



# What Do They Search? Investigating the e-Word of Mouth Search Behaviour of Tourists

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**Abstract** *Online reviews and posts about the beauty, unique characteristics, culture, amenities etc. about a tourist destination can influence the travel decisions of prospective tourists. This study aims at investigating the information needs and areas of concern while finalizing a destination and their influence on the e-WOM search behaviour of prospective tourists. The survey on 1319 respondents intended at identifying the concerns and information needs of tourists along with their extent of e-WOM search behaviour before they actually finalized their destination. The analysis concludes that there is a significant positive relationship between inquisitiveness related to destination characteristics, activities and attractions at a tourist destination and the e-WOM search behaviour. A significant negative relationship is found between the inquisitiveness related to amenities and the e-WOM search behaviour. The relationship between the concern for safety and security and the e-WOM search behaviour was found to be insignificant. The results of this study can provide useful insights to tourism marketing companies about the information related concerns of prospective tourists. The tourism marketing companies can accordingly ensure the availability of relevant content over online platforms for engaging with the prospective tourists and attracting them to the destination. The present study adds to the body of knowledge in tourism literature by categorizing the inquisitiveness and concerns of the prospective tourists into four broad categories and studies their linkages with the e-WOM search behaviour of prospective tourists.*

**Keywords:** *E-WOM, Tourism Information, Online Search Behaviour, Destination Attractions, Destination Safety*

## INTRODUCTION

The increased usage of smartphone has resulted in general public taking the role of reviewers, photographers, videographers and publishers of their experiences on the digital platform (Hanratty, 2015). Prior to purchasing goods or services, customers usually resort to online reviews and since these reviews are posted based on experience by fellow consumers, they are perceived to be authentic in comparison to professionally designed communications (Bronner & de Hoog, 2016). People usually visit tourism websites before finalizing their visits (Vila et al., 2017) and the relevance of the content, quality and accuracy of information increases the destination competitiveness in attracting tourists (Pühretmair & Wöß, 2008). Tourists usually share their travel experiences on various social media platforms and such posts providing first hand information are increasingly being considered to be authentic, comprehensive and more trustworthy in comparison to various commercially oriented marketing

communication vehicles (Knott et al., 2015; Bronner & de Hoog, 2016). The sources used by tourists to access information has a considerable impact on the destination image perceived by the tourist and leads to destination choice intentions (Phau et al., 2010). Word of mouth (WOM) has emerged as the most credible source of information about a destination in comparison to advertisements, books, movies and news which are usually used for creating a destination image (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). With increased usage of technology, word of mouth has evolved from face-to-face into Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) also termed as User-Generated Content (UGC) wherein communication can be through e-mails, newsgroups, discussion forums, chatrooms, blogs (Zhu & Lai, 2009) or via social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook and recommendation websites such as TripAdvisor (Harris & Prideaux, 2017).

Increased online search behavior of tourists is evident from the 500+ million reviews for 7+ million listings on the world's largest travel website, TripAdvisor, which attracts

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more than 390 million unique monthly active users (Odgers, 2017). Yelp is another very frequently visited tourism website by more than 139 million monthly visitors for gaining information on restaurants, shopping facilities, nightlife and entertainment (Odgers, 2017; Nallapaneni, 2020). Expedia, an online travel site receives 90 million unique visitors and has approximately 1.2 billion monthly site page views (Odgers, 2017). Besides the community travel sites like TripAdvisor (Xiang et al., 2014), social media sites such as Facebook (Escobar-Rodríguez et al., 2017), Twitter (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015) and YouTube (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) have been extensively used to search for tourism related information although the popularity and preference for the media source for information has been found to vary demographically (Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2017). The amount of time spent in searching for destination information increases with the level of involvement in decision making and the level of uncertainty perceived by the prospective tourists which has been reported to positively influence the pre- and post-visit gap in cognitive image (Martín-Santana et al., 2017).

Customer experiences during vacation have been found to be sequential in nature wherein the experience quality, shapes the revisit intentions of the customers and results in a positive word of mouth (Barnes et al., 2016). People who have travelled to a particular tourist destination form the most reliable source of information for potential tourists and their positive customer feedbacks generate interest in others to visit these destinations (Nayebzadeh et al., 2017). Participation in e-WOM could be either for opinion seeking or for opinion giving (López & Sicilia, 2014). The

trustworthiness and competence of the source of e-WOM impacts the attitude and the intention to follow it by the prospective tourists (Zainal et al., 2017; Abubakar et al., 2017). It also strongly influences the subjective norms and helps reduce the risk and uncertainty when it comes to taking tourism destination decisions (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Japanese visitors for instance prefer visiting those places previously visited and recommended by other Japanese tourists (Chacko, 1996).

e-WOM offers the prospective tourists the flexibility and convenience to search for information by using their own filters to fetch specific real time and archival information related to the destination thereby assisting them in decision making (Harris & Prideaux, 2017). Convenience, quality of information, risk reduction and social reassurance have been identified as the motivators for e-WOM search behavior (Kim et al., 2011). The credibility of the source, valence and volume of information are the key indicators for determining the level of influence e-WOM has on the customer decision making (López & Sicilia, 2014). While perceived risk influences the cognitive destination image, it is the e-WOM which influences the affective image of the destination which in turn impacts the intention to visit (Hamouda & Yacoub, 2018). A knowledge about the relevance of various elements of a tourist destination and evaluation parameters based on which customers take tourism decisions, can provide useful insights to tourist organizations (Alford & Jones, 2020). The themes of previous researches related to word of mouth (both WOM and e-WOM) in tourism are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Themes of Prior Research on e-WOM in Tourism**

Theme	Author(s)
Antecedents of negative WOM communication; Negative e-WOM in hospitality and tourism	(Cheng, Lam & Hsu, 2006); (Litvin & Hoffman, 2012)
Role of family and friends vs. e-WOM in influencing travel decisions; Influence of e-WOM based on Demography; Influence of traveler types and residents on destination e-WOM	(Murphy, Mascardo, & Benckendorff, 2007); (Patterson, 2007); (Simpson & Siguaw, 2008); (Arsal, Woosnam & Baldwin, 2010)
Service quality of tour operators and their WOM publicity	(Heung, 2008)
Patterns and features of online reviews of travelers; Textual vs. visual e-WOM	(Racherla, Connolly, & Christodoulidou, 2013); (Lee & Tussyadiah, 2010)
Customer generated reviews of service quality in hospitality	(Ye, Law, & Gu, 2008); (Ong, 2012); (Browning, So & Sparks 2013); (Levy, Duan, & Boo, 2013); (Cantallops & Salvi, 2014)
Motivating factors for seeking e-WOM; Adoption and processing of online reviews; Information search behavior	(Kim, Mattila, & Baloglu, 2011); (Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011); (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004); (Hungenberg, Ouyang & Gray, 2019); (Hwang, Jani & Jeong, 2013)
Perception of destination image based on e-WOM; Destination decisions based on e-WOM and recommendations post experience	(Leung, Law, van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013); (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012); (Jalilvand, Samiei, Dini & Manzari, 2012); (Phillips, Wolfe, Hodur & Leistriz, 2013); (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012); (Black & Kelley, 2009); (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011)

A study on dimensions affecting the satisfaction level of customers in tourism identified availability of amenities,

comfort, speedy service, supportive staff and trust as the five factors influencing the customer satisfaction leading to

positive word of mouth, better reviews and repeat purchases (Mehta et al., 2010). Prior research has established that tourists visit a destination for beauty and unique characteristics of the destination (Lopez & Balabanis, 2020; Graham, 2020; Moyle et al., 2010) and for the attractions and activities at the destination (Lee et al., 2009). The tourists are concerned about their safety and security at the destination (Chingarande & Saayman, 2018; Choi et al., 2019) and the amenities at the destination (Hingtgen et al., 2016; Vinyals-Mirabent, 2019). Whether these concerns of the prospective tourists are reflected in their e-WOM search behavior forms the basis of carrying out this study. Although researchers have studied and established the role of e-WOM in influencing the visit intentions of tourists, there exists a gap in literature regarding the type of information searched by the prospective tourists. Categorizing the destination related information needs of the prospective tourists and identifying whether there exists a relationship between the need for various categories of information and the e-WOM search behavior is the area of interest of this research.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Destination Characteristics

The beauty of the destination, the architecture of a palace or historic artifacts and the weather conditions are some of the elements that are utilized to create a sensation of grandeur, an aura of prestige or a source of knowledge to attract the tourists to a destination (Lopez & Balabanis, 2020). Tourism development at world heritage sites also enhance the international reputation of the site (Su & Wall, 2011). Tourists might desire visiting destinations endowed with natural beauty (mountains, grasslands, valley, beach etc.). Tourists have been found to be interested in theme parks, museums, destinations having cultural heritage, flora and fauna, topography, natural phenomena such as northern lights of Norway, volcanoes at Costa Rica and natural sites such as Niagara Falls, Victoria Falls, Amazon Rain forest etc. (Tourism Teacher, 2020). Climatic and biogeographic characteristics such as hot springs, natural caves, volcanic activity as well as flora and fauna of the location are also reported to attract many tourists (Moyle et al., 2010). Suggestions regarding best timings for visit, the budget requirements, food, culture and political stability are some other concerns of the tourists while planning their vacations (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). Internet plays a very important role in destination marketing and is looked upon as the fundamental channel for disseminating information about the products and services available at a tourist destination (Gutierrez, 2010). Whether inquisitiveness about tourist destination influences to the e-WOM search behavior led to the following hypothesis:

*H1: Inquisitiveness about the destination characteristics strongly influences the e-WOM search behavior.*

### Amenities

Supporting infrastructure comprising of transportation and accommodation facilities serve to add to the attractiveness of a destination as a tourist spot. Although primary attributes like climate, natural resources, culture and historical architecture are important considerations for a tourist to visit a destination, the secondary attributes like hotels, catering, transportation facilities, shopping arenas, entertainment activities are also equally important to reinforce the attractiveness of a destination (Vinyals-Mirabent, 2019). The accessibility of transportation and development of modern transport related technologies have emerged as key determinants in achieving a competitive position. The air, rail, road and marine transport and the availability of car rental companies increases the attractiveness of the city for tourism. A strong connection exists between the improvement in accessibility of the tourist destination and the income generated through tourism. This has been seen more in case of international tourism as compared to domestic ones (Toth & David, 2010). The friendliness and accessibility of service personnel; the quality of food and cleanliness of location; the lodging facilities and types of amenities in room contribute towards the overall satisfaction of the tourists and motivates them to revisit or suggest the destination to family and friends (Meng et al., 2006). The variety of stores, restaurants and bars, originality of signage and facades, parking, accessibility and hospitality are some additional factors which affect the tourism destination choices of the customers (Hingtgen et al., 2016). Some other important considerations for tourists include the quality of services and the availability of facilities/amenities (Pestana et al., 2020). These in turn influence the duration of stay and the amount of money spent by tourists while visiting these destinations (Moon & Han, 2019). The accessibility of the tourist destination and the physical and cultural amenities have been found to influence repeat tourism (Dedeoğlu, 2019). The accommodation capacities of the hotels and the extent of facilities available to host conferences and events are also considered while choosing locations for business tourism (Borodako and Rudnicki, 2012). Potential tourists often enquire about tour routes, lodging facilities, suggestions for restaurants and hotels, to which, replies are posted by the tourists who have already visited the destination (Zhu & Lai, 2009). Whether inquisitiveness about amenities at tourist destination influences to the e-WOM search behavior led to the following hypothesis:

*H2: Inquisitiveness about the availability of amenities at a destination strongly influences the e-WOM search behavior.*

## Attractions and Activities

Natural resources and cultural assets serve as important factors in attracting tourists to a destination. Tourists get attracted to experience hot springs, mountainous terrains, beaches etc. so that they can engage in variety of activities like trekking, surfing, skiing and rafting. Special events like cultural festivals also play a prominent role in attracting tourists to a place (Lee et al., 2009). Sightseeing, shopping, guided tours, visiting landmarks, galleries and museums and beach activities have also been an area of interest for various tourists (Chacko, 1996). Many tourists are interested in activities such as mountain climbing, skiing, river rafting, paragliding, bungee jumping, camping etc. which are adrenalin inducing (Graham, 2020).

In case of heritage tourism, the history and culture of the place, availability of facilities and services, interpretation of the heritage value by tourists and the attractiveness of the heritage destination play a very important role in attracting tourists (Vong & Ung, 2012). Many tourist destinations are known for their cuisines which serve the basis for culinary tourism where tourists can experience other cultures via food. The goal of tourists during culinary tourism is to explore and enjoy local delicacies and gain memorable culinary experiences. Visits to food processing facilities, wineries, breweries, farmers' markets, vineyards, specialty restaurants, wine routes, gourmet trails is what excites the culinary tourist and many tourist places are positioned accordingly (Horng & Tsai, 2012). Customers today look for individualized tourism as compared to overcrowding, go for different formats of accommodation (including home stays), prefer activity based flexible holidays with more contact with nature and are also ready to experiment the local delicacies as compared to convenience food (Petrou et al., 2007). Whether inquisitiveness about attractions and activities at tourist destination influences to the e-WOM search behavior led to the following hypothesis:

*H3: Inquisitiveness about the attractions and activities at a destination strongly influences the e-WOM search behavior.*

## Safety and Security

Safety and security of travelers is crucial in shaping the revisit intentions of the tourists (Lee et al., 2009). Tourism industry gets extremely affected if there are cases of violence, crime, political instability and civil unrest being reported about the destination (Asongu et al., 2019). Many tourists used to find United States of America an unsafe tourist destination as compared to Canada and Australia (Chacko, 1996). The changing political climate in Egypt had affected the tourism industry negatively (Ibrahim, 2013). Taxi crimes in Cape Town reported in media generated negative tourism perceptions and resulted in avoidance of public transport by

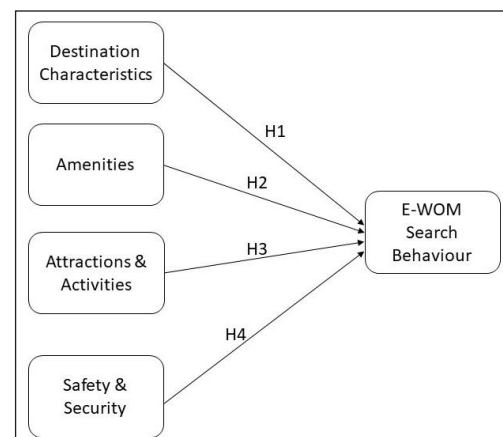
tourists (George, 2003).

Political unrest and terrorism can have serious implications on tourism as such conditions increase the anxiety level of tourists which can inhibit their selection of the destination (Choi et al., 2019). In a study carried out for 47 countries spanning from 1995 to 2013, safety and security of tourists was identified as one of the critical success factor for a tourism led growth (Chingarande & Saayman, 2018). A panel data study on 29 developed and 45 developing countries over a period of 2006-2012 using social, economic and political stability index revealed that all the stability index parameters were significant and positively related for developed nations while for the developing nations the relationship was significant but negative (Ghaderi et al., 2017). In order to develop sustainable tourism, the ethical issues related to work ethics of service providers of tourism with a high level of accountability is essential, so that tourists are given genuine and detailed information and are assured of non-fraudulent practices (Kensbock & Jennings, 2011). Tourists prefer changing their travel decisions, cancelling their bookings or even returning to their homelands when either traveling to or staying at a destination is perceived to be risky and a threat to their safety and security (Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006). Tourists usually give their opinion on the destination visited by them on social media (Hua et al., 2020). Online destination reports on breach of safety and security of tourists can adversely affect the tourist inflow (Brown, 2015). Whether the concerns about safety and security at tourist destination influences to the e-WOM search behavior led to the following hypothesis:

*H4: Concerns about the safety & security at a destination strongly influences the e-WOM search behavior.*

## CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Based on the extant literature review, the conceptual model developed for the study is depicted in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1: Conceptual Model**

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As per the published data by Indian tourism department, the number of foreign tourist arrivals to India in the year 2018 stood at 17.42 million reporting a growth rate of 5.2% over last year. Further, as per Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the country ranked 7<sup>th</sup> in the Asia Pacific region based on the number of tourism receipts in 2018 (India Tourism Statistics, 2019). Foreign tourists usually follow the golden triangle route (the name Golden Triangle is due to the triangular shape of the route) wherein they visit Delhi (the national capital), Agra (famous for Taj Mahal- one of the 7 wonders of the world) and Jaipur (famous for its vibrant culture and tradition) (Wikipedia, 2021). Uttar Pradesh where the city of Agra is located was ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> while Delhi was ranked 4<sup>th</sup> among all the states and union territories in 2019 based on the number of foreign tourist arrivals (State/Union Territory Tourism Departments, 2019). Tourism has been the largest revenue generator for the state of Rajasthan owing to its rich and varied topography, vibrant culture and festivities (ACNielsen, 2020) and the state was ranked 6<sup>th</sup> in 2019 based on the number of foreign tourist arrivals to the state (State/Union Territory Tourism Departments, 2019). The number of tourists visiting Rajasthan in 2019 comprised of 1.6 million international tourists Jaipur being the capital of the state of Rajasthan is the hub of all tourist arrivals to the state (RajRas, 2020). With this basis the study was carried out in Delhi, Agra and Jaipur which are popular tourist destinations in India attracting both domestic and international tourists.

The dimensions such as cleanliness, safety and security, presence of amenities, activities, culture etc. which have been studied in relation to tourism destinations in previous studies were considered for formulating the questionnaire for the present study. 21 statements intended to identify the dimensions valued by prospective tourists were adopted from the tourism studies carried out by (Chi & Qu, 2008; Martín-Santana et al., 2017; Alcañiz et al., 2009; Lin et al., 2007; Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2017) with minor modifications in the language of statements. Four statements on a five point likert scale ('I often read other tourists' online travel reviews to know what destinations make good impressions on others'; 'To make sure I choose the right destination, I often read other tourists' online travel reviews'; 'I often consult other tourists' online travel reviews to help choose an attractive destination'; and 'I frequently gather information from tourists' online travel reviews before I travel to a certain destination') to study e-word of mouth search behaviour were taken from the study on effect of electronic word of mouth on attitude and travel intention (Jalilvand et al., 2012).

Pilot testing was done with 25 respondents to check the errors or areas of further improvement in the questionnaire. Foreign tourists were approached for filling the survey form and they were screened by asking if it was their first visit to India. Only those tourists who were visiting India for the first time were requested to fill the questionnaire so that familiarity with the destination was factored out. Such a screening was designed to increase the possibility of online search about India as a tourist destination by the foreign tourists before their arriving at a decision to travel to India. The tourists were approached at popular sites visited by them at Delhi, Agra and Jaipur.

The arrival of international tourists to India is higher in January-March as compared to other months (India Tourism Statistics, 2019). The data collection took 3 months (December to February) and a total of 1319 complete responses were used for carrying out data analysis after discarding 51 responses which were incomplete. Data analysis was carried out using SPSS and Amos. Structural Equation Modelling Procedure (SEM) was applied to examine the relationship between the e-WOM search behaviour and the type of information searched for the destination before finalizing the destination.

## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The demographic details of the respondents are represented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Demographic Details of the Respondents**

Gender	Age	Marital Status
Males (52.5%)	Less than 20 (12%)	Married (42%)
Females (47.5%)	21-30 (32%)	Unmarried (58%)
	31-40 (24%)	
	41-50 (21%)	
	More than 50 (11%)	

## Exploratory Factor Analysis

Exploratory factor analysis was carried out for all the statements used in this study for checking the loadings of statements under different factors. The overall Cronbach's alpha value of 0.80 established the reliability of the scale. The KMO value of 0.706 established sampling adequacy while the Bartlett's test of sphericity with a significance value of 0.001 which is less than 0.05 led to the null hypothesis that "none of the variables are correlated" not being accepted. Since there is correlation indicated among the variables, the factor reduction test was conducted which resulted in four factors explaining 77.4% of the variance (refer to Table 3).

**Table 3: Total Variance Explained**

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	5.104	24.303	24.303	5.104	24.303	24.303	4.872	23.201	23.201
2	4.447	21.177	45.480	4.447	21.177	45.480	4.482	21.341	44.542
3	3.794	18.065	63.545	3.794	18.065	63.545	3.892	18.535	63.077
4	2.919	13.899	77.444	2.919	13.899	77.444	3.017	14.367	77.444
5	.890	4.238	81.682						
6	.717	3.413	85.096						
7	.536	2.554	87.650						
8	.414	1.973	89.623						
9	.355	1.691	91.314						
10	.295	1.405	92.719						
11	.261	1.242	93.960						
12	.242	1.152	95.113						
13	.216	1.027	96.139						
14	.186	.886	97.026						
15	.165	.788	97.814						
16	.146	.694	98.508						
17	.138	.656	99.164						
18	.094	.446	99.610						
19	.056	.268	99.878						
20	.024	.113	99.991						
21	.002	.009	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

The four factors extracted were Destination Characteristics, Amenities, Attractions & Activities, Safety and Security. The Eigenvalue and total variance explained by each factor is given in Table 4.

**Table 4: Statements for Constructs**

Sr. No.	Code	Statements	Eigen-Value	Total Variance
<b>Destination Characteristics</b>				
1	DC1	Before traveling I was keen to find information on cleanliness at the destination	5.104	24.303
2	DC2	Before traveling I was keen to know about the weather conditions of the destination.		
3	DC3	I was keenly interested in the ecological environment of the destination		
4	DC4	Before traveling I was inquisitive about the scenery and natural landscapes at the destination		
5	DC5	Before traveling I wanted to know the heritage value which the destination had to offer		
6	DC6	Before traveling I was keen to know about the popular tourist spots		
<b>Amenities</b>				
1	AM1	Before traveling I wanted to know about the transportation system at the destination	4.447	21.177
2	AM2	Before traveling I was keen to find out about public health service facilities at the destination.		
3	AM3	Before traveling I wanted information on telecommunication facilities at the destination		
4	AM4	Before traveling I was keen on getting updated tourism related information for the destination		
5	AM5	Before traveling I was inquisitive about the shopping facilities at the destination		
6	AM6	Before traveling I was concerned about availability of good lodging facilities		

Sr. No.	Code	Statements	Eigen-Value	Total Variance
<b>Attraction &amp; Activities</b>				
1	AA1	Before traveling I was inquisitive about recreational activities available in the destination	3.794	18.065
2	AA2	Before traveling I was inquisitive about cultures and lifestyles in a particular destination		
3	AA3	Before traveling I wanted to know the frequently visited tourist sites		
4	AA4	Before traveling I was inquisitive about festivals, concerts and events taking place in the destination		
5	AA5	Before traveling I was interested in possibilities of outdoor activities in the destination		
<b>Safety &amp; Security</b>				
1	SS1	Before traveling I was concerned about my security at the destination	2.919	13.899
2	SS2	Before traveling I was concerned about the availability of financial service facilities (e.g., ATM)		
3	SS3	I was inquisitive to know if the destination had witnessed natural disaster in the past		
4	SS4	I was concerned about the political stability at a destination.		

## Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis was further carried out to identify if the items listed under a particular factor had low weights such that their contribution to the factor was not much. All the six items i.e. DC1 to DC6 under the Destination Information factor were retained. Two items AM2 (Before traveling I was keen to find out about public health service facilities at the destination) and AM5 (Before traveling I was inquisitive about the shopping facilities at a destination) were dropped from the items explaining Amenities. Therefore, the

number of items under the factor Amenities got reduced from initial 6 to 4 post the CFA. The item number AA2 (Before traveling I was inquisitive about cultures and lifestyles in a particular destination) was dropped during the Confirmatory Factor Analysis as the same was better covered by remaining four items under the factor Attractions and Activities. All the items under the factor Safety & Security were retained post the conduct of CFA. The goodness of fit summary for each factor is mentioned in Table 5 and the CFA is depicted in Fig. 2.

**Table 5: Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results**

Indices	Destination Characteristics (DC)	Amenities (AM)	Attractions & Activities (AA)	Safety & Security (SS)	Suggested Value
Number of Statements Before CFA	6	6	5	4	
Chi-Square Value	13.871	0	7.689	.706	-
DF	8	1	2	2	-
P Value	.085	.984	.021	.702	>0.05 (Hair et al., 1998)
Chi-Square value/DF	1.734	0	3.844	.353	< 5.00 (Hair et al., 1998)
GFI	.986	1	.989	.999	>.90 (Hu and Bentler, 1999)
AGFI	.962	1	.943	.994	>.90 (Hair et al., 2006)
NFI	.993	1	.991	1	>.90 (Hu & Bentler, 1999)
CFI	.997	1	.993	1	>.90 (Daire et al., 2008)
RMSEA	.048	0	.095	0	<.08 (Hair et al., 2006)
Number of Statements After CFA	6	4	4	4	

DF: Degree of Freedom; GFI: Goodness of Fit Index; AGFI: Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index; NFI: Normed Fit Index; CFI: Comparative Fit Index; RMR: Root Mean Square Residuals; RMSEA: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation.

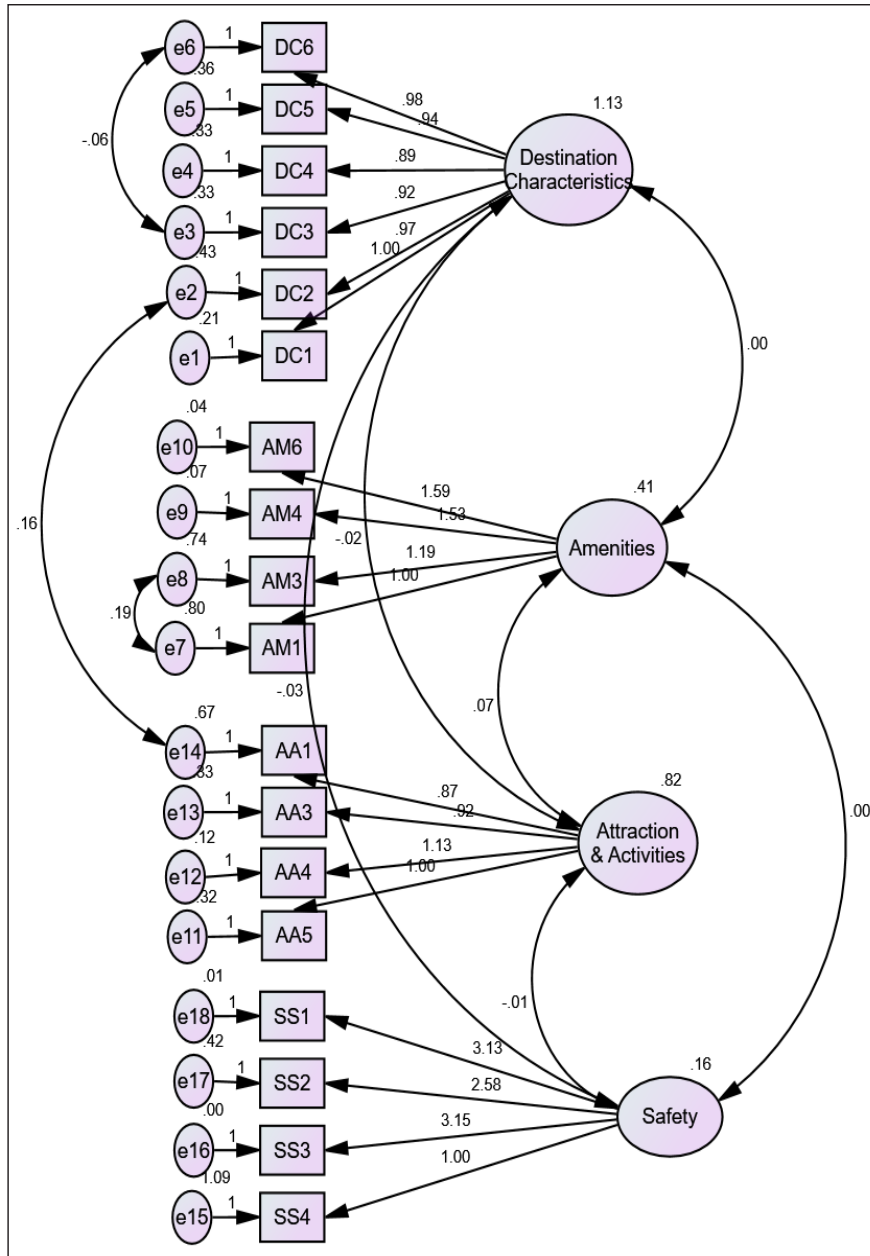


Fig. 2: Confirmatory Factor Analysis

**Measurement Model**

For the purpose of testing the model fit, the hypothesis framed are as follows:

H0: The hypothesized model has a good fit.

H1: The hypothesized model does not have a good fit.

As depicted in Table 6 the calculated P value is .673 (>.05) owing to which the null hypothesis that the model has a good fit is accepted. The Chi-Square/Degree of Freedom (DF)

value is .316 (<5) (Hair et al., 1998); the value of Goodness for Fit Index (GFI) is 1 (>.90) (Hu and Bentler, 1999); the Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI) is .994 (>.90) (Hair et al., 2006); Normed Fit Index (NFI) is .994 (>.90) (Hu and Bentler, 1999) and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) value is 1.0 (>.90) (Daire et al., 2008) all indicative towards a good fit of the model. Finally, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) value is .00 which is less than .08 (Hair et al., 2006) as per the required condition to indicate a good model fit.

**Table 6: Model Fit Summary Structural Equation Model**

Indices	Value	Suggested Value
Chi-Square Value	.316	-
DF	1	-
P Value	0.574	>0.05 (Hair et al., 1998)
Chi-Square value/DF	0.316	< 5.00 (Hair et al., 1998)
GFI	1.0	>.90 (Hu and Bentler, 1999)
AGFI	0.994	>.90 (Hair et al., 2006)
NFI	0.994	>.90 (Hu & Bentler, 1999)
CFI	1	>.90 (Daire et al., 2008)
RMR	.010	<.08 (Hair et al., 2006)
RMSEA	0	<.08 (Hair et al., 2006)

DF: Degree of Freedom; GFI: Goodness of Fit Index; AGFI: Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index; NFI: Normed Fit Index; CFI: Comparative Fit Index; RMR: Root Mean Square Residuals; RMSEA: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation.

## Validity and Reliability

In order to ascertain that the scale items are measuring the

theoretical construct, the construct validity was tested which required testing of convergent validity as well as discriminant validity (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). Convergent validity is verified through Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values which should be greater than or equal to .5 (Ahmad et al., 2016) and this condition is satisfied as depicted in calculated in Table 7. Convergent validity was also tested by observing the factor loadings. For convergent validity to be significant the item loadings should be  $\geq 0.7$  which indicates that about one-half of the item's variance (the squared loading) can be attributed to the construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and this condition too is satisfied as depicted under the factor loading range in Table 7 where the values are greater than or equal to .7 indicating towards convergent validity.

In order to achieve the construct reliability, a value of CR  $\geq 0.6$  is required (Ahmad et al., 2016). The values of .953 for Destination Characteristics, .885 for Amenities, .900 for Attraction and Activities and .897 for safety & Security are indicative of Construct Reliability. The Cronbach Alpha values of the constructs are greater than 0.7 which also indicates towards reliability.

**Table 7: Calculation of AVE and CR**

Sr. No.	Construct	Number of Items	Factor Loading Range	Cronbach's Alpha	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Construct Reliability (CR)
1	Destination Characteristics	6	0.843 - 0.930	0.951	4.632	0.953
2	Amenities	4	0.585 - 0.975	0.905	2.674	0.885
3	Attraction & Activities	4	0.694 - 0.975	0.913	2.782	0.900
4	Safety & Security	4	0.650 - 0.997	0.869	2.833	0.897

The condition for discriminant validity is that the square root of AVE for the construct should be higher than the correlation between the respective constructs (Ahmad et al., 2016). The diagonal values in bold in Table 8 are the square roots of

AVE for the constructs while other values are the correlations between the constructs. Since all the diagonal values in bold in Table 8 are higher than the values in its row and column, therefore the discriminant validity was achieved.

**Table 8: Discriminant Validity**

	Destination Characteristics	Amenities	Attractions & Activities	Safety & Security
Destination Characteristics	<b>2.152</b>			
Amenities	0.000	<b>1.635</b>		
Attractions & Activities	0.002	0.004	<b>1.668</b>	
Safety & Security	0.011	0.001	0.000	<b>1.683</b>

Hence, the results fully support the reliability and validity of the constructs used in the study. The measurement and

structural model demonstrate a good model fit, reliability, convergent and discriminant validity.

### Structural Model

Multiple regression analyses were used to test the hypothesized effects. Potential multi-collinearity concerns were checked using variance inflation factor (VIF) test. As all VIF values were below the threshold of 10 (all VIF < 1.110), suggesting that the multi-collinearity effect was not present among independent variables (Refer to Table 9).

The multiple R value obtained is .380 and the R square value obtained is .144 which indicates that 14.4% of the variance of the dependent variable is explained by the independent variables. The constant value obtained through multiple regression was 2.750. The regression equation thus framed

is as follows:

$$Y = 2.750 + 0.205X_1 - .267 X_2 + .203 X_3 - .052 X_4$$

Where Y= e-Word of Mouth

X<sub>1</sub> = Destination Information

X<sub>2</sub> = Amenities

X<sub>3</sub> = Attractions and Activities

X<sub>4</sub> = Safety & Security

Table 9 presents the results of the regression analysis and decision on hypothesis arrived upon running the Structural Equation Model.

**Table 9: Hypothesis Results**

Hypothesis	Unstandardised Coefficient (B)	S.E. of B	Standardised Coefficient Beta	T Value	P Value	VIF	Decision on Hypothesis
Constant	2.750	0.365		7.541	0.000		
e-WOM <- DC	0.205	0.05	0.215	4.130	<.001**	1.008	Supported
e-WOM <- AM	-0.267	0.059	-0.237	-4.548	<.001**	1.011	Supported
e-WOM <- AA	0.203	0.057	0.184	3.532	<.001**	1.004	Supported
e-WOM <- SS	-0.052	0.051	-0.053	-1.018	0.309	1.002	Rejected

Note:\*\* denotes significant at 1% level.

DC: Destination Characteristics; AM: Amenities;

AA: Attractions & Activities; SS: Safety & Security.

For the first hypothesis (H1) which intends to examine whether inquisitiveness about destination characteristics has a positive relationship with e-WOM search behaviour, the p-value obtained is significant (<.001) indicating that H1 is supported. The unstandardized coefficient of 0.205 for X<sub>1</sub> represents the partial effect of destination information on e-WOM search behaviour. Since the coefficient is positive, it can be interpreted that higher the inquisitiveness for destination information, higher would be the e-WOM search behaviour.

For the second hypothesis (H2) which intends to examine whether inquisitiveness about amenities has a positive relationship with e-WOM search behaviour, the p-value obtained is significant (<.001) indicating that H2 is supported. The unstandardized coefficient of -0.267 for X<sub>2</sub> represents the partial effect of inquisitiveness about amenities on e-WOM search behaviour. Since the coefficient is negative, the inverse relationship can be interpreted is that despite wanting to know about the amenities at the destination, it is not actively searched for while going through online reviews. It is also quite possible that tourists who have visited the destination do not speak too much about the amenities at

the destination and therefore an inverse relationship is being obtained.

For the third hypothesis (H3) which intends to examine whether inquisitiveness about attractions and activities has a positive relationship with e-WOM search behaviour, the p-value obtained is significant (<.001) indicating that H3 is supported. The unstandardized coefficient of 0.203 for X<sub>3</sub> represents the partial effect of inquisitiveness about attractions and activities on e-WOM search behaviour. Since the coefficient is positive, it can be interpreted that higher the inquisitiveness about attractions and activities, higher would be the e-WOM search behaviour.

For the fourth hypothesis (H4) which intends to examine whether concerns about safety and security has a positive relationship with e-WOM search behaviour, the p-value obtained is insignificant (>.05) indicating that H4 is rejected. The unstandardized coefficient of -0.052 for X<sub>4</sub> represents the partial effect of need for information about safety and security on e-WOM search behaviour although the relationship is insignificant. The fitted SEM is depicted in Figure 3.

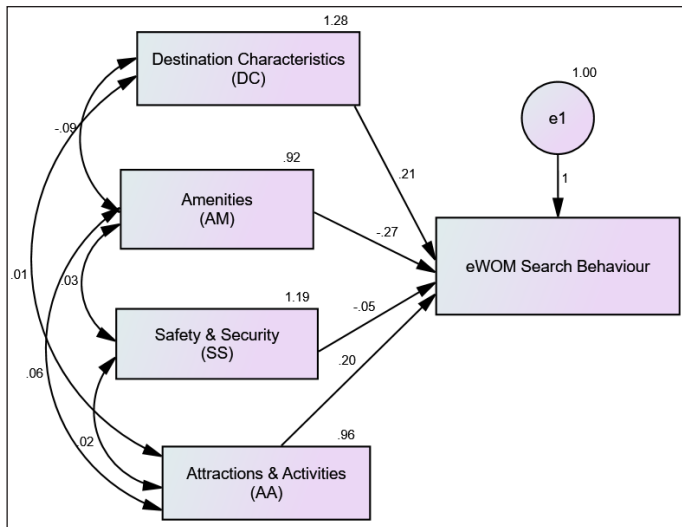


Fig. 3: SEM Fitted Model

## CONCLUSION AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study point that the information related to destination characteristics (primarily the weather, natural landscape, heritage value, climatic conditions etc.) and the attractions and activities are more important for prospective tourists in comparison to the information related to safety, security and amenities. The negative relationship between the e-WOM search behavior and information needs for amenities indicates that in order to collect information about amenities like transportation facilities, shopping avenues, lodging facilities etc. the e-WOM is not the source which is relied upon. A possible explanation could be that the reviews by the tourists who have already visited the destination might be more about the destination attraction and activities which the tourists were engaged in and less reviews might be posted related to the amenities at the destination. Information related to amenities is important for the prospective tourists but it might be missing in tourist online reviews. Despite safety and security being important for prospective tourists, its relationship with the e-WOM search behavior is not significant. A possible explanation could be that very rarely would the tourist explicitly write about safety and security at a destination unless their safety was at a threat during the visit and the prospective tourists might have other ways of finding about safety and security of a destination.

Previous studies in tourism on adoption and motivation for seeking e-WOM (Kim et al., 2011; Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011; Hwang et al., 2013; Hungenberg et al., 2019) and role played by e-WOM in formation of favorable attitudes and intention to visit the destination (Leung et al., 2013; Jalilvand et al., 2012; Phillips et al., 2013) point towards the growing importance of e-WOM in perception and image creation for

the destination (Leung et al., 2013; Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011; Black & Kelley, 2009). This study adds to the body of tourism literature by categorizing the information needs of the prospective tourists into four broad categories: a) destination characteristics, b) amenities, c) attractions and activities and d) safety and security. Although these terms are not new and have been previously reported in tourism literature, the mention of these terms have been for studies carried out on tourists at a particular destination under study and how the tourists have rated the destination on these parameters but not in relation to what prospective tourists are keen on knowing.

Besides image creation, positioning plays a very vital role in differentiating the destination from its competition on the attributes that are meaningful to the customers. Successful positioning of a tourist destination requires recognizing the market place, the competition and the perception of tourists (Lopez & Balabanis, 2020). It is the quality perception of the destination which significantly influences the satisfaction and ultimately the behavioral intentions of the tourists (Nair et al., 2015). The present study supports the previous studies on importance of e-WOM and adds to the body of knowledge in terms of the search behavior of prospective tourists. Although tourists do give online reviews about the hospitality and service quality of hotels where they have stayed during their visit to the destination (Ye et al., 2008; Ong, 2012; Browning et al., 2013; Cantalops & Salvi, 2014; Levy et al., 2013), there might be limited online reviews about amenities such as transportation facilities, banking facilities, shopping arenas etc.

In order to attract customers, destination marketers including the players of the hospitality sector at the destination need to actively engage with the customers over online platforms. More focus via e-WOM should be on elaborating about the key differentiators of the destination, the attractions, activities, amenities and safety of the tourists. Since these parameters are important for decision making, more information for prospective tourists will help attract them to the destination. Organizations related to tourism can encourage tourists to give reviews about the amenities available at the destination which can further assist the prospective tourists to finalize their tourism destination.

## LIMITATION AND SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study aimed to understand the e-WOM search behavior of the prospective tourists. The study supported that the inquisitiveness about destination characteristics, attractions and activities influences the e-WOM search behavior of the prospective tourists. However, the concerns about safety & security and amenities at a destination did not positively

influence the e-WOM search behavior. The probable reason could be that such information is not abundantly discussed via e-WOM. This analysis is purely based on the responses received from the tourists and future studies can do content analysis of tourist reviews to identify the dimensions of information/experiences shared by tourists who have already visited a destination. Destination familiarity might also impact the e-WOM search behavior which has not been studied for this research. A study on influence of destination familiarity on the e-WOM search behavior could also be carried out in future studies. Finally, this study focused on e-WOM search behavior and did not take into consideration the influence of tour and travel agents or family and friends. A comparative study for all these influencers can also be a scope for future study.

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