

**IMPACT OF ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH (eWOM) ON
INTERNATIONAL TOURISM RELATED DECISION-MAKING: A
STUDY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO COIMBATORE CITY**

THESIS

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CHAPTER V
FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

CHAPTER 5

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The results show that eWOM „message characteristics“, „source characteristics“, and „searchers“ characteristics“ have a significant positive impact on the perceived usefulness, attitude and trust towards eWOM leading to a significant positive impact on the respondents“ travel intentions. The majority of respondents use eWOM content for tour planning, especially at the beginning of their tour. Among the independent constructs, „eWOM quantity“ has a more significant influence on eWOM“s „perceived usefulness“ followed by „homophily“ and „searcher“s intent. Among the composite constructs, „Searchers“ characteristics significantly influence eWOM“s „perceived usefulness.

The mediating constructs „perceived usefulness“, „attitude“, and „trust“ significantly mediate the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable „intention to travel“. Considering the various fit measures, the model can be said to be valid and it perfectly fits the data, i.e., the model is proved to be empirically true. The influence of eWOM on intention to travel is found to be greater for the respondents whose internet usage skills are higher than for those whose internet usage skills are lower. Among the various consumer age groups, the „perceived usefulness“, „attitude“, and „trust“ towards eWOM are found to be significantly higher among Gen Y consumers.

Based on consumers“ education levels, it was found that the „perceived usefulness“, „attitude“, and „trust“ towards eWOM were significantly higher among the post-graduates. There is no significant difference between various occupation groups and area of residence groups with regard to the „perceived usefulness“ and „trust“ towards eWOM. No significant difference could be established between the gender groups concerning the „perceived usefulness“, „attitude“, and „trust“ towards eWOM.

5.1 Summary of the Findings

5.1.1 Demographic Profiles of the Respondents

- Majority of the respondents (31.1%) are between the age group of 40-60 years (Gen X).
- Majority of the respondents (55.1%) are male.
- In terms of education, the majority of the respondents (51.7%) have a Bachelor's degree.
- In terms of occupation, the majority of the respondents (30%) are self-employed/entrepreneurs, followed by professionals employed in private jobs (24.1%).
- In terms of family size, the majority of the respondents (51.3%) have 3-4 members in their families.
- Majority of the respondents (37.6%) have a monthly family income of Rs.60001 to Rs.90000.
- Majority of the respondents (56.4%) are married.
- In terms of residence, the majority of the respondents (46.9%) reside in semi-urban areas.

5.1.2. Travel Behaviour of the Respondents

- The majority of the respondents (35.4%) have travelled internationally 4-6 times in the last five years.
- Majority (44.2%) of the respondents opined that they will definitely go on an international tour in the future.
- When it comes to international tours and travel, the purpose of travel is pleasure/vacation for 15.08% of respondents, followed by adventure (12.3%), recreation and relaxation (12.9%).
- 51.3% of people opined that they always use social media for tour planning, 29.1% occasionally use social media while planning a tour and 2.3% rarely use social media.
- While planning an international tour, 19.05% of respondents said that they read travel-related blogs, 16.3% said they chat with travel experts and previous travellers and 15.7% of respondents watch travel videos online.

- Majority of the respondents always use eWOM at the beginning of the tour planning phase to get ideas (76.7%), 49.8% of the respondents often use eWOM in the middle of the tour planning phase to narrow down choices, 39.1% of respondents always use eWOM at a later stage, to confirm decisions.
- The majority of the respondents always use eWOM to decide “where to stay” (73.6%), and 56.4% of respondents often use eWOM to take decisions on “where to eat? (Restaurants)”. The respondents reported that they always use eWOM to make decisions about what to do, including shopping and other activities (38.1%). These results suggest that eWOM plays a crucial role in guiding travellers in various aspects of their travel planning process.
- The majority of the respondents (12.7%) rely on Tourism websites as their primary format and medium for online reviews. 12.06% of respondents use search engines or portals, 12.5% use virtual communities (for example, Tripadvisor) and 12.4% use online travel agency sites (for example, Expedia).

5.1.3. The impact of eWOM Characteristics (Source, Message, and Searcher’s Characteristics) on its Perceived Usefulness

The study’s findings indicate that eWOM quality, eWOM quantity, source credibility, homophily, Searcher’s Intent, and Level of Involvement all have a positive and significant impact on perceived usefulness. The regression weight of the paths, such as the one between eWOM quality and perceived usefulness ($B=0.799$), eWOM quantity and perceived usefulness ($B=0.971$), source credibility and perceived usefulness ($B=0.876$), homophily and perceived usefulness ($B=0.925$), searchers’ intent and perceived usefulness ($B=0.907$), and level of involvement and perceived usefulness ($B=0.795$) were positive and significant. The eWOM Quantity has a more significant impact on perceived usefulness ($B=0.971$).

The study's findings indicate that message, source, and searcher characteristics all have a positive and significant impact on perceived usefulness. The regression weight of the paths, such as the one between message characteristics and perceived usefulness ($B=0.357$), source characteristics and perceived usefulness ($B=0.456$), and searchers characteristics and perceived usefulness ($B=0.715$) are found to be significant indicating that the message, source and searchers’ characteristics have a significant influence on

eWOM's perceived usefulness among the respondents. The searchers' characteristics have a more significant influence on perceived usefulness ($B=0.715$). All the values are found to be greater than 0.7, indicating a good loading.

The result of the study is in conformity with the previous research exploring this relationship. A study conducted by Lin et al., (2013) found that eWOM quality and quantity have a positive significant effect on purchase intention. According to a study conducted by Wu (2013), homophily has a significant and positive relationship with trust. Senders' expertise and source similarity have a positive correlation with consumer choice, but the relationship is weak (Nirmanee, 2016). The intentions and trustworthiness of searchers play an important role in increasing the overall impact of eWOM. Overall, however, eWOM has a strong positive relationship with consumer choice. The intention of the searcher and the trustworthiness of the message have a strong positive relationship with the consumer's choice of a travel destination.

5.1.4. The Influence of eWOM Perceived Usefulness on Consumers' Attitude and Trust towards eWOM

According to the findings of my study, it was found that perceived usefulness plays a substantial and positive role in shaping both attitude and trust, with strong loadings ($B=0.704$) and ($B=0.776$) respectively. These research findings highlight the significant and positive influence of eWOM's perceived usefulness on trust, as supported by the coefficient ($B=0.776$).

The result of the study is in conformity with the previous research exploring this relationship. According to a study conducted by Gefen et al., (2003) the level of trust and perceived usefulness that eWOM conveys to its users has been found to be a critical factor in shaping their intentions to make a purchase on website. A study conducted by Nechoud et al., (2021) found that the indirect effect of the mediating variable "Perceived Usefulness" was not significant. Additionally, their research revealed that eWOM susceptibility did not have a moderating effect on the relationship between "perceived credibility" and "perceived usefulness." However, the study found that eWOM susceptibility had a significant moderating effect on the "direct" relationship between message credibility and intention to visit a destination.

5.1.5. The Influence of Consumers' Attitude and Trust towards eWOM on the Intention to Travel

The result of my study shows that the consumers' attitude and trust towards eWOM have a positive and significant influence on the intention to travel. The regression weights of the paths, such as the one between attitude towards eWOM and Intention to travel ($B=0.239$), and trust towards eWOM and Intention to Travel ($B=0.312$) are positive and significant. The trust towards eWOM ($B=0.312$) has a more significant influence on the intention to travel.

The result of the study is in conformity with the previous research exploring this relationship. According to Jalilvand et al., (2012), destination image and tourist attitude toward a destination were found to be significantly and positively associated with travel intention. When consumers perceive a message to be trustworthy, they are more likely to choose a particular travel destination. The study conducted by Nirmanee (2016) suggests that trustworthiness is an important factor in the decision-making process of consumers when selecting a travel destination. Therefore, marketers and advertisers need to ensure that their messages are perceived as trustworthy by consumers to influence their destination choices.

5.1.6. The Role of Consumers' Perceived Usefulness of eWOM, Attitude, and Trust in Mediating, the Relationship between the Independent Variables and Travel Intention.

The results of the study show that the mediating constructs „perceived usefulness“, „attitude“, and „trust“ significantly mediate the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable „intention to travel“. The regression weight of the paths, such as the one between perceived usefulness and intention to travel ($B=0.40$), attitude towards eWOM and Intention to travel ($B=0.239$), trust towards eWOM and Intention to Travel ($B=0.312$) are positive and significant. The trust towards eWOM ($B=0.312$) is found to have a more significant influence on perceived usefulness.

The result of the study is in conformity with the previous research exploring this relationship. Gefen et al., (2003) found that perceived usefulness has a significant effect on behavioural intent, as messages that appear useful lead to purchase intent. A study done by Shen et al., (2019), revealed that residents' attitude towards tourism plays a

significant role in mediating the relationship between their perception of the destination's image and their intention to engage in tourism-related activities. Larasetiat& Ali (2019), discovered that trust can mediate perceived usefulness and security with repurchase intention in the online travel agent industry. According to the findings of the study done by Nechoud et al.,(2021), there is a positive and significant mediating relationship of perceived usefulness between the perceived credibility and the intention to visit.

5.1.7. Comparisons of various consumer cohorts on their Perceived Usefulness, Attitude, and Trust toward eWOM

Among the various consumer age groups, Gen X consumers have significantly higher levels of "perceived usefulness" (12.5, + 2.07, p=.000), "attitude"(16.7, ± 2.4, p=.000), and "trust" (12.5, ± 1.9, p=.000) in eWOM. According to consumer education levels, post-graduates had significantly higher "perceived usefulness", "attitude", and "trust"((12.1, + 2.1, p=.000),(16.0, ± 2.6, p=.000), (12.1, ± 2.09, p=.000)) respectively towards eWOM. According to consumers' family size, families with above 6 members had significantly higher "perceived usefulness" (12.3, ± 1.8,p=.000), "attitude" (17.2,± 1.8,p=.000), "trust" (12.9,± 1.5,p=.000)" in eWOM. According to family income, families with monthly income above Rs 90000 had significantly higher "perceived usefulness" (12.1, ± 2.0,p=.000), "attitude" (16.5, ± 2.6, p=.000), "trust" (12.3, ± 2.1, p=.000)" in eWOM.

There is no significant difference between occupation groups in terms of "perceived usefulness"(F= 2.887, p=.022). Self-employee/ entrepreneur had significantly higher "attitude" (16.0, ± 2.7,p=.000) and "trust" (11.9, ± 2.09,p=.003)towards eWOM. There is no significant difference between consumer groups" areas of residence in terms of "perceived usefulness"(F=1.356, p=.258), "attitude" (F=.578, p=.561), and "trust" (F=.758, p=.469)' towards eWOM.

In terms of "perceived usefulness "(F =.854, p=.356), "attitude" (F=3.680, p=.055), and "trust" (F= 1.344, p=.247) towards eWOM, there is no significant difference between gender groups. In terms of the "perceived usefulness" (F=8.099, p=.005) of eWOM, there was a significant difference between various marital status groups, but with

regard to the “attitude” ($F=.845, p=.035$), and “trust” ($F=.248, p=.619$) towards eWOM, there was no significant difference between consumer groups based on marital status categorization.

The results of the study are in conformity with the previous research exploring this relationship. According to the study done by Jalilvand et al., (2012), gender influences tourist attitude, destination image, and travel intention associated with eWOM. It was observed that certain nationalities have a strong and significant impact of eWOM on tourist attitude, destination image, and travel intention. Further, age has an impact on eWOM, destination image, tourist attitude, and travel intention. Education had a significant impact on tourist attitude, and travel intentions. According to Kim et al., (2008), the relationships between trust, purchase intention, and eWOM involvement were not proven to be significant in their study. The study suggests that factors other than trust in eWOM information can also influence consumers' decisions when choosing a hotel. According to Wu (2013), Consumers' purchase intentions and eWOM involvement behaviour are still not predicted by trust in eWOM information about the hotel's performance.

5.2. Implications

The study will have a lot of implications for organizations engaged in tourism-related services.

- When deciding on international tourism, tourism service marketers can consider the impact of eWOM on the decision-making process of travellers.
- They can emphasise featuring online reviews on "neutral" websites rather than only hosting reviews on their own websites and pages.
- Marketers can encourage review writers to set up online profiles in order to boost the credibility of their reviews.
- Marketers may encourage elaborate and experience-based reviews, as consumers are more likely to find detailed stories useful.
- Tourism marketers can use online reviews as a source of feedback to improve their products and services. By analyzing customer feedback, organizations can

identify areas for improvement and make changes to better meet the needs of their customers.

- Tourism marketers can offer incentives such as discounts or freebies for customers who leave reviews. This can help to encourage more reviews and positive feedback.
- Tourism marketers should actively monitor their online reputation and take steps to manage it. This may involve monitoring social media channels, review sites, and other online platforms to ensure that accurate and up-to-date information is being shared.

5.3. Research Contribution

5.3.1. Contribution to the knowledge

Several tourism studies have been conducted around the world. Studies on eWOM source characteristics, eWOM motives for and consequences, post- and pre-visit destinations, tourism willingness, the impact of eWOM attitude, and behavior on attitude, and so on, are among them. However, tourism research in India is severely lacking, with special reference to the Coimbatore district. There is also a scarcity of empirical findings in the literature based on the conceptual model developed in this study.

This study aims to provide fresh insights into tourism marketing literature, specifically in relation to Indian travellers. A unique aspect of this research is its investigation into the levels of internet usage among respondents, as well as a segregation of those who use the internet and those who do not. This segmentation has not been explored extensively in tourism literature before, making this study a new contribution to the field.

Among the predictors, searchers' characteristics such as the level of involvement and searchers' intent are the most crucial factors that influence the perceived usefulness, attitude and trust towards eWOM leading to its adoption and influence on intention to travel. Hence to develop searchers' involvement and intent positively, visually appealing and authentic reviews, comments and recommendations are essential. Marketers need to adopt digital marketing strategies that will showcase their content to be aesthetic,

appealing and authentic. These efforts will ultimately develop searchers' involvement and their adoption of eWOM.

Additionally, this study seeks to combine three theories, which have not been studied together in previous research. By providing empirical evidence of these theories, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of tourism marketing. Thus, the findings of this study can significantly contribute to the existing knowledge of tourism and can guide tourism businesses in formulating effective marketing strategies for travellers.

5.3.2. Contribution to Practice

Technologies are emerging, disrupting, and changing our lives in ways that suggest we are entering the Fourth Industrial Revolution, a new era in which digitalization builds and affects societies in unexpected ways. Tourism was one of the first industries on a global scale to digitalize business processes, pioneering online flight and hotel booking. As information and communications technology (ICT) became a global phenomenon, tourism was an early adopter of new technologies and platforms. A digitalized tourism sector must innovate and create new business prospects to assure the sector's sustained competitiveness, growth, and long-term development.

Travellers can create online profiles to write reviews, which helps to change tourists' attitudes toward their intended travel destinations. Marketers may applaud elaborate and experience-based reviews in the sense that consumers may find detailed stories more useful for deciding before going on a trip, particularly in a critical situation. The ability of a marketer to carefully manage the credibility of eWOM is critical to ensuring that readers perceive it to be authentic, useful, and trustworthy over time. Tourism marketing professionals will be able to use the model in the future for the development of effective content strategies that will influence the decision-making processes of potential travellers through social media.

Detailed reviews based on personal experience can be especially helpful for consumers when making travel decisions, particularly in uncertain situations. As a result, marketers may value in-depth reviews that provide useful insights for potential customers. To ensure that readers continue to view eWOM as genuine, helpful, and trustworthy over time, marketers need to have the ability to carefully manage the

credibility of eWOM. Utilizing this model, one could devise a marketing strategy that would be optimized towards reaching a specific destination. Future tourism marketing professionals will be able to use the model to develop efficient content strategies that will influence the decision-making processes of prospective travellers via social media. These strategies will be put in place in order to encourage more people to travel.

5.4. Scope for the Future Study

In the future, social media will play an imperative role in consumers' decision-making process. Tourism companies can efficiently utilize social media as a promotion strategy to get connected with existing as well as prospective customers by understanding the travel behaviour of the customer and promoting their offers. The study can be further enhanced by adopting any of the following aspects for further research.

- Apart from the characteristics of the source, searchers and the message, the receiver's characteristics can also be tested.
- Exploring the motivations behind individuals' engagement in writing eWOM and their subsequent influence on others presents an intriguing area of investigation.
- The drivers of opinion givers will be an interesting area of inquiry.
- The research provides the way for future research on the subject, with a larger sample size and the inclusion of other relevant constructs associated with eWOM in the context of tourism.
- Tourism marketers can analyse textual data (reviews) to monitor their brands and services, as well as the needs of their customers.
- Tourism marketers could use the model in the future to reach out to potential travellers and influence their decisions.
- The eWOM adoption and its influence on travel planning can be compared between various regions and nations.
- Because children nowadays use smartphones and tablets to learn, the research can be expanded to look at how children plan their vacations.
- In the future, researchers can study why and how people choose travel plans and destinations and compare the same with people who use a minimal amount of internet.

5.5. Limitations

- A large sample size can increase the generalizability of the study findings.
- The study can cover a wide geographic area instead of being limited to a specific region.
- A comparison of international tourism before and after Covid 19 can be conducted in the study.
- The study can analyze text data from travel websites' reviews to gain insights.
- The study does not address the impact of natural disasters or climatic conditions on tourism.
- The study can be improved by broadening its scope by gathering data not only from individuals who travel internationally but also from those who travel domestically.
- Additionally, it may be beneficial to analyse the impact of eWOM separately for these two groups to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how eWOM affects individuals' travel decisions.

5.6. Conclusion

The current study looks at the message, source, and searcher aspects associated with eWOM adoption and their combined influence on the intention to travel. Social media is a marketing channel that should be used strategically when marketing tourism services. Customers are increasingly shopping online, and tourism marketers must remember this. Marketers should be aware of emerging technologies as well as the strategies of competitors. Although new electronic intermediaries do not allow for face-to-face communication, they are more powerful than older ones. Through a large number of virtual communities, social media allows travellers to share their thoughts and experiences. Social media has revolutionized the tourism industry, offering both opportunities and challenges for tourism businesses. To succeed in this rapidly evolving landscape, tourism marketers need to understand the profound impact of social media on the industry and consumer behaviour.

Social media platforms have empowered travellers to share their experiences and opinions with an extensive online community, creating virtual communities that transcend geographical boundaries. This unprecedented access to peer recommendations

and reviews has transformed how consumers make travel decisions, highlighting the need for tourism businesses to establish a strong online presence and manage their reputation effectively.

By recognizing the power of eWOM for engaging with travellers in meaningful ways, tourism businesses can tap into a vast pool of potential customers and build brand loyalty. However, they must also navigate the challenges of social media, such as managing negative feedback and staying up-to-date with the latest trends and best practices.

Ultimately, tourism marketers who leverage the opportunities presented by social media while addressing its challenges can gain a competitive edge in the industry and create a lasting impact on consumers. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in tourism communication and consumer behaviour research. Social media, user-generated content, and reviews present both opportunities and challenges. Social media's wealth of consumer information enables marketers to better understand consumers' expectations and, as a result, develop ways to improve their offerings. Influencers and opinion leaders can be identified, compensated, and encouraged to write useful product, service, and destination reviews. A marketer's ability to carefully maintain the credibility of eWOM is critical in ensuring that readers regard the eWOM as legitimate, valuable, and trustworthy over time. According to the findings of the literature reviews, consumers' tourism decision-making has been significantly influenced in the context of eWOM adoption. The study paves the way for future studies on the topic, with a larger sample size and the inclusion of other relevant constructs associated with eWOM in the context of tourism.