International Journal of Economics, Business and Innovation Research
https://e-journal.citakonsultindo.or.id/index.php/IJEBIR
E-ISSN : 2964-0865
IJEBIR

The Role of Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) in Moderating the Influence of Destination Image on Tourists' Visiting Decisions at the Bubohu Religious Village Tourism Destination

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the influence of destination image on tourists' visitation decisions regarding the Bubohu Religious Village tourist destination, as well as to analyze the role of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) in moderating this influence. The study employs a quantitative research design with a causal approach. Primary data were collected via questionnaires distributed to 100 respondents selected through purposive sampling. Data analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling - Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) with SmartPLS 4 software. Empirical findings confirm that destination image makes a positive and significant direct contribution to visitation decisions (t-statistic = 5.528 > 1.96; p-value = 0.000 < 0.05). Conversely, the interaction of the e-WOM variable did not demonstrate a significant moderating effect (t-statistic = 1.948 < 1.96; p-value = 0.051 > 0.05). These results indicate that the destination's reputation and physical/religious image serve as primary considerations for tourists, outweighing the influence of online reviews or digital discussions.

Keywords: Destination Image, Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM), Visitation Decision

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a key sector in supporting national and regional economic growth, while also serving as a reflection of a region's social and cultural identity. The success of a tourist destination is largely determined by tourists' decisions to visit; without such visits, the destination's full potential cannot yield meaningful economic or social impacts. The

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decision to visit is the result of a process of information search and evaluation that shapes tourists' perceptions of a destination. In this process, destination image is a critical factor because it reflects tourists' impressions and assessments of a destination before they decide to visit.

The rapid advancement of information and communication technology today is reshaping tourists' behavior patterns when selecting travel destinations. Decision-makers tend to rely on digital media as their primary source for pre-trip information. User-generated reviews, the sharing of visual content, and experience testimonials circulated through electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) are perceived as having a higher level of authenticity compared to official institutional promotional materials. Within this conceptual framework, if a destination's image serves as the primary foundation for initial perceptions, the presence of e- WOM has the potential to strengthen or weaken the elasticity of that image's influence on the decision to visit.

The dynamics of the interaction between these variables are worth examining in the context of religious tourism. Unlike general tourism, travelers visiting religious tourism destinations seek not only recreational experiences but also spiritual, historical, and cultural experiences, thus requiring information capable of convincing them before they embark on their journey. One religious tourism destination with these characteristics is the Bubohu Religious Village Tourism Destination in Bongo Village, Gorontalo Regency. This destination combines religious, educational, and cultural elements within a single tourist area. In addition to being known for the Walima tradition or the Kolombeng Festival, Bubohu also offers various attractions that can be enjoyed year-round. However, in tourists' perceptions, Bubohu's image remains more closely associated with the Walima Festival than as a religious tourism destination worth visiting at any time, and thus does not yet fully represent the destination's overall potential.

This situation is reflected in the tourist visitation data for the Bubohu Religious Village Tourist Destination over the past five years, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Data on Local and Foreign Tourist Visits to the Bubohu Religious Village Tourism Destination, 2021-2025

Year	Local Tourists	Foreign Tourists	Total
2021	10,374	21	10,395
2022	3,279	6	3,285
2023	2,639	10	2,649
2024	4,735	8	4,743

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2025	2,689	34	2,723
Total	**23,716**	**79**	**23,795**

Data Source: Bubohu Religious Tourism Park Management (2026)

Based on Table 1, the number of tourist visits shows significant fluctuations. The number of visits decreased from 10,395 in 2021 to 3,285 in 2022 and fell again to 2,649 in 2023. Although it increased to 4,743 in 2024, the number of visits declined again to 2,723 in 2025. These fluctuations indicate that tourists' decisions to visit have not yet stabilized. The researchers suspect that this situation is related to the fact that Bubohu's destination image has not yet been firmly and comprehensively established, as it is primarily known through the Walima Festival, while its other attractions remain largely unknown. Additionally, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) activity regarding this destination on digital media remains limited, so potential tourists have not yet obtained sufficient information to drive their decision to visit.

Previous literature reveals variations and inconsistencies in research findings (research gaps) regarding the interactive relationships among these variables. The findings of Arif and Sari (2022) suggest that e-WOM on digital platforms can significantly strengthen destination image through content visualization, which in turn boosts visitation preferences. Conversely, the study by Toffi et al. (2024) demonstrated that e-WOM does not play a significant moderating role in bridging the gap between image perceptions and visitation behavior. The contradiction in these findings calls for further empirical testing, particularly within the context of religious tourism. Based on this argument, the primary objective of this study is to analyze the direct impact of destination image on visitation decisions and to test the moderating role of e-WOM in this relationship structure in the religious village of Bubohu.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a quantitative design with a causal approach to measure the degree of direct association as well as the moderating interaction effects among constructs. The research location is focused on the Bubohu Religious Village Tourism Destination, Bongo Village, Batudaa Pantai Subdistrict, Gorontalo Regency. The target population includes all tourists who have ever made a direct visit to the study site. The sample size was determined using the Lemeshow formula with a non-probability sampling technique based on specific criteria (purposive sampling), resulting in 100 valid respondents. All collected primary data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling – Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) with SmartPLS 4 software.

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RESEARCH FINDINGS

General Profile of Respondents

The profiles of the 100 respondents were identified based on demographic characteristics and visit experience. In terms of gender, women dominated the sample population, numbering 61 (61%), while men numbered 39 (39%). This trend aligns with the findings of Namira et al. (2023), who noted that women exhibit higher levels of engagement in travel reference searches, itinerary planning, and digital travel documentation. In terms of age, the majority of respondents fell within the productive age range of 22–25 years (38 people or 38%), which, according to Siregar et al. (2022), reflects a group with a high degree of mobility and responsiveness to tourism trends. Based on occupation, the student group accounted for the largest share, comprising 33 people (33%). As for visit frequency, 43% of respondents reported having visited the destination 3 to 4 times. This confirms that the majority of the sample possesses a sufficient foundation of empirical experience to provide an objective evaluation of image attributes, e-WOM interactions, and visit decision-making

Research Model

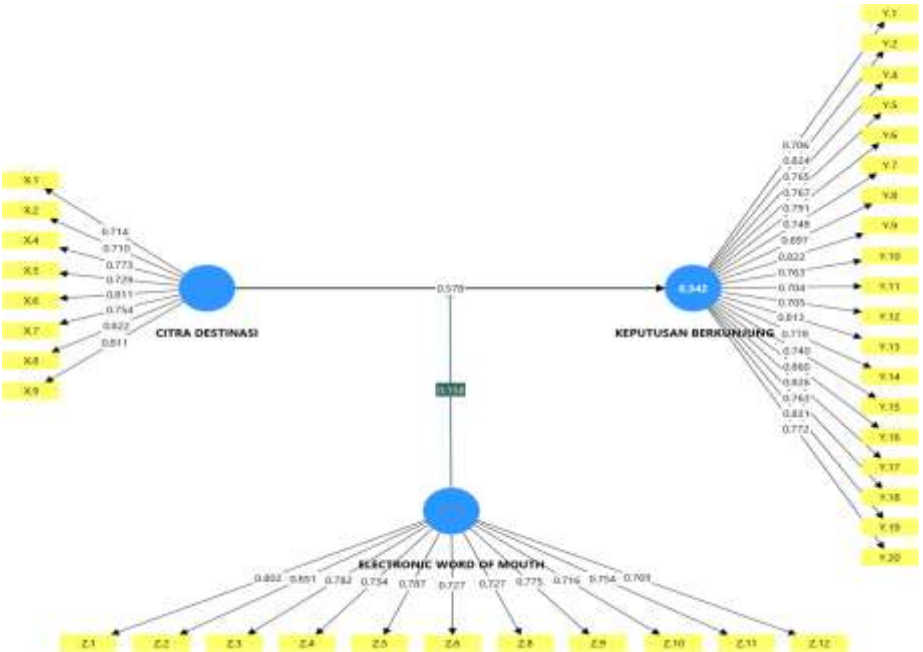


Figure 1: PLS Algorithm Research Model

Evaluation of the Measurement Model (Outer Model)

The outer model was tested to ensure the instrument met the criteria for convergent validity, discriminant validity, and construct reliability. The evaluation results

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showed that the factor loadings for all indicators were above the minimum threshold of 0.70. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for the Destination Image construct were 0.588, for Visit Decision 0.616, and for e-WOM 0.588 (all exceeding the 0.50 threshold). The instrument reliability test indicated that the Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha values for all variables were above 0.70. Thus, the measurement instrument was proven to be valid and reliable for use in further structural analysis.

Table 2 Result of Validity and Reliability Testing

Variable	AVE	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Description
Destination Image	0,588	0,899	0,919	Valid and Reliable
Decision to Visit	0,616	0,965	0,968	Valid and Reliable
Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM)	0,588	0,940	0,940	Valid and Reliable

Source: Processed Using SmartPLS (2026)

Structural Model Evaluation (Inner Model)

The inner model was evaluated using the coefficient of determination (R-square) test to determine the model's ability to explain variations in endogenous variables. The test results showed an R-square value of 0.342 for the decision to visit, with an adjusted R-square of 0.321. This value indicates that 34.2% of the variation in the decision to visit can be explained by destination image and electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), while the remaining 65.8% is influenced by factors outside the research model. Based on the criteria of Heir et al. (2021), this value is considered moderate, indicating that the model has a fairly good ability to explain tourist visit decisions

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Table 3 Coefficient of Determination (R-Square) Values

Variable	R-Square	R-Square Adjusted
Decision to Visit	0,342	0,321

Source: Processed Using SmartPLS (2026)

HYPOTHESIS TESTING

The significance of the causal relationship was evaluated using the bootstrapping procedure in SmartPLS 4. The results confirm that Destination Image makes a significant positive contribution to the Visit Decision (β = 0.578; t = 5.528; p = 0.000), thus Hypothesis 1 (H1) is empirically accepted. Conversely, testing the moderating effect of e-WOM on

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the relationship between Destination Image and Visit Decision yielded an interaction parameter (β = 0.158; t = 1.948; p = 0.051). Since the t-statistic value is below 1.96 and the p-value exceeds the 0.05 threshold, Hypothesis 2 (H2) is rejected.

Table 4 Hypothesis Test Results

Relationship Between Variables	Coefficient (β)	t-statistic	p-value	Notes
Destination Image -> Decision to Visit	0,578	5,528	0,000	**H1 Accepted**
Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) x Destination Image -> Visit Decision	0,158	1,948	0,051	**H2 Rejected**

Source: Processed Using SmartPLS 4 (2026)

DISCUSSION

The Effect of Destination Image on the Decision to Visit (H1)

The results of the statistical analysis demonstrate that perceptions of the destination's image have a direct, positive, and significant impact on tourists' decisions to visit the Bubohu Religious Village Tourist Destination, as indicated by a path coefficient of β = 0.578, a t-statistic of 5.528 (> 1.96), and a p-value of 0.000 (< 0.05). These empirical findings confirm that tourists' preferences in selecting travel destinations are highly dependent on their perceptions of the area's reputation as formed in their memories. Respondents' answers to the questionnaire indicate that these positive perceptions are supported by the cleanliness of the environment, a conducive and peaceful atmosphere, the preservation of distinctive religious tourism values, and the availability of adequate supporting facilities. The presence of iconic elements such as the Walima Emas Mosque, the coastal-hilly landscape, and the uniqueness of the local culture serve as distinguishing features that reinforce prospective visitors' positive impressions before they arrive at the location.

This study also reflects that tourists' considerations are not limited to a superficial evaluation of physical aspects alone but also encompass expectations regarding the quality of the emotional experience they will have while at the location. A strong sense of religiosity, a guaranteed sense of safety, comfortable social interactions, and the courtesy of the local community create a pleasant emotional impression, thereby strengthening tourists' internal motivation to make the visit a reality. In other words, travel decisions are not merely based on immediate recreational motivations but are driven by expectations of the added value of emotional and spiritual experiences believed to be gained in Bubohu Religious Village. This demonstrates that the establishment of a positive

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destination reputation can build initial trust among prospective visitors before they interact directly with the destination.

These field findings confirm that the dominant indicators shaping perceptions of a destination's image include the uniqueness of specific attractions, the cleanliness of the area, the availability of public facilities, a comfortable environmental atmosphere, and the reinforcement of the sacred nature of religious tourism. The holistic integration of these elements creates a highly valued perception within the cognitive structure of prospective visitors, thereby motivating them to prioritize Bubohu Religious Village as a travel destination. These research findings align with the theoretical framework of destination image proposed by Echtner and Ritchie, which posits that tourist preferences are largely determined by the interaction between cognitive attributes (facilities and the physical environment) and affective attributes (emotional impressions and spiritual tranquility). Respondents' positive evaluations of facilities, comfort, and religious uniqueness were found to reinforce the validity of this theory in explaining the decision-making process behind visitation.

The results of this study are also consistent with previous scientific findings by Andriani and Ma'rifatullaili (2022) as well as Riyadi and Nurmahdi (2022), which confirmed the positive and significant contribution of destination image to visitation decisions. However, this study in the Bubohu Religious Village possesses a distinctive contextual novelty, in which the dimensions of spirituality and the local religious climate play a central role in constructing perceptions of the area's image; thus, the appeal generated relies not merely on physical beauty but also on the depth of religious experience. Thus, the results of this study empirically prove that perceptions of destination image are the primary determinant of visitation decisions. The stronger the destination's reputation built through the excellence of its attractions, supporting facilities, cleanliness, and cultural-religious identity the greater the certainty tourists have in making their visitation decisions.

Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) Moderates the Influence of Destination Image on Visit Decisions (H2)

The moderation effect test indicates that the interaction of electronic word of mouth (e- WOM) was not found to significantly moderate the effect of destination image on tourists' visit decisions at the Bubohu Religious Village Tourist Destination. The results of the structural analysis show an interaction coefficient of $\beta = 0.158$ with a t-statistic of 1.948 (< 1.96) and a p-value of 0.051 (> 0.05). Although the parameter for the original sample is positive, the strength of this interaction is not statistically significant; therefore, the second hypothesis (H2) is formally rejected. These findings indicate that tourists' decisions to visit a location are driven more by their perception of the destination's firmly

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established image than by digital discussions or reviews circulating on social media. The questionnaire evaluation results show that respondents highly valued the physical image and religious atmosphere of the area particularly in terms of cleanliness, comfort, and the uniqueness of its attractions before seeking e-WOM references. thus, reviews on digital channels did not provide a substantial reinforcing effect (moderating effect).

Contextually, these findings indicate that prospective tourists tend to prioritize the actual conditions of the destination over claims made in reviews on digital media platforms. The unique characteristics of Bubohu Religious Village as a faith-based destination mean that the decision to visit is more heavily influenced by impressions from past experiences, face to face recommendations (conventional word of mouth) from family or relatives, and the desire to fulfill spiritual needs. Under these conditions, digital information disseminated via social media serves only as supplementary information (secondary information), not as the primary accelerator strengthening the link between destination image and the decision to visit. Furthermore, these data indicate that the weight of e-WOM review quality received by prospective visitors has not yet been fully established as a primary foundation in their travel decision-making process.

This study also confirms that the effectiveness of e-WOM as a moderator depends heavily on the destination typology and the behavioral patterns of the decision-making travelers. In the context of the Bubohu Religious Village Tourism Destination, the destination's image reputation has dominated travelers' perceptions, thereby severely limiting the scope for e-WOM to exert a moderating effect. Once perceptions of the destination's image are firmly established and positive, travelers' confidence is no longer swayed by the dynamics of online reviews. This finding aligns with the conceptual framework of e-WOM proposed by Hossain et al. (2024), which states that the effectiveness of e-WOM is determined by the dimensions of information quality, information credibility, information usefulness, and information quantity. In this case, these four digital dimensions have not yet reached a level of effectiveness capable of strengthening the influence of destination image on visitation decisions.

The results of this moderation hypothesis test are also consistent with the experimental findings of Toffi et al. (2024), which demonstrated that e-WOM does not play a significant moderating role in the relationship between destination image and visitation interest. This study confirms that tourists place greater trust in the actual conditions and factual reputation of a location than in narratives on social media. Similar findings are further supported by Haryono and Albetris (2024) as well as Widyastuti and Putri (2023), who concluded that digital information does not automatically become the primary consideration when a destination's image is already positively embedded in tourists' memories. Thus, this study demonstrates that e-WOM has not yet been able to act as a moderating variable in the relationship between destination image and visitation

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decisions in Bubohu Religious Village; e-WOM remains merely a supplementary information source rather than an amplifier of this causal relationship.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

1. Destination image has a positive and significant effect on tourists' visit decisions to the Bubohu Religious Village Tourism Destination. Therefore, the first hypothesis in this study is proven and accepted.
2. Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) does not moderate the relationship between destination image and tourists' visit decisions at the Bubohu Religious Village Tourism Destination. Therefore, the second hypothesis in this study is not supported and is rejected.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions above, the researcher offers several recommendations that are expected to be beneficial to relevant parties:

1. For tourism destination managers, it is recommended to continue maintaining and enhancing the destination's image by improving the quality of facilities, environmental cleanliness, the comfort of the tourist area, and service to tourists. Managers also need to preserve the distinctive characteristics of religious tourism, which are integrated with local culture and natural beauty, as these are the main attractions of the destination. Additionally, managers are expected to create positive travel experiences so that tourists feel satisfied and are motivated to return or recommend the destination to other tourists. Managers also need to manage social media more actively and professionally to ensure that information about the destination is effectively communicated to the general public.
2. Governments and tourism-related agencies are encouraged to provide support in the form of facilities, training programs, and guidance for destination managers. This training can cover digital marketing strategies, tourist experience management, and the optimization of online reviews and content. Government support can also take the form of incentives or awards for destinations that successfully increase visitor numbers through image enhancement and digital promotion. With this support, destination managers can more easily implement integrated strategies to sustainably enhance the destination's appeal.
3. For future researchers, it is recommended to explore additional variables that may influence visitation decisions, such as service quality, tourist satisfaction, virtual experiences, and interest in returning. Future research could employ a larger sample size and a broader geographical scope to provide a more comprehensive picture of

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tourist behavior. Additionally, future researchers may use different research methods, such as qualitative or mixed-methods approaches, to gain deeper insights into the factors influencing tourists' decisions when choosing travel destinations.

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