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E-WOM AND HERITAGE TOURISM IMAGE FORMATION: YOUNG TOURISTS' PERCEPTIONS OF BANGLADESHI WORLD HERITAGE SITES

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Abstract: This study examines the implications and formation of a heritage destination image through e-WOM (Electronic Word-of-Mouth) among young Bangladeshi visitors, with a specific emphasis on UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The research adopts a quantitative methodology. This study is based on the Goal-Directed Behavior Model (GDBM) by collecting data from 400 respondents. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was utilized to examine the hypothesized relationships among the constructs. The model exhibited high predictive validity, and e-WOM significantly influenced cognitive image (β = .552), affective image (β = .493), and desire (β = .615). The heritage image and travel intention were also revealed as major mediators of tourist behavior for young Bangladeshi visitors to the World Heritage Sites. The results indicate that e-WOM significantly enhances both cognitive and affective perceptions of a destination, thereby strengthening its perceived heritage image. Psychological constructs such as emotion, attitude, and desire influence the connections between e-WOM and the desire to travel. The study extends the GDBM to incorporate e-WOMs and heritage images, and thus contributes to the existing literature. The insights offer pragmatic suggestions for location managers and marketers to entice tech-savvy young tourists by employing techniques that highlight positive online evaluations and emotional interaction.

Keywords: destination image formation; e-WOM; world heritage sites; travel intention; Goal-Directed Behavior Model

1. Introduction

Digital referrals have become increasingly influential in shaping travel decisions. It is an extremely important factor in tourism image creation by offering authentic, trustworthy, and fast-distributed user-generated insights that impact potential travelers' perceptions and decisions (González-Rodríguez et al., 2022). Kietzmann and Canhoto (2013) defined Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) as online user-generated content. User-generated social media material influences visitor enjoyment and pre-travel decisions by providing trustworthy information and recommendations from friends and family (Narangajavana Kaosiri et al., 2019). Tourism boosts economic growth and cultural exchange, whereas heritage tourism preserves identities. Peer-driven online interactions build the destination's image, and e-WOM strongly influences young tourists' decisions (Mascheroni et al., 2015).

Facebook, Instagram, and X allow clients to provide personal testimonies, while travel destination evaluations and ratings can impact a larger audience (Litvin et al., 2018).

The term "young tourists" refers to individuals aged 17 to 30, aligning with both the sample demographic distribution in this study and the national youth definition used in Bangladesh. Despite being studied insufficiently, e-WOM affects young Bangladeshi visitors' views and actions (Hossain et al., 2024). The limited exploration of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral factors related to e-WOM-driven decision-making hampers effective heritage tourism marketing in resource-constrained countries such as Bangladesh.

Heritage tourism is visiting historical, cultural, or architectural sites to learn about history and preserve it, according to Adongo et al. (2017). Tourism and history are well-connected at UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The diverse cultural heritage of Bangladesh, including the Sundarbans, the Buddhist Viharas, and the Historic Mosques of Bagerhat, makes it a fascinating place to study these dynamics (Rahaman et al., 2010). Despite its expanding power, little is known about how e-WOM influences tourist behavior and historic sites, such as Bangladesh's World Historic Sites. Most research ignores e-WOM and employs generic destination image models. Bangladesh's World Heritage Sites attract tourists from around the world with their fascinating blend of history, culture, and nature (Khalid & Chowdhury, 2018). Due to the country's failed historical tourism promotion, it has fewer visitors than Sri Lanka, the Maldives, India, and Bhutan (Sarker et al., 2018). Online channels let Bangladeshi historical tourism reach more people while keeping its authenticity (Hasan & Jobaid, 2014).

Tourism contributes to the preservation of historical heritage and supports sustainable development, particularly in EU regions that emphasize both growth and conservation (Ursache, 2015). Heritage sites, tourism, and destination management have positive and negative effects, making sustainability a priority. Heritage tourism is difficult owing to visitor preferences and organizational complexity, although sustainable development can be of help (Ashworth, 2000). The Belvedere Memorandum in the Netherlands broadened heritage and encouraged public engagement by combining urban planning with historical protection (Janssen et al., 2012). Empirical studies have demonstrated that tourists' perceptions of a destination's image significantly influence their travel intentions and behavioral outcomes (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Stylos et al., 2016; Ursache, 2015). These researchers typically point to word-of-mouth (WOM), media narratives, and cultural storytelling as influencing factors of the image. However, the literature on topics related to digital and user-generated content, specifically e-WOM, is relatively new (Pencarelli, 2020; Tran et al., 2015). Moreover, limited research has explored the influence of e-WOM on perceptions and behaviors related to heritage tourism, particularly within developing countries such as Bangladesh (Hossain et al., 2024; Pandey & Sahu, 2020).

The study demonstrates the effect of e-WOM on youth tourists' impressions of Bangladesh's World Heritage Sites and tourism image. E-WOM improves cognitive and emotional destination pictures, boosting heritage image. Through psychological categories like emotion, desire, and attitude, it cascades into travel intentions and tourist behavior.

Addressing a notable gap in tourism behavior models, this study broadens the Goal-Directed Behavior Model (GDBM) by integrating e-WOM and heritage image in the era of digital tourism. Targeting young Bangladeshi tourists, the study intends to understand the underlying issues of the online reviews and emotional attachment for the influence on the

destination decision. Such insights would inform marketers and planners to develop a more experiential digital communication strategy in their heritage promotion.

2. Literature review

2.1. E-WOM

Since Web 2.0 allows customers to communicate their product and service experiences internationally, e-WOM has become more significant (Shuvo & Islam, 2024). Positive or negative online e-WOM can be conveyed by current or previous users (Ahmed et al., 2024). Due to its quick spread, Shuvo and Islam (2024) said that e-WOM is stronger than traditional word-of-mouth. Abubakar and Ilkan (2016) found that e-WOM affects psychological outcomes before product or service purchases. After consumption, e-WOM affects the way consumers react to the comments of others (Filieri & McLeay, 2014). E-WOM is an essential tourism industry source of information since it affects travel intentions, destination selection, destination image, and purchase decisions (Hossain et al., 2024). Authentic, peer-generated information from social media chats and online reviews helps travelers choose destinations and activities. Genuine online customer reviews increase a destination's reputation and perceived attraction to prospective passengers, creating a strong image (Shuvo & Islam, 2024). Litvin et al. (2018) found that e-WOM matters for tourist marketing and impacts passengers' historical or cultural site visits. Millions of travelers read internet reviews before booking, according to Tripadvisor.com (2011). E-WOM is more recent, trustworthy, and real-life than agency-provided material, which affects heritage visitors' pleasure and loyalty (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). The following hypothesis can be set:

- H_6: e-WOM positively influences tourist behavior.

2.2. Cognitive image

Tourists' perceptions of destinations are shaped by their experiences and knowledge (Lee et al., 2011). Tourists make their final selection based on the image (Levin, 2006). The knowledge, ideas, and facts about a tourist site build its cognitive image (Patuelli et al., 2016). In González-Rodríguez et al. (2022), e-WOM provided trustworthy insights that shaped the cognitive picture. Sarker et al. (2018) believe that e-WOM improves cognitive image and reduces uncertainty, making the location more desirable. According to Schiffman and Kanuk (2004), image and perception represent the ability to organize and analyze information in order to form a clear picture of the world, which influences a person's opinions and decisions. Schiffman and Kanuk (2004) state that image and perception represent the capacity to organize and analyze information to produce a clear picture of the world influence on a person's opinions and decisions. In tourism, location image affects tourists' perceptions and decisions (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). For a long time, heritage tourism has been a prominent and common kind of tourism (Sarıışık & Özbay, 2012). Tourism is driven by historical appreciation (Chen & Chen, 2010). Traditional tourism is losing popularity as people seek authentic historical experiences (Yankholmes & Akyeampong, 2010). Accordingly, it is proposed that the following hypothesis be true:

- H_1: The cognitive image is positively impacted by e-WOM marketing.

2.3. Affective image

Destination images are classified into two categories: affective and cognitive (Pan et al., 2007). Stylos et al. (2016) showed that both affective and cognitive images represent personal feelings and thoughts about a destination, and they together create the heritage image construct. Previous studies by Filieri and McLeay (2014) and Litvin et al. (2018) showed that positive online reviews significantly impact both affective and cognitive image formation. The combination of psychological and art theory concepts enhances images such as human faces and color that play key roles based on emotional content and abstract concepts, putting classification into challenges (Jalilvand & Heidari, 2017). Papadimitriou et al. (2015) revealed that affective image significantly impacts the destination's overall image, and over 80% of the variance in the overall image affects revisit intentions and recommends the tourist destination. The hypothesis can be set that:

- H_2: e-WOM positively influences affective image.

2.4. Desire

The GDBM asserts that people do not always control their activities (Davis et al., 1989). Thus, Ajzen (2015) noted that emotions and attitudes predict behavioral intention differently among TRA fields. Tourism research must still include behavioral intention research. Desire is the intention to accomplish something (Ifinedo, 2012). The GDBM includes desire (Armitage & Christian, 2003). A positive review boosts emotional connections, contentment, and heritage destination revisit intentions and recommendations (Mehmood et al., 2018). Hossain et al. (2018) found that visitors' perceptions impact their behavior and preferences in Bangladesh. According to Japutra et al. (2019), desire is a belief about the difficulty or ease of doing. It is feasible to formulate the following hypothesis:

- H_3: e-WOM positively influences desire.

2.5. Emotion

The GDBM includes emotions. Emotions mirror normative views (Davis et al., 1989). Behavior is positively influenced by emotions. Research suggests that visitors with greater emotions are more likely to prefer Bangladeshi tourist destinations (Hassan & Shahnewaz, 2014). This includes historical tourism. E-WOM alters social expectations, travel decisions, and emotions (Huete-Alcocer et al., 2019). Since people conform to expectations of others, subjective standards positively affect travel intentions (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015). It can be hypothesized that:

- H_4: e-WOM positively influences emotions.
- H_{10}: Emotions positively impacts travel intention.

2.6. Attitudes

Attitudes are behavioral, emotional, and cognitive, according to Page et al. (2014). Tourist attitude predicts Bangladeshi tourism destination behavior well, according to Ghosh et al. (2018). Thus, a tourist's mentality might alter their exterior conduct (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015). Youth from Bangladesh who read internet word-of-mouth or reviews choose heritage places based on their attitude. E-WOM alters tourists' views of destination services and improves attitudes. Positive internet reviews increase passengers' attitudes about a place,

according to Chiu and Cho (2022). According to Flavián et al. (2006), online review credibility influences destination perception. According to Chiu and Cho's (2022) GDBM, positive attitudes improve travel behavior. Ajzen (2015) found that visitors with favorable attitudes are more likely to travel and suggest locations, indicating a strong relationship between attitude and travel intentions. The following can be hypothesized:

- H_5: e-WOM positively influences attitudes.
- H_{11}: Attitude positively influences travel intention.

2.7. Heritage image

For decades, the historic and tourism industries have profited from each other (Long, 2020). The supply side of heritage and the role heritage tourism plays in economic development tend to dominate studies on the demand side (Rowan & Baram, 2004). Heritage tourism has gained political, state, and federal attention for its benefits (Jamal & Kim, 2005). Communities are strengthened and united by teaching residents and tourists about indigenous history and practices (Hausmann, 2007). Heritage image is greatly influenced by tourists' cognitive images of a site (Adongo et al., 2017). Garrod and Fyall (2000) and World Tourism Organization (2007) said that heritage tourism in underdeveloped countries helps reduce poverty and boost identity. This is shown by the growing number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. A heritage destination's perspective is heavily influenced by tourists' emotions (Huete-Alcocer et al., 2019). Heritage places create continuity, purpose, civic values, and pride, while also promoting liveliness (Sarıışık & Özbay, 2012). It can be hypothesized that:

- H_7: Cognitive image positively impacts heritage image.
- H_8: Affective image positively impacts heritage image.
- H_{12}: Heritage image positively impacts tourist behavior.

2.8. Tourist behavior

Poria et al. (2004) listed three key reasons for visiting historic sites: to immerse oneself in a new age or region, to develop one's thinking, and to teach others or young tourists. According to Chiu and Cho's (2022), GDBM intentions influence behavior, especially travel-related behavior. Lam et al. (2024) found that high wants increase travel. Travel intention directly affects active tourist behavior, according to Ajzen (2015). Thus, the following hypothesis is formed:

- H_{13}: Travel intention positively influences tourist behavior.

2.9. Tourist intention

Tourism research emphasizes travel intention, which represents tourists' intentions. Chiu and Cho (2022) state that intention is a key aspect in assuming behavior, especially in the GDBM. Travel intention, the desire, or plan to visit a location, is impacted by attitudes, emotions, desire, and destination image (Litvin et al., 2018). Positive reviews of a place and e-WOM have a big influence on travel intentions. Positivity, subjective norms, and behavioral control affect Bangladeshi tourists' travel inclinations to various locations, including heritage sites (Hossain et al. 2018). For young tourists planning travels, social media and internet reviews influence travel intention (Litvin et al., 2018). The chosen hypothesis is:

- H_9: Desire positively impacts travel intention.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The study utilizes a systematic quantitative approach through the implementation of a self-administered survey. A sample size of 400 valid replies was established according to Krejcie and Morgan's criteria (1970), with participants randomly selected to guarantee representativeness (Chuan & Penyelidikan, 2006). Data were gathered using a questionnaire that encompasses demographics and essential categories such as e-WOM, destination image, heritage image, emotion, desire, behaviors, and tourist behavior, assessed through five-point Likert scale (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012). The methodology, grounded on GDBM, evaluates the cascade impacts of e-WOM on psychological variables and tourist behavior. Ethical protocols provide informed consent, anonymity, and secrecy (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The main focus of this study revolves around young Bangladeshi tourists, which restricts the broader relevance of its findings. Moreover, while the authors made every effort to remain objective, the possibility of bias cannot be entirely ruled out.

3.2. Data collection, measurement, and analysis

This study used a survey method, conducted both in person and online. A pilot test with 60 participants was carried out to check the clarity and reliability of the questionnaire, leading to some necessary adjustments. From July 20 to September 1, 2024, 440 responses were collected, and after screening for incomplete entries, 400 valid responses were used in the final analysis.

Table 1. Demographic and socio-economic characteristics

Attributes	N
Gender	
Male	204
Female	196
Age	
17–20	152
21–23	67
24–26	78
27–30	103
Marital status	
Married	118
Unmarried	282
Education level of the respondent	
Higher school certificate	169
Undergraduate	84
Graduate	54
Postgraduate	93
Annual tours and travel cost (in BDT)	
2,000–5,000	154
5,001–10,000	95
10,00–15,000	48
15,000+	103

Note. BDT (Bangladeshi Taka); Exchange rate: 1 BDT ≈ .0091 USD or .0083 EUR

The questionnaire was separated into two parts. The first one collected socio-demographic data and the second assessed the opinions regarding several constructs of the participants with several items. All the items were rated on a five-point Likert scale. The feedback from the pilot test helped refine the wording and structure of the questions to improve understanding. For data analysis, a quantitative approach was applied to examine how e-WOM influences perceptions of heritage tourism. This method allowed the study to test relationships between variables with statistical rigor and draw insights from a broad sample of young tourists (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020). Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed in the research to examine the causal relations among the constructs (Deb et al., 2024), while Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was preferred, as it can manage large data sets and is predictive in nature (Dash & Paul, 2021). Data were analyzed with SPSS 27 and SmartPLS 4. The model is an extension of the GDBM through incorporation of some important constructs like the e-WOM and heritage image.

Table 1 presents a detailed summary of respondents' demographics and travel spending. Gender distribution is nearly even, with 51% male and 49% female. Most respondents (38%) are aged 17–20, followed by 25.8% aged 26–30, 19.5% aged 24–26, and 16.8% aged 21–23. A majority (70.5%) are unmarried. In terms of education, 42.3% have completed high school, 21% are undergraduates, 13.5% are graduates, and 23.3% hold postgraduate degrees. Regarding annual travel expenses, 38.5% spend 2,000–5,000 BDT, 23.8% spend 5,001–10,000 BDT, 12% spend 10,001–15,000 BDT, and 25.8% spend over 15,000 BDT.

3.3. Conceptual framework

The study evaluates the conceptual model and path relation using PLS-SEM. Marketers, tourist managers, and strategic planners employ PLS-SEM (structural equation modeling) (Hair et al., 2012). PLS-SEM is more open and yields similar findings (Dash & Paul, 2021). For these advantages, the article assessed the conceptual framework using PLS-SEM.

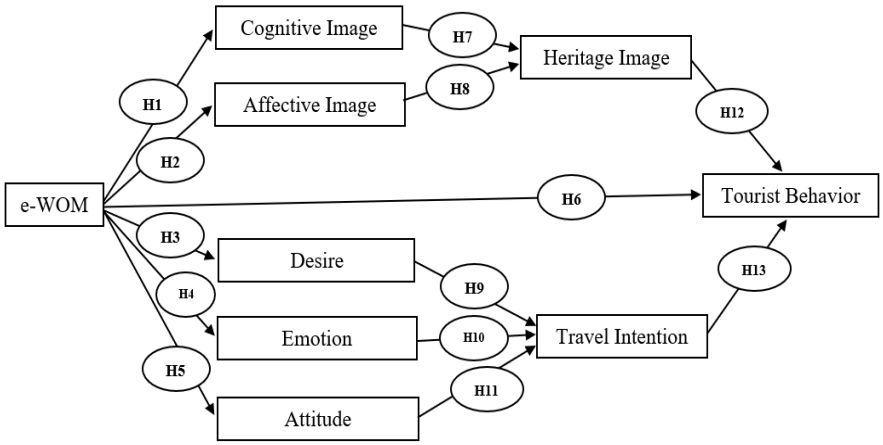

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Path diagram

The structural model demonstrates robust predictive capability for young visitors' motivation to engage in heritage tourism sites and shows how e-WOM shapes heritage images in Bangladesh in Figure 2. Path coefficients ranging from β = .357 to β = .615 indicate a significant influence of e-WOM on multiple dimensions of tourist decision-making, affecting the whole ecosystem, as per Jalilvand and Heidari (2017). According to Soliman (2019), e-WOM greatly influences cognitive and emotional images, with affective pictures having a somewhat stronger impact on heritage image development. Ahmed and Shuvo (2024) found that emotional linkages shape perceptions more than facts. E-WOM cascades on attitude, emotion, and desire affect travel intention and tourist behavior, mirroring Winarta et al. (2017). Tourist behavior is frequently explained more by indirect influences like family and friend recommendations (Soliman, 2019).

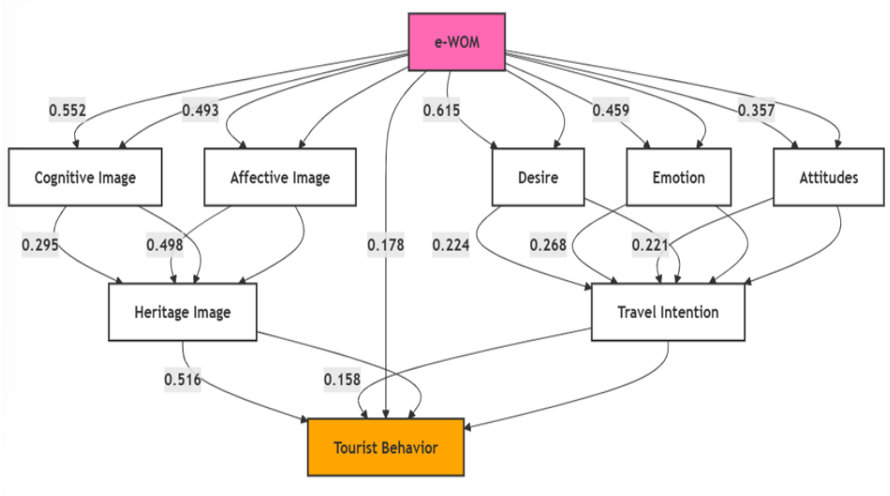

Figure 2. Path diagram of the conceptual framework.

4.2. Measurement model

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed for the measurement model. Shevlin and Miles (1998) recommended factor loading values above .63. Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Composite Reliability (CR), and factor loadings are given in Table 2. All latent variables met or exceeded the thresholds recommended by Hair et al. (2012) for CR, Cronbach's alpha (α), and AVE. Almost all constructions have loadings over .63. The criterion of .70 is exceeded by α values of .722 to .851 (Peterson, 2000). This work exceeded Shevlin and Miles's (1998) CR criteria of .70, ranging from .827 to .899. Fornell and Larcker's (1981) suggested AVE value is over .50. AVE varied from .575 to 0.691. Figure 3 shows the measuring model.

Table 2. Measurement model results

Latent	Loadings	A	CR	AVE
Affective image (AFF)	.826 .871 .817 .805	.850	.899	.689
Attitude (ATT)	.735 .752 .739 .806	.760	.844	.575
Cognitive image (COG)	.786 .886 .810 .719	.807	.874	.635
Heritage image (HI)	.830 .848 .830	.784	.874	.699

Table 2. Measurement model results (*continued*)

Latent	Loadings	A	CR	AVE
Desire (DE)	.661 .840 .840	.722	.827	.616
Emotion (EM)	.790 .805 .775 .789	.801	.869	.624
Tourist Behavior (TB)	.832 .787 .740 .834	.812	.876	.639
Travel intention (TI)	.832 .815 .840	.776	.869	.688
e-WOM	.817 .845 .833 .830	.851	.899	.691

The Fornell-Larcker criteria tested discriminant validity. According to Hair et al. (2012), it specifies that the square root of AVE for each construct must surpass the correlation with other variables. Table 3 demonstrates that the diagonal values exceed correlation values of other variables, and discriminant validity was confirmed. Each item in our model is unique, proving the measurement model's validity.

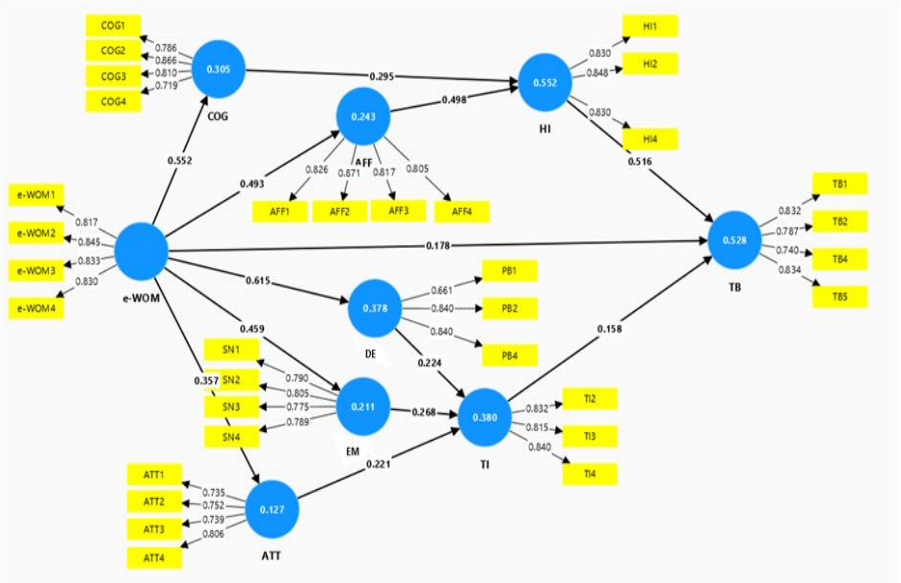

Figure 3. Measurement model.

4.3. Hypothesis results

The hypothesized relations among the variables are evaluated by utilizing the bootstrap technique of resampling with samples of 400. The results indicated the significance of the path coefficients within the structural model. The outcomes of the analysis showed that e-WOM, desire, attitude, and emotion shape the heritage image and travel intention, which has a significant impact on tourist behavior at a noteworthy level. Figure 4 is a representation of the structural model implemented in this paper.

Table 3. Discriminant validity

	AVE	AFF	ATT	COG	HI	DE	EM	TB	TI	e-WOM
AFF	.689	.830								
ATT	.575	.487	.758							
COG	.635	.741	.498	.797						
HI	.699	.716	.506	.663	.836					
DE	.616	.620	.533	.574	.634	.785				
EM	.624	.574	.719	.556	.559	.600	.790			
TB	.639	.639	.558	.593	.688	.608	.508	.799		
TI	.688	.502	.533	.560	.497	.502	.561	.501	.829	
e-WOM	.691	.493	.357	.552	.530	.615	.459	.528	.488	.831

Table 4 presents the findings of the path analysis. This study evaluated 13 hypotheses and all of them were confirmed as true and statistically significant. The results reveal that e-WOM substantially impacts visitors' cognition, affect, desire, emotions, attitudes, and behavior. Evidence indicates that e-WOM influences tourist decisions. The study also indicated that affective and cognitive imagery improve heritage destination perceptions. Additionally, desire, mood, and attitude affect a person's travel intention, which affects their travel behavior.

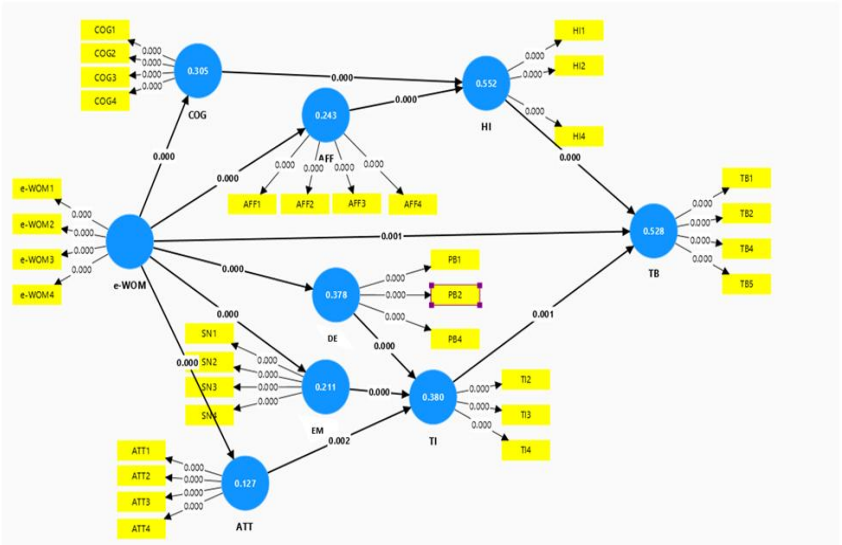

Figure 4. Structural model.

Table 4. Hypothesis test result

Path	Hypotheses	Path coefficient	*t*-statistics	*p*-values	Supported
e-WOM -> COG	H_1	.552	13.007	0***	Yes
e-WOM -> AFF	H_2	.493	10.559	0***	Yes
e-WOM -> DE	H_3	.615	14.666	0***	Yes
e-WOM -> EM	H_4	.459	9.52	0***	Yes
e-WOM -> ATT	H_5	.357	6.061	0***	Yes
e-WOM -> TB	H_6	.178	3.482	.001***	Yes
COG -> HI	H_7	.295	4.516	0***	Yes
AFF -> HI	H_8	.498	9.131	0***	Yes
DE -> TI	H_9	.224	3.888	0***	Yes
EM -> TI	H_{10}	.268	3.701	0***	Yes
ATT -> TI	H_{11}	.221	3.067	.002**	Yes
HI -> TB	H_{12}	.516	9.682	0***	Yes
TI -> TB	H_{13}	.158	3.336	.001**	Yes

Note. ***$p \leq .01$; **$p \leq .05$; *$p \leq .10$

The study provides a strong theoretical model for explaining the impact of online peer-generated content on the emotions, attitudes, desires, and tourist behavior. The synthesis of all the 13 hypotheses via PLS-SEM confirms the elusiveness of e-WOM in the formation of the tourism decision-making process in the context of emerging heritage destinations, such as Bangladesh. The findings support Gretzel and Yoo (2008) by showing that young people are more willing to use e-WOM as a main source of data for their heritage travels and, in most cases, they choose their destination based on it. Young people nowadays search online for their cultural heritage as their primary source of information. Travel marketers and heritage site managers should try to develop or improve their online presence so people can receive the information they need and write about their experience, which increases travel intentions (Acharjee et al., 2024).

According to Ahmed et al. (2024), positive e-WOM builds trust, while the experience fosters emotion, influencing the intention to revisit heritage sites and attract more visitors. Using techniques like storytelling, interactive media, and collaborating with influencers can enhance positive perceptions and encourage more visits. Therefore, travel marketers and managers should focus on acquiring more emotional and favorable evaluations to inspire young people to visit heritage destinations. Jalilvand and Heidari (2017) discovered that e-WOM, not general WOM, strongly affects affective and cognitive image-making emotional attachment, which generates legacy image.

Marketers can attract more tourists to heritage areas by using emotional appeals and creating memorable experiences through image-based marketing. According to Papadimitriou et al. (2015), most young tourists who have never visited a historic place rely on e-WOM and destination images like emotional, cognitive, and heritage to make their selection. Our findings corroborate Filieri and McLeay (2014), who also found that e-WOM shaped both affective and cognitive image dimensions. In contrast to their research in European settings, the results of this study indicate a more pronounced influence of affective image, highlighting cultural differences in emotional perception. In developing countries, cognitive assessment in destination images through social media may be less significant compared to developed nations.

In contrast to Baloglu and McCleary's findings (1999), our study highlights a greater influence of emotions over cognition in shaping heritage image, indicating that emotional

connections outweigh factual considerations, especially in developing countries. Therefore, destination managers and local governments should create informative and engaging marketing materials, including educational digital infographics, to shape a positive perception in the online service environment. Furthermore, responding openly to both the positive and negative online comments can support perceived trustworthiness and tourist revisitation. E-WOM is online and web-based; thus, Flavián et al. (2006) noted it has a trust and loyalty issue. To be loyal, the website and e-WOM should be useful and holistic, containing criticisms, concerns, and positive characteristics. Online marketers should comprehend the importance of utilizing emotional appeals and comprehensive content in their strategies. Marketers must note that young people are increasingly tech-savvy and can potentially be affected by other locations' web presence (Litvin et al., 2008).

6. Conclusion

This study has explored the vibrant impact of e-WOM as a key influence on young tourists' perception and emotional bonding toward heritage destinations in Bangladesh, particularly its UNESCO World Heritage Sites. By integrating the heritage image with GDBM, this research provides insights into how online reviews and shared experiences affect young tourists' emotions and decision-making. The study provides a strong theoretical base to explain the affective influence of online peer-generated content on emotional attachment, attitude formation, desire and, finally, tourist behavior. In addition, the present work significantly contributes to the current body of tourism literature by theoretically integrating GDBM with historical aspects, enhancing the understanding of heritage tourism dynamics. By doing so, this study offers a relevant and beneficial adaptation tailored for developing nation's heritage destinations to develop as a sustainable tourism destination.

While emphasizing the influence of social media on destination image evaluations over cognitive assessments in developing countries, the present work contributes to current models. This shift challenges the conventional approach in evaluating destination image perceptions. Especially concerning the younger generation, it addresses a significant knowledge gap on how digital communication channels influence the psychological factors that shape tourist behavior (Ahmed et al., 2025). Especially among the tech-savvy young generation, e-WOM also stimulates fresh academic debate on how digital word of mouth supports travel intentions and behavior, thus influencing both cognitive and affective images.

Moreover, the findings have practical implications for Destination Marketing Organizations, tourism marketers, and authorities of historical sites, guiding their strategic decisions and marketing efforts. The strategic importance of building positive e-WOM, especially emotional and experiential stories shared on social media, can be demonstrated by incorporating new technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality into destination marketing and incorporating smart technologies into every step of the tourist experience. This will enhance the perceived authenticity, satisfaction, trust, and appeal of heritage destinations. Effective content strategies, including storytelling, interactive media, and influencer communication, can positively impact perceptions of destinations and increase visitation. Creating and marketing such material can bring lesser-known but culturally rich sites international attention.

Despite the important contributions of the study, several limitations need to be considered. First, the data came from a homogeneous group of young tourists from

Bangladesh and so the generalization of results across a broader population is limited. The influence of cultural specificity may significantly affect the processing of emotional or cognitive cues. The study focuses on tourism activities of Bangladesh's world heritage sites in its entirety, rather than isolating specific heritage sites, as individual sites may vary significantly in terms of their appeal and accessibility. Moreover, the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow the possibility of tracking any associations between perception and behavior over time, whether before, during, or after a trip. This makes it impossible to assess the dynamics of e-WOM as well as destination image over time or across multiple exposures. The use of self-reported answers could also cause bias as a consequence of social desirability.

Future studies should use a longitudinal design to address these limitations and measure changes in tourists' perceptions. Comparative cross-cultural research would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the influence of e-WOM on heritage tourism image in different socio-cultural contexts. Alternatively, the incorporation of qualitative methods, such as content analysis of user-generated reviews or interviews, may offer more profound insights into cognitive and emotional influences. As part of future research, looking into the latest technologies like VR-enabled heritage exhibits and user-generated content, and stories could also lead to new ways of understanding how digital innovations affect heritage tourism engagement.

In conclusion, this study not only contributes to the literature by enhancing the theoretical understanding of e-WOM in heritage tourism but also provides practical implications for application in the real world. This study motivates researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to further investigate how digital engagement can influence the sustainable growth of the tourism industry, the satisfaction of tourists, and the preservation of cultural heritage.

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