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“This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in **Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology** on **30 November 2022**, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1108/JHTT-11-2021-0321>.”

# **The Impact of e-WOM Source Credibility on Destination Visit Intention and Online Involvement: A Case of Chinese Tourists**

## **Abstract**

### *Purpose*

This study aims to investigate the relationships between e-WOM source credibility, perceived risk and information usefulness, and how they influence consumers' destination visit intention and online review involvement.

### *Design/methodology/approach*

A quantitative approach was taken to this study. Data was collected via an online survey from 460 participants and analyzed using a partial least squares analysis.

### *Findings*

The dimensions of e-WOM source credibility reduce travelers' perceived risk of external information sources. Homophily has the greatest influence on overcoming perceptions of uncertainty and the potential risk inherent in online reviews. Tourists tend to believe people who are similar to themselves in socially significant ways. Lower levels of perceived risk are associated with higher levels of perceived information usefulness. This in turn boosts tourists' intention to visit a destination and e-WOM involvement.

### *Practical implications*

Results offer practical implications as to how the tourism industry can exploit e-WOM as the information source that consumers frequently consult. The results are also valuable for tourism stakeholders such as DMOs, allowing them to determine what type of information positively motivates potential tourist attitude and behavior toward destination visit.

### *Originality/value*

This study is one of the first studies that examined the interaction between e-WOM credibility, perceived risk and information usefulness, and their effect on consumer behaviors in the tourism context. It also presents and discusses empirical findings from Chinese tourists.

**Keywords:** e-WOM; Source Credibility; Perceived Risk; Information Usefulness; Destination visit intention; Involvement.

## **1. Introduction**

The emergence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) significantly influences managerial practices and strategies in the tourism industry (Law et al., 2019). ICTs generate collective wisdom and have become a go-to source of knowledge for tourists for their travel decision-making (Bilgihan et al., 2016; Gonzalez et al., 2019). Due to the intangibility, high cost, and high risk associated with tourism products and services (Lin et al., 2009), tourists search abundant information from a variety of sources such as blogs, social media, discussion forums, TripAdvisor, etc. (Becken et al., 2019). Online reviews offer tourists a better way of evaluating where to go and what to do and enable them to be more involved in planning their trips (González-Rodríguez et al., 2021; Li et al., 2019; Mariani & Predvoditeleva, 2019). In the tourism industry, online reviews are seen as electronic versions of traditional WOM as they incorporate comments posted by consumers (Leon, 2019).

E-WOM refers to “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company that is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, p. 39). E-WOM is a major informational source for customers to make travel decisions. Its fast expansion and wide acceptance among consumers are due to its perceived credibility (Dedeoglu, 2019), easy access (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006) and the abundance of information offered by experienced tourists (Litvin et al., 2018), which can help to reduce the perceived risk and make an informed choice.

Tourists access e-WOM from multiple sources (e.g., social media posts, travel forums, etc.), and it can be challenging for them to examine the trustworthiness of the information they receive. Increasingly, consumers are faced with the challenge of figuring out which piece of online information is helpful and credible to better evaluate their options (Mariani

& Borghi, 2019). While more and more tourists utilize online reviews posted by other tourists in their decision making, previous studies suggest that these communication venues create opportunities for dishonest comments (Wu, 2014), such as sponsored reviews (Mayzlin et al., 2014). Such dubious information may be considered as unhelpful and confusing, which lead to less e-WOM engagement (Ali et al., 2019). Consequently, it is essential to inform practitioners on what makes e-WOM credible and useful for consumers. While tourists' willingness to use e-WOM significantly influences their purchase behavior (Prendergast et al., 2010) and online involvement (Liang et al., 2013), it is important to examine the interaction between e-WOM credibility, perceived risk and information usefulness, and their effect on consumer behaviors.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to investigate the relationships between e-WOM source credibility, perceived risk and information usefulness, and how they influence consumers' destination visit intention and online review involvement by developing and testing a comprehensive theoretical model. More specifically, this research aims to investigate the impact of e-WOM source credibility on reducing perceived risk and increasing information usefulness which both in return are expected to influence the destination visit intention. In particular, the research questions are as follows: (1) Does e-WOM source credibility influence perceived risk? (2) Does perceived risk influence information usefulness? (3) Does information usefulness influence destination visit intention and online involvement? (4) Does destination visit intention influence e-WOM involvement?

Though the role of eWOM in reducing consumers' perceived risk has been recognized in various sectors (Muda & Hsamzah, 2021; Flanagin et al., 2014), the research gap persists, as no studies have examined how perceived risk affects travelers' evaluation of eWOM, their intention to visit the destination. This study contributes to previous research by

extending the analysis of the influence of e-WOM's credibility sources on the perceived risk by including information usefulness as another key driver of behaviour intention. Furthermore, the research model is an attempt to explain not only the antecedents of destination visit intention but also future online review involvement, which has practical implications for online travel forums and other eWOM platforms in meeting the needs of their users and encouraging consumer interactions. At the same time, it has been recognised that cultural backgrounds can affect consumers' cognitive response and subsequent involvement of eWOM (Lee & Gretzel, 2014; Rui & Stefanone, 2013). While China, as the world's biggest outbound tourism market (UNWTO, 2021) with the largest online population (Johnson, 2022), has received limited academic attention regarding potential tourists' evaluation of online information and its effect on their destination visit intention and online engagement. This study is one of the first to examine the e-WOM credibility sources and the perceived risk derived from e-WOM on the tourist behaviour intention related to a tourism destination as well as future behaviour on e-WOM involvement to recommend a destination in a cultural context like China.

This paper is structured as follows. Following this introduction, we offer a literature review and the hypotheses behind the proposed research model. Next, the methodology and data collection are presented, along with detailed data analysis and a discussion of the findings. Afterwards, the research provides theoretical and managerial implications and finally, recognizes some limitations and leads future research avenues.

## **2. Literature Review**

ICTs are key factors affecting e-business capabilities (Okoli et al., 2010). The current online environment is characterized by rapid digital development built on the rapidly expanding use of computers, smartphones, and the Internet, which has led to the development and adoption of new ways of accessing, measuring and ultimately

identifying consumer behavioural trends (Yohana et al., 2020). ICT and new types of online communication tools have had a major impact on the tourism sector (Ayeh et al., 2013), triggering measurable changes in tourist behaviour (Xie et al., 2014) and tourism marketing.

In this context, many theorists and practitioners consider e-WOM to be a powerful communication tool (Jin & Phua, 2014) capable of attracting potential tourists. Therefore, destination marketing organizations pay special attention to e-WOM communication, as it allows potential tourists to share information with each other (Sen & Lehmann, 2007) and spread ideas and opinions faster than other methods (Chatterjee, 2001). Previous studies have shown that e-WOM has a measurable impact on consumers' decision-making process (Quang & Trang, 2016), purchase behaviour (Prendergast, Ko & Yuen, 2010) and online engagement (Liang et al., 2013).

Based on the aforementioned discussion the theoretical framework and hypotheses have been developed. Specifically, the foundation of this study is the well-known Stimulus-Response Theory (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Stimulus-response theory refers to the belief that behaviour manifests itself as a result of the interaction between stimulus and response, thereby no behaviour can occur without a prior stimulus of some kind (Proctor & Vu, 2006). This theory is explained in detail by the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework more recently in the tourism context (Ali & Kim, 2015). According to the S-O-R framework, environmental attributes (stimulus) bring about individuals' response through their impact on the individuals' affective and cognitive conditions (organism), such as emotion, motivation, attitude, or reasoning (Chang & Chen, 2008). In this study, "stimulus" refers to social media-based e-WOM source credibility, including expertise, objectivity, homophily and trustworthiness (Hussain et al., 2017). The "organism" refers to all processes (affective-cognitive) occurring between the "stimulus" and the

“response.” The affective condition is the feeling or emotions manifested by travelers through the perceived risk when reading e-WOM. The cognitive state of travelers refers to the mindset of information acquisition, retention, and use. The “response component” refers to tourists’ willingness to visit a destination and engagement with e-WOM.

### ***2.1. Source Credibility and Perceived Risk***

Online reviews have been found to play a key role in consumers’ decision-making process (Luca, 2016). Its importance is recognized by tourism practitioners, since the perceived quality of their intangible products is strongly affected by the comments of consumers based on their experience (Litvin et al., 2008). Such information can be accessed from multiple resources, e.g. social media or travel forums. It can be difficult for a potential tourist to determine whether the source is credible or not (Qiu et al., 2012). Source credibility refers to "the perceived trust of the recipients of information towards the source of information used" (Wu 2014, p. 13). In the context of this study, E-WOM credibility refers to the extent to which the online recommendation is perceived as reliable (Lo & Yao, 2019; Verma & Dewani, 2021). It is related to both the online platforms and the users who generated e-WOM. Current academic literature identifies the following dimensions as e-WOM source credibility: expertise, trustworthiness, objectivity and homophily (Hussain et al., 2017). Expertise includes the knowledge, belief, and experience that an individual has of what he/she writes about (Park & Lee, 2009). Trust is an important antecedent of personal behavior. This effect can be observed when consumers accept advice offered by e-WOM community members about a tourist product or destination. Trustworthiness can modify tourists’ perception through comments of any relevant tourist information, viewpoints and feelings conveyed by those comments (Fan et al., 2018). Objectivity is about the information’s impartiality, which can be affected by reviewers’ emotions and biases (Hussain et al., 2017). During the pre-visit decision-

making process, tourists look for objectivity in comments given by others. Homophily refers to individuals' tendency to connect and bond with others based on similar characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, and level of education (Rogers, 1983). Tourists tend to imitate, connect, and identify themselves with other individuals, specifically, who they perceive to be like them (Fang, 2014). It was found that homophily has a positive impact on consumers' trust of eWOM sources (Chih et al., 2020).

Source credibility may decrease consumers' perceived risk (Chen, 2017), which refers to "the subjective belief that there is some probability of suffering a loss in pursuit of a desired outcome" (Pavlou & Gefen, 2004, p. 41). In the context of this study, perceived risk refers to potential tourists' perception of possible undesirable outcomes of their trips (Tseng & Wang, 2016), ranging from disappointing visit experience to health and safety threats. High perceived risk leads to more information search from sources that are considered as reliable to reduce the uncertainty (Flanagin et al., 2014). While e-WOM is seen as independent (Yoo & Gretzel, 2008) and more trustworthy than the content provided by suppliers and marketers (Smith et al., 2005), it may not be 100% genuine, since companies can influence the reviews by offering incentives to creators of e-WOM to enhance their business (Filieri et al., 2015). As a result, consumers are increasingly suspicious of the review credibility (Filieri et al., 2018) and have to increase their effort to securitize the online comments (Yoo & Gretzel, 2008). To counter the risk involved in the pre-visit information acquisition process, tourists must judge whether the e-WOM is reliable and valid before adopting it (Moro & Rita, 2018).

Quang and Trang (2016) found that the opinions provided by trusted friends or relatives, have a greater overall effect on tourists' intentions and behaviour than any advertising, as this trust reduces perceived risk. Hussain et al.'s (2017) research on food product consumers show that among the dimensions of source credibility, expertise, objectivity,



and trustworthiness affect perceived risk negatively, while homophily has a small negative influence on perceived risk. In the context of travel planning, Balouchi et al. (2018) found that users' perceived risk is negatively influenced by trustworthiness, but not by expertise.

The following hypothesis is proposed based on the above discussions.

Hypothesis 1: There is a negative relationship between source credibility (expertise, objectivity, homophily and trustworthiness) and perceived risk.

H1a: There is a negative relationship between expertise and perceived risk.

H1b: There is a negative relationship between objectivity and perceived risk.

H1c: There is a negative relationship between homophily and perceived risk.

H1d: There is a negative relationship between trustworthiness and perceived risk.

## ***2.2 Perceived Risk and Information Usefulness***

Perceived risk plays an essential role in the personal decision-making process since as it is associated with individuals' unpleasant feelings and, thereby, with individuals' non-desirable behaviors (Cunningham, 1967). Since risk aversion is a human instinct, perceived risk influences the entire decision-making process (Mitchell, 1992). With respect to the tourism sector, transactions between the supplier and customers are commonly influenced by perceptions of the latter. Tourists seek to mitigate risk by searching for the information required to make the best travel choice. E-WOM has been recognized as a significant information source for consumers to reduce perceived risk (Zinko et al., 2019). Information usefulness is a user perception concerning the value, informativeness and helpfulness of a piece of information (McKinney et al., 2002). It was revealed in the context of food products that customers consult eWOM to reduce potential hazards, and the perceived usefulness of the eWOM rose as the perceived risk decreases (Hussain et al., 2017). In a similar vein, in the context of tourism, when potential tourists'

perceived risk associated with destination selection is reduced, the perceived value and helpfulness of the information, i.e. information usefulness, will increase. The above discussions lead to:

Hypothesis 2: There is a negative relationship between perceived risk and information usefulness.

### ***2.3 Information Usefulness and Destination visit intention***

Information obtained from tourists' engagement with eWOM leads to a reduction in psychological risk, helping tourists to make decisions (Cheung & Lee, 2012). As noted by Wu and Wang (2011), tourists who trust the comments of others have a positive attitude toward the tourist products offered by travel agents and, ultimately, are inclined to visit the tourist destination. Similarly, recommendations offered directly by friends or relatives or via e-WOM have become mitigating factors of perceived risk when making travel-related decisions (Senecal & Nantel 2004). Tourists' evaluation of information usefulness determines their levels of information adoption and, ultimately, consumer behavior (Teng et al., 2017). Hence, a third hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Information usefulness has a positive and significant influence on destination visit intention.

Regarding Hypothesis 3, it is worth noting that while useful positive information may have a positive influence on the individual's intention to visit the destination, useful negative information can have a positive influence on the individual's intention to avoid the destination.

### ***2.4 Information Usefulness and Online Review Involvement***

Useful information helps tourists overcome negative perceptions, such as uncertainty and risk, during the travel decision-making process; it can generate a solid trust relationship

between the demand and supply sides, characterized by “trust-related behaviors” such as sharing tourist information or making purchases (Pavlou & Fygenon, 2006; Lin et al., 2009). Wu (2014) revealed that information seekers are more likely to share their experiences when they establish a closer relationship with the information provider, and they ultimately turn into information providers to help other users. Similarly, Wang and Li (2019) found when tourists find the e-WOM useful, they are more likely to use e-WOM for their decision making and to generate e-WOM to help other users. Those who trust the comments from others perceive the information as useful and develop a positive attitude toward the tourist products, which then lead to higher intention to visit the tourist destination (Wu & Wang, 2011). The relationship between information usefulness and behavior intention is also supported by Quang and Trang (2016). It is argued that intention is not only about possible future action, but also reflect the amount efforts an individual is prepared to make to obtain his/her desired outcome (Dixit & Badgaiyan, 2016). As such the heightened visit intention is then expected to trigger further online information searching and sharing. Thus, our study tests both the direct influence of information usefulness on online review involvement and the indirect influence on e-WOM involvement through destination visit intention:

Hypothesis 4: Destination visit intention positively influences online review involvement.

Hypothesis 5a: Information usefulness has a positive influence on online review involvement (direct effect).

Hypothesis 5b: Information usefulness positively influences online review involvement through destination visit intention (indirect effect).

Based on the above discussions, the whole research model and the proposed hypotheses are presented in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 near here]

### **3. Methodology**

We employed a quantitative research method to test out the proposed model (Figure 1) and the research hypotheses.

#### ***3.1 Survey Instruments***

The questionnaire developed for this study had three main sections to capture information regarding the variables of e-WOM “source credibility”, “perceived risk”, “information usefulness”, “destination visit intention” and “online review involvement” We screened respondents with a qualifier question in the first section to include only travelers with online tourism review experience during the past four months.

The second part of the questionnaire assessed respondents’ perceptions of the study’s main constructs. Responses to the constructs in the study were measured on a 7-point Likert scale. The measurement items are displayed Table 2. The “e-WOM source credibility” (expertise, trustworthiness, objectivity and homophily) latent variable was measured by adopting a construct developed by Hussain et al. (2017). Four items were used to measure Expertise ( $\alpha= 0.89$ ), three items for Objectivity ( $\alpha= 0.91$ ), four items for Homophily ( $\alpha= 0.87$ ) and three for Trustworthiness ( $\alpha= 0.90$ ). “Perceived risk” was also adapted from Hussain et al. (2017) using three items ( $\alpha= 0.88$ ). “Information usefulness” was adapted from a construct developed by Bailey and Pearson (1983) and measured by three items ( $\alpha= 0.89$ ). Behavioral intention was measured by three items ( $\alpha= 0.91$ ) adapted from Dodds et al. (1991) and Chu and Lu (2007). Review involvement was measured by three items ( $\alpha= 0.888$ ) adapted from Pihlström and Brush (2008). The third section collected data on respondents’ demographic characteristics and information search behavior.

#### ***3.2 Data collection***

The questionnaire was developed in English and translated into Chinese. A pre-test was conducted with a convenience sample of 53 participants in China, the results of which served to validate the measurement instruments and inform refinement of the questionnaire in wording and readability. A purposive sampling strategy was taken to approach tourists with prior experience of using eWOM for travelling purpose. A screening question was asked at the beginning of the survey to select participants with relevant experience. WeChat, one of the most popular social media platforms in China, was used to collect data mainly due to its recognition and market domination. Assistance with data collection was sought from multiple tourism WeChat group leaders to request permission to share a link to the online survey with the group members. WeChat groups featuring domestic and overseas travel were selected to avoid a biased sample. In total, data was collected from 598 participants during March to November in 2019 and 460 questionnaires were finally used for data analysis after filtering by the screening question first and removing those answers with systematic missing values. Table 1 presents the respondents' demographic profiles.

[Insert Table 1 here]

### ***3.3 Data Analysis***

The hypotheses were tested using variance-based structural-equation modelling through a partial least squares (PLS) analysis via SmartPLS v.3.2 (Ringle et al., 2015). The study focus lies on the path coefficients, R-squared, the statistical inference of path coefficients and effect sizes (Henseler, 2018). PLS is also suitable when the model involves complex relationships between variables (direct and mediating effects) (Hair et al., 2019) as the case of present research. Furthermore, the excess of Kurtosis and Skewness of most of items included in the questionnaire are below +/-1.3, so that the items' non-normality is not an issue for the application of PLS (Hair et al., 2012).

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### ***4.1. Measurement Model***

The variables included in the proposed model were modelled as Mode A composites (correlation weights) as all indicators and dimensions represent different facets with high correlations (Becker et al., 2013). Factor loadings, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) (Hair et al., 2017) were used to test the measurement model for convergent validity. Table 2 shows that the Mode A composite indicators meet reliability requirements as the outer loadings are above 0.7. The composites meet the CR and average variance extracted (AVE) requirements, where the CR figures are above 0.7 and AVEs exceed 0.5. The magnitude and significance of the weights were also checked (Table 2). From table 2, all indicators had significant weights. Next, discriminant validity was assessed using both the Fornell-Larcker (1981) criterion and the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations. According to Fornell-Larcker criterion, discriminant validity is met, when the square root of the variance shared between the constructs and their measures (diagonal elements) are higher than the correlation between constructs (off-diagonal). Based on HTMT criterion there is a discriminant validity issue when the HTMT value is above 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015; Kline, 2011). As Table 3 shows, the diagonal elements are larger than off-diagonal elements when considering Fornell-Larcker criterion, and all the values were below HTMT 0.85 for the HTM criterion, indicating that discriminant validity is not an issue for any of the composites in the model.

[Table 2 near here]

[Table 3 near here]

### ***4.2. Structural Model***

We then analyzed the relationships in the structural model. To evaluate the significance of the path coefficients, a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples was used to generate t-statistics and 95% confidence intervals (Henseler et al., 2009). Results of structural model and hypotheses testing are presented in Table 4. As proposed, source credibility has a negative and significant effect on perceived risk ( $\beta_{\text{expertise}}=-0.258$ ,  $p<0.001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{objectivity}}=-0.273$ ,  $p<0.001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{homophily}}=-0.280$ ,  $p<0.001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{trustworthiness}}=-0.269$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Hence, hypothesis 1 is supported (H1a to H1d). Perceived risk has a significant and negative effect on information usefulness ( $\beta=-0.550$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Thus, H2 is supported. Information usefulness has a positive and significant influence on both visit intention ( $\beta=0.5746$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and eWOM involvement ( $\beta=0.426$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). So H3 and H4 are supported. A significant and a positive influence of visit intention on eWOM involvement is observed ( $\beta =0.342$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). H5a is then supported. Table 4 also reports the indirect effect of information usefulness on eWOM involvement through visit intention, as the product of the coefficients of each of the causal relations in the mediating chain (Hayes et al., 2011). The causal relations in the mediating chain are, Information Usefulness $\rightarrow$ Visit intention ( $\beta=0.5746$ ) and Visit intention $\rightarrow$ Involvement ( $\beta =0.342$ ). Based on a bootstrapping procedure with 5000 samples and one-tailed test, the indirect effect is significant and positive ( $\beta =0.576*0.342=0.197$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and therefore, H5b is supported.

[Table 4 near here]

The magnitude of the effects between all the variables and perceived risk is relevant, indicating that source credibility exerts an effect on the latter (Table 4). This implies that strong consumer confidence in e-WOM resources leads to lower perceived risk. Likewise, lower perceived risk implies a positive perception of information usefulness. Eventually, this boosts the intention to visit a destination and online review involvement.

[Table 5 near here]

Table 5 presents the cross-validated redundancy measure ( $Q^2$ ), which is suggested for examining a research model's predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2012). This model has predictive validity for the three endogenous variables, as the  $Q^2$  coefficient is positive in all three cases. The  $R^2$  values refer to the predictor variables' explanatory power for their respective constructs (Hair et al., 2017). "Source credibility" explains 67.2 percent of "perceived risk." "Perceived risk" explains 43.9 percent of "information usefulness." "Information usefulness" explains 33.1% of "Destination visit intention", and both "Information usefulness" and "Destination visit intention" explain 46.7% of online review involvement. Table 5 also reports the  $f^2$ -effect size to evaluate whether the omitted construct has a substantive impact on the endogenous construct (Hair et al., 2019). As can be observed, as a source of credibility, homophily has a major effect on the perceived risk, information usefulness is highly relevant for destination visit intention and destination visit intention is important for involvement. The other effects are considered to have medium effects (above 0.15 and below 0.35) on the respective endogenous variables. The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) was also computed as an indication of the composite factor model's fit (Henseler et al., 2016). An SRMR value of 0 would indicate a perfect fit and, generally speaking, an SRMR value of below 0.08 is recommended as adequate for PLS path models. A 0.062 SRMR was observed in this study, indicating adequate model fit.

## **5. Conclusions and Discussions**

### **5.1. Conclusions**

This study aimed to analyze the influence of e-WOM source credibility (i.e., expertise, trustworthiness, objectivity and homophily) on travelers' willingness to visit a destination and online involvement through perceived risk and information usefulness. According to study results, the dimensions of e-WOM source credibility - expertise, objectivity,



homophily and trustworthiness - reduce travelers' perceived risk of external information sources. Homophily had the greatest influence on overcoming perceptions of uncertainty inherent in online reviews. Tourists tend to believe people who are like themselves in socially significant ways. They associate and bond with similar others and trust their opinions. In addition, the relevance of perceived risk for explaining information usefulness is observed. There exists an inverse relation between perceived risk and information usefulness. Tourists with lower perceived risk tend to feel higher information usefulness from e-WOM. This in turn boosts tourists' intention to visit a destination and e-WOM involvement. The next sections provide several specific theoretical and practical implications.

### ***5.2. Theoretical Implications***

This study examines e-WOM's influence on tourists' behavioral intention. Specifically, it analyzes the influence of sources of credibility (i.e., expertise, objectivity, homophily and trustworthiness) on e-WOM, perceived risk and, by extension, on information usefulness. The influence of information usefulness on destination visit intention and online review involvement has also been analyzed. Previous studies in this area identified e-WOM's influence on consumer behavior and a firm's sales performance (e.g., Duan et al., 2008). Despite the great significance of e-WOM, to date very few research studies have investigated the drivers of e-WOM involvement (Lim & Chung, 2011). Most of this research focuses on analyzing objective data such as sales levels and numbers of posted reviews or ratings (Zhang et al., 2013). This research sheds light on how both e-WOM and certain related variables might potentially be key drivers of consumer behavior and provides some understanding of how e-WOM influences consumer behavior in the tourism context.

The findings support the theoretical notion individuals tend to believe in other people who are similar to themselves. Similar people tend to associate with and bond with one

another. This holds true in online environments. Homophily has the greatest influence on overcoming perceptions of uncertainty inherent in online reviews. Similar results were found by Leonhardt et al. (2020) that perceived homophily increases trust and consumers' reliance on user-generated product information.

In addition, the presented theoretical model provides empirical support for the view that perceived risk is positively associated with perceived information usefulness. Potential tourists with high perceived risk may search information extensively to identify useful information and rely on that source to reduce risk (Cho & Lee, 2006). This echoes the findings of Tseng and Wang (2016), which showed that perceived risk increases information adoption intention directly and indirectly via information usefulness.

This study confirms that "source credibility" contributes to reducing perceived risk. This result is in line with the previous research (Chen, 2017). It is also supported in previous studies where the four dimensions of source credibility, expertness, trustworthiness, homophily and objectivity are considered to predict consumer's perceived risk (Wu, 2014; Hussain et al. 2017) and purchase intention (Muda & Hsamzah, 2021). Wu (2014) and Hussain et al. (2017) found significant and negative effects of expertness, trustworthiness and objectivity on perceived risk. Balouchi et al. (2018) found that expertise has a significant negative effect on perceived risk, whereas trustworthiness had no significant effect on perceived risk. Unlike our study, Wu (2014) and Hussain et al. (2017) did not find a significant effect between homophily and perceived risk, although previous studies revealed that the homophily dimension is more influential in the consumer's decision-making process (Steffes & Burgee, 2009).

Additionally, we observed that e-WOM information usefulness influences tourists' online reviews involvement both directly and indirectly via destination visitor intention. A number of e-WOM motivations have been identified, including enjoyment and self-

enhancement, social benefits, reciprocity and altruism, consumer empowerment, dissonance reduction, economic incentives, and need for status (Yoo & Grezel, 2011; Yang, 2017; Yang & Mattila, 2017). Considering the direct link between information usefulness and e-WOM involvement, it is likely that users who have benefited from the online reviews try to help others out of the reciprocity or altruism motives (Yang, 2017). In addition, when information usefulness leads to stronger destination visit intention, the individual tends to seek more information about the destination via e-WOM to make more informed decisions.

Finally, the current research confirms the use of the S-O-R framework in an online environment. Consumers' choice of destinations and their decision-making is largely influenced by their sensory organs (Rajaguru, 2014). The online environment (i.e., e-WOM source credibility) influences tourists' response (i.e., online involvement and visit intention), which is mediated by the emotional state of the individual (i.e., perceived risk). Stimuli develop tourists' cognitive and emotional states, which in turn determine the behavioral responses of the approach. Our research has validated the applicability of the framework for predicting consumer responses to credible online comments.

### ***5.3. Practical Implications***

The study results offer clear practical implications as to how the tourism industry can exploit e-WOM as the information source that consumers frequently consult (Dey & Sarma, 2010). Online reviews are increasingly important for the tourism industry's understanding of consumer behavior regarding its products and services and for improving the effectiveness of marketing campaigns (López & Sicilia, 2014). Though some countries have seen slow recovery of their tourism industry, it is expected that the COVID-19 pandemic will still be perceived as a health risk by potential tourists (UNWTO, 2022). E-WOM platforms can be employed by DMOs to inform potential

tourists of the health and safety protocols and procedures to rebuild confidence. Based on the findings of this research, it is suggested that the eWOM messages should be presented in an objective manner, e.g. supported by official statistics and first-hand photos, and produced by users with relevant expertise, to be considered trustworthy and useful by potential tourists. Consequently, they can be more confident about the destination and intend to visit in the near future.

In addition, considering the effect of information usefulness on destination visit intention and online involvement, it is recommended that DMOs and tourism businesses offer incentives to encourage travelers to share their experience and knowledge about the tourism products and services. The platform should provide an easy feedback function for users to conveniently assess the usefulness of the e-WOM. On the one hand, this will enable users to identify the most helpful information. On the other hand, it gives positive reinforcement for those who generate quality content. Membership and associated reward point system can be used to encourage travellers to share useful information, with points linked to membership benefits such as tourism product vouchers.

As source credibility significantly affects perceived risk, it is important for e-WOM platforms to have mechanisms to boost the key dimensions of e-WOM source credibility, such as expertise, objectivity and trustworthiness. Homophily is found to have the greatest influence on travelers' perceived risk. Consequently, e-WOM platforms may offer incentives (e.g., extra points) for users to provide detailed profile information, such as age, gender, profession, interest, lifestyle, and profile photos so that it is easier for users to identify people who are socially similar to themselves. In addition, the user's review statistics, such as the number of reviews generated, link to these reviews, membership history and usefulness of reviews as rated by other users should be available for other

members to check, as they are indicators of his/her expertise and trustworthiness, which impact on other users' judgement of source credibility.

Our findings offer insights to understand tourists' decision-making process. The results are valuable for tourism stakeholders such as DMOs, allowing them to determine what type of information help to reduce tourists' perceived risk and increase perceived usefulness of information, which are linked to destination visit intention and further online involvement. Additionally, our research contributes a predictive behaviour model that tests the potential influence of perception variables on consumer behaviour in a tourism context.

#### ***5.4.Limitations and Future Research***

The study has some limitations that might provide directions for future research. First, due to time and financial constraints, the paper adopted a cross-sectional research design, focusing on tourists' e-WOM involvement at the pre-visit stage. Second, the sample were restricted to Chinese tourists, but people in other countries may have different attitudes towards e-WOM. Future research may adopt a longitudinal and multicultural approach to examine tourists' e-WOM involvement throughout the trip process with consideration of cultural influences. Finally, we collected data before the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. Consumer behavior changed dramatically during this time. Future research might test the model in a post COVID-19 world.

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