

# **INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT SOCIOLOGY & HUMANITIES**



**ISSN 2277 – 9809 (online)**

**ISSN 2348 - 9359 (Print)**

*An Internationally Indexed Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal*

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Published by iSaRa Solutions

## Impact of Online Reviews on Tourist Booking Behaviour: An Empirical Study

Warshi Singh\*, Dr. Jitendra Dabral<sup>2</sup>, Arpana Katiyar\*#

\*Assistant Professor, School of Business Management, CSJM University, Kanpur

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, CSJM University, Kanpur,

# Corresponding Author mail id: [arpanakatiyar1980@gmail.com](mailto:arpanakatiyar1980@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Tourism has increasingly become a digitally mediated industry, where online reviews play a pivotal role in shaping consumer booking behaviour. This study investigates the impact of online reviews on tourist decision-making, focusing on how credibility, valence, and volume of reviews influence booking intentions. Drawing upon theories of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), trust formation, and consumer psychology, the research synthesizes prior literature and empirical findings to highlight the mechanisms through which reviews affect tourists' choices. The study identifies three core objectives: (1) to examine the relationship between online review credibility and tourist booking behaviour, (2) to analyze the role of review valence (positive vs. negative) in shaping consumer perceptions, and (3) to evaluate the moderating effect of review volume on booking decisions. Using secondary data and prior empirical studies, the analysis reveals that online reviews significantly reduce perceived risk, enhance trust, and increase booking likelihood, particularly when reviews are numerous and positive. Conversely, negative reviews exert disproportionate influence, often deterring bookings despite overall positive sentiment. Findings suggest that tourists rely heavily on peer-generated content as a substitute for direct experience, making online reviews a critical determinant of travel-related consumption. The study concludes with recommendations for tourism businesses to strategically manage online reputation, encourage authentic customer feedback, and leverage review platforms to build consumer trust. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on digital tourism marketing and underscores the transformative role of online reviews in shaping tourist behaviour.

**Keywords:** Online reviews, Tourist booking behaviour, eWOM, Trust, Consumer decision-making, Tourism marketing

### Introduction

Tourism has always been a sector deeply influenced by information exchange, trust, and reputation. Traditionally, travelers relied on guidebooks, travel agents, or personal recommendations to make decisions about destinations, accommodations, and services. However, the rapid expansion of digital technologies and the proliferation of online platforms have fundamentally transformed this

process. Today, tourists increasingly depend on online reviews as a primary source of information when making booking decisions. Platforms such as TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Expedia, and Airbnb have become central hubs where millions of travelers share their experiences, opinions, and ratings. This shift has elevated the role of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) as a decisive factor in shaping tourist behaviour.

The significance of online reviews lies in their ability to reduce uncertainty and perceived risk in tourism decisions. Travel purchases are often high-involvement, intangible, and experiential in nature. Unlike tangible goods, services such as hotel stays or guided tours cannot be evaluated prior to consumption. This makes trust and credibility essential components of the decision-making process. Online reviews serve as social proof, offering reassurance to potential tourists by providing authentic accounts of prior customer experiences. Positive reviews enhance confidence and increase booking likelihood, while negative reviews can deter tourists even when overall ratings are favorable. This phenomenon reflects the psychological principle of negativity bias, where consumers give greater weight to adverse information.

Moreover, the volume of reviews plays a critical role in shaping perceptions. A large number of reviews signals reliability and reduces the likelihood of biased or manipulated feedback. Tourists often interpret volume as a proxy for popularity and trustworthiness, thereby influencing their booking intentions. Similarly, the credibility of reviews—determined by factors such as reviewer identity, detail, and consistency—affects their persuasive power. Research has shown that detailed, balanced reviews are more impactful than vague or overly promotional ones.

The rise of online reviews has also democratized tourism information. Instead of relying solely on expert opinions or marketing campaigns, tourists now have access to peer-generated content that reflects diverse perspectives. This democratization has shifted power from businesses to consumers, making reputation management a strategic priority for tourism providers. Hotels, airlines, and tour operators must actively monitor and respond to reviews to maintain trust and competitiveness.

This study seeks to empirically examine the impact of online reviews on tourist booking behaviour, focusing on credibility, valence, and volume as key determinants. By synthesizing prior literature and analyzing behavioural patterns, the research aims to provide insights into how online reviews shape consumer decision-making in tourism. Ultimately, understanding these dynamics is crucial for both scholars and practitioners seeking to navigate the digital transformation of the tourism industry.

### **Literature Review**

The literature on online reviews and tourist booking behaviour is extensive, reflecting the growing importance of digital communication in tourism. This section synthesizes prior studies into four thematic areas: Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM), Trust and Credibility, Valence of Reviews,

and Volume of Reviews. Each theme highlights how reviews influence consumer perceptions and booking behaviour.

### **Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) in Tourism**

The concept of eWOM was first articulated by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), who defined it as consumer-generated communication about products and services shared online. In tourism, eWOM has become a dominant force, replacing traditional word-of-mouth due to its scalability and accessibility. Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan (2008) emphasized that eWOM is particularly influential in tourism because travel decisions are high-risk and experiential. Tourists often rely on peer-generated reviews to reduce uncertainty about destinations and accommodations. Gretzel and Yoo (2008) found that online travel reviews significantly shape consumer perceptions of service quality and destination image, making them a critical determinant of booking behaviour.

Unlike traditional advertising, eWOM is perceived as more authentic and trustworthy. Dellarocas (2003) argued that online feedback mechanisms democratize information, allowing consumers to share experiences that influence others' decisions. This democratization has shifted power from businesses to consumers, compelling tourism providers to actively manage their online reputations.

### **Trust and Credibility in Online Reviews**

Trust is a cornerstone of tourism decision-making. Sparks and Browning (2011) demonstrated that the credibility of online reviews strongly influences hotel booking intentions. Credibility is often determined by reviewer identity, expertise, and the level of detail provided. Filieri (2015) proposed a diagnosticity-adoption framework, suggesting that reviews perceived as diagnostic (i.e., providing useful, detailed information) are more likely to be adopted by consumers. Authenticity is also critical; reviews that appear biased or promotional are often disregarded.

Studies by Ayeh, Au, and Law (2013) highlighted that tourists evaluate credibility based on reviewer characteristics, such as whether the reviewer is verified or has a history of contributions. Trust in reviews reduces perceived risk, making tourists more confident in their booking decisions. This aligns with the broader literature on consumer psychology, which emphasizes the role of trust in reducing uncertainty in high-involvement purchases.

### **Valence of Reviews (Positive vs. Negative)**

The valence of reviews—whether they are positive or negative—plays a decisive role in shaping tourist behaviour. Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) found that positive reviews increase sales, while negative reviews exert a stronger deterrent effect. This reflects the psychological principle of negativity bias, where consumers give greater weight to adverse information. Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) demonstrated that exposure to online hotel reviews significantly increases consumer consideration, but negative reviews disproportionately reduce booking likelihood.

Ye, Law, Gu, and Chen (2011) confirmed that user-generated content influences traveler behaviour, with negative reviews often outweighing positive ones in impact. This asymmetry underscores the

importance of reputation management in tourism. Businesses must not only encourage positive reviews but also address negative feedback promptly to mitigate its effects.

### **Volume of Reviews and Booking Behaviour**

The volume of reviews also moderates tourist decision-making. Zhu and Zhang (2010) found that a higher number of reviews increases perceived reliability and reduces uncertainty. Tourists interpret volume as a proxy for popularity and trustworthiness. A large dataset of reviews signals that the information is less likely to be biased or manipulated. This effect is particularly pronounced in tourism, where consumers often lack prior experience with a destination or service.

Studies by Anderson (2012) revealed that hotels with higher review volumes tend to achieve better occupancy rates, as consumers perceive them as more trustworthy. The sheer quantity of reviews provides reassurance, making tourists more confident in their booking decisions. This aligns with the concept of social proof, where individuals look to the behaviour of others to guide their own choices.

### **Tourist Behavioural Patterns**

Tourists increasingly substitute peer reviews for expert recommendations. This reflects a broader trend in consumer behaviour, where peer-generated content is perceived as more authentic and relatable than expert opinions. Research by Xiang and Gretzel (2010) highlighted that online information search is dominated by user-generated content, underscoring the centrality of reviews in tourism decision-making. This democratization of information has transformed the tourism industry, making online reviews a critical determinant of success.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. **Review Credibility:** To examine the relationship between online review credibility and tourist booking behaviour.
2. **Review Valence:** To analyze the role of positive and negative reviews in shaping consumer perceptions.
3. **Review Volume:** To evaluate the moderating effect of review volume on booking decisions.

### **Discussion**

The discussion section integrates insights from the literature review with empirical observations to critically analyze how online reviews influence tourist booking behaviour. It explores the mechanisms of influence, the psychological underpinnings, and the managerial implications for tourism businesses.

### **Online Reviews as Social Proof**

Online reviews function as a form of social proof, guiding tourists in situations of uncertainty. Tourism decisions are inherently risky because services are intangible and cannot be evaluated prior to consumption (Litvin et al., 2008). Reviews provide reassurance by offering peer-generated accounts of experiences. Gretzel and Yoo (2008) noted that tourists perceive reviews as authentic reflections of service quality, which reduces uncertainty and enhances confidence in booking decisions.

The concept of social proof is particularly relevant in tourism because travelers often lack prior experience with a destination or accommodation. Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) demonstrated that exposure to online hotel reviews significantly increases consumer consideration, underscoring the persuasive power of peer feedback.

### **Credibility and Trust Formation**

Credibility is a critical determinant of review influence. Sparks and Browning (2011) found that credible reviews strongly impact hotel booking intentions. Credibility is shaped by reviewer identity, expertise, and the level of detail provided. Filieri (2015) emphasized that diagnostic reviews—those offering specific, detailed information—are more persuasive than vague or promotional ones.

Trust formation is central to tourist decision-making. Ayeh, Au, and Law (2013) highlighted that tourists assess credibility based on reviewer characteristics, such as verification status or contribution history. This aligns with Dellarocas (2003), who argued that online feedback mechanisms democratize information but also pose challenges in ensuring authenticity.

The managerial implication is clear: tourism businesses must encourage detailed, authentic reviews to build trust. Responding to reviews also enhances credibility, as it signals transparency and accountability.

### **Valence of Reviews: The Power of Negativity**

The valence of reviews—positive versus negative—plays a decisive role in shaping tourist behaviour. Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) found that positive reviews increase sales, but negative reviews exert a stronger deterrent effect. This reflects the psychological principle of negativity bias, where consumers give greater weight to adverse information.

Ye, Law, Gu, and Chen (2011) confirmed that negative reviews disproportionately influence traveler behaviour, often deterring bookings despite overall positive sentiment. This asymmetry underscores the importance of reputation management. Businesses must not only encourage positive reviews but also address negative feedback promptly to mitigate its impact.

The disproportionate influence of negative reviews highlights the vulnerability of tourism businesses in the digital era. A single negative review can outweigh multiple positive ones, making proactive reputation management essential.

### **Volume of Reviews and Perceived Reliability**

The volume of reviews moderates tourist decision-making by signaling reliability. Zhu and Zhang (2010) found that a higher number of reviews increases perceived trustworthiness and reduces uncertainty. Tourists interpret volume as a proxy for popularity and credibility.

Anderson (2012) revealed that hotels with higher review volumes achieve better occupancy rates, as consumers perceive them as more trustworthy. The sheer quantity of reviews reassures tourists that the information is less likely to be biased or manipulated.

This finding has practical implications: businesses should actively encourage customers to leave reviews, as volume itself enhances credibility.

### **Psychological Mechanisms Underlying Review Influence**

Several psychological mechanisms explain why online reviews exert such strong influence:

- **Risk Reduction:** Tourism decisions involve high uncertainty. Reviews reduce perceived risk by providing peer-generated information (Litvin et al., 2008).
- **Trust Formation:** Credible reviews foster trust, which is essential in high-involvement purchases (Sparks & Browning, 2011).
- **Negativity Bias:** Negative reviews carry disproportionate weight, deterring bookings more strongly than positive reviews encourage them (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006).
- **Social Proof:** Tourists look to the behaviour of others to guide their own choices, interpreting review volume as a proxy for popularity (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009).

These mechanisms collectively explain why online reviews are a decisive factor in tourist booking behaviour.

## **6. Managerial Implications for Tourism Businesses**

The findings have significant implications for tourism businesses:

- **Encouraging Authentic Feedback:** Businesses should actively solicit genuine reviews to enhance credibility (Filieri, 2015).
- **Reputation Management:** Monitoring and responding to reviews builds trust and mitigates the impact of negative feedback (Sparks & Browning, 2011).
- **Leveraging Review Platforms:** Strategic use of platforms like TripAdvisor and Booking.com enhances visibility and credibility (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008).

- **Transparency:** Ensuring transparency in handling reviews avoids consumer distrust (Dellarocas, 2003).

These strategies are essential for businesses seeking to thrive in the digital tourism landscape.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

While the literature provides valuable insights, several limitations remain. Most studies focus on hotels, with less attention to other tourism services such as airlines or guided tours. Future research should explore the impact of reviews across diverse tourism sectors. Additionally, cultural differences in review interpretation warrant further investigation, as tourists from different backgrounds may perceive credibility and valence differently.

### **Analysis and Findings**

The analysis section builds upon the literature review and discussion to present empirical patterns, case examples, and synthesized findings on how online reviews shape tourist booking behaviour.

## **1. Empirical Patterns in Tourist Behaviour**

### **1.1 Credibility of Reviews**

Empirical studies consistently show that credibility is a decisive factor. Sparks and Browning (2011) demonstrated that tourists are more likely to book hotels when reviews are perceived as authentic and detailed. Filieri (2015) confirmed that diagnostic reviews—those offering specific, actionable information—are more persuasive.

Case Example: On TripAdvisor, reviews that include photographs and detailed narratives are rated as “helpful” by other users, increasing their visibility and influence. This reinforces the finding that credibility enhances adoption.

### **1.2 Valence of Reviews**

Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) found that positive reviews increase sales, but negative reviews exert stronger deterrent effects. Ye et al. (2011) confirmed this in tourism, showing that negative reviews disproportionately reduce booking likelihood.

Case Example: Booking.com’s algorithm highlights both positive and negative reviews. Hotels with even a few negative reviews often experience reduced conversion rates, despite having high average ratings. This illustrates the power of negativity bias.

### **1.3 Volume of Reviews**

Zhu and Zhang (2010) demonstrated that review volume moderates consumer trust. Anderson (2012) found that hotels with higher review volumes achieve better occupancy rates.

Case Example: Airbnb listings with hundreds of reviews are perceived as more reliable, even when individual reviews vary in sentiment. Tourists interpret volume as a proxy for popularity and trustworthiness.

## 2. Case Studies of Review Platforms

### 2.1 TripAdvisor

TripAdvisor has been a pioneer in user-generated content for tourism. Gretzel and Yoo (2008) found that TripAdvisor reviews significantly influence destination image and service perceptions. The platform's "most helpful review" feature amplifies credible content, shaping booking behaviour.

### 2.2 Booking.com

Booking.com integrates reviews directly into the booking process. Sparks and Browning (2011) noted that reviews on such platforms have stronger influence because they are contextually embedded in the decision-making process. Negative reviews on Booking.com often deter bookings, even when overall ratings are high.

### 2.3 Airbnb

Airbnb relies heavily on peer reviews to build trust between hosts and guests. Aye et al. (2013) highlighted that credibility is particularly important in peer-to-peer platforms, where trust is essential. Airbnb's double-blind review system enhances authenticity, making reviews a critical determinant of booking behaviour.

## 3. Psychological Mechanisms in Practice

- **Risk Reduction:** Tourists use reviews to reduce uncertainty about unfamiliar destinations (Litvin et al., 2008).
- **Trust Formation:** Credible reviews foster trust, which is essential in high-involvement purchases (Filieri, 2015).
- **Negativity Bias:** Negative reviews deter bookings more strongly than positive reviews encourage them (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006).
- **Social Proof:** Review volume signals popularity and reliability (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009).

These mechanisms explain why reviews are so influential in tourism.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Credibility Enhances Adoption

Authentic, detailed reviews are more persuasive. Tourists rely on credibility cues such as reviewer identity, detail, and consistency.

#### 4.2 Negative Reviews Outweigh Positive Ones

Negative reviews exert disproportionate influence, deterring bookings despite overall positive sentiment. This reflects negativity bias in consumer psychology.

#### 4.3 Review Volume Builds Trust

High review volume signals reliability and reduces uncertainty. Tourists interpret volume as a proxy for popularity and credibility.

#### 4.4 Peer Reviews Substitute Expert Opinions

Tourists increasingly rely on peer-generated content instead of expert recommendations. This democratization of information has transformed tourism decision-making.

### 5. Managerial Implications

- **Encourage Authentic Feedback:** Businesses should solicit genuine reviews to enhance credibility (Filieri, 2015).
- **Reputation Management:** Monitoring and responding to reviews builds trust and mitigates negative feedback (Sparks & Browning, 2011).
- **Leverage Review Platforms:** Strategic use of platforms enhances visibility and credibility (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008).
- **Transparency:** Ensuring transparency in handling reviews avoids consumer distrust (Dellarocas, 2003).

### Conclusion

The empirical evidence and theoretical insights presented in this study confirm that online reviews are a decisive factor in shaping tourist booking behaviour. Tourism services are intangible, high-risk, and experiential, making trust and credibility essential in consumer decision-making. Online reviews serve as a substitute for direct experience, providing peer-generated information that reduces uncertainty and enhances confidence.

Three key determinants—credibility, valence, and volume—emerge as central to understanding the impact of reviews. Credibility ensures that reviews are perceived as authentic and trustworthy, thereby fostering consumer trust. Valence highlights the disproportionate influence of negative reviews, reflecting the psychological principle of negativity bias. Volume signals reliability and popularity, reassuring tourists that the information is representative and less likely to be manipulated.

Case examples from TripAdvisor, Booking.com, and Airbnb illustrate how these mechanisms operate in practice. TripAdvisor amplifies credible reviews through its “most helpful” feature,

Booking.com integrates reviews into the booking process, and Airbnb relies on peer reviews to build trust in peer-to-peer transactions.

The findings underscore the transformative role of online reviews in tourism. They democratize information, shifting power from businesses to consumers, and making reputation management a strategic priority. Tourism providers must recognize that reviews are not merely feedback but critical determinants of success in the digital marketplace.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed for tourism businesses, policymakers, and researchers:

### **1. Encourage Authentic Feedback**

Tourism businesses should actively solicit genuine reviews from customers. Authenticity enhances credibility, which is essential for trust formation (Filieri, 2015). Strategies may include post-stay emails, incentives for feedback, and simplified review submission processes.

### **2. Reputation Management**

Businesses must monitor and respond to reviews promptly. Sparks and Browning (2011) demonstrated that managerial responses enhance credibility and mitigate the impact of negative feedback. Transparent engagement signals accountability and builds consumer trust.

### **3. Leverage Review Platforms**

Strategic use of platforms such as TripAdvisor, Booking.com, and Airbnb enhances visibility and credibility. Businesses should optimize their presence on these platforms, ensuring accurate information and active engagement with customers.

### **4. Transparency in Review Handling**

Transparency is critical to avoid consumer distrust. Dellarocas (2003) warned that manipulation of reviews undermines credibility. Businesses should adopt transparent policies for handling reviews, ensuring that both positive and negative feedback is visible.

### **5. Focus on Review Volume**

Encouraging a high volume of reviews enhances perceived reliability. Anderson (2012) found that hotels with more reviews achieve better occupancy rates. Businesses should implement strategies to increase review volume, such as loyalty programs and follow-up requests.

### **6. Address Negative Reviews Proactively**

Given the disproportionate influence of negative reviews, businesses must address them proactively. Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) highlighted the deterrent effect of negative feedback. Prompt responses, corrective actions, and transparent communication can mitigate their impact.

## 7. Cross-Cultural Sensitivity

Future strategies should consider cultural differences in review interpretation. Tourists from different backgrounds may perceive credibility and valence differently. Tailoring review management strategies to diverse cultural contexts enhances effectiveness.

## 8. Policy Implications

Policymakers should establish guidelines to ensure transparency and authenticity in online reviews. Regulations against fake reviews and mechanisms for verification can enhance consumer trust in digital platforms.

## 9. Future Research Directions

Researchers should explore the impact of reviews across diverse tourism sectors, such as airlines, guided tours, and cultural attractions. Longitudinal studies can provide insights into how review influence evolves over time.

This study concludes that online reviews are not peripheral but central to tourist booking behaviour. They reduce uncertainty, build trust, and influence perceptions of service quality. Negative reviews exert stronger effects than positive ones, while credibility and volume moderate decision-making.

For tourism businesses, the implications are profound: reputation management is no longer optional but essential. Encouraging authentic feedback, responding to reviews, leveraging platforms, and ensuring transparency are critical strategies for success. Policymakers and researchers also have roles to play in ensuring that online reviews remain credible and representative.

Ultimately, online reviews represent the democratization of tourism information. They empower consumers, reshape industry dynamics, and redefine how tourists make decisions in the digital era.

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