A Study on the Positive Impact of eWOM in Eco-Tourism Destinations of Vietnam

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Abstract: This research study focuses on the positive impact of eWOM in determining the selection of eco-tourism destinations. A positive review of tourism destinations has significant images, content and experience. Its natural beauty, environment-friendly practices, sustainability, and other factors determine an eco-tourism destination. The paper's findings suggest that tourists research before selecting a destination. An honest review of a previous consumer has more impact on a potential customer. Travellers opt for online and offline media to judge the authenticity of the destination. This research paper also examines how electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) impacts the tourists' decision to select and visit eco-friendly destinations?

Keywords: eco-tourism destinations, e-WOM, positive reviews, carbon-neutral, travel forums

1. Introduction

Electronic word of mouth marketing is seldom referred to as word of the mouse advertising because of its multiplier effect such as a reliable tool, real-time information, trustworthy and hands-on experience of the product. Users post their reviews and ratings regarding a destination based on their experience, significantly impacting their decisions. 92% of consumers have more faith in friends and family than in advertising. 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 social media revolutionized brand visibility with content, images and videos. It is constantly updated with images and videos to get more visitors Interaction with Customers keeps buzzing and engaging the visitors on social media sites. Several studies discuss new-age travellers as always logged in, having ample information, a strong wi-fi connection, exploring new places, and checking accurate time information regarding destination, location, season, and other necessary information. (Camilleri & M.A, 2018)

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 customer's behaviour 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 above illustration reflects customers' positive reviews on the travel review website.

2. Electronic word of mouth(e-WOM)

e-WOM is a trustworthy source in portraying the positive side of the destination to a global audience. "In Internet marketing, consumers communicate with each other to determine the product's authenticity. Consumers are motivationally involved in e-WOM reviews left by writers, bloggers and reviewers". (Hussain, et al., 2020). Accessibility of products on e-WOM influences the potential customers to indulge in thorough surveys and planning. Ahmad, Hamad, Raed, & Maram (2019) identified three main dimensions of e-WOM as Quality, Quantity, and Trust, impacting the decision of travelling based on these dimensions." Vinyals-Mirabent, (2019) spoke about the several features of a destination such as 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".

As per the research paper of Constantinides E. and Holleschovsky, N.I., (2016), 93% of consumers opinionated that online reviews offer real-time suggestions, impacting their purchase decision. "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". (Ruiz-Mafe, et al., 2018). "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 eco-tourism site." (Tata, et al., 2019)

> *"Electronic word of mouth (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." (Ismagilova, et al., 2020)*

"Social media users' trust in the Internet platform significantly influences their intention to purchase a product/destination. Trust is an essential factor in online purchase, as people are affected by the good/bad experience of the product." (Mahmood, 2014) Consumer purchase decisions are influenced by online reputation and ratings given on online platforms (Schuckert, 2015). Previous visitors' reviews and ratings are seen as a reliable source when planning a decision (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008) (Park & Nicolau, 2015). UNWTO (2021) emphasized, for the long-term sustainability of eco-friendly destinations, retention of natural resources must be assured.

3. Eco-tourism

This branch of tourism targets environment-conscious travellers. Travellers keen to reduce carbon footprint are the exclusive clientele of this segment. 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.

Eco-tourism offers multiple opportunities for sustainable fishing, agriculture, recycling, reusing, reducing plastic waste, promoting green travelling by avoiding planes and motor vehicles. The International eco-tourism 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 properties in these destinations are eco-lodges, treehouses, homestay. **Ecotourism Destinations**

Eco-tourism destinations work towards sustainable development and inclusive growth. Several countries have breath-taking eco-tourism destinations,.These destinations have a stunning landscape, lush green ecosystem, miles of coastline. Different scholars have defined Eco-tourism destinations close to nature, conserved resources, and offered livelihood to the local community. The International Ecotourism (society, 2015), defined "Eco-tourism as a subcategory of sustainable tourism development restricted to natural surroundings." These destinations make optimum utilization of available resources, sustain the necessary ecological process, and conserve flora and fauna. UNWTO (2005) defines "Sustainable tourism as the overall protection of social and environmental impacts, addressing the visitors' needs, involve the environment protection and participation of the local community."

Eco-friendly destinations are focused on reducing the carbon footprint by complying with sustainable measures, i.e., avoiding flights to reduce carbon emission, opting to walk, riding a bicycle, driving electric vehicles, minimizing the use of plastic and other green initiatives. "A tourist visits almost 38 websites before finalizing a purchase decision of the destination. Potential tourist checks social media, search engines, booking sites, online reviews." (Dennis Schaal, 2013)

Numerous research papers discuss the relationship between tourism and the inconsistent landscape and its positive and negative impacts on the environment and local communities. (García-Martínez MÁ, et al., 2017). Millions of visitors visit eco-tourism destinations. This movement of visitors damages the site, and the vulnerable tourist activities disrupt the ecosystem. Over tourism degrades the landscape, and this environmental impact is responsible for the significant adverse effects on biological activities. The construction and development of infrastructure and facilities are often uncertain. (Deng, et al., 2002). Eco-tourism destinations minimize the impact and reduce carbon footprints by indulging in responsible behaviour. Tour operators encourage tourists

to be environmental-friendly during their trips and strengthen the local community by purchasing the local produce and participating in nature conservation sensitivity. "Tourists are influenced by electronic word-of-mouth opinions, and this is rising with the development of electronic culture." (López, et al., 2014)

The Eco-tourism activities make the generic use of natural resources, including landscapes, terraces, waterways, vegetation, wildlife and cultural heritage. Urban forests are depleting under pressure; therefore, managing recreational carrying capacity ensures ecological value and satisfaction. Ceballos-Lascuráin, H. (1996) discussed the role of eco-tourism potentials in the environmental development of the Miankaleh Protected Region, which validated the suitability of Protected areas, where activities are consistent in every region on a comprehensive management plan to support sustainable tourism development. Eco-tourism focuses on environmental protection concepts, ecological tourism, and sustainable development is prevalent worldwide. (Saraskanroud, et al., 2011)

Eco-tourism is 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. (Jingjing, 2008) Eco-tourism denotes travelling to the natural environment, developed to conserve the vegetation, habitat and wildlife. Eco-tourism is mainly based on the natural environment available to tourists for using it, appropriating conditions and requiring protection of natural resources, which can be realized through evaluation of capability and capacity of the natural environment.

4. Methodology

The existing literature suggests that perceptions of the destination image are essential factors to determine the choices of tourism destinations. The researcher investigated the literature to bridge the gap of determining the impact of positive reviews in motivating tourists. This research study revolves around the positive reviews of tourists and users' reviews on electronic media, i.e. blogs, social media websites, and travel review websites. The researcher has investigated leading newspapers, review websites, social media, buzz, blogs, vlogs and viral messages. This research paper is conducted with the descriptive-analytical method by gathering previous research papers and reports. The researcher has scrutinized tourism review websites to check the content, images, travel advice, recommendations, things to do on a site, reviews, vacation rentals, hotels, travel forms. TripAdvisor, TourRadar, Responsibletravel, Kimkim, Zicasso, Amazon and Agoda websites offer top reviews, a recent review of the verified purchaser, reviews of the destination by several star ratings, text, image, video, video ratings, destination, trip reviews, and verified reviews of a user. The positive reviews while searching a destination are based on previous users' reviews.

5. Result

The paper discusses the parameters of Ecotourism, such as sustainability, natural resources, which are utilized as keywords by a tourist for selecting Ecotourism. User reviews regarding things to do, travel forums, browsing destinations, and themes results suggest that e-WOM positively impacts determining a product and reaching a consensus regarding its purchase. The experience shared by fellow travellers and users' ratings influences the purchase decision of tourists. A bad review and rating on tourism websites can turn potential buyers into non-potential buyers, as people's opinions trigger these reviews and ratings. The paper contributes to the determinants of e-WOM and their impact on tourist buying behaviour.

6. Discussion and recommendation

6.1 Impact of excellent e-WOM

The excellent word of mouth offers a competitive advantage of influencing the customers. Digital WOM can be accessed by anyone, offering accurate time information with images and videos to an online visitor. Following excerpts from the leading newspaper of Vietnam; *VN Express* highlights the impact of a positive review of tourist destinations:

▪ In January, the New York Times included Con Dao, the 16-island archipelago in the southern province of Ba Ria-Vung Tau, in its list of "52 places to love in 2021."

▪ In February, Phong Nha-Ke Bang, a UNESCO heritage site, was chosen among the world's 25 best national parks by TripAdvisor readers. With over 3,000 caves and grottoes, it is often called the "Kingdom of Caves."

- In March, Hanoi and Da Lat were included in a list of 14 best Asian spots to watch spring flowers by Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post.

- In April, Dam Trau on Con Dao Island was named among the 25 best beaches globally by US travel site Travel+Leisure.

- In May, the Hai Van mountain pass between Thua Thien-Hue Province and Da Nang City in central Vietnam was listed as the world's fourth most beautiful drive by American site Travel+Leisure.

- In June, the old Hoi An Town was ranked eighth in the annual list of 10 cheapest tourist destinations in the world

- HCMC was named among Time magazine's 100 most incredible places in July.

- In August, British travel publication Rough Guides listed the Cai Rang floating market in Mekong Delta's Can Tho City among the world's 19 must-visit food hubs.

- In September, American new site BuzzFeed included the UNESCO-recognized Cat Ba biosphere reserve in the northern port city of Hai Phong on its list of 11 must-visit national parks.

- Cuc Phuong, a popular trekking destination near Hanoi, Asia's leading national park, was at the 2021 World Travel Awards in October.

- In November, Travel+Leisure mentioned Ban Gioc in Cao Bang Province in its list of 21 most beautiful

- In December, Mui Ne, a famous resort town in the south-central province of Binh Thuan, ranked ninth on the list of the world's 100 best beach destination waterfalls globally.

6.2 Travel forum

Word of mouth is persuasive for green travellers and offers real-time recommendations based on the customer's great experience. Green travellers use local transport, travel on foot, opt for bicycles, cause minimum damage to the environment, and follow green practices. They believe in a green and sustainable future. Green commuting, i.e., walking, bicycle, and train, reduce carbon emissions. Based on the online behaviour of customers, customized web pages and internet-based ads are recommended. Digital WOM can promote and demote destinations based on the recommendations of users.
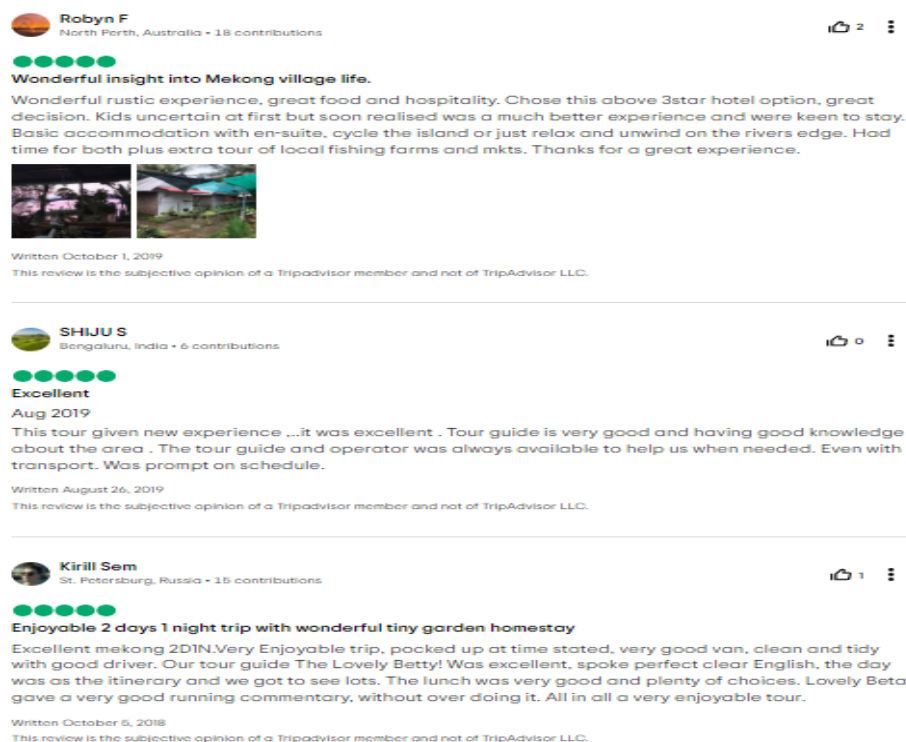

Figure 1: Positive reviews posted by the tourist on travel forum courtesy: Tripadvisor

6.3 Review sites

Online reviews can make or mar the business with positive and negative reviews. The tourism industry needs to be vigilant about its product line presence, rating, and reviews, as customers prefer to check online reviews about flights, hotels, sightseeing, and tour packages. The Global travel review websites, i.e., Bookings, Facebook, Expedia, Yelp, Hostel World, Foursquare, Airbnb, have multiple followers. Potential customers finalize their product line based on customer reviews, location, pricing, facilities, images, videos and virtual tours. The image drawn from Tripadvsiror represents Vietnam's jungles and monsoon forests in diverse ecosystems alive with unique wildlife.

Figure 2: Pu Luong Nature Reserve(Source: Tripadvisor)

6.4 Images and videos

Tourism Researchers widely accept the influencing capacity of destination images in the travel decision process. (Hanlan & Kelly, 2008). Researchers elaborated that "Beautiful images attract the potential buyer to the site, keep them engaged with the virtual tour of destinations and represent the multi-dimension views of the landscape." Mondo, Tiago & Marques, Osiris Ricardo & Gándara, José. (2020) investigated the image of Brazil and Rio de Janeiro as a blended tourism destination (TD) image by examining the image categories as positive or negative and cognitive or affective. The availability of information inspires tourists to visit a destination—images and videos of the destination are the most investigated item on the Internet. Pitana and Diarta (2009) validated that Images develop confidence regarding destination and services. Positive images have a favourable impact on deciding to visit the destination—the availability of images on search engines is well executed with the news, articles, and write-ups. Images and identity can influence tourists to visit a destination. Branding of destinations is significant when developing the strategies for Ecotourism. (Cameron, 2018)
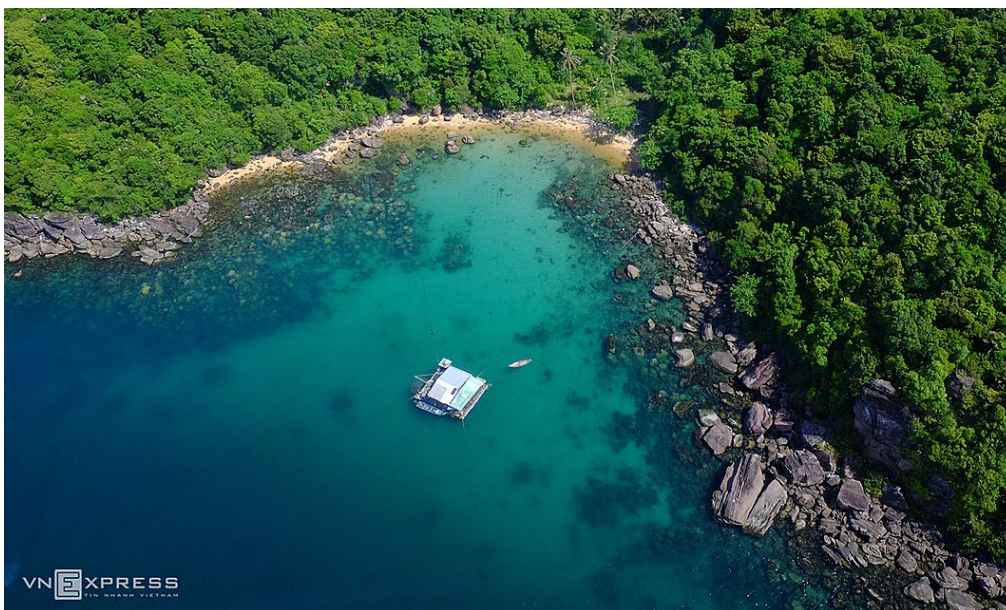

Figure 3: Vietnam tourist hotspot Courtesy: VN Express (Quy, 2021)

7. Information on potential purchase

When planning a purchase, the consumer gathers the information from various online sources where the destination marketers focus on content marketing for activating the USP (Unique sales proposition) of tourist attractions.

7.1 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.

7.2 Social media

Social media is the most sought-after tool among Internet users, as it enhances their visibility, thoughts, and expressions. Brands can showcase their products to global users by participating in social media activities. "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" (Poturak & Turkyilmaz, 2018).

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, travel agencies prefer to have a channel on YouTube, a dedicated web page on social media, i.e., Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Tik-Tok, Snapchat, Pinterest and Instagram. Instagram rules the market with one billion users. Millennials and Gen Z are regular visitors of social media sites to share their views via blogs and vlogs.

Social media networks are available in multiple languages and have billions of followers are associated. 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. Brands create a 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. (Statista, 2021)

Social media is used for 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." (Aprilia & Andriani, 2021)

7.3 Review/rating websites

Customers perceive the consumer review as a fact, emotion, experience, and even rumour. Their views are considered candid and authentic because their perception can change the behaviour of other consumers. Tourism review sites influence Customers' decisions. If there are no product reviews, customers may not opt for it thinking that the product is of inferior quality. Similarly, the excellent rating may initiate the potential buyer to purchase the product. (Blackshaw & Nazarro, 2006)

"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." 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. (Mellinas, 2019)

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 is also dependent on content. Reviews given on online platforms regarding the product impact the buyer's decision. (Park & Lee, 2009). Online reviews evaluate the parameters of products and services sold on third-party and retailers' websites. (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010)

7.4 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 follow DIY (Do it yourself) principles as they garner the information from the Internet. Availability of information and booking is convenient for prompting the customer to buy the deal. Potential tourists search for better deals and compare prices and products 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 product/destination website. Chatbots answer the FAQs (frequently asked questions) to assist the customers with their enquiries. Furthermore, an option of a secure gateway can develop 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.

7.5 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 to upgrade the word-of-mouth advertisement with positive reviews.

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 eco-tourism 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 destinations may be present on several platforms; therefore, destination marketers need to upsell their products by monitoring the reviews and promoting positive thoughts; they must monitor the data during the stay, after the stay, regarding parking, accommodation, availability of vegetarian and non-vegetarian food, restaurants, shopping, sightseeing, and ancillary facilities

Selecting the product based on electronic word of mouth advertisement involves the following:

| Identification of destination |
| Review of destination |
| Exploring potential alternatives |
| Selecting the Eco-friendly destination based on E-WOM |

Figure 4: Determining the selection of eco-tourism destinations (Source: Author)

To finalize the eco-tourism destination, the consumer identifies the destination of their choice and reviews it by judging its Compatibility, reviews, and ratings. The consumer also explores available alternatives based on budget and duration of stay.

8. Recommendation

The researcher recommends sustaining Ecotourism at these destinations with the following measures.

- A positive EWOM of Eco-tourism destinations can generate more eco-friendly tourists.

- Sensitizing the local community about conserving greenery, water bodies, natural habitat, and ecosystem can nurture the feeling of ownership among potential buyers. e-WOM can reduce the damage to the ecosystem if there is a dedicated web page on dos and don'ts at eco-tourism destinations.

- 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.

- 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 to avoid mitigated risk.

- Eco-tourism brings social and cultural changes; development measures can prevent the negative impact of a loss of flora and fauna, biodiversity and expansion of urban areas.

- E-WOM can significantly influence the harmony of suppliers and buyers. Eco-tourism destinations can be the best resort to maintain the natural surroundings, clean water bodies.

9. Conclusion

The researcher has surveyed travel review websites and found that positive e-WOM influences potential customers. The destination is searched based on experience, review, and ranking. Destination management organizations resolve the customer complaint about generating a positive review, which can take Ecotourism to a new level of sustainability.

It was observed that almost 90% of buyers read reviews to determine product quality. Product sellers often instigate the customers to write positive ratings and give a 5-star rating to enhance website product visibility. Positive reviews and star ratings can make the property/destination more powerful than its competitors. Positive reviews like Unique, Remarkable, WOW, Incredible, Significant, Impressive can leave a lasting impression on potential buyers. They can adopt the product advertised by e-WOM message if the information on site is latest and relevant.

The researcher concludes that the reviews posted on the website are perceived to be more credible than advertisements, and they can influence the potential buyer for purchasing the destination. Consumers are willing to share their views regarding the visited destinations, attracting more tourists.

Good reviews can enhance the online reputation. Eco-tourists follow the responsible tourism ethics on electronic platforms and reduce the carbon footprint at travel destinations. A customer has a high affinity

towards a remarkable experience; therefore, brands, products, and destinations must make themselves omnipresent on electronic platforms.

Tourism destinations have fierce competition for sustaining their business; therefore, excellent content and reviews are created in the e-marketing world. Authentic reviews result in buyers' conversion; therefore, destination sellers motivate the customers to share positive reviews to enhance brand reputation. Online promotions of events and virtual tours attract visitors. Consequently, positive reviews enhance the visibility of eco-tourism destinations.

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