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# The role of digital marketing and electronic word of mouth in restoring interest and visiting decisions to mangrove ecotourism *Kampung Blekok*, Situbondo in the new normal era

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**ABSTRACT**

**Introduction:** The presence of ecotourism is more oriented toward environmental conservation, utilization of natural resources, cultural preservation, and economic benefits. However, post-COVID-19 pandemic tourist visits to the *Kampung Blekok* mangrove ecotourism have not recovered, and the condition of the ecotourism is not maintained and is damaged. This research aims to analyze the influence of digital marketing, electronic word of mouth, and interest in visiting on the decision to visit the *Kampung Blekok* mangrove ecotourism. **Methods:** Data collection on ecotourism behavior was obtained from 172 respondents using a questionnaire. The data analysis technique used was Structural Equation Modeling Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) with WarpPLS version 8.0. **Results:** The results of the research analysis show that digital marketing and eWOM produce a positive and significant influence on visit intention and decision. The mediating role of visiting interest in the relationship between digital marketing and eWOM on visiting decisions is partial. Mangrove ecotourism managers in *Kampung Blekok* can optimize digital marketing and eWOM strategies, and adapt to current tourism situations and trends. **Conclusion:** Digital marketing and eWOM are important in shaping visit interest and determining tourist decisions. Changes in tourist behavior using digital media can be a tool for progressing the ecotourism business by increasing tourists' visiting decisions.

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## INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become a popular activity in modern life and has contributed significantly to economic development. The utilization of natural resources for tourism often causes environmental damage. In many parts of the world, the existence of ecotourism has contributed to the dual goals of poverty alleviation of local communities and conservation of natural resources to reduce the negative impacts of tourism (Das & Chatterjee, 2015). However, the occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic has caused a decrease in the number of tourist visits which directly impacts the level of tourism activity and cases of business closures in the sector (Karim *et al.*, 2020; Mwamwaja & Mlozi, 2020). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic occurred in the ecotourism of *Kampung Blekok* which caused a drastic decline in tourist visits and the condition of the ecotourism to be unmaintained until it was damaged. Since the COVID-19 pandemic until the new normal era, tourist visits to *Kampung Blekok* cannot be said to have recovered.

*Kampung Blekok* Ecotourism is one of the tourism potentials in Situbondo Regency, East Java. *Kampung Blekok* is one of the ecotourism as well as a mangrove forest nature conservation area which has a characteristic destination attraction in thousands of water birds (*blekok / Kontul*) that inhabit the mangrove area. *Kampung Blekok* with the tourist branding "Harmony of Life" charms the beauty of water birds that adorn the mangrove conservation area. This ecotourism has educational tours to get to know the diversity of mangroves and water birds to make crafts, and this tourist area is a center for handicrafts from shells and wood. *Kampung Blekok* Ecotourism is designed by considering the development of sustainable tourism destinations, utilizing tourism responsibly, and increasing community awareness of nature.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, tourist visits to *Kampung Blekok* have decreased drastically, from 63,602 visitors in 2019 to 11,571 visitors in 2021. According to Gössling *et al.*, (2020), Tourism is one of the sectors that has been

significantly impacted and disrupted by the Covid-19 outbreak. Hence, the a need to understand how post-Covid-19 travelers are made to return, as the survival of the destination depends on their visit (Menon *et al.*, 2022). As competition in the tourism industry sector increases, it becomes increasingly important for tourism managers and marketers to understand their target visitors better (Su & Huang, 2019). The availability of information and communication technology generates collective wisdom and has become a source of knowledge for tourists in making travel decisions, so marketers can take advantage of technology and the internet that can provide various methods of obtaining information that tourists need and want.

Consumer behavior theory has been referred to predict behavioral intentions and consumer decisions (Steinbaurer & Werthner, 2007) that are considered to be influenced by digital transformation in businesses and industries such as tourism (Hess *et al.*, 2016). Companies are considering digital technology to overcome social restrictions and adapt to the new normal era (Limna *et al.*, 2022). Digital marketing has become one of the main focus areas for the rapidly growing tourism business in a globalized world (Chamboko-Mpotaringa & Tichaawa, 2021; Chen & Lin, 2019). The use of digital technology, systems that facilitate communication, interaction, and innovation to support economic transactions to social activities (Chen *et al.*, 2021) that will encourage and shape consumers in the visiting process (Lodhi & Shoaib, 2017). In addition to digital technology, the existence of online reviews of tourists is a rich source of information for the tourist decision-making process (Nilashi *et al.*, 2019). Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM) has facilitated information search behavior and influenced the travel planning behavior of tourists (Li & Liu, 2014). The importance of innovative eWOM is a trusted source in the tourism industry, especially in the field of information (Litvin *et al.*, 2008). It appears that travelers are increasingly turning to eWOM to support their travel planning and travel-related decisions (Standing *et al.*, 2014; Tham *et al.*, 2013). EWOM will enable a better understanding of influencing traveler risk and subsequently increasing travel intentions for existing travel decision-making studies/models (Zuromskaite *et al.*, 2018).

Travelers behavioral Travelers' behavioral intentions play an important role in the recovery plan of the tourism industry (Kock *et al.*, 2020; Zheng *et al.*, 2021). Before choosing a destination, travelers may seek information on digital media to support their decision-making (Grant *et al.*, 2007). Selecting and purchasing a product involves dependent or independent decisions, thus a decision-making process (Nilashi *et al.*, 2019). The topic of decision-making is a cornerstone of marketing and consumer behavior (Nilashi *et al.*, 2019). In understanding consumer behavior, this study uses the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) which is one of the most prominent and widely used social-psychological models to explain human behavior (Han & Stoel, 2017; Yuriev *et al.*, 2020). TPB suggests that the likelihood of a person's behavior can be determined by the resources available, which is reflected by the construction of perceived behavioral control in the model (Wang, 2015). TPB is used comprehensively in tourism and hospitality literature in examining travelers' behavioral intentions (Yuzhanin & Fisher, 2016).

In relation to previous marketing research, the researchers revealed digital marketing-related research on marketing strategy (Kannan & Li, 2017; Nair & Gupta, 2020; Vollrath & Villegas, 2022), B2B (Saura *et al.*, 2021), and digital marketing on the TikTok platform (Guarda *et al.*, 2021). Digital marketing and eWOM are interrelated concepts in the context of online marketing. EWOM in the context of tourist behavior addresses tourist destinations (Tariyal *et al.*, 2022), ecotourism (Quoquab *et al.*, 2021), and tourism sites in China (Zhou *et al.*, 2020). This research fills the gap between digital marketing and visiting decisions to predict the behavior of mangrove ecotourism tourists after COVID-19.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to analyze the influence of digital marketing, electronic word of mouth, and interest in visiting on the decision to visit the *Kampung Blekok* mangrove ecotourism. Research findings related to factors affecting the decision behavior of tourists in mangrove ecotourism in *Kampung Blekok* not only provide an understanding of the pattern of tourist behavior but will also contribute or provide practical benefits in the development of marketing strategies based on digital marketing so as to recover visiting mangrove ecotourism in *Kampung Blekok*.

## METHODS

### Study site

This explanatory research that used a quantitative approach was carried out in the "*Kampung Blekok*" mangrove ecotourism located in Situbondo Regency, East Java. *Kampung Blekok* has become one of the ecotourism in the north coast of Java Island which has a characteristic destination attraction in thousands of water birds (Blekok).

### Sampling technique and data collection method

The sampling technique is based on purposive sampling, where before filling out the questionnaire the respondent goes through several questions to meet the sample requirements, before visiting the tourist has accessed one of the digital marketing official media (Instagram, Website, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Google Maps) from the *Kampung Blekok* ecotourism, is 17 years old, and has visited the *Kampung Blekok* ecotourism at least once from 2018-2023.

Data were distributed through offline and online surveys, the questionnaire used a Likert scale with a score of 1-5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree).

Based on the sampling technique used for Warp-PLS analysis, namely the rule of thumb with ten times the number of indicators, the sample of this study was taken as 170. A total of 153 questionnaires were distributed and 19 respondents were obtained separately from online and offline questionnaires, resulting in 172 eligible respondents (96.1%) after discarding incomplete answers.

**Data analysis**

The research data were analyzed using SEM-PLS (Stuctural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares) with WarpPLS version 8.0. SEM-PLS analysis consists of two sub-models, namely the measurement model, or outer model, and the structural model, or inner model.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Demographic characteristics of respondents**

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents

| Characteristics | Description | Frequency (person) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Place of Origin | East Java Province | 155 | 90 |
| | Outside East Java Province | 17 | 10 |
| Frequency of Visit | 1 time | 77 | 45 |
| | 2 times | 44 | 26 |
| | > 2 times | 51 | 30 |
| Environmental concern | Low | 0 | 0 |
| | Modest | 68 | 40 |
| | High | 104 | 60 |
| Gender | Male | 53 | 31 |
| | Female | 119 | 69 |
| Age (year) | 17-25 | 135 | 78 |
| | 26-36 | 33 | 19 |
| | 36-45 | 3 | 2 |
| | >45 | 1 | 1 |
| Marital Status | Not married | 145 | 84 |
| | Married, no children | 11 | 6 |
| | Married, have children | 16 | 9 |
| Education | Junior High School | 22 | 13 |
| | Senior High School | 84 | 49 |
| | Graduate (S1/S2/S3) | 66 | 38 |
| Job | Students | 102 | 59 |
| | Self-employed/Entrepreneur | 26 | 15 |
| | Civil Servant (PNS) | 8 | 5 |
| | Private employee | 18 | 10 |
| | Police/Navy | 1 | 1 |
| | Others | 17 | 10 |
| Income | ≤ IDR 2,500,000 | 134 | 78 |
| | IDR 2,500,000 - 5,000,000 | 34 | 20 |
| | ≥ IDR 5,000,000 | 4 | 2 |
| Expenses | ≤ IDR 2,500,000 | 154 | 90 |
| | IDR 2,500,000 - 5,000,000 | 17 | 10 |
| | ≥ IDR 5,000,000 | 1 | 1 |

Source: Primary data analysis, 2023

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The majority of young people fill their spare time by using digital media such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, to open websites. Based on the relevant age criteria, most of them are 17-25 years old or represent 78% of the total sample accessing and knowing the ecotourism information of *Kampung Blekok* from various digital media platforms from Kampug Blekok, namely Instagram as many as 120 people, youtube 28 people, website 35 people, TikTok 20 people, Facebook 3 people, google maps 3 people. The frequency of tourist visits is mostly 1 time (45%), including men (31%) and women (69%).

Most are unmarried and the majority come from East Java Province and live in areas around ecotourism such as Situbondo, Bondowoso, Jember, Banyuwangi, and Malang (90%). Most have a high school / vocational high school level of education (49%), with activities as students 59% of the total sample. Most of their monthly income (pocket money) was ≤ Rp 2,500,000 (78%) with expenditure ≤ Rp 2,500,000 (90%).

Mangrove ecotourism visitors in *Kampung Blekok* have different characteristics from visitors in tourists in Turkey (Armutcu *et al.*, 2023), especially in terms of domination of sex, age, and education, but have similarities with tourists in West Java in Sarifiyono & Lesmana research (2023) namely in terms of using various social media as a source of tourism information, including Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Tiktok.

**Validity and reliability test**

The questionnaire as a data collection tool, the level of accuracy and consistency is tested through validity and reliability tests. Validity and reliability testing was carried out on 30 and 60 respondents. The validity test results can be seen in Table 2, where the loading factor value is more than 0.3 and the AVE value is more than 0.5, which means that all question items are valid.

Table 2. Validity test results

| Variable | Indicator | Loading Factor | AVE | Description |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Digital Marketing* (DM) | DM1.1 | 0.782 | 0.512 | Valid |
| | DM1.2 | 0.743 | | Valid |
| | DM1.3 | 0.769 | | Valid |
| | DM2.1 | 0.755 | | Valid |
| | DM2.2 | 0.778 | | Valid |
| | DM3.1 | 0.796 | | Valid |
| | DM3.2 | 0781 | | Valid |
| | DM4.1 | 0.771 | | Valid |
| | DM4.2 | 0.828 | | Valid |
| | DM2.1 | 0.782 | | Valid |
| Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM) | EWOM1.1 | 0.767 | 0.505 | Valid |
| | EWOM2.1 | 0.787 | | Valid |
| | EWOM2.2 | 0.837 | | Valid |
| | EWOM3.1 | 0.917 | | Valid |
| | EWOM3.2 | 0.816 | | Valid |
| | EWOM4.1 | 0.780 | | Valid |
| | EWOM4.2 | 0.760 | | Valid |
| Visiting interest (MB) | MB1.1 | 0.756 | 0.539 | Valid |
| | MB 1.2 | 0.747 | | Valid |
| | MB 2.1 | 0.811 | | Valid |
| | MB 3.1 | 0.772 | | Valid |
| | MB 3.2 | 0.772 | | Valid |
| | MB 4.1 | 0.826 | | Valid |
| | MB 4.2 | 0.745 | | Valid |
| Visiting Decisions (KB) | KB1 | 0.716 | 0.564 | Valid |
| | KB 2 | 0.723 | | Valid |
| | KB 3 | 0.732 | | Valid |
| | KB 4 | 0.809 | | Valid |
| | KB 5 | 0.715 | | Valid |

Description: DM: *Digital Marketing*, EWOM: *Electronic Word of Mouth*, MB: Visiting interest, KB: Visiting Decisions.
Source: Primary data analysis, 2023

Discriminant validity (See Table 3) is analyzed to test the difference in dimensions measured by each construct where the square root of the AVE for each dimension is greater than the correlation coefficient between dimensions (Solimun *et al.*, 2017). Based on the test results in Table 3, it shows that discriminant validity in this study is met.

To determine the consistency of the questionnaire, the reliability test results show that all variables in the study are said to meet the reliability criteria of composite reliability value> 0.7 and Cronbach's alpha value> 0.6. Judging from the test results in Table 4 shows that the reliability test in this study is fulfilled.

Table 3. Discriminant validity test results

| | DM | EWOM | MB | KB |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| DM | **(0.716)** | 0.432 | 0.456 | 0.492 |
| EWOM | 0.432 | **(0.711)** | 0.348 | 0.465 |
| MB | 0.456 | 0.348 | **(0.734)** | 0.562 |
| KB | 0.492 | 0.465 | 0.562 | **(0.751)** |

Description: DM: *Digital Marketing*, EWOM: *Electronic Word of Mouth*, MB: Visiting interest, KB: Visiting Decisions
Source: Primary data analysis, 2023

Table 4. Hasil uji reliability

| Variable | Composite Reliability | Crinbach's Alpha | Keterangan |
|---|---|---|---|
| DM | 0.903 | 0.879 | Reliable |
| EWOM | 0.876 | 0.834 | Reliable |
| MB | 0.889 | 0.853 | Reliable |
| KB | 0.865 | 0.804 | Reliable |

Description: DM: *Digital Marketing*, EWOM: *Electronic Word of Mouth*, MB: Visiting interest, KB: Visiting Decisions.
Source: Primary data analysis, 2023

**Model fit and quality indices**

Model fit and quality indices are statistical measures used in structural equation modeling (SEM) and other multivariate statistical techniques to assess how well a proposed model corresponds with the observed data. These indices help researchers determine whether their theoretical model is a good representation of the underlying data structure. Here, model fit and quality indices were used to evaluate the suggested models. These indices collectively provide a comprehensive assessment of model fit, evaluating aspects such as explanatory power, multicollinearity, and the presence of suppression or paradoxical effects in the model.

Model fit and quality indices used in this study are APC, ARS, and AARS. APC measures the average strength of the relationships (paths) in the model, ARS reflects the average explanatory power of the independent variables on the dependent variables, and AARS reflects the average explanatory power of the independent variables on the dependent variables. A higher APC indicates a better overall fit of the model. Higher ARS values indicate a better fit and higher AARS values indicate a better fit, accounting for model complexity. The p values for the three main indices (APC, ARS, AARS) were significant at <0,001 for APC 0,299; ARS 0,373; and AARS 0,364 (in Table 5). The results indicate that the measurement model is feasible to use in the study. It means the model is a good fit for predicting the decision to visit *Kampung Blekok* mangrove ecotourism.

Table 5. Model fit and quality indices

| No | Model Fit and Quality Indices | Fit Criteria (Solimun *et al.*, 2017) | Analysis Results | Description |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Average path coefficient (APC) | *p-value* < 0.05 | 0.299 (P<0.001) | Significant |
| 2. | Average R-squared (ARS) | *p-value* < 0.05 | 0.373 (P<0.001) | Significant |
| 3. | Average adjusted R-squared (AARS) | *p-value* < 0.05 | 0.364 (P<0.001) | Significant |

Source: Primary data analysis, 2023

**R-square**

R-squared ($R^2$) represents the proportion of variance in the dependent variable that is explained by the independent variables in the model. Essentially, it is a measure of the goodness of fit of the model. R-squared indicates how well the independent variables explain the variability of the dependent variable. Higher R-squared values indicate a better fit, meaning the model explains a greater proportion of the variance in the dependent variable. In SEM, R-squared values are calculated for each endogenous (dependent) variable in the model.

Table 6. Results of the R-square Test

| Variable | $R^2$ | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Visiting Interest | 0.243 | Weak |
| Visiting Decision | 0.503 | Moderate |

Description: DM: *Digital Marketing*, EWOM: *Electronic Word of Mouth*, MB: Visiting interest, KB: Visiting Decisions.
Source: Primary data analysis, 2023

SEM can be used to examine structural paths and the R-square score of endogenous variables in PLS analysis determines the explanatory ability of the structural model. In Table 6, the PLS-SEM results show that the model is able to explain 50.3% of the visiting decision variables which are included in the moderate/moderate classification. The model explains a substantial but not overwhelming portion of the variance in the visiting decision. This suggests that while the model captures significant factors influencing the decision to visit, there are other variables not included in

the model that also play a role. A moderate $R^2$ indicates that the model is useful for understanding and predicting visiting decisions, but predictions should be made with some caution (variables in the model). In marketing research, an $R^2$ of around 0.5 might be considered acceptable, while in other fields, higher thresholds might be necessary.

**Hypothesis testing**

The hypotheses were tested using the PLS-SEM approach in WarpPLS version 8.0 after assessing the validity and reliability of the research instrument. Path coefficients represent the strength and direction of the relationships between latent variables in the model. A positive path coefficient indicates that as the independent variable increases, the dependent variable also increases. While the larger absolute values suggest a stronger relationship. The p-values indicate the statistical significance of the path coefficients. A p-value less than 0.05 typically indicates that the relationship is statistically significant. The results of SEM analysis in Table 7 show that all hypotheses are accepted and have a positive and significant effect between variables.

Table 7. Results of hypothesis testing

| Hypothesis | Pathway | Path Coefficient | Results |
|---|---|---|---|
| H1 | DM " MB | 0.367 (<0.001) | Accepted |
| H2 | EWOM " MB | 0.207 (0.003) | Accepted |
| H3 | DM " KB | 0.176 (0.009) | Accepted |
| H4 | EWOM " KB | 0.312 (<0.001) | Accepted |
| H5 | MB " KB | 0.430 (<0.001) | Accepted |
| H6 | DM " MB " KB | 0.158 (0.001) | Accepted |
| H7 | EWOM " MB " KB | 0.089 (0.047) | Accepted |

Description: DM: *Digital Marketing*, EWOM: *Electronic Word of Mouth*, MB: Visiting interest, KB: Visiting Decisions.
Source: Primary data analysis, 2023

The interpretation of the results of the hypothesis test is explained as follows:

- H1: Digital Marketing (DM) has a significant positive effect on Visiting Interest (MB). This means that improvements in digital marketing are associated with increased visiting interest. The hypothesis is accepted.
- H2: Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM) has a significant positive effect on Visiting Interest (MB). This means that more positive electronic word of mouth is associated with increased visiting interest. The hypothesis is accepted.
- H3: Digital Marketing (DM) has a significant positive effect on Visiting Decisions (KB). This indicates that improvements in digital marketing directly influence the decision to visit. The hypothesis is accepted.
- H4: Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM) has a significant positive effect on Visiting Decisions (KB). Positive electronic word of mouth directly influences the decision to visit. The hypothesis is accepted.
- H5: Visiting Interest (MB) has a significant positive effect on Visiting Decisions (KB). Higher visiting interest leads to a higher likelihood of deciding to visit. The hypothesis is accepted.
- H6: Digital Marketing (DM) indirectly affects Visiting Decisions (KB) through Visiting Interest (MB). This indicates that digital marketing influences visiting decisions partly by increasing visiting interest. The hypothesis is accepted.
- H7: Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM) indirectly affects Visiting Decisions (KB) through Visiting Interest (MB). This suggests that electronic word of mouth influences visiting decisions partly by increasing visiting interest. The hypothesis is accepted.

The results of the visiting decision model are shown in Figure 1. The model shows a moderate explanatory power for Visiting Interest ($R^2 = 0.24$) and a substantial explanatory power for Visiting Decisions ($R^2 = 0.50$). This indicates that while Digital Marketing and Electronic Word of Mouth are important for predicting Visiting Decisions, there are other factors influencing Visiting Interest that are not included in the model. All path coefficients are significant ($P < 0.01$), confirming the hypothesized relationships. The strongest direct effect on Visiting Decisions comes from Visiting Interest ($\beta = 0.43$), highlighting the importance of generating interest to drive decisions. Both Digital Marketing and Electronic Word of Mouth have significant direct and indirect effects on Visiting Decisions, reinforcing their roles in influencing visitor behavior. Implication for marketing strategy, focus on enhancing digital marketing efforts and encouraging positive electronic word of mouth to boost both visiting interest and decisions. For visitor engagement, strategies to increase visiting interest can lead to higher visiting decisions, suggesting that marketing campaigns should aim to engage potential visitors effectively.

The research model matches expectations based on the given data and provides valuable insights into the roles of Digital Marketing, Electronic Word of Mouth, and Visiting Interest in influencing Visiting Decisions. The significant relationships and substantial R-squared values suggest that the model is well-specified and relevant for understanding the factors driving visitors to *Kampung Blekok* mangrove ecotourism.

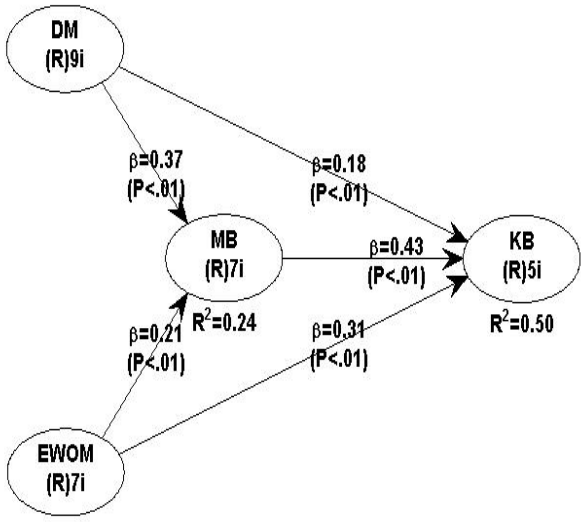


Figure 1. Results of the research model

Description: DM: *Digital Marketing*, EWOM: *Electronic Word of Mouth*, MB: Visiting interest, KB: Visiting Decisions.
Source: Primary data analysis, 2023

**The effect of digital marketing on interest in visiting**

Based on the results of data processing shows that digital marketing (β = 0.367, p <0.001) has a positive and significant effect on visiting interest, so the results of hypothesis 1 are accepted. This finding means that digital marketing is considered important for tourists to consider visiting interest. A positive value indicates that as digital marketing increases, interest in visiting also increases. Digital marketing can help tourists describe the state of the destination, the information provided, and even interactions related to the questions needed. In line with previous research that has been conducted Gomes *et al.* (2023), state that promotion, information, and content that is accurate and relevant can build visiting intentions.

**The effect of electronic word of mouth on Visiting interest**

Based on the results of data processing, it shows that the relationship of the eWOM variable has a significant positive effect (β = 0.207, p 0.003) on visiting interest, so the results of hypothesis 2 testing can be accepted. The availability of eWOM can reduce tourist uncertainty in considering visiting interests. A significant value indicates that eWOM is significant enough to influence tourists' interest in visiting. The existence of eWOM makes it easier for tourists to access information to recommendations from other people's perspectives or get credible sources. EWOM can influence tourists to facilitate decision-making. In line with the research of Doosti *et al.* (2016), eWOM from experience and recommendations has a positive effect on the intention to visit a tourist city.

**The effect of digital marketing on visiting decisions**

The results of the analysis of the effect of digital marketing on visiting decisions show a positive and significant influence (β = 0.176, p 0.009), the results of hypothesis 3 testing can be accepted. Digital marketing plays an important role in making tourist visiting decisions. Digital marketing is used to describe and introduce the state of the beauty of *Kampung Blekok* ecotourism. The display of published content can be accessed by many people so that potential tourists can get information easily in both written and visual forms. The use of digital media by ecotourism marketers of *Kampung Blekok* for promotion attracts tourists and allows interaction. The results of hypothesis 3 are in line with Ayu (2021), that digital marketing has a significant relationship with visiting decisions.

**The effect of electronic word of mouth on visiting decisions**

The results of hypothesis 4 state that it is acceptable, to support this hypothesis the relationship between eWOM and visiting decisions is significant (β = 0.312, p <0.001). EWOM represents a credible source of data for most tourists to evaluate uncertainty in making a visit decision. The availability of eWOM can provide convincing new information to encourage visiting a destination. In addition, the existence of online reviews can reduce concerns and make it easier for tourists to gather information to make travel decisions. The findings of hypothesis 5 support previous research from Filieri *et al.*, (2021) that reveals eWOM influences in reducing uncertainty, increasing trust, and facilitating tourists' visiting decisions.

**The effect of interest in visiting on visiting decisions**

The results of the analysis of the relationship between visiting interest and visiting decisions show a positive and significant influence ( β = 0.430, p <0.001), so it can be said that the results of hypothesis 5 are accepted. The behavior of tourists' visiting interest in this study is reflected in the intention and desire to visit *Kampung Blekok*. Interest in visiting is the first step for tourists to form a visiting decision process. Tourists' visiting interests and decisions are influenced by digital media and eWOM, where tourists use digital media when determining travel destinations and eWOM is used to convince them to visit *Kampung Blekok* after positive reviews. When the desire to visit tourists about a destination is fulfilled, it will affect the visiting decision. Thus testing hypothesis 5 is in line with Purwanto *et al.*, (2021) the higher a person's interest in visiting when he sees and gets the information he wants, will increase the decision to make a visit.

**The effect of digital marketing on visiting decisions with visiting interest as a mediating variable**

The results of hypothesis 6 state that there is an indirect effect of visiting interest as a mediating variable between digital marketing and visiting decisions resulting in a positive and significant effect (β = 0.158, p 0.001), so hypothesis 6 is accepted. Interest in visiting as a mediating variable can shape a tourist visiting decision. The results of testing this hypothesis prove that the role of visiting interest functions to mediate the relationship between digital marketing and visiting decisions. Digital marketing facilitates convenience for tourists in finding information so that tourists can have consideration in making visiting decisions. The findings of hypothesis 6 testing are in accordance with the results of the study, by Sarifiyono & Lesmana (2023) , the effectiveness of social media marketing can form an interest in planning travel activities which ultimately drives a visiting decision.

**The effect of electronic word of mouth on visiting decisions with visiting interest as a mediating variable**

The results of hypothesis 7 state that there is an indirect effect of visiting interest as a mediating variable between eWOM and visiting decisions resulting in a positive and significant effect (β = 0.089, p 0.047), so hypothesis 7 is accepted. The results of testing this hypothesis prove that the role of visiting interest functions to mediate the relationship between eWOM and visiting decisions. EWOM tends to influence tourist behavior in choosing a destination after receiving positive reviews. Reviews from previous individuals who have visited will help build trust in future tourists. Travelers can use eWOM as a reliable source of information according to their needs. Based on previous research, the test results of hypothesis 7 are in line with Purwanto *et al.*, (2021) the eWOM used by tourist attraction managers as a marketing strategy that can influence subsequent visiting interest which has an impact on visiting decisions.

Table 8. Prioritisation of path effectiveness

| Variable | | | *Direct Effect* | *Indirect Effect* | *Total Effect* | Priority Effectiveness of Influence on | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Predictor | Mediation | Respond | β (p-value) | β (p-value) | β (p-value) | MB | KB |
| DM | - | MB | 0.367 (<0.001) | | 0.367(<0.001) | 1 | - |
| EWOM | - | MB | 0.207(0.003) | | 0.207(0.003) | 2 | - |
| MB | - | KB | 0.430(<0.001) | | 0.430(<0.001) | - | 1 |
| DM | MB | KB | 0,.176(0.009) | 0.158 (0.001) | 0.334(<0.001) | - | 3 |
| EWOM | MB | KB | 0.312(<0.001) | 0.089 (0.047) | 0.401(<0.001) | - | 2 |

Description: DM: *Digital Marketing*, EWOM: *Electronic Word of Mouth*, MB: Visiting interest, KB: Visiting Decisions.
Source: Primary data analysis, 2023

Table 8 shows the path analysis of the effectiveness of visiting interest and visiting decisions. The order of the visiting interest path, namely (1) the total effect of the relationship between digital marketing and visiting interest is 0.367 (<0.001); (2) the total effect of the relationship between eWOM and visiting interest is 0.207 (0.003). In addition, the order of each path of the effectiveness of visiting decisions from largest to smallest is (1) the total effect of visiting interest and visiting decisions is 0.430 (<0.001); (2) the total effect of the relationship between eWOM and visiting decisions is 0.401 (<0.001); (3) then the total effect of the digital marketing relationship on visiting decisions is 0.334 (<0.001).

## CONCLUSION

Digital marketing strategies and eWOM can accelerate the recovery of visiting interest and visiting decisions to mangrove ecotourism "*Kampung Blekok*" in Situbondo Regency. Interest in visiting effectively, but not absolutely, can

mediate the effect of digital marketing strategies and eWOM on visiting decisions to mangrove ecotourism "*Kampung Blekok*" in Situbondo Regency.

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