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# SEGMENTING EWOM SEEKERS IN TOURIST DESTINATIONS: COMMUNICATION DYNAMICS IN CZECHIA AND SLOVAKIA

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## **ABSTRACT:**

This study explores the segmentation of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) seekers in tourist destinations, with a specific focus on communication preferences and channels. The aim is to enhance the understanding of eWOM behaviour beyond traditional sociodemographic factors, emphasising communication strategies that influence consumer decision-making in selecting tourist destinations. Using data from an electronic survey completed by respondents in Czechia and Slovakia, cluster and factor analyses identified four main segments of eWOM seekers: eWOM Enthusiasts, Local Explorers, Global Influencer-Focused Travellers, and Authenticity-Seeking Globetrotters. The study further examines preferred communication channels, including key travel information hubs, influencer-led networks, and supplementary channels to tailor marketing strategies to specific segments. Findings provide valuable communication insights for destination marketers, offering a framework for future research on effectively leveraging eWOM in tourism marketing.

## **KEYWORDS:**

eWOM, eWOM media, eWOM seeking, segmentation, tourist destination

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# 1 Introduction

Communication among individuals has been a perennial aspect of human interaction, but the advent of the Internet has markedly transformed the dynamics of interpersonal communication. This shift has profoundly affected consumer habits to such an extent that it can be characterised as revolutionary (Zaraket, 2021). With the increasing integration of the digital environment into everyday life, the traditional concept of word of mouth (WOM) has evolved into its electronic counterpart, known as electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Serra Cantalops & Salvi, 2014).

eWOM is multifaceted in its definitions, encompassing perspectives that view it as an expression (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), an informal mode of communication (Litvin et al., 2008), or a process of information exchange (Xun & Reynolds, 2010) through the Internet. This process is based on positive, neutral, or negative experiences shared by current or former consumers. These online interactions, whether intentional or unintentional, can cause a substantial impact on others in terms of their travel planning and experiences beyond their customary environments (e.g., Ismail et al., 2023; Bigne et al., 2024). This phenomenon is evidenced by the unwavering interest of academics in the study of eWOM over the past two decades.

The issue of electronic eWOM is pertinent to a significant portion of economic sectors and industries, particularly those involving intangible products that cannot be physically tested before purchase. Consequently, individuals rely heavily on the experiences of previous consumers. This reliance underscores why scholars focusing on eWOM predominantly examine the tourism sector.

The extant scientific literature, from the standpoint of demand, manifests interest in both the seeking and provision of eWOM. This body of research tirelessly investigates how specific individual characteristics, particularly gender (e.g., Kim et al., 2011; Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016; Saidani et al., 2023), age, and respectively generational affiliation (e.g., Sukhu & Bilgihan, 2014; Ruiz-Equihua et al., 2022; Sharipudin et al., 2023), influence behaviours related to eWOM. However, there appears to be a lacuna in the literature concerning a more nuanced segmentation of individuals in relation to eWOM based on criteria other than socio-demographic factors.

Addressing this research gap is crucial, as a more refined understanding of eWOM seekers can significantly enhance the marketing effectiveness. By identifying distinct segments based on behavioural patterns and preferences, it is possible to develop targeted strategies that better meet the needs and expectations of various consumer groups, ultimately increasing their satisfaction.

The aim of this study is to conduct a more nuanced segmentation of eWOM seekers, focusing on potential visitors to tourist destinations, which are the fundamental units of analysis in tourism. Most of the scientific literature on eWOM predominantly focuses on its examination within the tourism sector. Cluster and principal component analyses are employed to identify distinct segments of eWOM seekers and to examine their socio-demographic profiles, preferences for eWOM sources, and favoured destination types.

## 2 Literature Review

eWOM has been extensively examined in scholarly literature due to the Internet's profound influence on consumer behaviour, particularly in tourism. Abd-Elaziz et al. (2015) noted that eWOM's impact on tourism surpasses other sectors due to the high interpersonal interaction involved. Trinanda & Mutaqin (2019) suggested that social media's increasing expressiveness enhances visitors' ability to influence others through shared opinions and experiences. Liu et al. (2021) indicated that tourists increasingly rely on eWOM for decisions regarding destinations, accommodations, and dining, and actively share their travel experiences.

eWOM constitutes various online expressions including reviews, messages, emails, and multimedia posts, as detailed by Litvin et al. (2008), and Nechoud et al. (2021). These expressions span a diverse array of platforms such as blogs, virtual communities, third-party websites like TripAdvisor and Booking, and official sites of tourism entities.

They also encompass consumer conversation forums, hate websites, chat rooms, social networks, and search-oriented platforms, as explored by Abbasi et al. (2023).

Previous studies on eWOM seeking, by researchers such as Abubakar & Ilkan (2016), Kim et al. (2016), and Pang (2021), have identified eWOM as being perceived as more trustworthy, reliable, current, and valuable for potential visitors compared to organisational marketing communications. This perception is largely attributed to the fact that eWOM is generated from actual consumer experiences and opinions related to product use at specific tourist destinations.

Prospective visitors to destinations frequently utilise eWOM for its convenience and social validation, as noted by Kim et al. (2011). These individuals prefer information that is straightforward to process (Sparks & Browning, 2011) and of high quality (Kim et al., 2011; Filieri & McLeay, 2014). Consequently, they perceive eWOM as a tool to mitigate the risk of choosing incorrect services (Kim et al., 2011; Singh & Kathuria, 2019) and to facilitate more effective planning for their stays at tourist destinations (Singh & Kathuria, 2019).

eWOM significantly influences individuals' attitudes towards destinations, as demonstrated by Jalilvand et al. (2012), and Abubakar & Ilkan (2016). It also impacts the decision to visit these destinations, according to Jalilvand et al. (2012), Abubakar & Ilkan (2016), and Nechoud et al. (2021). Additionally, eWOM affects repeat visitation (Abubakar et al., 2017; Chang & Wang, 2019), visitor satisfaction (Chang & Wang, 2019), and trust in the destination (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016; Abubakar et al., 2017; Trinanda & Mutaqin, 2019).

In tourism marketing, market segmentation is a crucial strategy for understanding and influencing market behaviour (Díaz-Pérez et al., 2020). This involves dividing the market into distinct subgroups with specific needs and desires (Mok & Iverson, 2000). Segmentation is essential for developing targeted marketing strategies and differentiating audiences. Dolnicar et al. (2014) highlight that key strategic decisions in tourism, such as target segment selection and marketing mix development, rely heavily on market segmentation studies. However, segmentation related to tourist destinations has historically received less emphasis than company-specific analysis (Carvache-Franco et al., 2024).

Identifying effective methods for investigating the impact of different market segments on destinations is therefore a critical task. Segmentation not only clarifies target consumer groups but also assists in developing and offering better tourism products, maximising benefits at destinations, and establishing efficient tourism policies and positioning strategies (An & Alarcón, 2021). As highlighted by Gallego et al. (2023), a diverse array of variables is employed in segmenting tourists, recognising that a singular segmentation approach is not universally applicable. Variables for segmenting the tourism market extend beyond traditional geographical and socio-demographic characteristics to encompass travel activities, expenditures, psychographics (including personality, lifestyle, and social classes), and behavioural variables related to product usage and consumer responses.

While segmenting visitors to destinations presents certain challenges, segmenting individuals who seek electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) as potential visitors proves to be even more complex. The existing body of academic literature has not explicitly addressed this specific type of segmentation. Several studies have attempted to distinguish the preferences of eWOM seekers based on gender and generational affiliation, yet no research has explored the segmentation of eWOM seekers based on behavioural patterns and preferences.

Previous studies have focused on dividing eWOM seekers based on gender and generational affiliation, generally observing differences between genders (Kim et al., 2011; Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016; Jorgensen & Ha, 2019; Nilashi et al., 2022; Saidani et al., 2023) and between generations (Ruiz-Equihua et al., 2022).

Ruiz-Equihua et al. (2022) observed that the outcomes of online reviews elicit stronger responses from individuals belonging to Generation X compared to those from the millennial generation. Research by Kim et al. (2011) and Saidani et al. (2023) reveals that women utilise online reviews more for convenience, quality, and risk reduction, valuing these reviews significantly in decision-making processes. Abubakar & Ilkan (2016) found that eWOM impacts destination trust differently between genders, with a stronger effect on men but greater influence on travel intentions for women. Nilashi et al. (2022) and Saleem et al. (2022) found that perceived risk and trust in online reviews are more significant for women, whereas men are more inclined to experiment with new products and services. Jorgensen & Ha (2019) highlighted women's reliance on eWOM on social networks for product information.

Previous studies examining differences between selected groups of eWOM seekers have highlighted the significance of adjusting marketing strategies accordingly. By employing a more sophisticated segmentation approach for eWOM seekers, tourism destinations can establish a competitive edge. This extends beyond conventional marketing communications and encompasses a broader spectrum of organisational management aspects.

## 3 Methodology

### Geographical Scope

This study focused on Czechia and Slovakia, two Central and Eastern European countries, selected based on several criteria:

- *Population size and representativeness.* Both countries have relatively small populations (Czechia: approximately 10.7 million, Slovakia: around 5.5 million). This demographic feature facilitated the collection of a statistically ideal representative sample. The intent was to extrapolate the survey findings to the entire national populations, while maintaining a suitable level of confidence and an acceptable confidence interval.
- *Language considerations.* The ability to conduct the survey in the native languages of the respondents (Czech and Slovak) was crucial. This approach minimised potential misunderstandings related to the survey questions, ensuring clearer and more accurate responses.

Furthermore, the choice of Czechia and Slovakia was reinforced by their shared cultural, social, and economic trajectories. Their joint history, beginning post-World War I and encompassing over seven decades as a unified state (Czechoslovakia), provided a common backdrop, enriching the contextual relevance of the study within these nations.

### Data Collection

To achieve the research objective, a methodology similar to those predominantly used in previous studies focusing on eWOM from the demand-side perspective (e.g., Kim et al., 2011; Sukhu & Bilgihan, 2014; Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016; Sharipudin et al., 2023) was employed. Data was gathered via an online questionnaire survey.

The questionnaire was formulated based on relevant literature and aspects addressed by authors in studies on eWOM. It included questions to determine if individuals typically seek out eWOM regarding destinations, inquiries about the media and frequency of eWOM searches on specific platforms, the language in which individuals read eWOM, preferences concerning the destinations about which eWOM is sought, and information about the authors of eWOM.

The decision on media options for respondents to indicate their usage frequency was influenced by prior research on eWOM (Litvin et al., 2008; Sukhu & Bilgihan, 2014; Yan et al., 2018). This selection was refined to focus explicitly on travel destinations and customised to suit the geographical scope.

Most respondents provided their responses on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5.

To enhance the representativeness and reporting efficacy of the findings, a professional agency, Ipsos, was engaged to distribute the questionnaires to the populations of Czechia and Slovakia.

### Research Sample

The study's sample comprises 1,050 individuals from the Czech Republic and 1,042 from Slovakia, all within the working age range of 18 to 65 years. The representativeness of the sample was confirmed through Pearson's Chi-square test for quality at the significance level of 0.05. Based on the comparison of the  $\chi^2$  values with the critical value given the degrees of freedom (Tables 1 and 2), it is concluded that the observed frequencies do not significantly differ from the expected frequencies. In other words, the sample is representative in terms of age, gender, size of place of residence.

Table 1: SPSS Output representativeness of the researched sample of Czechia

SPSS Output		Age	Gender	Place of residence size	Educational background	
Chi-Square		0.007	0.002	0.004	0.006	
df		4	1	4	3	
Asymp. Sig.		0.794	0.887	0.845	0.792	
Monte Carlo Sig.	Sig.	0.805	0.903	0.867	0.812	
	99% Confidence Interval	Lower Bound	0.794	0.895	0.859	0.801
		Upper Bound	0.815	0.910	0.875	0.819

Source: Own processing, 2024

Table 2: SPSS Output representativeness of the researched sample of Slovakia

SPSS Output		Age	Gender	Place of residence size	Educational background	
Chi-Square		0.002	0.000	0.006	0.001	
df		4	1	4	3	
Asymp. Sig.		1.000	0.998	1.000	1.000	
Monte Carlo Sig.	Sig.	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	
	99% Confidence Interval	Lower Bound	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
		Upper Bound	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000

Source: Own processing, 2024

## Data Analysis

In this study, data were analysed using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics Data Editor (Version 29). A series of statistical tests were performed, setting the significance level at  $\alpha = 0.05$ .

To enhance understanding of individuals who seek destination-related eWOM, cluster analysis was utilised to identify relatively homogeneous groups. This analysis concentrated on the frequency of using various eWOM media channels, the language in which eWOM is read, preferences regarding destinations for which eWOM is sought, and preferences concerning the authors of eWOM. The statistical software recommended appropriate segments into which individuals naturally clustered. Nevertheless, the initial clusters formed were not adequately stable, necessitating the gradual exclusion of several characteristics of the subjects from the criteria. Ultimately, four clusters were identified. The structure of these clusters, characterised by the parameter known as 'silhouettes' reflecting the degree of coherence and separation, was considered acceptable. The mode value ( $\hat{x}$ ) was utilised to ascertain similarities within these segments, owing to the nominal nature of the variables involved in the cluster analysis.

Subsequently, a socio-demographic profile of the segments was conducted for each cluster, delineating the proportions of nominal and ordinal variables in the respective clusters. The statistical significance between individual segments and socio-demographic characteristic variables was examined using Pearson's Chi-square test and Cramer's V correlation coefficient. The analysis included variables denoting gender, generation, highest level of education, and the size of usual residence localities by population count.

Considering the wide range of eWOM media and their usage frequencies reported by respondents, a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was undertaken. The purpose of the PCA was to transform the original eWOM media variables into latent variables or principal components, thereby reducing them to a smaller, uncorrelated set that represents a linear combination of the original variables.

The determination of the appropriate number of components and the data's suitability for component formation adhered to several criteria specific to this statistical method. The optimal number of components was primarily based on the cumulative percentage of explained variance, ideally between 60% and 70%. In this instance, the cumulative percentage of explained variance for all three principal components was 60.33%, indicating the appropriateness of

the selected number of components. The first component explained the largest portion of the variance (36.79%) of the original variables, the second component accounted for the largest part of the variance (14.21%) not explained by the first component, and the third component accounted for the largest part of the variance (9.33%) not explained by the first two components.

The quality of the input data was assessed from various perspectives. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test, a crucial criterion for indicating the data’s suitability for PCA, yielded coefficients within the range of <0; 1>, with a higher coefficient indicating greater suitability due to sufficient variability between variables. The KMO test in this study resulted in a coefficient of 0.863, demonstrating the data’s adequacy for reduction and formation of new principal components. The data’s suitability was also evaluated using the Chi-square value from Bartlett’s test, which was 9869.89. The statistical significance of this test was confirmed, with a p-value (0.00) less than the significance level (0.05), indicating that the input data were suitable and of high quality for the PCA.

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha to determine the reliability of the formed components and their applicability in other statistical methods. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients generally range from <0; 1>, akin to the coefficients from the KMO test. For all three formed components in this study, Cronbach’s alpha values exceeded 0.700, suggesting sufficient reliability and suitability for further use in other statistical methods.

Descriptive statistics were employed to identify the most frequently used eWOM media. This analysis was grounded on median values, due to the high coefficient of variation (CV) for all eWOM media indicating a vulnerability of the arithmetic mean to outliers, thus rendering it unsuitable for further interpretative purposes.

The graphical representation of the formed components was based on factor loadings, which assigned individual eWOM media to the principal components. Factor loadings, ranging from -1 to 1, indicated an inverse relationship (values within -1 to 0) or a direct relationship (values within 0 to 1) between the original variables and the principal components.

## 4 Results

### Segmenting eWOM Seekers: Insights from Preference Analysis

In accordance with the findings derived from the cluster analysis, individuals actively seeking eWOM information concerning tourist destinations can be effectively categorised into four reasonably stable segments, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Characteristics of eWOM seeker segments

Segment name/ Characteristics	eWOM Enthusiasts	Local Explorers	Global Influencer- Focused Travellers	Authenticity- Seeking Globetrotters	Missing answers
Number of members	1021	328	289	383	71
Share of the segment	48.8%	15.7%	13.8%	18.3 %	3.4%
Preferences					
Destination focus	any	home	foreign	foreign	-
Familiarity with the destination	any	unvisited destination	already visited destination	unvisited destination	-
Type of eWOM	any	any	positive	any	
eWOM author	any	inland	overseas	any	-
eWOM author’s identity	does not matter	does not matter	known	known	-
eWOM author’s acquaintance	any	regular visitor	famous person	regular visitor	-

Source: Own processing, 2024

The first segment, designated as “eWOM Enthusiasts”, exhibits a comprehensive interest in all reviews and posts about destinations, regardless of the origin, nature, or content. This segment represents the largest proportion of the sample, accounting for 48.80%.

The second segment, labelled “Local Explorers,” predominantly focuses on eWOM pertaining to unvisited destinations within their own country. Their attention is mainly on reviews and posts authored by fellow domestic visitors, exhibiting a limited responsiveness to renowned personalities or influencers.

In the third segment, known as “Global Influencer-Focused Travellers”, individuals are characterised by their pursuit of eWOM about destinations they have visited abroad. Notably, this group is influenced by prominent personalities and influencers who disseminate reviews and posts on social media platforms. This segment particularly values the identity and positive nature of the review or post provider, with a preference for content from recognised figures.

The “Authenticity-Seeking Globetrotters” segment comprises individuals who search for eWOM about unvisited foreign destinations. Results from the cluster analysis suggest that this segment places importance on the authenticity of the contributors of reviews and posts. Unlike other segments, members of this group do not show a preference for content from well-known personalities or influencers. Instead, they opt for reviews and posts from ordinary social media users. This preference for authenticity in the identity of the review provider may be attributed to the members’ wariness of unreliable content in reviews or posts about destinations.

The analysis revealed that the socio-demographic profile of each segment (Table 4) is not significantly influenced by the gender of its members or their generational affiliation. However, a nuanced examination of the proportional data unearthed a higher representation of male members within the “eWOM Enthusiasts” and “Authenticity-Seeking Globetrotters” segments. In contrast, the “Local Explorers” and “Global Influencer-Focused Travellers” segments exhibited a slight predominance of female members.

Table 4: Socio-demographic profile of segments

Socio-Demographic Characteristics		Segment names				Correlation Characteristics for Nominal Variables	
		eWOM Enthusiasts (N=1021)	Local Explorers (N=328)	Global Influencer-Focused Travellers (N=289)	Authenticity-Seeking Globetrotters (N=383)	$\chi^2$ p-value	Cramer's V
Gender	Man	52.3	46.0	46.0	52.0	0.087	-
	Woman	47.7	54.0	54.0	48.0		
Generation	Baby Boomers	15.8	20.7	18.7	18.0	0.072	-
	Generation X	35.7	38.4	35.0	29.5		
	Generation Y	33.3	29.6	32.9	34.7		
	Generation Z	15.3	11.3	13.5	17.8		
Highest completed education	Primary education	9.1	8.2	8.3	5.5	0.000	0.126
	Secondary vocational education	34.3	32.3	36.7	13.3		
	Complete secondary education with a graduation examination	37.6	44.2	36.0	47.5		

	Higher (university) education	19.0	15.2	19.0	33.7		
Size of place of residence	Up to 1,000 inhabitants	16.2	16.2	16.6	13.6	0.016	0.074
	1,001 – 5,000 inhabitants	23.4	25.3	22.2	22.2		
	5,001 – 20,000 inhabitants	17.4	17.7	15.2	11.8		
	20,001 – 100,000 inhabitants	26.1	22.0	28.4	26.1		
	Over 100,000 inhabitants	16.9	18.9	17.7	26.4		

Source: Own processing, 2024

In terms of generational distribution, while older generations such as Baby Boomers and Generation X are primarily concentrated in the “Local Explorers” segment, younger generations (Y and Z) are most numerous represented in the “Authenticity-Seeking Globetrotters” segment.

Furthermore, individuals with complete secondary education and university-level education predominantly belong to the “Authenticity-Seeking Globetrotters” segment. Conversely, individuals with primary education tend to incline more towards the “eWOM Enthusiasts” segment, while those with secondary vocational education are more likely to be associated with the “Global Influencer-Focused Travellers” segment.

#### Analysis of eWOM Media for Destination Search: Utilisation Patterns Across Different Segments

The principal component analysis delineated three main categories of eWOM media, differentiated by their usage frequency for destination-related eWOM searches by respondents (Table 5).

Table 5: Results of principal component analysis (pca) and descriptive statistics

Components	Variance (%)	Cumulative (%)	Cronbach's Alpha	Variables	CV (%)	Median ( $\bar{x}$ )
Supplementary Destination eWOM Channels (Component 1)	36.8	36.8	0.798	Pinterest	64.9	1
				Twitter	62.4	1
				LinkedIn	62.35	1
Key Travel Information Hubs (Component 2)	14.2	51.0	0.776	Google Maps	45.0	3
				TripAdvisor	66.6	1
				Travel Blogs	57.53	2
				Online Communities	61.9	1
				Tourism Enterprises Websites	53.2	3
				Destination Websites	43.2	3
Influencer-Led Destination eWOM Networks (Component 3)	9.3	60.3	0.724	Facebook	52.4	3
				Instagram	64.9	1
				Youtube	56.0	2

Kaiser- Meyer- Olkin (KMO)	0, 863
Bartlett ' s test ( $\chi^2$ )	9869,89
p-value (sig.)	0, 000

Source: Own processing, 2024

The first component, termed “Supplementary Destination eWOM Channels,” encompasses Pinterest, Twitter, and LinkedIn. These platforms function as content-generating social networks, facilitating user engagement with and dissemination of a diverse array of travel-related content. Notably, about half of the survey participants indicated non-usage of these platforms for destination eWOM searches, a trend exemplified by their median usage value of 1. This suggests a supplementary role of these channels in the landscape of eWOM, primarily serving as secondary sources of information rather than primary outlets for eWOM exploration in travel and tourism.

The second component, labelled “Key Travel Information Hubs,” incorporates six eWOM platforms: Google Maps, TripAdvisor, Travel Blogs, Online Communities, Business Websites, and Destination Websites. These platforms stand out as specialised websites, offering specific functionalities for searching and reviewing travel-related content. This component is particularly noteworthy for its inclusion of diverse sources, ranging from user-generated content on Google Maps and TripAdvisor to more structured and curated information on Business and Destination Websites. Within this component, Google Maps, Tourism Business Websites, and Destination Websites are predominant, as indicated by their higher median usage values (referenced in Table 4). This underscores their significance as primary information sources in the travel eWOM landscape.

The final component, “Influencer-Led Destination eWOM Networks,” includes Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. These platforms are characterised by their extensive use in accessing content from well-known personalities and influencers, who significantly influence consumer behaviour in the tourism sector through their posts and opinions. This component is differentiated by its focus on mediation social networks, where the influence of influencers and celebrities on consumer behaviour is markedly evident. Among these, Facebook emerges as the most utilised platform, demonstrating a higher median usage value when compared to Instagram and YouTube (as detailed in Table 4). This component reflects the growing impact of influencer marketing and the centrality of visual and video content in shaping travel decisions and preferences in the modern digital landscape.

For the graphical depiction of the components, factor loadings were applied to allocate each Internet platform to its respective principal component (Figure 1). LinkedIn, Twitter, and Pinterest showed the highest direct correlations with the first component, with respective loadings of 0.868, 0.849, and 0.744. Invia, however, exhibited a moderate association (0.510) with this component and a similar correlation with the second component. To maintain the integrity of the principal component analysis, Invia was removed from the first component.

The second component demonstrated the strongest correlation with Destination Websites (0.818), followed by significant associations with Tourism Business Websites (0.751) and Travel Blogs (0.702). In the third component, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram displayed intense direct dependencies, with factor loadings of 0.807, 0.751, and 0.683, respectively (Figure 1).

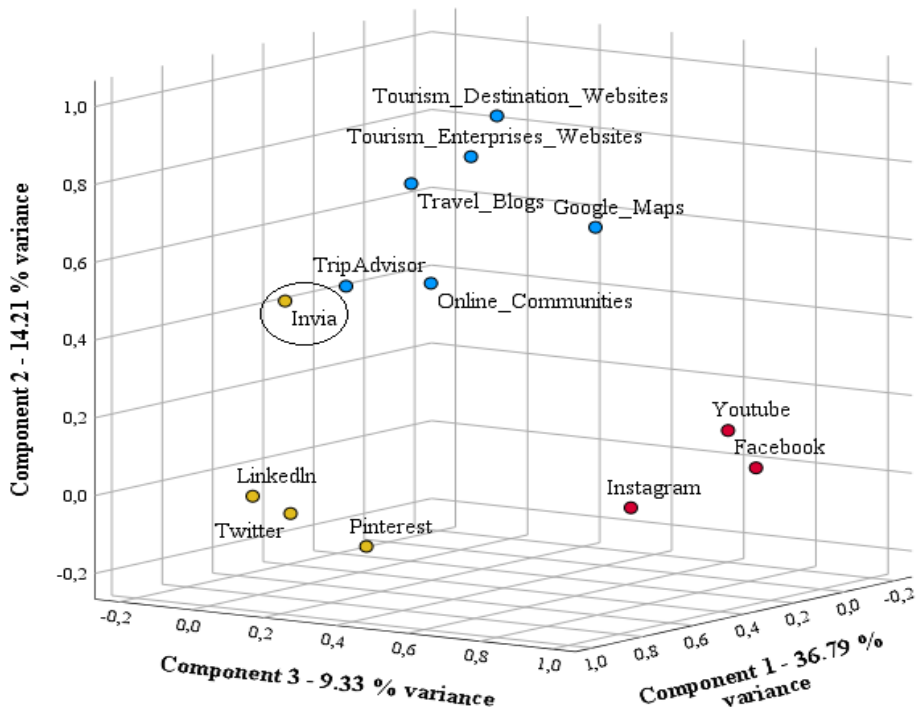


Figure 1: Components loading and their component plot in rotated space  
 Source: Own processing, 2024

To ascertain the preferred eWOM media utilised by each segment prior to their visits to destinations, more detailed analysis was undertaken. While respondents expressed their frequency of usage of each eWOM medium on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1 representing ‘never’ and 5 ‘always’), only responses with a score of 5, indicating a high frequency of usage, and 4, denoting regular usage, were considered in the analysis. The objective of this assessment was to comprehend the extent to which different Internet platforms are employed in the search for destination-related reviews and posts. The results of this investigation are depicted in Figure 2.

The results indicate that three out of four segments predominantly utilise Key Travel Information Hubs. While in the case of the eWOM Enthusiasts and Local Explorers segments, there is a more pronounced interest in Influencer-Led Destination eWOM Networks, this is not the case for the Authenticity-Seeking Globetrotters segment. Only a smaller proportion of this segment expresses interest in these eWOM media. Particularly noteworthy is the segment Global Influencer-Focused Travellers, which distinguishes itself from all others by prioritising Influencer-Led Destination eWOM Networks for searching for reviews and posts about destinations during the pre-purchase decision phase, especially for accessing content created by renowned personalities and influencers.

Key Travel Information Hubs are heavily relied upon by the Authenticity-Seeking Globetrotters segment, with 34.8% of its members frequently consulting these eWOM media to obtain trustworthy reviews of destinations they have yet to visit. In contrast, their engagement with Influencer-Led Destination eWOM Networks is relatively lower at 16.45%, marking the smallest proportion among all segments. This suggests a broader sense of mistrust in the content shared on these social networks.

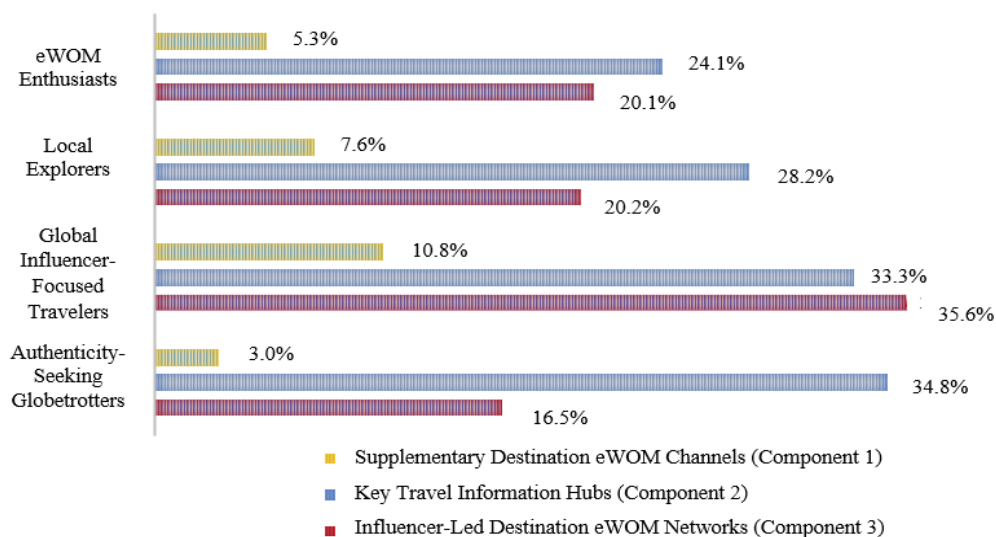


Figure 2: Utilisation of eWOM media groups by individual segments

Source: Own processing, 2024

Supplementary Destination eWOM Channels are the least utilised across all segments. Among them, Global Influencer-Focused Travelers exhibit the highest usage rate at 10.8%, whereas the lowest rate is observed in the case of Authenticity-Seeking Globetrotters at 3.00%.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusions

In the contemporary market landscape, organisations frequently segment groups of current or potential consumers by examining communication preferences and patterns that define both unique characteristics and shared tendencies. This approach extends to eWOM seekers, who are increasingly viewed as a distinct consumer segment whose communication behaviours are crucial to understanding their interactions with digital content. Previous studies have segmented eWOM seekers indirectly, analysing communicative differences across generations (Ruiz-Equihua et al., 2022) and between genders (Kim et al., 2011; Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016; Jorgensen & Ha, 2019; Nilashi et al., 2022; Saidani et al., 2023), with an emphasis on how these variations are manifested within tourism-related communication contexts.

The sole study that segmented individuals in the context of eWOM based on variables other than socio-demographic factors was conducted by Sağkaya Güngör & Ozansoy Çadırcı (2013). However, it did not pertain to eWOM seekers but rather eWOM providers. This study utilised a very limited sample of 252 Facebook users in Turkey, and categorised respondents into four clusters primarily based on their routine social media behaviour, rather than in relation to providing eWOM for specific products, brands, organisations, or destinations. As a result, the study is unable to provide a comprehensive description of the definitive profile of eWOM activities. The authors of the study are fully aware of this limitation and encourage further attempts to segment not only eWOM providers but also eWOM seekers in a more comprehensive way. According to Sağkaya Güngör & Ozansoy Çadırcı (2013), this approach will aid marketers in more efficiently targeting users of eWOM platforms.

In response to this challenge, a comprehensive representative survey was conducted in two CEE countries, focusing on eWOM seekers in the context of tourist destinations as a basic unit of research in tourism (UNWTO eLibrary, 2019), where communication is integral to the destination experience. The results of cluster analyses enabled the identification of four sufficiently stable eWOM seeker segments, each distinguished by their

communication preferences: eWOM Enthusiasts, Local Explorers, Global Influencer-Focused Travellers, and Authenticity-Seeking Globetrotters.

The segment known as “eWOM Enthusiasts” demonstrates a comprehensive interest in all reviews and posts related to tourist destinations, irrespective of their source, nature, or content. They are undemanding consumers of eWOM content, actively seeking it on Key Travel Information Hubs such as Google Maps, TripAdvisor, Travel Blogs, Online Communities, Business Websites, and Destination Websites, as well as on Influencer-Led Destination eWOM Networks like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. This segment primarily comprises individuals from Generations X and Y with high school education. It is worth noting that this segment has a slightly higher representation of men, who, according to Saleem et al. (2022), are more inclined to experiment with new tourism products.

Despite the prevalent focus of most researchers on specific social networks (e.g., Sukhu & Bilgihan, 2014; Jorgensen & Ha, 2019; Nilashi et al., 2022) or integrated websites in their studies of eWOM (e.g., Bae et al., 2017; Ruiz-Equihua et al., 2022), there is an emerging consensus on the necessity to also direct attention towards destination and business websites featured on Key Travel Information Hubs.

The cohort labelled “Local Explorers” predominantly directs its communication focus towards eWOM about lesser-known, local destinations, favouring content generated by domestic travellers. Their attention is primarily directed towards reviews and posts authored by fellow domestic travellers, a tendency that may be attributed to a lack of proficiency in foreign languages. This behaviour indicates a relatively muted reaction to notable personalities or influencers. Within this segment, there is a mild overrepresentation of women and individuals from older generations, notably the Baby Boomer demographic. Most members of this group hold a secondary level of educational attainment.

The “Global Influencer-Focused Travellers” group is distinguished by their engagement with eWOM related to international destinations they have visited. This segment is notably swayed by prominent personalities and influencers who share favourable reviews and posts on social media platforms. In this segment, there is a slight predominance of women, corroborating the findings of Jorgensen & Ha (2019), who underscored women’s dependence on eWOM on social networks for product information.

The “Authenticity-Seeking Globetrotters” group emphasises authentic communication, valuing eWOM from regular users over that from well-known influencers. This segment, predominantly highly educated men, demonstrates lower susceptibility to celebrity endorsements, showing a distinct communication preference focused on genuine user experiences.

This study’s outcomes hold significant implications for both theoretical understanding and practical application.

The current research landscape exhibits a notable deficiency in focusing on the segmentation of eWOM seekers. Moreover, prior studies have not thoroughly explored segmentation in the context of eWOM seeking beyond socio-demographic criteria. Thus, the authors contend that this analysis enhances existing knowledge and effectively bridges identified lacunae in the extant literature. Simultaneously, the current study corroborates the findings of preceding research that concentrated predominantly on identifying differences between men and women.

The study not only confirmed that it is feasible to segment eWOM seekers as potential destination visitors based on alternative criteria, but also succeeded in delineating three types of eWOM media. The most utilised in the context of seeking eWOM about destinations are Key Travel Information Hubs, such as Google Maps, TripAdvisor, Travel Blogs, Online Communities, Business Websites, and Destination Websites. Individual interest is also drawn to Influencer-Led Destination eWOM Networks like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. The least employed are Supplementary Destination eWOM Channels, which encompass Pinterest, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Given that previous eWOM studies have predominantly focused on selected social networks and integrated websites, future research should also be conducted on websites of specific organisations or destinations, as well as Online Communities, which so far represent an uncharted territory in this context.

The findings of this study present multiple managerial implications. Firstly, managers of destination management organisations (DMOs) should foster communication-driven eWOM strategies by encouraging visitors to share their experiences through communicative engagement with other prospective tourists. This motivation can be achieved through various strategies designed to facilitate and incentivise eWOM sharing.

Secondly, DMO managers should optimise destination websites as key communication platforms for eWOM, aiming to stimulate positive reviews, comments, and visual content (photos and videos). Enhanced functionality on these websites can facilitate effective communication, making them central hubs for eWOM.

Thirdly, it is essential for DMO managers to inform local businesses about the significance of their websites and to promote the use of these platforms for eWOM. Enhancing the functionality and visibility of these websites can facilitate more effective eWOM communication.

Furthermore, DMO managers should more actively initiate collaborations with influencers. A significant portion of eWOM seekers, especially women, seek out influencers' posts about destinations on social networks. Therefore, it is crucial to consider collaborations with both local and international influencers, taking into account the size of the destination and its key markets. This strategy can help to broaden the reach and impact of eWOM, catering to diverse audience segments.

The authors of the study acknowledge several limitations in their research methodology and scope. Firstly, the geographical coverage of the study was confined to only two CEE countries. This limited scope may not fully represent the broader trends and behaviours in eWOM seeking across different regions.

Secondly, although the research sample was representative, it was exclusively focused on individuals of productive age. Ethical considerations led to the exclusion of minors, while individuals older than 65 were not included due to their significantly lower Internet usage.

Furthermore, the study did not specifically target individuals based on their current traveller status but instead included a broader demographic. This decision was made to ensure a representative sample for the research. However, it implies a limitation in the depth of insights specifically related to actual visitors to selected destinations.

Lastly, the segmentation was conducted using cluster analysis. Due to the need for sufficient stability of the segments, not all potential alternative segmentation criteria that reflect the behaviour and preferences of eWOM seekers could be considered. This necessitated a progressive elimination of certain criteria during the analysis process. While this approach was essential for the integrity of the segmentation, it may have omitted some nuanced aspects of eWOM seeker behaviour and preferences, thus presenting a limitation in the comprehensiveness of the segmentation results.

These limitations highlight areas for potential refinement in future studies and suggest the need for broader geographical coverage, inclusion of a wider age range, and a more targeted approach to capturing the nuances of eWOM seeking behaviour among different traveller segments.

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