# IMPACT OF EWOM IN DETERMINING THE SELECTION OF ECOTOURISM DESTINATIONS

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**ABSTRACT** — Ecotourism reveals the natural beauty of a destination with minimal impact on the environment. Eco-friendly tourists want to avoid carbon footprints by indulging in responsible behaviour. Tour operators also encourage tourists to be environmentally friendly during their trips by strengthening the local community, i.e., Tourists purchase the local produce, participate in nature conservation and are sensitive towards nature. Tourists are influenced by electronic word-of-mouth opinions, and this is rising with the development of electronic culture. The purpose of this paper is to examine how electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) impacts the tourists' decision to select and visit eco-friendly destinations. The results suggested that e-WOM has a positive impact on determining eco-friendly destinations across the world. The experience shared by fellow travellers and users' ratings influences the purchase decision of tourists. By following the advice of previous users, tourists behave responsibly and reduce their carbon footprint. The paper contributes to understanding the relationship between concepts of e-WOM, tourist behaviour, purchase decision and eco-friendly destinations.

**Keywords** — Ecotourism, travel forum, e-WOM, fellow travellers, destinations.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The rationale behind selecting this topic is to examine the different aspects of the Electronic Word of Mouth platform in choosing eco-friendly destinations. It also discusses that how is e-WOM is helpful to perceive the filtered content? How are people impacted by the opinion of fellow travellers on travel forums?

Electronic word of mouth marketing is seldom referred to as word of the mouse advertising because of its potential to reach the masses. This marketing technology has a multiplier effect when people want to share their experiences. e-WOM encompasses social media, buzz, blogs, vlogs and viral messages. Tourism destinations have fierce competition for sustaining their business; therefore, potential visitors thoroughly check online platforms to judge the satisfaction level of previous users. Users give the rating to the destination based on their experience. In the digital era, the old acronym "Word of mouth" is replaced by "Word of Mouse," where anyone is reachable to everyone through digital media. It has been observed that consumers rely more on word of mouth/mouse information. The information significantly impacts their decision gathered from online and offline consumers, as Nielsen report that 92% of consumers have more faith in friends and family than in advertising [1].

Social media users' trust in the Internet platform significantly influences their intention to purchase a product/destination [2]. Trust is an essential factor in online purchase, as people are affected by the good/bad experience of the product. Therefore, e-WOM becomes the significant deciding factor. Moreover, it can portray the positive side of the destination to a global audience." e-WOM is a dynamic exchange of thought processes, where the potential, former and actual consumer forms an opinion about the available product, service, brand or organization, which has a far-reaching impact on individuals and institutions via the Internet." [3]

e-WOM phenomenon of travel review websites help to determine the influence and significance for the business. Optimum measures are required to control the pessimistic WOM to spread the optimistic WOM. The study examined the proficiency of electronic word-of-mouth marketing in reaping the positive outcome of more visits. The researcher identified that the words straight from horse mouth have maximum influence on potential buyers surfing the Internet for the product line. "In Internet marketing, consumers communicate with each other to determine the authenticity of the product. Consumers are motivationally involved in e-WOM reviews left by writers, bloggers and reviewers" [4].

According to prior studies, 93% of consumers opinionated that online reviews (a type of e-WOM communication) offer real-time suggestions, which impact their purchase decision [5]. "Service Industry, i.e., destination marketers take advantage of engaging the consumer's and user to voice their opinion. This approach amplifies the reach of business"[6]. "61% of consumers leave their opinion on travel review website to assist potential customer's. Their reviews help them to form an impression of the ecotourism site"[5].

e-WOM is considered reliable for judging the product's effectiveness, as the opinions formed on electronic modes are based on real experiences. The source becomes trustworthy as the user shares the hands-on experience of the product. On travel forums, Consumer trust each other like their family and friends. They advocate their candid opinion about the destination and its surroundings and facilities, i.e., parking facility, restaurant, movie hall, gas station and ticketing services available on the ground.

The emergence of the Internet has brought a mega shift in the lives of people. Social media revolutionized it with content, images and videos of people and the service industry. It offers the advantage of changing their images and videos to attract more buyers. Interaction with Customers keeps these social media energized with a constant presence for influencing the Customers with its prompt reach. People on social media trust each other like family and friends.

For selecting a destination, Tourists spend a significant amount of time checking the ratings and reviews posted by previous visitors to determine the authenticity of the destination, i.e., judging the parameters of an ecofriendly destination. Generally, eco-friendly destinations are focused on reducing the carbon footprint by complying with environmentally friendly measures, i.e., reducing the use of planes, walking on foot, opting for bicycles, minimal use of plastic and other green initiatives. A tourist visits almost 38 websites before finalizing a purchase decision of destination[7]. They may check social media, search engines, booking sites, online reviews.

The new age traveller is always logged in and has ample information at the tip of their finger [8]. They have 24x7 internet connectivity on their gadgets to explore new places, checking accurate time information regarding destination, location, season and other necessary information. A study conducted by Google in 2013 demonstrates the five significant phases of travel, i.e., dreaming, planning, booking, experiencing and sharing of pictures, reviews regarding their recent purchase. These stages demonstrate the behaviour of the customer beforehand, throughout and subsequently during the journey. It was found that the views of previous users impacted every phase, especially shared on social media and Review Sites. The figure 1 below represents the full acronym of e-WOM and discusses the complete form of each alphabet.

ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH ADVERTISEMENT			
E	w	0	Μ
Electronic	Word	Of	Mouth/Mouse
Mobile	E-Content	Travel review websites	Dialogue
Tablet	Podcast	Search Engine	Podcasts
Laptop	SMS	Email	Ebooks
E-devices	MMS	Images and Videos	Virtual tour
Alexa	Email	Social Media	Augmented reality
		Location	Interactive videos
		Real time experience	

Figure 1: Electronic word of mouth advertisement. Source: Author

The figure 1 reflects the extensive coverage of e-WOM. E stands for electronic gadgets on which information can be searched, i.e., Computer, Smart TV, Mobile phones, Tablet, Alexa. Word denotes good content, professional videos and images, Email marketing, and SMS marketing. Potential Tourist.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Various researchers have examined the relationship between sustainable development and tourism and concluded that "sustainable development is a way forward to assure the retention of natural resources for long term sustainability of destinations."

In Ecotourism, the landscape is the most vital product. The relationship between tourism and the inconsistent landscape can have positive and negative impacts on the environment and its negative impact on local communities [9].

Millions of people experience the natural environment every year, and this movement of visitors disturbs or damages the site. Vulnerable attributes and activities of tourists can directly or indirectly disrupt the ecosystem. The damage of the environment and its impact are responsible for the significant adverse effects on biological activities. Related activities such as the construction and development of infrastructure and facilities are often uncertain [10].

The nature-based tourism activities make the generic use of natural resources, including landscapes, terraces, waterways, vegetation, wildlife and cultural heritage. Urban forests are depleting under pressure because of the increasing demand for recreation and accessibility on these sites. Managing recreational carrying capacity is considered significant in ensuring continuity of ecological value and recreational satisfaction[11].

Seifi, F. and Ghobadi, G. explored the role of ecotourism potentials in the environmental development of the Miankaleh Protected Region[12]. The research validates that the Protected areas are suitable environments for tourism development, where tourism, consumer, and economic activities are consistent in every region on a comprehensive management plan to support sustainable tourism development.

Ecotourism focuses on environmental protection concepts, ecological tourism, and sustainable development is prevalent worldwide. Jiang, J defined Ecotourism as travelling to natural areas with a sense of responsibility to conserve resources and improve indigenous people's livelihood by giving them a source of revenue[13].

Consumer purchase is reflected by the online stimulus that impacts buyers' purchase decisions[14]. The S-O-R model (Stimulus-Organism-Response Model) of Consumer purchase examined the experience of previous users on consumer purchase behaviour conferring to online reviews of destinations. Statistical results of the study opined that the positive and negative reviews, described rating, picture reviews, appended reviews and cumulative reviews affect consumer purchase behaviour.

Consumer's purchase decisions are influenced by the online reputation and ratings given on online platforms[15].

## **III. DETERMINANTS OF E-WOM**

Word of Mouth is significant in the tourism industry, as intangible products have a shelf life. After the stay, customers can remember the good and bad experiences of the product line. The excellent word of mouth/mouse offers a competitive advantage of influencing the customers. The digital form of WOM has global accessibility and can affect an online visitor with beautiful images and videos. Accessibility of products on E-WOM can influence the selection of ecotourism destinations, as potential customers indulge in thorough surveys and planning.

Previous researchers identify three main dimensions of e-WOM as Quality, Quantity, and Trust, impacting the decision of travelling based on these dimensions." [16]. "Tourists select their destination based on several features, i.e., landscape, natural beauty, culture, architecture, gastronomy etc. These features and panoramic images influence consumers and turn out to be the assessment aspect of choosing a destination".

e-WOM is impactful because 50% of Internet surfers choose the word of mouth/mouse advertisements when searching for destination/hotel etc. The illustration represents that information on potential purchase is made via different sources, i.e., Online search engines, brand's presence on social media, virtual tour of the hotel property/ destination, reviews and star ratings given by previous tourists, destination website with information regarding its location, ease of transport, connectivity with other states, ticketing, facilities on sight, i.e., guidelines for responsible travelling, flora and fauna and other relevant information.

#### A. TRAVEL FORUM

Word of mouth is persuasive for green travellers and offers real-time recommendations based on the customer's great experience. Living a sustainable life with eco-friendly nature reflects responsible travel practices by being attentive to environmental surroundings. Green travellers use local transport, travel on foot, opt for bicycles. They cause minimum damage to the environment and follow green practices. They believe in a green and sustainable future. Green commuting, i.e., walking, bicycle or train, and reduce carbon emission.

Based on the online behaviour of customers, customized web pages and internet-based ads are recommended. Digital WOM can promote as well as demote destinations. Terms like most minor eco-friendly destinations may prevent an eco-friendly tourist from visiting such places. When choosing a place, 99% of millennials rely more on recommendations than advertisements.

## B. REVIEW SITES

In the digital era, Online reviews can make or mar the business with positive and negative reviews. People in the tourism industry have to be vigilant about their product line presence, rating, and reviews on travel review sites, as many customers prefer to check online reviews about flights, hotels, sightseeing, and tour packages. The Global travel review websites are Bookings, Facebook, Expedia, Yelp, Hostel World, Foursquare, Airbnb. Potential customers finalize their product line based on an Internet search for information about customer reviews, location, pricing, facilities, images, videos and virtual tours. The figure 2 below conveys how a positive review and negative review can bring more profitability or decrease profitability.

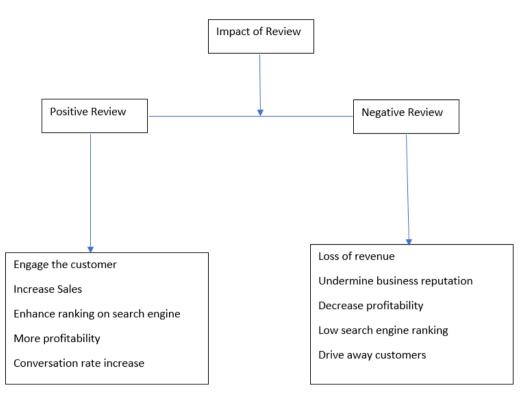


Figure 2: Impact of a positive and negative review on customers. Source: Author

#### C. IMAGES AND VIDEOS

Images and Videos of a destination play a pivotal role in influencing the choice of buyers and the travel decisionmaking process. Tourism Researchers and practitioners widely accept this theory [17]. Researchers elaborated that "Beautiful destination images attract the potential buyer to the site, keep them engaged with the virtual tour of destinations as well as represent the multi-dimension views of beautiful landscape." It was validated that consumers choose the destination based on online information sources. Valduga, M.C., Breda, Z. and Costa, C.M. investigated the image of Brazil and Rio de Janeiro as a blended tourism destination (TD) image by examining the categories of the image, as positive or negative and cognitive or affective[18].

The availability of destination information inspires the decision to visit a destination. Images are the maximum investigated item on the Internet. Pitana and Diarta validated that Images instil confidence regarding destination, products and services [19]. Positive images have a favourable impact on tourists and determine the decision to visit the destination. Plenty of images are available on Search Engines, synchronized with the news, articles and write-ups.

#### D. SOCIAL MEDIA

Tourism Researchers examined the role of social media in sharing information about travelling experience, knowledge, service and other products. Tourists have become selective in choosing their destination based on adequate information available online, i.e., positive e-WOM statement, positive image, trust and satisfaction level of tourists attracts more visitors to a destination empowered by positive feedback [20].

	Online search	
Information on Potential	Social Media ads or posts from product line	
Purchase	Review or rating websites	
	Destination/ Travel/ Hotel website	

Figure 3: Source of information on Potential Purchase. Source: Author

## **IV. INFORMATION ON POTENTIAL PURCHASE**

When planning a purchase, the consumer gathers information from various online sources where the destination marketers focus on content marketing for activating the USP (Unique sales proposition) of tourist attractions. Online media/ Word of mouth helps create destination awareness and influence the decision of the potential buyer. Information on potential purchases can be found in the various sources shown in figure 3, which can be seen above.

## A. ONLINE SEARCH ENGINES

Search Engines are the nerve centre of information. They are connected to websites, social media, keywords, third-party websites. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Search Engine Marketing (SEM) are the two tools used by analytic web teams to increase the footfall of visitors. This assists the firms to enhance the visibility of the brand and its products by push marketing strategy, i.e., Pop-up windows, websites, weblinks, cookies, keyword searches are checked and followed by Millennials. Websites also record consumer behaviour and present the choice base ads accordingly. It can divert the customer to a targeted page to enhance the traffic of visitors.

#### **B. SOCIAL MEDIA**

Social media is the most sought-after tool among Internet users, as it enhances their visibility, thoughts, and expressions. By participating in social media activities, brands can showcase their products to global users. This digital platform is used worldwide by the consumers. The Internet users always opt for social media to find any information, as users convey their thoughts, opinions, suggestions on these platforms. A customer visiting the destination posts their pictures, videos and experience, which affects the potential traveller in selecting the destination. A blog or vlog on a destination can persuade the customer to choose their destination; henceforth, many companies prefer to have a channel on YouTube, a dedicated webpage on top social media pages, i.e., Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Tik-Tok, Snapchat, Pinterest and Instagram. Instagram is ruling the market with one billion users. Youngsters are regular visitors of these sites to post their views via blogs and vlogs. These social media networks are available in multiple languages and have seen steady growth as billions of followers are associated. The most significant advantage is that the customers can have social interaction with each other. Brands and products willing to reach consumers need to assure their presence on all the social media pages with active threads and customer engagement platforms by making them like the brand. Many brands create their web page on social media and invite the users to like the web page. The use of social media is widespread all over the globe, with 3.6 billion people using this platform, which is likely to encompass 4.41 billion users in the year 2025.

## C. REVIEW/RATING WEBSITES

Blackshaw & Nazarro opinionated that Customers perceive the consumer review as a fact, emotion, experience, and even rumour [21]. Their views are considered candid and authentic because their perception can change the behaviour of other consumers. Tourism review sites have an integral role to play in influencing Customers' decisions. If there are no product reviews, customers may not want to opt for it thinking that the product is of inferior quality. Similarly, the excellent rating denotes that another buyer liked the product purchased by the customer.

According to Mellinas& Pedro, In the digital era, all the travellers read online reviews and ratings during their travel; many customers would not like to book a destination if previous users do not give reviews and ratings[22]. It is helpful to develop brand and destination recognition through online reviews. Sales and marketing of the service industry, i.e., hospitality, travel, and tourism sectors, are stimulated by images and videos shared on the Electronic Platform. Electronic word of mouth can be relied upon when planning a destination, as millennials constantly check reviews about a product or destination. Different Review ratings, i.e., Positive, moderate, negative review, impacts the consumer decision of buying/not buying the destination. Sometimes, consumer decision. Online reviews are the evaluating parameters of products and services sold on third-party and retailers' websites.

#### D. DESTINATION WEBSITE

Having a website of destination can enhance its reach to the global market. When selecting a destination, tourists search for 'tourist friendly' information, reviews and ratings posted by previous visitors. A dedicated website can provide information about peak season, low season, sightseeing, availability of accommodation, food and beverage, sightseeing, transport, and ancillary measures to be adopted by visitors for harnessing with the environment.

In the tourism industry, customer-oriented websites can bring more business and revenue. Tech-savvy customers have faith in the DIY (Do it yourself), as they garner information from the Internet. Availability of information and booking is convenient for prompting the customer to buy the deal. A potential tourist search for better deals, compare the price and product on different websites. They judge the product's authenticity based on its presence. Having a website is essential for product marketing. Good quality of website speaks a volume about the product.

Websites can increase the business's sales and profitability. On e-commerce sites, adding the product to the cart option makes it convenient to purchase the product later as per buyers' time and convenience. Websites keep highlighting and promoting the products to bring more visitors. Having a website with good content, beautiful images, and videos can keep the customer engaged. Therefore, destination marketers must emphasize having a good website. Good content on the website can significantly influence the decisions and preferences of customers. Web-based marketing is increasing continually due to good internet speed. There is an increased demand for having the own URL/website with Chatbots answering the FAQs (frequently asked questions) to assist the customers with their enquiries. Furthermore, an option of a secure gateway can instill confidence in customers for online transactions. The positive impact of the secure payment gateway is that E-WOM has increased the no. of transactions for visiting eco-friendly destinations from across borders.

## **V. ECOTOURISM**

This branch of tourism targets environment-conscious travellers. Travellers keen to reduce carbon footprint are this niche segment's exclusive clientele. Developing countries are funding the green belt conservation, afforestation, protection of flora and fauna, protecting extinguishing species and enhancing the environment sensitivity among the local community. Making people environment-conscious has become a necessity. Vision 2030 focuses on making the world a better place with 17 Sustainable development goals (SDG) determined by UNWTO. People across the globe are finding new ways to conserve natural resources. These initiatives are likely to reduce global warming.

Ecotourism offers multiple opportunities for sustainable fishing, agriculture, recycling, reusing, reducing plastic waste, promoting green travelling by avoiding planes and motor vehicles. The International ecotourism society defines it as "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people and involves interpretation, education, cultural exchange, preservation of biodiversity, livelihood improvement and strengthening of human rights." Environmentally responsible green properties in these destinations are eco-lodges, treehouses, homestay. An extensive literature review presents that image and identity influence tourists to visit a place in destination marketing. The branding of destinations is significant when developing the plan and strategies for ecotourism.

## **VI. ECOTOURISM DESTINATIONS**

Ecotourism destinations work towards sustainable development and inclusive growth. Several countries have breath-taking ecotourism destinations, and their details are easily accessible by electronic word-of-mouth advertising. These destinations have a stunning landscape, lush green ecosystem, miles of coastline. Different scholars have defined Ecotourism destinations close to nature, conserved resources, and offered livelihood to the local community. According to The International Ecotourism Society, Ecotourism is considered a subcategory of sustainable tourism development restricted to natural surroundings. Ecotourism destinations make optimum utilization of available resources, sustain the necessary ecological process, and assist in conserving flora and fauna. According to UNWTO, Sustainable tourism is the overall protection of social and environmental impacts, addresses the visitors' needs, existing industries, involve the environment protection and participation of the local community. The UNWTO wants to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between tourism and biodiversity protection.

#### **VII. SELECTION OF DESTINATIONS**

Destinations are selected based on their attraction, location—consultation with Friends and relatives, reviews, and ratings on social media sites. A bad review can prevent potential customers from booking a destination; therefore, it becomes vital for DMO (Destination Management Organization) to update the word-of-mouth advertisement constantly.

Millennials are tech-savvy, internet-friendly, and gadget-friendly and like to garner information faster, making them more decisive in handling information. e-WOM is a decisive factor for buyers while selecting the ecotourism destinations, i.e., reviews like heaps of filth and litter left by tourists make the place looks dirty. It may influence the Internet surfer to search for cleaner and greener destinations. Today's millennials prefer to select their products based on Electronic Word of Mouth Communication, as it is an unceremonious form of communication to get an insight into the product line. The eco-friendly destinations may be present on several platforms; therefore, destination marketers need to sell their products by monitoring the reviews and promoting positive thoughts. Destination marketers must monitor the data during the stay, after the stay, parking facilities, accommodation facilities, vegetarian and non-vegetarian food, restaurants, shopping, sightseeing, and other facilities that may have elated the customers.

Selecting the product based on electronic word of mouth advertisement involves the following steps in figure 4:

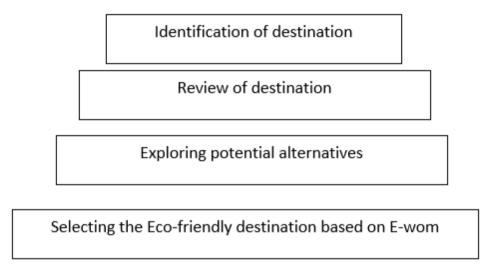


Figure 4: Determining the selection of ecotourism destinations. Source: Author

To finalize the ecotourism destination, the consumer identifies the destination of their choice and reviews the destination by judging its compatibility, reviews, and ratings. The consumer also explores available alternatives based on budget and duration of stay. The eco-friendly destination is finalized based on eco-friendly destination.

## **VIII. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

The researcher has discussed various elements of Ecotourism and recommended sustaining eco-friendly measures at these destinations with the following measures.

A positive e-WOM of Ecotourism destination can elevate the quality norms as tourists are particularly interested in exploring and visiting the neat green area.

Sensitizing the local community about conserving greenery, water bodies, natural habitat, and ecosystem can nurture the feeling of ownership among potential buyers.

Maintaining the cleanliness of water bodies can prevent the disposal of sewage and chemical in natural reservoirs; these sustainable development goals can be attained by the local community and responsible tourism measures adopted by green tourists.

e-WOM can assist in reducing the damage to the ecosystem by having a dedicated web page on Responsible tourism ethics.

If the tourists behave responsibly and remain sensitive to environmental risks, it can lead to articulate planning by determining the carrying capacity and reducing over-tourism at such destinations to avoid mitigated risk.

Ecotourism development can bring social and cultural changes; therefore, ecotourism development measures must be adopted to prevent the harmful impact. The negative impact could be the loss of flora and fauna, biodiversity and expansion of urban areas.

e-WOM can significantly influence the harmony of suppliers and buyers. Ecotourism destinations can be the best resort to maintain the natural surroundings, clean water bodies. The presence of wildlife habitat may prevent fiddling with nature and its surroundings.

## **IX. CONCLUSION**

The researcher has surveyed travel review websites and analyzed that e-WOM effectively influences potential customers. Internet surfers search the destination and property based on the experience, review, and ranking of others; properties and destinations highlight the positive reviews and resolve the customer complaint to change the negative feedback to a positive review. Eliminating such problems at a root cause can attract more buyers to a destination.

Almost 90% of buyers read reviews to determine the product quality; at times, business properties instigate the customers to write positive ratings and give a 5-star rating to enhance product line visibility on travel websites. Positive reviews and star ratings can lift the status of a property to the top.

Memorable words like unique, remarkable, WOW, incredible, significant, impressive, and other recommendations can leave a lasting impression on the guest. A Customer can adopt the e-WOM message if the information towards the product (destination) can influence the potential buyer.

The researcher concludes that the good feedback of customers can enhance the online reputation. Customers also follow the local protocols and behave responsibly at travel destinations to cut down the carbon footprint. A customer has a high affinity towards a remarkable experience; therefore, online travel agencies must offer them a seamless experience.

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behavior, banking finance.

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