Theoretical and Practical Research in Economic Fields

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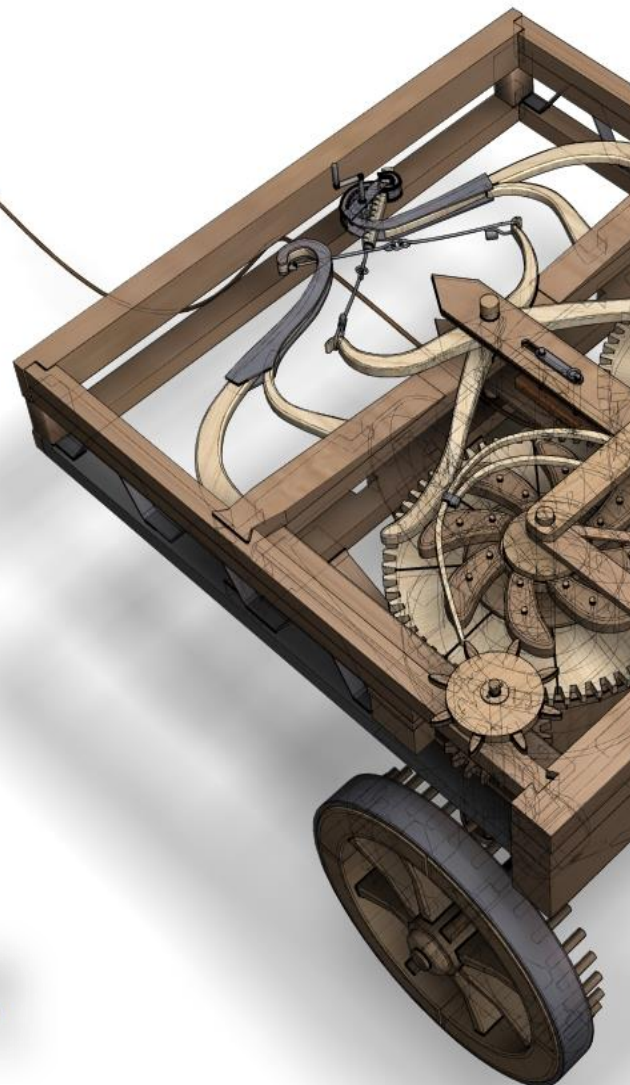
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Many economists today are concerned by the proliferation of journals and the concomitant labyrinth of research to be conquered in order to reach the specific information they require. To combat this tendency, **Theoretical and Practical Research in Economic Fields** has been conceived and designed outside the realm of the traditional economics journal. It consists of concise communications that provide a means of rapid and efficient dissemination of new results, models, and methods in all fields of economic research.

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The primary aim of the Journal has been and remains the provision of a forum for the dissemination of a variety of international issues, practical research, and other matters of interest to researchers and practitioners in a diversity of subject areas linked to the broad theme of economic sciences.

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The advisory board of the journal includes distinguished scholars who have fruitfully straddled disciplinary boundaries in their academic research.

All the papers will be first considered by the Editors for general relevance, originality, and significance. If accepted for review, papers will then be subject to double blind peer review.

This Special Issue was created at the request of a group of researchers from Ukraine. It is a response to the challenging situation of Ukrainian scholars due to the Russian invasion as well as the growing demand for knowledge on Ukrainian issues.

We would like to express our endless thank to our colleagues, scholars from Ukraine who are working amid the war on topics that are important for all. Also, we thank all our international authors for their valuable contributions to this Issue.

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Dynamics of Electronic Word-of-Mouth: Insights from Destination Management Organizations

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Abstract: This study investigates destination management organizations' (DMOs) perceptions and engagement with electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in tourism, aiming to understand its impact on destination management and tourist decision-making. This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with 46 Slovak and Czech DMOs and quantitative content analysis of eWOM about destinations on popular eWOM platforms - destination websites, Google Maps, and Facebook. The integration of in-depth thematic insights and extensive eWOM data analysis offers a comprehensive understanding of DMO strategies and their effectiveness in eWOM management. While DMO representatives acknowledge the importance of eWOM and claim to actively monitor and respond to it, the content analysis of eWOM reveals a low engagement in terms of the number of reviews and narrative feedback, particularly on destination websites and Google Maps. DMOs appear more active on Facebook, where they engage visitors through contests and respond to reviews and comments, aligning with the interview findings regarding their efforts to manage and respond to eWOM. The discrepancy between the perceived importance of eWOM by DMOs and the actual engagement levels on platforms like Google Maps and destination websites suggests a potential area for improvement in encouraging more narrative feedback and reviews to better manage destination image and visitor experiences. This research contributes to the understanding of eWOM from the supply side by focusing on DMOs' strategies and responses to online tourist feedback, an area previously underexplored in eWOM research within the context of tourism management.

Introduction

Currently, destination management organizations (DMOs), as key entities in destination management, are moving away from the simplistic growth paradigm focused on marketing communications to attract visitors at any cost. Instead, they are embracing more flexible measures that prioritize stewardship and sustainable tourism development (Reinhold *et al.* 2023). Previous studies (*e.g.*, Baggio and Scaglione 2018) have highlighted the challenges faced by third-generation DMOs. These challenges involve transforming traditional DMOs, often established along administrative boundaries, into dynamic tourism management organizations.

In their operational environments, DMOs are confronted with new challenges at their destinations, such as enhancing sustainability (*e.g.*, Farsari 2023; Reinhold *et al.* 2023), increasing resilience (*e.g.*, Jinyan *et al.* 2023; Reinhold *et al.* 2023), and advancing information and communication technologies (ICT) (*e.g.*, Zainal-Abidin *et al.*

2023; García-Carrión *et al.* 2024). The integration of these three pillars leads to sustainable, smart, and competitive management of tourism destinations (*e.g.*, Fyall and Garrod, 2020; Vogt *et al.* 2020).

DMOs are striving to adapt to the changing technological landscape (Zainal-Abidin *et al.* 2023), recognizing the importance of continuous data analysis in destination management, where DMOs act as active data coordinators (Gajdošík and Gajdošíková 2021). According to Fakharyan *et al.* (2012), managers should utilize new technologies in tourism destination management. In the context of ICT development, DMOs focus on areas such as public transportation, measuring visitor flows, augmented reality, etc. (Fyall and Garrod 2020; Gajdošík and Gajdošíková 2021; Gao *et al.* 2023).

Bigné and Decrop (2019), van der Zee *et al.* (2020), and Gao *et al.* (2023) assert that contemporary destination managers concentrate on understanding the fluctuating preferences of tourists and designing targeted development strategies through extensive analyses of heterogeneous user-generated online content. Similarly, Giglio *et al.* (2019) and Reinhold *et al.* (2023) emphasize the significance of digital data in tourism, as it enables destination managers to understand what visitors do, why they engage in specific activities, and the relevance of these activities. Digital data also provide insights into the overall dynamics of tourism in a destination. Van der Zee *et al.* (2020) highlight electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) as a vital information source for destination managers, as data derived from eWOM content offer new opportunities for destination management.

In the literature, numerous authors (*e.g.*, Abubakar *et al.* 2017; Chang and Wang 2019; Niavis and Tsiotas 2019; Tapanainen *et al.* 2021; Hoang *et al.* 2022) have focused significantly on eWOM in the context of tourism destinations from a demand perspective, mainly investigating eWOM's impact on visitor behavior.

From a supply perspective, researchers have explored eWOM's influence on the image and awareness of tourism destinations (*e.g.*, Susilowati and Sugandini 2018; Gosal *et al.* 2020; Wiwekananda and Aruan 2020). Niavis and Tsiotas (2019) focused on destination awareness, proposing an indicator to measure the ratio of total reviews to the total number of lodging facility beds at the destination. In the context of DMOs, studies (*e.g.*, Önder *et al.* 2019; Molina *et al.* 2020) have concentrated on their corporate Facebook accounts, hypothesizing demand for the destination through reactions like 'likes' on posts and evaluating the marketing effectiveness of DMO posts through content analysis, including follower count, post frequency, eWOM in the form of likes, and post characteristics.

None of the preceding studies have delved deeply into examining the attitudes of DMOs, as destination management entities, towards eWOM, or the practices they implement in this regard. Therefore, this study aims to fill this research gap by elucidating how DMOs perceive eWOM and the extent of their engagement with it.

1. Research Background

In the current digital age, it is crucial for DMOs to understand visitor consumer behavior, particularly how visitors process and assimilate information received through social media and websites, whether published by the DMOs themselves or by other visitors (García-Carrión *et al.* 2024). Beyond the advantages offered by advancements in ICT in tourism destination management, technology also plays a pivotal role for visitors during their stay at a destination by facilitating smoother and more comprehensive information exchange. This is largely due to the availability of new devices on the market (Dexeus 2019), which have shifted the advisory role traditionally held by travel agencies to online reviews and recommendations by current and former visitors. This shift has significantly empowered visitors due to the accessibility of such information and the growing importance of eWOM (Bigné and Decrop 2019), making information provided through eWOM increasingly referential (Auliya and Pertiwi 2019). Tourists utilize eWOM to gather information about destinations they intend to visit, influencing their decision-making process (Fakharyan *et al.* 2012). Concurrently, DMOs are showing an increasing interest in eWOM content (Bigné and Decrop 2019) and are engaging more with visitors through digital media (Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil, 2017) to enhance their competitive market positioning (Hoang *et al.* 2022).

In the tourism sector, visitors' attitudes towards a destination are a strong indicator of their planned choice, irrespective of previous experiences with the destination (Jalilvand and Samiei 2012). Visitors contributing eWOM provide real-time information about their experiences at the destination (Albarq 2014). The shared experiences online serve as a basis for individuals seeking information to better understand a chosen destination, motivating them to visit a specific location, business, or attraction (Albarq 2014; Prayogo and Kusumawardhani 2016).

Visitors search for destination information on social networks, official destination websites, and travel blogs (*e.g.*, Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil, 2017; Gosal *et al.* 2020; Nechoud *et al.* 2021). Social networks feature user opinions and experiences, with less emphasis on destination information. In contrast, official destination websites provide comprehensive details about the destination and logistical aspects such as transportation and schedules. Many of these sites allow users to post comments and share their experiences, enriching the website

content and offering a one-stop source of information, thus reducing the need to search elsewhere (Hernández-Méndez *et al.* 2015). Travel blogs not only provide destination-specific information but also offer travel tips useful for a diverse readership. Blogs allow users to engage with feedback and comments from other travelers, presenting a rich content experience (Hernández-Méndez *et al.* 2015).

Research indicates that official destination websites are the most utilized eWOM mediums (Hernández-Méndez *et al.* 2015), while others suggest social networks, particularly Facebook, play a dominant role in destination eWOM (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014; Lončarić *et al.* 2016; Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil, 2017; Önder *et al.* 2019; Nechoud *et al.* 2021). Facebook has become a key channel for eWOM, with positive eWOM serving as a strong promotional tool. Potential visitors rely on information shared by others, especially close friends. Travel photographs, being the most shared travel content, can significantly influence individuals' desire to visit a destination (Božić and Jovanović, 2017). Recipients of eWOM tend to trust posts where the author's identity is known (Lončarić *et al.* 2016; Zainal *et al.* 2017; Nechoud *et al.* 2021). Besides Facebook, platforms like YouTube and Flickr are also used, particularly by men who prefer video or photographic content (Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil, 2017). Božić and Jovanović (2017) found that Facebook is the most common platform for sharing eWOM about tourism destinations. Yan *et al.* (2018) noted differences in eWOM sharing, with positive eWOM typically shared on social networks and negative eWOM on integrated tourism websites.

Ismail *et al.* (2023) argue that destination managers should leverage positive eWOM from previous visitors in their marketing campaigns. Similarly, Setiawan *et al.* (2014) suggest that promoting tourism offerings through eWOM can quickly reach the global tourism market, supporting the views of Albarq (2014) and Phillips *et al.* (2015) that eWOM is becoming an increasingly popular means of gaining a competitive edge. DMOs can benefit from eWOM through reduced marketing costs (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012; Mutaqin and Trinanda, 2019) and its high impact on visitors, especially in highly competitive markets (Mutaqin and Trinanda, 2019). Setiawan *et al.* (2014) and Prayogo and Kusumawardhani (2016) confirm that eWOM is an effective and low-cost promotional method for DMOs and destinations. eWOM content can aid DMOs not only in promotion but also in policymaking and planning based on real visitor insights and experiences (van der Zee *et al.* 2020).

Wang *et al.* (2017) and Labanauskaitė *et al.* (2020) emphasize the importance of managing visitor experiences post-visit, suggesting that DMO managers should encourage individuals to share positive eWOM to improve the destination's reputation (Hoang *et al.* 2022), facilitate access to review sites, increase the number of reviews not just for the destination but also for businesses and attractions within it (Melián-González *et al.* 2013), and encourage visitors to engage in virtual community discussions (Doosti *et al.* 2016).

Responding to eWOM offers DMOs the opportunity to communicate with potential visitors (Min *et al.* 2015). Management responses are often the only tool service providers have to address customer complaints online (Gu and Ye, 2014). Prompt communication, personalized suggestions, and recommendations can enhance the quality of the visitor experience. The findings from hotel management studies could also apply to destination management. Min *et al.* (2015) found that management responses to online reviews should include empathy and paraphrasing statements, signaling that managers are reading the reviews and not merely duplicating generic responses. Even a small gesture of active listening can impact potential visitors' satisfaction, even if it occurs online (Min *et al.* 2015). Liu *et al.* (2019) advise managers to respond timely to eWOM, as managerial responses influence future visitor engagement. Managers should also filter content, for example, through hashtags, contributing to the destination's visibility. Hashtags increase post visibility, and it's crucial for managers to choose keywords that are memorable and descriptive of the destination. This allows potential tourists to find all relevant information and content created by both tourism organizations and visitors themselves. Managers should also invest in search engine optimization (SEO) services, as tourists frequently use search engines like Google to find destination information (Labanauskaitė *et al.* 2020). Önder *et al.* (2019) suggest that tourism management organizations can use Facebook reactions, such as likes, as a reliable indicator of demand, recommending their incorporation into the marketing efforts of tourism management organizations. Combining current and past like reactions with historical visitor numbers can enhance the accuracy of tourism demand models.

2. Materials and Methods

In the present investigation, a qualitative research methodology has been employed, recognized as an appropriate tool for probing into nascent areas of inquiry (DeJonckheere and Vaughn 2019; Hillman 2022). This study specifically embraces the interview technique as the principal and extensively utilized method in qualitative research (Monforte and Úbeda-Colomer 2021). This approach aligns notably with the post-positivist, interpretivist, and constructivist research paradigms (Picken 2018). Reflecting the exploratory and inductive essence of this research, comprehensive one-on-one interviews were conducted. During these sessions, the researcher presented a

sequence of pre-established but open-ended inquiries to the participants (Given 2008; DeJonckheere and Vaughn 2019).

In pursuit of the study's objective, contact was initiated in 2023 with representatives of all DMOs operating at the local and regional levels in two Central European countries with a shared history and a similar tourism offering - Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The choice of these countries was influenced by the authors' knowledge of the local conditions and proficiency in the respective national languages. Following three rounds of outreach, consent was secured to conduct in-depth interviews with representatives from 25 DMOs in Slovakia (encompassing 21 destinations at the local level and 4 at the regional level) and 21 DMOs in the Czech Republic (encompassing 16 destinations at the local level and 5 at the regional level). The research sample represents 53.2% of existing DMOs located in Slovakia, and 27.3% located in the Czech Republic. The interviews were conducted using various methods, including in-person meetings, telephone, and online applications. The data collection took place in the period from April to August 2023.

The interviews were conducted employing a malleable interview protocol to ensure adherence to the predetermined line of inquiry while methodically and comprehensively examining how DMOs perceive eWOM and the practices they implement in this context. The in-depth interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed manually into text.

For the subsequent content analysis of the data, Atlas.ti, a software specifically designed for qualitative data analysis, was utilized. Within Atlas.ti, categorization was conducted, facilitating the identification of core themes, and capturing the breadth of perspectives offered by the interviewees. Beyond the use of software for analysis, the transcripts underwent meticulous multiple readings by the first author, ensuring a thorough textual analysis. This was imperative for accurately delineating the phenomenon being investigated.

Information obtained from in-depth interviews is compared with the content of eWOM for the 46 tourism destinations under study, focusing on the eWOM platforms most frequently utilized by potential visitors (Medeková, Pompurová, 2023), *i.e.* destination websites, Google Maps and Facebook. Data were collected and processed during the months of November 2023 to January 2024. In the case of Google Maps, focus was placed on all reviews provided for the examined 46 DMOs, which were published up to November 30, 2023, totaling 354 reviews. Content from all 46 corporate accounts of the examined DMOs on Facebook, published up to November 30, 2023, was also scrutinized. A total of 727 reviews and 27 mentions were examined. Comments under posts were monitored over the last 12 months due to the labor-intensive nature of their collection and classification, during which 13,704 posts were reviewed, yielding 42,134 relevant comments. Data are processed in Microsoft Excel and SPSS statistic software.

3. Research Results

In this section, the findings from comprehensive interviews conducted with representatives of 46 DMOs are elucidated, alongside the interpretation of eWOM media content pertaining to 46 tourism destinations.

3.1. The Relationship of DMOs to eWOM

In today's digitally dense environment, DMOs strive to present themselves positively. In this context, eWOM from visitors has become a key element in tourists' decision-making about how they spend their leisure time. About half of the interviewees in this study recognized eWOM as a crucial factor in choosing a tourism destination. Even among those DMO representatives who did not prioritize eWOM initially, it is still seen as an influential element in shaping the final decision of visitors to a particular destination. Typically, the initial attraction for potential visitors is the destination's offerings, information about which they acquire from various sources. This information is often validated through eWOM, reinforcing their preliminary choice. Furthermore, the impact of traditional word-of-mouth (WOM), especially from friends and acquaintances, along with the overall image of the tourism destination, significantly affects visitor perceptions, with the influence of both eWOM and WOM varying across different age groups of tourists.

Most DMO representatives believe that potential visitors mainly look for eWOM about specific businesses and attractions within a destination, as these are more tangible compared to the destination as a whole. Visitors usually plan their travel by identifying specific destinations and then seek eWOM about chosen attractions and businesses. This decision-making process is individualistic and influenced by several factors, including the season and type of visitor. If a visitor has already decided on or is at a destination, they look for eWOM about local businesses and attractions. Conversely, if they are undecided about a destination, their initial search focuses on eWOM about the destination in general. The relationship between visitors and eWOM, including its frequency, importance, and impact on consumer behavior, largely depends on how familiar they are with the destination. While

local visitors may search for eWOM on specific activities, international visitors, generally less familiar with the destination, might focus more on eWOM about the destination itself. They may also initially look for activities aligning with their travel preferences and then select a destination where these activities are available.

In various DMOs, the management of eWOM is assigned to different job roles. In some DMOs, all employees participate in eWOM activities as time allows, while in others, specific positions like directors, marketing staff, product managers, project managers, or external personnel handle eWOM.

DMO representatives commonly view eWOM as an essential evaluation of their efforts, solutions, and daily operations from the perspective of visitors. Positive eWOM not only validates the significance of their work but also acts as beneficial public relations for both the destination and the organization. Conversely, negative eWOM enables DMOs to quickly identify and rectify any issues within the destination.

eWOM helps DMOs in understanding and identifying visitor needs, enhancing marketing communication, and enabling attractions and businesses within the destination to market themselves more effectively. This, in turn, attracts more visitors to the destination. It also aids in improving communication with tourism entrepreneurs within the destination, enhancing service quality, and in planning, creating, developing, and implementing new products. Moreover, eWOM contributes to the refinement, innovation, and quality enhancement of existing products, planning for future seasons, development of infrastructure, updates on websites or social networks, changes within the destination, strategy development for future years, and the overall enhancement of the organization's activities.

About 80% of the surveyed DMOs actively monitor eWOM regarding their destination, while 70% also track eWOM related to businesses and tourist attractions within the destination. This monitoring occurs at varying intervals, with most DMOs conducting it daily or regularly. Regional DMOs, particularly those in the Czech Republic, allocate more time to this activity. DMOs generally monitor eWOM about specific entities within the destination less frequently, occasionally, or in connection with particular initiatives like media campaigns, the development of new products, or media familiarization tours. Those DMOs not engaged in regular eWOM monitoring recognize its importance but often point to limitations in personnel and time as barriers.

DMOs usually pay more attention to the negative aspects of eWOM than its positive features, especially concerning tourism entities within the destination. When reviewing eWOM, they note specific details about the business or attraction being discussed, focusing on identifying the primary concerns. Their analysis of eWOM centers on objective aspects that can be addressed or improved through their intervention. They also evaluate the accuracy and precision of the information in the reviews, considering their own knowledge of the entity involved. Further, they collect additional information directly from the entity mentioned by visitors.

Figure 1. eWOM media through which DMOs search for eWOM about the destination
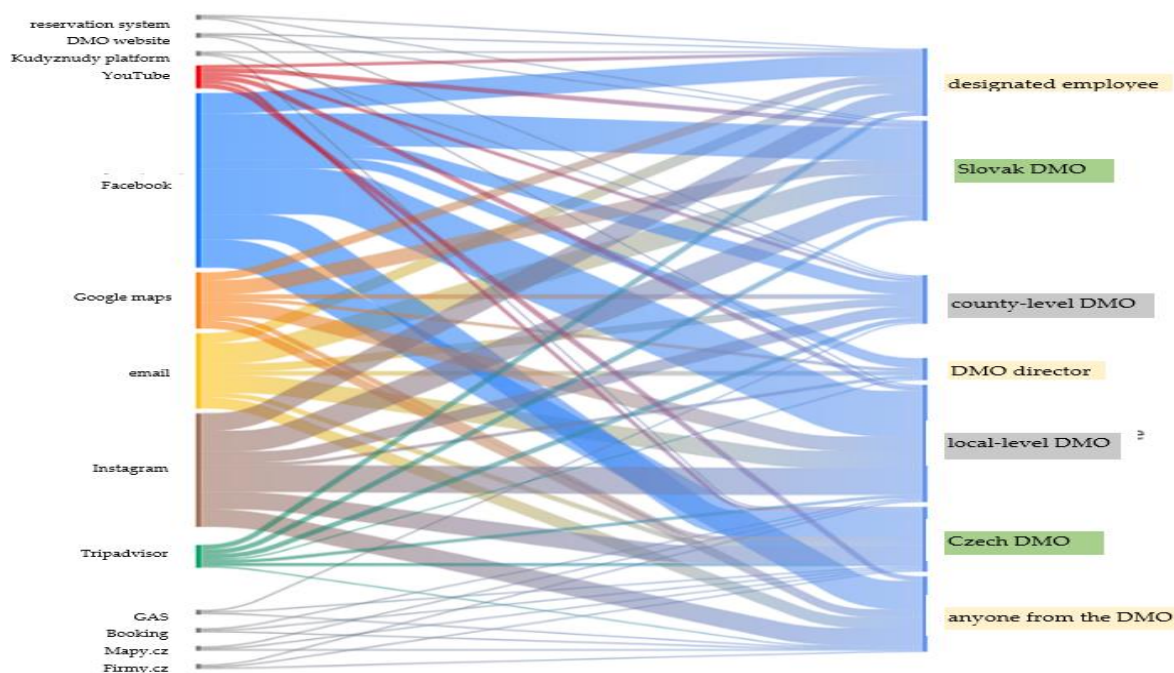
Source: Atlas.ti output.

The insights gained from these reviews are then integrated into action plans aimed at positive change, such as finding solutions or methods for improvement. DMOs also pay attention to responses to negative eWOM, as these shape the overall perception of the entity and can influence other visitors' decisions to visit. It is crucial for DMOs to respond to eWOM in a composed, courteous, and humble manner. They particularly monitor eWOM about businesses when hosting specific individuals, like journalists or bloggers, who are on familiarization trips to the tourist location, and use eWOM to verify information about attractions during trip planning.

Regarding the tools used for eWOM collection, just over 10% of the DMOs surveyed employ specialized software, which includes systems like the Good Analytical System, SupportBox, and Bolder.

DMOs from both countries consistently monitor eWOM about tourism destinations on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, GoogleMaps, and TripAdvisor, as well as through email. In Slovakia, DMOs also seek eWOM on their own websites and through reservation systems, while in the Czech Republic, the range of eWOM sources from the perspective of DMOs is more diverse (Booking, Kudyznudy, GAS, mapy.cz, firmy.cz).

Certain differences also exist in terms of the level at DMO operates (local/county level) and the specialization of its employees in the context of eWOM (Figure 1).

Czech DMOs primarily monitor eWOM about entities operating within a destination mainly on internet platforms like Facebook and Google maps. Slovak DMOs most frequently choose Facebook, Instagram, and Google maps. While county-level DMOs predominantly use Facebook and Tripadvisor, local organizations tend to track eWOM about the destination they represent primarily on Facebook, Instagram, and Google maps. Employee specialization does not play a significant role in this context (Figure 2).

Figure 2. eWOM media through which DMOs search for eWOM about businesses and attractions within destination
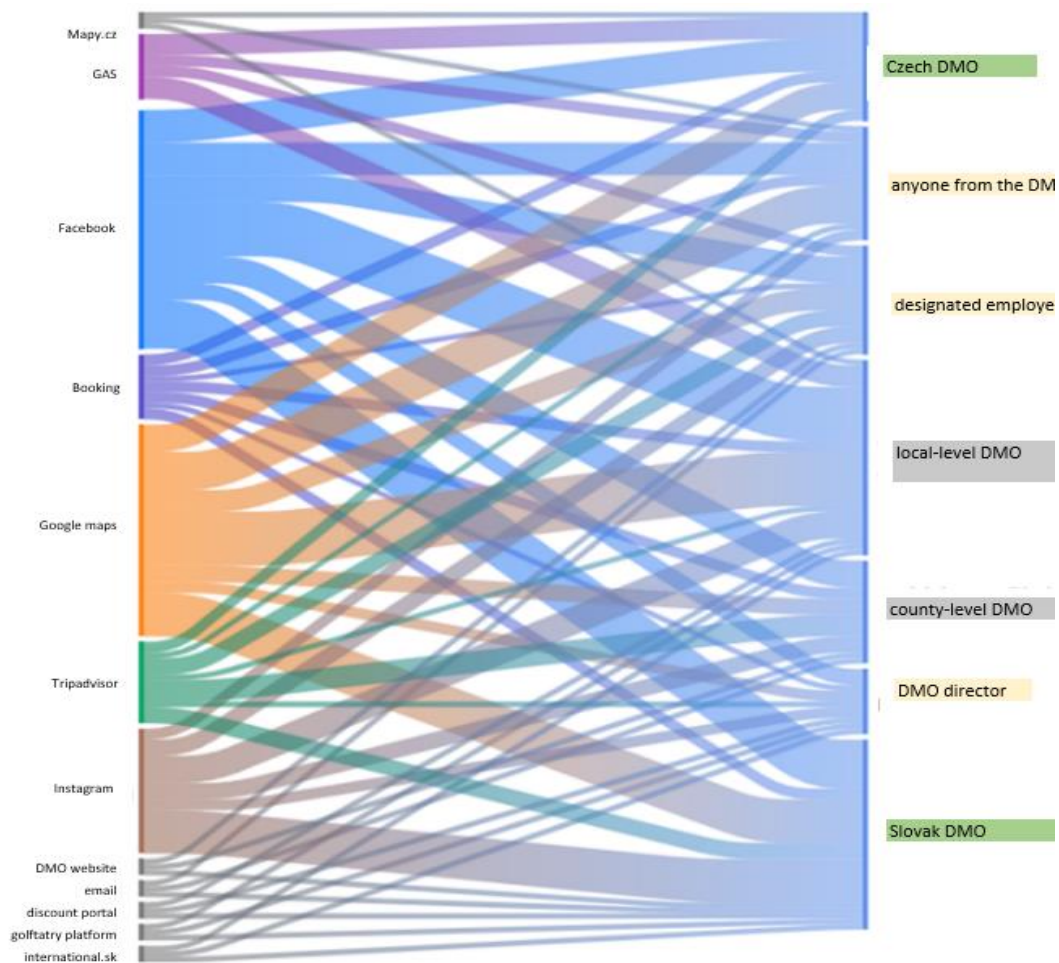
Source: Atlas.ti output.

DMOs in both Slovakia and the Czech Republic use social networks, including Facebook and Instagram, to encourage destination visitors to generate eWOM. They engage visitors by organizing contests or posing questions in their social media posts. Furthermore, Slovak DMOs also leverage their own websites and direct personal

interactions with visitors as additional methods to stimulate eWOM. They employ tactics such as making specific requests, issuing calls to action, and conducting surveys to motivate visitor participation in eWOM activities.

Nine out of ten DMOs surveyed report that they actively respond to eWOM provided by visitors. A quarter of these DMOs prioritize responding to negative eWOM over positive eWOM, considering it more critical. However, the majority do not distinguish between positive and negative eWOM, indicating a commitment to address all feedback, whether it be positive remarks, complaints, or suggestions for improvement. There is one DMO that limits its eWOM responses to direct inquiries and explicitly formulated requests.

For positive eWOM, DMOs typically respond in a standard fashion, often expressing gratitude or at least acknowledging the feedback on social networks. In contrast, negative eWOM undergoes an initial evaluation and detailed analysis, with an effort to verify the issues raised. This leads to a more extensive response, where DMOs aim to provide detailed explanations, focusing on factual and emotion-free communication, and sometimes include apologies. They may also offer direct contact options, such as phone or email, to the individual providing the eWOM. Additionally, some DMOs address negative eWOM with compensatory actions, like offering discounts or free admission to an attraction they manage. The most common platforms for eWOM responses are social networks like Facebook and Instagram, but email, Google Maps, and YouTube are also frequently used.

3.2. eWOM Content Pertaining to the Examined Destinations

The content of eWOM regarding tourism destinations managed by the examined 46 DMOs is investigated on destination websites, Google Maps, and Facebook, as these platforms were identified as the most preferred eWOM media from the perspective of potential visitors in the context of Slovakia and the Czech Republic (Medeková and Pompurová, 2023).

a) Destinations Websites

On the websites of the destinations, former, potential, and current visitors have the capability to provide eWOM feedback via email, contact forms, or chat tools (Table 1). However, only three of the 46 DMOs offer the option to rate the attractions of the tourism destination on their websites. The DMOs for the Trenčín Region and the Slovácko Region provide a rating option solely in the form of stars. On the website for the DMO Czech Switzerland, visitors must register before they can post comments on tourist attractions, and accommodations can be rated on a numerical scale from 10 (highest rating) to 0 (lowest rating), but verbal expression is not permitted. In relation to accommodations, visitors can rate aspects such as staff, services, cleanliness, comfort, and the value for money ratio. The DMO Banská Bystrica Region Tourism offers visitors the opportunity to provide eWOM through the booking system.

Table 1. The Potential of eWOM Provision through Websites of DMOs Presented in Absolute Figures

eWOM possibilities	Slovak DMOs	Czech DMOs	Total
contact form	12	3	15
email	25	21	45
chat tool	1	0	1
rating	1	2	2
booking system	1	0	1

Source: own.

A noted constraint is that the websites of analyzed DMOs do not provide visitors with the capability to publicly express their experiences at the tourism destinations, including attractions and tourism-related businesses, in a narrative form. Specifically, for the DMO of Czech Switzerland, it is feasible to submit a review for lodging facilities that becomes publicly visible, yet the provision of narrative feedback is precluded. Pertaining to the feedback on tourist attractions, submission of comments is contingent upon user registration on the platform; nevertheless, such comments are not disclosed to the general public. Moreover, should a visitor register via the e-commerce feature available on the website, they are able to participate in discussions, which, regrettably, remain inaccessible to the wider audience.

b) Google Maps

On Google Maps, visitors have the capability to furnish reviews. Out of the examined 46 DMOs, 63% maintain a corporate account on this social media platform. Furthermore, among those with a corporate account, 62.1% also possess reviews. The average number of contributed evaluations is low (20), with 74.3% of all ratings

being the most positive (5*), 17% rated 4*, 5% 3*, 1.1% 2*, and 2.6% only 1*. On average, each DMO has a rating of 4.6 on a scale of 1-5.

Only 48.3% of the surveyed DMOs have online reviews with verbal ratings, with an average of only 7 reviews with verbal ratings per DMO. This suggests that DMOs are underutilizing this tool and are not sufficiently motivating visitors to leave reviews on Google Maps. Of the verbal ratings, 84.7% are positive, 9% are neutral, and 7.3% are negative. Positive reviews typically emphasize visitors' impressions of the tourism destination, sightseeing opportunities, tourist attractions, tour guides, organized events, exhibitions, town squares, natural attractions, tourist information centers, and the activities of the DMO, or provide brief assessments of their visit. Visitors also offer recommendations on how DMOs could enhance their websites. Neutral reviews may include descriptions of where electric bicycles can be rented at the tourism destination or insights into the creation of the tourism destination. Negative reviews express dissatisfaction with the performance of the DMOs and the overall experience of visiting the tourism destination.

c) Facebook

The social media platform Facebook facilitates visitors to tourist destinations in delivering eWOM via various means such as reviews, direct messages, mentions, and comments on posts. Each of the DMOs under study maintains an official corporate presence on Facebook. Among the surveyed DMOs, as many as 84.8% provide the functionality to submit reviews on their corporate Facebook accounts; however, only 69.2% of them exhibit pertinent reviews. On average, each DMO receives only 28 reviews, of which 24 are positive, 3.4 are neutral, and only 0.6 are negative. Only 36.5% of all visitor reviews include verbal ratings, which are essential in negative reviews.

Another tool for providing eWOM through social media is mentions, where visitors can share their experiences on their private user profiles through posts that must be public. However, visitors utilize this option to a lesser extent, as it is primarily used by DMOs or tourism businesses for marketing communication. Only 30.4% of DMOs have mentioned, with a total of 27 mentions, of which only positive (37%) and neutral (63%) in nature.

Visitors to destinations can provide eWOM on Facebook through comments on posts as well. As many as 97.8% of the examined DMOs have comments on their posts. Over the course of 12 consecutive months analyzed, we observed an average of 301 posts per DMO on the social network (almost one per day), with 21.1% of these posts being commented on by users of the social network. On average, each DMO received up to 936 reactions in the form of comments per year, indicating that one post, if commented on, received 10 comments.

The majority of DMO posts have only a small volume of comments (1-5). Posts with a comment volume exceeding 50 are primarily focused on contests, calls for photo submissions, such as from visitors' favorite spots in the tourism destination, calls for photos for the DMO's calendar, posts about festivals organized in destinations, etc.

In Slovak DMOs, Facebook posts gradually increased during the observed period, reaching their peak in June, whereas Czech DMOs consistently added posts throughout the months. Regarding the number of commented posts, no significant increase or decrease was observed. However, a significant difference is noted in the comments from visitors on these posts, with the highest number of comments for Slovak DMOs occurring in January and March, and for Czech DMOs in May and January. The increase in the number of comments is mainly associated with the topic of the posts; for instance, in Czech DMOs, the high number of comments in May is related to a post about an actor's birthday, where all visitors offer congratulations, indicating that while DMOs may receive numerous comments, they are not relevant in terms of eWOM about the destination. In January, Czech DMOs formulated posts as contests or questions, similarly to Slovak DMOs, where the most commented posts in January and March were formulated as contests, questions, and challenges.

Table 2. Comments on individual posts published on the corporate accounts of selected DMOs

Focus of posts	Slovak DMOs		Czech DMOs	
	Abs.	%	Abs.	%
tourist destinations	793	5.5	3232	11.6
transport facilities	200	1.4	309	1.1
geological features	7	0.0	6	0.0
cultural heritage exploration games	7	0.0	4	0.0
natural heritage exploration games	6	0.0	17	0.0
cultural-historical sites	709	4.9	5211	18.8

Focus of posts	Slovak DMOs		Czech DMOs	
	Abs.	%	Abs.	%
cultural-enlightenment facilities	194	1.6	992	3.6
spa and wellness facilities	48	0.3	61	0.2
summer sports and recreational facilities	1083	7.5	3057	11.0
local producers	40	0.3	192	0.7
shopping centers	1	0.0	54	0.2
hospitality facilities	228	1.6	255	0.9
industrial sites	0	0.0	37	0.1
thematic parks	16	0.1	63	0.2
thematic trails	161	1.1	184	0.7
tourist information center	5	0.0	19	0.0
accommodation facilities	39	0.3	108	0.4
winter sports and recreational facilities	228	1.6	215	0.8
organized events	904	6.3	2967	10.7
special events	64	0.5	87	0.3
destination presentation	193	1.3	1314	4.7
visitor contributions	2	0.0	44	0.2
other	359	2.5	3487	12.6
questions	238	1.7	3082	11.1
contests	7280	50.7	2594	9.3
challenges	1557	10.8	181	0.7
Total	14,362	100.0	27,772	100.0

Source: own.

Figure 3. The correlation between the posting activities DMOs and the addition of comments by visitors
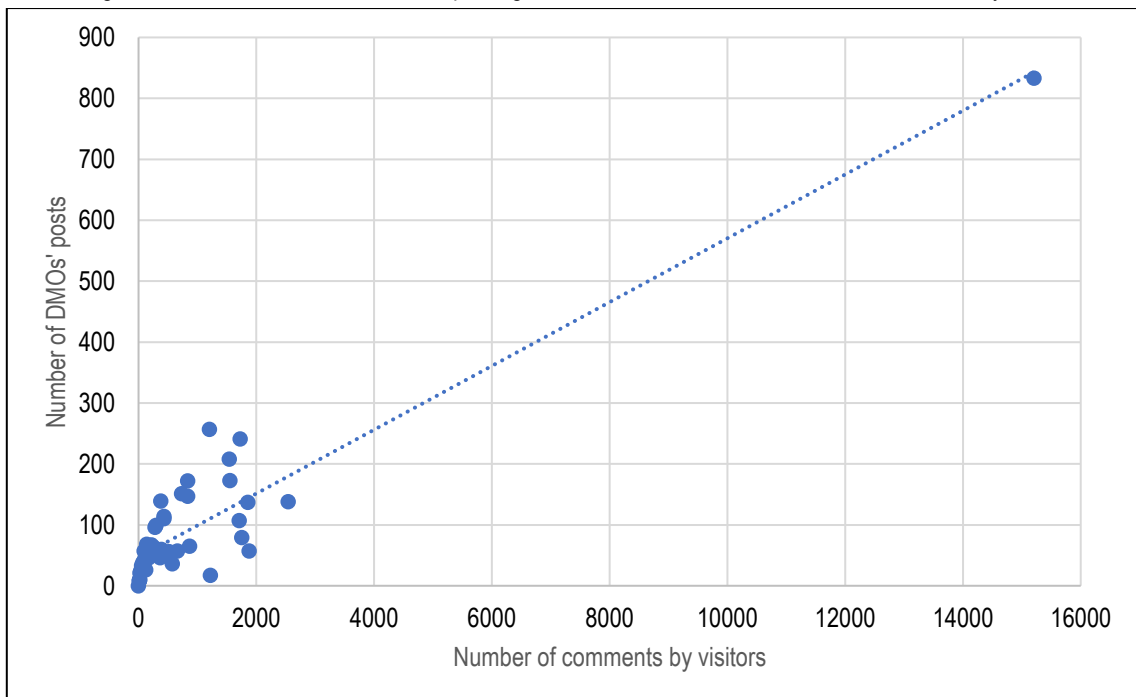
Source: SPSS output.

The focus of posts that visitors or social media users commented on was divided into several categories (Table 2), with contests receiving the most reactions for Slovak DMOs, and posts focusing on cultural and historical sites for Czech DMOs.

Based on the Pearson correlation coefficient (0.0556; p-value = 0.001), a significant positive correlation between the posting activities of DMOs and the addition of comments by visitors is concluded (Figure 3).

4. Discussions

Recommendations for DMOs managers, derived from demand analysis studies by several authors (*e.g.*, Albarq, 2014; Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil, 2017; Armutcu *et al.* 2023; Ismail *et al.* 2023), have been provided, yet only a few have examined this issue from the perspective of DMOs. Authors such as Hays *et al.* (2012), Mariani *et al.* (2016), Önder *et al.* (2019), Molina *et al.* (2020), and Confetto *et al.* (2023) tend to focus on analyzing corporate accounts of DMOs on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Their analyses mainly concentrate on the predefined 'like' emoticon, aiming to predict tourism destination visitation rates, understand user reactions based on the form and content of posts, process and evaluate the content of fictitious posts and comments by regular users using eye-tracking methods, or focus on the use of social media by DMOs, including partial observation of user activity. Kushcheva (2022) is unique in directly examining DMOs' attitudes towards eWOM, focusing on monitoring and managing their online reputation. However, her research sample consists of only three DMOs, rendering it insignificant.

Numerous authors (*e.g.*, Doosti *et al.* 2016; Wang *et al.* 2017; Labanauskaitè *et al.* 2020; Confetto *et al.* 2023) agree that DMOs should encourage visitors to provide eWOM. According to Confetto *et al.* (2023), DMOs do not proactively work to motivate visitors, instead relying on users' spontaneous activity for content creation on social media, resulting in posts aimed solely at marketing communication of destinations, which could theoretically engage social media users. However, findings from in-depth interviews in Slovakia and the Czech Republic indicate that the examined DMOs do encourage visitors to provide eWOM, especially through Facebook, using contests, challenges, questions, requests, and discounts. Yet, an analysis of corporate accounts on Facebook reveals that 92.7% of posts focus on promoting the destination and its entities, with only 7.3% of posts being interactive, aligning with Hays *et al.* (2012), who found that 88.2% of posts by selected national DMOs on Facebook and Twitter were not interactive. Confetto *et al.* (2023) suggest that DMOs should create more engaging content, such as quizzes and contests, to encourage eWOM, as contests have the highest comment rate (23.4%). This is supported by Hays *et al.* (2012), Munar and Jacobsen (2014), and Mariani *et al.* (2016), who found that interactive posts receive more responses from social media users than purely promotional posts. Mariani *et al.* (2016) suggest that social media offers a space for communication between visitors themselves or between the organization and visitors, recommending that DMOs post fewer social media posts due to time constraints. Users can absorb only a certain amount of content per day or week and tend to consider only the latest content, which might lead to missing out on content if there are too many posts. This finding is contradicted by our results, which show a strong direct correlation between the number of posts by DMOs and user comments, suggesting that more posts by DMOs result in greater feedback from visitors.

Italian DMOs tend to post most frequently in May, July, and September, with the lowest activity in April and August. On the demand side, engagement is highest in January, then significantly drops in February and gradually decreases until May, begins to rise again from May, reaching a relative peak in July, and then falls again in the autumn, presumably due to seasonality (Mariani *et al.* 2016). For Slovak DMOs, the posting frequency increases or decreases according to the season, with the highest number of posts in June. Czech DMOs do not show significant differences in posting frequency on Facebook, striving to post evenly throughout the year, with only a slight decrease observed in January. Regarding demand, no significant difference in the number of commented posts was observed, similar to Mariani *et al.* (2016), but a difference in the number of comments was noted, with Slovak DMOs receiving the most comments in January and March, followed by a significant drop and a gradual increase until October. For Czech DMOs, the highest engagement was observed in January and May, and the lowest in December. The number of comments in these cases might be influenced by interactive posts.

Three selected Finnish DMOs were found to gather eWOM about the tourism destination from social media platforms like Google, TripAdvisor, Booking, Facebook, Instagram, through email, or a virtual community focused on domestic tourism (Kushcheva, 2022). Slovak and Czech DMOs mainly monitor eWOM on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Google, and through email, partially aligning with the reality of Finnish DMOs.

Only Czech DMOs in our research sample were found to use software related to eWOM, specifically the Good Analytical System and a combination of SupportBox and Bolder. Kushcheva (2022) claims that selected Finnish DMOs use affordable and reliable systems for online reputation monitoring, tracking sentiment, the so-

called 'net promoter score' determining visitor loyalty, and monitoring visitation based on mentions, etc. However, she does not provide specific examples of systems, so we cannot compare these results with ours or obtain best practice examples.

Nechoud *et al.* (2021) emphasize that not only analyzing eWOM from visitors is critical but also DMO managers' responses to eWOM, a point also made by Gu, Ye (2014), Xie *et al.* (2014), Min *et al.* (2015), and Phillips *et al.* (2015), who, although not focused on tourism destinations, found their findings applicable to tourism destination management. By responding to eWOM, managers strengthen the relationship between themselves and visitors, affirming their importance and highlighting their value (Nechoud *et al.* 2021). Responses should not duplicate generic answers but should be empathetic, personalized, and timely (Gu, Ye, 2014; Min *et al.* 2015), and include paraphrasing statements of eWOM, as even a small gesture of active listening by managers can affect the satisfaction of potential visitors (Min *et al.* 2015). According to Kushcheva (2022), representatives of Finnish DMos strive to respond or react positively to all relevant messages and comments, as well as any feedback they may receive. However, she does not specify on which social media platforms managers respond to eWOM. Most Slovak and Czech DMOs, like Finnish ones, do not differentiate the nature of eWOM but have more detailed procedures for negative eWOM than for positive. Responses to eWOM are mainly through Facebook, Instagram, and email.

Phillips *et al.* (2015) argue that tourism entities should be present on as many social media platforms as possible, as eWOM will continue to be at the forefront of visitors' decision-making in tourism. Slovak DMOs primarily use Facebook, Instagram, GoogleMaps, and to a lesser extent YouTube, but visitors can also contact them through email, contact forms, and chat tools, which are not visible to other visitors. Czech DMOs use Facebook, Instagram, the websites Kudyznudy and Firmy.cz, and email.

Selected Finnish DMOs have an employee responsible for managing eWOM, although this is not their only job role (Kushcheva, 2022), similar to Slovak and Czech DMOs, which have designated employees for managing eWOM. However, this varies individually, and sometimes the entire DMO, the director, or external workers are responsible for eWOM management.

To date, no authors have investigated DMOs' attitudes towards eWOM except for Kushcheva (2022), who had a negligible participant sample (3). The majority (79.3%) of Slovak and Czech DMOs monitor eWOM focused on the destination. DMOs that do not monitor eWOM due to personnel and time reasons consider it important, as it represents a routine evaluation of the efforts, solutions, and daily work of tourism management organizations by visitors. This implies the importance of addressing eWOM not only at the level of businesses and attractions in tourism but also at the level of tourism destinations.

This study has several limitations, primarily its geographical focus on two Central European countries, chosen due to the authors' knowledge of the market and language. Another limitation is the lack of exploration of false eWOM, as the authors did not investigate it for fear that DMO representatives would not be willing to answer honestly, which could negatively affect the atmosphere of in-depth interviews and responses to other questions.

From the results of the study, several implications emerge. DMOs should undoubtedly make greater use of their own websites as an effective and easily manageable eWOM channel, including in relation to service providers in the area. DMOs should motivate visitors to the destination to concentrate their eWOM in a few places, making the effect of positive eWOM more significant. DMOs should have clearly defined in their organizational structure which employees are responsible for monitoring and managing eWOM, and the rules for managing eWOM should be clearly specified.

Conclusions and Further Research

Destination management organizations are facing new challenges, including increasing interest in eWOM among visitors to tourism destinations. Although existing studies partially investigate this eWOM phenomenon within the management of tourism destinations, it can be concluded that this area reins largely unexplored. This lack of scientific interest can be attributed mainly to the fact that the academic sphere began to pay attention to the issue only recently. At the same time, no previous study appears to have looked at eWOM from the management perspective of tourism organizations, indicating gap in current research. This study has illuminated the pivotal role of eWOM in shaping tourists' decision-making processes, underscoring its significance for DMOs.

In the realm of DMOs, a substantial proportion, approximately 80%, actively engage in the monitoring of eWOM to meticulously manage the image of their destinations, with a particular focus on addressing negative feedback to enhance service quality and visitor experiences. This engagement is manifested through the assignment of eWOM management tasks to various organizational roles, from comprehensive involvement by all employees as time permits to specific responsibilities held by directors and marketing personnel. Furthermore, the data reveals a proactive stance by DMOs towards eWOM, with a notable majority, nine out of ten, actively

responding to visitor feedback. This includes a strategic emphasis on addressing negative eWOM, highlighting the prioritization of maintaining a positive destination image.

On the contrary, the analysis of eWOM content on destination websites, Google Maps, and Facebook presents a nuanced view. It was observed that a mere fraction of DMOs provide visitors with the capability to rate attractions on their official websites, with an even smaller number allowing for narrative feedback on visitor experiences, thus constraining the public expression of visitor sentiments. In the context of Google Maps, although a significant number of DMOs maintain corporate accounts with an average commendable rating of 4.6 out of 5, the engagement in terms of verbal reviews remains minimal, indicating a potential underutilization of this platform for eWOM management. Conversely, Facebook emerges as a more vibrant platform for DMO engagement, with all surveyed DMOs maintaining an official presence and the majority facilitating review submissions. The average number of reviews per DMO on this platform stands at 28, predominantly positive, with user comments mainly centered around contests and photo submission calls.

This juxtaposition of findings from interviews and eWOM content analysis underscores a divergence between the acknowledged significance of eWOM by DMOs and the actual levels of engagement on platforms such as Google Maps and destination websites. While DMOs demonstrate a proactive approach to managing and responding to eWOM, particularly on social media platforms like Facebook, the limited narrative feedback and review engagement on other platforms suggest a potential avenue for enhancing the management of destination image and visitor experiences through more robust eWOM engagement strategies.

Future research should delve deeper into the longitudinal impacts of eWOM on destination branding and visitor loyalty, exploring the evolving dynamics of digital communication channels. Comparative studies across different geographic regions and cultural contexts could shed light on the universal and unique aspects of eWOM in tourism management. Additionally, investigating the role of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, in automating eWOM analysis and response strategies could offer valuable insights into the future of destination management practices.

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Credit Authorship Contribution Statement

Kristína Medeková: conceptualized the project, conducted investigations, developed methodologies, administered the project, performed formal analyses, drafted the original manuscript, validated the findings, participated in review and editing, and visualized the results.

Kristína Pompurová: played a significant role in methodology, the creation of the original draft, and contributed to the subsequent stages of writing, review, editing, and visualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Declaration of Use of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies

The authors declare that they have not used generative AI and AI-assisted technologies during the preparation of this work.

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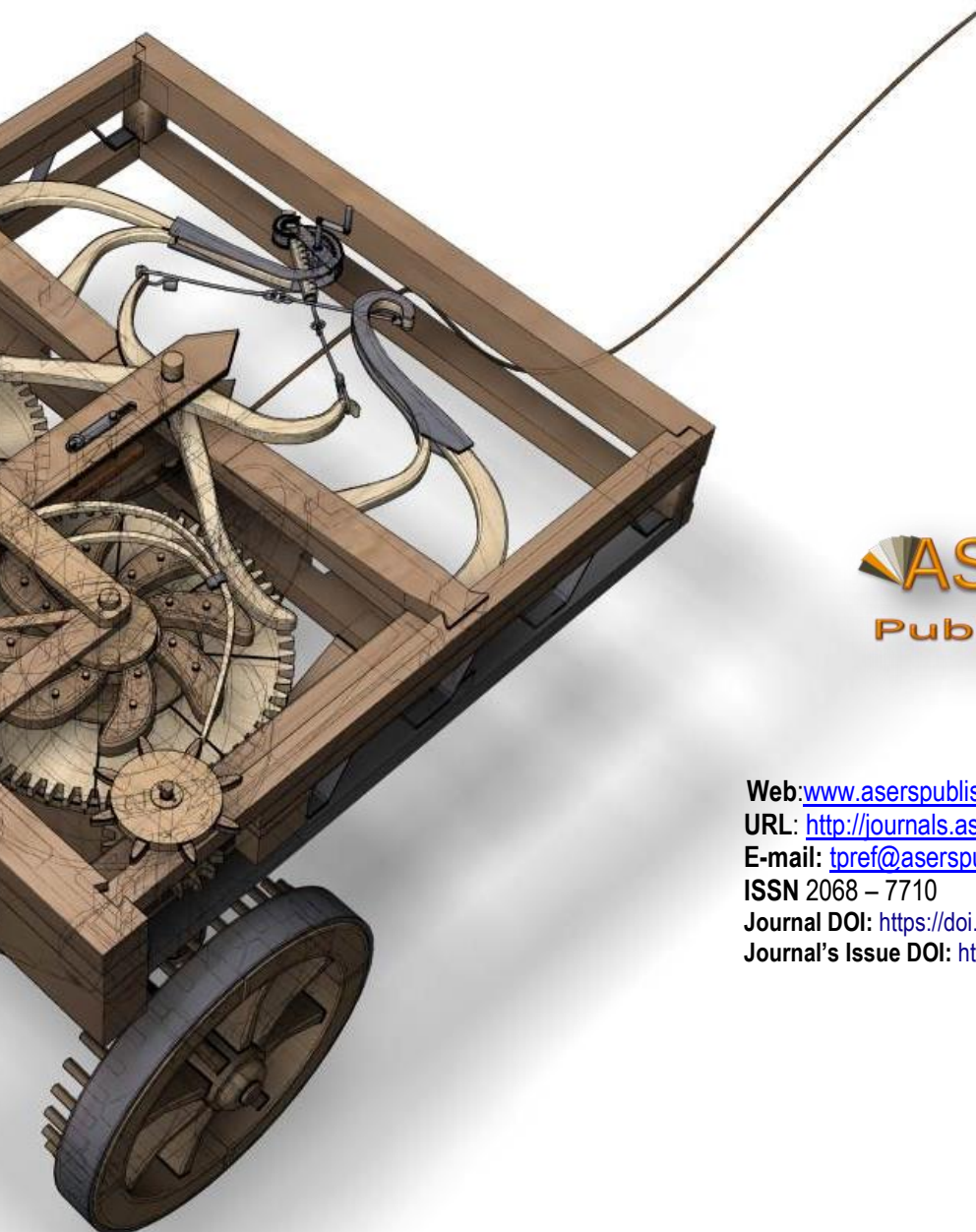
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