



The Impact of Electronic Word-Of-Mouth (eWOM) on Ecotourism Destination Choice: A Conceptual Paper

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Abstract. The influence of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on consumers is widely recognised, especially on the consumers' purchase intention. However, in recent years, social media has formed a new dimension on eWOM, enabling users to interact online and greatly influencing consumers. The presence of eWOM is apparent online and on consumers' platforms, such as consumer review websites, blogs, forums, social media, travel communities, etc. Nevertheless, there needs to be more consumer motivation to exchange information and knowledge online. Thus, this study examined the impact of electronic word of mouth on ecotourism destination choice. In the eWOM for tourist destinations among Malaysia consumers literature, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), for example, consumer attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioural control are researched. Therefore, this study will integrate TPB as a framework to analyse the impact of eWOM on ecotourism destination choices using the TPB. Further, an effort is employed to determine the effect of past travel experience on eWOM and TPB constructs. The contribution of this study is to provide insight into the influence of eWOM and TPB theory towards ecotourism destination choice.

Keywords: Consumer Behaviour · Ecotourism · Electronic Word of Mouth

1 Introduction

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia, the federal government of Malaysia has implemented the Movement Control Order (MCO), which affected the tourism industry severely. Malaysia's tourist receipts plunged by 85.3% from RM86.14 billion in 2019 to RM12.69 billion in 2020, with the average per capita expenditure recorded at a total of RM2,928, a decline of 11.3% from RM3,300 in 2019. In 2021, tourism in Malaysia, primarily domestic, continues to drop in visitor arrivals and tourism expenditure due to the COVID-19 lockdown and restrictions to crossing interstate borders. It was a negative growth of 49.9% compared to 2020 (-44.9%), as it recorded only 66 million visitors. Relatively, the volume of total tourism trips also decreased from 147.0 million visits (2020) to 72.0 million trips. This means it will have negative growth of 50.7% in 2021.

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National Tourism Policy (DPN) 2020–2030 launched by the 8th Prime Minister YAB Tan Sri Dato' Hj. Muhyiddin Bin Hj. Mohd. Yassin to be able to drive the survival of the country's tourism industry and make Malaysia a significant tourist destination globally. This policy focuses on sustainable tourism and increasing tourism revenue as the critical indicator impacting the national economy. In addition, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC) also aims to brand Malaysia as the Top of The Mind Eco-Tourism Destination of The World, where resource sustainability will drive new economic growth through ecotourism while creating new jobs. In the Asia-Pacific region, there is an increased interest in developing ecotourism as it is one of the forms of tourism [1]. Ecotourism is one of Malaysia's biggest tourist attractions. Characterised by ancient rainforests, beautiful beaches and reefs, spectacular natural formations and unparalleled biodiversity, Malaysia is a hotspot for tourists seeking to experience tropical flora and fauna (Fig. 1).

It can be the start of a new episode as a catalyst for the tourism industry to escalate again, further helping the survival of workers involved in the tourism and culture sector chain to boost the sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. It hopes to lead and revive the tourism, arts and culture industry to be more advanced and resilient. In the tourism industry, eWOM has a strong impact [2]. Thus, this study needs to identify the effects of consumers' eWOM on tourists' decisions to travel to a specific ecotourism destination. Secondly, the impact of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) on eWOM towards ecotourism destination choice [3] is widely adopted as one of the most prevailing tools to test consumers' behavioural intention [4] (Fig. 2).

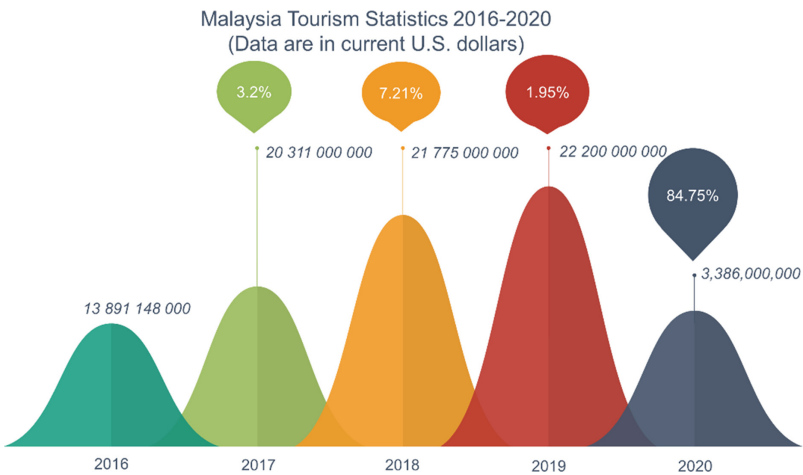


Fig. 1. Malaysia Tourism Statistics 2016–2020.

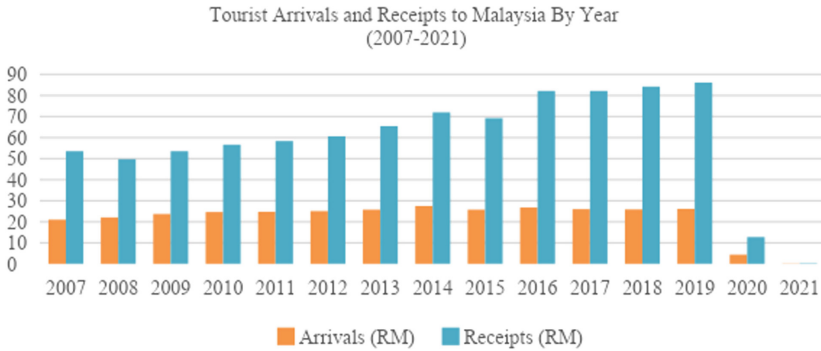


Fig. 2. Tourist Arrivals and Receipts to Malaysia by Year (2007–2021).

2 Literature Review

2.1 eWOM in Tourism Industry

The emergence of the Internet has brought a huge shift in the lives of people. In addition, it has revolutionized information and communications globally. Today, one of the new-age marketing that helps to reach the masses is electronic word of mouth (e-WOM). Reference [5] explained that eWOM encompasses social media, blogs, vlogs and viral messages. Hence, eWOM has a multiplier effect when people share their experiences digitally. Additionally, that study is supported by [6] that eWOM has a multiplier effect that could be easily spread to the masses. Besides, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is a continuing information-sharing process between prospective, actual, or previous customers about a product, service, or business, which is accessible to the public via the Internet [2, 7]. It is a significant source of information that considerably influences buying decisions [8, 9] eWOM can increase customer awareness, reduce risk regarding products or services and help travellers select their destinations [2, 10]. Online reviewers can choose to write so that their experience is best represented [11]. Opinions shared by peer travellers thus reduce the risk of a poor decision for tourists. Nevertheless, reading all reviews for an informed decision is difficult due to the increasing number of opinions and reviews on products and services per experience. Moreover, online travellers face complex decisions due to the wide variety of products, choices, and available information. Thus, online businesses are trying to support travellers' decision-making by providing advice from previous travellers and recommender systems.

In prior studies, its impact on behavioural patterns and travel intentions has been identified [12] as purchase intentions [13]. Consumer behaviour research suggests that eWOM and product assessments have an emotional and cognitive attitude towards the consumer [14]. Therefore, travellers need more external knowledge to assist them in performing purchase decisions throughout the evaluation stage. In this regard, travellers depend more profoundly on eWOM to decrease perceived risk and doubt, which impacts their decisions and intention regarding the booking [15]. The eWOM on TripAdvisor becomes significant when travellers have narrowed information regarding a travel destination to increase their awareness [16]. In the case of the Coronavirus outbreak quantity of travel eWOM posted on social media platforms (TripAdvisor forums)

provided real-time information on COVID-19 and can be effective in the brief description and forecasting of various COVID-19 travel news tips and statistics. Besides, that can increase travellers' awareness about coronavirus prevention.

2.2 Ecotourism

Reference [17] has defined ecotourism as related to the conservation of ecosystems and nature maintaining the cultural integrity of the local community. In Malaysia, ecotourism is beneficial for the economic growth of rural areas through the creation of job opportunities and the preservation of the natural environment. Other than that, ecotourism is a responsible travel activity to untouched natural areas that encourage natural learning and appreciates the quality of the environment and the well-being of the local communities [18–20]. It is a way of ecological tourism and low-impact travel [19]. The development of natural attractions is to generate ecological management of natural resources through ecotourism.

This industry can influence the aspects of social, environmental and economic and contributes to the protection of natural resources [19, 21, 22]. In Malaysia, ecotourism is one of the sectors experiencing fast development as a contribution towards real economic growth [23, 24]. Previous research defined ecotourism in Malaysia as travel experience progressed through the association between the government, the private sector, and local communities. Ecotourism involves the elements of respect for nature, involvement in conservation, benefits to homegrown communities, parts of education and mindfulness and sustainability-ecologically, economically, socio-culturally and ethically [25].

2.3 Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

TPB by [3, 4], who described that behaviour by attitude, subjective norm and perception would influence an individual's intention to perform a particular behaviour. Many published studies in the social sciences use Ajzen's model. These studies address consumer perception [26], purchase behaviour [27] and consumer innovativeness. Most of these studies support the usefulness of Ajzen's theory and his view that behavioural intent is a powerful predictor of targeted behaviour. However, few studies in the literature examine Ajzen's model in the context of the tourism and hospitality industry [28–30].

Further, one research integrated an additional variable, past behaviour, into the TPB model [31]. Past behaviour contains a kind of WOM behaviour. This study tries to add a new dimension of eWOM to TPB and investigates whether eWOM impacts TPB relationships. The research model includes the interaction of eWOM with attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control, all on intention to travel (Fig. 3).

In the relevant literature, all the proposed models that deal with customers intending to travel by consumers derive from the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) proposed by Ajzen. TPB proposes four predictors:

- 'Intention to behaviour' - (travel), which has a direct impact on a specific behaviour, and which in turn is inferred by personal attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control.

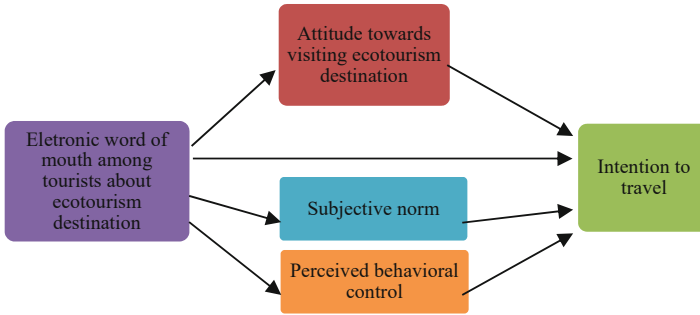


Fig. 3. Conceptual Framework.

- ‘Attitude towards behaviour’- (visiting toward ecotourism destination), the attitude that an individual must adopt or not adopt a specific behaviour.
- ‘Subjective norm’ is the influence that the view of others has on an individual’s choices.
- ‘Perceived behavioural control’, is a factor that might facilitate or constrain the performance of the behaviour.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study examines the causal relationship between eWOM and consumer attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control and ecotourism destination choice. It is quantitative research because all the variables can be measured. The unit of analysis is the individual. This study is cross-sectional because the data are collected once, over four weeks. The independent variables are eWOM, consumer attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioural control. The dependent variable is ecotourism destination choice.

3.2 Population and Sample

To achieve the research goal, a survey is planned on the ecotourism destination in Malaysia. The target population is inbound tourists who visited ecotourism during four weeks of research in April-May 2023. Tourists who had experience with online communities and used travel reviews as an information source about tourism destinations will be requested to complete the questionnaires. In determining the sample size, the researcher will refer to the table proposed by [32], for the minimum number of samples.

3.3 Research Instrument

A design questionnaire is to measure the research model variable constructs. Each variable construct (e.g. eWOM, attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control, and intention) will be measured. The survey consists of three parts covering the following issues: eWOM, TPB scale, and demographics. In the eWOM section, with six items for

the tourism context, respondents were asked about using eWOM. The second section contains the scale of TPB, including attitude toward behaviour (three items), subjective norm (three things), perceived behavioural control (three things), and behavioural intention (three things). The third section is about the demographic characteristics of tourists.

3.4 Data Collection and Data Analysis

Before the mass collection of data, the researchers will conduct a pilot study to ensure the questionnaire's feasibility, reliability and content validity. The data collection will be online (an online questionnaire and respondents will be requested to answer it). As for data analysis, this study employs the structural equation modelling (SEM) method. The research will link eWOM, attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control, and intention. SEM is suitable for this study because it analyses a model's complex inter-relationships among variables. Furthermore, as this study uses multiple response items to measure the variables in the model, SEM is considered more accurate.

4 Conclusion

This study is likely to contribute significantly to the body of knowledge. Firstly, this study examines the impact of eWOM and TPB in the ecotourism context. Secondly, this study contributes new insights to the tourism literature by examining the phenomena from the perspective of ecotourism destinations. There has been a lot of marketing research on eWOM. However, it has covered eWOM in ecotourism and its impact on ecotourism destination choice by adding a new dimension of eWOM to the theory of planned behaviour. This paper seeks to fill this gap. Based on its findings, the study will propose practical implications useful to ecotourism policymakers and practitioners to attract and retain more tourists in such destinations.

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