

## **Electronic Word-of-Mouth and Tourist Behavior: How Message Features and Destination Familiarity Shape Visit Intention**

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**Received: 03/09/2025**

**Accepted: 13/01/2026**

**Published: 01/03/2026**

### **Abstract:**

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has become a pivotal factor influencing consumer behavior in the tourism sector. This study examines the direct effects of key eWOM message characteristics—credibility, quality, and vivacity—on tourists' intention to visit a destination, while investigating the moderating role of destination familiarity. Building on the destination marketing literature, this research provides an integrative framework to understand how message-level factors interact with individual-level variables in shaping behavioral intentions.

Data were collected via an online survey administered to a sample of 411 respondents familiar with travel blogs. Multiple regression analyses were conducted using SPSS, and moderation effects were tested using Hayes' PROCESS macro with 5,000 bootstrap samples. The results confirm that message credibility, quality, and vivacity each have a statistically significant and positive effect on visit intention. Furthermore, destination familiarity significantly moderates these relationships.

These findings highlight the importance for tourism marketers and travel content creators to tailor their communication strategies by considering not only the message design but also the audience's prior knowledge and experiences.

**Keywords:** eWOM, visit intention, credibility, quality, vivacity, destination familiarity.

**JEL Classification:** M31; L83 ; D83

## **Introduction**

In an era where digital technologies are continuously reshaping consumer behavior, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has emerged as a pivotal factor influencing purchasing and consumption decisions. EWOM, defined as the online exchange of information and opinions about products or services between consumers. It differs from traditional word of mouth because it spreads quickly and can reach a broader audience, increasing its impact on consumers' purchasing decisions (Stambouli & Almi, 2024). In the tourism context, the tourists' decision-making process is more likely to be dependent on accumulating as much information as possible about tourism destinations, and among the most prominent sources on which tourists may rely on are those experiences and pieces of advice provided by others. In accordance with the previous point of view, (Phillips et al, 2011) argue that the positive recommendation of individuals who have already visited a tourism destination is one of the most influential means of communication that attracts new visitors to the tourism destination (Saoudi & Bichari, 2020)

The study proposes a theoretical framework that examines the relationship between three core characteristics of eWOM—credibility (Martínez-López, et al., 2020); (Nechoud, Ghidouche, & Seraphin, 2021)), quality ( (Pillay, 2021); (Saidani, Nechoud, Ghidouche, & Ghidouche Ait-Yahia, 2023)), and vivacity (Luarn, Lin, & Chiu, 2015); (Chen, Law, & Yan, 2022)—and tourists' intention to visit a destination.

To address existing gaps in the literature, this study extends beyond the examination of eWOM's direct impact by investigating the moderating effect of destination familiarity on the relationship between eWOM characteristics and visit intention, as previously suggested in the works of (Chi, Huang, & Nguyen, 2020)

This study has two primary objectives. First, it aims to empirically examine the impact of key eWOM characteristics on tourists' intention to visit a destination in the Algerian context. The goal is to identify which eWOM elements play the most significant role in shaping tourist decision-making. Second, the study seeks to explore the moderating role of destination familiarity in this relationship, providing insight into how travelers' prior knowledge and experiences shape the reception and effectiveness of eWOM messages. From a managerial perspective, the findings of this research offer practical implications for tourism stakeholders in Algeria. By understanding the influence of eWOM and the role of familiarity, tourism professionals will be better positioned to adapt their digital communication strategies to

improve the destination's image and online presence. Travel platforms, tourism offices, and hospitality businesses can leverage user-generated reviews and testimonials to enhance Algeria's appeal and encourage more visitors to consider it as a travel destination.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying eWOM influence on tourist behavior, with a particular focus on the Algerian case. Examining the moderating role of destination familiarity allows for a more nuanced analysis of how eWOM interacts with individual tourist characteristics, paving the way for more targeted and effective digital marketing strategies.

Questions are asked regarding the influence of eWOM messages on consumer behavior by incorporating destination familiarity as a moderating variable within the proposed conceptual model.

## **1- Literature Review and Conceptual Framework**

In this part, we present the definitions of the key variables involved in the development of the research model.

### **1-1-Intention to Visit a Destination**

Visit intention is defined as "tourists' willingness to visit a destination" (Lam & Hsu, 2006). The primary objective of this study is to assess tourists' intention to visit a destination after being exposed to eWOM messages within virtual communities. The intention to visit a tourist destination is significantly influenced by the availability and quality of information regarding that destination (Nechoud, Ghidouche, & Seraphin, 2021). Extant literature emphasizes that eWOM serves as a key trigger in the consumer decision-making process by providing shared experiences from previous travelers, thereby reducing uncertainty and enhancing trust in the selection of a destination (Filieri & McLeay, 2013). However, the impact of eWOM is not uniform; it can vary according to several contextual and individual factors, among which tourists' familiarity with the destination plays a crucial moderating role.

### **1-2- Quality of eWOM and Visit Intention**

Within the eWOM literature, message strength—or argument strength—is identified as a fundamental characteristic of informational content. Argument strength refers to the quality of the information provided and encompasses dimensions such as accuracy, relevance, clarity, completeness, timeliness, dynamism, personalization, and message diversity (Delone, William, McLean, & Ephraim, 2003). It is defined as the extent to which

recipients perceive the message as valid and persuasive (Cheung, Luo, Sia, & Chen, 2009) .

In online contexts, the robustness of a message is influenced by whether the information is objective or subjective in nature. Objective information typically includes factual data such as pricing or product specifications, whereas subjective information is based on personal experiences and interpretations (Lee & Koo, 2012).

Building on these considerations, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: The quality of eWOM positively influences consumers' intention to visit a tourist destination.

### **1-3-Credibility of eWOM and Visit Intention**

Academic research on credibility dates back to the 1950s, originating primarily from the fields of psychology and communication. (GOURI & Lalaoui, 2022)

Credibility has been extensively studied within the framework of dual-process theories and is recognized as one of the most influential factors in the information adoption process (Cacioppo, Petty, & Morris, Effects of need for cognition on message evaluation, recall, and persuasion, 1983).

In online contexts, the concept of credibility has attracted significant scholarly attention, particularly in terms of perceived source credibility—defined as the degree to which a source is viewed as trustworthy and competent. However, eWOM communications typically originate from anonymous or unfamiliar individuals, who may lack recognized expertise in the relevant product or service category. This anonymity complicates consumers' ability to assess the quality and reliability of the information (Chatterjee, 2000). As a result, eWOM recipients rely on alternative cues to evaluate credibility, such as contextual signals provided by the online platform where the message is hosted (Dellarocas & Chrysanthos, 2003) .

Perceived eWOM credibility can be defined as the extent to which a recommendation is viewed as trustworthy, truthful, and fact-based. Compared to information provided by brand websites, eWOM content is generally seen as more credible, relevant, and reflective of consumer expectations (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Moreover, perceived credibility significantly influences future consumer actions: when a recipient deems a message credible, they are more likely to accept it as a basis for decision-making (McKnight & Kacmar, 2006). Conversely, messages perceived as lacking credibility are often dismissed due to the perceived risk associated with following them (Cheung, Luo, Sia, & Chen, 2009).

Based on these insights, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: The credibility of eWOM positively influences consumers' intention to visit a tourist destination.

#### **1-4-Vivacity of eWOM and Visit Intention**

Vivacity of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) can be conveyed through various formats, including text, graphics, images, and videos. Within virtual communities, multimedia tools such as photos and videos are considered instrumental in enhancing content dynamism and enriching user experience. Applying the concept of vivacity to online content implies that it should be rich in sensory stimuli and capable of engaging multiple senses, as vivacity is perceived to be a key determinant of the customer experience (Hung & Li, 2007)

Previous research has demonstrated that playfully and immersively presented product information tends to strengthen users' brand appreciation. In other words, dynamic and visually rich content is more likely to enhance the perceived value of tourism-related information and promote its adoption among consumers. By fostering emotional engagement and creating a more tangible perception of the travel experience, vivid eWOM can increase consumers' interest and intent to visit a destination.

Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: The vivacity of eWOM positively influences consumers' intention to visit a tourist destination.

#### **1-5-Destination Familiarity as a moderator:**

Familiarity is commonly defined in terms of previous visit frequency (Milman & Pizam, 1995), number of past stays (Sun, Youn, Wu, & Kuntaraporn, 2006) , or as a distinction between first-time and repeat visitors. Previous tourism studies have shown that many travelers feel more secure in familiar environments, whereas unfamiliar surroundings are often perceived as riskier (Lepp & Gibson, 2003) .However, the search for the unknown is a key motivational driver in tourism. The degree of familiarity or novelty sought by tourists varies across individuals, reflecting different levels of risk that travelers are willing to accept.

Visitors may gain familiarity through interactions with others, travel guides, mass media, or education (Prentice & Andersen, 2003). Prior research has suggested that increased familiarity has a positive impact on the decision-making process and contributes to a more favorable destination image (Lee, Park, & Han, 2008). Lin et al. (2014) found that familiarity moderates the relationship between eWOM, digital destination image, and visit or recommendation intention. Tourists generally seek to acquire specific

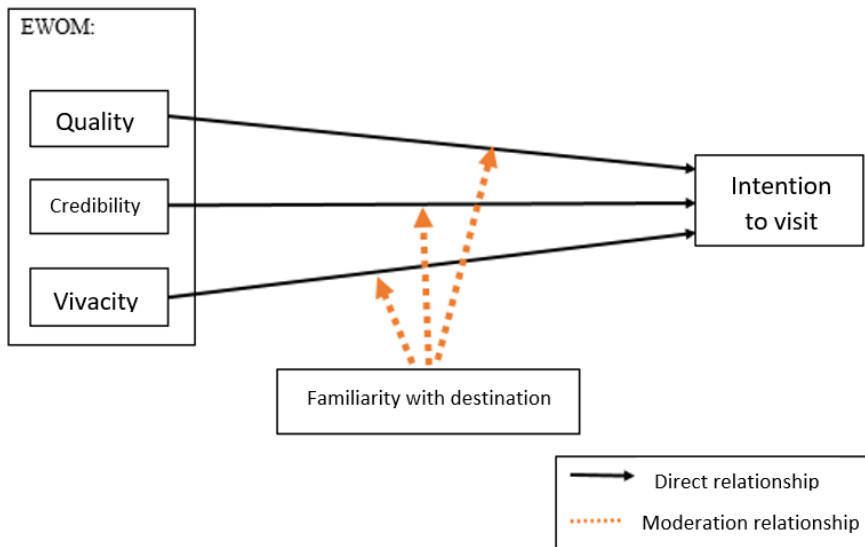
knowledge about a destination, which enhances their sense of comfort and safety and boosts their confidence in the travel decision. Similarly, (Henthorne, George, & Smith, 2013) concluded that repeat visitors exhibit greater comfort with the destination environment compared to first-time visitors, which can influence their purchasing behavior. Consequently, travel decisions may be influenced by tourists' level of familiarity with the destination. This study therefore considers the following hypotheses:

H4.1: Destination familiarity moderates the direct effect of eWOM quality on visit intention.

H4.2: Destination familiarity moderates the direct effect of eWOM credibility on visit intention.

H4.3: Destination familiarity moderates the direct effect of eWOM vivacity on visit intention.

**Figure number (01): Research Model**



**Source: Authors own elaboration**

## **2-Research Methodology**

The objective of this study is to explain consumer behavior in choosing a tourist destination after reading eWOM messages shared within virtual communities.

A quantitative research approach was adopted, as this study is grounded in existing theoretical frameworks and seeks to establish relationships between different variables. Specifically, the proposed model considers eWOM and its characteristics as the independent variable, visit intention as the dependent variable, and destination familiarity as a moderating variable.

A survey method was selected for data collection, as it is particularly suitable for examining behaviors and opinions across a large population sample.

### **2-1-Sampling and Data Collection**

In this study, a questionnaire-based survey was conducted among Algerian university students from various institutions across the country.

A convenience sampling method was employed. This is a non-probability sampling technique based on the ease of access to participants and their availability to respond to the survey.

### **2-2-Questionnaire Administration and Sample Description**

The questionnaire was administered online via social media platforms, primarily Facebook. It was designed and distributed using Google Forms, a tool that facilitates online surveys and enables direct export of collected data into Excel spreadsheets. The data collection phase was conducted over a two-month period in 2023. At the end of this 60-day period, a total of 411 valid responses were collected and subsequently used for data analysis.

### **2-3-Measurement of Constructs**

The items were adapted from previous researches of similar studies.

-eWOM Credibility: Measured through five items adapted from the works of Ayeh et al. (2013), Tsfati and Ariely (2014), and Ponte et al. (2015).

-eWOM Quality: Assessed through five items adapted from Erkan and Evans (2016) and Chang et al. (2001).

-eWOM Vivacity: Also referred to as the richness of eWOM content, measured based on scales used by Miller et al. (2010) and Gavard-Perret et al. (2014).

-Visit Intention: Adopted from Lam and Hsu (2006), this scale has been previously applied in similar tourism contexts.

-Familiarity with the Destination: Measured using a three-item semantic differential scale adapted from Moore et al. (2005).

### **3-Results and Hypotheses Testing**

Data analysis was conducted in several stages using multivariate techniques with the software SPSS 25 and SMARTPLS.

The research hypotheses were tested using multiple regression analysis. This approach allowed us to evaluate the impact of explanatory variables (eWOM and its characteristics) on the dependent variable (visit intention), with familiarity with the destination acting as a moderating variable.

#### **3-1-Descriptive Analysis**

The descriptive analysis highlights a well-balanced gender distribution, with a slight female majority (52.1%). Most respondents are from the central (54%) and eastern (31.9%) regions of Algeria. The sample is highly educated, with over 65% holding a Master's degree. In alignment with the study's objectives, the majority are experienced internet users—91% have been online for over six years, and 83.7% spend more than six hours daily on Facebook. Additionally, 59.1% access social media more than ten times a day. Visit intention within Algeria is strong, with 91.4% expressing a desire to travel domestically, and 77.4% using Facebook to search for destination-related information. These findings underscore the digital engagement of participants and their relevance to research on eWOM and tourism-related consumer behavior

#### **3-2-Measurement Model Analysis**

To ensure the robustness of the measurements, several statistical analyses were conducted:

-Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to identify the underlying structure of the constructs and reduce the data,

-Cronbach's alpha to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales,

-Pearson correlation to evaluate the reliability of relationships between variables.

### 3-3-Testing of Direct Relationships

This study tested four main hypotheses using multiple regression analysis with SPSS. The obtained results are summarized as follows:

**Table number (01): Results of the Multiple Regression Analysis for Direct Relationships**

				<b>B</b>	<b>S.E.</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>Label</b>
<b>H1</b>	Intention to visit	<-----	Quality	0,427	0,12	3,55	***	<b>Supported</b>
<b>H2</b>	Intention to visit	<-----	Credibility	0,168	0,038	4,444	***	<b>Supported</b>
<b>H3</b>	Intention to visit	<-----	Vivacity	0,522	0,123	4,247	***	<b>Supported</b>

\* p<.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001

#### **Source: SPSS results**

The regression model is statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ), confirming its appropriateness for the study.

H1 is accepted: The quality of eWOM messages has a significant positive effect on visit intention ( $\beta = 0.427$ ;  $t = 3.55$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

H2 is accepted: The credibility of eWOM messages also positively influences tourists' visit intention ( $\beta = 0.168$ ;  $t = 4.444$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

H3 is accepted: The vivacity of eWOM messages has a strong positive impact on intention to visit a tourist destination ( $\beta = 0.522$ ;  $t = 4.247$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

### 3-4-Testing of Moderation Hypotheses

The moderation hypotheses were tested using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 1; Hayes, 2013) with 5,000 bootstrap samples.

H4.1: Destination familiarity moderates the direct effect of eWOM message quality on visit intention.

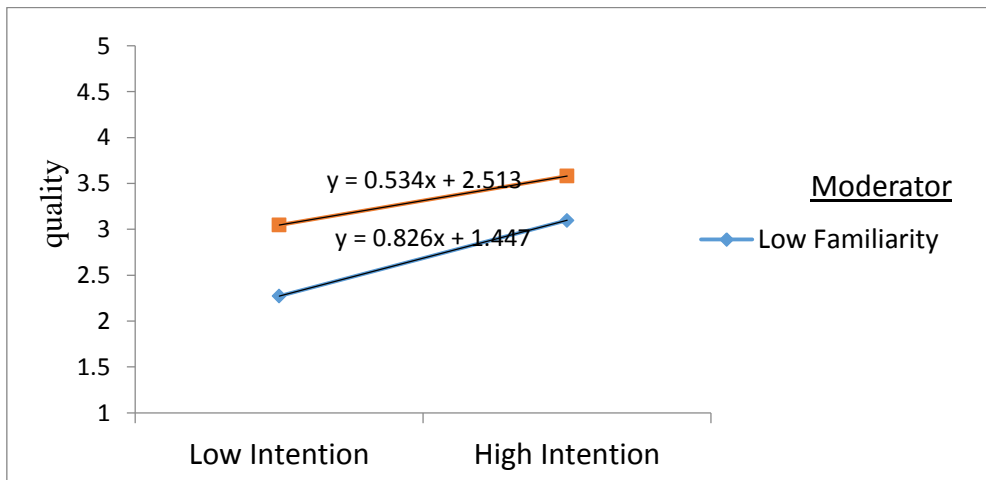
**Table number (02): Results of the regression analysis for Hypothesis H4.1**

	<b>coeff</b>	<b>se</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
<b>Familiarity</b>	,210	,049	4,331	,000
<b>Quality</b>	,478	,048	10,066	,000
<b>int_1</b>	-,085	,038	-2,270	,024

**Source: SmartPLS results**

Both Familiarity and Quality positively and significantly influence the dependent variable (likely visit intention). The variable int\_1 has a moderate negative effect, also statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Figure number (02): Visit intention as a function of message quality and destination familiarity.**



**Source: SmartPLS results**

Regarding the moderating role of familiarity with the destination, the results are as follows:

Hypothesis H4.1: Accepted. A significant interaction effect is observed between destination familiarity and the quality of eWOM messages ( $\beta = -0.085$ ;  $t = -2.27$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). This indicates that familiarity moderates the relationship between eWOM quality and visit intention, suggesting that tourists less familiar with a destination are more sensitive to the perceived quality of online reviews.

H4.2: Destination familiarity moderates the direct effect of eWOM message credibility on visit intention.

**Table number (03): Results of the regression analysis for Hypothesis H4.2.**

	<b>coeff</b>	<b>Se</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>F</b>	<b>P</b>
<b>constant</b>	,018	,049	,371	,711	,533	,284	41,457	,000
<b>Familiarity</b>	,314	,050	6,221	,000				
<b>Credibility</b>	,340	,049	6,890	,000				
<b>int_1</b>	-,073	,046	-1,583	,114				

**Source: Authors own elaboration**

Hypothesis H4.2: Rejected. The moderating effect of familiarity on the relationship between eWOM credibility and visit intention was not confirmed ( $\beta = -0.073$ ;  $t = -1.58$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ). This suggests that the credibility of online reviews influences visit intention regardless of consumers' familiarity level with the destination.

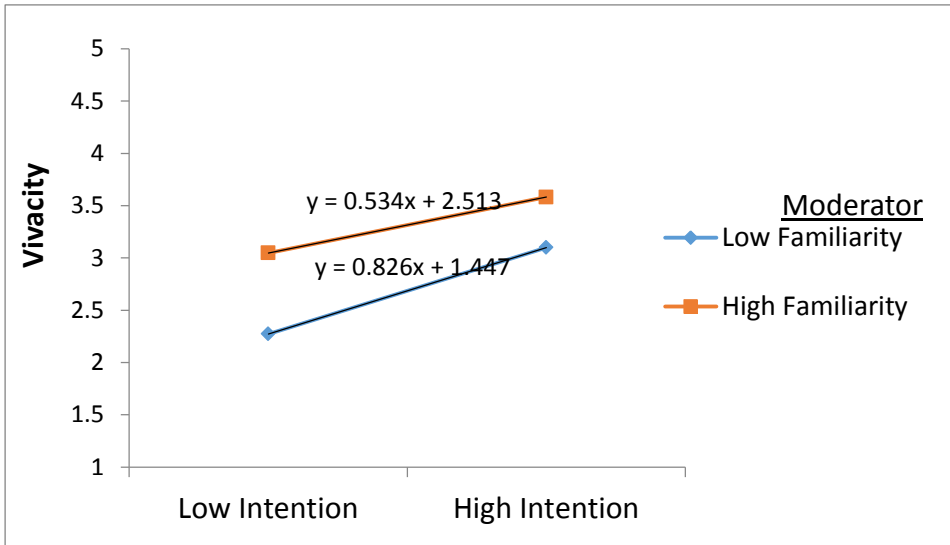
H4.3: Destination familiarity moderates the direct effect of eWOM message vivacity on visit intention.

**Table number (04): Results of the regression analysis for Hypothesis H4.3.**

	<b>Coeff</b>	<b>se</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>F</b>	<b>P</b>
<b>Constant</b>	,019	,045	,421	,674	,627	,393	67,734	,000
<b>Familiarity</b>	,259	,047	5,529	,000				
<b>Vivacity</b>	,473	,046	10,221	,000				
<b>int_1</b>	-,066	,038	-3,759	,005				

**Source: Authors own elaboration**

**Figure number (03): Moderation plot: Visit intention as a function of message vivacity and destination familiarity.**



**Source: SmartPLS results**

Hypothesis H4.3: Accepted. The moderating effect of familiarity on the relationship between eWOM vivacity and visit intention was confirmed after p-value adjustment ( $\beta = -0.066$ ;  $t = -3.759$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, familiarity with the destination attenuates the impact of vivid online reviews on visit intention, implying that more familiar tourists are less influenced by immersive and emotionally engaging descriptions.

## **Conclusion**

The rise of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in the tourism industry represents a major strategic lever to influence tourists' visit intentions. Our study demonstrated that eWOM characteristics — notably credibility, quantity, and valence — have a positive and significant impact on travelers' propensity to choose a tourist destination. Furthermore, we highlighted the moderating role of destination familiarity, which nuances the influence of eWOM depending on tourists' prior knowledge of the destination.

In this context, our study is based on the following hypotheses:

H1, H2, and H3: The characteristics of eWOM (credibility, quantity, vivacity) have a positive and significant impact on the intention to visit a tourist destination. This means that the more eWOM is perceived as credible, abundant, and positive, the more it encourages tourists to consider the destination. This relationship underscores the importance of eWOM as a strategic lever for companies and institutions in the tourism sector.

H4: The relationship between eWOM characteristics and visit intention is moderated by familiarity with the destination. In other words, the effect of eWOM varies depending on whether the potential tourist has prior knowledge of the destination or not. An individual already familiar with the destination might be less influenced by eWOM, while a less informed tourist may place greater importance on online reviews to guide their decision.

The results confirm that eWOM is a decisive factor in tourist behavior and must be fully integrated into digital marketing strategies for tourist destinations. More specifically, our study offers important managerial implications for tourism stakeholders in Algeria who aim to enhance the country's attractiveness to both domestic and international travelers.

**Strengthening the Digital Presence of Tourist Destinations:** A key takeaway from this research is that a destination's online visibility plays a central role in attracting tourists. To optimize eWOM impact, it is imperative that tourism offices, hospitality companies, and travel agencies invest in dynamic and interactive digital platforms.

-Create and animate discussion spaces: Destinations should encourage tourist participation on travel forums, discussion groups, and social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, TripAdvisor, etc.).

-Promote sharing of positive experiences: Campaigns encouraging visitors to share reviews, photos, and videos can strengthen a destination's online presence.

-Collaborate with influencers and travel bloggers: These actors play a key role in building a positive image of destinations and disseminating credible and engaging information.

In Algeria, where international visibility of tourist sites remains limited, such digital strategies can significantly improve the country's perception as an attractive destination.

**Managing and Enhancing eWOM Perception:** Our study revealed that eWOM credibility strongly influences visit intention. It is thus essential for

tourism actors to monitor, manage, and improve the image conveyed by eWOM about their destinations.

-Actively respond to online reviews: Proactive management of both positive and negative comments strengthens the credibility and transparency of tourism businesses.

-Encourage authentic reviews: Providing incentives for travelers to share honest and detailed experiences can increase trust among future visitors.

-Control the spread of misleading information: Fighting fake reviews and ensuring the quality of content is crucial to maintain a positive and credible reputation.

In the Algerian context, where some destinations suffer from a lack of reliable online information, these measures are especially relevant to reassure potential tourists.

**Adapting Communication Strategies According to Tourists' Familiarity with the Destination**

Our study highlights the moderating role of destination familiarity on the effect of eWOM. This means marketing campaigns should be tailored according to tourists' knowledge level about the destination.

For tourists less familiar with the destination:

-Emphasize testimonials and reviews from other travelers to reassure and convince.

-Provide detailed information on attractions, services, safety, and accessibility.

-Use engaging visuals (immersive videos, virtual tours) to help tourists imagine the travel experience.

For tourists already familiar with the destination:

-Highlight new and differentiating experiences (unique activities, off-the-beaten-path tours).

-Focus on loyalty strategies by valuing feedback from repeat visitors.

-Leverage user-generated content to strengthen the relationship with the community of regular travelers.

In Algeria, where some tourist sites are well-known domestically but less recognized internationally, this strategic differentiation can enable better market segmentation and more effective communication.

Harnessing the Potential of Digital Tourism to Boost Algeria's Image: Algeria possesses rich natural and cultural heritage, yet its tourism appeal remains underexploited internationally. eWOM represents a strategic opportunity to change destination perception and attract more visitors.

-Create a strong digital identity: Developing coherent and attractive digital campaigns around Algeria's tourist assets (Sahara deserts, archaeological sites, historic cities, etc.) can improve the country's recognition.

-Encourage digital storytelling: Authentic experience narratives shared by travelers through blogs or YouTube videos can emotionally impact future visitors.

-Invest in targeted digital marketing campaigns: Online advertising (Google Ads, Facebook Ads) aimed at specific audiences (tourists from Europe, the Middle East, or the Algerian diaspora) can increase the number of potential visitors.

By leveraging these strategies, Algeria could position itself as an emerging tourist destination, exploiting the power of eWOM to modify and enhance its image in the global tourism market.

Our research highlighted the key role of eWOM in tourists' visit intentions and the importance of tourists' familiarity in moderating this effect. These results emphasize the necessity for tourism stakeholders to fully integrate online reviews, recommendations, and testimonials into their marketing strategies.

For Algeria, which aspires to revitalize its tourism sector, the strategic exploitation of eWOM represents an unprecedented opportunity to improve its attractiveness. By adopting tailored digital strategies, managing online reputation effectively, and differentiating communication campaigns based on tourists' familiarity with the destination, the country could significantly enhance its tourism potential and attract a broader and more diverse clientele.

Finally, this study calls on tourism professionals to rethink their communication and promotion strategies in the digital age. The future of Algerian tourism depends on increased digitalization, better management of eWOM, and a deeper understanding of tourists' perception dynamics.

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