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The influence of social media on tourists' intention to return: a study in Can Tho city, Vietnam

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A B S T R A C T

The research objective is to determine the impact of social media on tourists' intention to return: research in Can Tho city, Vietnam, on that basis, proposes some managerial implications to enhance tourists' intention to return. The article uses qualitative research methods combined with quantitative research. Qualitative research conducted by consulting 03 experts to determine the electronic word-of-mouth factor affecting tourists' intention to return, determining the research model, and adjusting the scales to form a questionnaire for use in official research. Quantitative research assessed scale reliability using Cronbach's Alpha, evaluating the measurement model and structural equation modeling. The data analysis results have identified three independent factors affecting tourists' intention to return: Electronic Word of Mouth, Destination Image, and Attitudes Toward Destination. At the same time, destination image and attitude towards the destination impact tourists' intention to return. Based on the research, some solutions are proposed to improve tourists' intention to return.

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1. Introduction

Tourism promotes regional development and generates revenue, income, employment, and growth for destination governments (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Understanding the factors influencing tourists' intention to revisit is crucial in increasing tourism. Destination image has a significant impact on tourist behavior (Bigne et al., 2001; Lee et al., 2005), and (e-WOM) through social media platforms has become important (Kim et al., 2017). There are more than 5.04 billion Internet users globally, accounting for 62.3% of the population, and Vietnam has more than 70 million social media users (Digital, 2024). Social Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram have greatly influenced people's decisions and communication. The development of social media has strongly impacted consumer behavior, especially in the tourism industry. Tourists use social media to search for information and make decisions about tourism products, services, and destinations (Truong et al., 2022). Studies (Jaya & Prianthara, 2020; Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020) show that social media, especially e-WOM, positively affects travel intentions. According to Chun and Suwannee (2018), people who frequently use social media will have more information about tourist destinations, increasing travel intentions. In addition, with the development of e-WOM, many businesses have shifted from traditional advertising to social media, as tourists now trust and seek information from these platforms rather than traditional media (Cheunkamon et al., 2020; Luo & Zhong, 2015). The tourism industry, characterized by high-value products requiring significant customer participation (Traylor, 1981), has changed tourists' behavior and decisions by searching for information from social media platforms (Leung et al., 2013). With the vigorous development of the tourism industry in recent years, Can Tho City is becoming a popular destination for domestic and foreign tourists? However, there is still a lack of in-depth studies on the influence of social media on tourists' intention to revisit this city. Therefore, the study “The influence of social media on tourists' intention to return:

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a study in Can Tho city, Vietnam" aims to provide valuable information for tourism development and help tourism agencies and businesses build effective marketing strategies, attracting tourists to return and increasing loyalty to the destination.

2. Theoretical background and research methods

2.1 Theoretical Background

Tourist intention to revisit: This concept refers to the ability or decision of tourists to revisit a destination in the future after having experienced a previous trip. This is an important factor in tourism behavior research because tourists' intention to revisit reflects the satisfaction level and relates to the destination's loyalty and ability to attract long-term customers (Ya et al., 2015). Ran et al. (2021) that tourists' intention to revisit strongly indicates a destination's success in retaining customers and building a loyal customer base. Service quality, destination impression, local image, and social media can strongly influence this decision (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Furthermore, psychological factors, emotional connections, and positive impressions from previous trips also play an important role in forming future revisit intentions (Kozak, 2001). Social networks: According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), social networks are online platforms that allow users to (1) establish public or semi-public profiles within a restricted setting and (2) interact with other users while maintaining a list of their connections, and (3) explore and view their connections as well as those made by other users within the platform. Social networks are web-based applications that allow users to create, share, and transmit information (Hoffman & Novak, 2012). Today's popular social networking sites are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, etc.

Social media: Social media is a group of applications via the Internet; internet users publicly update the content, which is shared and spread quickly (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Besides, De Souza and Machado (2017) said that social media is a powerful information exchange channel where users can quickly access large amounts of data that suit their needs. According to Richard and Guppy (2014), social networks are proliferating, from a platform with a small number of users to an increasingly popular number of users. In short, social media is formed when social networks exist; through social networks, information is widely spread to reach the recipients.

Electronic word of mouth: Chu and Kim (2011) argue that messages will be easily spread through social media to many users, as information can be relayed quickly. Chueng and Thadani (2012) argue that technological advancements allow consumers to share information about products/services through social media. Hennig et al. (2004) state that electronic word of mouth is any positive or negative statement from potential, current, or former customers about a product/business made available to people and organizations via the Internet. Electronic word of mouth is a means of social media through which consumers can create messages and exchange and share personal content and opinions via the Internet. Word of mouth theory: Pan and Crotts (2016) argue that information sources conveyed by friends and relatives give the recipient a more trustworthy feeling than information conveyed by marketers because the information from the marketer is to introduce and promote the products/services they sell. Mattila (2001) argues that customers who are loyal to a product/service will receive positive feedback on other subjects. Managers can use this advantage to help information about the product/service spread effectively to other consumers as positive advice to customers. Theory of Reasoned Action: Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), in the reasoned action model, attitudes and subjective norms are also important components that influence consumer behavior. This attitude represents consumers' perception of product/service attributes because when making a purchase decision, customers tend to pay attention to valuable attributes and the importance of those attributes.

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB): Accordingly, Ajzen (1991) overcame and improved the limitations of the theory of reasoned action model by mentioning the third factor of perceived behavioral control. This attitude is expressed through customers' positive or negative beliefs about the product/service the business provides to the market. However, the planned behavior model also has certain limitations because this model is limited in predicting consumer behavior (Werner, 2004).

The Technology Acceptance Model was proposed by Davis (1986). Accordingly, the technology acceptance model has influenced consumers' decisions when adopting a new technology. Components such as attitude towards use, intention to use, and usage behavior are explained similarly to the theory of reasoned action model. The theories of electronic word of mouth, theory of reasoned action, theory of planned behavior, and the technology acceptance model show that the contributions of those around them will influence consumers' intentions, consumers will filter these contributions, and helpful information will be consulted and used to make decisions.

2.2 Literature Review

Amal and Abdulrahman (2013) state that the significant growth of online social networks has significantly expanded the potential impact of social media on consumer purchasing decisions. Thus, Internet shoppers are influenced by social media more than online

forums when purchasing products online. Ngo (2019) studied the influence of electronic word of mouth with images on tourists' destination choice behavior at Ly Son Island. Prayogo and Kusumawardhani (2017) determined the relationship between destination image, service quality, electronic word of mouth, and destination revisit intention at Sabang Island, Indonesia. The results of electronic word of mouth, destination image, and quality positively impact destination return intention to visit. Arıcı and Güçer (2018) found that in addition to the impact of electronic word-of-mouth on tourists' intention to return to a destination. Nguyen and Phi (2024) analyzed the impact of social media on domestic tourists' intention to choose Nha Trang as a tourist destination. The analysis showed three factors affecting tourists' intention to choose a destination: information quality, usefulness, and word-of-mouth on social media. Andilas et al. (2019) aimed to examine the relationship between word-of-mouth via Instagram, destination image, and intention to visit theme cafes in Bali, and the results showed that word-of-mouth via Instagram has an impact on destination image to visit theme cafes in Bali. Winarta et al. (2017) demonstrated that electronic word of mouth significantly impacts tourist attitudes, social influence, behavioral control, and travel intentions. Truong et al. (2023) determined the influence of social media on the travel intentions of Zoomers (Generation Z) tourists in Vietnam. The research findings indicated that four social media factors positively impact the travel intentions of Generation Z tourists in Vietnam, ranked in descending order: information quality, social media advertising, and word of mouth. Based on the theoretical basis, the study aims to find the relationship between electronic word of mouth and tourists' intention to return to their destination.

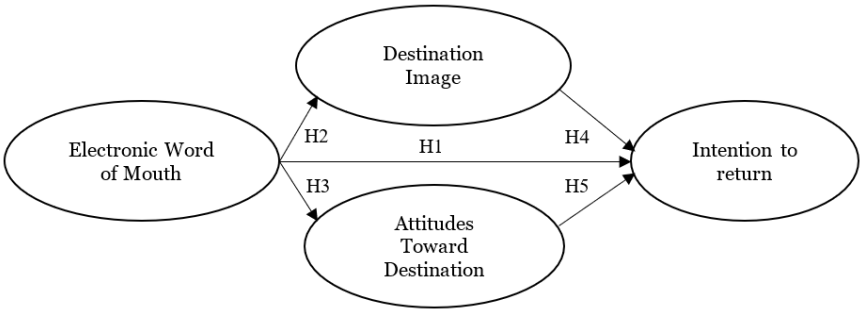

Fig. 1. Proposed research model

Proposed hypotheses:

H_1: *Electronic word of mouth influences tourists' intention to return*.
H_2: *Electronic word of mouth influences destination image.*
H_3: *Electronic word of mouth influences destination attitude.*
H_4: *Destination image influences tourist intention to return.*
H_5: *Destination attitude influences tourist intention to return.*

2.3 Research methodology

The article employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods:

Qualitative research: conducted by consulting 03 experts to determine the electronic word-of-mouth factor affecting tourists' intention to return, determining the research model, and adjusting the scales to form a questionnaire for use in official research. Quantitative research measures and quantifies the relationship between different factors by applying statistical analysis tools using a 05-level Likert scale to measure the value of observed variables. Survey tourists visiting 10 typical tourist attractions in Can Tho city including (My Khanh Eco-tourism Village, Cai Rang Floating Market, Ong Pagoda, Binh Thuy Ancient House, Truc Lam Phuong Nam Zen Monastery, Ninh Kieu Wharf, Bang Lang Stork Garden, Con Son, Song Hau Park and Ninh Kieu Night Market) using a convenient non-probability method; the survey time was in February 2025. However, the study surveyed various research subjects, and each tourist group only selected 1 survey subject. The survey results reached 350 valid survey questionnaires. After being collected from the survey subjects, the data was encoded, cleaned, and analyzed through the following steps: Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, exploratory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the model and research hypotheses.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Descriptive statistics

Gender: The proportion of men (52.6%) is higher than that of women (47.4%), indicating that more men participate in the survey, although the difference is not too significant.

Age: The 26-35 age group accounts for the highest proportion (36.6%), reflecting that this age group has a great need for travel, while the over-45 age group has the lowest proportion (14.3%).

Occupation: Civil servants and public employees account for the highest proportion (31.4%), indicating that they have many opportunities to travel, followed by business (28.6%) and students (22.0%).

Using social media: YouTube (31.1%) is the most popular social network for finding travel information, followed by Facebook (23.1%) and other platforms such as Instagram (17.4%) and TikTok (16.0%).

Purpose of travel: Sightseeing and relaxation are the most popular (45.1%), followed by business travel (31.4%) and visiting relatives (23.4%). Sources of information about tourist destinations: Information from relatives and friends (38.9%) is the primary source, followed by social networks (30.3%), and media such as travel agencies (16.9%) are less commonly used.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

	Criteria	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Female	166	47.4
	Male	184	52.6
Age	18 - 25 years old	105	30.0
	26 - 35 years old	128	36.6
	36 - 45 years old	67	19.1
	Over 45 years old	50	14.3
Job	Civil servant, Public servant	110	31.4
	Students	77	22.0
	Business	100	28.6
	Other	63	18.0
Using Social Networks	Facebook	81	23.1
	Youtube	109	31.1
	Instgram	61	17.4
	Tiktok	56	16.0
	Twitter	43	12.3
Purpose of travel	Work related	110	31.4
	Sightseeing, vacation	158	45.1
	Visit relatives	82	23.4
	Other	18	5.10
	Newspapers, magazines	31	8.90
Source of information about tourist attractions	Social network	106	30.3
	Relatives/friends	136	38.9
	Travel agency	59	16.9

3.2 Testing the reliability of the scale

The results of the scale reliability test (Table 2) indicate that all scales have a total correlation coefficient above 0.5, which is considered good. Additionally, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the overall variable is higher than that of the observed variable, and the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the observed variable exceeds 0.6, demonstrating that the scale is reliable (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 2
Reliability testing of the scale

Scale	Observation variable	Mean	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted	Cronbach's Alpha
WoM	4	3.34	0.589 - 0.653	0.735 - 0.766	0.803
Image	4	3.37	0.654 - 0.701	0.785 - 0.807	0.840
Attitudes	4	3.25	0.631 - 0.735	0.786 - 0.830	0.847
Return	3	3.37	0.680 - 0.749	0.734 - 0.802	0.840

Evaluation of the measurement model: The outer loading coefficient of the observed variables from (0.797-0.894) are all > 0.7; the observed variables have good significance (Hair et al., 2017). Reliability of the scale: The results show that all factor structures have good reliability when Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient from (0.803 - 0.847) and the composite reliability coefficient (rho_c) from (0.871 - 0.904) are both greater than 0.8. The scale convergence is based on the average variance extracted index AVE. The scales with values from (0.671-791) are all > 0.5; the scale has convergent values.

Table 3
Scale reliability

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
WoM	0.803	0.811	0.871	0.676
Image	0.848	0.852	0.898	0.688
Attitude	0.841	0.847	0.893	0.758
Return	0.840	0.84	0.904	0.628

3.3 Structural model evaluation

The assessment of discrimination using the AVE coefficient reveals that the square root of the total AVE values for Attitude (0.822), Image (0.830), Return (0.871), and WoM (0.792) are all higher than the total correlation values between each factor and the others. This indicates that the research sample maintains good discrimination among the measurement factors (Hair et al., 2017). Assessing discrimination by Heterotrait-Monotrait Radio Index (HTMT): The results show that all HTMT values with values from (0.510 - 0.840) are less than 0.85; thus, discrimination is guaranteed.

Multicollinearity: VIF values with values from (1.543 - 2.277) < 3. Therefore, no multicollinearity phenomenon exists (Hair et al., 2017). The assessment of the structural model's suitability indicates that the SRMR index of 0.057 is less than 0.08, suggesting that the model is deemed appropriate (Hair et al., 2017). The R-squared values for the coefficient of determination show that the Return variable has the highest value at 0.582, while the Image variable has an R-squared value of 0.166. This means that the variables in the model explain 58.2% of the variation in the Return component.

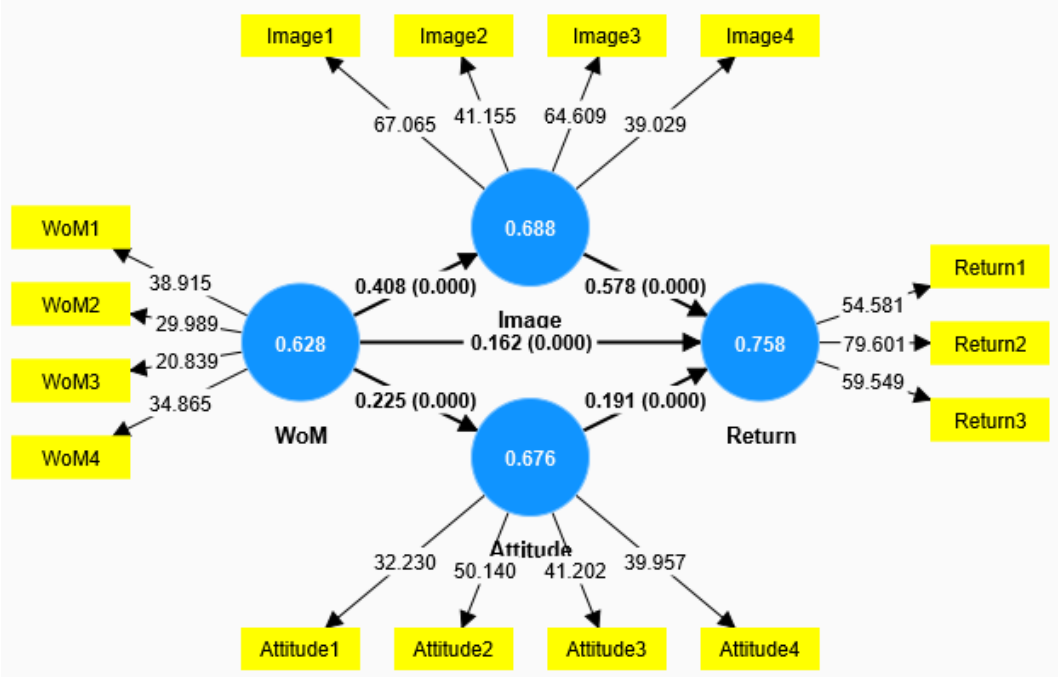

Fig. 2. Path coefficient results of PLS-SEM structural model

Direct impact: Path coefficient analysis results show that the direct impact relationship has a p-value less than 0.01, which means that the impact is statistically significant (Hair et al., 2017). The order of impact from strong to weak is: Image -> Return (0.578), WoM -> Image (0.408), WoM → Attitude (0.225), Attitude → Return (0.191), WoM → Return (0.162).

Table 4
Bootstrap estimation results of the structural model

Relationship	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T	P values	Result
WoM → Attitude	0.225	0.229	0.052	4.360	0.000	Accept
WoM → Image	0.408	0.411	0.046	8.925	0.000	Accept
WoM → Return	0.162	0.161	0.034	4.760	0.000	Accept
Attitude → Return	0.191	0.191	0.040	4.798	0.000	Accept
Image → Return	0.578	0.577	0.034	16.971	0.000	Accept

Indirect effect: The analysis results show evidence to accept the hypothesis (p-value < 0.01). The mediating role of Destination Image, Attitudes Toward Destination, and Intention to return is highly appreciated.

Table 5
Indirect Impact of Electronic Word of Mouth on Intention to Return

Intermediary relationship	(O)	(M)	(STDEV)	T	P
WoM → Image → Return	0.2353	0.23713	0.029	7.911	0.000
WoM → Attitude → Return	0.0429	0.043591	0.012	3.314	0.000

3.4 Discussion

The results of SEM analysis show that the factors with the most substantial impact on Intention to return are destination image, electronic word of mouth, and attitudes toward destination, respectively. In addition, all path coefficients are positive, indicating that the direction of impact between the factors is positive.

Hypothesis H1: e-WOM influences tourists' intention to return (p = 0.000). To strengthen the effect of e-WOM on tourists' intention to return, tourism agencies and businesses in the industry should focus on developing effective social media marketing strategies. This could involve encouraging tourists to share their experiences on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok. By doing so, they can motivate the spread of positive information, ultimately attracting more tourists and encouraging repeat visits.

Hypothesis H2: Electronic Word of Mouth Influences Destination Image (p = 0.000). To maintain and develop a destination image through electronic word of mouth, tourist destinations in the city need to take advantage of social media platforms such as blogs, YouTube, or websites specializing in destination reviews. Building cooperative relationships with influential influencers or KOLs in the tourism industry will help build a positive image and attract the attention of potential tourists.

Hypothesis H3: Electronic Word of Mouth Influences Destination Attitude (p = 0.000). To enhance positive attitudes towards destinations, tourist destinations need to focus on building promotional campaigns about cultural, historical, and local characteristics on social media platforms. Compelling stories about real travel experiences can be shared through short videos, vivid images, and detailed articles about prominent tourist destinations in Can Tho.

Hypothesis H4: Destination Image Influences Tourist Intention to return (p = 0.000). Tourism agencies must ensure that the destination image is constantly updated and improved to reflect what tourists want to experience. Focusing on factors such as infrastructure, service quality, entertainment activities, and unique tourism services will help improve the The image of a destination from the perspective of travelers. In addition, organizing special events or promotions will help refresh the destination's image, encouraging tourists to return in the future.

Hypothesis H5: Destination Attitude Influences Tourist Intention to return (p = 0.000). To change and improve positive attitudes towards the destination, the tourist destination needs to provide excellent and memorable experiences for tourists throughout their journey. Collecting feedback from visitors after their trip will help to adjust services, increase satisfaction, and improve visitors' attitudes towards the destination. Furthermore, creating reward and incentive programs for returning customers will drive visitors' loyalty to the destination, contributing to long-term engagement.

4. Conclusions

The study “The influence of social media on tourists' intention to return: a study in Can Tho city, Vietnam” has pointed out important factors affecting tourists' intention to revisit, with outstanding results from the analysis of the linear structure model. Factors such as Destination image, Electronic word of mouth, and Attitude towards the destination strongly influence tourists' intention to revisit, and the path coefficients all show a positive relationship between the factors. In summary, social media, especially electronic word of mouth, significantly impacts tourists' intention to return to a decision. Based on the research, some solutions are proposed to improve tourists' intention to return. Effective promotion strategies and attentive care for tourists will create a strong destination image and attract tourists to return to Can Tho next time.

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