

## USE OF ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH (E-WOM) FOR TOURISM DESTINATION SELECTION ACROSS PUNJAB PAKISTAN

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### Abstract

*In the context of contemporary trends in the tourism market, marketing communication has reached a new level. As a means of sharing information, ideas, and emotions to achieve specific outcomes, marketing communication is crucial for the tourism industry. To address the challenges of modern society, marketing professionals need to recognize the advantages of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). Its features offer great flexibility in terms of accessibility, a high level of reliability, and the ability to instantly reach a vast audience. The purpose of this study is to determine the role and importance of e-WOM in the travel decision-making process, given its numerous benefits and advantages.*

*This study is based cross sectional research design. To achieve the research objective, empirical research was conducted on a convenience sample of 156 Pakistani citizens. The study results showed that e-WOM's effects are the only true indicator of the value of products or services, considering their independence, objectivity, and the fact that they are not paid for, fabricated, or falsified. This paper contributes to both theory and practice by demonstrating the importance of the e-WOM concept in the travel decision-making process. Despite being conducted on a convenience sample, this study provides valuable insights into respondents' attitudes toward e-WOM. For tourist companies, e-WOM offers an objective presentation of products and services at minimal cost, often having a greater impact on sales and competitiveness compared to other forms of advertising.*

**Keywords:** e-WOM, e-marketing, marketing communication, tourist market

### Introduction:

In recent years, the tourism industry in Pakistan has seen significant growth, with an increasing number of tourists looking to explore the diverse and beautiful landscapes of the country (Ahmed et al., 2022). As the use of social media and online platforms has become more prevalent, Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) has emerged as a powerful tool for influencing tourists' decision-making process when selecting a destination. This paper aims to explore the impact of E-WOM on the selection of tourist destinations in Punjab, Pakistan.

Word of Mouth (WOM) is an informal communication way occurring between consumers about a product, service or an organization in order to pass their opinion, mostly their delight or dissatisfaction through other people. Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan (2008) define that e-WOM and

present a typology of E-WOM channels. The authors noted that “all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers” (p. 461). This includes communication between producers and consumers as well as those between consumers themselves.

This study examines the current state of e-WOM in the tourism industry and its role in shaping tourists' perceptions and preferences. By analyzing existing studies on e-WOM and destination selection, the key factors will be identified which influence tourists' decision-making process. This research also investigate the potential challenges and limitations of e-WOM in the context of the Pakistani tourism industry and explore ways to address them. By conducting survey with both tourists the study aims to provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of e-WOM and its impact on the selection of tourist destinations in Pakistan.

There is a lack of evidence-based studies scrutinizing the relationship between prospective travelers' intent to travel and reliance on the Electronic word of mouth for choosing a specific tourist destination. Overall, this research aims to shed light on the importance of E-WOM in the tourism industry and offer practical recommendations for tourism stakeholders to harness the power of E-WOM to make the tourist attractions in Punjab as preferred choice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The World Travel & Tourism Council's (WTTC) annual research report highlights key data pertaining to Pakistan revealing that in 2023, the travel and tourism sector contributed 5.8% to the country's GDP. This marks an impressive 8.7% increase from 2022 and a substantial 17.5% rise from the levels observed in 2019 (Pre-COVID benchmark).

Moreover, the tourism sector supported 4.73 million jobs in 2023, constituting a 6.7% share of total employment in Pakistan which is a 5.4% increase from 2022 and a remarkable 19.7% increase from 2019 levels (WTTC, 2024).

Pakistan made a significant development on International Travel and Tourism Development Index (ITTDI) by moving up six places as per the latest report released by the World Economic Forum (WEF).

As per the latest edition of the international travel and tourism competitive index titled "Rebuilding for a Sustainable and Resilient Future," Pakistan has been ranked 83rd, which is up from 89th place in the index's previous edition of 2019. Six points increase in the ranking of Pakistan on global travel and tourism index is quite a significant progress and now Pakistan is among the countries in the Asia Pacific Region that have improved its ranking the most since 2019 (PTDC, 2024).

Tourism is a sector in which consumers share their opinions widely, offline and online. This interpersonal influence is important because of the intangible nature of tourist products and the fact that these products cannot be evaluated before purchase (Confente, 2015)

The penetration of smartphones in Pakistan has seen a significant rise over the past decade. With the advent of affordable devices and improved connectivity, smartphones have become an integral part of daily life for many Pakistanis.

Several studies highlight the rapid increase in smartphone adoption in Pakistan. Cellular teledensity, the number of connections for every hundred individuals in the country, was recorded as 79.44% in June, 2024 by the PTA. According to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), there are around 193 million mobile phone subscribers (PTA 2024), with a significant portion using smartphones. The introduction of 3G and 4G services in 2014 accelerated this growth, enabling users to access the internet and various digital services more easily.

The use of big data and analytics in tourism promotion has become increasingly important. By analyzing data from various sources, including social media, booking platforms, and customer feedback, tourism businesses can gain insights into consumer preferences and trends on one hand and provides relevant and comparative information about probable destinations for the tourists. This information not only allows for more targeted marketing efforts, improved customer service, and the development of tailored experiences (Leung et al., 2013).

While new technologies, applications and platforms offer numerous benefits for tourism promotion, they also present challenges. Issues related to data privacy and security are growing

concerns as more personal information is shared online. The dynamic nature of digital platforms requires continuous up gradation in digital literacy by the consumers and adaptation and learning by tourism professionals (Buhalis, 2003).

## MOW-EMOW

Electronic Word of Mouth refers to the practice of sharing personal experiences, opinions, and recommendations about products, brands, or services online. In this digital age, social media platforms, review sites, and online forums are becoming increasingly popular. As a result, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) has emerged as a powerful influencer of modern consumers' purchasing decisions. Recent studies reveal that customers trust feedback and suggestions from other customers more than traditional advertising methods (Handoyo, 2024). EsraDemirbaş (2018) concludes that WOM is a consumer-dominated and valuable means to present products and services with on-commercial nature where the sender acts independently from the market. These characteristics make the WOM information more reliable, credible and trustworthy. Linton (2015) opines that travelers tend to trust other travelers (friends and review sites) for information about what to see and do during a trip. 84% of consumers rely on WOM recommendations from friends and family (Adams, 2015).

The development of the Internet has led to the expansion of possibilities of collecting information – consumers can view comments made by other consumers as well as post their own comments, and thus participate actively in the e-WOM process (Bronner, de Hoog, 2011). Jalilvand, Esfahani and Samiei (2011) define E-WOM as a positive or negative statement made by potential, current or previous users – consumers about a product, service or company, which is accessible to a wide audience through the Internet. “Online feedback mechanisms have emerged as a viable mechanism for fostering cooperation among strangers in such settings by ensuring that the behavior of a trader towards any other trader becomes publicly known and may therefore affect the behavior of the entire community towards that trader in the future. Knowing this, traders have an incentive to behave well towards each other, even if their relationship is a one-time deal.” (Dellarocas, 2003).

The big difference between WOM and E-WOM is that in-WOM, recommendations are typically from unknown individuals with whom strong ties are lacking, so “online consumers have difficulty in using source similarity to determine the credibility of information” (Park and Lee 2009, p. 61). Characteristics of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) enable a high level of flexibility related to accessibility, a relatively high level of reliability and the possibility of instantaneously reaching a huge audience (Lončarić, Ribarić and Farkaš, 2016). This is also due to the fact that tourist services are intangible and cannot be experienced and evaluated prior to purchase (Litvin et al., 2008; Philips et al., 2013).

RQ1. What are the habits of tourists when using the Internet to gather information for planning tourist activities?

RQ2. What are their opinions on the usefulness of information available on websites?

RQ3. How inclined are tourists to share their own experiences online?

## Research Design

In order to examine the research questions of this study, cross sectional design is employed. Empirical research was applied on the convenience sample 157 citizen of from all cross of the Pakistan. Those people are included in this empirical research study who have at least traveled once in the life as a tourist across different touring places of the province Punjab. Data were collected in June 2024 via Google online form. Google survey link shared through social media app such as what app.

The tourism scale was developed by Lončarić and Farkaš (2016), to measure the attitudes regarding e- WOM in tourism use scale developed by Jalilvand et al. (2011) and to measure motive and reason to use of e-WOM (Bronnerde & de Hoog, 2011). The informal sources of information, which influenced on the customers' loyalty of purchasing was adopted by the Gruen et al. (2006) research study. E-WOM perception such as credibility of message source, and validity of available information was adopted from the Lopez and Sicilia (2014). Xu (2014) measure the level of trust in the online information sources. Data analysis was performed with help of the IBM SPSS statistics 27 package. Descriptive statistics analysis conducted.

## Descriptive analysis

The socio-demographic structure of the sample is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of respondents (N=157)

<i>Description</i>	<b>Respondents</b>	
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<i>Gender</i>		
<b>Male</b>	91	58.3%
<b>Female</b>	65	41.7%
<i>Age</i>		
<b>Up to 18</b>	23	14.7%
<b>19 – 25</b>	74	47.5%
<b>26 – 35</b>	38	24.7%
<b>36 – 45</b>	8	5%
<b>46 – 55</b>	9	5.7%
<b>56 and more</b>	4	2.4%
<i>Occupation</i>		
<b>Employed</b>	54	34.6%
<b>Unemployed</b>	21	13.5%
<b>Student</b>	74	47.4%
<b>Retired</b>	2	1.3%

<b>Others</b>	5	3.2%
<i>Level of education</i>		
<b>Primary school</b>	0	0.0%
<b>Secondary school</b>	9	5.8%
<b>Graduation</b>	92	59.0%
<b>Post-graduation</b>	55	35.3%
<i>Monthly Income</i>		
<b>50000-70000</b>	35	22.4%
<b>71000-100000</b>	16	10.3%
<b>100001-130000</b>	49	31.4%
<b>Above-130000</b>	56	35.9%

The analysis of socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents leads to the conclusion that the majority of respondents consists of highly educated individuals under the age of 35 who reside in the Punjab Pakistan.

The empirical research examined the respondents' habits with regard to Internet use, especially in terms of gathering information about tourism products and services. It was found that 59% of respondents daily spend 1 hour a day or less, 30.8% use the Internet between 1 and 3 hours a day, and 16% use the Internet **more than 3 hours a day**.

With regard to using the Internet in order to gather information when planning travel and tourist activities, 56.4% of the respondents stated that they always used the Internet, 26.3% used it occasionally and only 3.8% of the respondents did not use the Internet for organizing and planning their travel. Out of the total 96% of respondents who use the Internet when planning travels, 44.9% always use informal Internet sources, i.e. they read the comments made by others about tourist products and services. Another 35.9% do this occasionally and 12.8% do it rarely. Subsequently, 41% always **follow recommendations** made by others about tourist products and services. Same number percentage of respondent 41% do this occasionally and 12.2% do it rarely.

A total of 53.2% of the respondents state that they read the experiences and comments of other Internet users regarding travel and tourist facilities. 49.4% respondent state always used internet for the purpose of gathering information needed to make a purchase or travel decision. On the other hand, 37.2% do this because they want to hear first-hand experience, 30.8% read content generated by other travelers after they have made a purchase decision in order to know what to expect from the tourist product or service. It is interesting to note that 28.2% of respondents read comments related to travel and travel services purely out of curiosity, even though they have no intention of traveling, or are not able to travel in the near future to actually make use of these products or services. Finally, 12.2% of respondents state that they have no interest in the comments and experiences of others. Those respondents who do not use the Internet to plan their travel state that the main reason for this is mistrust in the source and the veracity of the information.



Table 2: **Information sources on the Internet (N=156)**

Source	Percentage
Official Web site of the destination	40.9
Official Web site of the hotel and other tourism products	43.8
Pinterest	3.3
Online for a	38
Google+	12.4
Facebook	58.7
Twitter	0
Instagram	1.7
LinkedIn	0
Blog	7.4
TripAdvisor,Booking.com,etc.	41.3
YouTube	14.9
News Web sites	20.7

Table 2 displays information sources found on the Internet that are used by respondents when collecting information about tourist destinations or products.

With regard to the popularity of Web sites with user generated content, the research result show that the official Web sites of the destinations and the official Web sites of the providers of tourism services (hotel and other tourism products), are predominant and was named as a source of information by 68.7% and 55% respectively of respondents. Social networking site Instagram (54%) and facebook (42%) used as a source of information for tourism followed by the online fora. This information is not surprising considering that Instagram is the most popular and most widely used social networking site in Pakistan Although blogs are globally very popular for sharing travel experiences and advice (Fileri and McLeay 2014), it can be observed that this particular form of informal communication is not very popular in Pakistan, however You tube is pretty much popular among Pakistani tourist. It is also observed that some popular social networking sites Pinterest, Blogs, Twitter, News websites and LinkedIn are not using for travelling or finding tourists destination purpose.

A special set of questions was directed towards determining the respondents' attitudes regarding user-generated information on the Internet (Table 3). The mean scores for the three items are relatively close, indicating a moderate level of agreement with each statement. However, subtle differences can be observed: The highest mean score was for the item, trust the references and comments of other Internet users more than the official information published by the provider ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD=1.13$ ). This suggests that, on average, respondents slightly more agree with this statement compared to the other two. Second the item, how others rate the destination and the

tourism offer of the destination (M=3.35, SD=1.36), almost identical to the trust in online comments. This indicates a similar level of importance placed on how others rate destinations. While comments and experiences of other Internet users influence decision had the lowest mean score at (M=3.26, SD= 1.26).

**Table 3: Respondents’ attitudes regarding user-generated online content related to tourism products and services (N=156)**

Items	Mean	SD
It is important to me how others rate the destination and the tourism offer of the destination	3.35	1.367
I trust the references and comments of other Internet users more than the official information published by the provider	3.36	1.130
The comments and experiences of other Internet users influence my decision	3.26	1.260

Literature indicates that the credibility of the information source plays an important role in gaining the readers’ trust (Park and Lee 2009; Lopez and Sicilia 2014). A fact which has been confirmed by this research (Table 4). The respondents trusted those comments that have a known source identity more (visible name and surname, country of origin, profile, etc.) has the highest mean score (M = 3.62, SD= 1.13). This indicates that, on average, respondents agree more strongly with trusting comments that provide identifiable information about the commenter. Respondents agreed not all Web sites with user comments are equally reliable (M=3.58, SD=1.14).

**Table 4: Respondents’ attitudes regarding elements that influence the level of trust in the online information source (N=156)**

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
I trust those comments that have a known source identity more (visible name and surname, country of origin, profile, etc.) .	3.62	1.138
I trust comments that are accompanied by the photo of the user who posted the comment more	3.24	1.220
Not all Web sites with comment sections are equally reliable.	3.58	1.147
Valid N (listwise)		

Respondents most frequently ignore information gathered from informal online sources when the user identity is unknown and the medium is unreliable (38.5%), and if an insufficient



number of comments is available (32%). Up to 25.6% of respondents generally consider the Internet to be an insufficiently reliable source and 11% will doubt the reliability of the source if the comments contradict their previous knowledge about the subject.

When information from informal sources contradict the individual's previous knowledge and is different from the perception this person has of the tourism product or service, up to 50.6% of respondents will seek further information in other places such as the travel agency in order to check the validity of the information. Almost 34.6% of respondents would even decide not to visit the destination or buy the product or service for the abovementioned reason, while 14.7% would ignore what they read and rely on their previous knowledge about the product, service or destination. This information shows how strong the influence of user-generated online content is on the purchase decision.

One of the objectives of the research was to determine to what extent respondents were inclined to share their own experiences on the Internet. More than 45% of respondents confirmed that they always share their own opinions as well as read other people's comments, more than 9.6% never post their own opinions via the Internet, but they read other people's, 35.3% always post their own opinion, but they do not read other people's comments, and 37.8% never post nor read other people's comments.

It has been determined that 7.7% of respondents share their own opinions and comments on the Internet only when they are extremely satisfied or extremely dissatisfied (9%). Almost 30% of respondents do not want to waste time on sharing their experiences via the Internet, and same percentage 30% always have to share their experiences via the Internet, and 22.4% pointed out that they do not share their opinions online, but that they see a point in doing that.

The respondents were asked why they share their opinions, comments and recommendations regarding tourism products and services via the Internet. In accordance with previous research (Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 1993; Lee et al. 2011), 15.4% of respondents name altruistic (selfless) motives, i.e. the desire to help other Internet users make the right decision, 9% feel the need to publicly express their opinion, and 23.7% are motivated by the possibility of influencing positive changes. Furthermore, 37.2% feel that posting on the Internet has greater impact than directly addressing the provider, which is why they decide to participate in e-WOM, i.e. expressing their opinions on the Internet. Whereas 14.2% use this method of communication to deal with frustrations that were caused by dissatisfaction with the tourist product or service. The least represented motives are financial benefit and creating a positive image for oneself.

## Discussion

The benefits of using e-WOM (electronic word-of-mouth) for planning trips are well-recognized among the respondents. The research shows that a significant number of people engage in e-WOM communication when planning their travels. Around 57% of respondents rely on informal internet sources, such as reading other people's comments and recommendations about tourist products, services, and experiences.

Respondents generally have a positive attitude towards user-generated content, trusting comments and recommendations from fellow users more than information published by providers. It's no surprise that Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook are the most frequently used sources of information, followed by the official websites of tourist destinations. However, respondents are cautious and do not consider all websites equally reliable, placing more trust in comments when the source is known.

Interestingly, if information from informal sources contradicts their prior knowledge, 14% of respondents would decide against visiting a destination or purchasing a product/service. This highlights the strong influence of e-WOM on tourist decisions and underscores the importance of information credibility, consistent with previous studies (Lončarić&Licul, 2016). Many respondents also share their experiences online, indicating a tendency to participate in e-WOM. Satisfaction levels play a significant role in this behavior, as people are more likely to share their opinions when they are either extremely satisfied or dissatisfied. Altruistic motives, such as wanting to help others, are the most significant drivers for participating in e-WOM, aligning with previous research findings by Engel, Blackwell and Miniard (1993), as well as Lee et al. (2011) and Lončarićand Licul, 2016.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the e-WOM communication habits of Pakistani citizens residing in Punjab, specifically in the context of their decision-making process when planning vacations. The study also evaluated the usefulness of information available on the Internet and the popularity of various information sources.

The research has also provided an answer to the question regarding the tourists' tendency of sharing information of their tourist experience. The research has revealed insights into tourists' tendencies to share information about their experiences. The study found that a significant number of respondents use the Internet to plan their activities. When gathering information from informal sources, most respondents read multiple comments, evaluations, and recommendations. Some read comments, and a analyzes to select their tourist places.

While social networks like Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook are popular among the general public, the research indicates that official websites of destinations, hotels, and other facilities are also highly popular and play a dominant role as information sources. Respondents showed a positive attitude towards user-generated content, addressing the second research question. However, they closely associate the usefulness of information with the reliability of its sources, trusting comments more when the author's identity is known.

The third research question was to determine the tendencies of tourists to share their own experiences on the Internet. The research also explored the reasons behind why tourists share their experiences online. Some respondents are driven by altruistic motives, such as wanting to help others make informed decisions. Others feel compelled to publicly express their opinions or are motivated by the possibility of influencing positive changes. Many believe that posting online has a greater impact than directly addressing service providers, leading them to participate in electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). A portion of respondents use online platforms to vent frustrations caused by dissatisfaction with a tourist product or service. The least common motivations include seeking financial benefits and creating a positive personal image.

From a tourism perspective, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) communication offers numerous advantages for tourism companies. It allows them to present tourism products and services objectively with minimal costs, often achieving a greater impact on sales and competitiveness compared to other advertising forms. To maximize these benefits, establishing a reliable communication channel that facilitates the exchange of opinions and experiences is essential. Understanding tourist satisfaction is crucial for evaluating and improving tourism products and services.

However, the limitations of this research must be acknowledged for scientific objectivity. The study was conducted on a relatively small convenience sample due to time and financial constraints. Since it was carried out online using Google Docs, only respondents with Internet access were included. Additionally, the research focused solely on people from Punjab, Pakistan, excluding foreign tourists. Although the study addressed numerous issues within the topic, it lacked depth in certain areas. Despite these limitations, this research provides valuable insights into the attitudes of Pakistani citizens regarding e-WOM communication and serves as a foundation for further studies on this topic.

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