



eWOM vs. aWOM: AI Powered Word of Mouth and its Impact on Consumer Decision Making in Tourism

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Abstract: This paper explores the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on consumer behaviour in the online tourism industry, focusing on two types of Word of Mouth (WOM): electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) and Algorithmic Word of Mouth (aWOM). While eWOM, driven by consumer-generated content on platforms like TripAdvisor, influences travel decisions, aWOM uses AI to provide personalized recommendations based on data analysis. Despite its potential for greater personalization, aWOM raises concerns about transparency and authenticity. The study, using in-depth interviews and a focus group, reveals a general preference for eWOM due to its perceived authenticity, with participants valuing credible, detailed reviews. The findings suggest that aWOM can complement eWOM but should be used cautiously in the tourism industry to maintain trust and transparency.

Keywords: eWOM; aWOM; AI generated content; trust; credibility; consumer reviews.

JEL classification: M31; M37.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, the way consumers make decisions about products and services is increasingly influenced by online conversations, particularly through electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). As the digital interactions grow, eWOM has emerged as a significant factor in shaping consumer behaviour, particularly within the tourism industry. However, with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), a new form of word-of-mouth, algorithmic word-of-mouth (aWOM), has begun to take shape. Unlike traditional eWOM, which is generated by human users, aWOM is powered by algorithms that analyse vast amounts of data to provide personalized recommendations. This shift introduces a new layer of complexity to online reviews and consumer decision-making.

The novelty of this topic lies in the relatively unexplored territory of aWOM and its potential to transform consumer decision-making processes in the tourism industry. While eWOM has been widely studied, the application of AI to generate personalized recommendations – through aWOM – is an emerging area of research. This introduces important questions about the effectiveness, trustworthiness, and personalization of algorithmically generated content compared to user-generated reviews. This study seeks to bridge this gap by exploring how aWOM influences consumer perceptions and behaviours in ways that differ from traditional eWOM.

This study investigates the impact of aWOM on consumer purchase intentions, particularly in the context of travel services, and compares the perceived credibility of eWOM and aWOM. It also explores the factors that influence consumer decision-making, focusing on how consumers evaluate and trust these different forms of word-of-mouth when choosing travel-related services. By examining these aspects, the research aims to provide insights into how aWOM could complement or even replace eWOM in the future, offering businesses in the tourism industry guidance on adapting their marketing strategies in response to this shift.

The research gap identified in this study lies in the limited exploration of aWOM within existing literature. While eWOM is well-researched and its impact on consumer decision-making is well understood, the effect of AI-driven recommendations – aWOM – on consumer behaviour remains underexplored, particularly in terms of trust, credibility, and personalization. This gap presents a unique opportunity for this study to contribute new insights into how aWOM could complement or even replace traditional eWOM in the future, particularly in the context of online travel services. Understanding how consumers respond to aWOM versus eWOM can help businesses in the tourism industry adapt to evolving consumer expectations and enhance their digital marketing strategies.

The main objectives of the research are to assess the impact of aWOM on consumer purchase intention, compare the perceived credibility of eWOM and aWOM, and explore the factors that influence consumer decision-making in the context of online travel services. By examining the similarities and differences between these two types of word-of-mouth, the study aims to inform businesses in the tourism industry on how to best utilize both forms to enhance customer engagement and decision-making. Additionally, the study seeks to provide insights into the future potential of aWOM in shaping consumer behaviour in an increasingly digital world.

This article, through its comprehensive methodology and research objectives, provides valuable insights into the evolving role of digital word-of-mouth in influencing consumer decisions and lays the foundation for future studies exploring the ethical and practical applications of AI.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In today's digital age, where conversations about products and services happen mostly online, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is becoming an essential element in purchasing decisions. In parallel, algorithmic word of mouth (aWOM), eWOM generated by artificial intelligence (AI), implicitly by algorithms, adds a new and interesting perspective to the way consumers interact and perceive online recommendations.

2.1 Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM): Definition and Scope

Word-of-mouth (WOM), which can be loosely defined as personal recommendation or person-to-person recommendation, is the initial connections between customers about a brand (Abbas *et al.*, 2020). In this paper, we use the term eWOM to describe "any positive or negative statement made by potential, current or former customers about a product or company that is made available to a wide range of people and institutions through the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, eWOM occurs when consumers exchange information online and can be observed in various forms, such as user-generated content, online reviews of products or services, personal emails and social media posts.

The study by Babić Rosario *et al.* (2020) addresses the lack of clarity in defining the concept of eWOM. It is emphasized that any content generated by online consumers about products, even if it is not a recommendation directed to other consumers, should be recognized as eWOM. To understand the phenomenon holistically, it is proposed that the term 'eWOM' should serve as an umbrella term for online consumer-generated content. However, it is necessary to clarify the concept of eWOM by distinguishing its essential properties from those of related concepts such as: general information sharing, offline WOM, critic reviews, advertising, consumer-generated content, electronic recommender systems, online search rankings and observational learning. For example, unlike UGC, which refers to any content created by users and distributed primarily online, eWOM is necessarily and clearly related to consumption.

To facilitate the consistent use of the eWOM concept and the progressive building of knowledge on the subject, the authors offer the following revised definition: eWOM is consumer-generated, consumer-related communication that uses digital tools and is mainly directed to other consumers. This proposed definition succinctly addresses the prevailing confusion about the concept and allows the delineation of key competencies for theory development:

- source (i.e. consumers as eWOM emitters);
- the message (consumer-related content);
- the channel (digital conversation tools).

eWOM has been shaped by the growth of Internet use and shows significant differences from traditional word of mouth in two key aspects: the first relates to the number of people participating in the conversation (eWOM involves communication between a large number of users) (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008), and the second to the speed of communication (eWOM is faster than WOM) (Akbari *et al.*, 2022). On the Internet, not only can firms build relationships with their customers, but also customers can share their opinions, ideas, experiences, and information with a vast community of other customers (Akbari *et al.*, 2022).

eWOM represents unpaid communication by online users and is accessible to a wider audience, including both direct and indirect customers, as it can be distributed in online spaces. eWOM plays a crucial role in influencing the decision-making process of tourists and can take various forms such as reviews, recommendations, social media posts and blogs. In addition, it operates through a variety of modes, facilitating one-to-one or one-to-many interactions, and can occur in real time (synchronous) or with time delays (asynchronous) (Williams *et al.*, 2020).

Consumers rely on eWOM to assess the quality of services, and it is becoming a key factor in the decision-making process. eWOM also shapes expectations and customer satisfaction levels by providing information about the experiences of others (Chen and Law, 2016). eWOM plays a vital role in the consumer's decision-making process from initial consideration stage to post-purchase behaviour.

Verma and Dewani (2021) present nine variables associated with the sender that have a significant impact on the credibility of eWOM. These variables are as follows: source credibility which refers to how the receivers perceive the information source, homophily and strength of connection which focuses on the similarity between the information source and the receiver and the level of connection and influence it has with the receivers, source expertise which reflects the level of knowledge of the source, source trust which implies the degree of trust placed in the source, source attractiveness which relates to the physical attractiveness or personality of the source, source identity which refers to how the source is perceived and recognized, sponsorship disclosure which involves disclosing any sponsorship relationships. Previous studies have established that sponsorship disclosure significantly influences source credibility and changes attitudes towards the eWOM message. When consumers know that the reviews are written for personal benefit, it reduces the perceived quality of the information provided. Therefore, when the issuer receives financial incentives for providing online reviews, this negatively affects the credibility of eWOM. This complex relationship between sponsorship disclosure, source credibility and perceived information quality emphasizes the importance of transparency in online reviews. The last variable is social capital which represents the resources and benefits that people gain through social interactions. This social capital can be divided into two types: bridging and bonding. The former refers to weak ties and provides useful information to connections a distance, while bonding refers to strong ties and is linked to social and emotional support.

2.2 Algorithmic Word-of-Mouth (aWOM): Definition & Scope

The recent spread of artificial intelligence (AI) raises questions about how consumers react to these innovative technologies. In addition, the global accessibility of AI plays a key role in adoption and adaptation to these technologies. This global expansion opens new possibilities for improved interactions between services and consumers. As the study by Williams *et al.* (2020) indicates, aWOM represents algorithmically created and distributed content from non-human sources, media digital or eWOM, using artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms. This form of communication is designed to support customer decision-making about destinations, activities and more. AI-driven recommendations are powered by algorithms that analyse huge amounts of data to predict user preferences and suggest options relevant to the consumer (Brooks, 2022).

Continuing the discussion of the innovative aspects of aWOM, it is important to recognize its ability to leverage technology in a way that far exceeds the capabilities of eWOM. A key example of this relates to the use of AI assistants on mobile devices. In such scenarios, aWOM can integrate additional contextual information gleaned from previous user interactions. Here we include details such as travel patterns, sensor data from personal devices and social media. This exhaustive data integration allows aWOM to personalize content to a significantly greater extent than is possible through eWOM (Williams *et al.*, 2020).

A relevant example of this is how a software robot can use location sensors and eWOM reviews. Based on the user's current location, the robot can analyse the sensor data together with existing eWOM recalls creating a text or voice message. This message could describe the current state of nearby attractions, for example their degree of crowding (Williams *et al.*, 2020).

This example highlights the unique potential of aWOM to improve the personalization and relevance of information for users, especially in the context of online travel services. Such advanced personalization gives aWOM a special status as a transformative tool in online consumer behaviour. In this context, artificial intelligence is a valuable tool for improving customer experience.

Another concrete example of the use of AI is its application in analysing and managing guest reviews. Guest reviews are a treasure trove of information for hotels, providing insights into guest satisfaction levels and potential improvements needed in service. Another benefit of AI in this context is its ability to automatically generate responses to different reviews. This facilitates communication and building a strong relationship with customers (Candela, 2023).

Another study by Longoni and Cian (2022) introduces a concept called word of machine. This effect is based on the belief that AI is more competent at evaluating utilitarian attributes (such as practicality and functionality), but less competent at hedonic attributes (such as enjoyment and satisfaction). aWOM and word of machine reflect the same fundamental idea, in that aWOM can be considered a specific application of the broader concept of word of machine.

In tourism, this can manifest itself through AI systems that provide personalized travel recommendations based on utilitarian data (such as location and travel patterns), while attempting to enhance the hedonic experience by considering individual preferences and past consumer behaviours. This highlights the potential of aWOM to revolutionize decision making in the tourism industry through a balanced approach of utilitarian and hedonic aspects.

What is interesting to note is that the success of AI in influencing consumer decisions seems to be more pronounced when AI does not completely replace human recommendations but works together with humans. When AI assists a human recommender and supports them in the process of providing information or options, consumers appear to be more likely to receive and trust those recommendations (Longoni and Cian, 2022).

In this way, AI does not take over the role of final decision-maker but becomes a key tool that helps amplify the experience. This collaboration between technology and human intelligence represents a promising outlook for the future, where the benefits of both sides can be brought to the forefront to deliver better and personalized experiences to consumers.

According to the study conducted by Huang and Philp (2021), it is observed how consumers are more reluctant to share negative opinions after a failure of a service using AI compared to a human one. This difference is due to the perceived link between consumers and AI, which uses previously analysed data to predict future preferences. The study emphasizes the importance of understanding the interactions between consumers and AI and

suggests that firms should carefully implement AI in their services, taking these dynamics into account.

In this way, in the context of AI and eWOM-based recommendations, we can summarize the synergy between these two elements enriches the shopping experience of the modern traveller, giving them the tools to guide them towards a more informed decision. While AI-based recommendations offer high personalization, eWOM adds a layer of social proof and credibility by reflecting the experiences and opinions of real users (Longoni and Cian, 2022).

Table no. 1 – Differences between eWOM vs aWOM

| Feature | eWOM | aWOM |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| Source of Content | Consumer-generated content | AI-driven content |
| Personalization | Based on individual experiences | Based on algorithmic predictions of user preferences |
| Transparency | Transparent, source identifiable | Potential lack of transparency regarding AI influence |
| Credibility | Perceived as authentic, human-driven | May lack authenticity, seen as less human |
| Speed of Communication | Slower, time-dependent | Faster, real-time updates |
| Ethical Concerns | Minimal, but can be biased in some cases | Algorithmic bias, privacy concerns, manipulation potential |
| Privacy Issues | Limited to shared personal experiences | Rely on extensive data mining, including personal data without explicit consent |
| Trust | High trust in user-generated reviews | Lower trust, especially when AI involvement is unclear |
| Impact on Consumer Behaviour | Influences based on social proof | Highly influences through personalized suggestions |

Source: own processing

2.3 Tourist Experience in the Context of eWOM and aWOM

The effects of eWOM on consumer behaviour in the context of hospitality and tourism management are complex and significant. eWOM influences consumers' attitudes towards products and services, leading them to make purchasing decisions and express their intentions.

The tourist experience comprises several distinct but interconnected stages. It is not just limited to the moment you arrive at the destination but begins with the planning and preparation phase (anticipation), continues during the trip when tourists are physically present at the location, and extends beyond the trip by capturing memorable moments and retrospection of the trip (reflection) (Miao and Yang, 2023). In other words, the tourist experience is influenced by the entire process planning to subsequent memories and reflections.

First, the more informative the reviews a hotel accumulates, the more likely subsequent users are to post informative reviews, and these reviews are more likely to receive peer recognition ('helpful votes'). Second, reviews that give low ratings are more likely to create 'hot topics' for users, motivating them to contribute more informative and helpful reviews. Other studies have observed that, compared positive reviews, negative reviews attract more attention from readers and are more likely to be considered useful (Boo and Busser, 2018), while another study finds that negative reviews (mainly low-rated reviews with no other

comments) can motivate subsequent consumers to post higher quality reviews. Third, reviews posted by reviewers with a high reputation on the platform may prompt subsequent users to contribute their own high-quality reviews about the same hotel.

This feedback amplification effect can occur for two ulterior motives: (1) based on the above reasons, people want to conform to an established social norm in that they post high-quality reviews like others; (2) more high-quality reviews or reviewers with a high reputation willing to post reviews can increase the popularity of the hotel.

Based on the study conducted by [Majeed et al. \(2020\)](#), it is observed that there are other incentives for posting eWOMs, influenced by the quality of online information and the ease of accessing it. The results of the study conducted by [Majeed et al. \(2020\)](#) emphasize that there are other incentives that contribute to the increased tendency of tourists to distribute eWOMs, these are the high quality of information available online, along with an accessible and easy to navigate platform.

According to another study, conducted by [Moliner-Velázquez et al. \(2023\)](#), we can state that motivations for consulting eWOMs play a key role in shaping attitudes towards eWOMs in the online tourism industry. Of the two eWOM characteristics proposed as antecedents of motivations (credibility and volume), only perceived credibility was found to have a significant effect. This emphasizes the need for companies in the tourism industry to develop and maintain a solid reputation to gain consumer trust and ensure that eWOM remains positive.

This trend of increasing online booking has changed the way the tourism industry operates, with the focus largely on online presence and digital reputation management. This emphasizes the importance of technology and digital platforms in the contemporary tourism industry ([Elsaid and Sayed, 2022](#)).

A consumer's decision to purchase tourist accommodation is influenced by a number of criteria, including the reviews left by previous customers. It is important to note that a significant majority of consumers, around 60%, rely on customer comments and reviews in their decision-making process when making a purchase. Furthermore, an impressive 90% of consumers recognize that these reviews have a significant impact on their decision to make a purchase ([Garcia et al., 2022](#)).

Customer satisfaction is determined by a wide range of characteristics, both tangible (such as room decor, design and cleanliness) and intangible (service quality) ([Sparks and Browning, 2011](#)).

According to Rize Reviews, hotels are the second industry most impacted by reviews, surpassed only by restaurants, which ranks first ([Serrano, 2020](#)). 96% of travellers consider reviews important in the research phase of planning a vacation, and 83% say reviews play a key role in their final booking decision. Furthermore, 52% of people would never book a hotel that has no reviews ([Elphick, 2023](#)).

To conduct a comprehensive analysis of consumer behaviour regarding online tourism services, it is essential to highlight the most extensively used platforms in the context of reviews. While general review platforms, such as Facebook, may provide a wider audience, hotel review websites bring in a higher percentage of potential customers. According to the article by [Lyman \(2023\)](#) for Podium, these platforms are:

- TripAdvisor - The world's largest travel platform gathers a staggering 490 million monthly users and hosts around one billion reviews (Tripadvisor - Statistics & Facts, 2024). 72% of consumers consult reviews before booking ([Campbell, 2023](#)).

– Booking.com is known as one of the world's top choices for booking travel, especially in Europe. The site currently has nearly 30 million listings in the hotel sector and collects over 240 million reviews. Booking.com's algorithm takes hundreds of factors into account to personalize recommendations for each individual user. It analyses individual booking history and preferences, ensuring that users are presented with options that are folded on previous bookings. Although review scores play a role in the algorithm, they are not the main ranking criteria. However, many users use the review score filter to quickly find high-quality options, typically looking for hotels with scores above 8 (Report Recap: The Hotelier's Guide to Booking.com, 2023).

– Google - Although Google is not specific to tourism reviews, it is worth adding because of its general importance. Customers often use the Google search engine to compare properties based on location, prices and, of course, reviews. This feature gives users a simple and convenient way to evaluate and choose accommodations that meet their needs. Google reviews have become increasingly popular and have become a favourite mobile search platform, impacting hotels and other businesses. Google offers reviews integrated into Google searches and Google Maps, making it easy for users to access reviews and other information. Simplicity of use, integration, and authentic user reviews have contributed to its popularity, while other platforms such as TripAdvisor have faced challenges with advertising and user trust (Filieri *et al.*, 2020).

2.4 Trust and credibility in aWOM

An important aspect in evaluating aWOM is the perceived credibility of users. Studies show that although AI-generated reviews can be highly personalized and relevant, users may be sceptical about the transparency of the generation process and the lack of an authentic, human voice (Al-Hyari *et al.*, 2023). However, aWOM has the potential to influence purchase decisions through highly accurate recommendations based on extensive data and predictive analytics.

AI-based systems are used in offering suggestions for hotels, flights and other ancillary travel services based on user preferences, behaviour and budget. By meticulously analysing customer data, these systems look for patterns and trends in past trips, enabling the delivery of highly personalized recommendations. This personalized approach enhances user satisfaction by aligning with current individual preferences, as well as the revenue the company generates. The continuous learning capabilities of AI algorithms help to constantly refine recommendations, ensuring that they remain in line with changing customer preferences and market dynamics.

A relevant example for aWOM is TripAdvisor, which uses artificial intelligence to synthesize and present the most relevant information from many reviews. For example, a traveller looking for a clean and quiet hotel room can quickly access a summary that highlights these attributes, along with direct quotes from the original reviews. This simplifies the decision-making process, allowing users to make informed choices without having to wade through numerous individual reviews. This presentation is built on the summaries assigned to each qualitative attribute within the reviews, reflecting users' overall unbiased opinions according to the aspects they value most. The summaries are designed to be easy to read, are of optimal length, and are strictly based on quotes from the reviews. This process ensures the unbiasedness and authenticity of the experiences reflected, thus enhancing credibility and trust in the information presented (Gang and Raja, 2024).

However, the emergence of these summaries highlights weaknesses of generative artificial intelligence: inaccuracy and misleading information (Mauran, 2024).

In addition, the ethical implications of AI, including aWOM, are a topic of current concern, bringing into question privacy, surveillance, algorithmic discrimination, and the potential for AI to manipulate and spread misinformation. These developments emphasize high influence and ethical considerations related to aWOM, highlighting the importance of rigorous regulations and practices ensure a trustworthy and transparent environment for users (Akdim, 2021).

According to Palmer (2023) some Amazon reviews are created by robots, by AI. This practice raises serious concerns about the authenticity and credibility of reviews. Fake reviews can influence consumers' purchasing decisions by presenting products in a more favourable light than they would be or, conversely, unduly denigrating them. This manipulation can undermine consumer trust in platforms and the online shopping process in general. Although this example comes from Amazon, an e-commerce platform, this is also relevant for us.

If inaccuracies and misinterpretations go unnoticed, these summaries - presented authoritative - could damage the reputations of the products and, by extension, aWOM. This could lead to a loss of trust in the algorithms that govern aWOM and, ultimately, to a decrease in the credibility of the whole recommendation process. Thus, it is important to have filtering and verification systems in place that in an efficient way ensure the authenticity and accuracy of the information presented to consumers, thus protecting the integrity and reputation of aWOM (Mauran, 2024).

The impact of fake reviews is particularly relevant in aWOM because it relies on reviews and ratings already existing online to guide consumers' purchasing decisions, and fake reviews can distort these automatic recommendations. The importance of reviews in booking phase is particularly pronounced, with an overwhelming majority of travellers assigning them increased importance. Specifically, (Meng, 2024) indicates that 82% of travellers emphasize the relevance of reviews when selecting accommodation, while 77% consider them crucial in evaluating attractions. This underlines the considerable influence exerted by reviews in guiding travel-related choices, earning their role as indispensable sources of information for discerning consumers. If the reviews are not authentic, trust in aWOM may be significantly affected and consumers may be less willing to rely on these automated recommendations in the future.

Declining trust is also a challenge for platforms that rely on user-generated content. Users experienced a 2% increase in fake reviews on TripAdvisor in 2022 (Meng, 2024). This trend is worrying and highlights the importance of countering the phenomenon of fake reviews. It is essential that platforms invest in technological solutions and more rigorous verification processes to ensure that the reviews submitted are authentic and trustworthy, thereby strengthening credibility and trust online.

aWOM tools could generate content using information collected from the sensors of personal smart devices, thus raising privacy and information security concerns, especially for users who have not consented to such activities (Williams *et al.*, 2020).

Finally, aWOM's trust and credibility play a key role in shaping consumer perceptions and decisions in its eventual use. Highlighting these factors allows us to more deeply understand the impact of technology on consumer behaviour. In doing so, companies and marketers need to highlight their efforts towards a transparent policy towards the use of AI. Going forward, the balance between ethics and innovation will determine the success of aWOM.

2.5 Ethical Concerns of aWOM

Despite the advantages of aWOM, several ethical concerns need to be addressed, particularly around algorithmic bias, privacy, and transparency. Algorithmic bias refers to the potential for AI systems to perpetuate biases present in the data they are trained on. If the training data includes biased or unrepresentative information, the AI could generate skewed recommendations that favour certain groups, products, or services. For example, an AI system might prioritize luxury hotels over budget-friendly options, even when the latter might better suit a user's preferences or needs. This bias can lead to an unfair distribution of recommendations, undermining the trust consumers place in AI-driven systems and reinforcing existing inequalities (Akdim, 2021).

Privacy concerns are another significant ethical issue with aWOM. AI-driven systems rely on extensive data collection, including browsing history, preferences, and even location data, to make personalized recommendations. While this allows for a more tailored user experience, it raises questions about the extent to which consumers are aware of and consent to the data being collected. In many cases, users may not fully understand how much personal data is being gathered, nor how it is being used by the platforms they interact with. This lack of awareness can lead to privacy violations, as well as concerns about data security. Moreover, AI systems are often vulnerable to data breaches, which could expose sensitive consumer information and lead to a loss of trust in the system (Brooks, 2022).

The lack of transparency in aWOM is another critical ethical concern. Since AI algorithms often function as "black boxes," consumers are typically unaware of how their data is being used to generate recommendations. This lack of transparency makes it difficult for users to understand the rationale behind the suggestions they receive, potentially leading to feelings of manipulation. Without clear disclosure of how AI influences the recommendation process, consumers may question the authenticity and fairness of the content they encounter, further diminishing trust in aWOM (Longoni and Cian, 2022). Transparency is essential not only to maintain consumer trust but also to ensure that AI systems are being used ethically and responsibly.

While eWOM remains a powerful tool in influencing consumer decisions, aWOM offers unparalleled personalization that could reshape the tourism industry. The potential for aWOM to replace or complement traditional eWOM depends on how companies navigate the ethical implications of AI. For example, AI-generated content could be more effective when it works alongside human recommendations rather than replacing them entirely. Studies suggest that consumers are more likely to trust recommendations when AI assists human reviewers rather than fully automating the process (Longoni and Cian, 2022). This collaboration between human intelligence and AI-driven algorithms may lead to more effective and trustworthy recommendations, offering a balanced approach that combines the strengths of both systems.

The ethical concerns surrounding aWOM necessitate careful consideration of how AI is integrated into the consumer decision-making process. As the tourism industry increasingly embraces aWOM, it will be essential to address issues of algorithmic bias, privacy, and transparency to ensure that these technologies enhance rather than undermine consumer trust. The balance between innovation and ethics will ultimately determine the success of aWOM as a tool for influencing travel-related decisions.

aWOM represents a transformative force in the tourism industry, offering highly personalized recommendations that improve consumer decision-making. However, to fully realize its potential, it is essential to address the ethical challenges associated with its use. By

ensuring transparency, minimizing bias, and protecting user privacy, businesses can foster trust in aWOM while enhancing the customer experience. As AI continues to evolve, the future of aWOM will depend on how well the industry balances innovation with ethical responsibility.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research is to analyse and compare the impact of these two forms of WOM on online travel consumer behaviour. Objectives include understanding consumer preferences, the average budgets allocated to online bookings, the decision makers involved, as well as information on the online travel service platforms used. It will also explore the potential impact of aWOM implementation and how it could influence purchasing decisions. Thus, this paper aims to contribute to better, more effective and user-oriented marketing strategies in the online tourism industry.

The purpose of this research is to find out how companies in the tourism industry can successfully use eWOM and aWOM to increase their visibility and attract more tourists, taking into account the differences in credibility, persuasiveness and impact on purchase intention. This leads to the research problem, which is framed as follows: to determine the optimal strategies for using eWOM and aWOM to increase visibility and attract more tourists in the tourism industry, taking into account the differences between the two types of information in terms of credibility, persuasiveness and impact on purchase intention.

The objectives set for this research are the following:

O1. To assess the impact of aWOM on consumers' purchase intention of online tourism services.

O2. To evaluate the perceived difference between aWOM and eWOM among consumers.

O3. To compare consumers' level of trust in aWOM versus eWOM.

O4. To explore the link between purchase intention and eWOM and aWOM.

Therefore, O1 and O2 will be followed up through the interview, and O3 and O4 through the focus group.

In the present study, research on online tourism consumer behaviour will be conducted using qualitative methods. Qualitative research is conducted in an objective way, and the combination of using several methods, such as interview and focus group, allows us to get a deeper and more complete understanding of the reality.

In this case, to achieve a rigorous qualitative research, two techniques were used: the interview and a focus group. The approach was sequential, using several qualitative methods to assess participants' perceptions. The research period was between May-June of 2024, both interviews and the focus group have been conducted online, with the use of virtual meeting platforms.

To gain an initial understanding of participants' level of knowledge on the topic, the research began with an in-depth interview. This interview was designed to explore participants' previous experiences of eWOM and aWOM. The interview included open-ended questions designed to reveal participants' perceptions and behavioural attitudes ([Annex 1](#)). In this part of the study, 12 participants were chosen based on their frequency of travel, with all participants traveling approximately 3-4 times per year. The sample was diverse, consisting of individuals from various professional backgrounds: 3 doctors, 3 assistant managers, 2 in finance, 1 in construction, 1 in teaching, and 1 in IT. This diverse sample ensures a variety of

perspectives, as it captures differences in the budget allocated to traveling and a broad range of opinions. The diversity of the participants is relevant, as it provides insights into how different professional backgrounds may influence perceptions of eWOM and aWOM in the context of tourism services, thus offering a well-rounded view on consumer behaviour.

A focus group was organized in which, 7 participants were selected from the ones which participated in the first part of this study – the interview, and they were presented with different examples and forms of eWOM and aWOM ([Annex 2](#)). The aim of this focus group was to facilitate an interactive discussion, allowing participants to express their ideas and interact with other opinions. Focus group discussions were carefully moderated and recorded for analysis. The target audience for the focus group as well for the interviews consisted of:

- People who frequently book travel and accommodation online.
- Users of online review platforms for tourism services.
- People who used Booking before.

To conduct the focus group experiment we generated reviews using an artificial intelligence system, specifically ChatGPT-4o. These reviews were created in support of our experiment to reflect the diversity and variety found in the online environment, on Booking platform. Each of the reviews was designed to simulate the authenticity offered by a human reviewer but also included different styles and tones of expression (these reviews can be found in [Annex 2](#)).

To support the reviews in photographic form, different elements were also added to enhance their credibility, these were:

- Perceived usefulness indicator displayed by the number of people who found the review useful.
- New accommodation on Booking that reflects the timelines and relevance of the user experience.
- Some reviews are marked with "most liked review", indicating a high number of votes and likes.
- AI-generated content warning providing transparency for users.
- Overall score provided by the reviewer to give an overview of the quality of the stay.

Another element found in booking reviews is structuring them by highlighting their strengths and weaknesses, highlighted by happy emoji and sad emoji.

By introducing these elements, we wanted to instil credibility and transparency to participants, thus contributing to an improved user experience and trust in review platforms and AI.

TripAdvisor and Booking.com were chosen for this study due to their significant popularity and wide usage in the travel and tourism industry. TripAdvisor, as one of the largest travel platforms globally, hosts millions of user-generated reviews, ratings, and recommendations, making it an essential source for studying eWOM. Its focus on destinations, attractions, and services adds depth to understanding how consumers make decisions based on shared experiences. Booking.com, on the other hand, is a key player in online hotel bookings, where user reviews directly influence purchasing decisions. This platform is especially relevant because its reviews are tied directly to bookings, providing insights into consumer behaviour during the decision-making process. We chose to focus on TripAdvisor and Booking not only because they are among the most popular travel review platforms, but also because, at the time we started documenting the topic of artificial intelligence in tourism, they were already among the few platforms that had already integrated

some AI-based functionalities directly into the user experience. Another reason for choosing these platforms is the fact that they appear frequently in both interviews and the focus group. At that time, in 2024, TripAdvisor used AI technologies to personalize recommendations, aggregate relevant reviews, or highlight the most useful information from user feedback.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Interview results

In this sub-chapter, we present the themes identified from analysing the interviews that support our research objectives.

The first theme identified was *Online Channels and Resources for Travel Planning*, which resulted from grouping the questions *Do you often travel within a year? Tell me about your approach to planning a holiday, Which online platforms do you frequently consult for information about travel destinations, accommodation, flights or other travel services?* and *How much do online reviews influence your travel booking decisions*. These questions were posed at the beginning to introduce participants to the topic of the discussion and guide them through the steps involved in planning a vacation.

Table no. 2 provides a detailed analysis of consumer preferences and travel planning behaviour. This information is relevant for understanding how consumers interact with the online environment in the context of travel services.

Table no. 2 – Online channels and resources for travel planning

| Category | Item | Frequency |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------|
| Platforms Used | Booking.com | 12 |
| | AirBnb | 5 |
| | Airlines websites | 5 |
| | TripAdvisor | 4 |
| | Facebook groups | 4 |
| | Skyscanner | 3 |
| | Momondo | 2 |
| Inspiration | Google Flights | 1 |
| | TikTok | 4 |
| | Pinterest | 1 |
| Platform Choice Factors | Quality of reviews | 8 |
| | Number of reviews | 8 |
| | Platform reputation | 7 |
| | Details of the information | 3 |
| | Specific functionalities (filters) | 1 |

Source: own processing

When it comes to travel frequency and organizing vacations, most participants report traveling at least once or twice a year. Some, like for example, respondent 1, travels more frequently but prefers short trips relatively close to home. The planning process generally starts with determining the destination, securing transportation, and checking accommodation prices. For example, respondent 5 said, “Several times a year. If traveling by air, I choose my flight tickets from the airline's website and then purchase accommodations from sites like

Booking/AirBnb.”. Respondent 6 also noted, “I think about where I’d like to go, look for tickets to see the best price, and then I look for accommodation sometime after the vacation.”

The data analysis revealed a predominant preference for using popular booking sites such as Booking, which were mentioned most often 12 times. Opinions were also split between AirBnb and airline websites such as WizzAir or RyanAir, each being mentioned 5 times. This preference can be attributed to the high level of trust that consumers have in these platforms, as well as the ease of use and variety of options on offer. It is also important to consider platforms that facilitate price comparisons, such as Momondo, mentioned by 4 respondents. Respondent 3 stated they use “Booking, TikTok, Google Flights, Skyscanner” while respondent 9 prefers “Facebook groups dedicated to people who have been/will go on vacation.” Respondent 12 added, “I mainly use Booking and sometimes AirBnb, depending on what prices I find on accommodations. For flights, I use company websites but also Momondo.”

In terms of their main source of travel **inspiration**, TikTok plays a significant role for a significant number of respondents (4 out of 12), thanks to its engaging and easy-to-view content. Content creators promote destinations and travel experiences that are affordable for any budget. Pinterest is also mentioned as a main source by only one respondent.

When it comes to factors influencing **the choice of a platform**, respondents attach equal importance to both the quality and quantity of reviews. Reputation is also an important factor, with frequency of 7 out of 12. For instance, respondent 7 noted, “I choose a platform by the number of reviews, user trust scores, and honest reviews.” Respondent 12 agreed, emphasizing the importance of a “significant user base” and “verified reviews,” while Interview 2’s respondent mentioned the importance of the “length of comments/reviews” as a key indicator of reliability.

The types of information that travellers seek out in eWOM sources often vary. Many look for detailed descriptions, real photos, and videos of destinations, accommodations, and experiences. As respondent 4 explained, “I look for detailed descriptions, photos, and prices,” while respondent 10 added, “It helps me most if I have real photos and videos. From there I can draw conclusions and form my own opinion.” Many also seek out practical advice, such as “how quiet is the area” or “how comfortable is the bed,” as respondent 11 said when selecting accommodations.

One objective we set out to achieve is related to the level of trust in eWOM. Therefore, based on two questions, *What types of information do you specifically look for in eWOM sources?* and *How do you assess the usefulness and trustworthiness of information found in eWOM sources?*, we have identified the theme *eWOM Preferences* (see [Table no. 3](#)).

The analysis also reveals that respondents attach considerable importance to the information available online. Specifically, user reviews are a decisive factor in the choice of destinations, accommodation or other tourism-related activities, with every respondent having the answer. They consistently emphasized the value of reviews in forming a realistic picture. One respondent stated that “*In general reviews are a good factor to determine the quality of a service/offer*”.

In addition to reviews, photos or videos, i.e. visual content, also play an important role in the planning process. 7 out of 7 respondents felt that they value the possibility to visualize destinations or facilities before making a booking. One respondent says: “*It helps me most if I have real photos and videos. From this I can draw conclusions and form an opinion*”. Tips or tips and tricks are also actively sought by participants, who are interested in practical or personalized information to transform their experience.

Table no. 3 – eWOM preferences

| Category | Item | Frequency |
|---|---------------------------|-----------|
| Types of Information Sought | Reviews | 12 |
| | Photos and videos | 7 |
| | Tips & tricks | 6 |
| Specific Details Sought in Reviews | Cleaning | 5 |
| | Comfort | 3 |
| | Negative sides | 3 |
| | Quiet | 1 |
| | Positive sides | 1 |
| | Specific experiences | 1 |
| Rating Reviews | Number of similar reviews | 7 |
| | Writing style and tone | 6 |
| | Source check | 2 |

Source: own processing

When it comes to specific elements sought in the reviews, cleanliness (5 responses), comfort (3 responses) and negatives (3 responses) are key aspects. This reflects the need for a pleasant but carefree experience.

In evaluating online information, respondents consider it important to evaluate a review in the context of its veracity. Specifically, respondents pay attention to the number of reviews written in a similar way (7 answers), the writing style and tone of the review (6 answers), but also to checking the source of the information (2 respondents). Respondent 5 stated, "I check more reviews." while respondent 10 said "I usually look at multiple reviews and on different platforms to make sure the reviews are truthful.". These factors are pillars in determining credibility but also relevance. These factors help form a clear perception, which facilitates a user's satisfaction.

These observations bring to the forefront the behaviour of users as active and critical in evaluating online information, seeking to ensure its veracity and personal relevance before deciding.

The theme below we can say that it is a mixed theme, containing elements related to the participants' preferences as well as the behaviours exhibited during travel. So, its name is *Travel Preferences and Behaviours* (see [Table no. 4](#)).

Table no. 4 – Travel preferences and behaviours

| Category | Item | Frequency |
|----------------------------|---------------------|-----------|
| Frequency of Travel | 2-3 times a year | 6 |
| | From | 5 |
| | Once a year | 1 |
| Type of Trip | Long vacation | 4 |
| | City break | 3 |
| | Exotic destinations | 1 |
| | Exploring Romania | 1 |
| Travel Planning | Planned | 7 |
| | Spontaneous | 5 |
| Travel Companions | Alone | 3 |
| | Group of friends | 2 |
| | Family | 1 |

Source: own processing

Respondents' frequency of travel is varied, with most opting for 2-3 trips per year or frequent trips. This diversity reflects differences between respondents in terms of priorities, but also in their pace of life. In terms of type of travel, preferences tend towards long vacations (4 answers) and city breaks (3 answers).

Travel planning is split between spontaneity and careful planning. Some prefer to enjoy surprise trips (5 responses), while others appreciate details and careful organization (7 respondents). One respondent state *"I often find myself looking for new vacation locations, so I can say that with me everything is more spontaneous"*.

In the case of travel companions, most respondents prefer to travel alone, motivated by a desire for freedom in exploring destinations. Travel with a group of friends (2 responses) is also popular, which may reflect a desire to socialize. Although only one respondent mentioned traveling with family, these trips are important for spending quality time together as well as for memories.

These preferences may vary depending on different factors (type of trip, destination, budget, etc.). One respondent mentioned that they prefer to organize their holidays *"together with someone to be more manageable"* and another that *"I choose the destination, I decide the group of friends I go with"*, suggesting that they choose the company according to ease of organization or social preferences.

Table no. 5 offers details of previous experiences with AI, if any, views on the credibility and usefulness of AI-generated recommendations, and future willingness to use such tools. In this case information was extracted from questions 12. *Have you interacted with chatbots, virtual assistants or other AI systems that provide travel recommendations or tourist information*, 13. *To what extent do you consider AI-generated reviews to be objective and trustworthy compared to those of real users?* and 14. *How much do you think AWOM recommendations would influence your travel booking decisions*. This information is relevant to the research as it indicates an opportunity to introduce and promote these tools. Moreover, it helps to tailor the way of communication to build trust.

Table no. 5 – Attitudes and perceptions towards AI

| Category | Item | Frequency |
|---------------------|----------------------------|-----------|
| Interaction with AI | Mistrust | 11 |
| | No | 10 |
| Perception of AWOM | Limit | 3 |
| | Yes | 2 |
| | Small | 5 |
| | General | 3 |
| | Openness | 2 |
| Influence | Repetitive | 1 |
| | Source of inspiration | 7 |
| AWOM predictions | Increased adoption | 5 |
| | Limitations and scepticism | 4 |
| | Improved personalization | 3 |
| | Replacing human experience | 2 |

Source: own processing

The majority, 10 out of 12 respondents, have not interacted with artificial intelligence systems, preferring human interaction or being unfamiliar with such technologies. But there is an openness towards AI adoption, with 2 respondents reporting interactions.

In terms of perceptions of AWOM recommendations, there is significant distrust among respondents due to concerns about potential conflicts of interest or ethical issues. Respondents consider AWOMs to be repetitive (1 response), general (3 responses) and limited (3 responses), and there are also concerns about commercial interests in them.

In terms of AWOM's influence on travel decisions, many respondents (7 out of 12) consider that it would have little influence, preferring to use the recommendations as a source of inspiration and to compare them with other sources of information, stating that "*both types of reviews have complementary roles in forming an informed opinion*". Respondent 6 shared, "I couldn't compare these 2 types, I would only trust real users for that because they have lived the human and real experience." Likewise, respondent 7 felt that "AWOM recommendations don't influence me," as they "prefer to take the opinion of people rather than algorithms." Despite this, some participants acknowledged that AI could be useful for providing initial inspiration or for offering generalized information. Respondent 2 suggested, "It would influence the decision quite a bit, as I would spend time looking for information from various sources, not just AI."

In terms of the future of aWOM, respondents are split between optimism about increased adoption and improved personalization (8 out of 14) and scepticism about the limitations of the technology (4 out of 14). Some respondents emphasize the importance of direct experience and reviews from other real users, while others see the potential for AI to provide more personalized and relevant recommendations as technology advances.

Table no. 6 presents the theme of *the Impact of eWOM on travel decisions and experiences*. This theme explores the mechanisms by which online reviews shape online travel consumer behaviour, highlighting the importance of perceptions and feedback in the digital environment. eWOM not only informs potential travellers but also shapes their expectations at all stages of the planning process.

Table no. 6 – Impact of eWOM on travel decisions and experiences

| Category | Item | Frequency |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|
| The influence of reviews | Very big | 7 |
| | Confirm/Cancel plans | 5 |
| | Reduced | 3 |
| Change perspective | Average | 2 |
| | It depends on the context | 1 |
| | Increased attention | 4 |
| | Opinion forming | 2 |
| | Post-purchase precaution | 1 |
| Conflicting experiences | Repetitive reviews | 5 |
| | Disappoint | 4 |
| Fake reviews | Positive experiences | 1 |
| | Fake account/ Negative reviews | 1 |
| | Repeated photos | 1 |
| | Grammar mistakes | 1 |

Source: own processing

Analysing the data in the table above we can state that online reviews have a significant influence on participants' travel decisions. Many of the respondents, specifically 7 out of 12, state that reviews have a very high influence on their booking decisions, which emphasizes their importance in the travel planning process. One respondent state *"Very much, because based on them I form an opinion about a certain service/product and act accordingly"*.

Further, these reviews lead to a change in perspective on tourist destinations or services, with 5 out of 12 respondents mentioning that they have caused them to confirm or cancel travel plans or even avoid certain accommodation. For example, one respondent said *"I may change destination"* after reading the reviews.

Other respondents say that reviews have made them more attentive and responsive to certain aspects (4 out of 12 respondents) or helped them form an informed opinion about a service or product (2 out of 12 respondents). One respondent said that reviews made them *"more cautious in case everything is already taken, and they find something they don't like after purchase"*.

Conflicting experiences between online reviews and real-life experiences are relatively common in respondents' responses, with 4 out of 12 respondents reporting disappointments specifically related to accommodation. One respondent recounted how he was *"disappointed with a hotel with good reviews"*, while another mentioned that his friends *"were disappointed with the conditions found at their accommodation, despite the pictures online"*.

Respondents are also aware of the existence of false or misleading reviews, with 8 out of 12 saying they have encountered such reviews. These are identified by characteristics such as repetitiveness, obvious promotional content, major discrepancies between reviews and real experiences, fake accounts or negative reviews, repeated pictures and grammatical mistakes.

In conclusion, **online reviews play a considerable role in the planning process**, influencing respondents' decisions, perceptions and experiences. However, it is important for users to be critical and carefully assess the credibility and authenticity of reviews, given the possibility of false or misleading reviews.

4.2 Focus group results

Further on we will also analyse the focus group data. This focus group was designed to explore respondents' perceptions of the credibility of online reviews in the context of tourism services. The size of the focus group was 7 participants, which is sufficiently large number to ensure diversity of opinions and to provide an overview of the credibility of eWOM and aWOM.

Participants were presented with examples of reviews, some written by humans and some generated by artificial intelligence and asked to assess their credibility. Their discussions and assessments provided insight into the factors that influence how people perceive the veracity of online reviews, and how the presence of AI-generated elements can affect this perception.

The focus group discussion follows from the interview to see on concrete examples the elements that support or inhibit the authenticity and veracity of a review. In this case, the subjects were asked to analyse the credibility of eight reviews, four written by humans and four generated by artificial intelligence. They did not know the type of advertisement throughout the entire discussion.

Following the single question in the focus group, asking participants to analyse credibility, several key factors emerged:

1. Specific details

It was observed that reviews that contained specific details, such as items related to cleanliness, facilities, location or interaction with the owner, were considered more credible than general reviews. These details allow users to form an informed opinion, increasing trust in the reviews but also in the tourist service. One respondent stated that *"The details said in the review seem very experiential, so clearly he has been there on site and experienced it firsthand"*.

2. Authentic tone

In participants' responses, reviews that reflected personal experiences in an authentic way, in a sincere and natural tone, were appreciated. In contrast, reviews that used a formal, stiff or overly positive tone were perceived as less credible. One respondent says *"The friendly and warm tone denotes that it was written by a real person"*.

3. Balancing the pros and cons

Reviews that provide a complete picture, including both positive and negative aspects of the experience, were considered much more credible by the experiment participants. They pointed out that reviews that focus exclusively on positive or negative elements often appear biased or unrealistic. In contrast, balanced reviews, which present the pros and cons of accommodation in an honest and detailed way, are perceived as more authentic. Participants particularly appreciated reviews that describe both the strengths, such as cleanliness, comfort and friendliness of the staff, and the weaknesses, such as noise, lack of facilities or problems with reservations. This detailed and unbiased approach allowed users to get a realistic and comprehensive picture of their accommodation, helping them to make better-informed decisions and manage their expectations more effectively before traveling. One participant said, *"I think it's written by a human, it doesn't glorify accommodation and it's by no means exaggerated. It balances the bad with the good"*.

4. Language used

The language used in the reviews played an important role in assessing credibility. Reviews using language that was natural and close to that of the participants were perceived as more authentic. In contrast, reviews with too formal/informal language or exaggerated expressions raised questions about their authenticity. One participant said: *"The language is quite informal and, I can say, it seems exaggerated. Could be someone from generation Z..."*.

5. Elements generated by AI

Another important thing in a review is transparency. So, in question 8 there was a graphical element denoting the use of artificial intelligence in content generation.

The presence of this element played a significant role in shaping participants' perception of the credibility of that review.

Study participants repeatedly expressed concerns about the authenticity and objectivity of reviews that included AI-generated components. They emphasized that AI-generated reviews can appear artificially constructed and devoid of real personal experiences, which reduces their credibility. Furthermore, participants emphasized the importance of transparency in the use of AI for creation of reviews, suggesting that it would be essential for users to be clearly informed when a review was partially or fully generated by artificial

intelligence. One participant said, *"Even if it's a review that has AI-generated elements we don't know exactly what elements, I think it should say exactly what is being generated."*

In conclusion, to maintain consumer trust and ensure the objectivity of reviews, it is important for online travel service platforms to implement transparency measures to avoid potential misinformation.

A 5-point Likert scale was used to assess participants' perceptions of the credibility of online reviews, specifically comparing human-generated (eWOM) and AI-generated (aWOM) content. This scale is applied to evaluate how credible participants perceive different reviews. In this study, participants were asked to rate the credibility of various reviews, both human-written and AI-generated, based on their specific experiences. Reviews 1, 3, 5 and 7 are written by humans, while reviews 2, 4, 6 and 8 are generated with AI. The responses are quantified to capture the variation in trust levels between the two types of reviews.

Review 1 scored the second highest credibility score with 4,71. Participants' appreciation is evident in the specific and experiential details described, which enhanced their authenticity and relevance. One participant mentioned that *"The mention of the parking lot and the crowding seems to me an authentic detail that someone who has been there would notice"*. The review was a real one, provided by a user for a hostel. This aligns with findings by Litvin *et al.* (2008), who emphasized that reviews rich in experiential and location-specific details significantly boost perceived credibility.

Review 2 received the score 3,86. Some participants appreciated the balance between positive and negative aspects, while others found it too impersonal and possibly artificial intelligence generated. This review generated discussion about the importance of specific details and personal style in assessing credibility. One participant stated that *"It's very much like the review before except that it lacks some details, some more specific details. And it's quite cold in its phrasing, so it could possibly be AI-generated, but I can't say"*. This tension is echoed in Huang and Philp (2021), who showed that AI-generated service reviews are often criticized for lacking emotional depth and contextual specificity.

The following reviews, **number 3 and 4**, received predominantly neutral scores, 3,57 and 3,14 respectively, reflecting participants' uncertainty about their authenticity. They were quite short and general, which raised suspicion. Participants inferred that they might have been written by people close to the owner to help with the promotion of the location. Although we cannot state with certainty the authenticity and purpose of review number 3, given that the location was new on Booking, we can say that review number 4 was an example of aWOM. One participant stated that it *"seems credible enough, although it may have been put up by an acquaintance of the owner"*. This scenario reflects the concept of aWOM (algorithmic word-of-mouth), as discussed by Williams *et al.* (2020), who highlighted how short, vague, or overly favourable reviews may originate from owners rather than genuine guests.

Review number 5 received the score 3,57, reflecting divergent perspectives. Some participants appreciated the honesty of the review and the inclusion of the negative aspects, *"Credible", seems honest as it mentions the weaknesses. It's a bit too short, but gives pertinent details"*, while others found the details insufficient. This review emphasized the importance of balance between positive and negative aspects, but also the need for specific details to give a full picture of the experience. This finding mirrors insights from Sparks and Browning (2011), who noted that balanced reviews, even if critical, often inspire more trust than exclusively positive ones.

Review number 6 received the most polarized scores, with a score of 2,43. Its informal and exaggeratedly positive language was rated as unnatural or unconvincing by most participants, while others rated it as authentic and expressive. This review generated discussion about the impact of writing style and tone on perceptions of credibility. One participant stated, *"The language is quite informal and, I can say, it seems pulled by the hair"*. This polarization can be found in the results of [Kim et al. \(2011\)](#), who said that writing style, especially tone and vocabulary which can significantly affect perceived authenticity, often dividing audiences.

In 1st place with the highest credibility score is **review number 7**, where all participants gave it the maximum score, meaning 5. This review was praised for its honesty and transparency, providing both positive and negative aspects with specific and relevant details. One participant said *"I like that the review is straightforward and does not try to sugarcoat reality. The issues mentioned with linen and towels are useful details for anyone looking for an honest description of the accommodation"*. These characteristics are consistent with what [Chen and Law \(2016\)](#) identified as key trust-building factors in credible hospitality reviews.

Review number 8 scored the lowest, with most participants giving it one point, having an exact score of 1,57. The negative tone and lack of any positive aspects were considered unconvincing, with an exaggerated undertone. The mention of AI-generated elements also raised questions about the authenticity of the review. One participant stated *"Personally, I think the review is too biased in the negative direction to be completely credible. While some aspects may be valid, the highly critical tone and the mention of AI-generated elements raises questions about objectivity"*. This resonates with [Mauran \(2024\)](#), who warned that AI-generated reviews often amplify polarity, either excessively positive or overly negative by that reducing their credibility in readers' eyes.

The table below shows the average of the credibility scores given by focus group participants for each review presented. The scores are on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Table no. 7 – Average credibility scores of AWOM reviews, own processing

| Reviews | Average scores |
|------------------|----------------|
| 1 – real | 4,71 |
| 2 – AI generated | 3,86 |
| 3 – real | 3,57 |
| 4 – AI generated | 3,14 |
| 5 – real | 3,57 |
| 6 – AI generated | 2,43 |
| 7 – real | 5 |
| 8 – AI generated | 1,57 |

Source: own processing

In conclusion, measurement of credibility for the reviews with the Likert scale responses and focus group discussions, highlight the importance of a balance between positive and negative aspects, specific details and an authentic writing style. Transparency about the use of AI in review generation is also considered very important by participants.

This analysis supports the interviews, where participants repeatedly mentioned the importance of specific details and a balanced tone in the reviews. For example, in the first interview, it was stated that *"I look for reviews that provide details about the positive as well*

as the negative". Similarly, in another interview, the importance of "*balancing the pros and cons so I can make the best decision*" was mentioned.

In addition to these aspects, focus group participants mentioned other factors that influence their perception of the credibility of reviews, such as the number of reviews, the overall score of the location, and the existence of AI-generated elements. These factors are also relevant in the context of the interviews, where participants discussed their importance in their decision-making process.

5. DISCUSSIONS

This research utilized a qualitative approach, based on in-depth interviews and a focus group, to explore the perceptions and use of online reviews (eWOM and aWOM) in the tourism industry. The sample consisted of 12 participants, selected based on their experience with online platforms for tourism services. The study aimed to understand how these reviews influence decision-making and expectations of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-generated reviews (aWOM), focusing on aspects such as credibility, persuasiveness, and the impact on purchase intention.

The first objective of the study was to assess the impact of aWOM on purchase intention. Our findings revealed a general reluctance towards aWOM. Participants expressed a stronger preference for eWOM reviews, which they valued for their authenticity and the experiential details they provided. The majority stated that aWOM had little influence on their booking decisions and was often seen only as a source of inspiration or a starting point. This aligns with previous research by [Gretzel and Yoo \(2008\)](#), who found that consumer trust is often rooted in human-generated content, particularly in the tourism sector, where shared experiences are essential for building credibility. [Williams et al. \(2020\)](#) also support this by suggesting that while aWOM offers personalization, it lacks the emotional connection and trust that eWOM reviews provide. These results thus challenge the assumption that aWOM can quickly replace eWOM, as eWOM continues to be a stronger driver of purchase intention in tourism.

For the second research objective, which aimed to assess the differences between eWOM and aWOM, the findings indicated that participants could clearly distinguish between the two based on writing style, level of detail, and tone. Participants valued the authenticity and subjectivity of eWOM, which they considered more relevant to their personal experiences. [Longoni and Cian \(2022\)](#) found that eWOM is preferred for hedonic consumption (such as travel), as it offers subjective insights that resonate with individual emotions and needs, unlike the more utilitarian nature of aWOM.

The third objective explored trust levels in aWOM versus eWOM. Our results showed that participants exhibited a low level of trust in aWOM, mainly due to concerns over transparency and the potential for manipulation. One participant remarked, "I choose to trust real users more because reviews also have emotional influence." This perception was reinforced in the focus group, where participants expressed mistrust about the objectivity of aWOM reviews. These findings are consistent with [Akdim \(2021\)](#), who highlighted that aWOM is often viewed with suspicion due to its algorithmic nature and lack of transparency. [Longoni and Cian \(2022\)](#) also noted that while AI can provide personalized recommendations, its absence of emotional engagement and human authenticity raises concerns about its trustworthiness, particularly in sectors like tourism, where emotional connections are vital to the consumer experience.

Finally, in examining how eWOM and aWOM influence consumer decisions, our study revealed that eWOM reviews were predominantly used to form informed opinions about a particular service. Participants were generally less open to aWOM, reflecting doubt regarding its effectiveness. This observation aligns with [Serra Cantallops and Salvi \(2014\)](#), who found that eWOM plays a pivotal role in the decision-making process in the tourism sector, as it provides credible, real-world insights. The low openness to aWOM highlights that while AI-based reviews may offer personalization, they do not yet match the perceived value and influence of eWOM.

In summary, the findings of this study confirm that eWOM remains a dominant and trusted source of information for consumers in the tourism industry, a sentiment that aligns with existing research on consumer behaviour in digital environments. However, our study also reveals a growing interest in aWOM as a complementary tool, especially when used alongside eWOM to offer additional insights. This study expands on previous literature by suggesting that while aWOM has potential, it cannot yet replace eWOM, particularly due to the emotional connection and trust associated with human-generated content. To fully integrate aWOM into the decision-making process, it is crucial for online platforms to address concerns over transparency, bias, and the perceived lack of authenticity in AI-driven reviews.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, our study suggests that while eWOM reviews remain an essential source of information for travellers, there is potential for aWOM to play a complementary role in the decision-making process. However, to fully integrate aWOM into the decision-making process, online platforms must address transparency and objectivity concerns in order to increase user trust.

In terms of promoting the use of aWOM within the Booking.com platform, an integrated approach is required, involving both online and offline placements. Being a strong brand with global recognition, out-of-home (OOH) advertisements, such as banners, can be used for offline promotion. These banners were placed nationwide in Romania, specifically in the top six cities with the most airport traffic. For online promotion, posts and advertisements were made on social networks such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, targeting the proposed audience.

Particularly for Facebook and Instagram, we focused on the development of paid advertisements, leveraging prior experience in managing social media pages and a deep understanding of the impact of visuals in marketing.

Overall, the analysis of participant responses and focus group discussions provides detailed insights into how people assess the credibility of online reviews and the factors influencing their perceptions, particularly regarding their openness to new AI-generated reviews. This understanding can be valuable for online review platforms and tourism service providers, helping them to improve how they present and manage online reviews.

Businesses can also use aWOM as a complementary tool to provide general insights and enhance the user experience. However, they must be mindful of the current limitations of this technology and avoid relying on it exclusively.

For online promotion, we recommend that companies focus on delivering visually appealing content. Posts that include short, concise aWOM reviews, accompanied by photos or videos showcasing real experiences, will engage users more effectively. Using relevant

hashtags and interactive features within stories, such as polls, can stimulate conversation with prospective customers.

On platforms like TikTok, short, engaging videos can creatively showcase how aWOM can help users discover new destinations and personalize their travel experiences. Leveraging popular challenges and trends will help increase visibility and appeal to a broader audience.

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of eWOM and aWOM in consumer decision-making within the tourism industry, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size of 12 interview participants and the focus group of 7 is relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future studies could benefit from a larger and more diverse sample to capture a broader range of perspectives and behaviours.

Another limitation is the scope of the study, which was confined to the tourism industry and platforms like Booking.com and TripAdvisor. Although these are prominent platforms, future research could explore aWOM and eWOM in other sectors, such as e-commerce or retail, to assess the broader applicability of the findings.

Finally, the rapidly evolving nature of AI technology means that the study's conclusions regarding aWOM may be subject to change as new advancements emerge. Future research should consider the dynamic nature of AI and its potential to further transform the landscape of online reviews and consumer decision-making.

Future studies could investigate the long-term effects of aWOM on brand loyalty, trust, and consumer behaviour. Further exploration is also needed into the ethical concerns of aWOM, particularly regarding algorithmic transparency, bias, and its influence on consumer decision-making, as these issues become increasingly important in the digital age.

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ANNEXES

ANNEX 1 – INTERVIEW GUIDE

Hello! We are a group of people conducting research on the consumer behaviour of online tourism services.

I would like to thank you for accepting our invitation to take part in this interview, which aims to discover and analyse information about your preferences in terms of online tourist services and what motivates you in your choice of accommodation.

The information you give me during the interview will be anonymous and confidential. The discussion will be recorded and the research data will not be disclosed to others. Our discussion in this interview will last approximately 15-20 minutes. Everything you tell us is important and will be used to help us better understand your behaviour.

1. Do you travel often in a year?
2. Which online platforms do you frequently consult for information about travel destinations, accommodation, flights or other tourist services? (e.g. TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Facebook, travel-specific discussion forums)
3. What are your criteria for choosing a reliable eWOM platform? (Ex: number of reviews, diversity of opinions, user trust scores)
4. What types of information do you specifically look for in eWOM sources (e.g. detailed descriptions of destinations, real photos and videos, reviews of specific experiences, practical advice from other travellers)?

5. How do you assess the usefulness and credibility of the information found in eWOM sources (e.g. check the sources of the reviews, consider the diversity of opinions, assess the writing style and tone of the reviews)?
6. How much do online reviews influence your travel booking decisions? (Ex: consider only positive reviews, give more weight to detailed and honest reviews, ignore negative reviews)
7. How do you change your perspective on a destination or tourist service after reading online reviews? (Ex: confirm or change travel plans, avoid certain options)
8. Have you ever had conflicting experiences between online reviews and your own actual experience? (Ex: you had a positive experience with a hotel that had negative reviews, you were disappointed with a destination that was praised online)
9. Have you ever spotted fake or misleading online reviews? (e.g. repetitive reviews, obvious promotional content, major discrepancies between reviews and real experiences)
10. What do you think about sponsored or paid reviews? Do you consider them as credible as non-sponsored ones?
11. How do the overall ratings of travel platforms (e.g. Booking.com, TripAdvisor) influence your booking decisions compared to individual reviews?
12. Have you interacted with chatbots, virtual assistants or other AI systems that provide travel recommendations or tourist information? (Ex: chatbots on hotel websites, airline virtual assistants, AI-based travel recommendation platforms)
13. If yes, have you ever received AI-generated AWOM recommendations that were not relevant to your needs or interests? (Ex: accommodation recommendations that did not fit your budget, destination suggestions that did not match your travel preferences)
14. How objective and trustworthy do you consider AI-generated reviews to be compared to those of real users?
15. How do you perceive the credibility and impartiality of AWOM recommendations (e.g. you concerned about potential conflicts of interest, do you consider the limitations of AI systems, do you assess the quality and diversity of information used to generate recommendations)?
16. How much do you think AWOM recommendations would influence your travel booking decisions? (Ex: consider the recommendations as a source of inspiration, compare them with other sources of information, ignore them if they don't suit your needs)
17. How do you think AWOM will develop in the future and what impact will it have on the tourism industry? (Ex: increased use of AI systems, improved accuracy and relevance of recommendations, more sophisticated personalization).

ANNEX 2 – FOCUS GROUP REVIEWS REAL AND AI GENERATED

This focus group aims to explore your views on online reviews for tourism services. Today, we are going to discuss the credibility of AI-generated reviews (AWOM) versus human-generated reviews (eWOM) and how they influence your decisions to choose a hotel or other tourist destination.

During the discussion, we will present examples of eWOM and AWOM reviews and use a rating scale to measure their credibility. We will also ask you a series of questions to find out more about the factors that influence your perception of the credibility of reviews.

Your participation in this focus group is voluntary and confidential. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions during the discussion.

| eWOM | aWOM |
|--|---|
| "The location to the town of Soller was excellent, just a few minutes walk! Loved the nice courtyard and friendly staff. We stayed here for three days and took day trips by car to the surrounding towns. Nearby parking was great and reasonable at 6 EUR for 24 hours - can be crowded during the day, but worth the wait to vacate a spot. A bit noisy at night, but that's the price you pay for being in such a great location for everything!" ³ | "The hotel has a great location, close to the beach and center Soller. The staff are friendly and the inner courtyard is lovely for breakfast. However, the noise at night and lack of air conditioning make it difficult to rest the sanitary facilities are limited. Ideal for a short stay but not recommended in the summer months." ⁴ |

Evaluare: 20 mai 2024

Baza excelenta pentru Soller/ Portul Soller/ Deia/ Valdemossa

Locația până în orașul Soller a fost excelentă, la doar câteva minute de mers pe jos! Mi-a plăcut curtea drăguță și personalul amabil. Am stat aici trei zile și am făcut excursii de o zi cu mașina în orașele din jur. Parcarea din apropiere a fost grozavă și rezonabilă, la 6 EUR pentru 24 de ore - poate fi aglomerată în timpul zilei, dar merită să așteptați pentru a elibera un loc.

Puțin zgomotos noaptea, dar acesta este prețul pe care îl plătiți pentru a fi într-o locație atât de grozavă pentru tot!

Evaluare: 20 mai 2024

Bine

Hotelul are o locație excelentă, aproape de plajă și centrul orașului Soller. Personalul este prietenos și curtea interioară este încântătoare pentru micul dejun.

Totusi, gălăgia nocturnă și lipsa aerului condiționat fac odihna dificilă, iar facilitățile sanitare sunt limitate. Ideal pentru o ședere scurtă, dar nu recomandăm în lunile de vară.

Figure no. A1 – Screenshot Booking.com review

Source: <https://www.booking.com/Share-RseE9g>

"An extraordinary stay at Casuta Carmen, a superb location with a breathtaking lake view. A very friendly host and as pretty as I have never met! We are waiting to come back to you!"

Figure no. A2 – Screenshot AWOM review

Source: own processing

"Carmen's cottage is a lovely place with a beautiful view of the lake and extremely welcoming hosts. We felt at home thanks to comfort and excellent facilities. We can't wait to return and highly recommend this location! Note 10."

Exceptional
Evaluare: 12 mai 2024
3 evaluări

Un sejur extraordinar la Casuta Carmen, o locație superbă cu o vedere spre lac impresionantă. O gazdă foarte prietenoasă și dragută cum n-am mai întâlnit! Abia așteptăm să ne întoarcem la dumneavoastră!

Exceptional
3 evaluări
10

Figure no. A3 – Screenshot Booking.com review

Source: <https://www.booking.com/Share-oPYTGV>

"An enjoyable stay, no unnecessary fuss, generated a feeling of well being and relaxation. Comfortable, well located, parking, equipped with everything needed, very comfortable mattresses. Toilet could be better cleaned, unclog bath tub."⁷

Exceptional
Evaluare: 4 iunie 2024
3 evaluări

O experiență minunată ce merită încercată măcar o dată!

Căsuța Carmen este un loc minunat cu o vedere superbă spre lac și gazde extrem de primitoare. Ne-am simțit ca acasă datorită confortului și dotărilor excelente. Abia așteptăm să revenim și recomandăm cu încredere această locație! Nota 10.

Figure no. A4 – Screenshot AWOM review

Source: own processing

"The location of this studio is simply next level! You're right downtown, close to everything you need. The host is super cool and friendly, she even let us park our bikes in the apartment. The studio is tiny but cozy and has all the stuff you need. The

| eWOM | aWOM |
|------|--|
| | bed? OMG, mega cozy! We slept like babies. The hot water comes quickly and the WiFi works great. Bathroom? Spotless! Everything is so clean and well maintained. I highly recommend! The vibe is superb and we will definitely be back!" |

Evaluare: 27 aprilie 2024

Un sejur plăcut, fără fițe inutile, care a generat o stare de bine și de relaxare.

8,0

Confortabil, bine situat, parcare, dotat cu tot ce este necesar, saltele foarte comode.

Toaleta ar trebui mai bine curățată, de desfundat cada.

1 persoană a considerat că acest comentariu este util. Util Inutilă

Cel mai apreciat comentariu Evaluare: 26 iulie 2021

Exceptional

10

Locația acestei garsioniere e pur și simplu next level! Ești fix în centru, aproape de tot ce ai nevoie. Gazda e super cool și prietenoasă, ne-a lăsat chiar să ne parcam bicicletele în apartament. Garsioniera e micuță, dar cozy și are toate chestiile de care ai nevoie. Patu? OMG, mega confortabil! Am dormit ca niște bebeluși. Apa caldă vine rapid, iar WiFi-ul merge brio. Baia? Impecabilă! Totul e atât de curat și bine întreținut. Recomand cu toată încrederea! Vibe-ul e superb și clar o să ne întoarcem!

10 persoane a considerat că acest comentariu este util. Util Inutilă

Figure no. A5 – Screenshot Booking.com reviewSource: <https://www.booking.com/Share-gBnEYw>

"Everything was ok if you're not too picky. We had a ground floor apartment, a family with two kids and it's ok as far as proximity to the center old. Good price for what it offers. It was warm, it was clean. The linens were a little old, some even torn, torn towels, scorched towels, it is known that those are also old and maybe a bit of repainting would work..."

Figure no. A6 – Screenshot AWOM review

Source: own processing

"The rooms were disappointingly small and insufficiently clean, with old and damaged furniture. The major problem was with the plumbing in the king room, which caused a massive water leak into the room with every shower. In addition, the stifling temperature in the room made it difficult to breathe and the lack of air conditioning made it even more uncomfortable. The price, although affordable, in no way justified the poor conditions. Parking was a nightmare, and the quiet was just a pleasant dream with the constant noise all around. The staff, instead of solving problems, seemed indifferent and uncaring."

Evaluare: 30 ianuarie 2023

Totul a fost ok daca nu ești prea pretențios.

8,0

Am avut un apartament la parter, o familie cu doi copii și e ok ca apropiere fata de centrul vechi. Prețul bun pentru ce oferă. A fost cald, a fost curățenie.

Lenjerii cam vechi, unele chiar rupte, prosoape scurtoase se cunoaște că și alea sunt vechi și poate un pic de zugrăveala ar merge...

Figure 7. Screenshot Booking.com review
Source: <https://www.booking.com/Share-90ChPq4>

This review contains AI generated content and may contain errors.

Evaluare: 13 decembrie 2022

Experiență dezamăgitoare

1,0

Camerile au fost dezamăgitor de mici și insuficient de curate, cu mobilier vechi și deteriorat. Problema majoră a fost cu instalația din camera king, care a provocat o scurgere masivă de apă în încăperea la fiecare dus. În plus, temperatura sufocantă din camera a făcut dificilă respirația, lipsa aerului condiționat amplificând disconfortul. Prețul, deși accesibil, nu a justificat în niciun fel condițiile precare. Parcarea a fost un coșmar, iar liniștea a fost doar un vis frumos, cu zgomotul constant din jur. Personalul, în loc să rezolve problemele, părea indiferent și nepăsător.

Figure 8. Screenshot AWOM review
Source: own processing