

The Impact of Electronic Word-Of-Mouth (EWOM) on Ecotourism Destination Choice

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ABSTRACT

Electronic word-of-mouth, or eWOM, has become a significant influence on how tourists make decisions, especially in the rapidly expanding ecotourism industry. Ecotourism research is still scattered and underdeveloped, despite the fact that many studies have looked at eWOM in general tourism contexts. By synthesizing existing literature and incorporating theoretical viewpoints, such as Source Credibility Theory, the Information Adoption Model, the Theory of Planned Behavior, and Destination Image Theory, this conceptual paper fills this gap and creates a comprehensive framework that explains how eWOM affects ecotourism destination choice. The framework identifies the following important factors: moderators (eco-consciousness, generational differences, and previous travel experience), mediators (destination image, trust in sustainability practices, and memorable tourist experiences), and antecedents (eWOM credibility, quality, and valence). Future empirical testing will be guided by the hypotheses put forth. This report advances theoretical knowledge, laying the groundwork for further research and useful advice for ecotourism destination marketers looking to use eWOM to promote sustainable travel experiences.

Keywords— electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), ecotourism, destination choice, conceptual framework, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

One of the most powerful communication channels in modern tourism is electronic word-of-mouth, or eWOM. Through internet platforms like TripAdvisor, Booking.com, and social media networks, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) allows tourists to instantly and internationally share information, unlike conventional word-of-mouth, which is constrained by geography and social ties [1]. Since eWOM captures the real experiences of other travelers, tourists frequently view it as more reliable than marketer-generated content [2]; [3]. Especially when travelers are choosing places they have never been to before, this credibility lowers risk and uncertainty.

The significance of eWOM is considerably greater in the context of ecotourism. According to [4]; ecotourism places a strong emphasis on sustainability, authenticity, and community involvement—qualities that are frequently intangible and challenging to assess in advance. Therefore, sincere internet reviews play a crucial role in influencing opinions about whether a place actually practices environmental stewardship. Beyond initial decision-making, eWOM promotes loyalty and helps create memorable tourist experiences (MTEs). Long-term competitiveness of ecotourism sites was strengthened by research on mangrove ecotourism in Indonesia, which showed that memorable experiences shared online not only drew new tourists but also increased inclinations to return [5].

Furthermore, eWOM offers insightful information about the attitudes and views of tourists. According to a sentiment analysis of internet evaluations of Malaysian ecotourism clusters, travelers usually emphasize themes like adventure, relaxation, nature, culture, and services [6]. Even though the majority of reviews were favorable, both neutral and negative comments pointed out areas that needed work, highlighting how crucial it is to keep an eye on eWOM in order to maintain destination quality [6].

Last but not least, the increasing impact of Gen Z tourists emphasizes the strategic importance of eWOM for

ecotourism. According to recent studies, internet evaluations and reputational cues have a significant influence on Gen Z decision-making habits, especially when sustainability principles are at play [7]. This suggests that when selecting eco-friendly places, younger tourists—who will account for the majority of future tourism markets—are particularly dependent on eWOM [7].

All things considered, eWOM is essential to ecotourism because it lowers uncertainty, builds trust, boosts environmental credibility, and promotes long-term competitiveness through destination image management and repeat business. eWOM will continue to be a vital tool for ecotourism locations in luring and keeping eco-aware tourists as the need for responsible travel rises.

Research Problem

Research specifically examining the role of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in ecotourism destination choice is still scarce, despite the fact that its impact on consumer decision-making has been thoroughly examined in the larger tourism and hospitality literature [1]; [2]; [3]. The majority of earlier research has been on general tourist, lodging, and hospitality settings, where convenience and service quality are key determinants of choice. However, compared to mainstream tourism, ecotourism offers unique incentives like sustainability, authenticity, and community involvement [4].

By investigating the effects of eWOM on ecotourism in particular contexts, several researches have started to close this gap [8]; [5]; [7]. There is currently no cohesive conceptual framework that synthesizes the ways in which eWOM effects destination image, perceived legitimacy, unforgettable tourist experiences, and ultimately, the choice of ecotourism location, and the findings are fragmented. Furthermore, little is known about the role of emerging consumer groups in ecotourism, such as Generation Z, who place a high value on sustainability and mostly rely on internet evaluations [7].

Both theoretical development and useful tactics for ecotourism operators and policymakers are constrained by this lack of comprehensive understanding. Thus, it is imperative to understand the ways in which eWOM influences the selection of ecotourism destinations, taking into account both established theories and current empirical data.

Research Objective

This conceptual paper's main goal is to create a conceptual framework that clarifies how eWOM influences travelers' decisions about ecotourism destinations. This paper's specific objectives are to:

1. Compile the body of research on eWOM and traveler decision-making, paying special emphasis to ecotourism contexts.
2. Determine the main eWOM factors that influence the perceptions of ecotourism destinations and travelers, such as perceived destination image, credibility of sustainable claims and memorable meaningful experience.
3. Analyze how eWOM affects the behavioral intentions of tourists, such as their choice of destination, level of satisfaction, and intention to return.

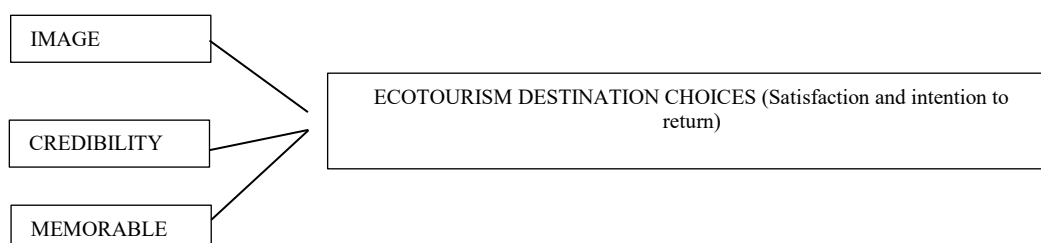


Fig. 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework

LITERATURE REVIEW

With an emphasis on ecotourism destination selection, this chapter examines the theoretical and empirical research pertinent to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and its function in travel decision-making. First, we define eWOM and provide an overview of the basic studies on its impact on the travel and hotel industries. The literature that connects eWOM to behavioral goals, credibility, memorable travel experiences, and destination image is then reviewed.

According to [1], electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is any statement—whether favorable or unfavorable—that prospective, current, or past customers make about a business or product online. eWOM is distinguished from traditional WOM by its worldwide reach, permanence, potential author anonymity, and machine-readable formats that facilitate extensive analysis [1]; [9]. In order to explain how online peer information influences attitudes and intentions, eWOM research frequently uses information adoption models, source credibility theory, social proof theory, and the theory of planned behavior [9]; [7]; [16].

Numerous studies have demonstrated that eWOM has a major impact on traveler decisions and hospitality outcomes. According to early, frequently referenced research, consumers tend to trust user-generated content more than information from marketers, which lowers perceived risk and enhances the likelihood that they would make a reservation or visit [2]; [3]. The consistent effects of eWOM across lodging, dining establishments, and attractions are further supported by meta-analyses and literature reviews [9]. Methodologically, these seminal investigations quantify valence, volume, and reviewer credibility as important result variables using surveys, trials, and archival analyses of review platforms [15].

According to [9]; [4], ecotourism is distinct from typical tourism in terms of its evaluative criteria (such as authenticity and sustainable practices), perceived risk, and objectives (such as conservation, learning, and community benefit). As a result, general conclusions about eWOM in the hospitality industry could not apply entirely to ecotourism settings. According to recent empirical research, ecotourism visitors evaluate a destination's true sustainability practices and community effect using online reviews—aspects that are not readily apparent from promotional materials [8]; [6]. As a result, eWOM in ecotourism frequently serves as a credibility filter: reviewers' accounts of conservation efforts, community involvement, and environmental stewardship have a direct impact on the trust and destination preference of potential tourists [12].

Researchers have discovered a number of variables that connect eWOM to traveler preference:

1. Perceived destination image: eWOM influences the image's emotive (attractiveness, feelings) and cognitive (attributes, facilities) components. Positive stories about conservation and natural beauty improve the perception of the location and raise the likelihood that it will be chosen [3]; [10].
2. Credibility of sustainability claims: Ecotourism necessitates confidence that providers are not "greenwashing." Perceived trust is increased and perceived ethical risk is decreased when reviews highlight genuine conservation efforts and community benefits [11]; [12].
3. In addition to drawing first-time visitors, user-generated reports of meaningful experiences (learning, emotional connection with nature) also predict the intention to return and encourage positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) sharing, thereby generating a positive feedback loop [5]; [13].

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has changed from simple text reviews to complicated, multi-modal, and algorithmically mediated information flows because there are so many digital communication platforms. First, influencer marketing has become a significant factor in shaping traveler behavior. Pourazad [17] showed that followers' destination selections are greatly influenced by the intimacy and credibility of influencers. Similarly, Luo [18] discovered that the association between visit intention and influencer content is mediated by perceived closeness and influencer expertise. Influencers who uphold sustainable principles can serve as reliable "digital ambassadors" in the ecotourism space, influencing followers' environmentally conscious opinions about travel locations.

Second, the creation and consumption of eWOM is being redefined by visual storytelling, especially through short-form films (like TikTok and Instagram Reels). Visual signals have a considerable impact on customers' behavioral intentions, acting through perceived usefulness and believability of the material, according to Filieri et al. [19]. This was furthered by Gan et al. [20], who demonstrated how verbal and visual framing interact to influence travel intentions, emphasizing the significance of vividness and story structure. By portraying immersive and meaningful experiences, visual storytelling can increase the attraction of sustainable destinations for ecotourism, which places a strong emphasis on natural settings and sensory experiences.

Third, algorithmic recommendation systems in platform such as TikTok and Instagram control how consumers are exposed to eWOM content. Zhang and Wang [21] shown that the strength of algorithmic recommendations increases travelers' behavioral intentions by increasing exposure to short movies about the destination. Tucker [22] contended that algorithmic recommendations might supplement or replace interpersonal trust, making platform-level elements important contextual moderators in consumer decision-making models. For ecotourism, algorithms may selectively boost visually appealing content, indirectly impacting opinions of sustainability and destination image.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a conceptual research methodology to create a comprehensive framework that incorporates modern digital communication trends—influencer marketing, visual storytelling, and algorithmic recommendation systems—into existing eWOM models for ecotourism destination selection. The aims of this paper is to present the conceptual framework's methodical development, talk about the underlying theories, and describe the hypothesis-forming process. Conceptual research is crucial for developing theories and directing upcoming empirical investigations, particularly in fields with little empirical study, like ecotourism and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) [14].

Research Design

Instead of focusing on direct empirical study, this paper uses a conceptual research approach that prioritizes theoretical synthesis and a comprehensive literature review.

Building models, combining disparate study findings and offering guidance for upcoming empirical investigations are all depend on conceptual paper.

To identify important characteristics and correlations, this study critically evaluated pertinent literature on eWOM, tourism, and ecotourism.

Theoretical Foundations

The following theoretical stances serve as the foundation for the suggested conceptual framework:

1. Source Credibility Theory: explains why eWOM sources' competence and dependability are important.
2. The Information Adoption Model explains how people use internet information to inform their decision
3. The Theory of Planned Behavior sheds light on how behavioral intentions are influenced by attitudes and perceived behavioral control.
4. The theory of destination image describes how perceptions and image impact the choice of destination.

Development Of Conceptual Framework

The following procedure was used to create the conceptual framework:

1. A thorough analysis of the literature on eWOM in ecotourism and tourism.

2. Consistent antecedents including the perceived image of the place, the veracity of sustainable claims, and a memorable, impactful experience are identified.
3. Outcomes like eWOM sharing, intention to return, and ecotourism location choice are defined.

By providing a comprehensive model of eWOM's function in ecotourism, this paradigm goes beyond the disjointed previous research.

Hypotheses Development

Theoretical foundations and earlier empirical data serve as the foundation for the hypothesis. For instance, Source Credibility Theory supports the expectation that eWOM credibility will favorably affect the perceived destination image. Similar to the role of trust in the Information Adoption Model, it is suggested that trust in sustainability practices mediates the relationship between eWOM quality and destination choice. As a result, every proposition presented in Chapter 2 has theoretical support.

Proposed Analytical Approach (For Future Empirical Testing)

Despite being conceptual, this work offers recommendations for empirical testing in further studies such as internet surveys of ecotourists, content analysis of internet reviews, and experimental investigations are a few possible methods for gathering data. Besides, the use of proven measuring scales for factors including trust, destination image, information quality, eWOM credibility, and memorable travel experiences can also be used. Direct, mediating, and moderating effects are tested using structural equation modeling (SEM), either PLS-SEM or CB-SEM. This guarantees that the conceptual framework is testable empirically in addition to being theoretically sound.

CONCLUSION

A framework for understanding the influence of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on the selection of ecotourism destinations has been created in this conceptual study. The framework identifies important antecedents that influence ecotourism destination choices by combining pertinent literature and theories like the Information Adoption Model, the Theory of Planned Behavior, Source Credibility Theory, and Destination Image Theory. Future empirical research that seeks to validate and expand this paradigm is supposed to be guided by the hypotheses that have been put out.

The study offers a number of theoretical insights. First, it expands the study of eWOM into the comparatively unexplored field of ecotourism. Second, it combines several theories to provide a comprehensive view of how online communication influences decisions about environmentally friendly travel. Third, it highlights how crucial contextual elements like environmental consciousness and past travel experience are in reducing the impact of eWOM.

Practically speaking, this study offers useful information to policymakers, destination managers, and ecotourism marketers. Designing more successful digital marketing strategies, fostering positive eWOM that draws eco-aware visitors, and establishing trust in sustainable practices can all be facilitated by an understanding of how travelers assess online information.

However, the study's conceptual character limits it. Its structure is based on theoretical integration and secondary sources, and it excludes the collecting of empirical data. Future studies should take into account on cross-cultural contexts and new digital platforms while experimentally testing the suggested hypotheses through techniques like surveys, experiments, or content analysis.

This study concludes by highlighting the critical role that eWOM plays in influencing the selection of ecotourism destinations. It supports scholarly research as well as the real-world growth of sustainable tourism by providing a conceptual framework and research agenda.

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