



Article

The Role of Electronic Word of Mouth and Destination Image in Shaping Tourist Visit Intention and Decision: A Case Study of Sebalang Beach, South Lampung

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Abstract: This study analyzes the influence of Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) and destination image on visit intention and decision to Sebalang Beach, South Lampung. With tourists increasingly relying on online reviews, understanding these relationships is essential for effective destination marketing. The research addresses the issue of how eWOM and destination image affect tourists' decisions, aiming to provide insights for tourism stakeholders. A quantitative approach was used, employing a survey method with purposive sampling of 110 respondents who have visited or intended to visit Sebalang Beach. Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) to test the proposed hypotheses. Findings indicate that destination image significantly influences visit intention and visit decisions, while visit intention also mediates the effect of destination image on visit decisions. However, eWOM does not have a significant impact on visit intention or visit decisions, and visit intention does not mediate the relationship between eWOM and visit decisions. These results suggest the importance of strengthening online promotional strategies and enhancing the positive image of Sebalang Beach. Encouraging content creation on social media and collaborating with influencers can effectively increase engagement and attract visitors. This study offers practical recommendations for tourism stakeholders to optimize Sebalang Beach's potential and enhance its competitiveness as a tourist destination.

Keywords: Decision to Visit; Destination Image; Electronic Word of Mouth; Intention to Visit.

1. Introduction

Indonesia has a diverse tourism sector, with attractions spread across various regions, including mountains, beaches, lakes, waterfalls, and man-made tourist destinations. In recent years, Lampung's tourism industry has grown significantly, contributing to the local economy. The increasing number of visitors each year reflects a rising interest in travel. However, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a sharp decline in tourist arrivals due to movement restrictions and health protocols. Despite these challenges, some tourists continued to travel for relaxation while adhering to safety measures. As the pandemic subsided, tourism in Lampung began to recover, supported by improved infrastructure, accessibility, and aggressive online promotion efforts. In 2023, Lampung ranked third in Sumatra's highest tourism movement, with 10.26 million visitors, following North Sumatra and West Sumatra.

Lampung Selatan, known as the "Gateway to Sumatra," boasts stunning tourist destinations, including Krakatau Island, Sebesi Island, and Legundi Island. Its strategic location and natural beauty position it as a promising hub for tourism development. Marine tourism, which attracts both domestic and international travelers, plays a crucial role in this growth. Coastal destinations offer relaxation and psychological benefits, as studies suggest that the sound of waves and ocean breezes enhance emotional well-being. This reinforces the appeal of marine tourism, making it a favored choice for those seeking stress relief and rejuvenation.

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Sebalang Beach, one of the marine tourism destinations in South Lampung, was initially rarely visited due to limited facilities and difficult access. However, the presence of cafes and culinary businesses along the shore has boosted its popularity, creating a lively atmosphere with aesthetic decorations such as colorful umbrellas, bean bags, and decorative lights. Known for its breathtaking sunset views, Sebalang Beach has become a favorite spot for young people to relax and take photos. The Instagrammable design not only attracts visitors but also serves as an indirect promotional strategy. Visitors often share their experiences on social media by uploading photos and adding location tags or relevant hashtags, reinforcing Sebalang Beach's image as the "Bali of Lampung." Social media interactions through comments and responses from other users create an Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) effect, playing a crucial role in enhancing the beach's appeal and increasing visitor numbers.

Prospective tourists typically search for information through social media and Google before visiting a destination, making Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) a crucial factor in tourism appeal. However, not all e-WOM is positive; negative reviews can influence potential visitors' perceptions, as seen in Sebalang Beach, where poor ratings and unfavorable reviews have led to a decline in popularity. Google Reviews play a role in ranking destinations based on the quantity and quality of reviews, where negative comments about services, facilities, or safety can spread widely and significantly impact tourists' decisions. The strength of arguments, recommendation consistency, and ratings affect e-WOM credibility, while high-quality e-WOM helps potential visitors assess a destination before making a decision [1]. As part of Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM), positive reviews enhance rankings, while negative ones lower them. High-quality e-WOM helps potential visitors assess destinations and influences their decisions [2]. However, e-WOM is not always positive; negative comments, can spread quickly and significantly impact tourist perceptions, often highlighting poor service, inadequate facilities, safety issues, or other negative experiences [3].

The more content uploaded with the destination's name, followed by user comments, the stronger its image becomes. Destination image reflects public perception shaped by social media content and travel experiences. Negative perceptions arise from poor infrastructure, cleanliness, security, and overpriced services, as seen in Sebalang Beach, where tourists highlight issues like safety concerns, illegal fees, and inadequate facilities. However, the beach is also known for its stunning sunset views, with many visitors sharing scenic photos. A positive image encourages visits, but perceptions vary [4].

Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) plays a crucial role in shaping tourists' perceptions and decisions by providing insights through testimonials and reviews. In a competitive tourism landscape, Sebalang Beach must enhance its image to attract visitors. Travel intentions are influenced by prior information, personal motivation, and external recommendations [5], [6], with positive e-WOM strengthening a destination's appeal [7]. Social media content and destination image significantly impact visit decisions, as a strong image increases the likelihood of tourism interest [8], [9]. Ultimately, internal motivation and e-WOM both play key roles in influencing tourists' choices (Montjai & Tewal, 2014). Research findings on the impact of e-WOM and destination image on travel decisions remain inconsistent [9]–[11].

2. Literature Review

Previous studies on the influence of Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) and destination image on visit decisions have yielded inconsistent findings. Some research found that while destination image significantly affects visit decisions, e-WOM does not have a direct impact [9], [11]. Similarly, e-WOM has no significant effect on visit decisions but is mediated by visit intention [12]. In contrast, studies by [13], [14] confirmed that e-WOM positively influences destination image, tourist attitudes, and visit intentions. Furthermore, [15] highlighted the role of both WOM and e-WOM in shaping destination image and visit intentions. Given these discrepancies, there is a need for further research to clarify the direct and indirect effects of e-WOM on visit decisions and its interaction with destination image. This study aims to address this gap by examining the extent to which e-WOM and destination image influence tourists' decisions, providing deeper insights into their role in the tourism industry.

2.1. Marketing

Marketing is crucial for a company's growth and profitability, emphasizing customer satisfaction. Kotler and Keller (2016) define it as a social process where needs are met through exchanges [16]. It involves key concepts like demand, value, and transactions. Tourism marketing builds destination popularity and improves quality to attract more visitors through diversification, quality enhancement, and season extension.

2.2 Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)

Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) is consumer-shared online feedback that influences purchasing and travel decisions [3]. Unlike traditional WOM, e-WOM spreads faster through social media, blogs, and review sites, offering more credible insights [17], [18]. It helps businesses understand consumer preferences, refine marketing strategies, and boost sales. Notably, recommendations from familiar sources are 50 times more persuasive than those from strangers (McKinsey & Company).

2.3 Destination Image

Destination image refers to an individual's perception of a place, shaped by promotions, media, and personal experiences [19]. It influences travel motivation and varies among individuals. [20] defines it as a mix of knowledge, emotions, and imagination about a location. A positive image enhances future visit intentions. Factors like e-WOM, media, and experiences shape this perception, influencing travel decisions, satisfaction, and revisit intentions [4].

2.4 Visiting Intention

Visiting intention in tourism parallels purchase intention and is driven by internal motivation before deciding on a destination [6]. [21] describes intention as a response to a stimulus, leading to interest and decision-making. [22] identify two key influencing factors: others' attitudes, which depend on their negativity and the consumer's willingness to comply, and unexpected situational factors, which can alter decisions based on consumer confidence.

2.5 Visiting Decision

In tourism, visiting decisions resemble purchase decisions, involving knowledge integration to evaluate alternatives [6]. [16] define it as the stage where consumers finalize their visit. Factors influencing this decision include need recognition, timing, marketing influence, and information search. [21] emphasizes that visitors mentally assess various aspects before traveling, making this process crucial for tourism development.

2.6 Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical framework and conceptual model discussed earlier, the hypotheses of this study are as follows:

H1: It is assumed that the electronic word-of-mouth variable influences visit intention to Sebalang Beach, South Lampung.

H2: It is assumed that the destination image variable influences visit intention to Sebalang Beach, South Lampung.

H3: It is assumed that the electronic word-of-mouth variable influences visit decisions.

H4: It is assumed that the destination image variable influences visit decisions.

H5: It is assumed that the visit intention variable influences visit decisions to Sebalang Beach, South Lampung.

H6: It is assumed that visit intention mediates the influence of electronic word-of-mouth on visit decisions to Sebalang Beach, South Lampung.

H7: It is assumed that visit intention mediates the influence of destination image on visit decisions to Sebalang Beach, South Lampung.

3. Proposed Method

This study employs a quantitative method, collecting data through an online questionnaire distributed to respondents who have visited Pantai Sebalang. Primary data is obtained directly from surveys, while secondary data is gathered from literature studies, journals, articles, and visitor reviews. The study population includes individuals who have visited Pantai Sebalang, with the sample determined using non-probability sampling and purposive sampling techniques, following [23] recommendations, with a minimum of 110 respondents. Sample criteria include being at least 17 years old, actively using the internet, having read reviews about Pantai Sebalang, and intending to visit the destination.

3.1. Operational Definitions

An operational definition standardizes assumptions in research by making abstract concepts measurable through specific dimensions (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016:195). In this study, the operational definition is as follows:

Table 1. Operational Definitions

No	Variable	Definition	Indicator	Scale
1	Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)	Positive or negative statements from visitors about a tourist destination shared with others or an institution via the internet (Hennig-Thurau, 2004).	1. I frequently read online reviews from other tourists to see if Pantai Sebalang leaves a good impression. 2. To ensure I choose Pantai Sebalang, I often check online reviews from other visitors. 3. I rely on online reviews to help me decide on visiting Pantai Sebalang. 4. The number of reviews about the destination influences my decision. 5. Positive visitor comments about Pantai Sebalang affect my perception. 6. I gather online reviews before traveling to Pantai Sebalang. 7. I feel uncertain about my decision if I don't read online reviews before visiting Pantai Sebalang. 8. Social media recommendations influence my decision to visit a tourist destination. 9. I feel more confident about visiting Pantai Sebalang after reading online reviews.) 10. Online reviews provide information about tourist attractions, facilities, and services. (Jalilyand & Samiei, 2012)	Likert
2	Destination Image	Knowledge, prejudice, imagination, and emotional thoughts of an individual or group toward a specific location (Lopes, 2011).	1. Sebalang Beach has an attractive natural environment. 2. Sebalang Beach is a place for entertainment. 3. Sebalang Beach has a unique natural environment. 4. Sebalang Beach provides unique photo spots. 5. Sebalang Beach is an enjoyable place. 6. Sebalang Beach is a comfortable place. (Qu et al., 2011)	Likert

3	Visiting Intention	An internal drive within consumers in the form of a desire to visit a place or area that captures their interest (Yulianto & Mawardi, 2016).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I want to find information about Pantai Sebalang. 2. I am interested in looking for references about Pantai Sebalang. 3. I plan to visit Pantai Sebalang in the near future. 4. I intend to visit Pantai Sebalang. (Ferdinand, 2014) 	Likert
4	Visiting Decision	The stage in the buyer's decision-making process where the consumer actually makes a visit. (Kotler and Armstrong, 2014)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I feel that Pantai Sebalang is a tourist destination that meets my needs. 2. I am confident that visiting Pantai Sebalang is the right choice. 3. I have traveled to Pantai Sebalang. 4. I am willing to share information about Pantai Sebalang with others. 5. I believe Pantai Sebalang is a great tourist destination. 6. I will visit Pantai Sebalang again in the future. (Arsita, 2016) 	Likert

3.2. Analysis Method

3.2.1. Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Model Analysis (PLS-SEM)

Partial Least Square (PLS) is a structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis primarily used in exploratory research with underdeveloped theories. PLS-SEM applies regression methods using Partial Least Squares [24]. SEM allows for separate relationships between dependent variables and estimates multiple regression equations simultaneously. The SEM process involves two key steps: validating the measurement model followed by structural testing. It begins with hypothesis formulation, model direction, variable operationalization, and structural model testing. PLS-SEM is used to measure both direct and indirect effects. In this study, inferential statistical analysis is conducted using SmartPLS 4, evaluating the measurement model (outer model) and testing the structural model (inner model).

- **Measurement Model Analysis (Outer Model)**

The measurement model (outer model) evaluates construct validity and instrument reliability. Validity testing ensures the instrument measures what it is intended, while reliability testing assesses the consistency of the measurement tool or respondent answers. Convergent validity is determined by the correlation between constructs and latent variables, with a standardized loading factor above 0.75 indicating validity [24]. Another method compares the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) with inter-variable correlations, where AVE values above 0.5 confirm good discriminant validity. Composite reliability measures the consistency of indicator blocks, with values above 0.7 confirming reliability. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha tests consistency, with values above 0.5 considered good and above 0.3 considered acceptable.

- **Structural Model Analysis (Inner Model)**

The structural model (inner model) predicts causal relationships between latent variables. Bootstrapping generates T-statistic parameters to assess these relationships. The model's explanatory power is evaluated using the R² value, where an R² above 0.2 indicates a strong predictor effect at the structural level. Additionally, the Stone-Geisser Q-square test measures predictive relevance. A Q-square value greater than zero indicates the model has predictive relevance, while a value below zero suggests otherwise.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Outer Model Test Result

The measurement model analysis evaluates validity and reliability. Convergent validity assesses item reliability based on the standardized loading factor. According to [25], a loading factor above 0.7 is ideal, while values between 0.5 and 0.6 are considered acceptable. Below are the validity and reliability test results.

4.1.1. Validity Test Result

Table 2. Validity Test Result

Variable	Items	Outer Loading	Composite Reliability	AVE
E-WOM	EWOM 2	0.824	0.9	0.692
	EWOM 3	0.824		
	EWOM 4	0.876		
	EWOM 5	0.801		
Destination Image	CD1	0.901	0.897	0.637
	CD2	0.896		
	CD3	0.7		
	CD5	0.731		
	CD6	0.739		
Visiting Decision	KB1	0.788	0.885	0.562
	KB2	0.776		
	KB3	0.729		
	KB4	0.705		
	KB5	0.767		
Visiting Intention	NB1	0.759	0.834	0.557
	NB2	0.715		
	NB3	0.763		
	NB4	0.747		

Based on that table, it showed that all research variable indicators meet the outer loading > 0.700 criteria. E-WOM.2 – E-WOM.5 range from 0.801 to 0.876, with E-WOM.4 having the highest value (0.876), indicating strong reliability. Destination Image (CD.1 – CD.6) scores between 0.731 and 0.901, with CD.2 having the highest value (0.901), while CD.3, at 0.700, still meets the minimum requirement. Visit Intention (NB.1 – NB.4) ranges from 0.715 to 0.759, with NB.3 scoring the highest (0.763). Visiting Decision (KB.1 – KB.6) ranges from 0.728 to 0.788, with KB.1 at the highest (0.788). Higher loading factors indicate stronger correlations with the measured variable.

4.1.2. Reability Test Result

Table 3. Reability Test Result

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	rho_a	Composite reliability	AVE
EWOM	0.853	0.873	0.9	0.692
CD	0.854	0.872	0.897	0.637
KB	0.844	0.846	0.885	0.562
NB	0.735	0.736	0.834	0.557

Based on the table, the Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values for E-WOM, Destination Image, Visit Intention, and Visiting Decision all exceed 0.700, indicating reliability (Hair et al., 2019). The variance explained by each construct is 69.2% for E-WOM, 63.7% for Destination Image, 56.2% for Visiting Decision, and 55.7% for Visit Intention. With composite reliability > 0.700 and AVE > 0.500, all variables demonstrate good reliability and validity, allowing for further structural model testing.

4.2. Inner Model Test Result (Structural Model Analysis)

The structural model analysis is conducted by examining the path coefficient, which indicates the strength of the relationship between constructs. The direction of the path must align with the research hypothesis, and its significance can be determined through the t-test or p-value obtained from the bootstrapping process in SmartPLS.

4.1.1. Hypotheses Test Result

Table 4. Hypotheses Test Result

Hypotheses Test	Original Sample (O)	P-Value
E-WOM (X1) → Visiting Intention (Z)	0.044	0.634
Destination Image (X2) → Visiting Intention (Z)	0.733	0.000
E-WOM (X1) → Visiting Decision (Y)	0.021	0.861
Destination Image (X2) → Visiting Decision (Y)	0.436	0.001
Visiting Intention (Z) → Visiting Decision (Y)	0.411	0.000
E-WOM (X1) → Visiting Intention (Z) → Visiting Decision (Y)	0.018	0.647
Destination Image (X2) → Visiting Intention (Z) → Visiting Decision (Y)	0.301	0.000

Based on the table, the hypothesis testing results indicate that Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) does not significantly influence visit intention ($O = 0.044, p = 0.634 > 0.05$), leading to the rejection of the first hypothesis. This suggests that lower E-WOM leads to lower visit intention. Conversely, destination image has a significant positive effect on visit intention ($O = 0.733, p = 0.000 < 0.05$), confirming the second hypothesis. This means that a stronger destination image increases visit intention.

E-WOM also does not significantly affect visit decisions ($O = 0.021, p = 0.861 > 0.05$), rejecting the third hypothesis. However, destination image has a significant positive effect on visit decisions ($O = 0.436, p = 0.001 < 0.05$), supporting the fourth hypothesis. Visit intention positively influences visit decisions ($O = 0.411, p = 0.000 < 0.05$), confirming the fifth hypothesis. Additionally, E-WOM does not affect visit decisions even when mediated by visit intention ($O = 0.018, p = 0.647 > 0.05$), leading to the rejection of the sixth hypothesis. Meanwhile, destination image significantly influences visit decisions through visit intention ($O = 0.301, p = 0.000 < 0.05$), supporting the seventh hypothesis.

4.2.2. Determination Coefficient (R²)

Table 5. Determination Coefficient Test Result

Variable	R-square	R-square adjusted
Visiting Decision (Y)	0.647	0.637
Visiting Intention (Z)	0.572	0.564

Table 5 shows an R-square value of 0.647 and an Adjusted R-Square of 0.637 for visit decisions, indicating that electronic word of mouth, destination image, and visit intention explain 64.7% of the variance, while 35.3% is influenced by other factors outside this study. An $R^2 > 0.67$ indicates a strong effect, 0.33–0.67 is moderate, and 0.19–0.33 is weak. Therefore, this model has a good determination coefficient in the moderate category (0.647).

4.3. Discussions

4.3.1. The Influence of Electronic Word of Mouth on Visiting Intention

Hypothesis 1 (H1) shows that E-WOM does not significantly influence visit intention (path coefficient = 0.044, p-value = 0.634 > 0.05). This may be due to inconsistent or irrelevant information quality [1]. Similar findings by [10] confirm that E-WOM does not always impact visit intention. Negative reviews have a stronger persuasive effect than positive ones [26], and the prevalence of negative E-WOM about Pantai Sebalang may discourage visits. To improve, management should enhance E-WOM quality by engaging with reviews and maintaining a positive reputation. Given that most respondents are young and active on social media, negative E-WOM is more influential. Since E-WOM is not a key driver, promotional strategies should focus on experience, attractions, and natural appeal.

4.3.2. The Influence of Destination Image on Visiting Intention

Hypothesis 2 (H2) confirms that Destination Image significantly influences Visit Intention (path coefficient = 0.733, p-value = 0.000 < 0.05). A positive image of Pantai Sebalang increases tourists' intention to visit, aligning with [27], who emphasize destination image as a key factor in travel decisions. Similar findings by [28] highlight its role in shaping visitor perception. Strengthening Pantai Sebalang's image through promotions showcasing its natural beauty, sunset views, and facilities can enhance its appeal and attract more visitors.

4.3.3. The Influence of Electronic Word of Mouth on Visiting Decision

Hypothesis 3 (H3) rejects the influence of E-WOM on Visit Decision (path coefficient = 0.021, p-value = 0.861 > 0.05), indicating that online reviews of Pantai Sebalang do not significantly impact tourists' decisions. This aligns with [6], who found E-WOM to be insignificant in visit decisions. Factors like situational influences and peer opinions play a stronger role [9], [11]. Tourists tend to rely more on personal testimonials than online reviews, with external factors such as weather, pricing, or competing destinations being more decisive.

4.3.4. The Influence of Destination Image on Visiting Decision

Hypothesis 4 (H4) confirms that Destination Image significantly influences Visit Decision (path coefficient = 0.436, p-value = 0.001 < 0.05). A positive image of Pantai Sebalang encourages visitors' decisions, aligning with studies by [4]. Prior research [12] also supports that destination image directly impacts tourists' decisions. Beyond influencing initial visits, a strong destination image fosters repeat visits and recommendations. To enhance tourism development, Pantai Sebalang must improve services, facilities, and overall visitor impressions.

4.3.5. The Influence of Visiting Intention on Visiting Decision

Hypothesis 5 (H5) confirms that Visit Intention significantly influences Visit Decision (path coefficient = 0.411, p-value = 0.000 < 0.05). This aligns with studies by [6], emphasizing intention as a key factor in decision-making. Consistent with Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior, intention predicts actual behavior. To boost visit decisions, Pantai Sebalang must enhance factors that stimulate tourist interest. Research by [7] further supports that strong visit intention drives final decisions.

4.3.6. The Influence of Electronic Word of Mouth on Visiting Decision, Mediated by Visiting Intention

Hypothesis 6 (H6) is rejected, indicating that Visit Intention does not mediate the effect of E-WOM on Visit Decision (path coefficient = 0.018, p-value = 0.647 > 0.05). This suggests E-WOM lacks a strong influence on visit decisions through intention, likely due to its situational nature and dependence on social context. [17] found E-WOM impacts early decision stages but not final choices. It emphasized interpersonal communication's role over E-WOM. Contrary to some studies [12], other factors may play a stronger mediating role in visit decisions.

4.3.7. The Influence of Destination Image on Visiting Decision, Mediated by Visiting Intention

Hypothesis 7 (H7) is accepted, indicating that Visit Intention mediates the effect of Destination Image on Visit Decision (path coefficient = 0.301, p-value = 0.000 < 0.05). A strong destination image enhances visit intention, leading to actual visit decisions, aligning [29]. Strengthening Pantai Sebalang's image, through its natural scenery, attractions, nightlife, and infrastructure, can be an effective marketing strategy to boost visit intention and final decisions.

5. Conclusions

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that electronic word of mouth (E-WOM) does not significantly influence visit intention and visit decisions to Pantai Sebalang. Low credibility and less relevant information are likely the main factors making E-WOM ineffective in shaping tourists' intentions and decisions. On the other hand, destination image has a positive and significant impact on both visit intention and visit decisions, indicating that a positive impression of the environment, attractions, and facilities of Pantai Sebalang can attract more visitors. Additionally, visit intention mediates the influence of destination image on visit decisions but does not mediate the relationship between E-WOM and visit decisions, suggesting that tourists rely more on other factors such as personal experiences and direct recommendations. This study has several limitations, such as the limited scope of respondents, which may not fully represent all tourist segments of Pantai Sebalang, and the lack of exploration of external factors like offline promotions or other tourism trends. Therefore, future research is recommended to expand the sample, explore additional factors influencing tourists' decisions, and investigate strategies to enhance the credibility of E-WOM to make it more effective in attracting visitors.

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