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The influence of publicity, e-WOM, and destination personality on visit intention to Wakatobi national park

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A B S T R A C T

Although destination publicity is widely used in tourism marketing, there is a lack of studies specifically examining its role in national park tourism. Thus, this study looks into the effects of publicity and electronic word, of, mouth (e-WOM) on tourists' visit intention to Wakatobi National Park, an internationally recognized marine destination known for its commitment to sustainable tourism. Grounded in the stimulus–organism–response (S, O, R) framework, the proposed model includes five constructs: publicity, destination personality, e-WOM, destination preference, and visit intention. Responses from 208 potential tourists were gathered through an online survey and analysed through structural equation modelling. The findings indicate that publicity enhances destination personality significantly, which further enhances the intention to visit. E-WOM has a direct impact on destination preference and visit intention. Destination preference has no impact on visit intention, implying that the impact of affective evaluation may not be enough to trigger sustainable visits without the presence of cognitions and social validation. The findings emphasize the strategic application of non, commercial communication, particularly credibility, based publicity and peer, generated content, to generate symbolic, ethical, and desirable destination images. This work contributes to the literature on sustainable tourism by addressing how authenticity, based destination branding and community stories can contribute to the creation of environmentally friendly tourist conduct. The practical contributions indicate that the tourism authorities should spend on publicity and online interaction to co, construct destination personality as per the spirit of conservation.

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1. Introduction

The National Park is an attractive tourist destination because of its unique natural beauty and abundant biodiversity (Wang, 2012; Wei et al., 2020). National Parks are often the main attraction for tourists looking for a different natural tourism experience and wanting to explore the underwater world's beauty. Besides offering a pleasant tourism experience, National Parks also play an essential role in preserving marine biodiversity and the surrounding ecosystem (Dudley et al., 2011). This makes the National Park an environmentally friendly and responsible tourist destination (Aryal et al., 2019; Su et al., 2020). In addition, National Parks also positively impact the local economy by providing opportunities for local people to be involved in the tourism industry, such as becoming tour guides, lodging providers, or souvenir traders (Akyeampong, 2011;

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Healy, 1994; Novelli & Gebhardt, 2007). Therefore, a National Park as a tourism destination can provide positive benefits for the environment, local communities, and tourists who come to enjoy its natural beauty (Purnomo et al., 2020; Sica et al., 2020).

This study examines tourist behaviour concerning national parks. Prior studies pay attention to this field. For example, Seong et al. (2021) state that visit intention to national parks depends on coving behaviour, while coving behaviour is influenced by attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control. Choirisa et al. (2021) add that the destination image and attitude are essential in arousing the intention of tourists to visit the national park. Moreover, according to Neuvonen et al. (2010), revisiting national parks depends on place dependence, place identity, and social bonds. Boit and Doh (2013) claim that a key success to push revisit intention to national parks is tourist satisfaction. However, although many studies have observed tourist behaviour related to national parks, using several variables as predictors, such as publicity, destination personality, and destination preference, it still needs to be found. For this reason, this study examines the effect of publicity, e-WOM, destination personality, and destination preference on visit intention to national parks.

Generally, there are different types of national parks, including marine, land, and joint national parks. Marine national parks are conservation areas that aim to protect marine biodiversity and its ecosystem. The government protects this area from various activities that can harm the environment, such as irresponsible fishing, waste disposal, or other activities that can disrupt the balance of the marine ecosystem. Examples of marine national parks in Indonesia are Wakatobi National Park, Bunaken National Park, Kepulauan Seribu, and Karimunjawa National Park. On the other hand, land or mainland national parks are conservation areas that aim to protect biodiversity and land ecosystems. This area protects flora, fauna, and their natural habitat from various threats such as deforestation, forest fires, poaching, or other human activities that can damage land ecosystems. Examples of land national parks in Indonesia are Mount Leuser National Park, Komodo National Park, and Bromo Tengger Semeru National Park. Lastly, joint national parks are conservation areas covering land and sea areas that the government protects to protect biodiversity and its ecosystem. This area protects flora and fauna on land and in the sea, as well as their natural habitat, from various threats such as deforestation, forest fires, poaching, and other human activities that can damage land and sea ecosystems. Examples of land and sea national parks in Indonesia are Komodo National Park and Ujung Kulon. We chose Wakatobi National Park as the setting for the current study, which is one of 54 national parks in Indonesia (Kataomed, 2019).

Specifically, this study chose the setting of a national park as the research object. Wakatobi National Park is a marine conservation area in the Wakatobi District, Southeast Sulawesi Province, Indonesia. Wakatobi National Park has an area of around 1.39 million hectares and includes marine waters of the Wakatobi archipelago and its surroundings, including the three most significant clusters of coral reefs in the world, namely Wang, wangi, Kaledipa, Tomia, and Biongko. Wakatobi National Park is known for its rich marine biodiversity, with 942 species of reef fish and 750 species of molluscs (Raharjo et al., 2019). Besides, Wakatobi, along with ten other regions in Indonesia, were designated as national priority tourism destinations by the Indonesian government (Fadriani et al., 2021).

2. Literature review

2.1 Publicity

Publicity is the spreading of news not necessarily sponsored through paid advertising with the aim of creating public knowledge or public awareness. Publicity, in the context of tourism, is used as an umbrella device for building perceptions about destinations in a strategic way through management of trustworthy, not for sale mediums like press reports, public relations, as well as influencer commentary. According to Grunig and Hung, Baesecke (2015), publicity is an image enhancing device helping in establishing public faith and corporate image. Coupled with that, Milewicz and Herbig (1996) emphasized publicity as an indicator in the marketplace, a device that distinguishes services or places in a crowded marketplace. Contrarily, as opposed to straight promotions from advertising, publicity encourages branding through subtle means via non, direct pathways, targeting public believability and media amplification (Gardner & Shuman, 1986).

Castronovo and Huang (2012) highlighted how publicity is especially potent in the digital age, as social media as well as user generated content emphasize messaging authenticity as well as engagement. Joachimsthaler and Aaker (1997) likewise maintained that publicity can efficiently replace mass media in targeting niche as well as global publics through edited narratives. Current scholarship follows through with the same reasoning, finding that online publicity is involved in co, creating destination image, especially when integrated with influencer marketing as well as digital narrative plans (Apuke, 2018). Publicity campaigns are therefore central in creating destination personality, an antecedent of perceived emotional as well as symbolic qualities of an environment (Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009).

The correlation between publicity and destination branding is also of particular importance when destinations aim for increased appeal with limited marketing budgets. Publicity can also bring about not only initial awareness, but emotional resonance with potential visitors (Chen & Phou, 2013). As noted, merging publicity with wider marketing communication adds cohesion to the campaigns as well as stakeholder alignment (Smith & Taylor, 2004). However, gaps in empirical work exist with respect to how uniquely different types of publicity – earned media, digital advocacy, or editorial placements – impact destination personality or travel intent. Filling in such gaps, Hultman et al. (2017) confirmed that destination

personality fit in addition to advertising awareness predicts tourists' attitudes and behavioural reactions. This connects with sustainable tourism goals, wherein image management as well as cultural compatibility take precedence in promoting longer term visitation without the commodification of local cultural resources.

2.2 Publicity and Destination Personality

Publicity contributes significantly towards the development of destination personality through credible, paid coverage that reinforces the destination's symbolic as well as emotional features. While traditional advertising from agencies is primarily based on rational appeal, publicity generally emphasizes stories, media attention, as well as third party endorsements that have a greater likelihood of generating affective responses (Castronovo & Huang, 2012; Grunig & Hung, Baesecke, 2015). These stories enable target audiences to develop notions about the destination's character, including being adventurous, authentic, or serene (Joachimsthaler & Aaker, 1997). Additionally, publicity is generally of higher trust value as an earned coverage, which adds legitimacy to the associated destination traits (Apuke, 2018). Destination managers, media, and tourists co, creating stories provide the symbolic vocabulary that shapes the destination's personality in the long term.

Under sustainable tourism conditions, in which destinations aim to position their image as being environmentally responsible, culturally authentic, and beneficial for the local community, the function of public relations is even more strategic. When sustainability messages are consistently integrated in public relations activities, destination characteristics like sincerity, responsibility, and capability are consolidated as the destination's core dimensions of destination personality, promoting tourist identification as well as trust. Hence, public relations should be an important antecedent of destination personality, especially in environments in which authenticity and credibility play key roles in destination appeal.

H_1: *Publicity plays an effective role in the development of destination personality.*

2.3 Destination Personality

Destination personality emerged as an important concept in the realm of tourist studies as an extension of brand personality, describing human, like characteristics of tourist destinations (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Joachimsthaler & Aaker, 1997). The concept presents an attractive mechanism for differentiation in competitive scenarios in which the destinations possess similar functional characteristics (Pan et al., 2017; Xie & Lee, 2013). Destination personality that is appropriately developed can contribute to increased emotional involvement, tourist satisfaction, and customer loyalty (Papadimitriou et al., 2015; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011), which eventually translates into renewed behavioural intentions like revisit as well as word, of, mouth positive recommendations (Chi et al., 2018; Hultman et al., 2015).

Destination personality is generally made up of such dimensions as sincerity, excitement, sophistication, competence, and ruggedness (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Xie & Lee, 2013). These qualities are not merely constructed through marketing messages, but also arise from tourists' cultural interpretations as well as their affective experiences with a destination (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2017). Of particular importance is the congruence of tourists' self, concept with perceived destination personality found to play an important role in tourist attitudes as well as pro, environmental behavioural intentions (Sop & Kozak, 2019; Wu & Lai, 2022). Furthermore, linguistic diversity is found to promote feelings of sophistication in DP, thus enhancing tourist attitudes as well as visit intentions (Chen et al., 2024). Also, studies have shown that destination image is commonly an antecedent of destination personality, while the synergy between destination image and destination personality can amplify their impacts on tourist behavioural responses (Papadimitriou et al., 2015; Souiden et al., 2017). From the sustainability viewpoint, developing an integrated destination personality with alignment with local culture, history, and environmental sustainability can create greater tourist identity, satisfaction, and loyalty, promoting long term sustainability of tourism development (Ren & Xu, 2024). Destination personality is therefore not merely an important strategic marketing construct, but also an indispensable element in promoting sustainable tourism practices.

2.4 Destination Personality and Visit Intention

Destination personality is the collection of symbolic, emotive, and human, like qualities of a destination, which affect how tourists emotionally connect with and judge a destination (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Xie & Lee, 2013). Where a destination is perceived as being honest, exciting, or competent, identification and affective attachment are evoked, leading in turn to behavioural responses in the form of intention to visit, revisit, or recommend (Papadimitriou et al., 2015; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). DP thus serves as an in, depth bridge between destination image and tourist behaviour, explaining why some destinations are of greater appeal for particular traveller profiles.

Several studies have established that visitors prefer to visit destinations whose personality matches their own self, concept through what is termed as self, congruity (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2017). Specifically, characteristics such as sincerity and responsibility, which are common with sustainable tourist destinations, have tendencies for building trust, perceived value, and quality experiences, all towards increased visit intent (Chi et al., 2018; Hultman et al., 2015). This is especially the case for environmentally responsible or culturally authentic positioning of destinations like Wakatobi National Park, where personality traits can strengthen the affective connection between visitor and destination.

Hence, when a destination is successfully infused with positive personality characteristics through public relations and branding communication, not only is its brand equity increased, but its role must be recognized accordingly in determining the traveller's behavioural intent. On the grounds of such theoretical and empirical foundations, the ensuing hypothesis is formulated as follows:

H_2: *Destination personality contributes positively and significantly to visit intent.*

2.5 e, Word, of, Mouth

The rapid growth of electronic word, of, mouth (e-WOM) has drastically changed the context of tourist marketing, serving as a key driver of tourist behaviour. Described as user, generated content that shares customers' views of travel experiences, e-WOM is an influential source of consumer purchase intentions, thanks to its immediacy, availability, and perceived truthfulness. Its applicability is heightened in the tourism industry, as services are intangible, involvement is high, and they tend to carry risk and uncertainty. Online reviews in such an environment function as an incentive for reducing risk, allowing tourists to make informed choices.

The theoretical development of e-WOM highlights its deviation from word, of, mouth. While face to, face interactions are limited in both time and space, e-WOM is both informative and emotive in its value to users. Tran and Kumar (2024) have established the major drivers of e-WOM as quality, credibility, usefulness, and adoption, which together affect tourist destination choices. These authors found hotel websites as the highest source of influence in adopting e-WOM, with social media as an influence that is similar for both age and experience.

With regard to behavioural consequences, various studies have shown that e-WOM positively impacts tourists' trust, attitudes, and eventually their purchase or revisit intent. Jalilvand and Samiei (2012), using the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), found that e-WOM had a notable impact on subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, as well as travel intent, thereby justifying its use in tourist decision, making. Additionally, Khan et al. (2024) pointed out the mediating role of brand equity in the path linking e-WOM with purchase intent in the Indian clothing context with suggested parallels in the case of tourism situations where, like in apparel, brand trust plays an equivalent role.

Cross culturally, Jyoti et al. (2024) showed that although e-WOM significantly impacts both Indian and Vietnamese tourist purchase intentions, its magnitude as well as mechanism could be different depending on cultural context. That such an impact is being found in Indian as well as Vietnamese context emphasizes the importance of culturally attuned e-WOM strategies in international tourism marketing.

2.6 e-WOM and Visit Intention

e-WOM consists of positive or negative word of mouth generated by potential, current, or lapsed customers regarding the destination or product, which is made accessible to large numbers of individuals and institutions through the internet (Hennig, Thurau et al., 2004). Within the tourism context, where experiential features are not testable until purchase can take place, e-WOM is an important source of social confirmation and behavioural cues. Tourists use more and more frequently online critiques, social media content, blogs, and online assessments as surrogates for individual experience when choosing new or far, flung destinations.

The theoretical underpinning for the relationship between e-WOM and visit intention is grounded in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (2012), assuming that individuals process information through either a central or peripheral path depending on the perceived credibility and relevance of the source. The e-WOM operates through both routes, delivering elaborate content for those who are inclined to critique, as well as serving as an indicator of familiarity for other individuals (Jyoti et al., 2024). Studies have consistently found positive e-WOM to improve tourists' destination attitudes, build trust, as well as favour their visit intent (Jalilvand et al., 2012; Jyoti et al., 2024).

Additionally, e-WOM is becoming deeply embedded in the sustainability story of destinations. For instance, user, generated content promoting sustainable practice, community involvement, or cultural protection can enhance the sustainable appeal of the destination as well as foster conscious visitation. To this extent, e-WOM not only conveys information, but creates interpretations as well as facilitates collective judgment. As such, those destinations with the ability to persuasively motivate as well as curate favourable e-WOM are more likely to generate visit intent, especially from active online as well as socially oriented traveller segments.

H_3: *Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) positively and significantly impacts on visit intention.*

2.7 e-WOM and Destination Preference

Destination preference is the cognitive and affective inclination of a tourist toward a destination based on internal drivers as well as external sources of information. It is an important antecedent of destination choice and behavioural intent where options are numerous and differentiation is nuanced. For such situations, e-WOM is considered an effective driver of

preference formation through offering peer, centric, experience, based knowledge about the characteristics of a destination (Musa et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024).

As opposed to traditional advertising, which can be perceived as being biased or overly contrived, e-WOM provides an informal, authentic, and diversified set of voices. These voices not only decrease perceived risk and uncertainty but also enable future tourists to experience the destination vicariously through other people's stories (Tran & Kumar, 2024). Empirical observations confirm that the intensity, valence, and credibility of e-WOM have notable influences on how tourists order destinations in ranking when planning their travel (Jyoti et al., 2024). Positive e-WOM, particularly content highlighting local distinctiveness, cultural richness, and sustainability practices, can generate positive associations and enhance psychological salience in the decision making process.

In sustainable tourism, e-WOM is also an important platform for destination promotion that adopts an environment, friendly approach with social concern. It acts as an influencer of destination preferences toward values, based destinations. Destinations that emphasize social responsibility can have their destination preferences positively enhanced through increased exposure of positive and reliable e-WOM.

H_4: *Destination preference is positively affected (influenced) by e-WOM.*

2.8 Destination Preference

Destination preference is tourists' cognitive and affective tendencies toward destinations, prior to trip decision making. It is determined by both internal drivers and external drivers, such as destination features, perceived value, and marketing. Zhou et al. (2024) investigate the role of incidental negative affect in destination preferences, whereby increased emotional response can fundamentally change destination choice models when social disorder, like lockdowns, is involved. The results emphasize the importance of factoring in emotional heterogeneity in destination marketing.

Musa et al. (2024) define sustainable destination preference as an intervening construct between escapism motivation and affordability perception in mediating tourist satisfaction. They further highlight that sustainable values like environmental protection as well as cultural preservation are being intertwined in tourists' preferences. The authors establish that escapism motivation is positively linked with preferences for destinations with authenticity as well as sustainability, which indicates that SDP is of prime importance in bridging motivation towards positive evaluation as well as loyalty. In addition, Struwig and du Preez (2024) discuss in their analysis of destination preferences in post, apartheid times how race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status intersect in determining domestic tourist behaviour. They have found that strong differential preferences for beaches, game parks, and destinations for visiting friends and relatives exist, indicating that cultural and historical influences continue to be drivers of destination choice in multicultural societies.

2.9 Destination Preference and Visit Intention

Destination preference is the positive attitudinal stance favourable toward a destination, both in terms of affective appeal and perceived suitability for future travel. It is an intermediate cognitive concept that comes before actual decision, making and behavioural intentions. Theoretically derived from the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), preference acts as an important attitudinal antecedent linking evaluative beliefs with concrete outcomes, including the intent to visit or suggest a destination (Musa et al., 2024).

A number of empirical studies have verified that when tourists feel a preference for a destination based on destination image, personality, and informational cues, they tend to develop an intention to go to that destination (Struwig & du Preez, 2024; Zhou et al., 2024). Preferences are strong predictors of intent when they are accompanied with congruent motivational stimuli, such as an appeal for nature, based experiences, cultural authenticity, or social bonding. For sustainable tourism situations, demands for environmental stewardship or community-based tourism are of particular importance, developing preferences for destinations with such characteristics that in turn inspire greater emotional congruence and behavioural intent (Musa et al., 2024).

However, destination preference is not always necessarily translated into action. The performance of destination preference is contingent on intervening variables like affordability, budget constraints, or availability of other alternatives. Still, when the preference is favourably established and supported through credible communication as well as shared values, it is strongly associated with visit intent.

H_5: *Destination choice is positively and significantly associated with visit intent.*

The conceptual model constructed in this work combines five constructs of importance, publicity, destination personality, e-WOM, destination preference, and visit intention, to explain how non, commercial communication and digital participation influence tourists' behavioural outcomes. Based on the stimulus–organism–response (S, O, R) model, the model argues that publicity is an external stimulus that impacts the organismic responses of tourists through destination personality, an image of destination qualities. The perception then generates visit intention, an index of the behavioural outcome. Concurrently, e-WOM serves both as a stimulus as well as an intervening force, contributing to destination preference, the cognitive as well as affective evaluation of the destination, and directly influencing visit intention. The model presumes that whenever tourists

receive credible publicity as well as influential e-WOM, they create positive perceptions as well as preferences leading towards increased behavioural intentions. Additionally, with the incorporation of constructs of sustainability (i.e., authentic publicity as well as environmentally oriented e-WOM), the framework facilitates an in, depth understanding of the role of strategic communication in sustainable destination branding as well as purposeful visitation, particularly in ecologically sensitive destinations such as marine national parks.

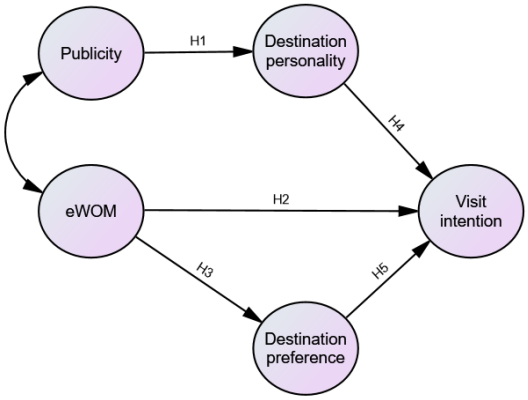

Fig. 1. The Theoretical Framework

3. Methods

3.1 Sample

Participants in the current study were sampled through the non-probability convenience sampling approach, which is the approach commonly used where exploratory studies on tourism are undertaken and random sampling is not viable because populations are spread out and not easily accessible (Hair et al., 2019). The eligibility criterion meant that the respondents were to be aged 17 years and above and be interested in national park or coast tourism. The minimum age was set to establish juristic capacity to give informed consent and to include potential tourists who were at different stages of decisional autonomy.

The data were gathered using an online self administered questionnaire, which was sent through an online survey link to prospective participants who had shown willingness to participate. The prospective participants were contacted using social media websites, online tourism forums, and university networks. A short introduction to the survey at the beginning summarized the intent of the research, assured the respondent's anonymity, and stressed the voluntary participation in line with ethical standards of research. The sampling strategy was deemed to be suitable for reaching the potential tourists who embody the target market segment for Wakatobi National Park and actively consume digital tourism content, a focal concern of the study’s constructs like e-WOM and publicity.

3.2 Measurements

This research utilised existing measurement items taken from established scales of previous studies to provide both content validity and contextual appropriateness in the area of sustainable tourism. The five constructs to be measured were: publicity, destination personality, electronic word, of, mouth (e-WOM), destination preference, and intention to visit. All were measured using the six, point Likert, type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), to be able to gather subtle degrees of agreement and minimise the tendency towards the middle response. Four items each were used to measure publicity and e-WOM, which were adopted from Kim and Lee (2018) and represent the credibility, positivity, and occurrence of mediated publicity and peer, to, peer communication about Wakatobi National Park. These indicators focused on the influence of unsponsored communication and word of, mouth within the community on tourist beliefs. Destination personality was measured using six bipolar adjective scales adapted from Kumar and Nayak (2014), capturing affective and symbolic characteristics including friendliness, excitement, and accessibility. These are human, like characteristics that are consistent with destination branding for sustainability. Destination preference was measured by four items derived from Mao and Zhang (2014) and had to do with comparative appeal and relative importance of Wakatobi compared to other national parks. Lastly, the intention to visit was assessed using seven items taken from Kim et al. (2009) and Su et al. (2022) and included both cognitive readiness and behavioural commitment to the destination.

3.3 Data Analysis Methods

The structural associations between the latent constructs were explored through the use of Structural Equation Modelling with AMOS version 29 This is because it is well adapted to use for exploratory study models with intricate causal links, non, normal data distribution, and comparatively larger sample sizes (Hair et al., 2019). It is further commonly suggested for use

in tourism and sustainability studies where prediction and theory building take precedence over optimization of the fit of the model.

The two stage analysis was undertaken. The construct validity and construct reliability were first examined through the assessment of the measurement model. The internal consistency reliability of the scale was gauged through Cronbach's alpha and the composite reliability (CR). Convergent validity was determined through the average variance extracted (AVE). The Fornell, Larcker criterion and cross loading were employed to find the discriminant validity. Second, the structural model was examined to analyse the hypothesised associations between constructs. Path coefficients, t, values, and significance tests were achieved using 5,000 bootstrap resampling procedures. The explanatory ability of the model was also checked using R^2 and predictive relevance (Q^2) values. Multicollinearity was examined using variance inflation factor (VIF) scores to determine the stability of regression estimates. This two, stage approach guarantees statistical integrity and offers a strong foundation for hypothesis testing within the framework of sustainable tourism communication policies.

Table 1
Criteria of a Fitted Model

Fit measure	Good fit indices	Sources
Probability	$0.05 < p \leq 1.00$	Schermelleh, Engel et al. (2003)
X^2/DF	$0 \leq X^2/DF \leq 2.00$	Tabachnick et al. (2007)
CFI	$0.95 \leq CFI \leq 1.00$	Hu and Bentler (1995)
RMSEA	$0 \leq RMSEA \leq 0.05$	Browne and Cudeck (1992)

4. Results

4.1 Participants

Table 2 shows the demographic profile of the 208 participants of the present study. All the participants were included on the basis of being at least 17 years old and having previously shown an intention to travel to coastal or national park destinations. The data represent an e, literate and tourism conscious segment of the population that is well suited for studying publicity, e-WOM, and branding at destinations in the context of sustainable tourism. By gender, the sample was well balanced, with 52% female and 48% male participants, indicating no apparent gender bias towards exposure to digital tourism communication. The distribution by age involved the majority of participants aged between 18 and 25 years (42.7%), followed by the 26–35 years group (28.3%), and implies that the sample was predominantly young adults, a group normally active in travel digital participation and decision making.

In terms of educational level, a high percentage possessed the bachelor's level (47%), then came the high school graduate (31%), and then the postgraduate level (14%). This level indicates an adequately to highly educated group, which is consistent with target markets for ecotourism communication and digital storytelling campaigns. In addition, Occupation-wise, the most represented groups included students (33%) and private sector employees (29%), followed by civil servants (18%) and others. These occupation categories are in line with urban, connected populations who are most prone to being impacted by destination publicity and e-WOM. The population profile of the sample is in line with previous work on digitally active and sustainability focused tourists, justifying its applicability to investigating behavioural intention in the setting of a marine national park.

Table 2
Profile of Participants

Profile		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	58	27.9
	Female	150	72.1
	Total	208	100.0
Age	>39	1	0.5
	17, 20	26	12.5
	21, 25	130	62.5
	26, 29	32	15.4
	30, 34	14	6.7
	35, 39	5	2.4
Level of education has been completed	Less than high school	3	1.4
	Diploma	20	9.6
	Postgraduate	7	3.4
	Undergraduate	94	45.2
	High school	84	40.4
Occupational status	Employed	107	51.4
	Unemployed	82	39.4
	Self, employed	19	9.1
Marital status	Unmarried	167	80.3
	Married	41	19.7

4.2 Data Validity, AVE, and Reliability Tests

Table 3 shows the results of the assessment of the measurement model, including internal consistency reliability indicators, convergent validity, and discriminant validity for all the constructs. The internal consistency was assessed through Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR). The constructs all surpassed the suggested values of 0.70 for Cronbach's alpha and 0.70 for CR (Hair et al., 2016), which represents acceptable consistency.

The convergent validity was determined through Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and all AVE values were well above the minimum standard 0.50. This indicates that the items measuring each construct on the questionnaire shared a high percentage of the variance and were theoretically well correlated with their corresponding latent dimensions.

The constructs of publicity, destination personality, e-WOM, destination preference, and intention to visit were found to exhibit strong psychometric properties. The results verify the validity of the adapted measuring scales and provide justification for using them to model behavioural intention in the context of sustainable tourism. The reliable and validity findings that were satisfactory provide strong support to the structural model's interpretability as well as the predictive validity of communication, related constructs to impact tourist behaviour.

Table 3
Results of Data Validity and Reliability Tests

	Variables and Indicators	Factor Loadings	AVE	Cronbach's Alpha
	Publicity		0.786	0.780
Pu1	I often find news from the mass media about Wakatobi National Park.	0.887		
Pu2	News from the mass media about Wakatobi National Park is positive and favourable.	0.887		
	e, Word of Mouth		0.644	0.828
eW1	People around me talk about Wakatobi National Park	0.856		
eW2	There are recommendations from others about Wakatobi National Park	0.816		
eW3	Wakatobi National Park is portrayed positively on the internet.	0.677		
eW4	People around me speak well of Wakatobi National Park.	0.847		
	Destination Personality		0.555	0.864
Per1	Wakatobi National Park is not fun/fun.	0.770		
Per2	Wakatobi National Park is boring/attractive.	0.761		
Per3	Wakatobi National Park is gloomy/exciting.	0.802		
Per4	Wakatobi National Park is cool/friendly.	0.693		
Per5	Wakatobi National Park is depressing/relaxing.	0.771		
Per6	Wakatobi National Park is isolated/readily accessible.	0.663		
	Destination Preference		0.562	0.746
DPRr1	Wakatobi National Park will be my first choice compared to other national parks.	0.787		
DPR2	Wakatobi National Park is more interesting than other national parks.	0.815		
DPR3	I am more interested in visiting destinations other than Wakatobi National Park.	0.684		
DPR4	I intend to visit destinations other than Wakatobi National Park in the near future.	0.705		
	Visit Intention (1)		0.719	0.870
V5	I have extensive knowledge about travelling to Wakatobi National Park.	0.928		
V4	I can confidently tell my friends how to travel to Wakatobi National Park.	0.830		
V2	I'm collecting information about Wakatobi National Park.	0.807		
V7	I prefer to visit Wakatobi National Park to other destinations.	0.795		
	Visit Intention (2)		0.682	0.805
V6	I hope to visit Wakatobi National Park in the future.	0.887		
V1	I am interested in visiting Wakatobi National Park.	0.850		
V3	I want to experience a trip to Wakatobi National Park.	0.688		

4.3 Hypotheses Testing

Fig. 2 presents the structural model that is used empirically in testing the five proposed hypotheses linking publicity, destination personality, e-WOM, destination preference, and visit intention. The model captures two main causal paths. The first causal chain positions publicity as an important exogenous variable that directly influences destination personality, which in turn influences visit intention, in underscoring the affective and symbolic path to behavioural intention. The second path highlights the importance of e-WOM as both a direct antecedent of visit intention as well as an antecedent of destination preference, which in turn is hypothesized to impact visit intention. All in all, the model is reflective of multi-path structure in that both communication, based stimuli (publicity and e-WOM) as well as internal assessments (destination personality and preference) work together in influencing tourists' behavioural intentions. The structure of the model is such that the relative strength of the direct versus the indirect effects can be tested, thus presenting an in, depth perspective of an interplay of communication tactics as well as perceptual constructs in the development of sustainable tourist behaviour.

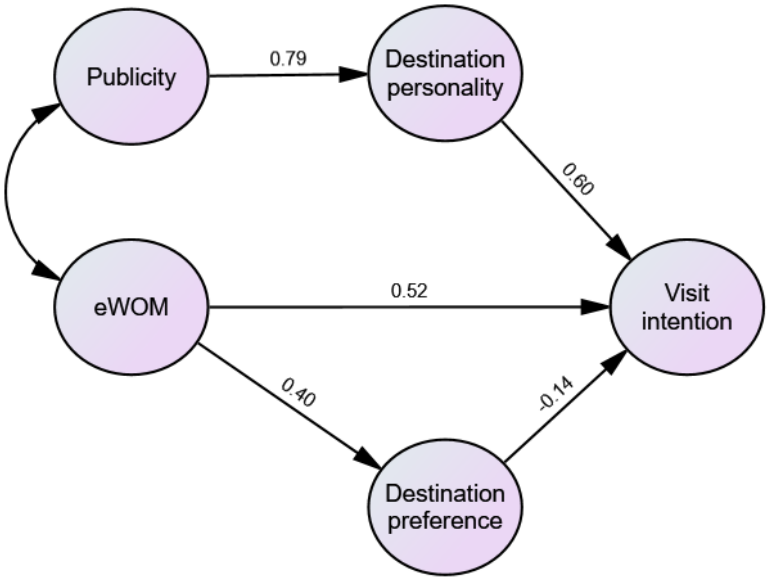

Fig. 2. Structural Model of the Hypotheses Testing

Table 4 reports the test results of the structural hypotheses, collating the path coefficients, t, values, and significance levels for each of the suggested relationships. The results suggest that four of the five hypotheses are statistically supported. Publicity positively and significantly influences destination personality (H1), supporting the role of non-commercial communication in inducing affective perception of a destination. Similarly, destination personality significantly impacts visit intention (H2), supporting the contention that human, like destination characteristics boost tourists' behavioural commitment. Both the direct relationships from e-WOM with visit intention (H3) and from e-WOM with destination preference (H4) are supported, demonstrating the fundamental role of digital peer influence in tourist choice. The path from destination preference to visit intention (H5) is not supported, indicating that preference per se may not necessarily translate into behavioural intent in the absence of affective or social stimuli. The results provide empirical support for the dual, process structure of the model, whereby both symbolic perception via digitally mediated communication contribute to sustainable visit intention, as through mechanisms and with varying strengths.

Table 4
Results of the Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses	Paths	C.R.	P	Results
H1	Publicity > Destination personality	8.733	***	Accepted
H2	Destination personality > Visit intention	2.042	0.041	Accepted
H3	e-WOM > Visit intention	2.087	0.037	Accepted
H4	e-WOM > Destination preference	4.145	***	Accepted
H5	Destination preference > Visit intention	, 1.925	0.054	Rejected

5. Discussion

The result of Hypothesis 1 confirms that publicity positively and significantly influences destination personality. This is consistent with earlier assumptions in theory that publicity, being an unsponsored mode of communication, is a key determinant of symbolic and affective destination image (Grunig & Hung, Baesecke, 2015; Joachimsthaler & Aaker, 1997). The empirical evidence supporting the association further confirms that when narratives of publicity through media coverage, endorsement of experts, or community narratives are clear in their message as well as credible, they help shape human, like characteristics linked with a destination, including sincerity, excitement, or competence (Hosany et al., 2006).

With respect to Wakatobi National Park, with its strong marketing through sustainability based narratives, the finding indicates that destination managers can proactively use publicity in order to build destination personality based on environmental stewardship, cultural authenticity, and constituent engagement. Publicity is not only used as an awareness raising tool in this respect, but also as a strategic tool for destination branding with sustainable values. This is especially applicable for environmentally sensitive destinations that eschew commercial mass promotion in favour of establishing rapport, based communication.

Also, the quality of the relationship between publicity and destination personality highlights the need for linking media planning with sustainability goals. It suggests that publicity should move beyond mere exposure and resort to persistent storytelling consistent with the destination's image and positioning for the long term. With this perspective, the results enrich

sustainable tourism theory by illustrating the ability of intangible communications, when rooted in authenticity and credibility, to mold affective destination characteristics that impact tourists' cognitive as well as emotional assessments.

The discovery that destination personality has an impact on visit intent confirms Hypothesis 2 and is in agreement with an increasing body of work corroborating the affective as well as symbolic influence of destination personality in driving consumer behaviour (Papadimitriou et al., 2015; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). The finding confirms the theoretical expectation that when tourists find a destination human, like in terms of having the qualities such as being honest, dependable, or exciting, they tend to form positive emotional attachments and positive behavioural intentions toward the destination (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2017; Xie & Lee, 2013).

In the case of Wakatobi National Park, this relationship emerges in particular because the park's character is typically framed in terms of ecological wholeness, cultural richness, and marine diversity. These qualities ring clear with nature, sensitive visitors as well as with those in search of authentic, place, based experience. The strong impact of destination character on visit intent then indicates that developing an intriguing and consistent character can be an exercise in soft power for moving visitors not only in the direction of visitation but also in the direction of being respectfully and responsibly behaved once on the destination.

Additionally, the results have implications for sustainable development of tourism because, through the development of destination personas that emphasize sustainability values such as community, based, nature, based, or cultural authenticity, destination marketers and policymakers can create greater psychological fit with ethically and value based visitors. This psychological fit is key in developing long, term commitment, attachment, as well as advocacy, all of which are key components of resilience and sustainability of tourist destinations.

The empirical finding confirms Hypothesis 3, suggesting that e-WOM has positive and significant impact on visit intent. This finding is corroborated by previous work that highlights the power of peer, created content in influencing travel decisions (Jalilvand et al., 2012; Tran & Kumar, 2024). Unlike paid advertising, e-WOM offers perceived authenticity, relevance, as well as social proof, as key drivers in services with high involvement such as travel in which immediate assessment before consumption is impossible.

When applied to Wakatobi, which is mostly marketed through digital narratives, social media, and online reviews, the function of e-WOM is central. Visitors presented with positive word of mouth, images, and experience stories have increased chances of developing confidence and believability, finally leading to increased visit intentions. Especially in the post-pandemic period, when perceived safety, believability, as well as being environmentally friendly, have emerged as prime choices in destination choice.

From the perspective of sustainable tourism, the finding serves to identify the strategic function of e-WOM in spreading values, based messages concerning conservation, community involvement, and cultural sensitivity. Tourists not just provide factual information about logistics but also emotional observations and moral evaluations of their experience. Positive e-WOM with an emphasis on eco, friendliness or cultural authenticity can consequently reinforce destination sustainability positioning as well as appeal to like minded visitors. Tourism marketers and authorities should consequently create environments that motivate tourists to post about their experience as well as provide platforms through which such messages are amplified for driving sustainable patterns of visit.

The outcome for Hypothesis 5 is that destination preference is not found to impact visit intention. This outcome contradicts some past research in which positive associations between tourist preference and behavioural intention have been found (Musa et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024). The situation calls for some reflection based on theoretical reasons as well as contextual interpretation. One such explanation is the difference between evaluative liking (preference) as opposed to actionable readiness (intention). Although tourists can have affective or cognitive preferences for a destination, these will not necessarily translate as such into behavioural plans unless activated through motivational, logistical, or affective enablers.

In the context of Wakatobi, a distant marine national park, the destination choice can be influenced by extrinsic constraints like accessibility, cost of travel, perceived risk, or availability of time. The destination can be found attractive for tourists, but psychological or structural barriers can curtail the action of fulfilling that inclination. Additionally, in sustainability, focused destinations, mere preference can be too vague unless supported with personal values, environmental consciousness, or identity congruence. This is an indication of how preference is an indispensable yet not an obligatory condition for visitation.

Theoretically, the finding contradicts simple linear models in favour of richer models that include mediators like affect, control of behaviour, or trust. On the practical side, the finding alerts destination managers that preference formation, though critical, is not sufficient. It must be complemented with measures of reducing travel friction as well as increasing emotional involvement, for example, through experiential narratives, interactive activities, as well as transparent communication of access as well as sustainability advantages.

Collectively, the findings of H1 through H5 paint a layered, related chain of influence from destination publicity through destination personality leading to visit intention, with mediation through e-WOM. The strong role of publicity (H1) as well

as destination personality (H2) reinforces those narratives of sustainability, when honestly conveyed, can inform positive affective as well as cognitive feelings towards marine destinations such as Wakatobi. The impact of influence of both visit intention (H3) and destination preference (H4) through e-WOM further highlights the capability of narratives produced through social peers in disseminating pro, sustainability values. The non-significant influence of destination preference on visit intention, though (H5), indicates that sustainability, focused communication is not enough unless accompanied by tangible accessibility, mutual trust, as well as perceived congruence of values. This finding indicates an important principle of sustainable tourism: perception must be accompanied by experiential readiness. The destination can be favoured, but only with the environmental wholeness, cultural legitimacy, as well as service availability ascertained will sustainable visitation ensue. This further emphasizes the importance of holistic destination management that not only encourages sustainability but also executes it in all touchpoints of the tourist experience.

6. Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence on the role of publicity, destination personality, and electronic word, of, mouth (e-WOM) in determining tourists' visit intention for Wakatobi National Park, a prominent marine park in Indonesia. The results confirm that publicity not only reinforces destination personality, which in turn directly facilitates increased visit intention. Additionally, e-WOM is an important informational and social driver of destination choice as well as visit intention. Surprisingly, destination preference is not directly found to impact visit intention, implying that perceived identity and peer influence are of greater significance than mere interest.

Theoretically, this research adds value to sustainable tourism scholarship through emphasis on how perception, driven and community oriented communication (i.e., publicity and e-WOM) influence tourist behaviours in environmentally sensitive destinations. The use of destination personality as the mediator provides an original perspective for analysing how branding communication can be harmonized with sustainability objectives, in particular for facilitating respectful, educated, and nature friendly tourist behaviour. The outcome enhances the stimulus–organism–response (SOR) model in such a way that sustainable tourist promotion is not just about image, but about resonance.

Managerially, the results call for destination stakeholders to create sustainability, driven publicity that transcends promotion in favour of developing a persona based on ecological stewardship, cultural authenticity, and the wellbeing of the community. Encouraging positive e-WOM through active involvement of visitors, open communication, and honest narratives can maximize sustainable values. Of note, the weak direct relationship between destination choice and visit intention indicates that sustainability, driven infrastructure, access, and value communication need strengthening in order to translate perception into environmentally sound visitation. Tourism planning must incorporate digital advocacy, visitor education, and on, property sustainability practice in order to maintain long term sustainability.

Nevertheless, the research is not without its limitations. It is based on Wakatobi National Park only, which reduces the scope of the results. The sample is skewed towards youth and educated individuals and might not mirror the total tourist sample. Contextual variables like perceived sustainability, environmental consciousness, or ecological literacy were not investigated, even though for their applicability in sustainable tourist behaviour. Finally, the cross, sectional self, reports might bring in bias, as well as limit the causal inferences.

To further promote the sustainability of tourism, future studies must investigate a wider array of destination types like rural ecotourism, coastal village tourism, as well as mangrove, based Edu, tourism to derive context, related sustainability strategies (Ekowati et al., 2023; Kurniati et al., 2024; Suryani et al., 2023). Evaluation of community readiness and participation must also be researched in more detail to analyse how local agency influences the implementation of tourism (Hadi et al., 2020; Prabawani et al., 2020).

Contract management and social media engagement in destination branding can also be the subject of research in post, pandemic tourism characterized by live streaming and platform, based destination choice (Farida et al., 2024; Kusumastuti et al., 2025). CSR activities and co-creation programs for enhancing the capacity of small, scale communities like villagers in post, mining areas or coastal fishermen provide another avenue (Khoirul Anas et al., 2023; Roziqin et al., 2021).

The incorporation of ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) and environmental literacy in the design of tourist experience also demands further empirical work, especially in school, or youth, based models of tourism (Prabawani et al., 2023; Prabawani, Hadi, & Hapsari, 2020). These can be supported with scale development studies or with multi, level governance studies.

Additionally, future scholars must examine the economic, cultural co, benefits of tourism SEZs like Tanjung Kelayang in terms of their long-term sustainability using social, environmental, as well as financial indicators (Prabawani et al., 2022). Multidisciplinary methods combining governance, environmental engineering, as well as education can provide richer models (Muktiali et al., 2023; Nasarani et al., 2024).

Of equal significance is the use of content and bibliometric analysis in charting developing topics as well as identifying areas of research in the regions (Suryani et al., 2023). Lastly, mixed, method studies with longitudinal or cross, case designs like

cross, island or cross, country park comparison can yield richer insights regarding what motivates sustainable visit intent as well as tourist citizenship action (Amir & Prabawani, 2022; Utomo et al., 2023; Wahyudi et al., 2021).

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