

**THE EFFECT OF ELECTRONIC WORD OF
MOUTH (E-WOM) ON PRE-TRIP TRAVEL
DECISIONS: THE MODERATING ROLE OF
ONLINE TRUST**

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DECISIONS: THE MODERATING ROLE OF
ONLINE TRUST**

by

ALA ADEL AHMAD ALREFI

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AUSM	Active Users of Social Media
CMV	Common Method Variance
EFA	Exploratory Factor Analysis
e-WOM	Electronic Word of Mouth
OT	Online Trust
PE	Post-Tourist Experience
PEU	Perceived Ease of Use
PU	Perceived Usefulness
SC	Source Credibility
SEM	Structural Equation Modelling
TD	Tourist Decision

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A	Questionnaire After Pilot Study
Appendix B	Literature Survey of e-WOM
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**KESAN ELEKTRONIK WORD OF MOUTH (E-WOM) TERHADAP
KEPUTUSAN PRA-PERJALANAN PELANCONG: PERANAN
PENGANTARAAN KEPERCAYAAN ATAS TALIAN**

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneliti kesan komunikasi dari mulut ke mulut secara elektronik (e-WOM) terhadap proses membuat keputusan pelancong di Jordan, dengan memberi tumpuan khusus kepada peranan pengantaraan kepercayaan atas talian. Penyelidikan ini meneroka bagaimana pelbagai faktor pencetus termasuk kredibiliti sumber, pengalaman selepas melancong, kegunaan yang dirasakan, kemudahan penggunaan yang dirasakan, serta pengguna aktif media sosial (blogger) mempengaruhi keputusan pelancong melalui kesan pengantara e-WOM. Kajian ini berteraskan empat kerangka teori utama iaitu Teori Tolakan dan Tarikan (Push and Pull Theory), Model Penerimaan Teknologi (Technology Acceptance Model - TAM), Model Kemungkinan Pengolahan (Elaboration Likelihood Model - ELM), dan Model Rangsangan-Organisma-Tindak Balas (Stimulus-Organism-Response - S-O-R). Kesemua kerangka ini secara kolektif menyediakan pendekatan menyeluruh untuk memahami tingkah laku pengguna digital dalam sektor pelancongan. Reka bentuk kajian kuantitatif telah digunakan, dan data diperoleh daripada 504 orang pelancong yang menggunakan e-WOM dalam membuat keputusan pra-perjalanan mereka ke Jordan. Responden terdiri daripada pelancong tempatan (Jordan) dan antarabangsa. Instrumen utama pengumpulan data ialah soal selidik berstruktur yang telah disahkan melalui kajian rintis. Analisis data dilakukan menggunakan perisian Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) versi 22.0 dan Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) versi 3.2.7. Ujian awal seperti semakan data hilang, nilai luar jangka,

normaliti dan multikolineariti telah dijalankan, diikuti oleh penilaian model pengukuran dan model struktur. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa kredibiliti sumber, pengalaman selepas melancong, kegunaan yang dirasakan dan penggunaan aktif media sosial memberi kesan signifikan terhadap keputusan pelancong, manakala kemudahan penggunaan yang dirasakan tidak menunjukkan kesan yang ketara. Faktor-faktor ini juga didapati meningkatkan komunikasi e-WOM secara signifikan. Selain itu, e-WOM mempunyai kesan positif yang kukuh terhadap keputusan pelancong dan berfungsi sebagai pengantara penting antara pemboleh ubah pencetus dengan keputusan pelancong. Walau bagaimanapun, kepercayaan atas talian didapati memoderasi hubungan antara e-WOM dan keputusan pelancong secara negatif, yang menunjukkan bahawa tahap kepercayaan yang tinggi boleh mengurangkan pengaruh langsung e-WOM. Kajian ini menyumbang kepada pemahaman teori dan praktikal mengenai bagaimana saluran komunikasi digital membentuk tingkah laku pelancong. Ia turut memperkayakan khazanah ilmu dalam bidang pemasaran pelancongan digital dan memberikan panduan yang bernilai kepada pembuat dasar serta pemasar dalam merangka strategi pelancongan yang lebih berkesan di Jordan dan destinasi pelancongan lain yang sedang pesat membangun.

THE EFFECT OF ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH (E-WOM) ON PRE-TRIP TRAVEL DECISIONS: THE MODERATING ROLE OF ONLINE TRUST

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) on tourist decision-making in Jordan, with a particular focus on the moderating role of online trust. The research explores how various antecedents—including source credibility, post-tourist experience, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and active users of social media (bloggers)—influence tourists' decisions through the mediating effect of e-WOM. The study is grounded in four key theoretical frameworks: the Push and Pull Theory, Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), and Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model. These frameworks collectively provide a comprehensive lens through which to examine digital consumer behaviour in the tourism sector. A quantitative research design was adopted, and data were collected from 504 tourists who had used e-WOM to make pre-travel decisions within Jordan. Respondents included both Jordanian and non-Jordanian tourists. A structured questionnaire was used as the primary data collection tool, which was validated through a pilot study. The data were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0 and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) version 3.2.7. Preliminary tests, including checks for missing data, outliers, normality, and multicollinearity, were conducted, followed by measurement and structural model assessments. The findings reveal that source credibility, post-tourist experience, perceived usefulness, and active

use of social media significantly influence tourist decisions, whereas perceived ease of use does not. These antecedents also significantly enhance e-WOM communication. Additionally, e-WOM was found to have a strong positive effect on tourist decisions and serves as a significant mediator between the antecedent variables and tourist decision-making. However, online trust was found to negatively moderate the relationship between e-WOM and tourist decisions, suggesting that higher trust levels may reduce the direct influence of e-WOM. The study offers theoretical and practical implications for understanding how digital communication channels shape tourist behaviour. It contributes to the growing body of knowledge in digital tourism marketing and provides valuable insights for policymakers and marketers aiming to enhance tourism strategies in Jordan and other emerging tourism destinations.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) has emerged as a critical factor in shaping contemporary travel decisions. The growing influence of e-WOM in the tourism industry has led to its development as both a scientific field of study and a domain of professional practice in modern organizations (Li et al., 2019). Travel decisions, being high-stakes and often complex choices, are particularly susceptible to the impact of e-WOM. Online user reviews about destinations, accommodations, and tourism services have become invaluable sources of information for travellers, significantly influencing their decision-making processes (Li et al., 2019). The importance of e-WOM in travel decisions is underscored by recent data from Tripadvisor.com (2021), which reveals a vast number of potential visitors consult online reviews when planning their trips. These reviews play a crucial role in shaping travel reservations, with a substantial percentage of travellers basing their decisions on the information gathered from these online sources. The significance of travel decisions in this context cannot be overstated, as they involve considerable time, financial investment, and emotional engagement, making the role of e-WOM in informing and influencing these decisions paramount in the modern tourism landscape.

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that positive online comments significantly enhance the perception of hotels among potential consumers. These favourable reviews not only improve the overall image of the hotels but also increase the likelihood of booking intentions. Research by X. Lai et al. (2021a), found that positive online feedback contributes to a more favourable evaluation of hotel

attributes, such as service quality, cleanliness, and value for money. This positive perception formed through e-WOM can be a critical factor in influencing consumers' decision-making process when selecting accommodation for their travels. Consequently, e-WOM is characterized as a potentially cost-effective tool for the travel and tourism sector. It addresses some of the emerging ethical and technological challenges marketers face as they aim to fully leverage e-WOM technologies. Through the sharing and application of information via e-WOM, users' knowledge is enriched with diverse perspectives (Pour et al., 2020).

As well as Studies in the field of e-WOM have also highlighted the fundamental role of virtual communities in e-WOM. Social relationships, the sharing of experiences, and the various tasks accomplished through electronic devices have become integral components of e-WOM (Bouzaabia et al., 2018); The virtual environment serves as an ideal platform for transactions, as it enables online users to interact, share experiences, and form social connections. This environment cultivates a new social style and consumption attitude, which significantly impacts an individual's network consumption behaviour (Bourgeois-Bougrine et al., 2022). e-WOM is one of the most reliable sources of online user feedback, emerging as a significant result of engagement in a virtual environment. Through computer-mediated communication, it enables users to interact socially, exchange relevant information, and make informed decisions. The virtual environment also encourages users to communicate, build relationships, exchange knowledge, and express their perspectives with ease. These factors contribute to changing consumption attitudes and influencing corporate strategies. As a result, the impact of e-WOM spreads widely and significantly affects individuals' decisions (Mahecha-Duarte et al., 2022).

e-WOM is considered a significant data source that influences tourists' intentions and choices. Previous research has shown that e-WOM communications have a significant impact on attitudes toward visiting destinations and the intention to travel (Thaothampitak & Wongsuwatt, 2022). Much discussion has revolved around the intensity of e-WOM, with earlier literature focusing on respondents' perceptions of how online reviews affect their travel decisions. e-WOM, derived from the consumption of specific experiences, enhances reliability, responsiveness, and assurance, ultimately enhancing the perceived quality of information and increasing the likelihood of patronage (Gosal et al., 2020; Ladhari & Michaud, 2015; Zarifah et al., 2020).

Social media has ingrained itself into the lives of most people worldwide. It was reported by Hootsuite that, with an annual growth rate of 1.0 percent, the world's population, which was 7.91 billion in January 2022, is expected to reach 8 billion people by the middle of 2023. Currently, over half (57%) of the world's population lives in urban regions, also by the beginning of 2022, there will be 5.31 billion unique mobile phone users, or more than two-thirds (67.1%) of the world's population. With 95 million additional mobile users since this time last year, the global total has increased by 1.8%. In January 2022, there are 4.62 billion social media users worldwide. This figure equates to 58.4% of the world's population, although social media "users" might not be distinct people. In the past 12 months, the total number of social media users worldwide has increased by over 10%, with 424 million new users joining social media platforms in 2022 (Digital, 2022).

Given the significant effect of e-WOM on tourist decisions, it becomes crucial to investigate the specific factors of e-WOM that impact these decisions, particularly within virtual communities and among online users. This investigation is especially

relevant in regions experiencing rapid growth in internet usage, such as the Middle East. The Middle East serves as an excellent case study for understanding the evolving dynamics of e-WOM in emerging digital markets. The region has seen a substantial increase in internet users, which has implications for how tourists' access and use online information for travel decisions.

A virtual community is a group of people who come together on various online platforms (for example, Facebook or TripAdvisor travel-related groups) to share their thoughts and ideas about travel and places to visit. Often, these communities are well-defined, require members to participate frequently, and help members develop trust in one another. Otherwise, online users can be more broadly defined as visitors who interact less with the community or only post or read content on the platform. Although all users in a virtual community have an online account, not every online user is part of a virtual community. This is significant because how engaged a person is determines the trust and impact they give to e-WOM.

According to the World Internet Statistics (2023), The growth of internet users in the Middle East has been substantial, as depicted in Table 1.1. This growth in internet penetration provides a unique opportunity to examine how e-WOM operates in a rapidly digitalizing market, offering insights that could be valuable for both regional and global understanding of e-WOM's impact on tourism.

Table 1.1 Summary of Population Internet user statistics for Middle East Internet

MIDDLE EAST	Population	Users, in Dec/2000	Internet Usage	Population% (Penetration)	Internet % users	Internet % users (2023)
Bahrain	1,804,583	40,000	1,804,583	100.0%	0.8%	0.9%
Iran	85,777,708	250,000	78,086,663	91.0%	36.5%	38.0%
Iraq	41,752,172	12,500	31,027,400	74.3%	14.5%	17.7%
Jordan	10,370,272	127,300	8,700,000	83.9%	4.1%	6.8%
Kuwait	4,375,865	150,000	4,332,106	99.0%	2.0%	1.0%
Lebanon	6,776,509	300,000	5,692,267	84.0%	2.7%	2.6%
Oman	5,328,207	90,000	5,061,797	95.0%	2.4%	1.2%
Palestine	5,302,778	35,000	3,977,083	75.0%	1.9%	2.3%
Qatar	2,962,541	30,000	3,179,400	107.3%	1.5%	2.3%
Saudi Arabia	35,719,422	200,000	35,005,034	98.0%	16.4%	9.0%
Syria	18,224,180	30,000	8,500,000	46.6%	4.0%	4.5%
U A E	10,088,517	735,000	12,176,400	120.7%	5.7%	10.0%
Yemen	30,938,435	15,000	8,353,377	27.0%	3.9%	2.2%
TOTAL Middle East	268,302,801	3,284,800	213,889,560	79.7%	100.0%	100%

Source: World Internet Statistics (2023).

Over 8 million people in Jordan, representing more than 80% of the population, are internet users, with this number continuing to rise steadily (Al-Adwan et al., 2020). This high internet penetration rate has significant implications for the tourism industry in Jordan, as it provides a robust platform for travel-related e-WOM. The internet's rapid expansion and improved communication tools have dramatically enhanced the reach and effectiveness of various tourism marketing initiatives, creating a fertile ground for travel-focused e-WOM. The framework of tourism e-WOM communications spread swiftly both locally and internationally, transcending time and location restrictions. This is particularly beneficial for Jordan's tourism sector, allowing potential visitors from around the world to access real-time, user-generated content about Jordanian travel experiences.

The pervasiveness of internet usage in Jordan allows tourists and locals alike to simultaneously connect with large audiences, sharing their travel experiences, recommendations, and reviews of destinations, accommodations, and attractions within the country. The success of e-WOM as a marketing tool in the tourism sector is evident in the traveller's journey of seeking trustworthy and credible information. This journey often begins with seeking advice on destinations, accommodations, or activities in Jordan and culminates in sharing positive or negative experiences post-trip. In cyberspace, this journey is reflected through posts or comments on travel websites, tourism business pages, or social networking platforms dedicated to travel in Jordan (Bataineh & Al-Smadi, 2015). For Jordan's tourism industry, this high internet engagement level presents opportunities and challenges. It offers a cost-effective means of reaching potential visitors through authentic, user-generated content. However, it also necessitates active management of online reputations and strategic engagement with e-WOM to leverage its potential to attract tourists and enhance their travel experiences in Jordan.

Many studies have confirmed that e-WOM significantly impacts feedback in the tourism industry. Nowadays, people can publish their travel experiences on social networks, reaching a vast audience. A good online review can make a brand more famous, lead to more reservations, and broaden the available market, but a negative comment can wreck the image of any destination or firm in a matter of days (Litvin et al., 2008; X. Lai et al., 2021a). One negative comment on a popular site like TripAdvisor can lead to around a 20% drop in hotel bookings (Zervas et al., 2015).

Furthermore, according to Jalilvand and Samiei (2012), e-WOM is thought by consumers to be more reliable than advertisements because it appears honest and based on personal experience. In tourism, which depends heavily on customer reviews and

trust, e-WOM has a significant impact. They should always supervise, react to, and oversee their online feedback. Since e-WOM spreads fast, it is stronger than traditional advertising in guiding opinions about a business and attracting loyal buyers.

Social media has become more vital for businesses to communicate with their customers and collect feedback. It covers numerous venues such as blogs, forums, and video sharing that can assist businesses promote electronic word-of-mouth and inform customers about their products and services. According to studies, consumers appreciate other users' recommendations and feedback more than vendor-created material, making social media a key tool for businesses to influence purchasing decisions. (Aichner et al., 2021).

Researching e-WOM is relevant as it is expanding quickly, particularly in the travel industry, where opinions among travellers depend a lot on their peers' feedback. Because tourists now turn to online reviews and social media before deciding on a tourist spot, we must focus on how e-WOM helps shape these decisions. Since the hotel and tourism fields focus on experiences, they are particularly at risk of e-WOM. Examining this topic makes it easier to understand today's customers and use more effective strategies for selling and gaining their trust (Litvin, Mandrusiak, & Rocchi, 2008; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012).

This study looks specifically at the hospitality sector of Jordan's tourism industry. First impressions and opinions formed during a trip often start with the hospitality sector since where one rests can leave a strong first mark on those visiting. Many travellers share their experiences with hotels on the internet, so hotels are one of the leading providers of e-WOM. Therefore, looking at e-WOM in hotels helps

ascertain the effect of online feedback on hotel bookings, deciding where to travel, and judging the level of service quality (Litvin et al., 2008; X. Lai et al., 2021a).

The primary interest of this study is to understand how tourists decide to travel after reading about e-WOM. Several elements from perception, including how reliable the source is, how useful information seems, and how easily the process is used, help to influence it. Although perceptions play a role, the primary focus is whether the tourist chooses a destination, books a hotel, or enjoys different activities. Consequently, the research focuses on studying the factors that direct our choices due to digital influence.

1.2 Research Background

The landscape of travel information has been dramatically transformed by the proliferation of internet media platforms and social networks in recent years. This digital revolution has led to an unprecedented abundance of travel-related information available to tourists. Bloggers, social media influencers, and various online sources have emerged as pivotal channels for sharing and disseminating information about travel destinations, accommodations, and experiences. Consequently, modern travellers increasingly rely on these online information sources to make informed travel decisions.

In this digital ecosystem, the credibility of online sources has become a critical factor influencing tourists' choices. Numerous studies have emphasized the importance of source credibility in shaping consumer trust and reliance on online information (M. Y. Cheung et al., 2009; Fan et al., 2013; Hussain et al., 2017; Ismagilova et al., 2020b; Mehryar et al., 2020; Purcarea et al., 2013; Reyes-Menendez et al., 2020; Spence et al., 2020; Sundram et al., 2022). These studies consistently show that sources perceived

as reliable and trustworthy are more likely to gain users' confidence and influence their decision-making processes. Understanding the factors that affect source credibility in the context of online travel information is therefore crucial for both researchers and practitioners in the tourism industry.

The concept of post-tourist experience has gained significant traction in tourism research. This concept encompasses the experiences and emotions that tourists harbour after their trip concludes. By studying the post-tourist experience, researchers can gain valuable insights into how tourists evaluate and internalize their travel experiences (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004; Kim, Kim, et al., 2021; Milman & Pizam, 1995; Shuang, 2013; Tasci & Knutson, 2004; Vittersø et al., 2000; Wong et al., 2020; Y. Yang et al., 2015) These post-trip reflections not only shape the tourists' overall satisfaction but also influence their likelihood of sharing experiences online, thereby contributing to the cycle of e-WOM in tourism.

The perceived usefulness and ease of use of online travel information are additional crucial factors in shaping tourist decisions. Research has consistently shown that tourists are more inclined to use and trust online travel information that they perceive as both useful and easy to navigate (Amani, 2022; Faqih, 2011; Mensah, 2020; Mohammed Habes et al., 2018; Sweeney et al., 2012). This finding underscores the importance of not only providing valuable content but also ensuring that it is presented in an accessible and user-friendly manner.

In the realm of online information exchange, two concepts have garnered significant attention: online trust and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). Online trust refers to individuals' confidence in online information sources, while e-WOM encompasses the sharing of information and opinions about products and services

through online platforms (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016; Eneizan et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2019; Ismagilova et al., 2020a; Lai et al., 2020; Oraedu et al., 2020; Seo et al., 2020). These interrelated concepts play a crucial role in the dissemination and reception of travel information in the digital age.

The Theoretical framework of this study incorporates several key theoretical models to analyse tourist decision-making. It draws upon the Push and Pull Theory, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework to explore how internal motivations, online platform perceptions, persuasive information, and environmental stimuli influence tourist behaviour. Previous research has established that positive e-WOM significantly motivates tourist decisions (Filieri, Acikgoz, et al., 2021; Hao et al., 2010; S. Verma & Yadav, 2021). Source credibility has also been identified as a key factor (Girish et al., 2021; Hussain et al., 2017; P. Wang, 2014), along with post-tourist experience (Hyde, 2008; J. H. Kim, Kim, et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2020; J. Yang et al., 2013). The perceived usefulness and ease of use of information sources (Hussain et al., 2017; Y. Park & Gretzel, 2010a; Zhang et al., 2012) , as well as the influence of bloggers (Hanifah, 2019; Nurfadila, 2020; Zain et al., 2018) , have been shown to play significant roles in tourist decision-making, particularly when coupled with higher levels of trust. Notably, research suggests that positive e-WOM tends to have a more substantial impact on the decision-making process compared to negative e-WOM (Filieri, Acikgoz, et al., 2021; M. Y. Lai et al., 2020).

Various qualitative and contextual signs are assessed to check if e-WOM in tourism is genuine. In genuine e-WOM, people usually describe what happened to them personally, mention certain services or locations, and give opinions that present both good and bad sides. It is common for genuine reviews to be written without too

much advertising or very negative statements (Filieri, 2015). Furthermore, these websites use special algorithms to identify fake reviews by spotting repeated phrases, atypical frequency of comments, and reviewers who post only once (Luca & Zervas, 2016).

In this study, sincerity is indirectly evaluated by focusing on variables such as source credibility and post-tourist experience. Source credibility is a strong indicator of sincerity, as reviews from identifiable individuals with a history of engagement on the platform are more likely to be trusted (Cheung et al., 2009). Post-tourist experiences, when shared transparently and comprehensively, reflect authentic emotional and service-based responses that tourists wish to communicate with others. Hence, through theoretical constructs and the contextual analysis of review patterns, this study infers the sincerity of e-WOM in influencing trust.

In the context of Jordan, the tourism industry is built upon a foundation of remarkable natural wonders and rich historical and archaeological sites. The breathtaking landscapes of Wadi Rum and the ancient wonders of Petra and Jerash have positioned Jordan as a sought-after destination for traveller's seeking adventure, nature, and cultural experiences (Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, 2022; Jordan Tourism Board, 2022) In the current digital age, e-WOM plays a pivotal role in promoting and shaping perceptions of these destinations.

The power of e-WOM in promoting Jordan's tourism is multifaceted. Positive online reviews, engaging social media posts, and informative travel blogs about Jordan's natural and historical wonders can significantly influence the decision-making processes of potential visitors. Compelling e-WOM has the potential to inspire travellers to explore Jordan's treasures, leading to increased tourism and consequent economic growth for the country (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). This digital word-of-

mouth not only serves as a cost-effective marketing tool but also as a means of authentic promotion, leveraging the experiences of real travellers to attract new visitors.

Furthermore, e-WOM enhances the visibility and accessibility of Jordan's tourist attractions on a global scale. It enables people worldwide to discover and appreciate the country's rich cultural heritage, often sparking interest in destinations that might otherwise remain unknown to potential visitors. The reliance of modern travellers on online platforms and social media for researching destinations, sharing experiences, and seeking recommendations has transformed e-WOM into a powerful force within the tourism industry (Luo & Zhong, 2015).

Effective utilization of e-WOM offers Jordan a unique opportunity to highlight its diverse offerings, engage with potential visitors, and cultivate a positive perception of its tourism industry. A robust and positive e-WOM can attract a greater number of visitors, generate increased revenue, and create valuable employment opportunities for local communities. This, in turn, contributes not only to the country's economic growth but also to its cultural preservation efforts.

The impact of e-WOM on Jordan's tourism industry extends beyond mere promotion. It plays a crucial role in setting visitor expectations, influencing travel patterns, and shaping the overall tourist experience. Positive e-WOM can highlight lesser-known attractions, encourage visitors to explore beyond the most famous sites, and contribute to a more sustainable distribution of tourism across the country. Conversely, it also places a greater responsibility on tourism stakeholders to ensure that the experiences they offer live up to the expectations set by online reviews and recommendations.

Globally, word-of-mouth shared via the internet has taken control over how people act as consumers, with the tourism industry feeling its impact most. When traveling, many people from the U.S., Europe, and some areas in Asia now depend on e-WOM to help them decide where to go. People often rely on user-submitted reviews on TripAdvisor, Google Reviews, and social media rather than official hotel ads to make trip reservations (Litvin et al., 2008; Filieri & McLeay, 2014). Its global presence is due to consumers finding it quick, accessible, and reliable compared to regular marketing.

Jordan's tourism sector has similar trends to those in other parts of the world. Today, people choose places, hotels, and travel services based on views and ratings shared by other travellers. Jordanian tourists prioritize trustworthiness, being helpful, and ease of using e-WOM like world tourists. With nearly all Jordanians online (over 83%) and photos and videos on social media becoming common, e-WOM is growing rapidly in the country (Internet World Statistics, 2023; Al-Adwan et al., 2020). Still, several specific conditions separate Jordan from other countries. Tourism businesses in many parts of the world rely on advanced analytics and AI systems to manage online reviews. Unlike bigger companies, most traditional operators in Jordan do not have a website set up or access to the internet to handle online feedback properly. In addition, trust online is less stable in Jordan since poor digital regulations, varying quality of services, and doubt about online sites create difficulties for people (Rouibah et al., 2021; Eneizan et al., 2020).

How people communicate depends a lot on their culture as well. Although they may be more noisy, North American, and European tourists frequently give their opinions and explain their issues. Users in this area are less likely to post open

comments that could criticize brands, as this is considered inappropriate within their culture (Alghizzawi, 2019).

This study examines the tourism sector broadly, focusing on how electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) influences tourist decision-making before travel. Rather than limiting the scope to specific areas like hospitality or tour services, it considers a range of decisions such as destination selection, itinerary planning, and overall travel intentions. The research explicitly targets the pre-travel stage, when tourists gather information online to make informed choices. During this phase, travellers consult reviews, compare destinations or services, and assess value based on e-WOM, making it a crucial moment where digital content significantly shapes their final decisions (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

The study also focuses on widely used social media platforms in Jordanian tourism—particularly Facebook, Instagram, or Snapchat, or travel websites/online booking agents such as Airbnb, Wego, or Booking.com—where tourists frequently engage with travel-related e-WOM. These platforms were chosen due to their popularity and relevance for sharing and consuming travel experiences. Survey items were designed to capture how tourists interact with e-WOM content on these platforms. Future instrument versions will explicitly name the platforms involved to improve clarity and contextual alignment, helping respondents better relate their experiences to the research objectives.

In the evolving digital landscape, online trust has become a pivotal factor in determining how tourists perceive and respond to electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). Online trust reflects the degree to which tourists believe in information credibility, reliability, and integrity on digital platforms such as review websites, social

media, and travel blogs (Eneizan et al., 2020; Ismagilova et al., 2020). It plays a fundamental role in shaping user interactions with online content, particularly when information asymmetry and perceived risk are high. In tourism contexts—where services are intangible, and experiences are highly subjective—online trust becomes even more essential, as tourists must often rely on second hand information to form expectations and make decisions (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016). The presence of strong online trust not only enhances the persuasive power of positive e-WOM and mitigates negative reviews' impact, thereby directly influencing tourists' likelihood of choosing a destination or service provider.

1.3 Problem Statement

Over the past two decades, the rapid proliferation of internet technology has significantly altered consumer behaviour, reshaping how people seek, evaluate, and share information about tourism experiences. The Middle East, including Jordan, has experienced a digital transformation that has influenced all sectors, particularly tourism. By 2023, the Middle East reported 213.889 million internet users, representing approximately 79.7% of its population (Mahadin et al., 2020). Jordan's internet penetration stood impressively at 83.9% within this landscape, with 8.7 million users (Internet World Statistics, 2023). This surge in digital connectivity, accompanied by the rise of social media platforms, has led to the expansion of virtual communities and user-generated content, of which electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) plays a central role.

In parallel, Jordan's tourism sector has seen significant economic growth, with revenues climbing to \$5.816 billion in 2022 and tourist arrivals reaching over 5 million, up from \$4.108 billion and 4.8 million tourists in 2019 (Central Bank of

Jordan, 2019; Ministry of Tourism & Antiquities., 2019). Despite these achievements, the sector faces critical challenges rooted in the unpredictability and influence of e-WOM. As consumers increasingly rely on online reviews, ratings, and travel blogs to inform their decisions, tourism businesses are vulnerable to rapid fluctuations in public perception based on digital discourse (Pyle et al., 2021). A striking example is the case of a well-known hotel chain in Petra that experienced a 30% drop in bookings within one month due to a string of negative online reviews. This case underscores how powerful and immediate the impact of e-WOM can be on the tourism industry in Jordan.

Although the influence of e-WOM on consumer decision-making has been explored globally, there is limited scholarly understanding of how this phenomenon operates specifically in Jordan's tourism context (Pop et al., 2022). While it is evident that tourists increasingly turn to online platforms for guidance, the underlying drivers that shape the efficacy of e-WOM—such as source credibility, perceived usefulness, ease of use, and online trust—remain underexplored in this cultural and geographic setting. Most notably, there is a dearth of research exploring how these variables interact with one another to influence actual travel decisions despite their centrality in digital behaviour models like the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model.

Online trust is crucial in moderating the relationship between e-WOM and tourist decisions. In an era saturated with user-generated content, identifying credible and trustworthy sources is essential for tourists seeking reliable information. Trust influences how e-WOM is interpreted, enhancing its impact when the source is deemed credible or reducing its effect when skepticism arises (Pihlaja et al., 2017; Rouibah et

al., 2021). For instance, tourists who trust a travel blog or influencer are more likely to follow their recommendations, whereas low trust may lead to the rejection of even positive reviews. Despite its importance, online trust remains inconsistently defined and insufficiently examined in tourism studies, particularly in Jordanian contexts. This lack of clarity limits the development of effective digital strategies to build trust, improve tourist engagement, and enhance satisfaction with online travel information (Eneizan et al., 2020; Sarkar et al., 2020).

Moreover, while the literature is rich with studies examining e-WOM's influence on consumer behaviour, most have focused on purchase intention or travel intention in general (Alghizzawi, 2019; Baber et al., 2022; Berné Manero et al., 2022; Filieri, et al., 2021; Nilashi et al., 2022a). Few studies have offered a comprehensive investigation into the relationship between e-WOM and actual tourist decision-making processes, particularly with integrating mediating (e-WOM) and moderating (online trust) mechanisms. This lack of depth weakens both the theoretical foundation and practical insights available to tourism stakeholders in Jordan, who increasingly rely on digital platforms for destination marketing and customer engagement.

Compounding this issue is the limited investigation into the antecedents of e-WOM within the context of tourism. Variables such as source credibility, post-tourist experience, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and the influence of active social media users (bloggers) have been considered critical in global contexts. Still, they are underrepresented in research focused on Jordan. Each factor plays a significant role in shaping how e-WOM is generated and consumed. For instance, credible sources are more likely to be trusted by potential tourists, thereby increasing the persuasiveness of e-WOM (Girish et al., 2021; Hussain et al., 2017). Similarly, post-tourist experiences are crucial in generating authentic e-WOM, influencing

others' tourist decisions (Wong et al., 2020; J. H. Kim, Kim, et al., 2021). The absence of these considerations in Jordanian-focused research leaves a critical void in academic knowledge and practical tourism marketing.

Adding to the complexity, existing research often isolates individual variables rather than considering them within a comprehensive framework that captures their interdependence. For example, some studies have explored e-WOM's relationship with travel intention without accounting for moderating variables like online trust or the mediating effects of communication channels (Al-Adwan & Sammour, 2021; Al-Gasawneh & Al-Adamat, 2020). This narrow scope limits the ability to produce holistic insights that reflect the real-world complexity of tourist decision-making.

Furthermore, despite Jordan's significant investment in digital tourism marketing, the return on these investments has been inconsistent. Government initiatives and private sector campaigns have struggled to fully capitalize on the potential of digital engagement, partly due to a lack of evidence-based strategies grounded in comprehensive research. A deeper understanding of the mechanisms by which e-WOM impacts tourist decisions—especially when filtered through perceptions of online trust—could help optimize such initiatives. Without this insight, efforts remain vulnerable to inefficiencies and misalignments with actual consumer behaviour.

While e-WOM has been widely explored in different industries, research on its impact across the broader tourism sector in Jordan remains limited. Most existing studies focus on specific areas such as hospitality, overlooking that tourists often make decisions that span various services—including destinations, cultural experiences, and travel plans—based on information they find online. To address this gap, the current

study adopts a general tourism perspective better to understand the overall influence of e-WOM on tourist decision-making.

In response to these gaps in the literature and practice, this study sets out to achieve three main goals. First, it examines how key factors—such as source credibility, post-tourist experience, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and bloggers—affect tourist decisions in the Jordanian tourism context. Second, it investigates the mediating role of e-WOM communication in the relationship between these factors and tourist decisions. Third, it explores how online trust moderates the link between e-WOM and tourists' decision-making processes. By analysing the interactions among these variables, the study aims to build a comprehensive model that explains how digital communication influences tourist behaviour before travel.

This research is especially timely given the global shift toward digital dependency, accelerated by recent socio-economic disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As tourists increasingly rely on digital tools to plan, book, and review their travel experiences, understanding how online factors shape tourism behaviour is more crucial than ever. The insights from this study will be invaluable to researchers and policymakers, tourism boards, and digital marketers seeking to leverage e-WOM more effectively in a rapidly evolving market.

1.4 Research Questions

Considering the previously discussed issues, this study aims to explore the following research questions.

- i. How do source credibility, post-tourist experience, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and active users of social media influence e-WOM communication?
- ii. How do these factors influence tourist decision-making in the context of Jordan?
- iii. What is the direct effect of e-WOM communication on tourist decisions?
- iv. To what extent does e-WOM communication mediate the relationship between these antecedents and tourist decisions?
- v. How does online trust moderate the relationship between e-WOM communication and tourist decision-making?

1.5 Research Objectives

The main goal of this study is to investigate e-WOM on tourist decisions through Jordanian and non-Jordan online users who are making a trip inside Jordan, Based on the following objectives:

- i. To identify the influence of source credibility, post-tourist experience, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and active social media users (bloggers) on e-WOM communication among tourists in Jordan.
- ii. To examine the impact of source credibility, post-tourist experience, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and active social media users (bloggers) on tourist decision-making.
- iii. To evaluate the direct effect of e-WOM communication on tourist decisions in Jordan's tourism industry.

- iv. To analyse the mediating role of e-WOM communication in the relationship between the identified antecedents and tourist decision-making.
- v. To assess the moderating effect of online trust on the relationship between e-WOM communication and tourist decisions.

1.6 Research Hypotheses

The research hypotheses of this study are as follows:

H1: Source credibility, post-tourist experience, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and active social media users have a positive and significant relationship with tourist decisions.

H1a: Source credibility has a positive and significant relationship with tourist decisions.

H1b: Post-tourist experience has a positive and significant relationship with tourist decisions.

H1c: Perceived usefulness has a positive and significant relationship with tourist decisions.

H1d: Perceived ease of use has a positive and significant relationship with tourist decisions.

H1e: Active users of social media have a positive and significant relationship with tourist decisions.

H2: Source credibility, post-tourist experience, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and active users of social media have a positive and significant relationship with e-WOM.

- H2a:** Source credibility has a positive and significant relationship with e-WOM.
- H2b:** Post-tourist experience has a positive and significant relationship with e-WOM.
- H2c:** Perceived usefulness has a positive and significant relationship with e-WOM.
- H2d:** Perceived ease of use has a positive and significant relationship with e-WOM.
- H2e:** Active users of social media have a positive and significant relationship with e-WOM.
- H3:** e-WOM has a positive and significant relationship with tourist decisions.
- H4:** e-WOM mediates the relationship between source credibility, post-tourist experience, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, active users of social media, and tourist decisions.
- H4a:** e-WOM mediate the relationship between source credibility and tourist decisions.
- H4b:** e-WOM mediates the relationship between post-tourist experience and tourist decisions.
- H4c:** e-WOM mediate the relationship between perceived usefulness and tourist decisions.
- H4d:** e-WOM mediates the relationship between perceived ease of use and tourist decisions.
- H4e:** e-WOM mediates the relationship between active users of social media and tourist decisions.

H5: Online trust moderates the relationship between e-WOM and tourist decision.

1.7 Scope of Research

This study focuses on investigating the impact of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) on tourist decision-making in Jordan, with a particular emphasis on the moderating role of online trust. The research encompasses Jordanian and non-Jordanian tourists who have engaged with online information sources for travel decisions related to Jordan. The geographical scope of the study is limited to tourism activities within Jordan, including popular destinations such as Petra, Wadi Rum, the Dead Sea, and other significant tourist sites across the country. This focus allows for a comprehensive examination of e-WOM's influence on tourism decisions specific to Jordan's unique cultural and historical context.

The target population for this study consists of adult tourists (aged 18 and above) who have either visited Jordan or actively considered visiting Jordan in the past year and have engaged with online travel information sources. The unit of analysis is the individual tourist, allowing for a detailed examination of personal decision-making processes and experiences. The sample size for this study was determined using the "10 times rule" proposed by Hair et al. (2011) for PLS-SEM analysis. With 42 items in the questionnaire, a minimum sample size of 420 was required. To account for potential data collection issues and to enhance the reliability of results, the sample size was increased by 20%, resulting in a target of 504 respondents.

The study investigates five key independent variables: source credibility, post-tourist experience, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and the influence of active social media users (bloggers). The dependent variable is the tourist's decision,

with e-WOM communication as a mediating variable and online trust as a moderating variable. This multi-faceted approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing tourism decisions in the digital age. The study employs a cross-sectional design, collecting data at a single point in time rather than longitudinally. This approach provides a snapshot of current trends and attitudes in e-WOM and tourism decision-making in Jordan.

Methodologically, the study utilizes a quantitative approach, employing a structured questionnaire for data collection. The survey instrument has been carefully designed and validated through pilot testing to ensure reliability and validity. The study uses Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) for data analysis. This technique was chosen due to its ability to handle complex models with multiple constructs and relationships and its robustness in dealing with non-normal data distributions (Hair et al., 2017).

1.8 Significant of the Research

The significance of this study lies in its comprehensive examination of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) in the context of tourist decision-making, particularly within the unique setting of Jordan's tourism industry. By integrating several theoretical frameworks, including the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), and Push and Pull Theory, this research provides a multifaceted approach to understanding the complex dynamics of online information processing and its impact on tourist decisions. One of the primary significances of this study is its contribution to the existing body of literature on e-WOM and tourist behaviour.