

City Branding, Electronic Word-of-Mouth, and City Image in Shaping Tourists' Visiting Decisions

Ferry Satria¹, Haryadi Haryadi^{2*}, Syahmardi Yacob³, Junaidi Junaidi⁴

Universitas Jambi, Jambi, Indonesia^{1,2,3,4}

ferry.satria.unja.25@gmail.com¹, haryadi.fe@unja.ac.id^{2*}, syahmardi_yacob@unja.ac.id³, junaidi@unja.ac.id⁴



Article History

Received on 09 February 2026
1st Revised on 12 February 2026
2nd Revised on 19 February 2026
3rd Revised on 05 March 2026
Accepted on 31 March 2026

Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to examine how city branding and electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) influence tourists' visiting decisions through the mediating role of city image in a medium-sized emerging tourism city.

Research Methodology: This study was conducted in Sungai Penuh City, Indonesia, using a quantitative survey of 360 tourists who had previously visited the city. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS, and mediation effects were tested through bootstrapping.

Results: The findings show that city branding and e-WOM have significant positive effects on both the city image and tourists' visiting decisions. City image also has a strong direct influence on visiting decisions and significantly mediates the relationship between city branding, e-WOM, and visiting decisions.

Conclusions: This study concludes that tourists' visiting decisions in emerging urban destinations are shaped not only by institutional branding strategies and online narratives but also by how these factors are translated into a favorable city image.

Limitations: This study was limited to one medium-sized tourist city and employed a cross-sectional design, which may restrict the generalizability of the results to other destinations.

Contributions: This study highlights the city image as a key mechanism linking city branding and e-WOM to tourists' visiting decisions and provides practical implications for destination managers to strengthen branding strategies and manage digital communication.

Keywords: *City Branding, City Image, Destination Marketing, Electronic Word of Mouth, Perception Management*

How to Cite: Satria, F., Haryadi, H., Yacob, S., Junaidi, J. (2026). City Branding, Electronic Word-of-Mouth, and City Image in Shaping Tourists' Visiting Decisions. *Studi Ilmu Manajemen dan Organisasi*, 7 (1), 345-357.

1. Introduction

Urban tourism has become one of the most competitive sectors of the global tourism industry as cities increasingly compete to attract visitors, investment, and symbolic recognition. In recent years, this competition has intensified owing to increased global mobility, rapid growth of digital platforms, and tourists' rising demand for experience-oriented travel (Mandagi & Tappy, 2024; Mega, Barusman, Habiburrahman, & Barusman, 2026). Consequently, tourists' visiting decisions are no longer shaped solely by tangible attractions or infrastructure but increasingly by how cities are perceived, narrated, and emotionally evaluated in digitally mediated environments.

In this context, city branding has emerged as a pivotal strategic tool (Mandagi and Tappy (2024), particularly for medium-sized emerging tourism cities seeking to strengthen their visibility and competitiveness. City branding refers to the strategic efforts of local authorities and destination managers to create a distinctive urban identity that resonates with potential tourists. Empirical evidence

suggests that effective branding enhances destination attractiveness, strengthens tourists' perceptions, and significantly influences their intention to visit ([Indriani, 2024](#); [Ramadania, Gafur, Rahmawati, & Afifi, 2024](#)). In post-pandemic tourism recovery, city branding has become even more critical as cities attempt to revitalize tourism demand through coherent image-building strategies and digital engagement ([Indriani, 2024](#)).

However, the contemporary tourism information landscape is no longer solely dominated by official branding initiatives. The rise of electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM), including online reviews, social media narratives, and user-generated travel content, has transformed the way tourists gather information and evaluate destinations. Compared with institutional promotional messages, e-WOM is often perceived as more credible and experiential, thereby exerting a strong influence on tourists' attitudes and behavioral intentions ([Alrwashdeh, Emeagwali, & Aljuhmani, 2019](#); [Elsalam & Ezzat, 2022](#)). Moreover, e-WOM provides social proof that can amplify branding efforts by rapidly disseminating favorable destination perceptions across digital networks ([Hasan, Qayyum, & Zia, 2022](#); [Siddiqui et al., 2021](#)).

City image is a crucial mechanism linking city branding and e-WOM to tourists' behavioral outcomes. City image represents the overall cognitive and affective evaluation that individuals have of a destination. It functions as a perceptual lens through which branding signals and peer-generated narratives are interpreted. A favorable city image enhances trust, reduces uncertainty, and increases emotional appeal, thereby strengthening tourists' intention to visit ([Indriani, 2024](#); [Lin, 2024](#)). Studies further confirm that city image mediates the influence of e-WOM on decision-making, as tourists are more likely to act on online information when it aligns with a coherent and positive destination image ([Elsalam & Ezzat, 2022](#); [Praswati, Wardani, & Rohim, 2021](#)).

Despite growing scholarly attention to the relationships among city branding, e-WOM, and city image, existing research often examines these constructs in isolation or focuses primarily on globally established metropolitan destinations. Comparatively limited attention has been given to medium-sized emerging tourism cities, where global visibility is weaker ([Ximenes, Utari Dewi, and Widnyani, 2024](#)), and competitiveness depends heavily on perception management, authenticity, and digital engagement. Therefore, examining how branding strategies and digital narratives interact to shape tourist decision-making in medium-sized cities is an important yet underexplored area of urban tourism research. In such contexts, branding strategies and online narratives are essential mechanisms through which destinations can build legitimacy and attract tourists ([Gao & Shao, 2024](#); [Hasan et al., 2022](#)).

To address this gap, the present study investigates how city branding and electronic word-of-mouth shape tourists' visiting decisions through the mediating role of city image in a medium-sized emerging tourism city, Sungai Penuh City, Indonesia. By focusing on a medium-sized tourism destination, this study offers a novel perspective on how emerging cities can build tourism competitiveness through branding and a digitally mediated reputation. By integrating institutional branding efforts, peer-generated digital communication, and perceptual image formation into a single explanatory framework, this study contributes to the urban tourism and destination marketing literature by clarifying the cognitive–affective mechanisms that drive tourist decision-making in less prominent urban destinations.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1 City Branding and Tourists' Visiting Decisions

City branding has become an essential strategy in urban tourism, particularly as cities compete to enhance their attractiveness and distinguish themselves in increasingly competitive destination markets. City branding influences tourists' visiting decisions by strengthening destination brand equity through key dimensions, such as brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand image. Empirical evidence confirms that higher destination brand awareness significantly improves tourists' perceptions and contributes to stronger loyalty and intention to visit ([Vinh, Nguyen, Tran, Tran, & Huynh, 2019](#)). Similarly, [Shen and Ma \(2022\)](#) found that perceived destination brand quality directly enhances tourist loyalty, which ultimately shapes their decision to choose a city as a travel destination.

In the contemporary digital tourism environment, city branding efforts are strongly reinforced through social media engagement and electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM). Social media platforms enable cities to communicate branding narratives more effectively, and peer-generated digital content provides credibility and social validation. [Indriani \(2024\)](#) emphasized that social media promotion and e-WOM serve as significant mediating mechanisms that enhance city attractiveness and positively influence tourists' visitation intentions, particularly in emerging tourism destinations.

Moreover, tourists' direct experiences play a critical role in strengthening city brand equity and shaping their visiting decisions. Positive tourism experiences contribute to favorable city brand attitudes, which further amplify the effectiveness of branding strategies. [Miftahuddin, Hermanto, Raharja, and Chan \(2021\)](#) highlight that experiential satisfaction enhances city brand equity by cultivating stronger emotional and cognitive attachment among visitors. Therefore, city branding functions not only as a symbolic differentiation tool but also as a strategic driver of tourists' behavioral intentions and visitation decisions. These findings suggest that a strong city brand can enhance destination attractiveness and influence tourists' behavioral intentions to visit the city. Based on this theoretical and empirical reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H₁: City branding positively affects tourists' visiting decisions

2.2 Electronic Word of Mouth and Tourists' Visiting Decisions

Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) has become a dominant source of information in tourism decision-making, particularly in the digital era, where tourists increasingly rely on online reviews, social media content, and user-generated recommendations. e-WOM significantly shapes tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness and credibility, thereby influencing their visiting decisions ([Makur, Karta, & Oktaviani, 2022](#)). Empirical evidence demonstrates that e-WOM exerts a direct and significant effect on tourists' decision-making processes by enhancing perceptions of city image and overall destination appeal ([Kurniawati, Ikhwana, & Anggraeni, 2022](#)). [Muslim, Hidayati, and Pardiman \(2021\)](#) further argue that e-WOM may even have a stronger influence on tourists' visiting decisions than city branding itself, highlighting the strategic importance of managing and improving destinations' online reputation.

Moreover, e-WOM not only directly affects tourists' visiting decisions but also strengthens destination brand image through its mediating role in reinforcing branding signals. [Indriani \(2024\)](#) emphasized that positive e-WOM enhances perceived quality and destination attractiveness, thereby amplifying the effectiveness of city branding strategies. This mediating mechanism integrates institutional branding efforts with experiential narratives shared by previous visitors, shaping more favorable perceptions ([Wiryokusumo, Wiranatha, & Suryawardani, 2021](#)). Additionally, [Hernowo, Chan, and Purnomo \(2022\)](#) underline that social media-based user-generated content spreads recommendations rapidly and plays a crucial role in guiding travel choices, particularly in emerging tourism markets, where tourists depend heavily on digital feedback to reduce uncertainty. Therefore, positive e-WOM is expected to increase tourists' confidence and encourage them to visit a destination. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H₂: Electronic word of mouth has a positive effect on tourists' visiting decisions

2.3 City Branding and City Image

City image reflects the overall cognitive and affective evaluations that tourists hold toward a destination and serves as a critical determinant of how a city is perceived in the tourism market. City branding plays a central role in shaping this image by constructing a distinctive urban identity that enhances the attractiveness of the destination. Empirical studies confirm that effective branding initiatives significantly strengthen city images, making destinations more appealing and competitive. [Dastgerdi and Luca \(2019\)](#) emphasized that a well-developed city image enhances urban attractiveness, while [Pramesti and Sholahuddin \(2024\)](#) demonstrated that city branding positively contributes to city image and influences visitors' intentions in specific tourism contexts, such as religious destinations.

Furthermore, city branding is increasingly influenced by experiential and contextual factors that shape tourists' perceptions, including local friendliness and cleanliness, and social media engagement. [Setiawan, Meivitanli, Arrieta-Paredes, Morrison, and Coca-Stefaniak \(2021\)](#) highlighted that such

attributes significantly contribute to Jakarta's destination brand image, suggesting that city branding requires a nuanced and multidimensional approach. In the digital era, active brand management through social media is essential, as interactive platforms provide real-time engagement and feedback from potential tourists ([Indriani, 2024](#)). City image also functions as an intervening mechanism linking branding to tourist behavior. [Dastgerdi and Luca \(2019\)](#) found that both city branding and city image significantly impact visiting interest, while [Syafitri, Novianti, and Effendi \(2023\)](#) stressed that emotional experiences such as nostalgia further reinforce positive destination perceptions and strengthen city image over time. Therefore, effective city branding is expected to contribute to the formation of a favorable city image. Based on this theoretical and empirical reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H₃: City branding positively affects the city image

2.4 Electronic Word of Mouth and City Image

In the digital tourism environment, a city's image is strongly shaped by information disseminated through electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), particularly via social media platforms where tourists actively share experiences, evaluations, and recommendations. e-WOM has become a crucial determinant of destination image formation, as travelers increasingly rely on user-generated content rather than traditional promotional efforts by destination management organizations. [Kakirala and Singh \(2020\)](#) demonstrate that e-WOM directly enhances destination image by fostering trust and satisfaction among potential tourists, reflecting the growing dominance of peer-based narratives in shaping city perceptions ([Umnikrishnan & Sibi, 2023](#)). As a result, both positive and negative online discourse can significantly strengthen or distort the overall image of a city, influencing its attractiveness in competitive tourism markets ([Azhar, Ali, Hamid, Akhtar, & Rahman, 2022](#)).

Moreover, e-WOM not only contributes directly to image formation but also functions as an important mediating mechanism that reinforces branding signals and shapes tourists' evaluative perceptions. [Indriani \(2024\)](#) emphasizes that e-WOM plays a mediating role in the relationship between city branding efforts and city image, suggesting that effective management of online narratives is essential for improving destination reputation. A favorable city image strengthened through e-WOM has been shown to enhance tourists' visiting and revisiting intentions, particularly in post-pandemic tourism contexts where credibility and reassurance are highly valued ([Azhar et al., 2022](#)). Additionally, [Yannacopoulou and Kallinikos \(2024\)](#) highlight that user-generated content significantly contributes to shaping visitors' perceptions, underscoring e-WOM as a central component of modern tourism marketing strategies. Consequently, positive e-WOM is expected to strengthen tourists' perceptions of a destination and improve the overall city image. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H₄: Electronic word of mouth has a positive effect on the city's image

2.5 City Image and Tourists' Visiting Decisions

City image is widely recognized as a crucial determinant of tourists' visiting decisions, as it shapes expectations regarding destination experiences and influences how potential visitors perceive a city. A favorable city image enhances overall attractiveness, strengthens tourists' impressions, and increases the likelihood of destination selection. Empirical evidence confirms that destination image significantly affects tourists' decisions to visit, as positive perceptions generate stronger emotional appeal and confidence in their travel choices ([Putri & Widyastuti, 2023](#)). Furthermore, city image has been identified as an important mediating mechanism linking digital information exposure to behavioral intention. [Kusumawati, Aprilia, and Abdillah \(2019\)](#) demonstrate that city image mediates the relationship between e-WOM and visit intention, highlighting its central role in transforming online recommendations into travel decisions.

Moreover, city image not only influences initial visiting intentions but also contributes to tourists' revisit behavior, reinforcing the strategic importance of maintaining a positive destination reputation for sustainable tourism development. [Azhar et al. \(2022\)](#) emphasized that a strong city image increases the likelihood of repeat visitation, particularly in post-pandemic tourism contexts, where reassurance and trust are essential. e-WOM further strengthens this process by enhancing destination trust, which directly influences travel intentions ([Mutaqin & Trinanda, 2019](#)). Additionally, [Negara, Yuliati, and](#)

[Sartono \(2019\)](#) highlight that service quality impacts destination image, and a positive image encourages tourists to share experiences through e-WOM, creating a feedback loop that continuously reinforces the city’s attractiveness and tourism competitiveness. A favorable city image can reduce uncertainty and increase tourists’ willingness to visit a destination. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H₅: City image positively affects tourists’ visiting decisions

2.6 The Mediating Role of City Image

Although city branding and electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) may directly influence tourists’ visiting decisions, their effects are often transmitted through the formation of a city image. City image functions as a cognitive–affective mechanism that translates branding signals and peer-generated narratives into coherent destination perceptions. Empirical evidence confirms that city branding significantly strengthens the city image, which subsequently shapes tourists’ behavioral intentions. [Indriani \(2024\)](#) highlights the direct pathway through which city branding enhances the city image and influences visiting decisions, while [Fatmawati and Maharani \(2023\)](#) further demonstrate that a strong brand identity contributes to a favorable city image, making destinations more appealing to potential visitors.

In addition, e-WOM plays a critical role in shaping the city’s image by providing experiential validation through online recommendations and shared tourist experiences. [Pramesti and Sholahuddin \(2024\)](#) found that e-WOM significantly influences city image, which in turn affects tourists’ interest in visiting specific attractions. The mediating role of city image is particularly evident in studies showing that branding and digital communication jointly shape the intention to visit. [KR, Yusuf, Mariana, and Marsuni \(2023\)](#) demonstrate that city branding and city image together influence tourists’ visiting interest, while [Kusumawati et al. \(2019\)](#) confirm that city image mediates the relationship between e-WOM and visit intention, suggesting that a strong city image enhances the persuasive impact of online word of mouth. Therefore, integrating city branding, e-WOM, and city image within a unified framework provides a more comprehensive understanding of tourists’ decision-making processes in emerging urban-tourism contexts. Based on this reasoning, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H₆: City image mediates the relationship between city branding and tourists’ visiting decisions

H₇: City image mediates the relationship between electronic word of mouth and tourists’ visiting decisions

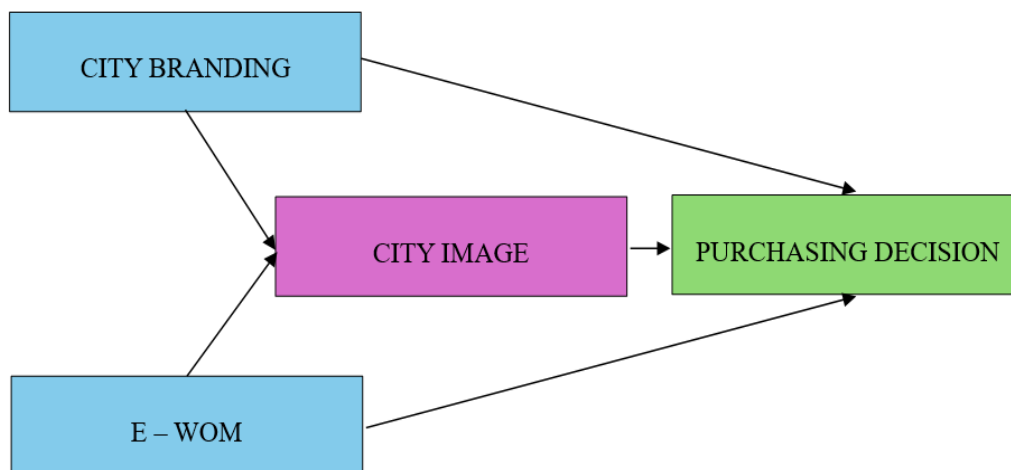


Figure 1. Research model

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Study Context

This study adopts a quantitative research design to empirically examine the relationships among city branding, electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM), city image, and tourists’ visiting decisions. A cross-

sectional survey approach was employed, which is appropriate for theory testing and explanatory research in the tourism and destination marketing contexts. A cross-sectional survey approach was employed, which is appropriate for theory testing and explanatory research in tourism and destination marketing contexts. However, because the data were collected at a single point in time, this design does not capture potential changes in tourists' perceptions and behavioral intentions over time. Quantitative methods are particularly suitable for assessing complex relationships involving mediation effects and latent constructs.

The empirical setting of this study is Sungai Penuh City, Indonesia, which represents a medium-sized emerging tourist city. The city is characterized by developing urban tourism attractions, a strong cultural identity, and increasing reliance on digital promotion to enhance destination visibility. Sungai Penuh City is used as an empirical context rather than an object of theoretical generalization, allowing the findings to contribute to broader urban tourism theory concerning medium-sized destinations in emerging economies.

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

Data were collected from tourists who had previously visited the city. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that respondents possessed direct travel experience and were therefore capable of evaluating city branding perceptions, electronic word of mouth, city image, and visiting decisions. Data were collected from tourists who had previously visited Sungai Penuh City. To ensure the relevance of responses, the study applied several selection criteria: respondents had to be at least 18 years old, have visited Sungai Penuh City within the last three years, and possess experience accessing online travel information or social media related to the destination. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that respondents possessed sufficient travel experience to evaluate city branding perceptions, electronic word of mouth, city image, and visiting decisions. This sampling approach is consistent with prior tourism studies focusing on perceptual and behavioral constructs.

The survey was administered using a structured questionnaire that was distributed both online and in person to maximize response diversity. A total of 360 valid responses were included in the final analysis. This sample size exceeded the minimum requirements for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), providing sufficient statistical power to estimate the proposed model and test the mediation effects.

3.3 Measurement of Constructs

All constructs in this study were measured using multi-item scales adapted from the established tourism and destination marketing literature to ensure content validity. City branding was measured using items that captured perceptions of destination identity, uniqueness, and attractiveness. Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) was operationalized through items reflecting the credibility, usefulness, and influence of online reviews and digital travel narratives. City image was measured as a multidimensional construct that captures both cognitive and affective evaluations of the destination. Tourists' visiting decisions were assessed using items reflecting intention, preference, and decision confidence.

All measurement items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire items were carefully reviewed and refined to ensure their clarity, relevance, and contextual appropriateness. Where necessary, minor wording adjustments were made to reflect the characteristics of the study context while maintaining consistency with the original scale.

3.4 Data Analysis Technique

The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), implemented with SmartPLS software. PLS-SEM was selected because it is well-suited for predictive research, complex models with multiple constructs, and mediation analysis. Moreover, PLS-SEM does not impose strict normality assumptions and is appropriate for studies that focus on theory development and extension.

The analysis was performed using a two-step procedure. First, the measurement model was evaluated to assess internal consistency, reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity using

established criteria. Second, the structural model was assessed to test the hypothesized relationships among the constructs. Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was used to evaluate the significance of the path coefficients and indirect effects. This procedure provides robust estimates of the standard errors and confidence intervals, ensuring reliable hypothesis testing.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Results

4.1.1 Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was evaluated to assess internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity before examining the structural relationships. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability indices (ρ_a and ρ_c), and convergent validity was evaluated using average variance extracted (AVE) values.

As presented in Table 1, all constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. The composite reliability values also exceeded the minimum criterion, indicating that the measurement items consistently represented their respective constructs. Convergent validity was established, as all AVE values were well above the recommended threshold of 0.50, confirming that the constructs explained a substantial proportion of the variance in their indicators. Overall, these results indicate that the measurement model exhibits satisfactory reliability and convergent validity and is therefore suitable for subsequent structural model analysis.

Table 1. Construct reliability and convergent validity

Variables	Indicator	Loading Factor	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (ρ_a)	Composite reliability (ρ_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
City Image	CI1; CI2; CI3; CI4; CI5; CI6; CI7; CI8	0.899; 0.876; 0.887; 0.898; 0.829; 0.908; 0.864; 0.871	0.958	0.958	0.965	0.773
City Branding	CB1; CB2; CB3; CB4; CB5; CB6; CB7; CB8	0.899; 0.888; 0.890; 0.904; 0.832; 0.912; 0.878; 0.858	0.959	0.960	0.966	0.779
e-WOM	EW1; EW2; EW3; EW4; EW5; EW6	0.895; 0.905; 0.902; 0.916; 0.840; 0.913	0.950	0.952	0.960	0.802
Purchasing Decision	KB1; KB10; KB2; KB3; KB4; KB5; KB6; KB7; KB8; KB9;	0.902; 0.867; 0.890; 0.897; 0.837; 0.923; 0.906; 0.842; 0.918; 0.862	0.969	0.970	0.973	0.783

4.1.2 Structural Model Evaluation

The structural model was assessed to examine the hypothesized relationships among city branding, electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM), city image, and tourists' visiting decisions. Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was used to evaluate the significance of the path coefficients. The results indicate that the model explains a substantial proportion of the variance in both city image and tourists' visiting decisions, suggesting strong explanatory power.

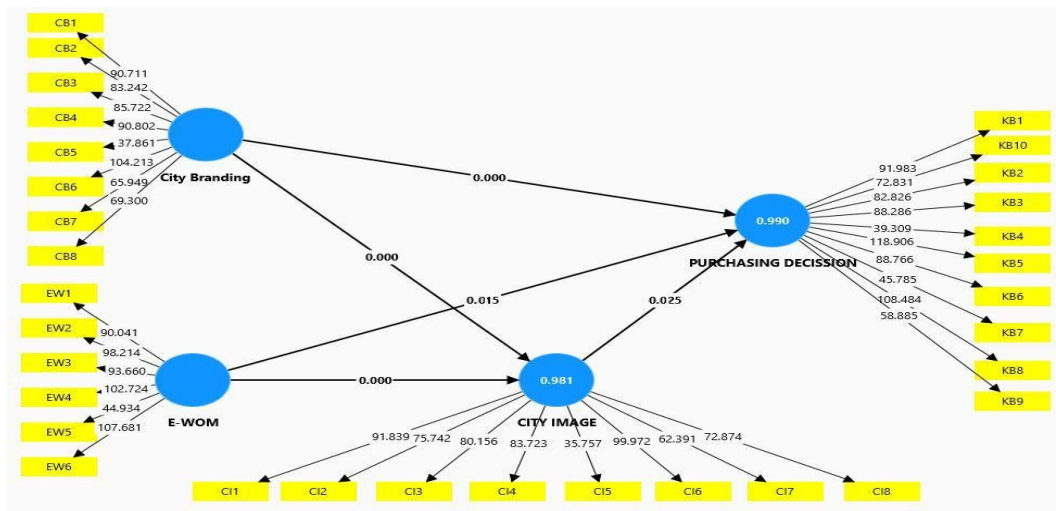


Figure 2. Structural model results of the PLS-SEM Analysis

4.1.3 Direct Effects

The results of the direct effects analysis are shown in Table 2. City branding had a positive and significant effect on tourists' visiting decisions ($\beta = 1.002$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H_1 . This coefficient indicates that stronger city branding perceptions are associated with a higher likelihood of tourists visiting the destination. Electronic word-of-mouth also has a positive and significant influence on tourists' visiting decisions ($\beta = 0.573$, $p < 0.05$), supporting H_2 . This suggests that positive online reviews and digital travel narratives increase tourists' confidence in choosing a destination.

City branding exerts a strong positive effect on city image ($\beta = 1.250$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H_3 . This finding indicates that effective branding strategies contribute significantly to the formation of a favorable perception of the city among tourists, while electronic word-of-mouth also significantly influences the city image ($\beta = 0.831$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H_4 . This result shows that user-generated online content plays an important role in shaping tourists' destination perceptions. In addition, city image has a positive and significant effect on tourists' visiting decisions ($\beta = 0.691$, $p < 0.05$), supporting H_5 . This implies that a more favorable perception of the city increases tourists' intention and confidence in visiting the destination. These findings indicate that both institutional branding signals and peer-generated digital information play important roles in shaping destination perception and tourist behavior.

Table 2. Direct effects of city branding, e-WOM, and City Image on Tourists' Visiting Decisions

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H_1	City branding \rightarrow Visiting decision	1002	12329	0.000	Supported
H_2	e-WOM \rightarrow Visiting decision	0.573	10814	0.015	Supported
H_3	City branding \rightarrow City image	1250	22051	0.000	Supported
H_4	e-WOM \rightarrow City image	0.831	14587	0.000	Supported
H_5	City image \rightarrow Visiting decision	0.691	10797	0.025	Supported

4.1.4 Mediating Effects

The mediating role of city image was examined through indirect effects analysis using a bootstrapping procedure. The results presented in Table 3 indicate that city image significantly mediates the relationship between city branding and tourists' visiting decisions ($\beta = 0.863$, $p < 0.01$), supporting H_6 . Similarly, city image significantly mediated the relationship between electronic word-of-mouth and tourists' visiting decisions ($\beta = 0.574$, $p < 0.01$), supporting H_7 . These findings suggest that city branding and e-WOM influence tourists' visiting decisions directly and indirectly through the formation of a favorable city image. These results confirm that city image functions as an important psychological mechanism through which branding and online narratives influence tourists' decisions to visit.

Table 3. Indirect Effects of City Image in the Structural Model (Mediation Analysis)

Hypothesis	Indirect Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H_6	City branding \rightarrow City image \rightarrow Visiting decision	0.863	10.924	0.002	Supported
H_7	e-WOM \rightarrow City image \rightarrow Visiting decision	0.574	10.070	0.004	Supported

4.2 Discussion

This study examined how city branding and electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) shape tourists' visiting decisions through the mediating role of city image in a medium-sized emerging tourism city. By integrating institutional branding strategies, peer-generated online narratives, and perceptual image formation into a single framework, the findings provide important insights into tourist decision-making processes in digitally mediated contexts of urban tourism.

First, the results demonstrate that city branding has a strong and significant effect on tourists' visit decisions. This finding reinforces the strategic role of city branding in enhancing destination competitiveness, particularly for emerging tourism cities that lack strong global reputations. Consistent with destination brand equity perspectives, city branding strengthens brand awareness, perceived quality, and loyalty, which ultimately encourages tourists to choose a destination (Shen & Ma, 2022; Vinh et al., 2019). Moreover Indriani (2024) highlights that in post-pandemic tourism recovery, city branding initiatives supported by social media engagement are increasingly essential for revitalizing tourism demand. These results suggest that medium-sized cities such as Sungai Penuh must rely on deliberate branding efforts to establish legitimacy, differentiation, and attractiveness in competitive tourism markets (Fatmawati & Maharani, 2023).

Second, the findings confirm that e-WOM significantly influences tourists' decisions to visit. This supports the growing consensus that tourists increasingly prioritize user-generated online content when evaluating a destination. Anggraeni, Widagdo, and Handayani (2022) found that e-WOM directly shapes tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness and city image, while Muslim et al. (2021) argue that e-WOM may even exert a stronger influence on visiting decisions than branding itself. This highlights the critical importance of online reputation management, as tourists often rely on digital feedback to reduce uncertainty and build trust before traveling, especially in emerging tourism markets (Hernowo et al., 2022).

More importantly, this study provides robust evidence that city image plays a pivotal mediating role in translating both cities branding and e-WOM into tourists' visitation decisions. This finding supports the argument that branding and digital narratives exert a stronger behavioral influence when they contribute to the formation of a favorable city image. Indriani (2024) emphasizes that e-WOM strengthens the effectiveness of city branding by enhancing perceived credibility and attractiveness, while Kusumawati et al. (2019) confirm that city image mediates the relationship between e-WOM exposure and visit intention. Similarly, Kakirala and Singh (2020) demonstrate that e-WOM fosters trust and satisfaction, which are essential components of positive destination image formation. Thus, tourists' visiting decisions are not driven merely by direct information exposure but by how branding signals and online experiences are cognitively processed and emotionally evaluated through the city image.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the distinctive dynamics of medium-sized emerging tourism cities, where competitiveness depends heavily on perception management rather than on established symbolic capital. A strong city image is a strategic asset that compensates for limited global visibility and enhances tourists' willingness to visit. Azhar et al. (2022) show that a positive destination image not only increases visit intention but also strengthens revisit behavior, particularly in post-pandemic contexts where trust and reassurance are highly valued. Empirical studies have also demonstrated that city branding, e-WOM, and city image jointly shape tourists' interest in visiting emerging destinations, such as religious and nature-based attractions (KR et al., 2023; Pramesti & Sholahuddin, 2024). This

confirms that city image serves as an essential cognitive–affective mechanism linking institutional branding and peer-generated narratives to tourist decision making.

Overall, this study underscores that effective tourism development in medium-sized cities requires an integrated approach that aligns official branding strategies with active management of e-WOM and digital storytelling. Destination managers should recognize that city branding and online narratives are mutually reinforcing forces that shape the city’s image and influence tourists’ visiting decisions. Therefore, strengthening branding consistency, encouraging positive online discourse, and cultivating a coherent city image are critical strategies for enhancing tourism competitiveness in digitally mediated urban tourism markets.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined how city branding and electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) influence tourists’ visiting decisions through the mediating role of city image in a medium-sized emerging tourism city. By integrating these constructs into a unified explanatory framework and empirically testing the proposed model using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), this study provides deeper insights into tourist decision-making processes within urban tourism destinations that lack strong global brand recognition.

The findings demonstrate that both city branding and e-WOM exert significant direct effects on tourists’ visit decisions. City branding strengthens destination attractiveness by enhancing tourists’ awareness, perceived quality, and emotional attachment, while e-WOM serves as a credible digital information source that shapes tourists’ trust and expectations before travel. These results confirm that institutional branding efforts and peer-generated online narratives are critical drivers of tourist behavior in digitally mediated tourism markets.

More importantly, the study reveals that city image plays a pivotal mediating role in translating branding signals and e-WOM into tourists’ visit decisions. City image functions as a cognitive–affective mechanism through which tourists interpret destination identity cues and experiential online information. This highlights that tourists’ visiting decisions are shaped not merely by exposure to branding or online content but by how these information sources are processed into favorable perceptions and emotional evaluations of the city. Overall, this study contributes to the urban tourism and destination marketing literature by emphasizing the strategic importance of perception management for medium-sized emerging tourism cities competing in increasingly digitalized environments.

From a practical perspective, these findings provide important guidance for destination managers and local governments in medium-sized tourism cities. Local authorities should strengthen city branding strategies by developing a clear and distinctive destination identity that highlights the city’s unique cultural and natural attractions. In addition, destination managers should actively manage electronic word of mouth by encouraging positive online reviews, engaging with tourists through social media platforms, and promoting user-generated content. Finally, tourism stakeholders should focus on maintaining a consistent and positive city image through coordinated marketing communications, service quality improvement, and enhanced visitor experiences. These strategies can help medium-sized tourism destinations improve their visibility and competitiveness in the increasingly digital tourism market.

5.2 Research Limitations

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted in a single medium-sized emerging tourism city, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other destinations with different tourism characteristics. Second, the cross-sectional design captures tourists’ perceptions at only one point in time, whereas destination image and behavioral intentions may evolve. Finally, the study relied on self-reported survey data, which may have involved response bias. Future research should apply longitudinal and mixed-method approaches across multiple destinations to strengthen external validity and provide deeper insights into tourists’ decision-making processes.

5.3 Suggestions and Directions for Future Research

Based on these findings, several directions for future research are recommended. First, future studies could expand the conceptual framework by incorporating additional constructs such as tourist satisfaction, perceived authenticity, place attachment, and experience quality, which may further explain how branding and e-WOM shape visiting behavior. Second, researchers should explore the moderating role of demographic factors, travel motivation, and destination familiarity, as these variables may influence how tourists interpret branding signals and online narratives. Examining the differences between domestic and international tourists can also provide valuable insights into destination competitiveness in global tourism markets.

Third, future research should investigate the role of emerging digital technologies, such as influencer marketing, virtual tourism experiences, and AI-driven recommendation systems, which increasingly shape e-WOM dynamics and destination-image formation. Such studies would deepen our understanding of how medium-sized tourism cities can strategically adapt to rapidly changing digital environments. Finally, comparative research between medium-sized emerging cities and globally established metropolitan destinations would help clarify whether the mechanisms identified in this study differ according to the destination scale, symbolic capital, and tourism maturity.

Authors Contribution

FS was responsible for data collection, data processing, and preparing the initial manuscript draft. HH as the corresponding author, contributed to the development of the research concept and design and coordinated the overall research process. SY contributed to strengthening the theoretical framework, improving the research methodology, and providing guidance on data analysis and the interpretation of the findings. JJ contributed to reviewing the manuscript, refining the discussion of the results, and providing critical suggestions for improving the quality of the study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to all the respondents who participated in this study and shared their valuable experiences and perceptions. We also appreciate the support of local tourism stakeholders and institutions in Sungai Penuh City during the data collection process. Any financial or non-financial assistance provided during the completion of this research is gratefully acknowledged.

References

- Alrwashdeh, M., Emeagwali, O. L., & Aljuhmani, H. Y. (2019). The effect of electronic word of mouth communication on purchase intention and brand image: An Applicant Smartphone Brands in North Cyprus. *Management Science Letters*, 505-518. doi:<https://doi.org/10.5267/j.msl.2019.1.011>
- Anggraeni, Y., Widagdo, S., & Handayani, Y. I. (2022). Determinant of the Decision to visit tourist attractions. *Wiga Jurnal Penelitian Ilmu Ekonomi*, 12(2), 125-130. doi:<https://doi.org/10.30741/wiga.v12i2.813>
- Azhar, M., Ali, R., Hamid, S., Akhtar, M. J., & Rahman, M. N. (2022). Demystifying the effect of social media e-WOM on Revisit Intention Post-Covid-19: An Extension of Theory of Planned Behavior. *Future Business Journal*, 8(1). doi:<https://doi.org/10.1186/s43093-022-00161-5>
- Dastgerdi, A. S., & Luca, G. D. (2019). Boosting city image for creation of a certain city brand. *Geographica Pannonica*, 23(1), 23-31. doi:<https://doi.org/10.5937/gp23-20141>
- Elsalam, m. A., & Ezzat, M. (2022). Impact of electronic word of mouth on purchase intention: mediating role of brand image and brand trust of tourist destinations and hospitality establishments in egypt. *Minia Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research MJTHR*, 14(3), 153-173. doi:<https://doi.org/10.21608/mjthr.2022.170036.1070>
- Fatmawati, I., & Maharani, A. (2023). The influence of a heritage city branding on the city's brand identity and brand image, and tourists' visiting decision. *Jurnal Ekonomi Bisnis Dan Kewirausahaan*, 12(2), 168. doi:<https://doi.org/10.26418/jebik.v12i2.60169>

- Gao, S., & Shao, B. (2024). How to prompt brand love and e-WOM intention? exploring the role of brand interactivity, consumer involvement and consumer brand engagement. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, 36(10), 2744-2765. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1108/apjml-10-2023-1010>
- Hasan, S., Qayyum, A., & Zia, M. H. (2022). Social media marketing and brand authenticity: the role of value Co-Creation. *Management Research Review*, 46(6), 870-892. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1108/mrr-07-2021-0552>
- Hernowo, A., Chan, A., & Purnomo, M. (2022). The influence of e-WOM on decisions to visit entrepreneurial companies (case study of the great asia africa tourism medium enterprises). *Inovbiz Jurnal Inovasi Bisnis*, 10(2), 253. doi:<https://doi.org/10.35314/inovbiz.v10i2.2403>
- Indriani, E. (2024). Social media in city branding strategic: empirical study in Solo City, Indonesia. *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research*, 07(03). doi:<https://doi.org/10.47191/ijsshr/v7-i03-03>
- Kakirala, A. K., & Singh, D. (2020). The mediating role of social media in tourism: An e-WOM Approach. *Journal of Asian Finance Economics and Business*, 7(11), 381-391. doi:<https://doi.org/10.13106/jafeb.2020.vol7.no11.381>
- KR, M. Y. A. R. A., Yusuf, M., Mariana, L., & Marsuni, N. S. (2023). Interest in visiting in terms of city branding and city image in Bantimurung Tourism Objects Mars County. *Kontigensi Jurnal Ilmiah Manajemen*, 11(1), 320-329. doi:<https://doi.org/10.56457/jimk.v11i1.399>
- Kurniawati, R., Ikhwana, A., & Anggraeni, E. (2022). Strategi pengembangan objek wisata karacak valley berbasis blue ocean strategy. *Jurnal Kalibrasi*, 20(2). doi:<https://doi.org/10.33364/kalibrasi/v.20-2.1163>
- Kusumawati, A., Aprilia, F. D., & Abdillah, Y. (2019). Analyzing influence of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) towards visit intention with destination image as mediating variable: a study on domestic visitors of Museum Angkut in Batu, Indonesia. *Eurasia Economics & Business*, 19(1), 50-57. doi:<https://doi.org/10.18551/econeurasia.2019-01.07>
- Lin, Y. (2024). A Study on the impact of social media marketing on non local loyalty of tourism city brands: A Case Study of Yantai. *Hc*, 1(6). doi:<https://doi.org/10.61173/a2gppg15>
- Makur, B., Karta, N. L. P. A., & Oktaviani, L. (2022). Pengaruh electronic word of mouth terhadap kepercayaan dan keputusan pembelian pada aplikasi shopee mahasiswa Universitas Triatma Mulya. *Jurnal Bisnis dan Pemasaran Digital*, 2(1), 25-38. doi:<https://doi.org/10.35912/jbpd.v2i1.2255>
- Mandagi, D. W., & Tappy, Y. P. (2024). Determinants of health tourism destination attractiveness: a comprehensive systematic review. *Jurnal Studi Perhotelan dan Pariwisata*, 2(2), 57-69. doi:<https://doi.org/10.35912/jspp.v2i2.3261>
- Mega, S. A., Barusman, M. Y. S., Habiburahman, H., & Barusman, A. R. P. (2026). The impact of global trends on tourism and the creative economy in Lampung Province. *Studi Akuntansi, Keuangan, dan Manajemen*, 5(3), 225-240. doi:<https://doi.org/10.35912/sakman.v5i3.5619>
- Miftahuddin, A., Hermanto, B., Raharja, S. u. J., & Chan, A. (2021). City branding and its variables: the evidence from Indonesia. *Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites*, 34(1), 240-244. doi:<https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.34132-643>
- Muslim, S., Hidayati, N., & Pardiman, P. (2021). Pengaruh city branding dan electronic word of mouth terhadap kunjungan wisatawan di Kabupaten Banyuwangi. *Jurnal Ekonomi Modernisasi*, 17(3), 185-195. doi:<https://doi.org/10.21067/jem.v17i3.5789>
- Mutaqin, P. D., & Trinanda, O. (2019). The influence of electronic word of mouth toward destination trust and travel intention on Sirandah Island in Padang City. *Jurnal Ecogen*, 2(2), 118. doi:<https://doi.org/10.24036/jmpe.v2i2.6146>
- Negara, D. H. C., Yuliati, L. N., & Sartono, B. (2019). Electronic word of mouth intension in Kalibiru Natural Tourism Kulon Progo. *Russian Journal of Agricultural and Socio-Economic Sciences*, 95(11), 25-31. doi:<https://doi.org/10.18551/rjoas.2019-11.04>
- Pramesti, S. A., & Sholahuddin, M. (2024). The influence of city branding and e-wom on interest in visiting religious tourist attractions in surakarta the role of the intervening variable city image. *Jurnal Manajemen*, 15(1), 216-230. doi:<https://doi.org/10.32832/jm-uika.v15i1.16172>
- Praswati, A. N., Wardani, N. M., & Rohim, M. (2021). The impact of online destination brand experience, destination brand authenticity and tourist destination image on behavioral

- intentions. *Journal of Indonesian Tourism and Development Studies*, 9(3), 145-152. doi:<https://doi.org/10.21776/ub.jitode.2021.009.03.01>
- Putri, Y. S., & Widyastuti, H. (2023). The effect of electronic word of mouth, destination image on tourist visiting decisions at nagari tuo pariangan tourism object. *Tijab (The International Journal of Applied Business)*, 7(1), 104-114. doi:<https://doi.org/10.20473/tijab.v7.i1.2023.43333>
- Ramadania, R., Gafur, M. A., Rahmawati, R., & Afifi, M. Z. (2024). The role of city branding mediation in building domestic tourists' intention to visit: empirical study lawang kuwari as city branding sekadau regency. *Prosiding Seminar & Conference FMI*, 2, 652-671. doi:<https://doi.org/10.47747/snfmi.v2i1.2344>
- Setiawan, C., Meivitawanli, B., Arrieta-Paredes, M.-P., Morrison, A. M., & Coca-Stefaniak, J. A. (2021). Friendly locals and clean streets?—evaluating Jakarta's destination brand image. *Sustainability*, 13(13), 7434. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/su13137434>
- Shen, L., & Ma, J. (2022). A study of shanghai tourist destination brand equity: perspectives from western group tourists. *Journal of Tourism Management Research*, 9(1), 82-96. doi:<https://doi.org/10.18488/31.v9i1.3079>
- Siddiqui, M. S., Siddiqui, U. A., Khan, M. A., Alkandi, I., Saxena, A. K., & Siddiqui, J. H. (2021). Creating electronic word of mouth credibility through social networking sites and determining its impact on brand image and online purchase intentions in India. *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, 16(4), 1008-1024. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/jtaer16040057>
- Syafitri, T. M., Novianti, M., & Effendi, D. (2023). Strategi city branding dalam meningkatkan minat berkunjung wisatawan pada festival budaya Tabut Bengkulu. *Journal of Trends Economics and Accounting Research*, 4(1), 320-330. doi:<https://doi.org/10.47065/jtear.v4i1.912>
- Unnikrishnan, T., & Sibi, P. S. (2023). Congruity and incongruity between projected (dmo) and perceived (ugc) destination image – a comparative content analysis. *Atna Journal of Tourism Studies*, 18(2). doi:<https://doi.org/10.12727/ajts.30.7>
- Vinh, T. T., Nguyen, N. P., Tran, P. T. K., Tran, T. N., & Huynh, T. T. P. (2019). Brand equity in a tourism destination: a case study of domestic tourists in Hoi an City, Vietnam. *Tourism Review*, 74(3), 704-720. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1108/tr-08-2017-0130>
- Wiryokusumo, M. Y. P., Wiranatha, A. S., & Suryawardani, I. G. A. O. (2021). Pengaruh Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) terhadap brand image, trust dan keputusan berkunjung ke Kampung Tridi Malang. *Jurnal Master Pariwisata (Jumpa)*, 332. doi:<https://doi.org/10.24843/jumpa.2021.v08.i01.p17>
- Ximenes, R., Utari Dewi, N. D., & Widnyani, I. A. P. S. (2024). Strategic tourism development by the municipal government of Baucau, Timor-Leste. *Jurnal Studi Pemerintahan dan Akuntabilitas*, 4(1), 29-41. doi:<https://doi.org/10.35912/jastaka.v4i1.2358>
- Yannacopoulou, A., & Kallinikos, K. (2024). Measuring destination image using ai and big data: kastoria's image on tripadvisor. *Societies*, 15(1), 5. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/soc15010005>