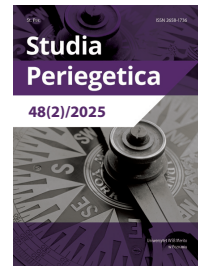


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# From Reviews to Reality: The Role of Electronic Word of Mouth in Shaping Tourist Experiences in South Africa

**Abstract.** The study investigated the influence of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) on tourism experiences in South Africa, focusing on how digital interactions shape travel decisions, destination behaviour, and post-visit evaluations. With the rise of digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and TripAdvisor, eWOM has become central in tourists' search for information, expectation formation, and experience sharing. The study is based on qualitative data collected during semi-structured online interviews with 30 South African tourists who engaged with eWOM platforms during their travel planning and experiences. Findings reveal that eWOM significantly affected interviewees' destination choice, trust in travel information, and behavioural intentions, including in-destination activities and online experience sharing. The study highlights the effect of accurate and trustworthy eWOM content on tourist satisfaction and future travel behaviour. Given its vital role throughout the entire tourism experience cycle, eWOM should be strategically integrated into tourism marketing and experience management.

**Keywords:** electronic word of mouth, tourism experiences, South Africa, digital marketing, tourist behaviour

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## 1. Introduction

Over the years, the tourism sector has proved its essential economic value by creating employment positions and producing financial gains that simultaneously promote cross-cultural understanding among various communities (Hussain et al., 2024). The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2025) reports that international tourist arrivals reached approximately 963 million in 2022 after experiencing a strong recovery from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital technologies serve as the core catalyst behind this travel recovery because they have changed the entire process that tourists use to prepare for their experiences and assess destinations (Sánchez-González & González-Fernández, 2021). Internet information sources, including websites, review platforms, and social media platforms, have become essential tools for modern travellers who need to make well-informed choices during their planning journey. Digital tools have improved information availability for travellers while increasing destination-tourist engagement, helping the tourism industry to offer more personalised service (Sumaia-Afren, 2024). Digital engagement has become a widespread practice which guides global tourism marketing efforts and experience operations. The ongoing technological progress shapes how tourists behave and what kind of service they expect, especially electronic word of mouth (ewom) and other digital communication channels (Armutcu et al., 2023; Gavaza et al., 2019). With social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok gaining popularity, tourism destinations can now market their destinations to worldwide visitor audiences at affordable rates, thus enabling tourists to explore hidden attractions (Xalxo & Shree, 2019). User-generated content has become the driving force behind digital storytelling by creating and modifying destination reputations as well as determining travel motivation patterns (Hussain et al., 2024).

The use of word-of-mouth information in travel decision making is not a new phenomenon; it has grown from being shared among close friends to online exchanges between residents of the global village using digital technologies. Several studies have focused on pre-trip ewom by analysing its role in travel decision making as well as tourists' post trip behaviour by measuring aspects related to future behavioural intentions. In a study of the impact of different aspects of ewom such as information usefulness, credibility and the quality of different sources of ewom on destination choice, Ilieva and Boteva (2023) found that all four aspects played a more important role in the case of travel blogs and social media than for company websites. This confirms the view that tourists perceive ewom from other platforms as more influential than the destination's own formal ewom. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, people have increasingly been using internet platforms to share and

access information, which prompted Tung and My (2023) to examine the impact of ewOM on travel intentions post-COVID-19 and found that ewOM positively influences the intention to travel. As a result, tourists tend to make travel decisions based on ewOM information, which they consider to be trustworthy. According to a study by Su et al., 2021, who used the Stimulus-Organism-Response theory (SOR), the negativity or positivity expressed in online reviews (S) triggers tourists' destination trust (O) and influences their travel intention (R) (Su et al., 2021). In other words, positive reviews increase destination trust and travel intention, while negative reviews erode destination trust and have a negative effect on travel intention. More generally, details and emotions displayed in reviews are important factors considered by tourists when making travel decisions.

Despite the growing research focus on the role played by ewOM in tourists' behaviour, the bulk of studies have mainly investigated the pre-trip planning (Ilieva & Boteva, 2023; Luong, 2025; Su et al., 2021) and post trip experience sharing behaviours (Ghaderi et al., 2024; Oliveira et al., 2020; Van Hanh & Tuyen, 2023). With the advent of internet technologies and social media platforms, tourists rely heavily on ewOM when making decisions regarding the choice of a destination, accommodation and activities (Hussain et al., 2024; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Kaewnaknaew, 2024). Literature has extensively documented tourists' post trip behaviours on travel platforms such as Instagram, Booking.com, TripAdvisor and other travel-related sites. However, there is still little research on the influence of ewOM on actual destination behaviours, i.e. subjective norms stemming from ewOM recommendations and real-time decisions taken during the trip. This is a significant gap that should be addressed: since ewOM can change on a daily basis, it can affect tourists' behaviour not only at the stage of looking for information but also during the trip, which means that ongoing exposure to digital content can influence tourists' decisions in real time.

Another thing that most studies regarding the trust of ewOM have in common is their reliance on quantitative data, which means they tend to pay much less attention to the psychological factors that determine trust in ewOM. This raises a few questions: Do recommendations by previous tourists influence actual destination behaviour and if so, to what extent? Why do tourists trust the electronic word of mouth compared to the traditional word of mouth? Does ewOM reflect the reality of the destination visited? Answers to these questions could help to highlight the importance of ewOM throughout the whole tourist experience from planning to post trip behaviour and enable tourism marketers to integrate ewOM into their tourism offerings during the actual destination experience. South African Tourism (2024) reports that the tourism sector maintains positive growth following the pandemic period because of specialised digital advertising initiatives with effective

online relationship-building approaches. TripAdvisor and Instagram, along with travel blogs, have heightened South Africa’s exposure to tourists while they distribute first-hand accounts that steer other travellers toward selecting their destinations. This study, therefore, aims to address the gap described above by analysing the role of eWOM beyond the stage of information search and post trip behaviour of South African domestic tourists. By evaluating digital interactions, the authors seek to expand knowledge about ways in which digital marketing contributes to the expansion of the tourism sector and the improvement of consumer experience.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theory of Planned Behaviour

According to the theory of planned behaviour (TPB), consumer behaviour is affected by the consumer’s attitude towards this behaviour, subjective norms (whether the behaviour is considered socially acceptable) and perceived behavioural control (the consumer’s belief in whether they can carry out this behaviour (Ajzen, 1991).

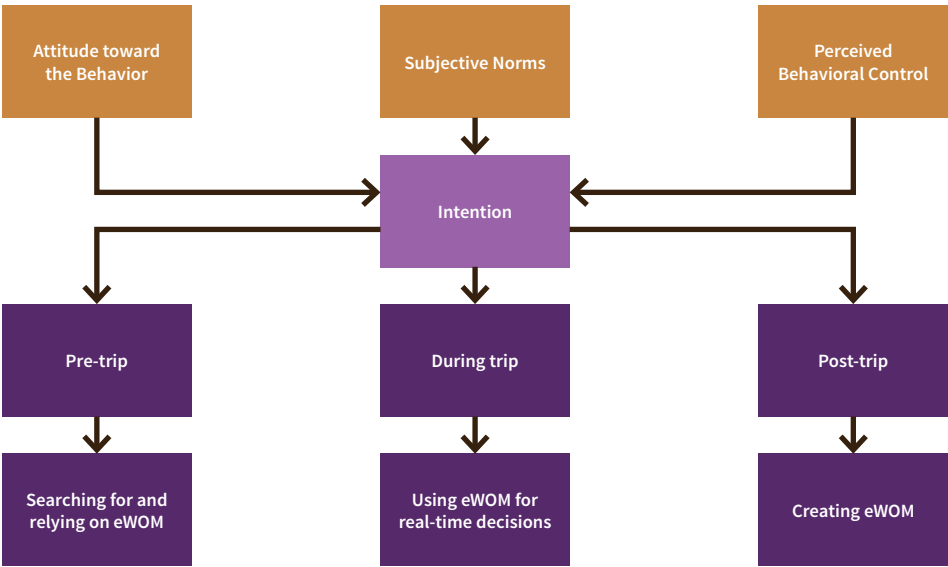


Fig. 1. Theoretical framework of the study  
Source: Microsoft (2025)

As shown in Fig. 1, ewOM is used by tourists at all three stages of the travel experience, namely, before, during and after the trip (Yadav et al., 2022). During the pre-trip stage, the attitude of tourists towards a destination depends on the perceived credibility of its ewOM: if they regard ewOM as trustworthy, they are likely to have a positive attitude towards the destination (Vu Dinh et al., 2025). Tourists tend to put more trust in information shared on social media by friends and relatives than in what they find elsewhere, for example on a hotel or a tourist attraction's website. Thus, they are likely to use ewOM to guide their travel decisions (Ilieva & Boteva, 2023). In other words, attitudes towards the destination are formed when tourists are still searching for information before they decide to travel, which highlights the importance of ewOM in tourism. Online reviews enable tourists to get an idea of a destination based on opinions of other people and may therefore affect their behaviour and experience once they arrive in the destination (Xu et al., 2021). Based on ewOM recommendations, tourists may consider destinations and activities recommended by fellow tourists, friends, relatives or colleagues. It can therefore be said that a tourist's social circle creates a social pressure to make the same travel choices (Wasaya et al., 2022).

Perceived behavioural control refers to factors that affect the tourist's ability to perform an action (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of ewOM and tourists' decision making, perceived behavioural control refers to the ease of access to platforms where travel experiences can be shared or reviewed and to the resources which enable such actions. According to Jalilvand and Samiei (2012), there is a positive correlation between negative ewOM and perceived behavioural control. This means that detailed, credible and trustworthy ewOM positively influences behavioural control over the intention to travel. When tourists trust ewOM, they are most likely to follow through on their travel decisions. This perceived control influences their behavioural intentions. With respect to behavioural control, the authors of this study sought to understand why tourists choose to share or not to share their experiences online, which may help to understand factors behind tourists' behavioural intentions and actual behaviour.

## 2.2. Digital Technology in Tourism Experiences

The growing reliance on digital technology has also shaped tourism experiences. It is now the main way in which tourists obtain information which they need to make travel decisions and to share their travel experiences (Hussain et al., 2024). Recommendations posted on social media sites play a major part in tourists' decision-making process, particularly when searching for information about potential destinations (Armutcu et al., 2023). Expectations formed at this stage are then used

as reference in the evaluation of the actual travel experience during the recollection stage. Once a decision to travel has been made, tourists keep searching for information about activities that can be undertaken at the destination, share content and live updates about their travel experience (Matikiti-Manyevere & Kruger, 2019). Caution is therefore advised when using social media metrics such as likes and views as indicators of actual tourist activity.

Tourists can be actively involved in shaping their own travel experiences, which is known as co-creation. The process of co-creation is nowadays greatly facilitated by digital technology, which gives consumers control over what to consume by easily accessing different online platforms (Sugathan & Ranjan, 2019). There is a positive correlation between the degree of co-creation and customer experience (Sugathan & Ranjan, 2019); hence, companies should ensure that they provide many opportunities for co-creation by incorporating technology into actual destination experiences. Many tourism destinations rely on smart technology to enhance tourists' experience and a study by Sustacha et al. (2023) indicates that smart technologies have a positive effect on the overall tourism experience.

### 2.3. Electronic Word of Mouth in Tourism

Electronic word of mouth (ewom) refers to any positive or negative feedback about a product or company given by customers online (Sánchez-González & González-Fernández, 2021). Online review sites, blogging platforms, social media, and forum networks provide tourists with tools they can use to spread their opinions quickly across worldwide networks (Gavaza et al., 2019). In addition to text and hyperlinks, users of online platforms can share multimedia including photos and videos (Litvin et al., 2008). Much of ewom content on review sites is anonymous, which is a double-edged sword: while this gives tourists a chance to express their opinions freely, it makes it harder to verify the veracity of information (Jansen & Moura, 2024).

ewom has become an integral part of tourists' experiences and serves to satisfy various needs, from the need of recognition to post purchase evaluation (Liu et al., 2024). Positive reviews reinforce trust and boost brand value, while negative reviews trigger reputational issues and decrease sales (Khostaria, 2024). The intangibility of tourism experiences makes the sector heavily reliant on ewom (Ahmed et al., 2025). Tourism has undergone a fundamental transformation as a result of the growing popularity of ewom. The practice of acquiring travel information acquired from guidebooks and travel agents has largely been replaced by the reliance on user-generated online content (Mahadevan & Joshi, 2021). The choice of accommodation and activities, and the planning of itineraries now depend heavily on information found in online reviews, which are perceived as more trustworthy

than traditional marketing content because they are believed to be authentic first-hand testimonies (Tho & Trung, 2025). By providing genuine destination feedback, ewom helps tourists minimise information imbalances and facilitates risk management of unknown destinations (Khoshtaria, 2024).

TripAdvisor, together with Booking.com and Yelp, have established themselves as the main ewom platforms in tourism by offering users tools to assess accommodation and dining options, travel activities and destinations (Sumaia-Afren, 2024). The platforms provide both text-based and visual feedback options. The visual power of ewom has grown through social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok (Agyapong & Yuan, 2022). Tourism-related visual content on these platforms spreads quickly and can turn unknown attractions into trending hotspots in a matter of days.

Knowledge exchange among tourists takes place on dedicated review websites and on social media platforms (e.g. Facebook travel groups and Reddit forums) (Sthapit et al., 2023). Travellers value these interactions because they unify digital speed with extensive forum-like sharing practices, which allow participants to develop trusted knowledge platforms. The ewom ecosystem owes much of its popularity to YouTube because of the rising number of travel vlogs on this platform. Travel vloggers generate narrative-based immersive content that lets viewers experience destinations remotely and provides thorough information about local life, combined with accommodation analysis and pricing, and authentic travel experiences (Hussain et al., 2024).

ewom also plays a vital role within the South African tourism sector by influencing both destination image development and travel choices (South African Tourism, 2024). The major South African tourist attractions, such as Table Mountain, the Kruger National Park, Robben Island, the Garden Route and Cape Winelands, achieve frequent visual exposure through social media networks including Instagram, Facebook and TikTok. The natural splendour and wildlife encounters, as well as cultural landmarks and South African dining experiences, get showcased by visitors through digital posts, resulting in a compelling virtual image of the country (Nyikana & Bama, 2023). South African Tourism recognises the strategic importance of ewom by partnering with social media influencers to generate user content through digital storytelling campaigns and hashtag-related initiatives (South African Tourism, 2024). Tourists generate positive wom content regarding safety advances, exceptional customer care, and distinctive touristic encounters, which overcome unfavourable stereotypes and increase South Africa's worldwide attractiveness for travel.

Studies like Sumaia-Afren (2024) show that ewom plays a vital part in current tourism marketing and experience management through multiple digital channels.

It is now clear that tourism businesses, together with destination marketers, should develop ewOM strategies to help satisfied customers post positive reviews while handling negative comments effectively and using digital platforms to demonstrate authentic visitor activities. To be competitive, tourism businesses need to keep in mind that consumers rely more on peer suggestions than on corporate promotions (Dutta & Mandal, 2018). Destination management plans should include ewOM strategies designed to improve brand perception, boost visitor numbers and support sustainable development within digital tourism realms.

### 3. Methods

The purpose of this qualitative study was to thoroughly evaluate the relationship between ewOM and tourism experiences of South African tourists (Bell et al., 2022). In particular, the researchers wanted to understand how ewOM shapes tourists' pre-trip behavioural intentions and travel experience without pre-conceived ideas. Data for the analysis were collected using semi-structured open-ended online interviews in which respondents were able to freely express their views. An invitation outlining the purpose of the study and participation details was disseminated via Eastern Cape travel related Facebook groups. Interested participants were also encouraged to share the details about the study with their social and professional circles. Microsoft Teams meetings were then scheduled based on participants availability. The sample consisted of 30 domestic tourists from the Eastern Cape province in South Africa who had visited a tourism destination in South Africa in the last three years and used ewOM platforms to enquire about the destination. These criteria are similar to those used in other qualitative studies related to tourism marketing.

The interviews took 15–20 minutes. The adequate sample size for qualitative studies varies based on the scope and purpose of the study. According to some authors (Hagaman & Wutich, 2017; Wutich et al., 2024), saturation can be achieved after just 6 to 9 interviews, while statistical analysis conducted by Ellis and Hart (2023) indicates that a study involving between 14 and 17 participants was sufficient to reach saturation. The sample size of 30, which is comparable to those used in similar qualitative studies (El Maich & Zniber, 2024; Gavaza et al., 2025), can therefore be regarded as adequate.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, which included three levels of meaning-making, namely, re-reading interviews and listening to the recordings (Saldaña, 2021), classifying responses (Hemme et al., 2017), and data reduction



and sense-making (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Re-reading consists in first summarising the content of each interview as a brief piece and then developing a much longer narrative about each focus group. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, the respondents were asked to listen to their recording to check if it captured what they had intended to share. Ethical principles, such as informed consent, right of participation, confidentiality, and anonymity of the interviewees, were adhered to.

Basic sociodemographic information about the respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Socio-demographic information

Variable	Category	Number of respondents
Gender	Male	10
	Female	16
	Prefer not to say	4
Age	20–25 years	13
	26–30 years	8
	31–35 years	3
	36–40 years	2
	41–45 years	4
Purpose of travel	Leisure	18
	Business	7
	Academic	5

Source: Authors' own compilation

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Information Search and Decision Making

Interviewees indicated a wide range of internet platforms they used to search for information prior to travel, including social media sites like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, travel websites such as booking.com, the destination's website and the Google search engine if no information was available on the destination's social media page. More than one social media platform can be used during information search, as indicated by one interviewee who used both Instagram and TikTok but regarded TikTok as more influential. Detailed descriptions, videos, pictures, comments and reviews were major factors that determine the choice of a destination. The social media platform WhatsApp was also used, as it saves time spent on

online research, according to the same interviewee. Apart from using social media to search for information prior to travel, information found on these platforms, such as pictures, videos and reviews, plays a key role in interviewees' decisions to travel to the destination. Interviewees unanimously agree that ewom had a significant influence on their decision to travel. Sample responses from interviewees are included below:

**Interviewee 1:** Yeah. I actually used Google, TikTok, booking.com and social media. It was actually Google because it wasn't that popular. They're not posting that much on their TikTok page, so they didn't have much more information as compared to Google, so Google ended up influencing my decision.

**Interviewee 8:** I mostly use Google search and social media, specifically Facebook. OK, firstly, for Google search and Facebook, I chose it because it makes it possible for you to also see the pictures of the place you want to visit, provide you with real-time information, for instance, with the Google search, I was also able to view those preview videos about Durban and see what the pictures of the place are, so that I can make an informed decision whether I want to visit or not. And with Facebook, I was also able to see the comments from people who've also visited the place before.

**Interviewee 23:** First of all, I chose the destination. It was because I heard people talking about it, and also, it was along the road to where I was going. But for me to get further information, I had to. Consult online from here, that is, to go to Google and try to go to the pages of those areas, go down or visit and see what they offer. And also, what are people saying in their reviews then? That's what gives me an idea. Okay, so from all these places, I think if I can go to this place, what people are saying in the reviews.

## 4.2. Expectations

Information found prior to travel is used to form perceptions and opinions about the destination and creates certain expectations. The interviewees admitted they expected to get the same level of service as what they had seen online, if not better. If ewom is extremely positive, the resulting expectations can be very high. Discrepancies between ewom and the actual experience can lead to negative evaluations. Intangible elements such as culture, natural beauty and the weather also form part of expectation formation. According to some interviewees, some expectations were not met because they were based on exaggerated descriptions, such as the distance to nearby attractions. Some of these descriptions and pictures were the main reason why the interviewees had decided to visit the destination, while the difference between expectation and the actual experience was largely negative. If a destination

is presented as luxurious or the experience is rated highly, expectations are also high. Some interviewees had this to say:

**Interviewee 19:** Very high. I was thinking I was going to arrive in paradise and a luxurious place. Yeah, I expected too much. Even though we did have fun and the place was as it was in the video. There are lots of things that were obviously edited out things that we didn't see, stuff like transportation. She didn't mention how expensive the transportation was. She didn't mention how chaotic the transportation was, and getting from one place to another was very difficult. Even though we were able to go to all the places that she had recommended, she didn't specify all the difficulties that she encountered throughout her stay. So, I feel like it was lacking in a way.

**Interviewee 28:** Some places exceeded my expectations. Some places didn't meet my expectations, but in terms of the view, it exceeded my expectations. It was beautiful. Everything nice. What disappointed me was the size of the room. I don't think they're honest enough because when I got there, the size of the room was very small, and I couldn't understand how, like the pictures, they were not actually showing us these rooms like they showed me another room, whereas you are giving me a room that I didn't see in the pictures, but the view, the service, everything was just exceptional.

#### 4.3. eWOM and Trust

Information presented online is not always trustworthy. This is why the interviewees also checked the destination's star rating and reviews from previous travellers. This means that apart from initial ewom, tourists often take the trouble to check if the information they found can be trusted. Positive reviews played an important role in fostering trust in ewom for most of the respondents. In other words, when more people share similar positive experiences, one can conclude that the information presented via ewom platforms is reliable. Positive past experiences with a specific platform also enhance trust in other ewom platforms. Close relations to the source of ewom had a positive effect on trust. However, not all interviewees trusted ewom on account of their past experiences and inaccurate information upon arrival at the destination. Since some aspects of reviews depend on individual preferences, there is a certain degree of distrust towards information they contain: things that one tourist liked may not be liked by another person. Therefore, the presence of both negative and positive reviews on a travel platform enhances its trustworthiness; in addition, it creates more realistic expectations. Interviewees had this to say:

**Interviewee 20:** OK, it's a deep look at what I usually do. I search the place now and then I look at reviews. If I see that most reviews speak about similar things, then I do

trust the information. But when I see that, for example, person one is speaking something different, person two is speaking something different, person three is speaking something different, I don't really trust the place, so it depends on how many reviews are similar, that's how I trust something.

**Interviewee 16:** I get my doubts, but for bookings.com, my trust is higher, considering that I've been using it for a while, and they even grade you in their levels of usage for users. There's a genius level there, gold level and so on. So, because I've used them for so long, they also offer discounts. That gave me trust to say, oh, ok, this is legit on the place that they are showing me. For me to even go and check this place. The actual website of this place compared to other websites, such as bookings, travellers and so on, because I have never booked through travellers, but I have booked through bookings.com.

#### 4.4. Destination Behaviour

As demonstrated in the previous sections, ewom plays a significant role in the pre-trip stage of the tourist experience. The purpose of this study was also to determine whether ewom influences in-destination behaviour. A number of interviewees explained that because of the videos and pictures they had seen online, they chose to engage in activities shown in these videos or photos. This indicates that ewom can also influence in-destination behaviour. However, some respondents were much less influenced by experiences of other tourists and had their own ideas as to how to spend their time. In other words, the influence of ewom on in-destination behaviour varies depending on the person. Sample responses regarding this aspect are provided below:

**Interviewee 3:** Honestly, yeah, when it comes to that, there was no way that I was influenced by the reviews in terms of the specific question that you asked. But when it comes to just a general review in terms of probably the cleanliness, the environment, and the safety, then indeed it influenced me. But when it comes to probably trying also to imitate, or maybe just to have a recollection of other guests or other visitors, I haven't had that experience, but it's something that I'm also considering, based on what you're saying, it's something that I could probably consider doing going forward.

**Interviewee 19:** So, everything that she did, we did; there's nothing new that we had tried to experience. So, everything that was on her video influenced our decisions or our behaviours. So, everything that she had done, from cycling to quad biking, we did.

**Interviewee 10:** I can say that when it comes to content creation, I'm not that much invested, to be honest, because ABC took a photo at this certain spot or when I was checking reviews. I just take general pictures at a place because I might find a certain

sport to be attractive, then you. You can find a certain place not attractive, but so that's the thing. So I haven't been influenced in regard to that.

#### 4.5. Overall Experience

Overall travel experience is evaluated in relation to expectations formed prior to travel based on pictures, videos and reviews supplied by other tourists. When comparing their expectations and their actual travel experience, interviewees stated that their expectations were met, which means that the ewom was accurate, though not necessarily in all aspects. One interviewee mentioned that they liked the view from their room, but the size of the room was smaller than expected. Trip highlights were completely shaped by ewom recommendations. For first-time visitors, highlights of the experience were based on the knowledge collected about the destination as opposed to ewom recommendations.

The interviewees described specific aspects of the travel experience as highlights under the influence of ewom, such as a pool, WiFi and breakfast, to name a few. In the case of destinations that had little to no social media presence, the interviewees said that online information had little influence on the highlights of their trip. Negative differences between the actual experience and the experience portrayed via ewom may lead to inconveniences such as rebooking a completely different accommodation. The interviewees recommended doing extra research about the place before visiting to avoid disappointment. Although there were some discrepancies between ewom and the actual experience, the interviewees were generally satisfied. In some instances, the experience exceeded expectations. Here are some comments regarding this aspect:

**Interviewee 13:** Some of the information was a little bit exaggerated. For instance, I had visited the outdoors and the information provided indicated that it was very close to the outdoor National Park. But only when I got there, I realised it's quite a little bit far away. Just close to the freeway, and it was a self-catering venue.

**Interviewee 5:** OK, to be honest, on social media, they presented more than what the actual reality was, I think, because they wanted to get customers for the place they were selling them, please. So they gave us too many expectations. We were not mad but let if I could rate it, I'll make it like an 8 out of 10 because everything else that they spoke about was there.

**Interviewee 21:** Obviously, the place that we had initially seen on social media didn't meet our expectations, but the island itself, the one that she was promoting, which is Mauritius, did live up to our expectations. So, I do recommend it to people like me. Make use of social media to go like internationally or even nationally to visit places, but I feel

like your own research does play a role, because I feel like if we did our own research on top of seeing things in social media, it would have assisted and made us aware of the other things that we are missing. From the videos that she had posted, do you understand? The experience was positive because it did meet our expectations in the manner that we did enjoy most of the activities that she was promoting and that she had shared, yeah.

#### 4.6. Sharing the Experience Online and Recommendation of the Place

The general reason why the interviewees chose to share their experiences online was to encourage others to travel and have the same positive experience at a given destination. Some interviewees received enquiries about their experience from people who were also interested in visiting the same destination. Platforms used for this purpose range from those that enable sharing with complete strangers, such as Instagram and TikTok or dedicated travel websites which publish user ratings and reviews, to more personal platforms such as WhatsApp and oral word of mouth to friends and family. As a result, those who want to travel and experience these destinations or attractions have ample information to rely on. The interviewees also believed that their ewom recommendations would influence others to visit the place. Some shared their feedback directly with the owner of the establishment rather than publicly. Interestingly, there also those who were not willing to share their experiences with others, whether online or in person.

**Interviewee 1:** Yeah, I did take some pictures, and I did post on WhatsApp. I posted on Facebook and on Instagram. Yeah. And then I think on Instagram, I did share the location of the place where I was. Posting influenced others to also visit, I think, by me posting online, there was this cousin of mine who commented, as I've said, that the view is so nice. So she commented on when I was in this place? I told her the location, and to my surprise, the following week she booked the place. So, I can say word of mouth is strong from my side in terms of, because if I can say they can go and check this place on Google or their page on Instagram, they're not that active. So, on my side, I can say word of mouth and then as they were seeing the pictures as I was posting online.

**Interviewee 13:** I still don't believe that my experience would have made a difference, considering that the needs and the preferences of people usually tend to differ. Hence, even in the presence of you recommending something, people still find things not 100% what they expected, because we don't see or perceive things the same way.

**Interviewee 26:** Yeah. I posted it on WhatsApp, but it's not a full-blown video, just like a pic, and that's all. That's all. I was, I could say. Yeah, I was kind of marketing the place. Oh, let me just say I was showing where I'm at so people can decide if they want to come or not.

## 5. Discussion

This goal of the study was to understand the role of ewom in tourists' travel decisions, experiences, satisfaction and behavioural intentions. The tourists' travel decisions are shaped by various factors at different stages of the travel experience, such as information gathering, actual travel, destination behaviour and future behavioural intentions. Online information search helps to minimise the risks and unpredictability associated with travel (Khoshtaria, 2024). Tourists use online information to analyse potential destinations. According to Wang (2014), the quality of information about destinations, which is posted online, such as pictures, videos and reviews, affects tourists' intention to visit them. The results of this study are consistent with those reported by Pourazad et al. (2025), who found that details and informativeness of content on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok were persuasive in destination selection. Similarly, Keelson et al. (2024) found that information gathered by tourists online and from friends and family influences their destination choices. In other words, online sources of information are crucial in tourists' decision-making process, especially during the pre-purchase stage of travel.

Before the actual trip, tourists develop expectations based on information they have found on various ewom platforms, and these expectations are crucial in the evaluation of the travel experience. Chang & Wang (2019) note that information obtained from social media platforms tends to produce high expectations regarding potential destination. In support of this, this study found that tourists had had high expectations of destinations they visited based on information obtained from ewom platforms. Furthermore, in some instances, there were mismatches between expectations and reality, which were the result of poor information quality. Information quality in the context of this study relates to the accuracy, believability, reputation and objectivity (Wang & Strong, 1996). It is therefore crucial that ewom recommendations should be an accurate representation of the experience, since they have a direct impact on tourists' behavioural intentions and shape their perception of a destination (Majeed et al., 2020). Any inaccuracies in this regard can be detrimental to satisfaction levels and can lead to negative reviews and ratings of an establishment.

Tourists tend to trust online user reviews (ewom) as they are assumed to reflect someone else's actual experience. Since word-of-mouth lacks the self-serving interests of commercial advertising, tourists are increasingly relying on social media for travel-related decision making (Liu et al., 2024). If online information about a destination or an experience is perceived as accurate and trustworthy, tourists are likely to engage in the experience (Armutcu et al., 2023).

The choice of activities at a given destination can also be influenced by ewOM recommendations, which is partly confirmed by the results of this study and consistent with the concept of subjective norms mentioned in the TPB. However, preferences and other on-site factors can also influence tourists' behaviour at the destination. Tourists who are not familiar with a destination are more likely to rely on online recommendations as regards the choice of activities (Zhang et al., 2009). This study found that tourists were generally satisfied with their experiences, indicating that their ewOM-based expectations were met and, in some instances, exceeded. This is consistent with a study by Hung & Khoa (2022), who found that ewOM indirectly influences satisfaction by shaping the destination image, attitudes towards a destination and travel intention. Similarly, Goyal and Taneja (2023) report that pre-trip ewOM is critical in the final evaluation of the trip, as it plays a key role in the formation of expectations, which in turn significantly influence the level of satisfaction.

Thanks to the inclusion of high quality of videos and pictures, ewOM regarding a given destination is likely to be perceived as positive (Zhou et al., 2022). This means that the quality of ewOM information is crucial in shaping tourists' behavioural intentions. Travel experiences shared online are the source of up-to-date information about destinations, which helps tourists make more informed travel decisions (Liu & Park, 2015). Tourists who use ewOM to plan and execute their trips tend to be willing to share their experiences online. While examining the relationship between customer experiences, commitment, and ewOM, Paisri et al (2022) found that a positive experience increases affective commitment, which encourages tourists to share their experiences online. In other words, when expectations based on ewOM recommendations are met or exceeded, tourists are highly likely to engage in positive ewOM, thus ensuring that the connection between experiences and online influence continues through feedback platforms.

## 6. Conclusions

This study highlights the crucial role played by ewOM during the entire tourist experience, from the stage of information search, through behavioural intentions, the actual behaviour at a destination and experience evaluation. The study confirms the validity of TPB through findings that ewOM influences tourists' actual behaviour at the destination and shows that detailed information from online reviews minimises perceived risks associated with the intangible nature of tourism experiences, thus increasing the level of perceived behavioural control. Quality,



the level of detail, and persuasiveness of online recommendations and reviews can produce favourable attitudes towards potential destinations, while recommendations from fellow travellers and the online community on travel platforms and social media reinforce subjective norms. Tourists generally perceive ewom as reliable and trustworthy information, which helps to eliminate risks associated with travel and increases tourists' confidence in executing their travel related decisions. The study provides additional evidence supporting the TPB by demonstrating the social influence of online platforms through ewom, which has become an integral part of travel decision making. The role of ewom goes beyond initial information search and, as such, should be incorporated by service providers to ensure that it is an accurate representation of the actual experience. Unlike traditional wom, trustworthiness of ewom information is harder to verify and its motivations are unknown, which means that in some cases it may not be an accurate representation of the reality. Tourists tend to trust online information more if it comes from a known source or a verified account on a travel website or Google reviews. The use of ewom in tourism is a continuous loop of information sharing, which ensures that fellow travellers make informed decisions using up-to-date information.

## 7. Limitations and Future Research

The main limitation of the study is its exclusive reliance on qualitative data, which cannot be used to make any generalisations about the whole population of South African tourists. Additionally, the study did not account for regional differences in digital infrastructure or access to ewom platforms, both of which are bound to influence the extent and nature of ewom engagement. Future research should therefore involve mixed-method approaches, including quantitative data collected from larger samples of tourists that could provide more representative information about ewom in tourism. Longitudinal studies could explore how ewom influences tourist satisfaction and loyalty over time, while comparative studies across different cultural or regional contexts would help uncover variations in ewom trust and impact. Moreover, future investigations could examine the role of artificial intelligence and platform algorithms in shaping ewom visibility and credibility, and the potential of ewom to promote sustainable and inclusive tourism practices.

## CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

Conceptualization, **BKG, PN**; data curation, **N/A**; formal analysis, **PN**; funding acquisition, **N/A**; investigation, **BKG**; methodology, **BKG**; project administration, **N/A**; resources, **N/A**; software, **N/A**; supervision, **N/A**; validation, **N/A**; visualization, **N/A**; writing — original draft, **BKG, PN**; writing — review & editing, **BKG, PN**

## Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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## Od recenzji do rzeczywistości: rola elektronicznego marketingu szeptanego w kształtowaniu doświadczeń turystów w RPA

**Streszczenie.** W badaniu przeanalizowano wpływ elektronicznego marketingu szeptanego (eWOM) na doświadczenia turystów z RPA, a szczególnie sposób, w jaki treści umieszczane w internecie kształtują plany wyjazdów turystycznych, aktywność w miejscu docelowym oraz oceny wystawiane po zakończeniu wyjazdu. Wraz z rozwojem platform cyfrowych, takich jak Instagram, TikTok i Trip-Advisor, eWOM zaczął odgrywać kluczową rolę w procesie wyszukiwania informacji turystycznych, kształtowania oczekiwań i dzielenia się wrażeniami z pobytu. Badanie opiera się na danych jakościowych zebranych podczas częściowo ustrukturyzowanych wywiadów prowadzonych przez internet z udziałem 30 turystów z RPA, którzy korzystali z platform eWOM podczas planowania wyjazdów turystycznych i w ich trakcie. Wyniki wskazują, że eWOM znacząco wpłynął na wybór miejsca docelowego, poziom zaufania do informacji turystycznych oraz zachowania turystów, w tym na wybór aktywności w miejscu docelowym, jak również na chęć dzielenia się swoimi wrażeniami w sieci. Badanie zwraca uwagę na wpływ rzetelnych i wiarygodnych treści eWOM na zadowolenie turystów i ich przyszłe decyzje wyjazdowe. Biorąc pod uwagę jego kluczową rolę w całym cyklu doświadczeń turystycznych, eWOM powinien stać się strategicznym elementem marketingu turystycznego i zarządzania doświadczeniami turystycznymi.

**Słowa kluczowe:** marketing szeptany w formie elektronicznej, doświadczenia turystyczne, Republika Południowej Afryki, marketing cyfrowy, zachowania turystów



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