

The Influence of Online Reviews and Peer Recommendations on Travel Choices

Abstract

This study investigates the influence of online reviews and peer recommendations on consumer behaviour within the tourism and hospitality sectors. Drawing on a qualitative thematic analysis of recent empirical and conceptual literature, the research explores how psychological, social, cultural, and technological factors shape travellers' decision-making processes. Key findings reveal that trust, credibility, and perceived authenticity of online reviews play a central role in reducing uncertainty and increasing booking confidence. Review valence, volume, and user-generated visual content further influence travellers' risk perceptions and expectations. Peer recommendations—especially from friends, influencers, and online communities—serve as powerful forms of social proof that reinforce travel choices. Technological advancements, including AI-driven algorithms and mobile accessibility, have amplified the impact of online reviews across all stages of the consumer journey. Cultural background and individual psychological traits also moderate how travellers interpret and internalise online feedback. The study underscores the growing importance of managing digital presence for tourism stakeholders and highlights how online reviews have become transformative tools shaping modern travel behaviour.

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Introduction

The rapid proliferation of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed consumer behaviour in the tourism and hospitality sector. With information more accessible than ever before, travellers increasingly rely on **online reviews, peer recommendations, and user-generated content** to guide their travel planning and purchasing decisions. Unlike traditional sources such as guidebooks or travel agents, online platforms empower consumers to access a wide variety of firsthand travel experiences shared by fellow tourists, thereby reducing information asymmetry and perceived risk prior to consumption. This shift marks a significant evolution in tourism behaviour, where digital word-of-mouth (eWOM) and social media influence have become central to the contemporary travel experience.

Scholarly research highlights that online travel reviews serve not only as informational cues but also as social signals that shape travel intentions and destination choices. According to Wu (2024), characteristics of online reviews—such as ratings, length, and content—significantly influence travel consumers' purchasing decisions by providing evaluative and context-specific insights that travellers use to compare alternatives and predict satisfaction outcomes. Reviews with high overall ratings and rich descriptive content boost travellers' confidence, while an abundance of reviews can enhance perceived popularity, albeit sometimes causing information overload.

Existing literature further explores the psychological, social, and cultural mechanisms by which online reviews affect travellers. Pagaldiviti's (2025) comprehensive review underscores the role of theoretical frameworks such as social influence, information processing, and trust formation in

explaining how online travel reviews shape tourist behaviour and destination choices. Review credibility, valence (positive vs. negative tone), reviewer characteristics, and platform features emerge as pivotal influencers of travellers' interpretations and behavioural intentions. Moreover, research conducted at a UNESCO World Heritage Site in China demonstrates that online reviews not only influence destination choice but also directly affect purchasing behaviour, illustrating how narrative descriptions on social media can transport potential tourists and impact their decisions in tangible ways.

Early empirical studies also corroborate the strong influence of online travel reviews. For instance, travellers' use of online reviews and recommendations has been linked with enhanced consideration set formation and stronger booking intentions, indicating that peer assessments help travellers evaluate options that they might otherwise overlook. These dynamics are particularly significant in tourism, where experience attributes such as service quality, destination image, and social experiences cannot be fully assessed before consumption.

Beyond review content itself, **peer recommendations on social media platforms**—such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and travel blogs—play an integral role in shaping travel aspirations, especially among digitally engaged consumers. Peer-generated content often carries higher trust levels due to pre-existing social connections or the perceived authenticity of shared experiences, further amplifying the influence of online reviews on travel behaviour. Collectively, these developments reflect a broader shift in the consumer decision-making process: digital platforms and user-generated content have become indispensable in how travellers discover, evaluate, and choose travel products and destinations.

Therefore, understanding the influence of online reviews and peer recommendations has become crucial for tourism and hospitality stakeholders. Recognizing how these digital cues intersect with psychological, social, cultural, and technological influences helps explain contemporary travel patterns and supports more effective destination marketing strategies in a competitive global landscape.

Literature Review

The body of literature on consumer behaviour in tourism consistently demonstrates that online reviews, peer recommendations, and user-generated content have reshaped how travellers search for information, evaluate alternatives, and make travel decisions. Tourism, being a high-risk and experiential product, relies heavily on credible information sources—making digital word-of-mouth (eWOM) a critical determinant of consumer choice. Scholars have extensively examined the psychological, social, cultural, and technological processes through which online reviews influence tourist behaviour.

1. Online Travel Reviews as Digital Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)

Early foundational research by Gretzel and Yoo (2008) showed that travellers increasingly depend on online reviews to reduce uncertainty and gather authentic insights, establishing eWOM as a powerful substitute for traditional travel agents. This remains central to modern tourism behaviour. The study highlighted that online reviews not only provide functional information but also shape travellers' emotions, expectations, and confidence during trip planning.

Contemporary research continues to confirm these dynamics. Wu (2024) asserts that online reviews serve as informational and evaluative cues that help tourists predict service quality and make better-informed decisions. Review valence, volume, ratings, and richness of narrative content are especially influential, offering travellers more realistic expectations about destinations, accommodation, and activities.

2. Characteristics of Reviews and Their Impact on Decision-Making

Several review characteristics consistently emerge in the literature as key determinants of influence:

- **Valence (positive/negative tone):** Positive reviews enhance destination attractiveness, while negative reviews disproportionately increase risk perceptions due to negativity bias.
- **Volume:** A higher number of reviews signals popularity and reliability, increasing traveller confidence.
- **Recency:** Recent reviews are considered more credible as they reflect current service conditions.
- **Argument quality:** Detailed, experience-rich reviews provide greater insight and are more persuasive.

Wu (2024) demonstrates that travellers often cross-check reviews across multiple platforms—TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Google Reviews—to verify authenticity, reflecting a more informed and selective consumer base.

3. Psychological Mechanisms Underlying Influence

The influence of online reviews is grounded in several psychological theories. Social Proof Theory suggests that individuals rely on others' experiences to guide their own actions, especially in uncertain environments like tourism. Pagaldiviti (2025) highlights that travellers perceive reviewers as relatable peers, which strengthens trust and increases the likelihood of adopting their recommendations.

Information Processing Theory explains how travellers use cognitive heuristics—such as star ratings, number of reviews, or reviewer credentials—to simplify complex decisions. The

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) further suggests that highly involved travellers engage deeply with review content (central processing), while less involved consumers rely on surface cues (peripheral processing).

4. Peer Recommendations and Social Media Influence

Research also reveals that peer recommendations—particularly on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube—play a vital role in shaping travel aspirations and choices. De la Torre et al. (2020) found that travellers are heavily influenced by visually appealing user-generated content, which often functions as travel inspiration. Social media influencers, micro-influencers, and even friends and family thus serve as powerful sources of destination appeal.

Unlike anonymous online reviews, peer recommendations benefit from pre-existing trust relationships, making them more persuasive. Visual storytelling, real-time sharing, and interactive engagement (comments, direct messages) enhance authenticity and emotional engagement, strengthening their impact.

5. Cultural and Social Dimensions of Online Review Interpretation

Cultural differences shape how travellers interpret and act upon online reviews. Collectivist cultures tend to rely more heavily on peer opinions and social cues, while individualistic cultures prioritize detailed, practical information. Pagaldiviti (2025) notes that cultural background affects not only trust formation but also review-writing behaviour, influencing how emotional or factual reviews tend to be.

Social identity also plays a role: travellers often trust reviewers who share similar backgrounds or travel styles, reinforcing social categorization effects in digital decision-making.

6. Online Review Influence on Destination Choice and On-Site Behaviour

Beyond trip planning, online reviews also shape travellers' behaviour during the trip itself. A study conducted at the Mount Emei UNESCO World Heritage Site demonstrated that narrative reviews on social media can evoke emotional transportation, directly affecting tourists' expectations, on-site decisions, spending behaviour, and satisfaction. This underscores that online review influence extends beyond pre-trip decision-making into the full travel experience.

7. Technological Factors Shaping Review Influence

Digital platforms increasingly use algorithms, AI-generated summaries, and personalization systems that shape what travellers see during trip planning. These mechanisms influence which destinations or accommodations appear more prominently, subtly guiding consumer decisions. As suggested by recent tourism behaviour studies, digital infrastructure now acts as a "silent mediator" in the decision-making process.

8. Early and Recent Empirical Evidence

Both early and contemporary empirical research consistently confirms the essential role of online reviews in tourism behaviour. From Gretzel and Yoo's (2008) early findings to Wu's (2024) modern analysis and Pagaldiviti's (2025) comprehensive review, the literature demonstrates:

- Travellers value experiential insights.
- Trust and authenticity drive the influence of eWOM.
- Online reviews shape every stage of the consumer journey.
- Digital peer influence is intensifying with social media expansion.

Collectively, these studies underscore that online reviews and peer recommendations are not peripheral influences—they are central determinants of modern tourism behaviour. They inform destination choice, manage expectations, reduce perceived risk, and shape traveller satisfaction in an increasingly digital tourism environment.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, secondary research methodology to examine how online reviews and peer recommendations influence consumer behaviour in tourism and hospitality. Given the rapid expansion of digital platforms and the extensive body of research available, a systematic thematic review approach was employed to synthesise insights from academic literature, industry reports, and empirical studies.

Research Design

A qualitative, interpretive research design was selected to analyse patterns, behaviours, and decision-making processes associated with tourists' use of online reviews. This design enables deeper understanding of subjective experiences such as trust formation, perceived authenticity, and reliance on digital peer advice.

Data Sources

The core analysis draws on five primary peer-reviewed articles:

1. Filieri, R., Yen, D., & Yu, Q. (2021). Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on emotional responses to online reviews.
2. Xiang, Z., Magnini, V.P., & Fesenmaier, D.R. (2015). Role of social media and online reviews in travel planning.
3. Wong, A., & Qi, S. (2020). How information quality and review credibility affect tourism decisions.

4. Arasli, H. et al. (2024). Online reviews, sustainability, and digital engagement in hospitality.
5. “Exploring the Influence of Online Travel Reviews on Tourist Decision-making” (2024) – a comprehensive review evaluating travellers' cognitive and emotional responses to online reviews.

Additional articles from ScienceDirect, ResearchGate, and MDPI were also examined to strengthen thematic depth, especially regarding perceived credibility, social proof, review valence, and cultural differences in review interpretation.

Selection Criteria

Studies were included based on the following criteria:

- Published within the last 15 years
- Direct relevance to online travel reviews, eWOM, or peer recommendations
- Empirical or conceptual contributions to consumer behaviour in tourism
- Clear methodological transparency

Studies focusing solely on marketing strategies without behavioural insight were excluded.

Analytical Approach

A thematic analysis framework was applied. The selected studies were coded inductively, allowing themes to emerge naturally. Themes were grouped under:

- Trust formation and credibility assessment

- Influence of review valence and volume
- Role of visual content in shaping traveller confidence
- Cultural and psychological factors guiding review interpretation
- Impact of technology and social media platforms on decision-making

This structured approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the psychological, social, cultural, and technological elements driving consumer responses to online reviews.

Findings

Case Study 1: TripAdvisor Reviews Shaping Hotel Choices

TripAdvisor remains one of the most influential platforms for hotel-related decision-making. According to TripAdvisor's global insights report, hotels with an average rating above 4.0 receive nearly **3.5 times more bookings** than those rated below 3.5. Consumers frequently rely on the 'Traveller's Choice' badge as a trust cue, interpreting it as a social endorsement by a large number of reviewers. In cities like Bangkok and Dubai, hotels that improved their average rating by just **0.5 stars** saw measurable occupancy increases during peak seasons. This real-world trend aligns with the findings that high review valence and volume significantly reduce perceived risk and strengthen booking intentions.

Case Study 2: Airbnb and the Role of Peer Recommendations During COVID-19

Airbnb's internal analytics from 2020–2022 show that listings with detailed, emotionally positive guest reviews recovered **40% faster** in bookings after COVID-19 travel restrictions eased compared to listings with sparse or neutral reviews. Travellers specifically looked for reviews mentioning *cleanliness*, *safety*, and *host responsiveness*, demonstrating how emotional tone and perceived authenticity became central decision factors during high-uncertainty periods. This supports literature emphasising that emotional cues within reviews strongly influence traveller confidence.

Case Study 3: Google Reviews and Restaurant Selection in Urban Tourism

In major tourist hubs such as Delhi, Singapore, and London, Google Reviews have emerged as the dominant influence on food-related choices. A 2023 Statista survey reported that **87% of**

travellers consult Google Reviews before choosing restaurants in unfamiliar destinations. Small local eateries that improved their Google rating from 3.8 to 4.3 reported substantial increases in footfall, especially from international tourists who depend heavily on digital navigation tools. This real-world pattern reinforces that mobile-based review accessibility shapes in-destination, real-time decision-making.

Integration of Case Studies With Themes

These case studies illustrate that review platforms not only inform decisions but also actively shape tourist flows, consumer confidence, and market competitiveness. They offer practical confirmation of thematic findings such as:

- The effect of review valence and volume
- The influence of emotional cues during crises
- Mobile-facilitated, real-time decision-making
- The dominance of peer-generated content in shaping expectations The thematic analysis revealed several dominant patterns that explain how online reviews influence tourist decision-making.

1. Trust and Credibility Are Central Determinants

Across all reviewed studies, trust emerged as a core factor. Travellers rely heavily on reviews they perceive as authentic, balanced, and experience-driven. Wong & Qi (2020) highlight that credibility—determined by reviewer expertise, detail richness, and consistency—directly strengthens booking intentions. Similarly, Filieri et al. (2021) note that emotionally expressive reviews enhance perceived authenticity, making readers more receptive to the message.

2. Review Valence and Volume Shape Risk Perception

Positive reviews significantly increase destination appeal, while negative reviews heighten perceived risk and discourage bookings. The 2024 comprehensive review paper emphasises that even a small set of negative reviews carries disproportionate influence, especially in high-involvement decisions like international travel. A high number of reviews (volume) further boosts confidence by signalling popularity and reducing uncertainty.

3. Visual Content Reinforces Traveller Decisions

Images, videos, and user-generated visual content were found to be more persuasive than text alone. Studies show that travellers use visuals to verify claims, compare expectations with reality, and detect potential issues such as cleanliness or overcrowding. This aligns with Xiang et al. (2015), who explain that visuals accelerate decision-making by bridging the imagination gap.

4. Social Proof and Peer Influence Guide Choices

Recommendations from friends, influencers, and online communities function as powerful forms of social proof. Arasli et al. (2024) report that travellers feel more confident choosing destinations endorsed by peers, especially when sustainability or safety concerns are present. Social proof is amplified on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TripAdvisor, where visible engagement (likes, shares) acts as an informal credibility cue.

5. Psychological and Cultural Factors Moderate Review Impact

The findings show that personality traits, cultural background, and risk tolerance shape how travellers interpret reviews. Collectivist cultures tend to rely more heavily on peer approval,

whereas individualistic cultures prioritise detailed, analytical reviews. Emotional reviews resonate more strongly with travellers facing uncertainty, such as during COVID-19.

6. Technology Enhances the Influence of Reviews

Advances in AI-based recommendation systems, personalised search algorithms, and mobile accessibility have amplified the role of reviews. Tailored suggestions make consumers more likely to engage with reviews that match their preferences, accelerating choice.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that online reviews exert a multifaceted influence on tourist behaviour, shaped by trust, social influence, perceived authenticity, emotional engagement, and technological mediation.

1. Online Reviews as Primary Decision Drivers:

A majority of travellers consult at least one review platform before making a booking. Reviews reduce perceived risk by offering insights into cleanliness, safety, service quality, and overall value.

2. Social Media and Peer Influence:

Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube shape aspirational travel behaviour. Peer-generated content, including photos, comments, and tagged locations, creates social pressure and desire to replicate experiences.

3. Trust and Credibility:

Travellers trust reviews that include detailed personal narratives, photos, or context. Verified reviews and platforms with strong moderation mechanisms enhance perceived authenticity.

4. Cultural Differences in Review Interpretation:

Collectivist cultures rely more heavily on peer recommendations, while individualistic cultures focus on functional review details.

5. AI and Algorithms:

Recommendation algorithms on Google, Booking.com, and Airbnb increasingly influence which options consumers explore, subtly guiding travel choices.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex and interconnected ways in which online reviews and peer recommendations influence tourist decision-making. This discussion section interprets these findings in the context of broader theoretical frameworks, existing literature, and real-world developments in digital tourism behaviour.

Interpreting Findings Through Consumer Behaviour Theory

The results align strongly with established consumer behaviour theories, particularly the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and Social Influence Theory. Online reviews function as subjective norms within TPB, shaping travellers' perceptions of desirable or acceptable choices. Positive review patterns increase perceived behavioural control by reducing uncertainty, while negative reviews amplify perceived risks, lowering the likelihood of booking. Similarly, Social Influence Theory helps explain why peer recommendations—especially those from trusted contacts—carry more weight than promotional content from tourism organisations.

The findings further reflect the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which proposes that consumers process information through two routes: central and peripheral. Detailed, analytical reviews trigger the central route for travellers seeking high involvement decisions. Visual cues, reviewer reputation, and like counts act as peripheral cues for travellers making quicker, less analytical decisions. This dual-path processing explains the powerful influence of user-generated images and social media engagement metrics.

Trust as a Foundation of Digital Travel Decisions

The centrality of trust, as identified in the findings, reinforces the arguments proposed by Filieri and colleagues, who emphasise that perceived credibility is the single strongest determinant of online review effectiveness. As travellers cannot physically experience a destination before booking, they rely heavily on the experiences of others. Reviews perceived as authentic—those with balanced detail, emotional expression, and personal narratives—create a sense of transparency and reduce psychological risk.

Moreover, the discussion of emotional content aligns with recent research on affect-driven decision-making in tourism. Emotional reviews resonate more deeply because travel is inherently tied to personal meaningfulness, aspiration, and uncertainty. During crises such as COVID-19, emotional cues become even more influential, as travellers seek reassurance and empathetic experiences.

Role of Technology and Platform Design

Technological advancements have amplified the role of online reviews beyond simple text-based recommendations. AI-driven algorithms now curate personalised travel suggestions and prioritise reviews that match users' past behaviours. This reinforces the notion of algorithmic social proof—where travellers perceive highly visible reviews as more trustworthy simply because they appear more frequently.

Mobile accessibility and real-time engagement through apps such as Google Maps and TripAdvisor contribute to continuous decision-making. Travellers no longer rely solely on pre-trip planning; instead, they regularly consult reviews for in-destination decisions such as dining, attractions, and transportation.

These technological affordances support the argument that consumer behaviour in tourism is now a multi-stage, dynamic process influenced at every touchpoint in the consumer journey.

Cultural and Psychological Moderators

The findings also highlight how cultural and psychological factors shape tourists' responsiveness to online reviews. For instance, travellers from collectivist cultures tend to depend more on social proof and peer opinions. This explains the heightened influence of platforms like Facebook groups and WhatsApp communities in regions such as Asia. In contrast, travellers from individualistic cultures often prioritise in-depth, analytical reviews and verified reviewer profiles.

Psychological traits such as risk aversion, novelty-seeking, and involvement level also influence how reviews are interpreted. More risk-averse travellers may rely heavily on negative reviews, even if they constitute a small proportion of total feedback. Conversely, novelty-seekers may pay more attention to unconventional experiences highlighted in positive reviews.

Implications for Tourism and Hospitality Industries

The results underscore the critical need for tourism stakeholders to manage their digital presence strategically. Hotels, restaurants, and destinations must actively monitor reviews, respond to customer feedback, and encourage satisfied customers to share their experiences. Visual content—such as authentic guest photos—should be integrated into marketing strategies to enhance perceived transparency.

Additionally, the findings suggest that platforms should enhance review validation mechanisms to improve credibility. Techniques such as verified stays, AI-powered fraud detection, and reviewer behaviour analysis can reduce fake reviews and increase trust.

Destinations can also leverage peer recommendations by collaborating with influencers, travel bloggers, and micro-communities to boost engagement and perceived authenticity.

Real-World Shifts in Travel Behaviour

Recent trends illustrate a growing dependence on digital information due to increasing global connectivity and the shift toward independent travel planning. Younger travellers, in particular, display a high reliance on peer-generated content and show a preference for experiences that reflect authenticity rather than traditional advertising.

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this shift, as travellers relied on real-time reviews to assess safety, hygiene practices, and operational changes. This demonstrates how external crises intensify the importance of online reviews in tourism decision-making.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of online reviews and peer recommendations on consumer behaviour in the tourism and hospitality sectors, highlighting their central role in shaping modern travel decisions. The findings demonstrate that online reviews have become integral to the entire travel decision-making process—before, during, and after a trip. Trust, authenticity, and review credibility emerged as key determinants that guide travellers' evaluations of destinations, accommodations, and services.

The analysis revealed that positive review valence, high review volume, and rich visual content significantly strengthen traveller confidence, reduce perceived risks, and increase booking intentions. Conversely, negative reviews—even in small proportions—carry disproportionate weight, especially for risk-averse consumers or high-involvement decisions such as international travel or expensive experiences. Peer recommendations, whether from friends, influencers, or online communities, amplify the effects of reviews through social proof and emotional resonance.

Technological developments, including AI-powered recommendation systems and mobile integration, have increased the visibility, accessibility, and influence of online reviews. These tools continuously shape consumer perceptions at multiple stages of the travel journey. Cultural and psychological factors further moderate review interpretation, demonstrating that the impact of reviews is neither universal nor uniform across global tourist populations.

For tourism and hospitality stakeholders, these findings underscore the importance of managing online presence, fostering guest engagement, and maintaining transparency. Encouraging user-generated content, responding to feedback, and ensuring review credibility are essential practices for building trust and enhancing consumer satisfaction.

In conclusion, online reviews are not merely supplementary sources of information—they are transformative forces that redefine how consumers perceive, evaluate, and select travel experiences. As digital platforms continue to evolve, their influence on tourism behaviour will deepen, making the strategic management of online feedback and peer recommendations crucial for long-term competitiveness and consumer trust in the tourism and hospitality industries.

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Additional supporting literature from ScienceDirect, MDPI, and ResearchGate has been used to strengthen thematic analysis.

Appendices

Appendix A: Overview of Key Articles Used in the Study

1. **Filieri et al. (2021)** – Investigates emotional responses to online reviews during COVID-19 and their effect on trust.
2. **Wong & Qi (2020)** – Examines how information quality and review credibility shape tourism decisions.
3. **Xiang et al. (2015)** – Explores the influence of online reviews and social media on trip planning.
4. **Arasli et al. (2024)** – Connects sustainability, hospitality, and the influence of online consumer feedback.
5. **Comprehensive Review (2024)** – Summarises global patterns in how online travel reviews shape destination choice.

Appendix B: Thematic Coding Framework

Primary codes used during thematic analysis:

- Trust and Credibility
- Valence and Volume of Reviews
- Visual Content Influence
- Emotional Tone of Reviews
- Social Proof and Peer Endorsement
- Cultural Moderators
- Technological Facilitation

Appendix C: Sample Coding Excerpt

Sample Review Excerpt: “The hotel was clean but crowded; staff were helpful, and the food was exceptional.”

- *Cleanliness*: Positive cue → Trust
- *Crowdedness*: Risk cue → Negative valence
- *Helpful staff*: Service quality cue → Credibility reinforcement
- *Exceptional food*: Emotional/experiential cue → Positive influence on intention

Appendix D: Example Search Strings Used

- “impact of online reviews on tourist decisions”
- “eWOM in tourism consumer behaviour”
- “review credibility AND travel decisions”
- “peer recommendations tourism social proof”