e-WOM: How do Fake Reviews in the Saudi Tourism Sector Impact Consumers' Purchasing Intentions?

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Abstract: - e-WOM (Electronic Word of Mouth) is a practical way of exchanging and discussing views on the quality of goods, services, ideas, and organizations that provide them. In the age of mass digitalization, people find it easy and practical to review/rate the output of any institution through Social Media channels available to them. However, the ease of Mass-communication is itself responsible or at least a contributor to fake/false/biased reviews of purchased products and services. This research will investigate e-WOM as expressed by service reviewing in the Saudi Tourism/Hospitality sector, which has been booming in recent years due to the 2020-2030 transformative Plan. We propose to study how different variables may influence the service provider (Brand Reputation), the consumers' attitudes towards it, the quality of the information provided, and the ease of accessibility of them. To our surprise, we found no significant impact of e-WOM on Brand Reputation, while for Customer purchase intentions, all the above-mentioned factors proved to impact significantly.

Key Words: - e-WOM - digital marketing, social media marketing, service sales, fake e-reviewing, tourism & hospitality sector, KSA, brand reputation, customer purchase intentions.

1 Introduction
This research will investigate how Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) is impacting the Saudi Tourism/hospitality sector through the extensive use of Digital and Social Media mediums, [1]. It will consider eWOM as the Independent Variable, while Consumer Purchase Intention is the Dependent variable with Brand reputation as a moderating factor. Fake eWOM reviews, also known as "astroturfing" or "sock puppetry," can significantly impact consumers' purchasing intentions in the tourism sector. Tourism organizations and businesses in Saudi Arabia need to monitor and address fake eWOM reviews, as well as educate consumers about the importance of reading reviews from credible sources and using critical thinking when evaluating online reviews. Strategies for addressing fake eWOM in the tourism industry include implementing review verification systems, encouraging honest and authentic reviews, monitoring and responding to reviews, educating consumers, and working with review platforms. By addressing fake eWOM reviews, tourism organizations and businesses in Saudi Arabia can ensure that consumers have access to accurate and trustworthy information, which can help increase their purchasing intentions and contribute to the growth of the country's tourism industry, [2].

1.1 Research Aim/Problem Statement
Our research aims principally at exploring the possible links between fake eWOM, especially fake reviews in the Tourism/ Hospitality sector in KSA the Consumers' purchasing Intentions.

1.2 Research Objectives
We intend to explore the concept of eWOM and eventually investigate the concept of fake reviews, especially in tourism/hospitality in Saudi Arabia. In particular, we aim to study the impact of eWOM on the Consumer's Purchasing Intentions as well as on the Brand Reputation of the marketed service.

In addition, we will investigate how consumers' attitudes, the quality of the information provided, and the ease of access can intervene as possible factors in the main relationship between fake eWOM and the consumers' purchasing intentions.

1.3 Research Questions

Our present research pretends to answer the following questions:

1. What is the exact nature of the relationship between fake eWOM and the Consumer's Purchasing intentions in the Saudi Tourism/Hospitality sector?
2. Does Brand Reputation affect the relationship between fake eWOM and the Consumer's Purchasing intentions in the Saudi Tourism/Hospitality sector?
3. How consumer attitudes, the quality of the information provided, and the ease of access can intervene as possible factors in the main relationship between fake eWOM and the consumers' purchasing intentions.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Digital Marketing

It has been stated that digital marketing is the fastest e-commerce solution available and is more affordable than traditional offline marketing methods, [3]. The rise in popularity of organizations integrating technology into their marketing strategy has led to the need for an in-depth review of digital marketing strategies, [4]. Two authors recognize the differences in consumer opinions by availing distinguished services of traditional as well as internet marketing strategies, [5], [6]. A Study on Literature Review for Identifying the Factors used and the findings established that there is a positive relationship between Internet Savvy and Innovativeness with their Internet utilization and the Internet utilization shows a positive relationship with sales performance. One study brings to light a few factors affecting digital marketing from the marketer's perspective, such as the target market, channels, technology, content, social media, talent, and budget, [7]. Some authors analyze the various distinctions between traditional marketing and e-marketing effectiveness, [8]. Customer satisfaction plays a predominant role in the success and sustenance of any business organization.

2.2 Social Media Marketing

Another study contributes to social media marketing strategy knowledge by developing a Social Media Marketing Evaluation framework. The framework has six stages: setting evaluation objectives, identifying key performance indicators (KPIs), identifying metrics, data collection, and analysis, report generation, and management decision-making, [9], [10]. Two key challenges depicted by the study are the agency-client relationship and the available social analytics tools. Additionally, one author examines the influence of interactive social media marketing communications on teenagers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral attitude components in South Africa. The study ascertained that social media marketing communications positively influenced each attitude component among adolescents, but on a declining scale, which correlates to the purchase funnel model, [11].

This investigation also makes an important contribution to attitudinal research in developing countries, where there is a lack of research in social media marketing communications. The most important details in this text are that companies and their brands should consider using and/or adapting their strategies based on the declining impact of social media marketing communications on the hierarchical attitude stages among young consumers and the divergent influence of usage and demographic variables when targeting Generation Z consumers. A study identified various factors that determine the purchase of a product using social media from a customer's point of view, [12]. Two authors have found that social media tools directly affect the purchasing behaviors of young consumers, depending on their age group and educational status, [13]. This suggests that companies should consider using and/or adapting their strategies based on the declining impact of social media marketing communications on the hierarchical attitude stages among young consumers and the divergent influence of usage and demographic variables.

2.3 Ethical Issues in Digital & Social Media Marketing

The Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed that the UK-based consulting firm mined data from millions of Facebook users to strategically influence behavior using targeted advertisements, [14]. This scandal should serve as a wake-up call to every profession that uses social media data. Social media platforms

have attempted to open some small windows into the platform's practices, but have simultaneously closed other doors. Transparent and proactive measures, informed by empirical research, need to be taken at the platform, professional, and policy levels to ensure ethical social media marketing practices. Research has been dedicated to understanding how to successfully use and implement social media for marketing purposes.

Social media marketers have access to platforms' in-house advertising tools, as well as public data on social media. Research pieces of evidence that an individual's expectation of privacy may change over time and may differ based on who is using the data and for what purpose. Academic research has been leading the charge in considering ethical social media data practices. Data consumers need a higher level of literacy in understanding the ethics and practices of social media, and professionals can no longer rely on the "spray and pray" approach. Social media privacy is complicated and compounded by the distinction between social and institutional privacy.

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Digital Marketing
Digital media has changed drastically since the mid-90s, with two odious media compositions created: paid media (Google AdWords) and demanding media (email marketing sites and friend sites). Clicks are key pieces of information to collect and test for paid and claimed media, and a third medium called acquired media has been created. In Figure 1 below we can see the most common types of Digital Marketing nowadays in practice.

Fig. 1: Types of Digital Marketing, [15]

Digital marketing is an important strategy for businesses, as it helps to build a strong relationship between the business and the consumer. The target consumers for online businesses are people living in metro cities, and digital marketing can generate sales which will lead to brand recognition and loyalty. The growth of the digital market in 2010 was estimated to be 48%. Digital media helps buyers connect to online stores and view different remarks from different buyers, creating a positive image among the users.

3.2 Social Media Marketing
Social networking websites are based on building virtual communities that allow consumers to express their needs, wants, and values online. Social media marketing connects these consumers and audiences to businesses that share the same needs, wants, and values. Mobile phones have grown at a rapid rate, allowing individuals immediate web browsing and access to social networking sites. Real-time bidding use in the mobile advertising industry is high and rising. Mobile devices have become increasingly popular, with 5.7 billion people using them worldwide.

Social media marketing (SMM) is a form of Internet marketing that utilizes social networking websites as a marketing tool. SMM is perceived as a more targeted type of advertising and is believed to be very effective in creating brand awareness.

3.3 e-WOM
eWOM (Electronic Word of Mouth) is the sharing of information about a product or service in the form of social media recommendations, online reviews, or influencer-generated content. 90% of consumers read online reviews before visiting a business, 84% trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations, and 71% are more likely to make a purchase based on social media referrals. EWOM has various formats, such as text-based electronic word of mouth, pictures, videos, or star ratings. Online Reviews: Reviews are often the #1 factor for consumers to make purchase decisions, but it is no one-way street! The success of reviews depends on their volume and the responses and resolutions offered to dissatisfied customers.

Social media recommendations can increase conversion rates by 25%, webpages can be strong avenues to drive eWOM, and images + video reviews can offer a real slice of what a brand is like. The most important details in this text are the tools that can help businesses run and scale their activities across locations. Regular responses to customer queries are a great way to control your brand's story and impression online, while engagement with your

community is about extending offline experiences online. To build a positive and long-lasting eWOM, it is important to evaluate if it is worth the time. A survey on Review Fraud found that 66% of consumers in the US feel fake reviews are a growing problem, and two-thirds of Facebook users visit a local business page at least once a week. To make the process of building a strong eWOM manageable and scalable, it is crucial to equip teams with tools and training.

3.4 Fake e-Reviewing

The Internet has transformed traditional word of mouth (WOM) into electronic word of mouth (eWOM), which has significantly impacted consumer behavior. WOM is a person-to-person communication tool that influences consumer behavior, particularly in intangible products like tourism or hospitality. eWOM, an online form of WOM, has gained importance due to online platforms. Both types of recommendations enable companies to better understand customers' needs and promote their products or services. However, there is a gap in the literature on WOM credibility in situations involving multiple communicators and receivers. Both WOM and eWOM are different concepts, with the Internet transforming traditional WOM into eWOM, making them the most influential media in influencing consumer behavior.

3.5 Tourism in KSA

Saudi Arabia's tourism industry has grown, with significant investments in infrastructure and diversifying its economy. Key attractions include Islamic holy sites, cultural heritage, natural beauty, and modern cities. However, challenges remain, such as limited awareness, infrastructure, and cultural and entertainment options. Saudi Arabia has invested $810 billion in culture, leisure, and entertainment projects, aiming for 100 million visitors by 2030. The Vision 2030 project aims to increase international religious tourists to 30 million by 2030, promoting Saudi heritage.

4 Methodology

4.1 Population & Sampling

Since consumers of Tourism/Hospitality consumers using The Internet/ Social Media channels to review

and exchange views with other users can be counted by millions in KSA, we have chosen a sample of 456 respondents for the present research. The e-survey was also used for reasons of easiness and practicability.

4.2 Hypothesis

1- Main Hypothesis:
H.0: There is no significant impact of fake eWOM on the Purchase Intention of Tourism/ Hospitality Consumers in KSA
The main hypothesis is based on a set of sub-hypotheses, which are:

2-Sub-hypotheses:
H.1: There is no significant impact of fake eWOM on the Brand Reputation of Tourism/ Hospitality Businesses in KSA.
H.4: There is no significant impact of Brand Reputation on the Purchase Intention of Tourism/ Hospitality Consumers in KSA

The main Sub-Hypothesis can be split into the following:
  - H2: There is no significant impact of Consumer Attitudes on the Brand Reputation
  - H3: There is no significant impact of fake eWOM on Brand Reputation according to consumer attitude.
  - H5: There is no significant impact of the Ease of Accessibility on Purchase intention.
  - H6 There is no significant impact of the Quality of Information on Purchase intention.
  - H7: There is no significant impact of Brand Reputation on Purchase Intention according to the quality of the information provided.
  - H8: There is no significant impact of Brand Reputation on Purchase Intention according to the ease of accessibility.

4.3 Research Model

In Figure 2, we illustrated the main relationships that bound together variables.
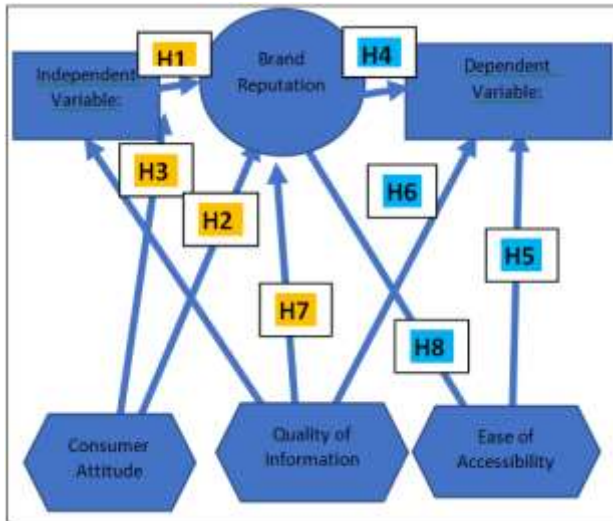
Fig. 2: Research Model developed by authors
Source: developed by authors

4.4 Limitations

As our research is limited in time and space as any research we have conducted the main research activities including the survey in the period from September 2022 to February 2023. As for the location it was limited to AL Qassim region.

5 Research Analysis & Reporting

This study examines the results obtained from data collection and analysis using IBM SPSS and SmartPLS software. In Table 1 we summed up the main demographics.

Profile of Respondents

The most important details in this text are that 78.9% of the respondents are male, while 21.1% are female. A majority of respondents are between the ages of 20-29, followed by 40-49 years (10.1%), 30-39 years (9%), and 50 years and over (1.8%). In terms of marital status, 80% of respondents are single, 18.4% are married, 1.3% are divorced, and 0.2% are widowed. In terms of education levels, 57.9% of the respondents hold a bachelor's degree, 34.6% have completed secondary school, 6.1% have a Ph.D., and 1.3% have a master's degree. In terms of employment, 68.9% are students, 17.5% are private sector employees, 7.7% are civil servants, 3.3% work in other fields, and 2.6% have liberal jobs.

Table 1. Summary of Demographic Information

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	360	78.9
	Female	96	21.1
Age	20 - 29 Years	361	79.2
	40 - 49 Years	46	10.1
	30 - 39 Years	41	9
	50 Years & Over	8	1.8
Marital Status	Single	365	80
	Married	84	18.4
	Divorced	6	1.3
	Widowed	1	0.2
Education Level	Bachelor	264	57.9
	Secondary School	158	34.6
	PhD	28	6.1
	Master	6	1.3
Job	Student	314	68.9
	Private Sector Employee	80	17.5
	Civil Servant	35	7.7
	Other	15	3.3
	Liberal Jobs	12	2.6
Tourism Preference	Domestic Tourism	243	53.3
	International Tourism	213	46.7
Hotel Class	Fiver Stars And Over	141	30.9
	Three -Four Stars	127	27.9
	Unclassified	101	22.1
	One - Two Stars	87	19.1
Social Media	Other	109	23.9
	Snapchat	94	20.6
	Twitter	44	9.6
	Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat	41	9
	Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat	16	3.5
	Twitter, Snapchat	16	3.5
	Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Other	12	2.6
	Facebook	11	2.4
	Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat	11	2.4
	TikTok, Snapchat	10	2.2
	Twitter, TikTok, Snapchat	10	2.2
Platform/ Application	Booking	165	36.2
	Other	163	35.7
	Booking, Other	24	5.3
	Booking, Wego	17	3.7
	Almosafer	15	3.3
	Booking, Almosafer	11	2.4
	Wego	9	2
	Agoda	5	1.1
	Booking, Agoda	4	0.9
	Booking, Agoda, Wego	4	0.9
	Trip Advisor	4	0.9
	Booking, Almosafer, Wego	3	0.7
	Booking, Trivago	3	0.7
	Trivago	3	0.7
	Booking, Trip Advisor, Trivago	2	0.4
	Booking, Trip Advisor, Trivago, Almosafer, Agoda, Wego, Other	2	0.4
	Booking, Trivago, Almosafer	2	0.4

When it comes to tourism preferences, 53.3% prefer domestic tourism, 46.7% favor international tourism, 30.9% choose five stars and over, 27.9% prefer three-four stars, 22.1% opt for unclassified hotels, and 19.1% go for one-two star hotels. In Table 2 below, we will spell out the main components of the descriptive analysis together with Data normality.

Descriptive Analysis

Table 2. Descriptive Analysis and Data Normality

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Std. Error	Kurtosis	Std. Error
Fake eWOM	456	4.5062	.47440	-.119	.114	-1.621	.228
Purchase Intention	456	4.0592	.64218	.025	.114	-.736	.228
Attitude	456	4.1061	.52737	.078	.114	-.356	.228
Brand Reputation	456	4.0614	.57936	.015	.114	-.597	.228
Quality of Information	456	4.0965	.58005	-.036	.114	-.667	.228
Ease of Accessibility	456	4.0468	.60985	.036	.114	-.752	.228

Table 3 presents the descriptive analysis and data normality of the variables in the study, including fake eWOM, purchase intention, attitude, brand reputation, quality of information, and ease of accessibility. The mean scores range from 4.0468 (Ease of Accessibility) to 4.5062 (Fake eWOM), and the standard deviation values range from 0.47440 (Fake eWOM) to 0.64218 (Purchase Intention). Skewness and kurtosis values are considered for assessing data normality, and all variables have skewness and kurtosis values within this acceptable range, indicating that the data are normally distributed.

5.1 Measurement Model

This study developed a measurement model to illustrate the relationships between latent variables and their indicators. The researchers employed SmartPLS software for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and adapted scales from previous literature. The questionnaire was well-designed and underwent rigorous pre-testing. To assess the CFA, three main evaluations were employed: internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The measurement model features a reflective-formative hierarchical research model with a disjoint two-stage approach.

The first-order constructs were based on the standard model, with direct relationships from the first-order constructs of all the exogenous latent variables to the three first-order constructs of the endogenous variable. The second-order exogenous variables included Fake eWOM, Attitude, Brand Reputation, Quality of Information, and Ease of Accessibility. Purchase Intention was considered an endogenous second-order variable. All readings are based on loadings displayed in the measurement model.

Internal Consistency Reliability

The researchers tested three criteria to measure the internal consistency of the data: Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and Dijkstra-Henseler's rho values. Dijkstra-Henseler's rho is considered the more consistent measurement in measuring internal consistency reliability using PLS-SEM. Cronbach's Alpha is the lower level for reliability access, but the value for Cronbach's Alpha was found to be sufficient, [16], [17].

Assessment of the formative measurement models

The study checked for potential collinearity concerns among the first-order constructs by calculating variance inflation factor (VIF) values for all subdimensions. The findings indicated that all formative measurement models were unaffected by collinearity. Additionally, the contribution of each first-order construct to the higher-order constructs was evaluated. The weights of first-order constructs on the higher-order constructs and their significance were inspected using BCa bootstrap confidence intervals. All first-order constructs exhibited positive and significant associations with their respective higher-order constructs, in line with theoretical expectations. Table 3 summarizes the VIF values, weights, and their significance.

Table 3. VIF Values, weights, and their significance

Second-order	First-order constructs	VIF values	Weights	Significance
Brand Reputation	Fake eWOM	1.017	0.445	0.000
	Attitude	1.015	0.274	0.000
Purchase	Brand Reputation	1.021	0.159	0.000
Intention	Ease of Accessibility	1.714	0.489	0.000
	Quality of Information	1.702	0.385	0.000

Table 3 displays the VIF values, weights, and significance for first-order constructs in the second-order model. For Brand Reputation, Fake eWOM and Attitude have VIF values of 1.017 and 1.015, respectively. Purchase Intention, Brand Reputation, Ease of Accessibility, and Quality of Information have VIF values of 1.021, 1.714, and 1.702. Their weights on Purchase Intention are 0.159, 0.489, and 0.385, with 0.000 significance levels.
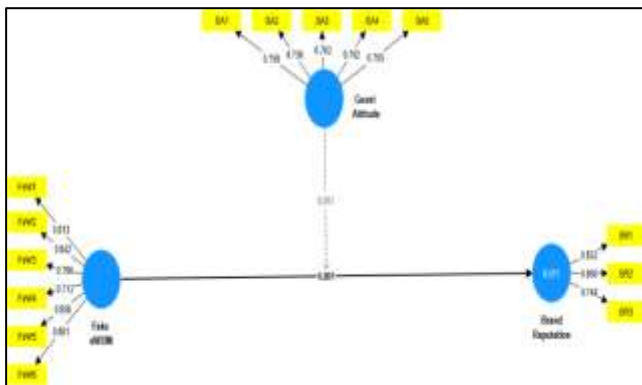

Fig. 3: Measurement Model

Figure 3 above illustrates our Measurement Model.

Structural model

For the structural model, researchers established the links between the construct with a set of paths that explained the hypothesis developed. To access the structural model, the assessment took into account the issue of collinearity among all the predictors, the significance of the hypothesized relationships, and the value of the coefficient of the determinant (R^2), effect size (f^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2). In the Table 4, we find a summary of R^2.

R Square

Table 4. R^2 Summary

	R^2	Cohen (1988)	Chin (1998)	Hair et al. (2014)
Purchase Intention	0.269	moderate	moderate	moderate

The R^2 value for Purchase Intention, as shown in Table 4, is 0.269. According to the guidelines provided, this value is considered moderate, indicating that the model has a moderate predictive ability for the Purchase Intention construct, [17], [18], [19]. In Table 5 below we will show the Effect Size f^2.

Effect Size (f^2)

Table 5. *Effect Size f^2*

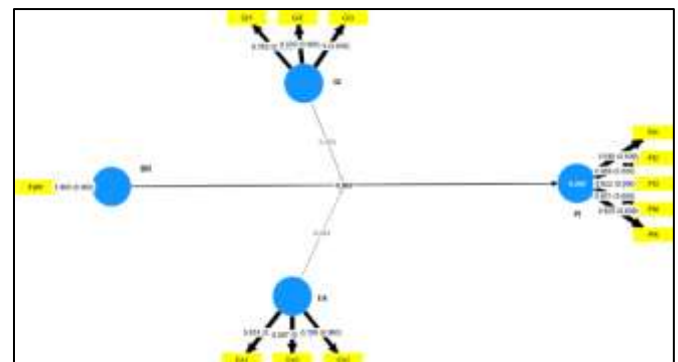|	Purchase Intention	Effect Size (Cohen, 1988)
Brand Reputation	0.015	Small
Ease of Accessibility	0.122	Small
Quality of Information	0.015	Small

Fig. 4: Structural Model

In Figure 4, we explained our Structural Model.

Hypothesis Testing

This study formulated eight direct hypotheses between constructs and an additional hypothesis to examine the mediating effect. A one-tailed test was used for five direct hypotheses and a two-tailed test for the mediating hypothesis. T-statistics were generated using the bootstrapping method to assess the significance level of these hypotheses. Table 6 summarizes the Direct Hypothesis Testing Results:

Table 6. Direct Hypothesis Testing

Hyp	Link	Beta	SD	T Value	P Values	Decision
H1	Fake eWOM -> Brand Reputation	0.012	0.037	0.031	0.975	Not Supported
H2	Attitude -> Brand Reputation	0.712	0.027	25.873	0.00	**Supported***
H4	Brand Reputation -> Purchase Intention	0.107	0.040	2.704	0.07	**Supported***
H5	Ease of Accessibility -> Purchase Intention	0.390	0.055	7.059	0.00	**Supported***
H6	Quality of Information-> Purchase Intention	0.138	0.056	2.395	0.017	**Supported***
Moderating Effects						
H3	Attitude x Fake eWOM -> Brand Reputation	0.049	0.036	1.438	0.151	Not Supported
H7	Quality of Information x Brand Reputation -> Purchase Intention	0.055	0.052	1.080	0.280	Not Supported
H8	Ease of Accessibility x Brand Reputation -> Purchase Intention	-0.107	0.054	2.045	0.041	**Supported***

Note: Significance Value = <0.05***

Table 6 presents the results of direct hypothesis testing for this study, which includes beta coefficients, standard deviations, t-values, p-values, and the decision to support or reject each hypothesis.

6   Results Discussion
Based on the Data Analysis researchers can summarize the research findings as follows:
1. Fake eWOM does not have a significant impact on Brand Reputation.
2. Attitude significantly influences Brand Reputation.
3. Brand Reputation significantly influences Purchase Intention.
4. Ease of Accessibility significantly affects Purchase Intention.
5. Quality of Information significantly influences Purchase Intention.
6. The interaction between Attitude and Fake eWOM does not significantly affect Brand Reputation in the context of this study.
7. The interaction between the Quality of Information and Brand Reputation does not significantly affect Purchase Intention in the context of this study.

8. The interaction between Ease of Accessibility and Brand Reputation significantly influences Purchase Intention in this study.

Although generally speaking this research results seem to comfort previous studies as seen in the literature review and theoretical framework, one striking surprise relates to our main hypothesis i.e. how fake eWOM is impacting Brand Reputation. When it comes to Customer purchase intentions, many factors proved to impact significantly namely Brand Reputation, Attitude, Ease of Accessibility, and quality of information result which was expected from the outset. So one can assume that if there is some impact of eWOM on Brand Reputation it is either insignificant statistically or of indirect nature owing to some intermediary variables that should be investigated eventually in the future.

It seems that eWOM in our research does not have the expected significant impact on Brand Reputation which was our main hypothesis. This might be explained either by the weak internet penetration /digitalization of the respondent population which is far from the reality in the Saudi context. Or by the strength of the Marketing/ Promotion campaigning of the Tourism actors to counterattack potential fake eWOM. Alternatively, the type of booking in the Saudi context might be the explanation as most nationals at least as far as Domestic destinations are concerned would prefer a walking-in direct booking rather than eBooking especially in the case of apart-hotels which are generally preferred to hotels due to the large family size and/ or affordable prices.

When it comes to Customer Purchase Intentions, no surprise as all of the Brand Reputation, Attitude, Ease of Accessibility, and quality of information are impacting significantly the customer.

7   Limitations & Future Research
More studies need to further investigate the possible impacts of Fake eWOM on Brand Reputation in other geographical zones (comparative studies) as well as to measure exactly the ratio of eWOM to the WOM itself as it seems from our present research that may be the traditional WOM is still predominant in shaping Brand Reputation but could not be singled out given our hypothesis setting, [20].

However, all traditional (not electronic) influencers are major players in directing the

customer purchasing Compass which confirms previous studies.

To conclude and to our humble knowledge, this field of Marketing/ Management studies is yet at its first steps especially when we focus on the possible impacts of Digital Marketing/ Social Media Marketing on the eCustomer while consuming Tourism products in this booming region (KSA) with high incomers.

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