

THE IMPACT OF ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH ON TOURISTS' PURCHASE INTENTION: SPECIAL REFERENCE TO GENERATION Z TOURISTS IN SRI LANKA

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a vital sector that contributes significantly to the global economy, generating revenue for employment and fostering cultural exchange between regions. In 2019, tourism accounted for 10.4% of global GDP and provided 330 million jobs worldwide (UNWTO). International tourism receipts reached \$1.5 trillion, with domestic tourism expenditures amounting to \$4.7 trillion (UNWTO, 2021). Sri Lanka's tourism industry is a crucial driver of its economy, contributing 5.1% to the country's GDP and employing around 400,000 individuals in 2019 (SLTDA, 2020).

Social media's widespread integration into daily life, allowing real-time sharing of photos, videos, and opinions, has increased in popularity (Jayasinghe & Madushanka, 2021). This technological revolution has transformed communication, learning, and business practices globally. With billions of users spending an average of 2 hours and 27 minutes daily, platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube have become essential components of modern life, particularly in the tourism sector, where they facilitate strong consumer-business connections (Živković et al., 2014). Tourism organizations utilize these platforms to promote their offerings, while consumers increasingly rely on them for informed purchasing choices.

Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) encompasses online reviews and recommendations, positive or negative, accessible to a broad audience (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Its significance is evident as tourism organizations rely on E-WOM to promote accommodations, attractions, and events, leveraging its global accessibility for peer-generated product insights (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Positive E-WOM influences tourists' choices, while negative reviews can significantly decrease buying intentions (Wang, 2016).

Generation Z, born into the digital era, is active in tourism (Prensky, 2001). They are technologically native and familiar with the digital world, using various devices like laptops, smartphones, and tablets daily. Social media networks such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram are instrumental in building relationships and sharing information among Generation Z. Moreover, this generation is intensely interested in travel, constantly seeking new destinations and experiences (Monaco, 2018). The study fills a gap in the existing literature by providing theoretical insights and empirical evidence on the impact of E-WOM in the context of Sri Lanka. This study explores how social media's electronic word-of-mouth influences Generation Z's intention to purchase tourism products in Sri Lanka.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this research study involves an explanatory research design. The study employs a quantitative research approach, which involves identifying the impact of electronic word of mouth: argument quality (AQ), source credibility (SC), information quantity (IQ), perceived usefulness (PU), and purchase intention (PI) on tourists' purchase intention. The research strategy chosen for this study is a survey research strategy. This approach is well-

suited for investigating the impact of E-WOM on tourist purchasing intention. The unit of analysis in this study is the young (Generation Z) domestic tourists of Sri Lanka. The research adopts a cross-sectional study design, which involves collecting and analyzing data simultaneously. In this case, the study gathers information from a sample of young domestic tourists in Sri Lanka to understand the impact of E-WOM on purchase intention. The population for this study was people of Generation Z in Sri Lanka who are followers and active users of social media. A total of 384 people of Generation Z in Sri Lanka between the ages of 18-25 were selected as the study sample. In this study, the non-probability convenience sampling method was applied. Data was collected using an online questionnaire and analyzed using SPSS Software.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The frequency analysis results indicate that most of the sample consists of female domestic tourists, accounting for 56.3% of the participants in the age distribution. The highest percentage (74.7%) falls within the 20 to 24 years category, followed by 20.1% in the 15-19 years category. Regarding the educational level of the respondents, the majority hold a bachelor's degree (73.3%). Among the occupational categories, most respondents (52.1%) identified themselves as students, followed by 20.3% employed in the private sector, 10.9% in the government sector, and 13.3% self-employed. Regarding social media usage, most respondents (86) spend more than 20 hours per week on social media, while 14.6% spend 5-10 hours, 16.4% spend 1-5 hours, and 18.8% spend 10-15 hours. For social media preferences, the majority (62.5%) selected Facebook as their first preference, followed by 65.1% choosing YouTube as their second preference, and 72.7% selecting Instagram as their third preference. Cronbach's alpha values for the variables, including AQ, SC, IQ, PU, and PI, were 0.845, 0.892, 0.868, 0.857, and 0.887, respectively. These values indicate good internal consistency. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values for all variables were above 0.5, ranging from 0.782 to 0.863, suggesting good sampling adequacy.

The regression analysis was conducted to assess significant impacts. The study utilized tourist purchase intention as the dependent variable, and argument quality, source credibility, information quantity, and perceived usefulness are considered independent variables in the analysis.

Table 1
Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error
1	0.832 ^a	0.692	0.688	0.384

a. Predictors: (Constant), PU, AQ, SC, IQ

The R-value of the model was 0.832. That implies there is a strong association between independent and dependent variables. The adjusted R square of the model is 0.688, which reveals that the dimensions explain 68.8% of the variation of the dependent variable. According to the ANOVA table of multiple regression analysis, the probability of F statistics is highly significant ($P < 0.01$). Hence, the overall study model is statistically valid.

Table 2
ANOVA Summary

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	125.258	4	31.315	212.414	0.000 ^b
Residual	55.873	379	0.147		
Total	181.131	383			

a. Dependent Variable: PI
b. Predictors: (Constant), PU, AQ, SC, IQ

Table 3
Coefficients Summary

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	β	Std. Error	β		
(Constant)	0.285	0.144		1.987	0.048
AQ	0.041	0.044	0.042	0.935	0.350
SC	0.270	0.052	0.278	5.237	0.000
IQ	0.204	0.057	0.193	3.548	0.000
PU	0.424	0.055	0.398	7.682	0.000

The beta value represents the standardized regression coefficient, indicating the change in outcome variable for one-unit predictor change while holding other variables constant. The beta value of 0.042 and a P-value of 0.350 (>0.05) suggest that argument quality does not significantly impact purchase intention. With a beta value of 0.278 and a P-value of 0.000 (<0.05), source credibility significantly influences purchase intention. Information quantity's positive beta value of 0.193 and P-value < 0.01 (P=0.000) demonstrate its significant positive impact on purchase intention. With a beta value of 0.398 and a significance level < 0.01 (P=0.000), perceived usefulness significantly impacts purchase intention. Results show that source credibility, information quantity, and perceived usefulness positively impact Generation Z tourists' purchase intention. However, the argument is that the quality factor has little impact on tourist purchasing intention.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study aimed to assess the impact of electronic word of mouth (E-WOM) on Generation Z's domestic tourist purchase intentions in Sri Lanka. Four main E-WOM factors were identified: argument quality, source credibility, information quantity, and perceived usefulness. The research collected primary data utilizing structured questionnaires distributed to the study sample. Demographic data indicated that most respondents were female domestic tourists, primarily students aged 20-24, with an average weekly social media usage of 15 to 20 hours, predominantly on Facebook.

Regression analysis indicated that source credibility, information quantity, and perceived usefulness significantly and positively influenced purchase intention, while argument quality did not exhibit an individual impact. The study's findings are relevant to the increasing trend of social media use among travelers, providing practical implications for tourism managers, business people, and marketers. The research's significance lies in its contribution to understanding Generation Z's behavior, which is crucial for developing effective marketing

strategies tailored to this demographic. Ultimately, the study's insights can benefit the Sri Lankan tourism industry by informing strategies that target Generation Z tourists and boost revenue. In summary, the research enhances knowledge in tourism marketing, consumer behavior, and E-WOM, paving the way for more impactful marketing approaches in the Sri Lankan tourism sector.

Keywords: Electronic word of mouth, generation z tourists, social media, tourist behaviorpurchase intention

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