

Visual e-WOM Influence on Tourists' Booking Intentions of HORECA Services: A Conceptual Paper

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Abstract: This study thoroughly investigates the factors influencing travelers' decisions to make reservations for Hotel, Restaurant, and Café (HORECA) services, emphasizing the impact of visual electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on Instagram. The research analyzes variables to form a new framework, adding to the existing body of knowledge inspired by key theories like the Information Adoption Model, the Theory of Planned Behavior, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model. Central to the investigation is the role of visual eWOM as a mediating factor, elucidating the nuanced interplay between several variables, including information quality, information credibility, motivation, innovativeness, destination fascination, popularity heuristics, and destination brand image. This framework analyzes how visual eWOM drives HORECA booking intentions, as shared content provides realistic portrayals through user photos and ratings, creating genuine engagement. Mediated by platforms like Instagram, these variables collectively shape perceptions and encourage reservations. By balancing credibility, creativity, and social proof, the framework offers a holistic view of how digital visual narratives transform modern HORECA choices, ultimately converting online interest into booking intentions for all tourists worldwide. This research study demonstrates the importance of visual eWOM mediating impact on booking intentions, thus enhancing the comprehension of tourist consumer behavior on Instagram by suggesting a novel conceptual framework. By integrating credibility, visual appeal, and social influence, this study contributes to a more profound understanding of consumer behavior in digital tourism contexts. It also provides a foundation for future empirical research across different platforms, industries, and demographic groups.

Keywords: Visual Electronic Word-of-mouth, Purchase Intention, Consumer Behavior, HORECA, Instagram.

1. Introduction

The burgeoning influence of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) has fundamentally restructured how tourists search for information, particularly within the hotels, restaurants, and cafés (HORECA) industry (Gupta, 2019; Tsai & Bui, 2020; Azhar et al., 2022). As an informal digital dialogue where consumers exchange reviews and experiences, eWOM serves as a cornerstone of contemporary trust-building and purchase-related decision-making (Lestari et al., 2026). While its importance is well-documented, the rapid evolution of digital marketing necessitates deeper inquiry into how specific formats of eWOM, specifically visual content, shape consumer purchase intentions (Zulyanti et al., 2024).

Recent technological shifts have empowered visual eWOM, such as photos and videos, to become a primary determinant in leisure trip booking intentions (Mosa, 2021). Platforms like Instagram have added complex dimensions to the consumer decision-making process by prioritizing aesthetic appeal and social proof (Yerizal & Abror, 2019; Santos et al., 2020). However, a significant research gap remains: despite the HORECA sector's heavy reliance on visual appeal for competitive positioning, existing literature has largely focused on text-based eWOM or general technology acceptance (Nilashi et al., 2022; Silaban et al., 2023). There is a notable scarcity of studies that integrate visual eWOM into a comprehensive theoretical framework specifically tailored to Instagram's unique environment (Mosa, 2021; Filieri et al., 2021; Dwivedi et al., 2021).

This theoretical ambiguity leads to a critical problem statement from a managerial perspective. The HORECA industry has become hyper-competitive, yet many businesses struggle to sustain market positions because they fail to strategically leverage visual eWOM (Zulyanti et al., 2024). Visual content is often treated as a peripheral byproduct rather than a core component of marketing communication strategies. While scholars have begun to explore how User-Generated Content (UGC) affects cognitive processing and information internalization (Yang, Wang, & Zhao, 2023), there is a need for a comprehensive model that explains how visual cues on Instagram mediate the journey from information exposure to final booking intentions in the HORECA context.

This study aims to address these gaps by evaluating the visual eWOM literature, exploring several underlying theories starting with the Information Adoption Model (IAM), and establishing a robust conceptual framework. This research provides a holistic view of how visual eWOM on Instagram functions as a critical mediator between

digital antecedents and tourists' booking intentions, offering both theoretical clarity and strategic utility for the HORECA sector.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Instagram's Role in HORECA Marketing and Consumer Purchase Intention

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) explains tourists' adoption of visual eWOM platforms such as Instagram in terms of perceived usefulness and ease of use. In this study, TAM complements IAM by explaining why users engage with visual platforms in the first place, thereby enabling the subsequent evaluation and processing of visual content, especially in HORECA (Rahaman et al., 2022). When used across settings such as social media and online reviews, TAM correlates with concepts such as innovativeness and motivation, which help explain why travelers embrace Instagram and other platforms for visual eWOM (Rahaman et al., 2022).

The effects of technological advancements on consumer experience and market trends are among the main research topics in the HORECA sector (Samoggia, 2021). Social networking sites (SNS), such as Instagram, along with the shared appealing pictures, have positively influenced how tourists search for, interact with, and assess accommodations, destinations, and dining experiences. A study by Lee et al. (2020) shows that Instagram has become an essential tool for tourists to evaluate and search for destinations before making reservations. However, there is still little knowledge about how particular Instagram content affects decision-making processes of various demographics in the tourism industry. To understand its effects on purchase intention, more research is necessary to determine the authenticity and perceived credibility of UGC on Instagram (Mosa, 2021; Filieri et al., 2021).

Purchase intention, which Marlien et al. (2020) define as "consumers' choice to buy particular brands or products", is a crucial component of marketing and is impacted by several variables, including the caliber of the product or service, the price, the brand's reputation, the location, WOM, menu variety, and individual preferences. The impact of visual eWOM variables on travelers' intentions to visit HORECA venues can be better understood by using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Choirisa et al., 2021), which predicts and analyzes people's behavior based on their attitudes, perceived control, and subjective norms, such as peer recommendations and societal influences (Kan and Fabrigar, 2017). The theory can also ascertain how these elements affect customers' willingness to engage in eWOM behavior towards HORECA services.

2.2 Visual eWOM Antecedents

The in-depth exploration of the relevant literature revealed that several theories were used in eWOM studies, which inspired this study to draw attention to the complex relationships between the eWOM antecedents discussed below. Visual eWOM serves as a central mediating mechanism through which antecedents influence tourists' booking intentions by enabling the evaluation of information usefulness, guiding cognitive processing through central and peripheral routes (as per the Elaboration Likelihood Model-ELM), and translating these evaluations into behavioral intentions (TPB). Conceptually, visual eWOM can be reflected through indicators such as perceived attractiveness of visual content, engagement with visual posts (likes, shares, comments), and the perceived influence of visual content on travel-related decision-making. The mediating role of visual eWOM lies in its ability to transform various antecedent inputs into meaningful consumer perceptions. In Pradana et al. (2026) study, e-WOM, alongside brand awareness, was a strong mediator between social media marketing and purchase decisions and was found to have a positive effect on purchase decisions.

Cognitive factors (information quality and credibility) enhance the perceived usefulness of visual content, emotional factors (motivation and fascination) increase engagement and affective responses, and social factors (popularity cues and brand image) reinforce trust and social validation. Through this operationalization, visual eWOM acts as a transmission mechanism that converts these influences into observable behavioral intentions.

2.2.1 Information Quality

In the HORECA industry, information quality—defined by its timeliness, accuracy, and completeness—serves as a primary determinant of customer intentions and service adoption (Walkowski et al., 2022). Grounded in the IAM, the perceived utility and usability of information technology significantly influence consumer engagement and behavioral outcomes (Mensah et al., 2021; Hermawan, 2022). This process is further amplified by SNS, where peer feedback and shared experiences directly shape traveler behavior (Halдар, 2022). Crucially, while

high-quality eWOM bolsters brand reputation and facilitates informed decision-making (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2021; Cho & Shin, 2020), its credibility is heavily dependent on the strength and consistency of the brand identity (Ukpabi & Karjaluo, 2018). Despite the established link between information quality and purchasing intent, current scholarship has focused predominantly on textual content, leaving the specific impact of visual eWOM relatively underexplored within the sector (Fileri et al., 2021; Nilashi et al., 2022; Silaban et al., 2023). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₁: Information Quality conveyed through visual eWOM information has a favorable influence on customers' booking intentions toward HORECA services.

2.2.2 Credibility Information

As a critical determinant of consumer behavior, source and message credibility significantly shape decision-making and purchase intentions within the HORECA sector. Within the framework of the ELM, credibility functions as a persuasive tool that dictates how tourists cognitively process information—via central or peripheral routes—when engaging with social information systems (Guyer et al., 2021; Rani & Shivaprasad, 2021). While traditional eWOM credibility is established through message content, medium, and source expertise (Ben, 2019; Daowd et al., 2021), source characteristics specifically exert a profound influence on perceived value and subsequent buying intentions (Ismagilova et al., 2020; Muda & Hamza, 2021). Furthermore, the literature suggests that high credibility levels favorably shift brand perceptions and consumer attitudes (Lundin, 2021; Siddiqui et al., 2021). However, despite its established role in fostering consumer trust, a significant gap remains in understanding how credibility interacts with visual cues in modern SNS, necessitating further empirical investigation (Fileri et al., 2021; Nilashi et al., 2022; Silaban et al., 2023). Accordingly, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H₂: Information credibility conveyed through visual eWOM information has a favorable influence on customers' booking intentions toward HORECA services.

2.2.3 Motivation

Customers have a range of reasons for engaging in eWOM, such as gaining benefits, maintaining social identity, building relationships, helping others, and finding psychological fulfillment (Kanje et al., 2020). When visitors interact with visual eWOM material for travel inspiration, the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) assists in identifying the reasons and the ways they use media and the satisfaction they seek on SNS (Plume & Slade, 2018). It reveals the motivations behind visitors' use of visual eWOM, including informational, recreational, self-expression, social, and decision-validating purposes. Furthermore, by acknowledging their active position as content makers and participants in the digital world, the UGT encourages users to reply and share their thoughts on using social media material connected to HORECA services (Hanekom & Swart, 2023). According to Zhou et al. (2019), different platforms may aim to satisfy distinct eWOM goals. Intrinsic incentives like the satisfaction of one's own needs (entertainment, exhibitionism, self-improvement) and social desires (social comparison, social bonding, social enhancement value) have an impact on the creation of eWOM on social media (Aramendia-Muneta, 2022). While researchers have explored motivation in the context of content engagement, its influence within visual storytelling environments necessitates further integration with other behavioral factors. (Zhou et al., 2019; Aramendia-Muneta, 2022; Hanekom & Swart, 2023). Considering the body of current literature, the following hypothesis is put forth:

H₃: The motivation conveyed through visual eWOM information has a favorable influence on customers' booking intentions towards HORECA services.

2.2.4 Innovativeness

Innovative consumers, characterized by a heightened drive for novelty, are more predisposed to adopt and propagate emerging information formats like visual eWOM. According to the IAM, this novelty-seeking behavior facilitates deeper interaction with digital content, while the TPB suggests that such engagement directly strengthens travel intention formation. On platforms like Instagram, this innovativeness motivates tourists to seek updated travel sources and visit HORECA services, fueled by a desire to discover and share original experiences (Mahmood, Khwaja, & Jusoh, 2019). Consequently, these highly innovative individuals are more inclined to utilize eWOM channels to disseminate information regarding creative products and services (Dobrinic, Gregurec, & Dobrinić, 2021), acting as catalysts for the proliferation of ideas across social networking

sites (Bhat, 2020). Ultimately, identifying these underlying drivers of eWOM metrics is essential for developing effective viral marketing initiatives (Nguyen & Chaudhuri, 2019), thus the following hypothesis is put forth:

H₄: Innovativeness conveyed through visual eWOM information has a favorable influence on customers' booking intentions toward HORECA services.

2.2.5 Destination Fascination

Destination fascination reflects the emotional appeal and attractiveness of visual content shared through eWOM. Emotionally engaging visuals stimulate affective responses, which play a critical role in decision-making processes. According to the ELM, such affective cues can influence attitudes through peripheral processing, while the TPB suggests that these positive attitudes contribute to stronger booking intentions. The concept of fascination is widely used in the tourism sector, and it is a critical factor shaping travelers' choices and enhancing their experiences (Fernández-Miguélez et al., 2020). According to Alebaki, Lontakis, and Koutsouris (2020), destination marketing refers to the special, memorable, and customized experiences that travel destinations provide.

Customers frequently use eWOM channels to learn about potential vacation destinations and to share their experiences with others. Negative eWOM might discourage potential tourists and lessen a destination's competitiveness, while positive eWOM can improve a destination's reputation and draw high-value travelers searching for unforgettable experiences (Aktan et al., 2022). The following hypothesis is proposed in light of the relevant literature:

H₅: Destination fascination conveyed through visual eWOM information has a favorable influence on customers' booking intentions towards HORECA services.

2.2.6 Popularity Heuristics

According to Filieri et al. (2021), online signals that affect consumers' perceptions and buying intentions are known as visual eWOM popularity heuristics. Popularity heuristics relate to how tourists use cues like shares, likes, and comments on Instagram posts as shortcuts for decision-making. ELM explains this as peripheral route processing, where consumers rely on heuristics (like popularity) instead of deeply analyzing the content. This model examines how much effort tourists are willing to put into processing the information they encounter in eWOM. According to Li, Lee, and Yang's (2019) discussion of popularity heuristics, customers may judge a product's credibility and dependability depending on the number of reviews or ratings it has gotten. The body of extant literature suggests the following hypothesis:

H₆: The popularity heuristics conveyed through visual eWOM information have a favorable influence on customers' booking intentions for HORECA services.

2.2.7 Destination Brand Image

By highlighting the influence of brand image on customer satisfaction and loyalty, Anggraeni and Harris (2019) demonstrate a positive correlation between destination brand image and eWOM in the restaurant and hotel sectors. Influenced by the TPB theory, Choirisa et al. (2021) recognized the theoretical arguments and assumptions about the connections among destination image, eWOM, and tourist attitudes toward visiting intention. The importance of brand image in the tourist industry is examined by Huang and Liu (2018), who also point out that it affects traveler selections for destinations and lodging. Travelers' decisions are influenced by brand image, as Duman and Sacli (2023) show when they delve deeper into the link between destination image, local food components, and destination selection. The following hypothesis is put out in light of the body of extant literature:

H₇: Positive destination brand image, conveyed through visual eWOM information, has a favorable influence on customers' booking intentions towards HORECA services.

3. Conceptual Framework

The proposed conceptual framework, inspired by Sardar et al. (2021) and illustrated in Figure 1, explores the interrelationships among various eWOM antecedents and their impact on consumer behavior. The visual eWOM on Instagram serves as the mediator between several independent variables and the dependent variable: tourists' booking intention toward HORECA services. By integrating these antecedents within a visually driven

social media context, this framework advances prior research to offer a more comprehensive, sector-specific understanding of modern tourist behavior.

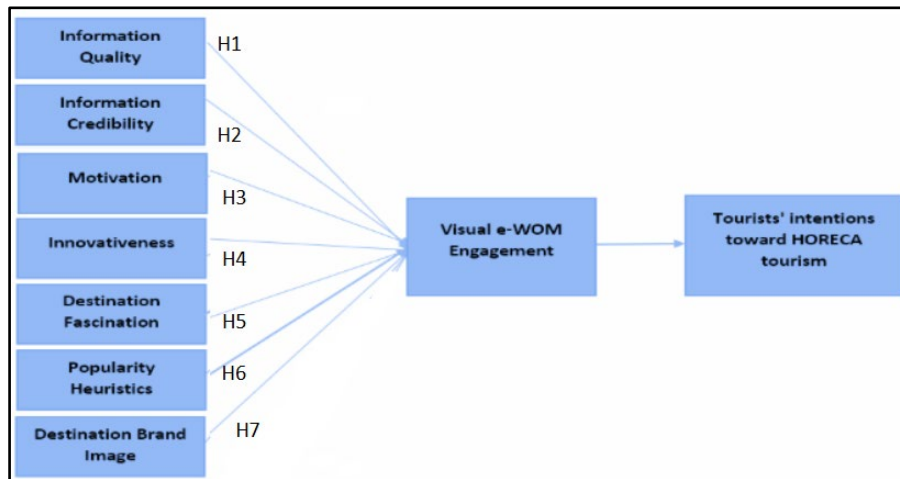


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

First, the framework identifies several key explanatory independent variables (antecedents) categorized by their influence on the consumer’s decision-making process. To enhance the empirical applicability of the conceptual framework, the following measurement scales for each variable are proposed based on prior literature and adapted to the context of visual eWOM on Instagram. These measurement items are indicative and can be refined and validated through future empirical research.

Table 1: Measurement Scales

Construct	Measurement Items	References
Information Quality	Evaluated based on whether the visual content is trustworthy, accurate, comprehensive, and timely.	(Filiery et al., 2021) (Bhat, 2020)
Information Credibility	Measured by the reliability and the credibility of the content and the level of confidence tourists place in the visual eWOM.	Daowd et al. (2021) (Isogo et al., 2021)
Motivation	Driven by captivating inspirational visuals, increased desire, and the excitement shared by other users leading to motivation to visit HORECA Services.	(Hussein, Song, and Niu, 2020) (Topornytska, Francois, and Osinska, 2020)
Innovativeness	Reflects the creative, unique, novel and imaginative nature of HORECA offerings as portrayed through visual content enhancing interest and presenting attractive experiences online.	(Isogo et al., 2021) (Perera, Nayak, and Long, 2019)
Destination Fascination	Captures the allure of unique, attractive, exciting, and interesting attractions shared through visual media.	(Topornytska, Francois, and Osinska, 2020); (Siang, Yang and Liu, 2020)
Popularity Heuristics	Characterized by high engagement metrics (likes, shares), the widespread presence of content across SNS, and the general perception of popularity.	(Carlisle, Ivanov, and Dijkmans, 2023)
Destination Brand Image	Focuses on the strength and distinctiveness of the HORECA brand identity, which fosters a positive perception.	(Bhat 2020) (Filiery et al., 2021)

Construct	Measurement Items	References
Visual eWOM (Mediator)	Visual content influences perception, engagement, and decision-making regarding HORECA services.	(Mathur, Khandelwal, and Mittal 2019) (Oliveira and Casais, 2019)
Booking Intention	Measured by the visit intention, considering booking consideration, and services chosen in the future.	(Filiari et al., 2021) (Abubakar et al., 2017)

Second, in this research, the mediating role of visual eWOM is conceptualized as the degree to which consumers are exposed to and influenced by user-generated visual content (images, videos, and posts) on platforms like Instagram. As a mediating construct, it captures the process of transmitting the aforementioned antecedents through visual stimuli to shape final booking intentions. It reflects both the cognitive processing of the imagery and the social influence inherent in shared digital experiences.

4. Contribution to Theory

This research improves current knowledge of consumer behavior in the HORECA industry through the following key advancements:

Visual eWOM as a vital mediator: Unlike traditional models that often assume a direct link between eWOM determinants and purchase intentions or treat visual eWOM as a static mediator, this study positions visual eWOM as an active processing mechanism that integrates cognitive (IAM), heuristic (ELM), and behavioral (TPB) dimensions, thereby offering a more profound explanation of how visual stimuli translate into booking intentions. By doing so, it explains the specific process through which external factors translate into behavioral outcomes, providing a more granular look at the consumer journey (Sardar et al., 2021; Filiari et al., 2021).

Integration of cognitive and affective frameworks: The study proposes a holistic conceptualization that captures both cognitive and affective mechanisms. This dual perspective represents a significant advancement over conventional models, i.e. IAM, TAM & ELM, that primarily emphasize cognitive processing, acknowledging that visual stimuli on platforms like Instagram trigger emotional responses that are just as influential as functional information (Guyer et al., 2021; Chatterjee et al., 2021).

Contextualization of visual platforms: By focusing specifically on Instagram, this research highlights the distinctive relevance of imagery in a hospitality context. It extends established theories such as the TAM by applying them to a visually driven environment, showing how visual stimuli uniquely influence attitudes and perceived usefulness in ways prior models have overlooked (Molinillo et al., 2021; Filiari et al., 2021; Nilashi et al., 2022).

Finally, the study contributes a novel, comprehensive visual eWOM framework that simultaneously integrates multiple antecedents. This provides a more profound understanding of how social media dynamics and visual storytelling jointly shape tourist booking intentions, moving the field beyond the traditional boundaries of text-based eWOM research (Ismagilova et al., 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2021).

5. Conclusion and Future Work

To successfully navigate the shifting HORECA landscape, organizations must adapt to evolving traveler behaviors and the rising influence of visual eWOM. Effectively managing visual eWOM is critical, as it bolsters brand visibility and destination image, directly driving tourist interest. Following an extensive literature review, this study identifies key visual eWOM factors influencing booking intentions and proposes an innovative conceptual framework to guide future research across multiple SNS.

While this study adopts a conceptual approach, the framework is specifically designed for empirical validation. Future research could operationalize these constructs using quantitative methods, such as survey-based data collection from social media users—particularly those active on visually driven platforms like Instagram. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is recommended to analyze the relationships between antecedents, the mediating role of visual eWOM, and ultimate booking intentions. Measurements should utilize established

multi-item scales adapted to a visual context. While a cross-sectional design is a practical starting point, longitudinal approaches would offer more profound insights into how consumer behavior evolves.

By empirically testing this proposed framework, businesses can gain actionable intelligence to craft customized marketing strategies and enhance customer experiences. Furthermore, comparative studies across different generations and platforms (Mobhamad Shuvo and Ahmed, 2026), and world regions (Chatterjee et al., 2021) are encouraged to capture the nuanced cultural and geographical variations in how visual eWOM influences consumer decisions.

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Ethics Declaration

Ethical clearance was not required for the research

AI Declaration

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT for language-related support. All content was subsequently reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final version.

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