MANAGEMENT
2025, Vol. 29, No. 2
www.management-poland.com
DOI: 10.58691/man/195476

THUC NGOC NGUYEN

Electronic Word-of-Mouth Marketing in the Promotion of Ecotourism – The Role of Trust and Perception

Abstract

Research background and purpose: eWOM, an evolution of traditional word-of-mouth via social media, plays a key role in influencing consumer decisions, particularly in Vietnam's growing ecotourism sector. This study examines eWOM's effect on ecotourism intention, with online review credibility as a moderator and trust, attitude, and perceived destination image as mediators, applying the TPB and the S–O–R framework.
Design/methodology/approach: A convenience sample of 608 Vietnamese respondents was surveyed. Data were analyzed using PLS-SEM in SmartPLS 4.0 to test hypothesized relationships and moderation effects.
Findings: eWOM positively influences trust, attitude, perceived destination image, and ecotourism intention. Online review credibility positively moderates the effects of eWOM on trust, perceived destination image, and intention, but not on attitude.
Value added and limitations: This research extends TPB and S–O–R by integrating online communication factors into ecotourism intention models. It offers practical implications for destination marketing, particularly in enhancing review credibility to strengthen trust and positive perceptions. Limitations include the use of non-probability, convenience sampling and the focus on Vietnamese ecotourism, which may restrict the generalizability of findings.

Keywords: *Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM), ecotourism, Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R), ecotourism intention.*

JEL
Classification: M31, L83, Z32, O33

Received: 2025-08-14; **Revised:** 2025-10-25; **Accepted:** 2025-11-15

1. Introduction

THUC NGOC NGUYEN ✉
Faculty of Business Administration, Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City (IUH), Viet Nam; email: nguyenngocthuc@iuh.edu.vn
ORCID: 0000-0002-5164-5226

Tourism today is no longer just a form of pure entertainment. In this era of development, tourism has become an important spearhead of the country's development. According to National Statistics Office of Vietnam (2024), in the first 6 months of 2024 alone, the service sector increased by 6.64%, contributing 49.76% to Vietnam's GDP in 2024.

According to the Vietnam National Authority of Tourism (VNAT) (2025), during the Lunar New Year of At Ty 2025, the country's tourism industry is estimated to welcome and serve about 12.5 million domestic tourists, an increase of about 19% over the same period in 2024. According to Nhan Dan Online (2024), 96% of Vietnamese tourists consider sustainable tourism an important factor in their travel choices; 56% feel guilty about engaging in environmentally harmful tourism, and 21% actively choose sustainable options because they believe it is the right decision. This highlights that sustainable tourism is not only a practical market demand but also an inevitable trend to enhance competitiveness.

Ho Chi Minh City, with about 9.5 million residents, is a key source market for eco-tourism. Over 74.2% of its population is of working age, mainly young professionals and stable-income households, who show strong travel demand and spending capacity. Their heavy reliance on social media and online reviews makes eco-tourism promotion highly effective, strengthening the city's competitiveness.

With many solutions implemented, the tourism industry of Ho Chi Minh City in the coming time, eco-tourism will have breakthroughs, with more tours, tourist routes, creating highlights for each destination, typically Binh Duong, Can Gio, ... (Vietnam National Authority of Tourism (VNAT), 2019) to attract more and more tourists.

eWOM is not only a supporting tool but also a mainstay of digital marketing, especially in the tourism and service industries (Litvin et al., 2018). eWOM is an important part in influencing destination image and travel intention (Rizky et al., 2017). Especially for a type of tourism that is not yet popular, eWOM plays an important role in raising visitors' awareness and promoting visit intention (Herstanti et al., 2024). The roles of destination attitude and destination trust have been shown to influence travel intentions (Jalilvand et al., 2012). Additionally, Satyarini et al. (2017) showed that destination image directly affects both intention and decision to choose a destination.

Current research has not fully demonstrated the impact of these factors on ecotourism intention, despite growing interest in this field. Harun et al. (2023) examined eWOM in destination choice and extended TPB but did not apply it to Vietnam, a market with unique cultural and behavioral traits. Hoang Duc Sinh (2022) focused on destination choice without addressing the formation of travel intention, while Luong The Bao (2025) overlooked the mediating role of attitude and perception. Similarly, Hultman et al. (2015) did not integrate TPB components such as subjective norms and trust. These limitations highlight a clear research gap that this study seeks to address. Although eWOM and related constructs such as destination trust, attitude, and image have been extensively examined in international contexts,

systematic empirical evidence in Vietnam remains limited. Given the distinctive cultural and behavioral patterns of Vietnamese tourists and the rapid growth of the digital ecosystem, the influence of eWOM on ecotourism intention may differ significantly. This study is the first to test the model in Vietnam, focusing on HCMC residents, thereby providing timely insights for sustainable tourism. In previous studies, the moderating role of online review credibility between eWOM and factors such as trust and travel intention has been clarified (Luong, 2024; Su et al., 2022). Specifically, when consumers highly value the trustworthiness of online reviews, the influence of eWOM on destination trust and travel intention will be significantly enhanced. Yet, limited research has examined this moderating role in relation to perceived destination image and attitude-two critical drivers of travel intention. This study addresses that gap by providing empirical evidence on the moderating effect of online review credibility, thereby offering a clearer understanding of how eWOM shapes ecotourism intention in Vietnam.

TPB and the S-O-R model are used by the authors as the premise framework for the research. The study aims to answer the following research questions: What factors affect the ecotourism intention of Vietnam residents? What is the moderating effect of trustworthiness of online reviews on relationships? What are the appropriate implications for increasing the number of tourists participating in ecotourism? The novelty of the study is that it has tested the role of eWOM relationships as well as the moderation of credibility variables in the context of ecotourism in Vietnam. Thereby providing managerial implications to help the tourism industry develop further, as well as the form of ecotourism becomes more widely known in the future.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Theory of planned behavior

Ajzen (1991) developed the TPB, which describes how behavior is formed. According to the author, the way people form intentions and perform behaviors is shaped through three main factors: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Among these, an individual's attitude toward the behavior reflects their positive or negative evaluation of performing that behavior. Subjective norms represent the perceived social pressure or expectations from others regarding that behavior. Finally, perceived behavioral control reflects the degree of an individual's belief in their ability to perform the behavior under actual conditions.

In the context associated with modern consumer behavior, especially in the field of ecotourism, where actual experiences are difficult to evaluate beforehand, tourists' decision-making increasingly relies on information from the online community, particularly through eWOM.

Applying the TPB theoretical framework to this study, the attitude toward the destination affects the intention to engage in ecotourism. At the same time, eWOM or online reviews from others correspond to the subjective norm factor in TPB theory and therefore influence the intention to engage in ecotourism.

2.2. S-O-R Theory

The S-O-R model is a psychological approach through the study of specific situations and environments. This model consists of three components: Stimulus, Organism, and Response. In this model, Stimulus is an element created by the environment and is what generates certain perceptions and emotions in consumers. Organism refers to the factors that express the consumer's emotional state in specific cognitive contexts. Response represents the intentional reactions of consumers aiming to achieve their goals.

In the context of studying ecotourism intention, the S-O-R model is adjusted and specified as follows: Stimulus (S) corresponds to eWOM as the main stimulating factor. This includes reviews, experience sharing, or feedback from consumers in the online environment, playing the role of an external agent affecting the perception of potential tourists. Organism (O) in this stage reflects the internal psychological state of individuals when receiving stimulation from the environment, including: trust in the destination, attitude toward the destination, and perception of the destination's image. Response (R) is expressed through ecotourism intention, which is an individual's planned commitment to undertake a trip to an ecotourism destination.

The integration of the TPB and S-O-R models in the study provides a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the mechanism behind the formation of ecotourism intention. While the TPB model focuses on internal factors such as attitude and subjective norms influencing intention, the S-O-R model adds a perspective on external environmental stimuli (eWOM) and the internal psychological processing (trust, perception) before leading to responsive behavior (ecotourism intention).

2.3. eWOM

eWOM refers to any positive or negative statements made by potential, current, or past customers about a product, service, or company, shared over the Internet with many people and organizations (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). It encompasses informal online communication between consumers regarding products, services, or sellers, allowing users to share opinions and reviews on digital platforms(Litvin et al., 2008). Research indicates that eWOM positively influences trust, especially when reviews from other users align with tourists' expectations, reducing uncertainty and enhancing destination

trust (Park et al., 2007; Lin & Lu, 2010; Yerizal & Abror, 2019; Abubakar et al., 2017; Giao, 2022).

eWOM influences product trust, especially through reviews from other users (Park et al., 2007). According to Lin and Lu (2010), there is a potential relationship between eWOM and destination trust. Positive eWOM can eliminate uncertainty and increase destination trust. When tourists find eWOM consistent with their expectations, destination trust is formed and increased (Yerizal & Abror, 2019). eWOM increases tourists' trust in destinations (Abubakar et al., 2017; Giao, 2022).

H1a. eWOM positively affects destination trust

eWOM is important in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors (Castaneda et al., 2009). In a study analyzing the impact of eWOM on perceived destination image and tourist intentions, it was found that eWOM communication has a significant positive impact on tourist attitudes toward the destination (Jalilvand et al., 2012; Rizky et al., 2017). The study surveyed 167 Instagram followers of Batu City (Indonesia) tourist attractions. The results showed that eWOM has a positive impact on destination attitudes (Rizky et al., 2017). eWOM conveyed through online reviews increased tourists' positive attitudes (Tung & My, 2023). According to Huong and Hoan (2023), eWOM is a source of initiative that creates tourists' positive attitudes about a destination

H1b. eWOM positively affects destination attitudes

According to Semuel and Lianto (2014), there is a significant positive relationship between eWOM and brand image. Information from eWOM helps tourists build first impressions and perceive destination image (Jalilvand et al., 2017). Negative word of mouth will have an impact on the perception of destination image, when tourists are not satisfied, they will leave negative comments about the tourist destination. Electronic word of mouth, whether positive or negative, affects the destination image in the eyes of tourists (Rizky et al., 2017). Research by Nasar (2022), và Prayogo (2021) concluded that a good eWOM platform will create a good destination image perception and higher interest in visiting. Based on research Martini (2022), the results of this study show that eWOM and WOM have a partial and simultaneous impact on perceived destination image.

H1c. eWOM positively affects perceived destination image

eWOM helps to increase customer awareness, reduce risks when choosing a product or service, and assist tourists in deciding on a travel destination (Abubakar et al., 2016; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Previous studies have shown that eWOM has an impact on consumer behavior and travel intention (Di Pietro et al., 2012). In the tourism context,

tourists increasingly rely on eWOM to reduce risks and uncertainties, which directly affects their booking decisions and intentions (Tsao et al., 2015). eWOM has a positive and significant impact on satisfaction and visit intention (Prayogo et al., 2016). A survey of 302 tourists in Bangladesh showed that most of the eWOM factors positively affected travel intention (Akhi et al., 2024). Abubakar (2016) base on "trust transfer theory" showed that eWOM enhances trust in the destination and thereby increases travel intention (sample of 216 tourists in Cyprus).

H1d. eWOM positively affects ecotourism intention

The relationships between eWOM and key outcomes (H1a–d), including destination trust, perceived destination image, destination attitude, and ecotourism intention, are strongly supported by foundational theories. The S-O-R model explains how eWOM, as an external stimulus, affects internal states, shaping perceptions and attitudes. Meanwhile, TPB highlights that trust and attitude are critical psychological mechanisms driving behavioral intentions. Previous studies also confirm that positive eWOM enhances trust, image, and attitude, which in turn increases travel intentions, thus demonstrating that these foundational theories underpin the proposed relationships.

2.4. Destination trust

Destination trust is described as tourists' belief that a place can be trusted to perform its promised functions (Han & Hyun, 2015). Destination trust is also defined as tourists' confidence and certainty about the products, services, and activities of a tourism destination (Marinao et al., 2012). Tourists tend to visit destinations that they perceive as trustworthy, so it will affect tourists' willingness to visit a destination (Giao, 2022). Research by Han and Hyun (2015) shows that international tourists are more likely to visit destinations they trust. In their study, Karami et al. (2018) demonstrated that trust in social media information promotes travel intention.

H2. Destination trust positively affects ecotourism intention

2.5. Destination attitude

According to Passafaro (2020), attitude is a psychological tendency to express positive or negative evaluations and in tourism, it reflects how tourists perceive a destination, experience, or travel behavior. Tourists' attitudes describe their psychological intentions expressed through their positive or negative evaluations when they engage in certain behaviors (Ajzen, 1991). Attitude is a core factor in the formation of behavioral intentions, including travel intentions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Positive attitudes

toward a destination increase the likelihood of generating travel intentions (Jalilvand et al., 2012).

H3. Destination attitude positively affects ecotourism intentions

2.6. Perceived destination image

Perceived destination image is often defined as a tourist's overall perception of a specific destination (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). According to Crompton (1979), destination image is a combination of beliefs, opinions, and impressions that a person will develop when choosing a destination. Destination image is also a description of the cumulative impressions, beliefs, ideas, expectations, and emotions toward a place over time (Kim & Richardson, 2003). Positive perceptions of country and destination images promote tourists' destination choice intentions (Chaulagain et al., 2019), and destination images constructed through eWOM strongly impact travel intentions (Rizky et al., 2017).

H4. Perceived destination image positively affects ecotourism intention

2.7. Trustworthiness of online reviews

The trustworthiness of online reviews (RT), defined as the extent to which readers believe that the comments are accurate and objective (Su et al., 2022), plays a crucial moderating role in the relationship between eWOM, destination trust, and ecotourism intention. Consumers tend to trust information from experts or influencers more, and when review sources are perceived as trustworthy, eWOM can amplify positive impacts on tourists' perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions (Luong, 2024; Su et al., 2022). Conversely, low trustworthiness leads to skepticism and reduces information acceptance, weakening the effectiveness of eWOM. In the study Amarullah et al. (2022) even in the context of e-commerce, the relationship between eWOM and trust is strongly influenced by review credibility. Consumers rely on credibility to decide their attitude towards eWOM (Cheung et al., 2009). If the reader trusts the review content, eWOM will have a stronger influence on destination image (Nechoud et al., 2021). When consumers trust the review source, they have higher travel intentions (Luong, 2024).

According to the S-O-R model, eWOM serves as an external stimulus (S) affecting consumers' internal states (O), where the trustworthiness of information determines the degree of acceptance and the formation of positive perceptions and attitudes. Simultaneously, within the TPB framework, beliefs and attitudes toward the destination

form a critical basis for behavioral intentions, explaining how eWOM influences ecotourism intention through perceptions and trust when reinforced by the credibility of online reviews. When eWOM is perceived as trustworthy, consumers are more likely to process information positively, forming favorable destination perceptions and attitudes, which in turn enhance their ecotourism intentions. Conversely, low eWOM credibility leads to skepticism, reduces information acceptance, and weakens its impact on perceptions, attitudes, and behavior. Although the direct effects of eWOM on destination perceptions and intentions have been studied, the moderating role of online review trustworthiness in the relationship between eWOM and destination attitude, as well as between eWOM and destination image, remains underexplored, particularly in emerging ecotourism markets like Vietnam. This study addresses this gap by examining these moderating effects in HCMC, where eWOM and ecotourism are both rapidly developing

H5a. Trustworthiness of online reviews positively moderates the relationship between eWOM and destination trust
H5b. Trustworthiness of online reviews positively moderates the relationship between eWOM and destination attitude
H5c. Trustworthiness of online reviews positively moderates the relationship between eWOM and perceived destination image
H5d. Trustworthiness of online reviews positively moderates the relationship between eWOM and ecotourism intention

2.8. Mediation role

Jaitip et al. (2024) found that eWOM positively influences destination trust, which mediates the relationship between eWOM and intention to revisit an eco-destination. Setiawan et al. (2021) also confirmed the mediating role of destination trust in the relationship between eWOM and visit intention. Similarly, Jalilvand et al. (2012) highlighted that eWOM affects destination image and attitude, with attitude subsequently influencing travel intention, while Hung and Khoa (2022) emphasized the strong mediating role of attitude, especially in the context of ecotourism. Moreover, Rizky et al. (2017) and Thaothampitak and Wongsuwatt (2022) demonstrated that perceived destination image is an important mediator between eWOM and travel intention, underscoring the role of cognitive and psychological mechanisms. These empirical findings are theoretically supported by the TPB, which explains that trust and attitude form the psychological basis for behavioral intention, and the S-O-R model, where eWOM as an external stimulus (S) influences consumers' internal states (O), shaping perceptions, attitudes, and ultimately travel intentions. Therefore, destination trust, attitude, and perceived image serve both as

psychological mechanisms and theoretical bridges, enabling eWOM to effectively impact ecotourism intention.

H6a. Destination trust plays a mediating role in the relationship between eWOM and ecotourism intention
H6b. Destination attitude plays a mediating role in the relationship between eWOM and ecotourism intention
H6c. Perceived destination image plays a mediating role in the relationship eWOM and ecotourism intention

2.9. Ecotourism intention

According to Björk (2000), ecotourism is an activity in which authorities, the tourism industry, tourists and local people together create conditions for tourists to visit pristine areas to admire, study and enjoy nature and culture, in a way that does not exhaust resources but contributes to sustainable development. In tourism research, ecotourism intention is defined as the intention of tourists to participate in historical tourism activities (Hultman et al., 2015). According to research by Pham and Khanh (2021), ecotourism intentions are also discussed from the perspective of preserving and experiencing natural areas.

From the above hypotheses, the authors propose the following research model (Figure 1).

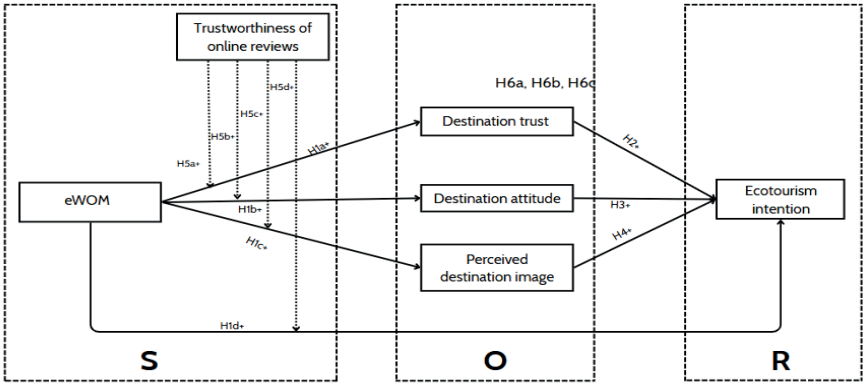

Figure 1. **Research model**

Source: compiled by the authors (2025)

3. Research method

This study combines qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure both theoretical depth and empirical accuracy in the process of model building and testing.

In this study, SmartPLS software was used to analyze statistical data. According to Memon et al. (2021), the PLS-SEM method is widely used because of its easy-to-use, intuitive interface and flexibility to apply in many industries such as human resource management, marketing, tourism, hotels, etc. This method allows analyzing the relationship between observed variables and latent variables to test the strength and estimate new research models (Hair Jr & Sarstedt, 2019; Sarstedt et al., 2016).

The qualitative phase involved analyzing previous studies on travel intention to develop and adapt the measurement scale to the Vietnamese context, with input from 10 marketing experts to ensure its validity and reliability. The quantitative phase employed an online survey via Google Forms using a cross-sectional and convenience sampling method, collecting data from January to April 2025 at urban parks and major shopping centers. Respondents were individuals who had not experienced ecotourism but were interested in and actively searched for information about it online.

3.1. Research process

The qualitative data collection was conducted through a questionnaire targeting HCMC residents aged 18 and above, with prior travel experience and Internet use for information search. Participants were reached via a questionnaire link sent through Facebook and Zalo or by scanning a QR code. The questionnaire, based on established measurement scales, comprised three sections and was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). A pilot test was conducted to ensure clarity and reliability before the official survey was distributed across digital platforms. Collected responses were screened, and invalid samples were removed to obtain a final dataset, ensuring accuracy and replicability for analysis.

The cross-sectional convenience sampling method has limitations, as missing target respondents, susceptibility to word-of-mouth influence, low representativeness, sampling and self-selection bias, and demographic imbalance, which reduce the reliability and generalizability of the study. To address this, the questionnaire was structured into three parts: (i) a screening section with the questions "Have you ever heard of ecotourism?" and "Do you search for tourism information through online applications or platforms (such as Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, blogs, reviews…)?" Respondents answering "No" were screened out and did not continue; (ii) demographic information including gender, age, occupation, and income for

descriptive analysis; and (iii) the main section with measurement items for model testing.

The sample size was determined based on the recommendation of Hair Jr et al. (2019), which suggests that SEM analysis requires at least 5–10 observations per measured variable. With 32 observed variables, the minimum required sample size is approximately 320. Similarly, according to Tabachnick & Fidell (2001), regression analysis requires a minimum of 50 + 8m samples (where m is the number of independent variables), equivalent to 82 samples for four independent variables. Survey participants took part voluntarily, and after removing 12 invalid responses due to selecting the same answer for all questions, 608 valid responses were included in the analysis.

The study used the Bootstrapping method with N = 5,000 to test the hypothesis. Specifically, the CR should be greater than 0.5 (Hair et al., 2013) and Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient must be greater than 0.7 (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021).The same authors state that the constructs in the model should have an AVE greater than 0.5. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), AVE values above 0.7 are considered excellent, while those below 0.5 are acceptable. The structural model is evaluated using several metrics, such as the R^2, Q^2, and f^2. According to Cohen (2013), R^2 values of 0.02, 0.16, and 0.26 indicate explanatory power, respectively. weak, moderate, and significant. According to Hair et al. (2019) the model has low predictive accuracy if $Q2 < 0.25$; medium predictive accuracy if $0.25 \leq Q2 \leq 0.5$ and high predictive accuracy if $Q2 > 0.5$. In summary, the effect size (f^2) exhibits three distinct ranges: weak ($f^2 = 0.02$), moderate ($f^2 = 0.15$), and strong ($f^2 = 0.35$).

3.2. Measuring scale

The measurement scales used in this study were adapted from previous studies. The electronic word of mouth scale was adopted from the study of Bambauer Sachse and Mangold (2011). The scale for measuring destination attitudes and ecotourism intention was inherited from the research of Song et al. (2012). The scale of perceived destination image was adopted from the study of Souiden et al. (2017). The scale of destination trust was adopted from the study of Abubakar and Ilkan (2016). The scale of online review trustworthiness was adopted from the study of Su et al. (2022). The full list of constructs, their observed variables, and corresponding sources is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. **The variables in the research model**

Name	Symbol	Observed variable	Reference sources
Electronic word of mouth	eWOM1	I often consult other travelers' online travel reviews to help me choose an attractive ecotourism destination.	Bambauer Sachse & Mangold, 2011
	eWOM2	I am more confident in my decision to go ecotourism, thanks to online reviews from other travelers	
	eWOM3	I often gather information from other travelers' online reviews before visiting a particular ecotourism destination.	
	eWOM4	I often read other travelers' online travel reviews to see which ecotourism destinations have made a good impression on them.	
	eWOM5	I would be worried about my decision to go on an ecotourism trip if I hadn't read other travelers' online travel reviews.	2011
	eWOM6	I often read other travelers' online travel reviews to make sure I choose the right ecotourism destination.	
Destination attitude	ATT1	I think that visiting ecotourism destinations is a positive behavior.	Song et al., 2012
	ATT2	I think that visiting ecotourism destinations is a valuable activity.	
	ATT3	I think that visiting ecotourism destinations brings many benefits.	
	ATT4	I think that visiting ecotourism destinations is necessary.	
Perceived image destination	PDI1	I think an ecotourism destination is a place with beautiful natural scenery	Souiden et al., 2017
	PDI2	I think an ecotourism destination has good infrastructure (roads, communication, etc.).	
	PDI3	I think an ecotourism destination is a suitable place to experience and learn about the environment.	
	PDI4	I think an ecotourism destination is a safe place to visit and explore.	
	PDI5	I think an ecotourism destination has many attractive recreational activities associated with nature.	

Destination trust	DT1	I trust that this ecotourism destination will meet my expectations	Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016
	DT2	I can trust this ecotourism destination.	
	DT3	I will not be disappointed with my experience at this ecotourism destination.	
	DT4	I can trust that the ecotourism destination will guarantee satisfaction.	
	DT5	I can trust that the ecotourism destination will be sincere and friendly in addressing my concerns.	
	DT6	I can trust that the services at the ecotourism destination will address my problems.	
	DT7	I can trust that this ecotourism destination will provide me with satisfaction.	
	DT8	I can trust that this ecotourism destination will have a compensation or support policy if I have problems after my trip.	
Trustworthiness of online reviews	RT1	I think ecotourism destination reviews are acceptable.	Su et al., 2022
	RT2	I think ecotourism destination reviews accurately reflect reality.	
	RT3	I think ecotourism destination reviews are highly trustworthy.	
	RT4	I think ecotourism destination reviews are objective.	
	RT5	I think ecotourism destination reviews provide complete information.	
Ecotourism intention	EI1	I will try to visit the ecotourism destination soon.	Song et al., 2012
	EI2	I intend to visit the ecotourism destination.	
	EI3	I am willing to visit the ecotourism destination.	
	EI4	I am willing to spend time and money to visit the ecotourism destination.	

Source: own elaboration

3.3. Sample and data collection

The survey sample shows (Table 2) a fairly balanced gender balance (female 52.6%, male 47.4%). Age: The 24–34 age group accounts for the largest proportion (29.9%), representing the primary target segment with stable income and strong demand for sustainable destinations. The 35–44 group (27.6%) consists mainly of families concerned with health and well-being. Those aged 45 and above (18.8%) also remain engaged, motivated by an interest in nature and health. Although the under-24 segment is smaller, it still shows potential due to strong influence from social media.

Table 2. **Descriptive statistics**

Category		Frequency	%	Category		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	288	47.4	Occupation	Student	107	17.6
	Female	320	52.6		Office worker	227	37.3
Age	Under 18	76	12.5		Freelancer	184	30.3
	18 to under 24	68	11.2		Others	90	14.8
	24 to under 35	182	29.9	Income	Under 5 million VND	78	12.8
	35 to under 45	168	27.6		5 to under 10 million VND	55	9.0
					10 to under 20 million VND	217	35.7
	45 and above	114	18.8		20 to under 30 million VND	157	25.8
					30 million VND and above	101	16.6

Source: author compiled from survey data

Occupation: Office workers (37.3%) and self-employed individuals (30.3%) are the two dominant groups, combining spending capacity with flexible time to participate in ecotourism. Students (17.6%), despite limited income, are active and influenced by online trends. Other occupations (14.8%) also express interest, confirming the broad appeal of ecotourism across professional groups. Income: The 10–20 million

VND group (35.7%) constitutes the core market, with strong purchasing power and high reliance on eWOM. Higher-income groups, earning 20–30 million (25.8%) and above 30 million (16.6%), prioritize premium and sustainable experiences and are more likely to spread positive eWOM. Lower-income groups (<10 million) have limited spending ability but still show interest in affordable or low-cost ecotourism options. The core customer segment for ecotourism in Ho Chi Minh City consists of individuals aged 24–44, primarily office workers and self-employed, with medium to high income levels. They are willing to spend, strongly influenced by social media, and serve not only as the main demand source but also as a key channel for spreading eWOM.

4. Result

Before assessing the measurement and structural models, the key assumptions of the SEM model were examined. The data met the requirements of normality, and no multicollinearity issues were detected as all VIF values were below 5. The model also showed an acceptable fit with an SRMR value of 0.041 (Table 5), indicating good overall adequacy. In addition, the R^2 and Q^2 values (0.748 and 0.593, respectively; Table 5) confirmed the model's strong explanatory and predictive power. These results demonstrate that the assumptions of SEM were satisfactorily met.
The model showed an acceptable fit, with an SRMR value of 0.041, indicating good overall adequacy. In addition, the R^2 value (0.748) and the Q^2 value (0.593) confirmed the model's strong explanatory and predictive power. These results demonstrate that the assumptions of SEM were satisfactorily met.

4.1. Measurement model

Table 3 shows that most of the Cronbach's alpha values of each variable is higher than 0.7 and CR is greater than 0.5 . Therefore, the reliability of the indicators has been ensured. The AVE values of the variables are all at a very good and acceptable level, so each construct shows good convergent validity.

Table 3. **Reliability and convergent validity**

No.	Construct	Factor Loading Range	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
1	eWOM	0.85 – 0.94	0.952	0.961	0.81
2	ATT	0.91 – 0.97	0.959	0.971	0.89
3	PDI	0.84 – 0.93	0.930	0.947	0.78

4	DT	0.75 – 0.85	0.923	0.937	0.65
5	RT	0.84 – 0.91	0.929	0.946	0.78
6	EI	0.83 – 0.95	0.930	0.950	0.83

Source: author compiled from survey data

The results of the Factor Loading Coefficient in Smart PLS 4 software (2025), the external loading coefficients of the observed variables in the research model are shown. The level of correlation between the measured variables and related structures is shown by the external loading coefficients. The external loading coefficients of the variables are all greater than 0.7, and the variables are all meaningful. Therefore, the observed variables of the research model show convergent values (Hair Jr et al., 2019).

Table 4. **Fornell-Larcker discriminant validity test**

Construct	ATT	DT	EI	PDI	RT	eWOM
ATT	0.944					
DT	0.632	0.806				
EI	0.673	0.770	0.910			
PDI	0.644	0.632	0.688	0.884		
RT	-0.053	0.102	0.098	-0.047	0.883	
eWOM	0.588	0.669	0.753	0.593	-0.032	0.898

Source: analysis results from SmartPLS 4 software

The results of the Fornell-Larcker discriminant reliability test are shown in Table 4. This test is used to assess the degree of difference between the measured variables in the research model. The study uses the Fornell-Larcker criterion proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Table 4 shows that all constructs in the model ensure discriminant validity, as the square root of the AVE for each construct is greater than its correlation with other constructs, indicating that each measurement construct is independent and accurately reflects its underlying concept.

4.2. Evaluate the structural model

4.2.1. Direct hypothesis testing

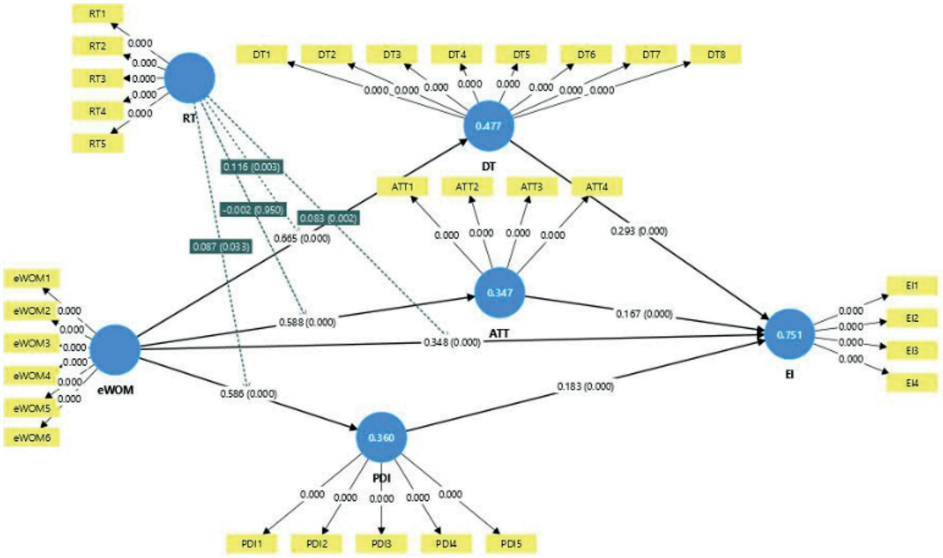

Figure 2. **Results of PLS-SEM estimation**

Source: analysis results from SmartPLS 4.0

The results of model estimation using Bootstrapping method with a sample size of 5,000 are depicted in Figure 2.

Table 5. **Results of the relationships between constructs in the model**

Paths	Estimate (β)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	t -value (|O/STDEV|)	p-value
eWOM→DT	0.665	0.667	0.034	19.676	< 0.001
eWOM→ATT	0.588	0.589	0.035	16.836	< 0.001

eWOM→PDI	0.586	0.587	0.037	15.740	< 0.001
eWOM→EI	0.348	0.346	0.039	8.984	< 0.001
DT→EI	0.293	0.296	0.049	5.914	< 0.001
ATT→EI	0.167	0.165	0.029	5.686	< 0.001
PDI→EI	0.183	0.181	0.034	5.363	< 0.001
R^2 (EI)	0.748				
Stone-Geisser's Q	0.593				
f^2	f^2DT → EI = 0.139; f^2ATT → EI = 0.053; f^2PDI → EI = 0.063; f^2eWOM → EI = 0.233				

Source: analysis results from SmartPLS 4.0

Destination trust (DT) has a significant positive effect on ecotourism intention (EI) ($\beta = 0.293$, $t = 5.914$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2. Destination attitude (ATT) also positively influences EI ($\beta = 0.167$, $t = 5.686$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H3. Similarly, perceived destination image (PDI) shows a significant positive impact on EI ($\beta = 0.183$, $t = 5.363$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H4. Therefore, hypotheses H2, H3, and H4 are all supported.

4.2.2. Mediation hypothesis testing

The test results in Table 6 show that destination trust plays a mediating role in the relationship between eWOM and ecotourism intention (H6a: $\beta = 0.195$, $p < 0.001$) destination attitude plays a mediating role in the relationship between eWOM and ecotourism intention (H6b: $\beta = 0.098$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived destination image plays a mediating role in the relationship between eWOM and ecotourism intention (H6c: $\beta = 0.107$, $p < 0.001$) . From there, it can be concluded that the mediating relationships are all significant and acceptable.

Table 6. **Mediation analysis results**

Relationship	Direct Effect		Indirect Effect		Total Effect		Type of mediation	Decision
	β	p-value	β	p-value	β	p-value		
eWOM→DT→EI	0.348	< 0.001	0.195	< 0.001	0.748	< 0.001	Partial mediation	Supported
eWOM→ATT→EI			0.098	< 0.001			Partial mediation	Supported
eWOM→PDI→EI			0.107	< 0.001			Partial mediation	Supported

Source: analysis results from SmartPLS 4.0 (2025)

4.2.3. Moderator hypothesis testing

The results in Table 7 show that hypotheses H5a (β = 0.116, p = 0.003), H5c (β = 0.087, p = 0.033), and H5d (β = 0.083, p = 0.002) are all supported, indicating that the trustworthiness of online reviews (RT) significantly moderates the relationships between eWOM and destination trust (DT), perceived destination image (PDI), and ecotourism intention (EI). However, hypothesis H5b (p = 0.950) is not supported, indicating that RT does not moderate the relationship between eWOM and destination attitude (ATT). The non-significant moderating effect of H5b may be because tourists' attitudes are primarily shaped by personal experiences and cultural values, making them less directly influenced by the trustworthiness of online reviews, especially in emerging markets like Vietnam.

Table 7. **Beta Coefficient Results of the Moderating Variable**

Hypoth-esis	Relationship	Estimate (β)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	t-value	p-value	Decision
H5a	eWOM→DT	0.665	0.034	19.676	< 0.001	Supported
	RT→DT	0.120	0.030	4.049	< 0.001	
	RT x eWOM→DT	0.116	0.039	2.992	0.003	
H5b	eWOM→ATT	0.588	0.035	16.836	< 0.001	Not supported
	RT→ATT	-0.034	0.035	0.973	0.330	
	RT x eWOM→ATT	-0.002	0.039	0.063	0.950	

H5c	eWOM→PDI	0.586	0.037	15.740	< 0.001	Supported
	RT→PDI	-0.030	0.034	0.897	0.370	
	RT x eWOM→PDI	0.087	0.041	2.135	0.033	
H5d	eWOM→EI	0.348	0.039	8.984	< 0.001	Supported
	RT→EI	0.095	0.021	4.570	< 0.001	
	RT x eWOM→EI	0.083	0.026	3.163	0.002	

Source: analysis results from SmartPLS 4.0 (2025)

The Q^2 and R^2 values (Table 5) were used to comprehensively evaluate the quality of model. Specifically in Table 5, the R^2 value of EI is 0.748 far exceeding the level of 0.36 and is considered to have a good predictive level (Cohen, 1988). At the same time, the Q^2(EI) reached 0.593, exceeding the level of 0.5, confirming the model's suitability (Chin, 2009). Furthermore, the f^2 values are all greater than 0.02 (f^2eWOM → EI = 0.233 > 0.15), showing that there is a level of impact between factors in the model. Indicating that there is an impact between factors, with a moderate level of influence Henseler et al. (2009).

5. Discussion and implications

5.1. Discussion of results

According to the S-O-R theory, the stimulus factor (eWOM) positively influences trust, attitude, and perceived destination image, thereby enhancing ecotourism intention. From TPB perspective, attitude and the subjective norm (represented by eWOM) also positively affect destination choice intention. Integrating S-O-R and TPB clarifies the mechanism of behavioral intention formation: S-O-R explains psychological responses to external stimuli, while TPB emphasizes the cognitive–behavioral structure. The findings reinforce previous research, confirming that eWOM, trust, attitude, and perceived destination image are key determinants of ecotourism intention.

First, the study results confirm that eWOM has a direct impact on ecotourism intention, which is consistent with previous studies by Jalilvand and Samiei (2012) and Abubakar et al. (2016). Second, the study demonstrates the mediating role of trust, attitude, and perceived destination image in the relationship between eWOM and ecotourism intention. This result agrees with many previous studies. Specifically, according to Jaitip et al. (2024) and Setiawan et al. (2021), eWOM has a positive impact

on destination trust, and trust plays a mediating role in the relationship between eWOM and ecotourism intention. Meanwhile, Jalilvand et al. (2012) and Hung and Khoa (2022) tested and agreed on the role of destination attitude as a mediator for eWOM variables with ecotourism intention. In the research of Rizky et al. (2017) and Thaothampitak and Wongsuwatt (2022), there is also a similarity with the authors that confirms the mediating role of perceived destination image in the relationship between eWOM and travel intention. Third, the study of Su et al. (2022) tested the moderating role of trustworthiness of online reviews in the relationship between review valence and review emotional intensity with destination trust and travel intention. In reality, tourists tend to trust a destination more when online comments are positive rather than negative. Negative reviews significantly reduce trust and visiting intention, whereas positive ones do not notably enhance them. Building on Su et al. (2022), this study extends the model by replacing Review Valence and Review Emotional Intensity with eWOM, and adding two mediating variables-attitude and perceived destination image while continuing to test review credibility as a moderating factor.Testing the moderating role of review credibility in this context is a new contribution when Su et al. (2022) and Luong (2024) have not tested the relationship between eWOM and attitude towards the destination, between eWOM and perceived destination image. The study confirms that when tourists perceive eWOM information as credible, trust and perceived destination image exert a stronger influence on ecotourism intention. The results indicate that online review credibility positively moderates the relationships between eWOM and trust, eWOM and perceived destination image, and eWOM and ecotourism intention (supporting H5a, H5c, and H5d), while it shows no significant effect on the relationship between eWOM and destination attitude (rejecting H5b). Overall, ecotourism intention is shaped by eWOM through the mediating effects of trust, attitude, and perceived destination image, along with the moderating role of online review credibility.

In summary, the impact on ecotourism is related to many factors. This study examines the impact of eWOM on ecotourism intention through the mediating roles of trust, attitude, and perceived destination image, and tests the moderating role of review trustworthiness in the relationships.

5.2. Contribution

First, this study contributes to the previous literature by expanding the understanding of the impact mechanism of eWOM in the context of ecotourism, through the integration of theoretical literature on online consumer behavior and the S-O-R model. This is an important contribution because most of the previous studies on eWOM focus on e-commerce, hospitality or tourism in general, while ecotourism is an emerging field.

Therefore, the findings from the current study not only fill the theoretical gap but also clarify how eWOM affects the process of ecotourism intention.

Second, the study contributes to the field of ecotourism by integrating the S-O-R model and TPB. Although previous studies have used each model separately, combining these two models helps to explain more comprehensively the mechanism of travel intention formation.

Thirdly, the study has clarified the mediating role of three factors including: destination trust, destination attitude and destination image perception in the relationship between eWOM and ecotourism intention. This finding provides reliable empirical evidence that eWOM does not directly affect travel intention, but rather influences it through consumers' psychological processes.

Finally, the study contributes new theory by examining the moderating role of online review credibility in the relationships between eWOM and mediating factors. The results show that credibility has a significant moderating effect on the relationship between eWOM and perceived destination image, but does not moderate the relationship between eWOM and attitude – a novel finding, suggesting that emotional responses such as attitudes may be less dependent on information credibility than cognitive evaluations.

Based on the results, the authors propose some managerial implications for businesses and ecotourism developers to optimize tourists' ecotourism intention, as well as open up new research directions.

Destination trust: This is the factor most strongly affected by eWOM, especially the most strongly regulated by trustworthiness of online reviews. Therefore, tourism service businesses need to build a verified review system by allowing tourists who have experienced the new service to leave reviews to ensure the authenticity of eWOM. To increase trust in tourists, businesses can label quality reviews such as "Most helpful", "Most agreed". In addition, monitoring and censoring negative fabricated content also plays an important role in preventing individuals and organizations from destroying the image of the destination, helping tourists have high confidence in the destination. For restaurants or hotels in ecotourism locations, it is necessary to ensure the quality of their services/products such as safety, hygiene, and attentive service staff.

Destination attitude: This is the second most strongly influenced factor by eWOM, and attitude is the third most strongly influenced factor on ecotourism intention. For HCMC residents, especially young and middle-class travelers, tourism businesses should strategically combine emotional storytelling with modern media technologies such as short videos, VR/AR, or 360° tours to authentically showcase local heritage, culture, and ecology. The integration of emotion, technology, and local values helps inspire travelers, build trust, and foster sustainable ecotourism intentions. Therefore, tourism service businesses need to focus on creating inspirational content. For example, when introducing an ecological destination, travel companies need to convey accurate information about cultural value. In addition, the management board of eco-

tourism areas can organize emotional experiential events such as meditation camping, checking in at sunrise by the lake, etc. to create strong emotions for participants to share.

Perceived destination image: This is the factor that is least influenced by eWOM among the three factors, but has the second strongest influence on ecotourism intention. In the digital environment, images, videos, and online reviews are the first touchpoints shaping tourists' impressions of a destination. Therefore, ecotourism management boards should invest in landscape preservation and green infrastructure, while establishing official communication channels with transparent, authentic, and regularly updated content. These efforts not only strengthen tourists' trust but also enhance the destination's image, contributing to the sustainable development of ecotourism.

5.3. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Although the study has provided valuable findings, there are still some limitations that need to be addressed in future research. Specifically, the survey sample primarily focused on a specific group of participants. Therefore, future studies could expand the scope of the survey to include various geographic regions, including international tourists, to enhance the generalizability of the results. In addition, the current research mainly employs a cross-sectional approach, whereas longitudinal studies could offer deeper insights into changes in ecotourism intentions over time and across different stages of travel decision-making.

While this study focuses on the intention to engage in ecotourism, it does not examine the post-choice stage, such as booking behavior, payment decision-making, or post-experience satisfaction. Future research could expand the model along the tourist behavior chain to better understand the comprehensive impact of eWOM on the ecotourism journey. Factors such as cultural characteristics, income should also be considered in future research models.

Acknowledgment

Sincere thanks to the Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City (IUH) for funding and supporting during the implementation of this research. The valuable support from the university has been a significant motivation, enabling the successful completion of this article.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used to refine the structure, wording, and language of the abstract to align with the target journal's format. All content was reviewed and edited by the author(s) prior to submission.After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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