

**THE INFLUENCE OF PERSUASIVE E-WOM
REVIEW IN SOCIAL MEDIA TOWARD SAUDIS
TRAVEL INTENTION**

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by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AQ	Argument Quality
ATD	Attituded Toward Destination
B2C	Business-to-consumer
CAGR	Compound annual growth rate
ELM	Elaboration Likelihood Model
EWOM	Electronic Word of Mouth
GDP	Gross domestic products
IA	Information Acceptance
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
MENA	Middle East and North Africa Region
MICE	Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions
PBC	Perceived Behavioral Control
SA	Source Attractiveness
SC	Source Credibility
S-Commerce	Social Commerce
SM	Social media
SN	Subjective Norm
SP	Source Perception
TI	Travel Intentions
TPB	Theory of planned behaviour
TRU	Trust
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organization
HTORs	Hospitality and tourism online reviews

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**PENGARUH ULASAN E-WOM YANG MEYAKINKAN DALAM MEDIA
SOSIAL TERHADAP KEINGINAN WARGA SAUDI UNTUK MELANCONG
ABSTRAK**

Media sosial telah mengubah cara komunikasi perniagaan secara radikal. Ia telah mengubah internet daripada media penyiaran kepada media interaktif dengan pengguna boleh menghasilkan bahan, berkongsi serta menyertai dalam media sosial. Kaedah pembangunan dan penyebaran melalui mulut ke mulut secara elektronik pada masa kini melalui media sosial. Kita telah melihat betapa popular eWOM dalam perniagaan pelancongan. eWOM adalah salah satu alat untuk mencari maklumat tentang produk dan perkhidmatan pelancongan yang boleh membantu mereka untuk membuat keputusan melancong pada masa akan datang. Oleh itu, penyelidikan tambahan terhadap ulasan destinasi dalam talian dan faktor kritikal yang mempengaruhi penilaian pelancong diperlukan. Kajian ini menyelidiki kesan anteseden ulasan persuasif eWOM terhadap sikap pelancong ke destinasi luar negara dan niat perjalanan pelancong Arab Saudi. Penyelidikan ini juga mengkaji kesan kepercayaan sebagai moderator dengan anteseden ulasan persuasif eWOM dan penerimaan maklumat. Data dikumpul daripada 391 rakyat Arab Saudi yang menggunakan saluran media sosial untuk mencari atau mengesyorkan maklumat perjalanan. Instrumen pengumpulan data diperolehi dengan mentadbir soal selidik penyelidikan daripada tinjauan *Google* responden. PLS-SEM telah digunakan untuk menguji hipotesis kajian. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa anteseden ulasan persuasif eWOM dalam laman rangkaian sosial (kualiti hujah, daya tarikan sumber, dan persepsi sumber) mempunyai pengaruh yang signifikan terhadap sikap pelancong terhadap destinasi di luar negara. Penemuan juga menunjukkan bahawa persepsi kawalan tingkah laku dan sikap terhadap destinasi di luar negara memberi kesan ketara

kepada niat melancong. Kajian ini memberi maklumat berharga dalam pemasaran dan pembuat dasar yang akan membantu dalam memahami dengan lebih baik cara pengguna mencari maklumat dan berinteraksi menggunakan media sosial. Selain itu, kajian mendapati bahawa kumpulan sasaran di Arab Saudi yang berusia di bawah 32 tahun menggunakan media sosial untuk mengumpul maklumat pelancongan dalam membantu membuat keputusan. Kumpulan ini menggunakan media sosial sebagai platform untuk mencari dan berkongsi pengalaman mereka, pada masa yang sama, bertindak sebagai pengaruh dalam kalangan rakan sebaya mereka. Pada asasnya, media sosial telah media sosial sudah sehati dalam diri gologongan muda, yang memainkan peranan penting dalam mempromosikan pengalaman mereka di Kerajaan Arab Saudi (KSA). Agensi pelancongan dan syarikat pengurusan pelancongan boleh mempromosikan lebih banyak destinasi pelancongan dengan menggunakan kandungan eWOM daripada media sosial dalam strategi pemasaran masing-masing.

THE INFLUENCE OF PERSUASIVE E-WOM REVIEW IN SOCIAL MEDIA TOWARD SAUDIS TRAVEL INTENTION

ABSTRACT

Social media has radically altered how businesses communicate, transforming the Internet from a broadcasting medium to an engaging and communicating channel that enables users to produce, share, and participate in media. Social media also enables the development and exchange of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which has gained popularity in the travel and tourism business. The eWOM is considered a powerful information-seeking tool on potential tourists' products and services to facilitate decisions on future travel locations or support current travel plans. Therefore, additional research into online destination reviews and the critical factors influencing tourist evaluation is required. This study investigates the influence of the antecedents of persuasive eWOM reviews on tourists' attitudes towards the destination abroad and the travel intention of Saudi tourists. The research also investigates the influence of trust as a moderator between antecedents of persuasive eWOM review and information acceptance. Data were collected from 391 Saudi citizens who utilise social media channels to seek or recommend travel information. The data collection instrument involved administering a Google survey to the respondents. Partial least squares-structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was used to test the hypotheses. Results showed that the antecedents of persuasive eWOM review in social network sites (the quality of the argument, the source's attractiveness, and the source's perception) significantly influence tourist attitudes toward the destination abroad. The findings also revealed that perceived behavioural control and attitude toward destinations significantly influence tourists' travel intention. The study findings provide valuable

insight that will assist marketers and policymakers in better understanding how users find information and interact using social media. Furthermore, the study discovered that the Saudi target group under the age of 32 used social media to gather travel information to help in decision-making. This group uses social media as a platform to find and share their experiences while acting as an influence among their peers. Essentially, social media is ingrained in young consumers, who play a significant role in promoting their experiences in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Travel agencies and travel management companies can promote more tourist destinations by using eWOM content from social media in their respective marketing strategies.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Chapter Overview

The chapter contains the study background, including tourism growth worldwide, discussions on different social media used in tourism including eWOM, followed by the tourism status and its development within the region and beyond in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). The chapter also highlights tourism issues in KSA, specifically regarding eWOM. The study's problem statement is developed in the chapter, followed by the research methodology and the scope. The chapter further discusses study objectives and questions and the theoretical and practical significance of the study. The definitions of the key terms of variables are explained. Summarily, Chapter 1 presents the structure of the entire study up to its conclusion.

1.2 Background of the Study

Social Social media profits businesses through attracting and communicating with consumers, which has transformed the modern business scope over the past few decades (Bauman & Lucy, 2020). Social media has expanded the Internet from a broadcasting medium to a sharing and collaborative forum that enables consumers to produce and exchange information and engage with the media (Lingreen et al., 2013). The eWOM is considered an influential factor in assisting tourists in deciding future travel destinations or support their travel decisions.

The eWOM is undeniably popular in travel and tourism with features that allow users to participate, connect, and communicate with one another through accepting and sharing information. Given the intangible and often ambiguous nature of tourism

products, eWOM affects tourist destination choice more than other industry products. Travel and tourism entail a significant intangible component, which is also considered high-involvement products. Specifically, the desire to make the right choice and minimise risks among vacationers is paramount (Ishida et al., 2016).

The widespread Internet and rapid technological evolution have revolutionised the function of tourism and business tourism destinations as information sources and mediums of sale (Pencarelli, 2020). Presently, tourists are increasingly utilising social media to seek travel-related information, decide on travel destinations, and share their travel experiences through social networking websites (Facebook), blogs or microblogs (Twitter), and travel review websites. Tourists' perceptions of individuals on social media have become increasingly significant. Tourists use eWOM before travelling for information that supports their judgements on travel products and reduces the risk connected to their decision (Weir, 2017). Tourists also use eWOM to support their vacation plans and seek suitable destinations. Tourists share their experiences with travel service providers by forming and using eWOM after travelling and posting the information on social media to aid others in obtaining the most out of trips, which substantially affects travel business commercial performance and strategy. More businesses are leveraging social media to provide tourists with a channel to submit evaluations in order to strengthen their fundamentals and tourist relationship management. The study extended the literature on eWOM reviews and proposed their significant influence on tourism (Chong et al., 2018). The study enhanced knowledge of the determinants of persuasive eWOM review and the influence on tourist attitudes towards destinations and travel intention.

Social networking sites have become a valuable resource for gathering comprehensive information on travel destinations (Lund et al., 2018). The eWOM can influence the travel intention to a destination tourists significantly depend on reviews to make choices, such as hotels and suitable travel options. According to Charlton (2015), 92% of consumers read online reviews on social media to obtain travel-related information and decide accordingly. Tourists are co-creators and users throughout their entire tourism experience, including before, during, and after a trip (Fan et al., 2020). The involvement in content co-creation may include providers and tourists (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2013), hence outlining the significance of online reviews in travel and hospitality services. First, consumers want to take advantage of their tourist experiences by referring to other tourists' reviews (Rageh et al., 2013).

Second, tourism cannot be experienced before consumption, thus tourists depend on others' familiarity and experience (Lončarić et al., 2018). Lastly, peer reviews are considered truthful and accurate, thus tourists depend on them as reliable sources of knowledge for their travel choices and aid in making travel decisions. Therefore, eWOM and social media are essential tourism information sources (Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, 2017). The swift changes in technology and communication transformed travel and tourism into one of the major economic areas, generating approximately 10% of the global gross domestic product (GDP).

The eWOM has recently attracted researchers, as observed in substantial literature on eWOM in the travel industry (Abubakar et al., 2017; Chong, 2018; Wang 2016; Zainal et al., 2017). Nevertheless, Hlee et al. (2018) and Tham et al. (2013) stated that the subject is still in the process of investigation in terms of social media influence on destination choice. Moreover, Ismagilova et al. (2017) mentioned that more research is required on eWOM influence from the consumer's perspective to

identify any cultural and social changes as different studies from various countries have presented mixed outcomes on the persuasiveness of eWOM communications. Additionally, few studies have investigated how eWOM influences tourist decisions and travel intentions. Thus, the current study identified the factors influencing the persuasive eWOM review and the influence on tourist attitudes towards destinations abroad and travel intention.

1.3 Tourism Growth in the World

Tourism has been one of the fastest-developing areas in the global economy. Tourism creates a vast amount of money and jobs worldwide, which brings people together. Hence, tourism is one of the most dynamic economic development devices in a country. Tourism growth has been integrated into critical national development projects to a certain extent. Most national development strategies now include tourism, provided the strategies are clear and the country owns a strong economic foundation, good infrastructure, and abundant natural resources. These factors grant a country a competitive advantage and ensure that tourist development progress steadily.

Recent tourism development has become one of the most prevailing constituents for economic and development growth. Tourism provides ample employment to all local populations, thus generating employment prospects and entrepreneurship and reducing the global unemployment rate (UNWTO, 2019). Studies reported that the travel and tourism industry supports 319 million employees, which constitutes 10% of the workforce and equal to one out of every 10 jobs globally (WTTC, 2019). Furthermore, the tourism industry contributed US\$8.8 trillion to the worldwide economy in 2018, which constitutes 10.4% of the global GDP.

Although United Nation Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) predicted that tourist revenue would hit the 1.4 billion mark by 2020, the remarkable growth of international arrivals rapidly boosted the revenue and the mark was reached two years ahead in 2018. In 2018, global tourist arrivals in Europe were approximately 713 million, which was an impressive 6% growth from 2017. The increase was +7% in Southern and Mediterranean Europe, +6% in Central and Eastern Europe, and +6% in Western Europe. Nonetheless, no change was observed in Northern Europe due to fewer arrivals in the United Kingdom (UK). Asia and the Pacific received over 343 million (+6%) international tourists in the same year. The number of tourists that entered South-East Asia increased by 7%, followed by North-East Asia (+6%) and South Asia (+5%). The growth in Oceania was a reasonable +3%. Meanwhile, the United States of America (USA) noted an increase of +3% with 217 million international tourists in 2018 and mixed outcomes. North America (+4%) experienced the maximum growth, followed by South America (+3%), while Central America and the Caribbean decreased by -2%. In 2018, Africa experienced a 7% upsurge: North Africa observed a +10% and Sub-Saharan +6% with approximately 67 million arrivals. Last year, the Middle East noted positive outcomes with an upsurge of +10%, hence combining its 2017 tourist arrival with 64 million international tourists (see Figure 1.1).

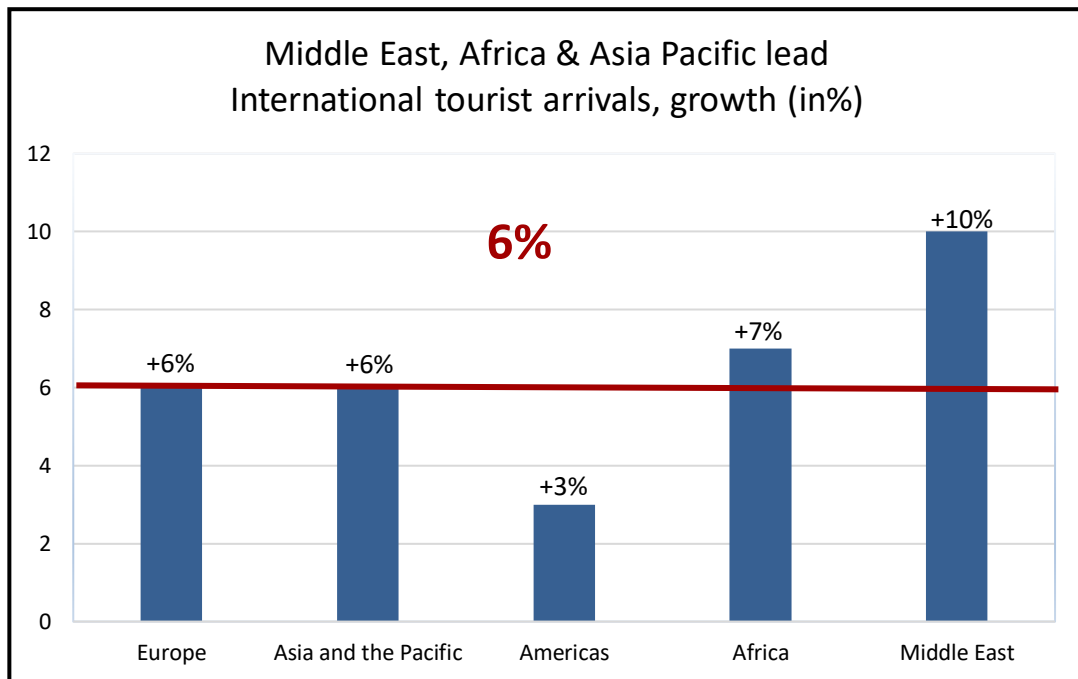


Figure 1.1 Tourist Arrival in the Middle East, Africa & Asia Pacific lead

Source: UNWTO (2019)

Current technological improvements and widespread social media use have transformed the tourism industry. Abubakar (2016) is an information source that determines tourists' travel intentions. The substantial information available in the digital and non-digital world has increased tourists' dependence on eWOM when making travel decisions. Moreover, tourists tend to use other tourists' content to gather additional travel information (Amaro et al., 2016).

Tourists rely heavily on eWOM reviews when making travel choices, such as which travel destinations or hotels to choose. Researchers also emphasised that user-generated content (UGC), such as eWOM reviews, is usually extremely useful (Jayathilaka et al., 2020). The eWOM provides tourists with additional travel information, which tends to persuade tourists to make certain travel decisions. Tourists create a significant amount of eWOM through numerous social media sites to share

their experiences and assist other tourists with their travel decisions (Matikiti-Manyevere & Kruger, 2019).

1.3.1 Information Sources in Tourism

The travel sector seriously depends on information technology (Benckendorff et al., 2019), which is essential to understand changes in tourist behaviour and technologies and influence the flow and ease of access to crucial travel information. Communication is an essential component of human conduct. People normally discuss and exchange opinions on hotels, restaurants, movies, and holiday destinations with family, friends, and people they interact with publicly, which constitutes the consumer's reference group (Chu et al., 2019). The eWOM is defined as face-to-face communication on products or companies between people who are non-commercial entities (Arndt, 1967; Carl, 2006). Litvin et al. (2008) described eWOM as "the communication between consumers about a product, service, or a company in which the sources are considered independent of commercial influence". Although definitions vary, researchers mostly agree that word-of-mouth (WOM) consists of oral and interpersonal communications (Nyilasy, 2006). When people acquire specific information, they reference the information whenever they want to travel. Nevertheless, a tourist intending to visit a new destination can use WOM data from trusted sources to measure the service or performance of a tourism product. Williams et al. (2019) highlighted that positive WOM could enhance destination image and increase destination awareness.

Increasing, consumers use the developing Internet technologies to seek information about a product or company. The enhancement of the Internet, the popularity of e-commerce, and the widespread diffusion of social media applications

led to eWOM. Although eWOM may be less personal than traditional WOM, eWOM is more powerful due to its significant reach and public availability (Hennig et al., 2004). Moreover, numerous academic articles established eWOM as critical to tourism (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Litvin, 2008; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). The researchers generally agreed that eWOM communication is better than the power of regular WOM in this era. Litvin et al. (2018) defined eWOM as “All informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to particular goods and services usage or characteristics or their sellers. This includes communication between producers and consumers and those between consumers themselves”. Therefore, eWOM passes information from one person to another through internet technology, which is beneficial as information can be received from the comfort of one’s home. This type of communication does not require organising any meetings or travelling from one place to another to transfer information to Online Communities and Tourism, specifically the ‘meet other members’ feature. Data are stored and can always be referred to in the future from diverse internet media.

The information can be transmitted directly from one person to another, including through e-mail or posted by single or multiple individuals to a website accessible to several individuals (Litvin, 2018). The eWOM provides a unique channel for countries and cities to market themselves and increase their global attractiveness, making eWOM a vital tool for destination marketing strategy (Doosti et al., 2016). Therefore, when tourists are exposed to eWOM reviews on social networking sites, their persuasiveness may change depending on how they process the information. eWOM is a form of persuasive communication influence, which is linked with content credibility and helpfulness. Studies demonstrated that eWOM is perceived as more

credible and relevant to customers than market-created online sources of information (Gruen et al., 2006).

Many studies have verified the connection between the credibility and helpfulness of eWOM and information adoption, which can affect consumers' attitudes, purchase intentions, and sales (Cheung et al., 2009; TengKhongGoh et al., 2014a; Zhang et al., 2014). Malik (2020) mentioned no operational definition of persuasive eWOM messages, but message persuasion is attributed to "argument quality, source credibility, source attraction, source perception, and source style" (TengKhong & Goh (2014a); Teng et al. (2016). Tsao et al. (2015) emphasised that messages strongly influence intention. The message content full of the mentioned attributes develops eWOM through online sharing and discussion of the brand for the ultimate formulation of an intention to use the final reviews for online purchase decisions. The process stimulates consumers' eWOM usage intention. Meanwhile, TengKhong & Goh (2014a) explained that message persuasiveness is the ability of an online message to be perceived as a reliable source of information by the receivers and capable of influencing the individual's attitude. Online traveller reviews are a primary source that influences travel purchases. Cantallops & Salvi (2014) summarised the influence of eWOM on individuals regarding hotels and suggested that eWOM influences consumers' booking intentions, hotel comparisons, hotel brand awareness, loyalty, risk reduction, product acceptance, and decision-making processes.

Tourists in the past were inclined to discuss their experience with a product or service with their friends and family, which is known as UGC when offered in a complete and truthful method (Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). The UGC also describes how people use social media to share ideas and collaborate. Tourists perceive UGC as a credible source of travel information. The UGC is posted by travellers with first-

hand experience and shared with family and friends, while market-generated content is published on the Internet and created by marketers to interact with tourists on behalf of their companies (Agalo, 2018). The content can be in text, videos, images, and reviews, which are created by people rather than brands.

The eWOM is a specific type of content produced regarding products, services, or businesses (Rodgers & Wang, 2011). Tourists are ready to accept the words from other tourists instead of the marketers when the quantity of content and involvement increases. Some researchers attempted to explain the differences between WOM and eWOM. For instance, Pasternak (2017) tabulated the differences between WOM and eWOM while Alharbi et al. (2020) and others have explained eWOM in great detail. Nevertheless, no researchers have attempted to write the differences between the terms to clarify the subject. Hence, Table 1.1 has been developed to show the differences and similarities between the terms, which is an extended the table from Pasternak (2017).

Table 1.1 Key Differences and Similarities between WOM, eWOM, and Persuasive eWOM (PeWOM)

Features	WOM	eWOM	P eWOM	UGC	MGC
Channel/ context	Face to face	Online	Online	Online	Online
Origin	Consumer- initiated	Consumer- Initiated	Consumer- initiated	Consumer- initiated	Marketers generated
Valence	Positive, negative, neutral	Positive, negative, neutral	Positive, negative, neutral	Positive, negative, neutral	Positive
Form	Oral	Written	Written	Oral as well as written	Oral as well as written
Permanent evidence	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Strength of ties	Usually strong	Usually weak	Strong/ weak	Usually weak	Usually strong
Anonymity	No	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No	No
Timing	Synchronous	Synchronous, asynchronous	Synchronous, asynchronous	Synchronous, asynchronous	Synchronous, asynchronous

Source: Pasternak (2017)

1.3.2 The Growth of Social Media and Popularity for eWOM with Traveller

Social (2018) recorded over four billion individuals worldwide use the Internet, with approximately a quarter of a billion new online users in 2017. Over 50% of the world's population is now online, which is driven by the availability of increasing economic mobile data plans and smartphones. Over 200 million individuals obtained their first mobile devices in 2017. Over 50% of the world population is now online, which is driven by the availability of increasing economic mobile data plans and smartphones. Over 200 million individuals obtained their first mobile devices in 2017 (Social, 2018). Approximately two-thirds of the world's total population now own a mobile phone, and over half are smartphones, thus enabling individuals to enjoy the Internet and social network experiences. Social media assists consumers in

communicating, sharing information, and instantly gathering information for any online products or services, which influences the purchase decision (see Figure 1.2).

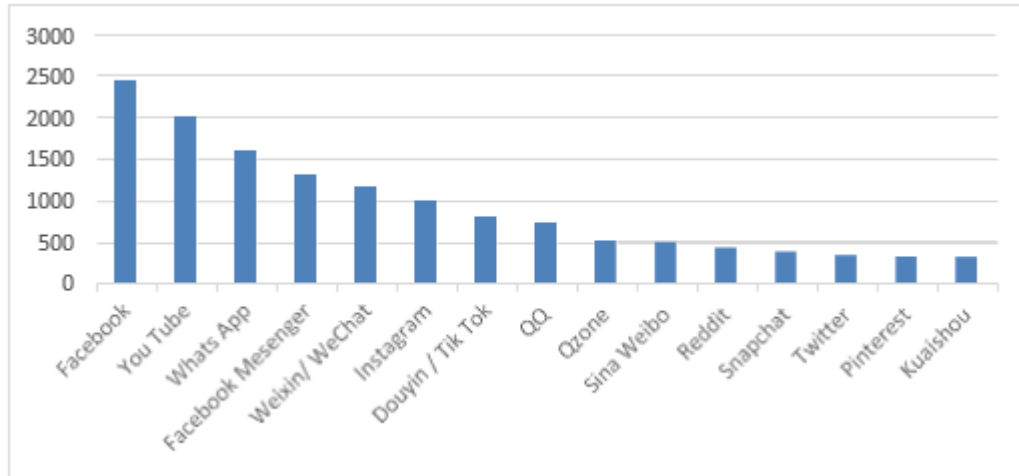


Figure 1.2 Most prevalent social networks worldwide as of January 2020

Source: Statista (2020a)

Social media has evolved as a powerful tool in the tourism industry to market various customised services. The acceptance of eWOM in the travel and tourism sector is apparent. The eWOM denotes “all informal information made available to potential clients through internet-based technology about a particular good or service or their sellers”. The eWOM is considered a vital information source that influences tourists’ travel intention and destination type (De La Hoz-Correa & Muñoz-Leiva, 2019). Advertising (2018) reported that 30% of American tourists utilised social media to obtain trip motivation, while 40% of all online bookings were made through smartphones and 74% of tourists used social media during vacation.

People's travel intention significantly relates to the amount of information or networks where individuals acquire information, which is instantly accessible on social media. Moreover, prospective tourists browse online reviews as the travel products and services are not easily accessible until consumption.

People form and share their travel experience details on soft networking websites, blogs or microblogs, and travel review websites. Similarly, people use eWOM to share their post-travel experiences and provide feedback on tourism services. Recommendations through social media regarding hotels, travel destinations, and tourism facilities are essential for tourists. Chen & Law (2016) highlighted that positive online reviews enhance hotel perceptions among prospective tourists. Chong (2018) suggested that readers usually perceive other tourists' reviews to be more updated, enjoyable, and reliable than the information from travel service providers. Litvin (2008) proposed online interpersonal influence or eWOM as the best and most affordable approach to marketing hospitality and tourism. According to Jalilvand & Samiei (2012), eWOM communications significantly affect attitudes towards visiting a destination and travel intentions. Therefore, eWOM and social media are necessary for tourism information among tourists and travel service providers.

1.3.3 Tourism in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Saudi is a leading nation in the outbound tourism market. The Saudi Arabian outbound tourism market is renowned as the most significant outbound travel expenditure in the world (Kitching, 2015). Saudi Arabian tourists are the largest spenders in the world, spending £14 billion annually on shopping trips abroad, while the Gulf country residents spend up to six times more than Westerners. The Saudi Arabian outbound tourist market is predicted to reach \$43 billion by 2025, which will

expand in size and sophistication. Saudi Arabia holds the most significant market share in the Middle East and North Africa for travel bookings where over 25% of the people use online methods for booking (Bagul, 2019). The Ipsos (2018) survey reported on KSA tourist preferences for discovering new destinations based on 500 interviews of Saudis and Arab Expats aged 18 to 64 years of both genders among the general public. The report suggested that 59% of Saudi Arabians travelled for business while 77% travelled for leisure in 2018.

Most tourists travel to the Middle East and Egypt as their favourite destinations, followed by the United Arab Emirates and Turkey. Saudi Arabian tourists were independent and impulsive tourists and most chose furnished apartments compared to hotel rooms (see Table 1.2). Saudi Arabian tourists are more inclined to purchase travel itineraries, lodging, and transport separately rather than a complete travel package. Despite the improvement and development of digital evolution, the report noted that 61% of Saudi tourists book their tickets through travel agents, whereas only 39% book online.

Table 1.2 Saudi Tourist Habits on Stay Accommodation, Package Type Accommodation, Spending, and Flight Route

	Accommodation		Types of Accommodation		Tourist Habits				Spending Pattern		Flight Routes	
					Booking Method		Planning Nature					
	Prefer to stay in hotels	Prefer to stay in furnished apartments	Travel package purchase	Purchase travel Items Separately	Online	Through Travel Agent	Prefer a rigoro-usly planned trip	Prefer spontaneous trips	Travel on a budget	Splurge during travel	Prefer to spend more on a directflight	Prefer to spend less & fly indirectly
Total	31%	69%	25%	75%	39%	61%	37%	63%	44%	56%	39%	61%
Male	33%	67%	29%	71%	43%	57%	36%	64%	47%	53%	43%	57%
Female	28%	72%	21%	79%	34%	66%	38%	63%	40%	60%	35%	65%
Under 35	27%	67%	24%	76%	38%	62%	37%	63%	44%	56%	35%	65%
35-49	25%	65%	28%	72%	40%	60%	39%	61%	48%	52%	41%	59%
50-64	34%	66%	27%	73%	39%	61%	30%	70%	39%	61%	57%	44%
Nationals	25%	75%	21%	79%	32%	68%	33%	67%	39%	61%	36%	64%
Arab Expats	34%	66%	34%	66%	47%	53%	44%	56%	52%	48%	41%	59%

Source: Ipsos (2018)

The KSA has recently witnessed a substantial increase in the outbound travel market, mainly due to holiday activities, including relaxation, shopping, and touring. The Saudi Gazette (2018) stated that Saudis spent approximately SR78 billion (\$21 billion) on tourism abroad in 2017. Behaviour change among tourists contributed to the significant growth of the outbound tourism market. According to Alreshaidan (2016), the number of Saudi tourists abroad is reflected in the number of nights spent, which increased from 26 million in 2006 to 250 million in 2015. The dramatic change in behaviour and attitude on outbound travel significantly resulted in a sharp incline in outbound travel and tourism expenditure, as demonstrated in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3 Figures on the Saudi Arabian Outbound Tourism Market from 2006 to 2015

Year	Outbound trip	Total night trip(Million)	OutboundTourism expenditure(Billions)
2006	2.0	25.9	6.8
2007	4.1	45.4	18.3
2008	4.08	42.2	19.6
2010	6.03	54.6	28.4
2011	7.2	89.0	22.6
2012	15.3	200.0	60.0
2013	18.7	121.3	62.9
2014	19.8	147.3	69.2
2015	21.5	251.7	96.3

Source: MASS Reported in Alreshaidan (2016)

1.3.4 Growth of the Internet and Social Media Environment in KSA

Overall, 30.26 million out of the 33.85 million Saudi Arabian population are Internet users. Saudis enjoy high Internet access and are also ranked as heavy users of different online social channels, accounting for approximately 23 million active online

users (Social, 2019). Table 1.4 presents that YouTube and Facebook were the most popular social media channels in Saudi Arabia in 2019.

Table 1.4 The Most Popular Social Network Channels in Saudi Arabia in 2019

Social Media Channel	users (in a million)	Percentage (%)
YouTube	24.71	73
Facebook	20.99	62
Instagram	20.31	60
Twitter	18.96	56

Source: Social (2019)

Social media has gained importance in Saudi Arabian society and its use has grown rapidly. Many organisations have utilised social media to share tourist reviews to enhance company performance and tourist relationship management. Travel companies in KSA that have adopted social media include Fursan Travel, Almosafer Travel, Zahid Travel Group, Hala Holiday Me, and Elaf Tourism. SEERA (2018) stated that Saudi Arabians seek tourism inspiration from three sources: friends, family, and social media. Most of them belong to Generation Z, where 70% are under 30 and well-informed with technology, changes in consumer behaviour and rapid online travel setting has are driven growth in the outbound and domestic travel sectors (Bagul, 2019).

1.3.5 Internet Usage in Travel Planning and Destination Choice in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The services class presently rules the business-to-consumer (B2C) e-commerce market in the KSA with over two-thirds of the total B2C e-commerce spending in 2016. Travel services hold a significant share in the services category. Airline and

hotel bookings are swiftly advancing to online channels where the average dealings are more significant than in the product category.

Jeddah Chamber (2019) revealed that approximately 90% of KSA interviewees purchase products and services from e-shops, including tourism services. For instance, reservations, car rentals, flight tickets, train reservations, or voyages constitute 16.4% of their total online purchases of products and services from e-commerce, primarily tourism services. Apart from online entertainment and subscriptions for movies, online shopping, music, and games, Saudi Arabians are purchasing more devices, accessories, clothes, and other goods online and increasingly use mobile apps when shopping online.

Travel bookings among Saudi Arabians mainly include the Middle East and North Africa, which generate over \$25 billion annually. The top Middle Eastern destinations for Saudi tourists are Dubai, Cairo, Manama, and Sharm El-Sheikh. Nevertheless, the situation is changing where Saudis prefer to travel abroad, such as Milan, Paris, Malaysia, and London. Meanwhile, over 25% of domestic travel bookings are made online with an online market increase of 30% annually (Malek, 2019).

1.4 Problem Statement

The problem to be addressed through this study is identifying the influential factors of Saudi tourists' travel intention. The study proposed that eWOM and social media are the most influential determinants in selecting a travel destination. Surprisingly, over 3.6 billion people were using social media worldwide in 2020, which is projected to increase to approximately 4.41 billion in 2025 for travel purposes (Statista, 2022). The statistic presents that the estimated number of Saudi Arabian

social media users will reach 34.17 million by 2025 (Statista, 2020b). Apart from social media, eWOM is another crucial factor in tourist travel intentions. Notably, 74% of travellers use online reviews or comments posted by other travellers to make decisions in planning trips (TengKhongGoh et al., 2014b). Overall, online travel reviews generate approximately US\$10 billion in travel purchases yearly (Gellerstedt & Arvemo, 2019).

Individuals' travel intentions positively correlate with the amount of information received from social network sites, thus eWOM and social media are considered necessary for seeking tourism information among tourists and travel service providers. Individuals seek information on social network sites to gain inspiration for their upcoming trips or make holiday plans. Therefore, eWOM is considered an innovative and efficient channel to obtain travel information and perceptions of the products and services. The development and expansion of social media and eWOM content on social media have significantly influenced tourist behaviour and travel planning. The importance of eWOM and social media in tourism and hospitality is expanding significantly where numerous products provided are intangible and thus inaccessible before consumption (Litvin, 2018).

The eWOM has recently garnered scholars' interest with many recent works concentrating on eWOM in tourism (Abubakar, 2017; Chong, 2018; Wang 2016; Zainal, 2017). Nonetheless, Tham (2013) stated that the subject is still in an investigative phase in exploring social media influence on the destination type. Hlee (2018) emphasised that hospitality and tourism online reviews (HTORs) had attracted researchers' interest. Similarly, most researchers are interested in the hotel and restaurant industry but display little interest in tourist destinations. Essentially, the first aspect of planning a trip involves tourist spots (destinations) and attractions. Hence,

further research is needed on online destination reviews and the crucial factors influencing tourist evaluation and travel decision-making.

Based on the abovementioned discussion, eWOM is considered an influential factor in seeking information on potential tourist products and services to aid in deciding future travel locations or support travel decisions. Furthermore, managing online tourist reviews has become a concern of the hospitality and tourism segment. Thus, studies should examine the effect of the antecedents of persuasive eWOM review on tourist attitudes towards the destination abroad and travel intention. Saudi Arabian tourists' interest in outbound tourism has expanded dramatically (Alreshaidan, 2016). Saudi tourists tend to go on 'Do It Yourself' (DIY) trips instead of joining tour packages or groups. Past tourists usually consult travel agents and company offices to book trips and decide on destinations (Ipsos, 2018). Meanwhile, Saudi Arabian tourists travel inspiration depends on social media and online reviews from other Saudis (SEERA, 2018).

Today, social media has become popular, specifically among the youth in KSA. Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn are used increasingly to interact with other people globally and obtain information easily, which used to be a complex task in the past. Khalufi (2019) stated that 40% of Saudis discovered social media as a great setting to increase consumer engagement. Most Saudis spend over 30% of their daily time on social media. Furthermore, online travel agencies increased their travel booking share to over 14% in 2018. The eWOM affects tourism business performance and business strategy. Thus, more organisations are using social media to spread tourist reviews to enhance business performance and tourist relationship management. According to Khoja & Al Omar (2018), social media is significant in Saudi users' perception of credibility in e-commerce where the website is presenting tourist opinions through

social media increases website credibility. Social media has become a vital channel to endorse online products and services and is extensively used to win tourists' trust by forming a mutual social connection with online users (Alam, 2017).

Tourism literature reviews revealed that prospective tourists seek information from vendors and other tourists when planning trips. Nevertheless, tourists depend on UGC, believing in its trustworthiness and delivery of real experiences (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020). Thus, people who believe the information is credible will gain more confidence to adopt eWOM information and use it to make decisions (Sussman & Siegal, 2003). Therefore, the vital details that should be explored are how Saudi tourists trust eWOM reviews, how reviewers are rated, and how the reviewers are ultimately accepted to make the reviews reliable and valuable. The current study analysed the determining factors of Saudi tourists' trust and acceptance in developing travel intention. The usage of eWOM in tourism has significantly expanded and Saudi tourists have been increasingly interested in eWOM.

Moreover, social media usage in the KSA has grown impressively with exceptional potential and aspects in the KSA outbound tourism market. Nonetheless, few studies have investigated the influence of eWOM reviews on Saudi Arabian tourists, thus highlighting a need to examine how Saudi tourists process eWOM messages and travel intentions. Therefore, the current study identified critical factors influencing Saudi users' attitudes and intentions when processing persuasive eWOM reviews.

1.5 Research Questions

Given the scarcity of information on eWOM reviews and their impact on KSA tourist decision-making, the following questions were posed in an effort to fill in the gaps in the existing research:

- RQ1. What is the influence of the antecedents of persuasive eWOM review on the attitude toward destination abroad and travel intention?
- RQ2. What is the influence of the antecedents of persuasive eWOM review on information acceptance and travel intention?
- RQ3. What is the influence of trust as a moderate between antecedents of persuasive eWOM review and information acceptance on travel intention?
- RQ4. What is the influence of perceived behavioural control on travel intention?
- RQ5. What is the influence of subjective norms on travel intention?

1.6 Research Objectives

The study aims to fulfil the following research objectives based on the research questions:

- RO1: To investigate the influence of the antecedents of persuasive eWOM review on the attitude toward destination abroad and travel intention
- RO2: To investigate the influence of the antecedents of persuasive eWOM review on information acceptance and travel intention.
- RO3: To investigate the influence of trust as a moderate between antecedents of persuasive eWOM review and Information acceptance on travel intention

RO4: To investigate the influence of perceived behavioural control on travel intention.

RO5: To investigate the influence of subjective norms on travel intention.

1.7 Scope of the Study

This study explored the influence of persuasive eWOM reviews (argument quality, source credibility, source attractiveness, and source perception) in social media on Saudi tourists' attitudes towards their destination abroad, travel intentions, and their trust in eWOM reviews. The study examined how persuasive eWOM reviews transform the travel attitude and behaviour of outbound Saudi tourists using social media channels to seek or recommend travel information. The framework for the study is formulated based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), the theory of planned behaviour (TPB), and the Trust transfer theory. This study has formulated a framework applicable to the KSA context. The study will examine how persuasive eWOM transforms the travel attitude and behaviour of outbound tourists from KSA.

1.8 Significance of the Study

The study provided theoretical and practical contributions to the hospitality and tourism industry as detailed in the following discussions:

1.8.1 Theoretical Contributions

Hospitality and tourism studies have highlighted the scarcity of information on the effect of online destination reviews and the key elements influencing consumer evaluation and decision-making. The development and theoretical implication of the study were accomplished through a conceptual model based on Cacioppo & Petty (1984)

ELM, TPB by Ajzen (1991), and the Trust transfer theory by McKnight et al. (2002). The study provided an understanding of the influence of the antecedents of persuasive eWOM review on Saudi tourists' attitudes towards their destination abroad and travel intention.

The study model proposed that Saudi tourists intending to travel abroad are more likely to be convinced by the eWOM reviews through a central route, hence making them critically consider eWOM reviews including argument quality. Central and peripheral routes influence Saudi tourists' attitudes towards their destination abroad and travel intentions. Peripheral cues are simple or mental shortcuts, such as source credibility, attractiveness, and perception. Depending on a person's level of elaboration, their message-related thinking should range from low to high elaboration. Attitude changes may occur at any degree of elaboration (Bhattacharjee & Sanford, 2006).

Based on TPB, one's attitude towards behaviour, subjective norms, and perceptions of behavioural control factors influence their intention to perform a specific behaviour. Furthermore, Leung (2019) reported that subjective norm affects travellers' visit intentions and decision-making, thus indicating that social relationships influence visit intentions. Therefore, the current study considered the role of subjective norms as a factor which has been neglected in research, specifically on eWOM reviews in Saudi Arabian society. The study investigated the effect of the subjective norm, which is perceived social pressure to perform or not perform the behaviour, such as the influence of significant others (parents or friends). Additionally, the study investigated the influence of perceived behavioural control on travel intention. Similarly, past studies have emphasised perceived behavioural control as a vital aspect in forming intention (Kashif et al., 2018; Leung, 2019), and perceptions of