $\beta = 0.153$, $p \leq 0.01$) and recommendation rating (H6, $\beta = 0.255$, $p \leq 0.001$), were significant, supporting hypotheses H1, H2, H5 and H6. Source credibility (H3, $\beta = 0.038$) and information framing (H4, $\beta = -0.073$) were not significant.

Empowerment had a significant impact on satisfaction (H7, $\beta = 0.435$, $p \leq 0.001$) supporting hypothesis H7. Together with perceived usefulness ($\beta = 0.303$, $p \leq 0.001$) these variables explained 0.473 of the variance in satisfaction. To determine the relative contribution of empowerment and perceived usefulness to satisfaction, the change is R-squared was examined, using effect size (f^2). Effect sizes of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 signal whether a predictor has a small, medium, or large effect on a dependent variable (Chin, 2010, p. 675). When perceived usefulness is excluded, $f^2 = 0.081$, signalling a small effect. On the other hand, when

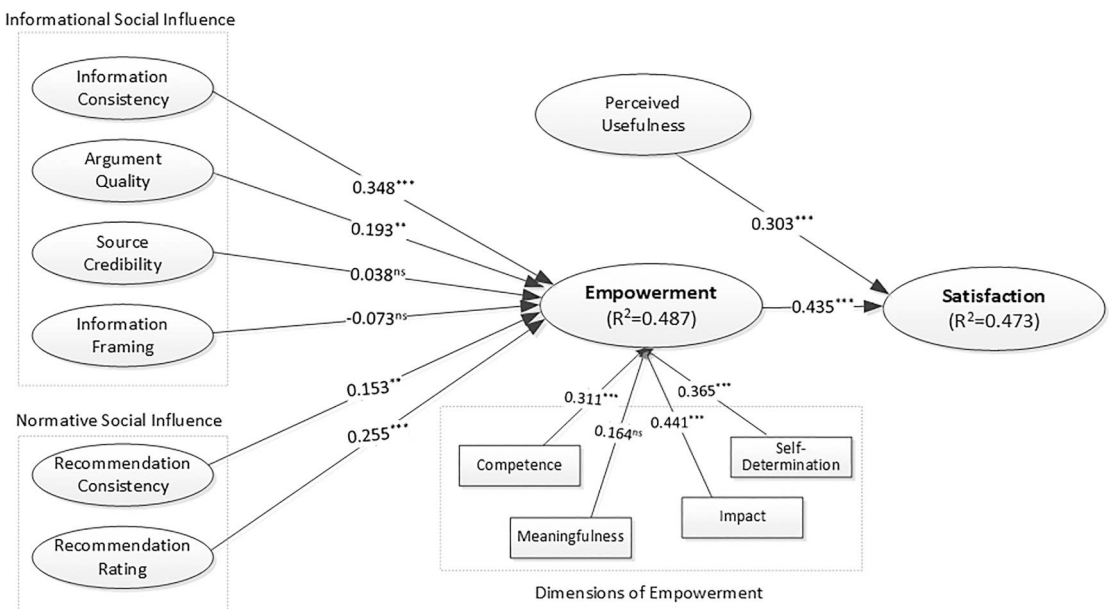


Figure 2. The results.

empowerment is excluded, $f^2 = 0.167$, confirming the greater importance of empowerment, which had a moderate effect on satisfaction.

Competitive model and mediation analysis.

To assess the robustness of the main model and determine whether empowerment is an important mechanism through which OTR attributes influence satisfaction, a competitive model was estimated in which the direct effects of the informational and normative attributes on satisfaction were assessed. Both empowerment and perceived usefulness (as a control variable) were retained. This evaluation also allowed the direct effects to be distinguished from the indirect effects. The bootstrap sampling procedure was used, with 2000 resamples, and set at a 95% confidence interval.

The results (Table 4) show that empowerment remained significantly associated with satisfaction with OTR use ($\beta = 0.294$, $p \leq 0.001$). For the informational attributes, information consistency ($\beta = 0.170$, $p \leq 0.01$) and argument quality ($\beta = 0.137$, $p \leq 0.05$) both had a significant direct effect on satisfaction, while source credibility ($\beta = 0.103$) and information framing ($\beta = -0.021$) were not significant. For normative social influence, neither recommendation consistency ($\beta = 0.047$) nor recommendation rating ($\beta = 0.084$) had a significant direct effect on satisfaction. The influence of perceived usefulness on satisfaction, though significant, became marginal ($\beta = 0.140$, $p = 0.049$). The overall model explained 0.543 of the variance observed for satisfaction.

Bootstrapping was also used to assess the indirect effects of the informational and social attributes through empowerment on satisfaction. The results (Table 4) suggest complementary partial mediation for information consistency ($\beta = 0.102$, $p \leq 0.01$) and argument quality ($\beta = 0.057$, $p \leq 0.05$) as both their direct and indirect effects were significant (Hair et al., 2022). By contrast, recommendation consistency ($\beta = 0.045$, $p \leq 0.05$) and recommendation rating ($\beta = 0.075$, $p \leq 0.01$) had only an indirect effect on satisfaction through empowerment. Neither recommendation consistency nor recommendation rating had a significant direct effect on satisfaction, signalling an indirect mediation such that empowerment mediated the effect of the normative influences on satisfaction.

Discussion

The role of online reviews in empowering decision-making has received little attention, despite their importance for traveller autonomy. Drawing on Dual-Process Theory and Psychological Empowerment Theory, this study provides insights into informational and normative attributes through which OTRs shape travellers' sense of empowerment and its impact on traveller satisfaction. Collectively,

Table 4. Competitive model results: direct effects and mediation analysis.

		Indirect effects through empowerment		
Hypotheses	Direct Effects β (*p*)	β (*p*)	95% Confidence Interval (with bias correction)	Mediation
Information Consistency → Satisfaction	0.170 (0.003)	0.102 (0.005)	[0.037, 0.173]	Partial
Argument Quality → Satisfaction	0.137 (0.022)	0.057 (0.029)	[0.016, 0.113]	Partial
Source Credibility → Satisfaction	0.103 (0.059)	0.011 (0.570)	[−0.025, 0.054]	No
Information Framing → Satisfaction	−0.021 (0.683)	−0.022 (0.213)	[−0.062, 0.009]	No
Recommendation Consistency → Satisfaction	0.047 (0.448)	0.045 (0.035)	[0.013, 0.097]	Full
Recommendation Rating → Satisfaction	0.084 (0.168)	0.075 (0.004)	[0.028, 0.13]	Full
Empowerment → Satisfaction	0.294 (0.000)	-	-	-
Perceived usefulness → Satisfaction	0.140 (0.049)	-	-	-

the findings indicate that empowerment is influenced not only by the informational quality of online reviews but also by normative validation (such as ratings and recommendation consistency) present in review environments. This highlights the role of user-generated signals in bolstering confidence and autonomy in travel planning.

The comparatively smaller contribution of meaningfulness to empowerment may reflect the task-oriented nature of travel planning such that competence, control and perceived impact are more directly associated with making travel plans than with their intrinsic caring about a task (Sarangan et al., 2025; Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). This is, however, a cautious interpretation, as the analysis does not show whether travellers prioritised factors such as control and competence over the meaningfulness of travel planning tasks.

The results show that both informational and normative attributes of OTRs enhance perceived empowerment in travel planning. Information consistency had the strongest effect, confirming its role as a key predictor of people's use of information from online communities (Zhang & Watts, 2003). When OTRs align with travellers' existing beliefs (Mumuni et al., 2020), this reduces uncertainty and increases their sense of empowerment. They are also more likely to use OTRs that are seen as persuasive and supported by sufficient qualitative reasoning (argument quality), which further enhance empowerment (Harrison et al., 2006).

The significance of normative factors through recommendation rating and recommendation consistency highlights the impact of the online community on individuals' sense of empowerment in decision-making. This aligns with research that suggests when recommendations are consistent and reviews are rated, this provides a mechanism that can instil greater confidence in the quality of the review and its usefulness for travel planning (Biswas et al., 2022; Chong et al., 2018; Liu & Park, 2015).

The results of the competitive analysis further show that information consistency and argument quality had both a direct effect on satisfaction and an indirect effect through empowerment, suggesting that their impact operated through complementary pathways. This suggests that when information is consistent and persuasive, this can directly improve travellers' satisfaction with OTRs while also enhancing their confidence and perceived control in travel planning. The results show that empowerment plays an important role in explaining the relationship between OTR attributes and satisfaction, when other pathways are accounted for.

In contrast for normative attributes, neither recommendation consistency nor recommendation rating had a significant effect on satisfaction, though both had indirect effects through empowerment. This suggests that validation from others does not directly enhance satisfaction with OTRs. Rather, consistency among reviewers together with positive evaluations of the reviews can help reassure travellers about the information they are considering, which in turn strengthens their confidence and independence in making travel decisions. Satisfaction with OTRs therefore increases when these attributes lead to a greater sense of empowerment.

The results show that source credibility and information framing were not significantly associated with perceived empowerment, nor were there significant direct effects on satisfaction. Although unexpected, prior research has shown mixed results regarding their influence when evaluating the quality of OTRs (Qahri-Saremi & Montazemi, 2019; Sparks & Browning, 2011). One explanation is that, despite efforts to ensure reviews are posted by actual consumers, in OTR contexts where reviewers are unknown or only partially identifiable, travellers may find it difficult to assess reviewer credibility. They may instead rely on the social cues such

as recommendation consistency and recommendation ratings, which is consistent with the significant findings observed for both normative attributes (Kusumasondjaja et al., 2012; Pooja & Upadhyaya, 2024). The marginal direct relationship of source credibility on satisfaction (Table 4) nevertheless suggests that source credibility may still contribute to travellers' general satisfaction with OTR use even though there is no significant effect on empowerment. Mechanisms such as source ratings, the number of reviews submitted, or reviewer profiles may help enhance perceived credibility (Filieri et al., 2018; Mumuni et al., 2020).

Similarly, the results also showed that information framing was not associated with empowerment or satisfaction. This suggests that whether reviews are presented positively or negatively framed may not significantly influence the evaluations (Qahri-Saremi & Montazemi, 2019) and be less important than whether a review is persuasive, consistent or supported by other reviewers. Other studies suggest that under certain conditions, information framing may shape OTR evaluations (Kusumasondjaja et al., 2012; Pooja & Upadhyaya, 2024). The impact may also be moderated by factors like recency and emotional intensity of the review (Sparks & Browning, 2011; Su et al., 2022). Still other studies suggest a more nuanced relationship; while positively framed reviews often lead to favourable evaluations, negatively framed reviews may carry more weight, resulting in less favourable evaluations (Sparks & Browning, 2011). As such framing may influence travellers' evaluations of OTRs differently under certain conditions. Regardless, the findings suggest that while information framing may remain relevant, its impact is not enough to increase a traveller's sense of empowerment in making travel decisions.

Implications for theory

A key objective of this research is to extend current understanding of how online reviews help to empower individuals in decision-making. This study examines traveller empowerment as an important outcome of engaging with OTRs in the travel planning process and contributes to the empowerment literature in several ways.

First, the study provides insights into informational and normative attributes of OTRs that travellers pay attention to when they evaluate information. It extends the application of Deutsch and Gerard's (1955) Dual-Process Theory, integrating it with Psychological Empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995) to examine the relationship between traveller empowerment and informational and normative factors and their relative importance. Together, our findings address a long-standing gap in the empowerment literature (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017; Maynard et al., 2012) and is a key step in understanding the empowering process for travel consumers in the online context.

The mediation analysis further clarifies how Dual-Process Theory and Psychological Empowerment Theory complement each other. This study showed that OTR attributes operated differently in relation to satisfaction with OTR use. Information consistency and argument quality had direct relationships with satisfaction and indirect relationships through empowerment. This suggests that consistency and persuasiveness of OTRs can be influential through their direct effect on decision-making and in strengthening individuals' confidence and sense of control in travel planning (Kang et al., 2020; Liang et al., 2021; Qahri-Saremi & Montazemi, 2019). In contrast, recommendation consistency and recommendation rating influenced satisfaction through empowerment but not directly. Collectively, these findings extend the application of Dual-Process Theory by suggesting that informational and normative social factors may differ in the pathways through which they influence outcomes, with normative attributes doing so through their impact on traveller confidence and control over the travel planning process.

The findings also extend the OTR literature by demonstrating that the influence of review characteristics goes beyond traditional outcomes such as perceived usefulness or information adoption (Filieri et al., 2018). While previous studies have primarily examined how review attributes help travellers evaluate alternatives, the present results suggest that these informational environments also shape travellers' psychological experience of decision-making. Specifically, it highlights the importance of certain informational and normative cues for enhancing travellers' sense of competence and autonomy during travel planning. In the competitive model, empowerment also remained significantly associated with satisfaction; perceived usefulness became marginal. This reinforces the importance of distinguishing whether OTRs are seen as useful from whether they enable travellers to feel confident and in control of their travel decisions. Taken together, the study highlights traveller empowerment as a distinct outcome of engaging with OTRs, providing a complementary perspective to technology-centric models and usefulness-focused research (Biswas et al., 2022; Filieri et al., 2018; Ranga et al., 2024; Werner et al., 2022).

Importantly, for Psychological Empowerment Theory, the findings identify empowerment as a mechanism through which attributes of the informational environment (i.e. OTRs in this case) impact individuals' evaluations of that context. This goes beyond whether travellers view OTRs primarily as useful sources of information (Filieri et al., 2018; Ranga et al., 2024) to understanding how online reviews can help travellers to feel empowered to make travel plans.

The concept of traveller empowerment is particularly relevant in tourism contexts because travel decisions are typically characterised by high uncertainty experiential consumption, and limited opportunities for pre-purchase evaluation. In such environments, travellers often rely heavily on user-generated information to reduce uncertainty and guide decision-making (Wu et al., 2026). The findings suggest that OTRs not only provide useful information but may also enhance travellers' confidence and perceived autonomy in navigating their travel choices. The study therefore contributes to growing discourse on traveller empowerment (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017; Assaker et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2025; Sarangan et al., 2025), which has so far offered limited insights into specific factors shaping traveller empowerment. The findings also indicate that empowerment is a key determinant of traveller satisfaction, adding to prior research on platform use (Werner et al., 2022). Altogether, the study provides insights into the "empowered traveller" and positioning of empowerment as an important factor for understanding OTR usage.

Implications for practice

The study has implications for practice. For travel service providers (TSPs), traveller empowerment presents significant challenges as more persons take charge of their travel, potentially disintermediating the travel service providers as providers of travel advice, information and other services, and shifting power to the travel consumer and business to online booking platforms. TSPs therefore face a challenging context in reconciling the demand for online access to quality information including quality reviews, with potential losses due to increased independence in the travel planning process, and ease with which travel consumers can change those from whom they purchase. To stem loss of business and reduce the risks, travel service providers need to develop interfaces, processes and reward systems that encourage quality reviews and ensure the information needs of the travel consumer are supported in ways that are complementary for the business. For example, fostering consumer loyalty while enabling TSPs to improve operational efficiencies (e.g. by passing on low-value information-seeking tasks) can enable

them to focus on value-adding tasks in the travel planning process that can attract and retain the travel consumer.

In demonstrating that travellers who feel empowered by the information they receive from OTRs are more satisfied with them, the study underscores the importance of investing in OTR platforms to create opportunities that enhance value for the TSP and the travel consumer. Recent advances in AI reinforce this need, as travellers increasingly use AI tools for trip planning (Arora et al., 2025), such as tools provided by platforms like Booking.com (2025), that create review summaries and provide personalised review feeds to help travellers make decisions more efficiently. It is therefore important that online platforms and TSPs leverage OTRs in providing tools that prioritise key attributes like argument quality, information consistency, and review ratings when AI curates, aggregates, and synthesises review content to support decision-making.

For review platforms, the findings also suggest that interface design should help travellers to validate review information rather than simply provide more information. Platforms could develop mechanisms that make consistency across reviews more visible through summaries that show where reviewers converge or diverge on recurring themes or issues, such as information about a hotel, its location, and overall quality, while maintaining access to the original reviews (Cai et al., 2026). Recommendation ratings can similarly help travellers identify reviews that others evaluate as helpful. Flagging reviews that are particularly substantive can also point travellers to information that is consistent and persuasive. Mechanisms that can draw on OTRs alongside individual and group preferences and personalise the information feed may also help travellers reduce information overload, identify relevant information, and enhance their overall control in making travel decisions (Mumuni et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2026). Where the OTR source is identifiable or even partially so, this should be visible to the reader. For travel service providers, responses to negative reviews should aim to reduce uncertainty by explaining what occurred, what has changed, and what future travellers can expect. This may support travellers' perceived control when handling conflicting or adverse information. This is also consistent with studies which show that personalised responses to negative reviews can have a strong empowering effect for customers, and that similar effects may extend to prospective guests reading the exchange (Shin et al., 2020).

Finally, the results show OTRs can enhance satisfaction both directly and indirectly through empowerment via access to quality information; empowerment, in turn, increases satisfaction. This suggests that satisfied users are likely to return to that TSP or platform for further information, and when products align, this can increase sales, loyalty, and customer engagement (Ürgüplü & Hüseyinoğlu, 2021) and a win-win for TSPs and the travel consumer.

Limitations and future research

This study examines the role of OTRs in empowering travellers. Even so, there are some limitations. First, the study focused on budget travellers (like backpackers) with data collected from New Zealand. Budget tourists are a unique group of tourists; most are young, tend to stay in budget accommodation like hostels (Hostelworld, 2019), and rely on reviews when booking travel. Their reliance on reviews and tendency towards independent travel planning may differ when compared to other groups such as business travellers , families, and ethnic minority tourists, or across geographies (Booking.com, 2025; Kim et al., 2025; Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995), suggesting a need to examine empowerment for other groups. Further, with a sample size of 268 respondents, though adequate for the analyses, generalisability of the findings beyond the young

budget travellers' segment should be approached with caution.

Future research should consider replicating the study with a larger or more diversified sample and other geographical settings. It can also provide further insights by extending the model to new platforms and tools like OpenAI's ChatGPT and Intelligent Agents (Arora et al., 2025; Booking.com, 2025; Choi et al., 2024), accommodation and destination decisions, or other settings where online reviews may have an empowering role such as purchasing decisions, consumer co-creation, and employee empowerment. The impact of AI-generated review summaries should also be considered. Research suggests benefits of information efficiency as well as concerns about completeness and bias of AI-generated review summaries. Such tools may therefore strengthen empowerment by reducing the search effort for information, but may also weaken empowerment by masking disagreement, source cues, or access to alternative views (Cai et al., 2026; Wang et al., 2026).

Second, as a survey-based study, all data was collected at once. This limits the depth of insights provided. To address this, future research may examine longitudinal effects to understand better the causal relationships implied in empowerment theory (Maynard et al., 2012; Sarangan et al., 2025; Spreitzer, 2008). Interviews may provide further insights into linkages among the constructs and uncover other relationships that extend the findings.

Third, the model explained 0.487 of the variance observed for empowerment, suggesting other influences. These may include review novelty or comprehensiveness, which may increase feelings of empowerment, while information overload and decision-making difficulty may lower empowerment (Broniarczyk & Griffin, 2014; Chong et al., 2018; Shin et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). Moreover, to advance the empowerment literature further, future research should examine other outcomes such as online reputation management, positive eWOM, trust, and customer value (Baka, 2016; Ma et al., 2021; Shin et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018).

Conclusion

In this study we set out to understand the role of OTRs in enabling travellers to have greater independence in the travel planning process. Drawing on Dual-Process Theory and Psychological Empowerment, the findings show that information consistency and argument quality, together with normative cues, recommendation consistency, and recommendation rating, are collectively associated with greater feelings of empowerment when planning travel. The mediation analysis further shows that consistent and persuasive information contribute to satisfaction both directly and indirectly through empowerment, whereas the effect of recommendation consistency and recommendation ratings operates primarily through empowerment. This underscores the importance of OTRs by demonstrating that they not only help travellers evaluate travel options but also that aspects of the review environment (e.g. by providing recommendation ratings) can further strengthen travellers' confidence and perceived control over their own travel decisions. The findings complement existing research on review usefulness by highlighting the role of OTRs in supporting traveller autonomy and confidence in decision-making. By identifying empowerment as an important mechanism that connects OTR attributes with satisfaction, the findings also provide insights into how online information can support independent travel planning, underscoring the importance of investing in online review forums.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Annette M. Mills:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft,

Writing – review & editing; **Luiz Mendes-Filho:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Felix B. Tan:** Conceptualization, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

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

AI tools were used for a limited way to provide editorial support such as language editing and clarity improvements. All intellectual contributions, analysis, and interpretation were conducted by the authors, who take full responsibility for the manuscript's content.

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