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HOW DOES ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH COMMUNICATION AFFECT THE DIGITAL IMAGE OF TRAVEL AGENCIES? A REVIEW ON TRIPADVISOR

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ABSTRACT

The current research aims to evaluate the positive and negative effects of electronic word of mouth communication on the digital image of travel agencies. In this context, research data were obtained from the five most-commented travel agencies in Nevşehir registered in the TripAdvisor system. In this study, which adopted the qualitative method, the research design was a case study and phenomenology. This research employing the document review technique and criterion sampling method, identified 7.259 online comments. This study subjected 1.724 online comments from 2022 to content analysis and descriptive analysis and obtained five main themes, twenty one positive sub-themes, eight negative sub-themes, and 4.534 codes. The main themes are tour, tourist guide, transport, eating and drinking, and accommodation. The tour main theme contains the sub-themes of types of tours, places included in the tour, all-inclusive package tours, price alternatives, organization and timing, transfer services, shopping opportunities, re-preference and recommendations. The tourist guide main theme covers the sub-themes of accumulation of knowledge and detailed expression, language skill, personality traits, interest and relevance to tourists. The transport main theme includes the sub-themes of vehicle comfort and cleanliness, captain and safe driving, and in-vehicle catering. The eating and drinking main theme covers the sub-themes of restaurant location, food variety, and food taste. The accommodation main theme contains the sub-themes of referral to a travel agency, accommodation services, and food and beverage services. In the main themes, the most frequently mentioned topics were the tour and tourist guide who represent the travel agency. On the other hand, the most focused themes by the tourists were the tourist guide's knowledge and detailed explanation and the re-preference and recommendations. Overall, it has been concluded that travel agencies have a positive image, and the determined themes affect digital image formations.

Keywords: Electronic word-of-mouth communication, digital image, travel agency, TripAdvisor, qualitative research.

INTRODUCTION

Tour operators and travel agencies, which make tourism an international phenomenon, are important tourism businesses for tourist sending and receiving countries (Aleadinoğlu & Can, 2007: 63). Travel agencies not only play an active role in delivering touristic goods and services to tourists but also provide tour arrangements, reservation, customs, visa, and insurance services to tourists (Albustanlıoğlu, 2009). Travel agencies, who prepare different package tours to satisfy the expectations of the tourists, are the most critical intermediaries between the destination and the tourist (Keleş et al., 2016: 226). Travel Agencies and Travel Agencies Association Law (1972) defines the travel agency as *“a commercial organization that is authorized to provide tourism-related information to tourists, to create tours, to sell accommodation, transportation, excursion, sports, and entertainment services for tourism. These organizations can market their products through their own or other travel agencies.”* Being one of the most important enterprises of the tourism sector and providing communication between tourists and businesses, travel agencies have experienced significant developments in Internet applications in recent years (Sarışık & Akova, 2006: 129). Considering the intangibility, complexity, diversity, independence, etc., of the characteristics of tourism goods and services, it arouses the desire to purchase with the least risk and to get more information about goods and services (O’Connor & Frew, 2002: 35).

With technological developments, people have started to share their experiences in virtual environments (Mattila & Wirtz, 2004: 148). In other words, people often use the Internet before and after purchasing. Comments shared on the Internet are a reference for potential consumers (Çamlıca et al., 2022: 127). People read the comments on the website during the purchasing process and purchase based on these comments (Doğan et al., 2016: 176). Therefore, the Internet environment creates areas where users get information extensively (Bayraktaroğlu & Aykol, 2008: 62). Consumers have started to express their experiences and thoughts about the tourism businesses they book online. Businesses know that online comments and evaluations about themselves are crucial and effective in the consumers’ decision-making process (Zhou, 2014: 10). For this reason, many agencies have started to create their goals and marketing strategies by following the changes and developments brought about by information technologies and the Internet. In addition, developments in information and communication technologies and the increasing prevalence of the Internet have led to a massive increase in travel sales made through the Internet (Kim et al., 2008: 818).

The development of technology and the increase in Internet users have allowed people to access the Internet anywhere and anytime, making word-of-mouth communication easily accessible (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012: 463). The widespread use of the Internet network has revealed alternative forms of word-of-mouth communication (Schindler & Bickart, 2005: 35). Word-of-mouth communication has turned into electronic word-of-mouth communication in the electronic environment and has become a significant source of information for consumers (Gruen et al., 2006: 449). The deep communication environment on the Internet has made global consumer communication possible (Jalilvand et al., 2010: 42). Through online reviews in these

information sources, tourists get information about the destinations before purchasing. In this context, it is critical for tourists who will make a reservation with any touristic destination to hear other visitors' comments on the services offered (Güngör et al., 2018: 77).

Tourists see electronic word-of-mouth communication as a reliable source of information when purchasing a new product or service. The Internet, which provides fast access to many resources, constitutes a substantial source of electronic word-of-mouth communication (Jeong & Jeon, 2008: 122). In electronic word-of-mouth communication, the fact that tourists can access relevant information at any time without any time and place limitations has led to the Internet becoming a decision-making mechanism. This situation seems to be the most prominent development that directs consumers to modern consumer behavior (Gürce & Benli, 2017: 135). These comments shared on various platforms on the Internet are conceptualized as electronic word-of-mouth communication, as previously stated in the literature (Sarıışık & Özbay, 2012: 2). Electronic word-of-mouth communication refers to *"all positive or negative comments about a product or company made by potential, current or previous customers, available to many individuals and institutions via the Internet"* (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004: 39). Topal and Nart (2016: 79) define electronic word-of-mouth communication as *"word-of-mouth communication carried out over Internet technologies."* Electronic word-of-mouth communication is among the most influential sources of consumers' tourism-related purchasing decisions (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014: 29-30) because customers can access other users' online and indelible comments besides the businesses' advertising in the Internet environment (Çetinkaya & Şahbaz, 2019: 385).

While the transformations in information and communication technology have changed the tourism sector, they have also changed the purchasing behavior of tourists. For this reason, electronic word-of-mouth communication has popularized online review sites that allow tourists to exchange information. Therefore, online review sites have become extremely important for the tourism industry in the before-purchase stage (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014: 29-30). The fact that the consumers create the content makes it the most reliable communication method. Online comment platforms ensure consumer-to-consumer communication possibilities instead of sharing information between the business and the consumer. Online reviews can be more convincing for tourists than business advertising and marketing activities because they can change consumers' decisions (Güngör et al., 2018: 77). Online reviews have led to the emergence of evaluation websites such as Booking.com, Otelpuan.com, TripAdvisor, HolidayCheck, etc., as new communication channels in the tourism sector (Diaz & Rodriguez, 2018: 262).

Tourists refer to the comments on the evaluation sites to reduce some risks and uncertainties during the booking stage. Comments made online by different users affect trust. The intangible and untestable character of tourism products increases the risk perception in the tourism sector. Since the tourism sector closely relates to information and communication technologies, online reviews and evaluations are persuasive for tourists (Sotiriadis & Van Zyl, 2013: 106). For this reason, online comment platforms should be used effectively by administrators. The content richness of the messages on these platforms positively affects the decision-making

process of tourists and businesses about touristic activities (Miguéns et al., 2008: 1-6). Therefore, online reviews are consequential for touristic businesses as much as for consumers (Reyes-Menendez et al., 2019: 3). Electronic word-of-mouth communication progresses through some platforms. TripAdvisor, among the platforms specialized in the tourism sector, is highly reliable for tourism businesses and tourists. Tourism businesses make great efforts to protect their reputation on these platforms (Hu et al., 2008: 203). TripAdvisor is one of the most important online platforms with comments and evaluations about the services provided by tourism businesses (TripAdvisor, 2017).

TripAdvisor, one of the world's largest travel platforms, was founded in the United States in February 2000. Today, it serves approximately 463 million tourists every month. The TripAdvisor platform hosts over 859 million reviews and evaluations of nearly 8.6 million accommodation establishments, restaurants, destinations, airlines, and cruises worldwide. The TripAdvisor website has been serving tourists for almost 23 years in 49 markets and 28 languages (TripAdvisor, 2017). Jeacle and Carter (2011: 295) describe TripAdvisor as *"a leading platform for tourists allowing them to share their views and comments."* TripAdvisor users evaluate the businesses by writing a title and a comment text through a scoring system and then share these evaluations with other users on the site. TripAdvisor awards the *"Certificate of Excellence"* to businesses that meet certain conditions (TripAdvisor, 2017). Therefore, these online platforms have become crucial in forming the image of tourism businesses.

As well as making consumers more knowledgeable and experienced about goods and services, online reviews and evaluations have pushed businesses that want to control their digital images to be more attentive to customer relationship management and client retention. Tourism businesses that can manage their digital image offer opportunities by making various improvements (Aydın, 2016: 15). The contents created by social media users appear as a factor affecting digital image (Eren & Çelik, 2017: 122). Comments and evaluations that cause consumers to make judgments about the business contribute to transferring the brand image to the online environment and help with the emergence of digital image (Kurtulay & Kızıllırac, 2017: 244). Digital image *"offers high-quality content for the promotional activities of creative professionals and businesses by integrating the industry's best quality, latest, and widest visual resources with artificially intelligent design tools on a single platform"* (Digital Image, 2023). As in many sectors, social media appears as a tool to create digital images. In their study, Civelek and Dalgın (2013: 269) state that the majority of the managers of tourism businesses use social media and consider social media as a prominent tool in business image formation. In addition, some researchers have concluded that the comments made on digital images positively increase the recognition of tourism enterprises (Cenni & Goethals, 2017: 28). Here, the point is that consumers pay attention to the high number of comments. The high number of comments gives information about the popularity of the business. However, when these comments are negative, they damage the business image regarding the goods or services (Sarıışık & Özbay, 2013: 6). For this reason, studies show that both positive and negative comments impact digital image (Sarıışık & Özbay, 2013; Zhang et al., 2010).

The literature has some studies on word-of-mouth communication and travel agency (Bozkurt & Yarimoğlu, 2020; Kwak & Kim, 2020; Soleimani & Einolahzadeh, 2018) and on electronic word-of-mouth communication and travel agency (Bigne et al., 2016; Hermawan, 2022; Poór & Horváth, 2021). Word-of-mouth communication and electronic word-of-mouth communication studies are usually on online travel agencies (Bozkurt & Yarimoğlu, 2020; Hermawan, 2022; Kwak & Kim, 2020; Poór & Horváth, 2021). For example, in their research, Bozkurt and Yarimoğlu (2020) aimed to analyze Y-generation customers' Internet usage characteristics and determine the relationships between word-of-mouth communication activities and the intention to visit online travel agencies. As a result of the research, they have found that 81.7% of the customers do shopping online, and 82.5% prefer to make online hotel reservations. They have recommended travel agencies use online channels to increase visit intention and pay attention to their customers' word-of-mouth communication activities. In their research, Kwak and Kim (2020) examined the components that determine the service quality of online travel agencies. They have found that price and convenience factors, two critical factors in service quality, positively affect consumers' word-of-mouth communication intention. In their study, Soleimani and Einolahzadeh (2018) aimed to determine the effect of service quality on revisit intention by focusing on the mediating role of word-of-mouth communication and satisfaction. The research results showed that the quality of travel agencies reinforced the desire to revisit a destination. Bigne et al. (2016) aimed to reveal how the preference between a specialized travel agency and a private label travel agency was affected by five factors. As a result of the research, they have documented that online comments, namely electronic word-of-mouth communication, affect users' attitudes, experience, and value awareness. The study by Hermawan (2022) on 150 travel agency users in Indonesia concluded that perceived web quality, perceived benefits, security, and privacy have a mediating impact on behavioral intention and electronic word-of-mouth communication.

Digital image is another variable handled within the scope of this current research. Although the literature review has shown no previous study on digital images, some research on images and travel agency were encountered (Frias et al., 2008). Frias et al. (2008) aimed to establish a perspective on the factors affecting the formation of destination images. They have found that tourists have negative thoughts about destination image when they use a travel agency and the Internet together but more positive thoughts when using only a travel agency. It seems that this research was related to travel agencies and destination images, and the issue of digital images has emerged as a subject that needs to be addressed in research on travel agencies.

The literature also covers studies examining online reviews about travel agencies over TripAdvisor (Hossain & Rahman, 2023; Ray et al., 2021). Similarly, these studies are related to online travel agencies. Most customers who want to be informed about travel scan websites like TripAdvisor, Virtual Tourist, Lonely Planet, etc., and read opinions and comments (Filiari et al., 2015: 178). In their study conducted over the TripAdvisor website, Çamlıca et al. (2022) aimed to analyze e-complaints for travel agencies operating in the Cappadocia Region with content analysis and determine the current situation in the region. As a result of the research, they grouped the e-complaints under four categories: rude behavior towards tourists, unfair pricing, foreign language insufficiency, negative interaction between tourists and staff and the resulting dissatisfaction. Hossain and

Rahman (2023) aimed to determine readers' emotional dimensions and positive empathy responses using evaluation and stimulus-organism-response (SOR) theories over online travel agency applications. This research on TripAdvisor has revealed that readers are influenced by emotional experiences and positive reviews and leave positive comments.

The literature review has shown no earlier study in which electronic word-of-mouth communication and digital image subjects were handled together with travel agencies, and the relations between these variables were discussed. In other words, extensive research showed that the electronic word-of-mouth communication variable was studied with variables such as brand image (Armawana et al., 2023; Hoang & Tung, 2023; Wang & McCarthy, 2021) or destination image (Assaker & McCarthy, 2021), but not with digital image. Research conducted by Armawana et al. (2023) in Balikpapan, Indonesia, reported that social media marketing, SerQual, and electronic word-of-mouth communication directly affect purchase intention, while brand image and brand trust mediate. Hoang and Tung (2023) researched in Ho Chi Minh City to determine the moderator role of situational context and brand image for online purchases using electronic word-of-mouth communication. As a result of the research, they found that brand image—without the influence of situational context—partially positively mediates the effect of electronic word-of-mouth communication on intention. In their study, Wang and McCarthy (2021) aimed to determine the impact of psychological mechanisms such as trust disposition and individualization on electronic word-of-mouth communication by distinguishing between positive/negative electronic word-of-mouth communication volume and electronic word-of-mouth communication value. They have found that negative electronic word-of-mouth communication does not directly affect the brand image, but its negative value affects consumers with high trust tendencies and high scores in individualization. In their study, Assaker and O'Connor (2020) examined the effects of various electronic word-of-mouth communication platforms (travel websites, social media, photo and video sharing platforms, blogs, and online communities) on visit intention in Lebanon. Their research has revealed that political instability and terrorism affect the travel decisions of consumers who only examine travel sites, and their visit intentions do not develop. They have concluded that consumers using electronic word-of-mouth communication platforms are not affected by the risk of political instability and terrorism for destination image and visit intention.

The fact that there is no study in the literature discussing the relationships between electronic word-of-mouth communication and digital image variables through travel agencies, etc., samplings reveal the importance of our research. However, depending on the developments in information and communication technology, it is necessary to carry out this research to determine the impact of electronic word-of-mouth communication on the digital image. This research investigated travel agencies over TripAdvisor using qualitative research methods and defined the five most-commented travel agencies as the sample. In order to conduct in-depth research, the current study subjected many comments to content analysis and assessed the role of electronic word-of-mouth communication in digital image creation. As a contribution to the literature and methodology, this research aimed to determine how electronic word-of-mouth communication affects the digital image of

travel agencies. For this purpose, the study scanned the literature on the variables and revealed the conceptual framework between them. After performing the necessary analyses, the results were interpreted in detail.

METHOD

Research Problem and Research Questions

The current study employed qualitative research methods to determine how electronic word-of-mouth communication affects the digital image of travel agencies. In research where qualitative research methods are adopted, the first thing to do is to specify the research problem and questions. In this context, the question of *“How does electronic word-of-mouth communication affect the digital image of travel agencies”* has been determined as a research problem. Based on the determined research problem, the research questions were as follows:

1. How many A, B, and C group travel agencies are there in Nevşehir?
2. How many travel agencies are registered on the TripAdvisor website from Nevşehir?
3. What is the total number of comments about Nevşehir travel agencies registered on the TripAdvisor website?
4. What is the total number of comments about Nevşehir travel agencies on the TripAdvisor website in 2022?
5. What issues do tourists comment on Nevşehir travel agencies on TripAdvisor?
6. What are the longest-talked topics on Nevşehir travel agencies in the comments of TripAdvisor?
7. What are the most frequent topics of tourists who comment on Nevşehir travel agencies on TripAdvisor?
8. What are the most frequently used words by tourists who comment on Nevşehir travel agencies on TripAdvisor?

The Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism General Directorate of Investments and Enterprises replied to the first question about the number of Nevşehir travel agencies. The TripAdvisor website answered the questions about the Nevşehir travel agencies registered on TripAdvisor, the total number of comments on them, and the comments made only in 2022. Other research questions were answered through a software program used in qualitative research. Later all answers were presented in a systematic way in the text.

Research Design and Data Collection Tools

In order to determine the effect of electronic word-of-mouth communication on the digital image, research designs were determined in accordance with the research problem. In this context, the most appropriate research designs were selected as phenomenology and case study. The fact that tourists share their touristic adventures with travel agencies over the TripAdvisor website and that this research measures their experience about the services they have purchased according to their online comments shows that the phenomenology

pattern is suitable for this work. Besides, the most-commented five travel agencies were selected, and the multi-case study was utilized to determine the current status of the digital images of the agencies.

After deciding on research designs, data collection tools were selected. In accordance with the purpose and scope of this research, tourists' online comments about travel agencies on the TripAdvisor website were examined using the document analysis technique. The data collection process started with determining the number of Nevşehir travel agencies. The number of travel agencies was obtained from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism General Directorate of Investments and Enterprises website on 21.02.2023 (T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı Yatırım ve İşletmeler Genel Müdürlüğü, 2023). For this purpose, A, B, and C group travel agencies in Nevşehir were searched on this webpage. The search produced 434 travel agencies which were all A-group. On 22.02.2023, these 434 travel agencies were re-scanned on the TripAdvisor webpage using their official names, but some of them did not show up with their official names. This situation led us to carry out alternative searches. As a result of the research, it was found that out of 434 travel agencies, 200 had registered on TripAdvisor. On 02.03.2023, the total number of comments about these 200 travel agencies and the number of comments they obtained in 2022 was obtained. Accordingly, the five most commented travel agencies were determined as the research sample through criterion sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods. The research data were obtained by transferring the 2022 comments of the travel agencies selected for the sample between 03.03.2023 and 10.03.2023 to a word file. Comments made in all languages were included in the study, which was classified into five categories "excellent," "very good," "average," "poor," and "terrible." Table 1 shows the total number of comments for 2022 from the five travel agencies determined for the study sample.

Table 1. Number of Online Reviews for Travel Agencies

Travel Agencies	Total Number of Online Comments	Number of Online Comments for 2022
Gorgeous Tourism Travel Agency	2.262	472
Hereke Tourism Travel Agency	1.943	910
MyTrip Travel Agency	1.530	98
Pu-Pa Tourism Travel Agency	850	63
Nomad Tourism Travel Agency	674	181
Total	7.259	1.724

The top five travel agencies were selected by the total number of online reviews. Table 1 shows an order from the most to the least number of comments. In this context, while the total number of online comments about travel agencies was 7.259, the number of online comments for 2022 was 1.724. While the total number of online reviews of the 200 travel agencies registered on the TripAdvisor travel site was 21.844; the number of online reviews for 2022 alone is 5.105. The research analyzed 1.724 online comments. This research did not require ethical committee permissions or legal or special permission.

Selection of Data Analysis Strategy and Processing of Data

Content analysis was used to analyze the data obtained within the scope of the research. In content analysis, first of all, 1.724 online comments accessed via TripAdvisor were transferred to a word file. Since the majority of the comments were translated from other languages, it was ensured that the text was more understandable and suitable for spelling rules and punctuation. Then the text was read again, and the themes were determined. After all the authors agreed on the themes, the subjects mentioned as main theme and sub-theme were classified. The final version of the themes was entered into the Maxqda software program. By re-reading the data file via the Maxqda software program, coding was carried out, and the entire text was subjected to detailed content analysis. In order to carry out the content analysis in more detail, descriptive analyzes were utilized. In this context, in addition to the code system, document portrait, subcode statistics, code-subcodes-segments model, and word cloud analyses were made in the Maxqda program. In addition, open and closed code systems were employed in the data processing. In other words, while determining the themes for the data obtained from TripAdvisor, that is, from the field, the authors also benefited from the literature knowledge on the relevant subject. Thus, the data was processed by utilizing the literature and the field. The content analysis and descriptive analyses, and data processing using open and closed code systems allowed the obtained data to be examined and presented in detail.

Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability in qualitative research are as significant as in quantitative studies. In this context, care has been taken to present the results obtained in this research as intact and impartially as possible. For internal validity in this research, attention was paid to ensure that the research findings were consistent and meaningful within themselves, that they were confirmed by different analysis strategies, that the results were compatible with the conceptual framework, and that the predictions and generalizations made based on the findings were consistent. For external validity, care was taken to display the research sample clearly, diversify the sampling, select the sampling that could allow some generalizations about travel agencies, present the research comprehensively, and ensure that the research results were consistent with the research questions. After the validity was established, the reliability of the research was emphasized. For external reliability, the research method was detailed, the research design, data collection tool, data analysis, etc., were explained, research results were associated with the data obtained, care was taken to present the results away from assumptions and prejudices, and raw data of the study was hidden. For internal reliability, the research questions were clearly stated, the research was ensured to be consistent with the determined research questions, the focus of the research was revealed, the data were collected in detail in accordance with the research questions, the themes determined from the collected data were discussed among the authors, and the authors concluded that the research results were reasonable. In the end, the study provided the criteria of credibility, transferability, consistency, and confirmability (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018: 269-283).

FINDINGS

Main Themes, Sub-Themes, and Codes

The current study first determined the main theme, sub-theme, and codes to understand how electronic word-of-mouth communication affects the digital image of travel agencies. TripAdvisor comments were transferred to a word file to specify the main theme and sub-theme. A new project was created in the Maxqda program to code the determined themes. The themes were defined in the program, and the text was carefully read and coded. Figure 1 shows the code system besides the codings about positive and negative digital images of travel agencies.

Code System	Count
Code System	4.534
TOUR	0
Types of Tours	502
Places Included in the Tour	291
All Inclusive Package Tours	42
Price Alternatives	73
Negative	1
Organization and Timing	278
Negative	8
Transfer Services	66
Negative	1
Shopping Opportunities	18
Negative	14
Re-Preference and Recommendations	879
Negative	7
TOURIST GUIDE	0
Accumulation of Knowledge and Detailed Explanation	1.025
Negative	4
Language Skill	126
Negative	1
Personality Traits	459
Interest and Relevance to Tourists	292
TRANSPORT	0
Vehicle Comfort and Cleanliness	70
Captain and Safe Driving	109
In-Vehicle Catering	23
EATING AND DRINKING	0
Restaurant Location	26
Food Variety	22
Food Taste	161
Negative	12
ACCOMODATION	0
Referral to a Travel Agency	9
Accommodation Services	11
Food and Beverage Services	4

Figure 1. The Code System Containing Main Theme, Sub-Theme, and Codes for Electronic Word-of-Mouth Communication and Digital Image

The code system in Figure 1 comprises 5 main themes, 21 positive sub-themes, and 8 negative sub-themes. The main themes are tour, tourist guide, transport, eating and drinking, and accommodation. **The tour main theme** contains the sub-themes of types of tours, places included in the tour, all-inclusive package tours, price alternatives, organization and timing, transfer services, shopping opportunities, re-preference and recommendations. **The tourist guide main theme** covers the sub-themes of accumulation of knowledge and detailed expression, language skill, personality traits, interest and relevance to tourists. **The transport main theme** includes the sub-themes of vehicle comfort and cleanliness, captain and safe driving, and in-vehicle catering. **The eating and drinking main theme** covers the sub-themes of restaurant location, food variety, and food taste. **The accommodation main theme** contains the sub-themes of referral to a travel agency, accommodation services, and food and beverage services.

In this research, performed to determine the digital image of travel agencies, all positive comments were coded into the above sub-themes, and a “**negative**” sub-theme was placed under the relevant sub-theme for negative comments. Tourists’ negative opinions were presented under the negative sub-themes of price alternatives, organization and timing, transfer services, shopping opportunities, re-preference and recommendations, accumulation of knowledge and detailed explanation, language skill, and food taste. In this context, the code system containing positive and negative comments has 4.534 codes. Of these codings, 4.486 are positive, and 48 are negative. Table 2 includes explanations about the themes and makes the code system comprehensible.

Table 2. Explanations of the Electronic Word-of-Mouth Communication and Digital Image Code System

Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Details
Tour	Types of Tours	Tour types such as green tour, red tour, balloon tour, ATV tour, bicycle tour, horse riding, safari, trekking, etc.
	Places Included in the Tour	Natural, historical, and cultural touristic places such as Göreme Open Air Museum, Derinkuyu Underground City, etc.
	All-inclusive Package Tours	Indicates that the tour consists of transportation, lunch, guide services, transfer, etc. services.
	Price Alternatives	Offering different price alternatives for tour types and making discounts.
	Negative	Negative comments about the price.
	Organization and Timing	Paying attention to time management in tours, making the tour in a planned and regular way.
	Negative	Negative comments about organization and timing.
	Transfer Services	Picking up and dropping off tourists from the airport, bus station, hotel, etc.
	Negative	Negative comments about transfer services.
	Shopping Opportunities	Tourist places that allow tourists to shop, such as pottery workshops, carpet workshops, onyx stone workshops, wine cellars, etc.
	Negative	Negative comments on shopping opportunities.
	Re-preference and Recommendations	Indicates that tourists prefer the same travel agency again and give a positive opinion about the service they have purchased.
Negative	Negative comments on re-preference and recommendations.	
Tourist Guide	Accumulation of Knowledge and Detailed Explanation	That the tour guide has a high level of knowledge in the fields of history, geography, etc., and explains the places included in the tour in detail.
	Negative	Negative comments on the knowledge and explanation of the tourist guide.
	Language Skill	The ability to speak and understand the languages attached to the tour guide’s

		work card.
	Negative	Negative comments about the language skills of the tourist guide.
	Personality Traits	Implies that the tourist guide has positive personality traits such as humorous, patient, sincere, friendly, polite, and hospitable.
	Interest and Relevance to Tourists	Indicates kindness of the tourist guide, such as taking pictures of tourists, answering non-tour questions and dealing closely with their problems, etc.
Transport	Vehicle Comfort and Cleanliness	Indicates that the preferred means of transportation for the tour is comfortable and clean.
	Captain and Safe Driving	That the tour captain has positive personality traits such as patience, kindness, etc., and that he drives the vehicle safely.
	In-vehicle Catering	During the tour, offering water, soda, etc., to the tourists in the vehicle.
Eating and Drinking	Restaurant Location	The location of the restaurant in the tour.
	Food Variety	Indicates that the tour restaurant introduces different food alternatives to the tourists.
	Food Taste	Indicates the deliciousness of restaurant food offered to tourists.
Accommodation	Negative	Negative comments on restaurant food served to tourists.
	Referral to a Travel Agency	Directing the hotel's tourists to the travel agency for tour etc. services.
	Accommodation Services	Accommodation services at the hotel.
	Food and Beverage Services	Food and beverage services at the hotel.

After determining the code system, which includes the main themes, sub-themes, and codes, and making the necessary explanations about the code system, it was appropriate to conduct descriptive analyzes, such as document portrait, subcode statistics, code-subcodes-segments model, and word cloud analyses were made. While making explanations on analyses, the tourist comments on TripAdvisor have also been included, and the effect of electronic word-of-mouth communication on the digital image of travel agencies has been revealed.

Descriptive Analysis

The first analysis for the digital image of travel agencies was document portrait. The Maxqda program was used in the analysis, and the visual tools tab was used. Since the number of positive and negative sub-themes was high, only the 20 most frequent sub-theme appeared on document portraits. In other words, the Maxqda program has made it possible to analyze document portraits with a maximum of 20 sub-themes. Figure 2 shows the document portrait.

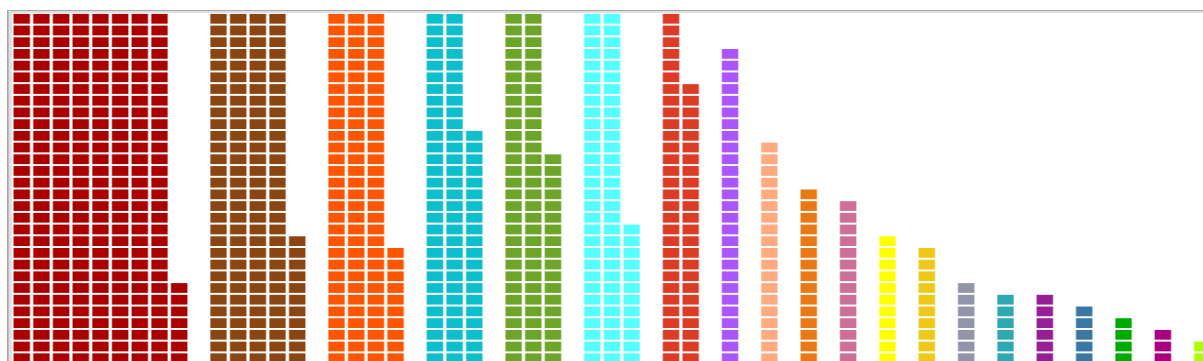


Figure 2. Document Portrait Displaying the Digital Image of Travel Agencies

Document portrait analysis (Figure 2), giving an idea about the digital image of travel agencies, contains boxes in different colors. Each colored box represents a sub-theme. The higher number of boxes indicates that tourists deliver long opinions about the relevant sub-theme when commenting on TripAdvisor. The topics that tourists visiting Nevşehir make the longest comments about travel agencies were (from left to right) accumulation of knowledge and detailed explanation, re-preference and recommendations, personality traits, types of tours, places included in the tour, interest and relevance to tourists, organization and timing, language skill, food taste, price alternatives, transfer services, captain and safe driving, all-inclusive package tours, shopping opportunities (negative), vehicle comfort and cleanliness, shopping opportunities, organization and timing (negative), restaurant location, food variety, and referral to a travel agency. These results show that the tourist guide is the most central subject of the tourists who benefit from the travel agency services and that the guide’s accumulation knowledge and detailed explanation are the most critical factors. The second important element was tourists’ re-preference and positive opinions about the service received. Again, patient, sincere, and polite tourist guides made the tourists express their views on this issue longer. The shortest emphasized issues were restaurant location, food variety, and referral to a travel agency. Eventually, the results show that tourist guides are the most significant factor for travel agencies.

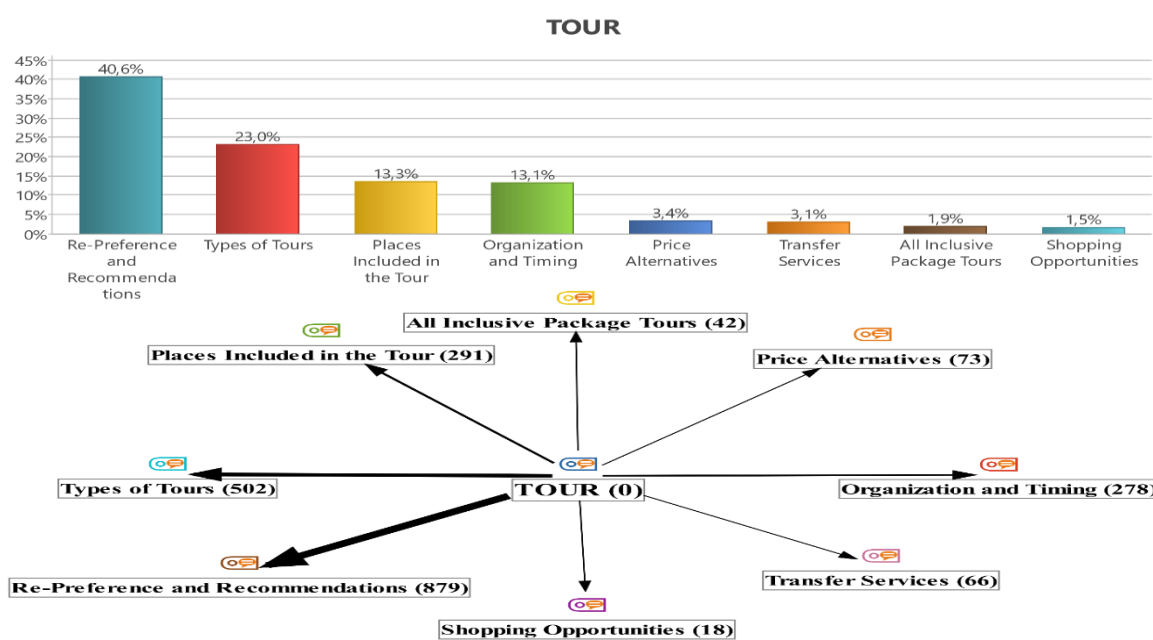


Figure 3. Subcode Statistics and Code-Subcodes-Segments Model for the Tour Main Theme Showing the Digital Image of Travel Agencies

Another analysis to determine the digital image of travel agencies was subcode statistics. This analysis was conducted through the use of the codes tab of the Maxqda program. By clicking subcode statistics, all main themes were transferred to the selected codes section, and analyses were conducted over the coded sections. Then, the graphical view was selected, and the most frequently coded sub-themes were placed from left to right using different colors. Each sub-theme frequency was represented in a percentage. In addition, code-

subcodes-segments model was made, and MAXMaps in the visual tools tab of the Maxqda program was employed. To analyze over MAXMaps, code-subcodes-segments model was chosen for the new model. Thus, each main theme and connected sub-themes were visualized with frequencies.

Figure 3 shows the subcode statistics and code-subcodes-segments model of the tour main theme. Both analyses display the frequency of sub-themes of the tour main theme. The most coded sub-themes are demonstrated with the thickest arrows in the code-subcodes-segments model. In this context, the most frequently coded sub-themes are re-preference and recommendations (f=40.6%-879), types of tours (f=23%-502), places included in the tour (f=13.3%-291), organization and timing (f=13.1%-278), price alternatives (f=3.4%-73), transfer services (f=3.1%-66), all-inclusive package tours (f=1.9%-42) and shopping opportunities (f=1.5%-18). The analyses have covered only positive sub-themes because of the program's characteristics. However, there are also negative codings on the sub-themes of shopping opportunities (f=14), organization and timing (f=8), re-preference and recommendations (f=7), price alternatives (f=1), and transfer services (f=1). On the other hand, there were no negative comments regarding the sub-themes of types of tours, places included in the tour, and all-inclusive package tour. The results revealed that the tour main theme was coded 2.180 times, including positive and negative codes, making it the most coded main theme. Out of 2.180 total codes, 2.149 were positive, and 31 were negative. This situation shows that travel agencies generally have a positive tour image. A few examples of the tour main theme are: *"If you want to visit Turkiye, I highly recommend this travel agency. If I come to Cappadocia again, I will contact the same guide. During the tour, we became like close friends with him. The agency made the right decision to hire this guide, who accompanied us all day. We learned a lot today. Thank you very much for everything"* (**Tour-Re-preference and Recommendations**). *"At the end of the tour, we visited a tourist shop. Our guide made it clear that there was no obligation to purchase. I appreciate him. Because I believe a guide can simply influence his group"* (**Tour-Shopping Opportunities**). These sample expressions belong to the most and least coded sub-themes and reflect tourists' positive opinions.

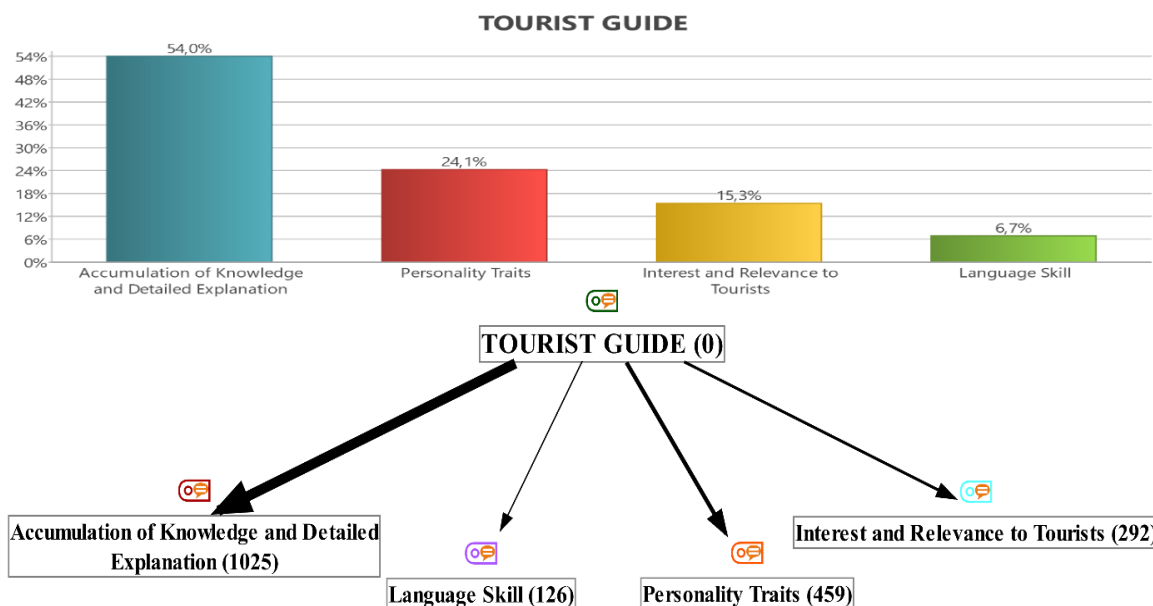


Figure 4. Subcode Statistics and Code-Subcodes-Segments Model for Tourist Guide Main Theme Showing the Digital Image of Travel Agencies

Figure 4 shows the subcode statistics and code-subcodes-segments model of the tourist guide main theme. The frequencies related to the tourist guide main theme were obtained from both analyses. Similarly, the code-subcodes-segments model shows the most frequently coded sub-themes with the thickest arrows. The most frequently coded sub-themes are accumulation of knowledge and detailed explanation ($f=54\%-1025$), personality traits ($f=24.1\%-459$), interest and relevance to tourists ($f=15.3\%-292$), and language skill ($f=6.7\%-126$). Besides positive sub-themes, there are a few negative codings about the sub-themes of accumulation of knowledge and detailed explanation ($f=4$) and language skill ($f=1$). The sub-themes of personality traits and interest and relevance to tourists have fully positive codings because of the lack of negative comments. The results revealed that the tourist guide main theme was coded 1.907 times, including positive and negative codes, and it was the second most coded main theme. Of the 1.907 codings, 1.902 were positive, and five were negative. When evaluated in general, the results show that travel agencies have an excellent image of tourist guides. A few examples of the tourist guide main theme are: *“As he grew up and studied in Cappadocia, he was naturally very knowledgeable about the region. In addition, his knowledge about the various touristic places and historical narration skill that made each place much more enjoyable indicated an impressive accumulation of knowledge” (Tourist Guide-Accumulation of Knowledge and Detailed Explanation)*. *“The most important thing for us was the presence of a Russian-speaking tourist guide. Thanks to him, everything was quite concise and clear. Accompanied by our wonderful guide, we got fascinating impressions. He spoke excellent Russian. Thanks so much for arranging such a tour with a Russian-speaking guide” (Tourist Guide-Language Skill)*. The sample expressions belong to the most and least coded sub-themes and reflect the positive opinions of the tourists.

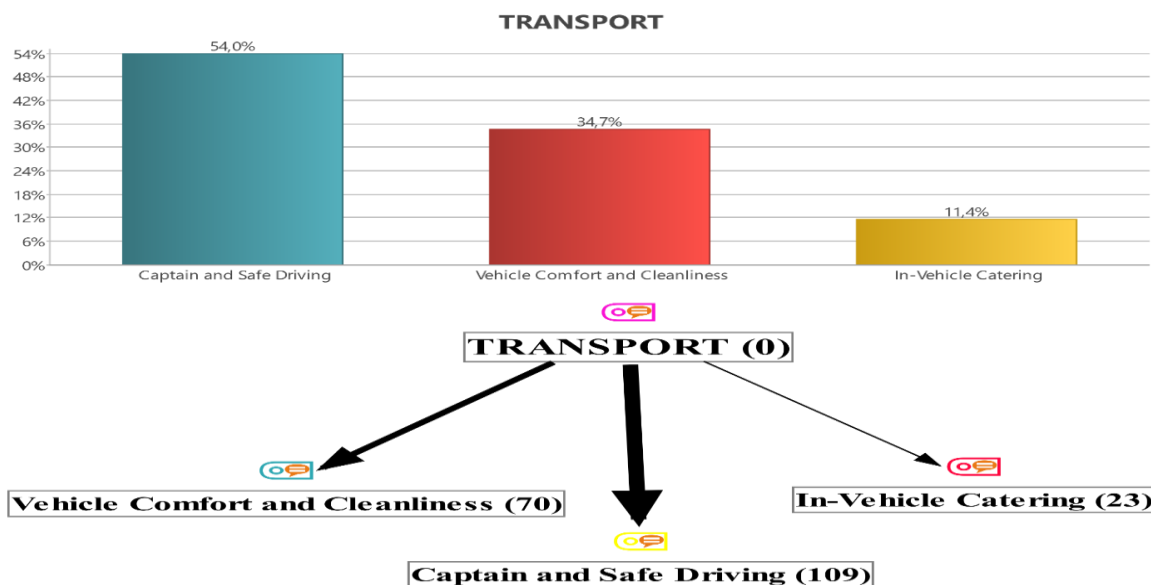


Figure 5. Subcode Statistics and Code-Subcodes-Segments Model for Transport Main Theme Showing the Digital Image of Travel Agencies

Figure 5 shows the subcode statistics and code-subcodes-segments model of the transport theme. As a result of the analysis, frequencies for sub-themes were obtained. The most coded sub-theme in the code-subcodes-segments model has been indicated with the thickest arrow. The most frequently coded sub-themes in the transport main theme were the captain and safe driving ($f=54\%-109$), vehicle comfort and cleanliness ($f=34.7\%-70$), and in-vehicle catering ($f=11.4\%-23$). Similar to other main themes, only positive sub-themes of the transport main theme are included. There are no negative comments in the transport main theme, and therefore, the transport main theme consists entirely of positive coding. The results show that the transport main theme has been coded 202 times and is the fourth most coded main theme. In general, travel agencies were impeccable in their transportation services and had a positive image. A few sample statements on the transport main theme are as follows: *"After long transatlantic flights, the driver arranged by the travel agency was ready at the airport, and the quality standard of the minibus and driver designated for us for the next four days was very high. Thanks to our experienced driver, we had a great time in Cappadocia"* (**Transport-Captain and Safe Driving**). *"Drinking water was abundant in the vehicle throughout the day. Considering the hot weather, we needed water much, and it was a right on-time service"* (**Transport-In-vehicle Catering**). The sample expressions are the most and least coded sub-themes and reflect the positive opinions of the tourists.

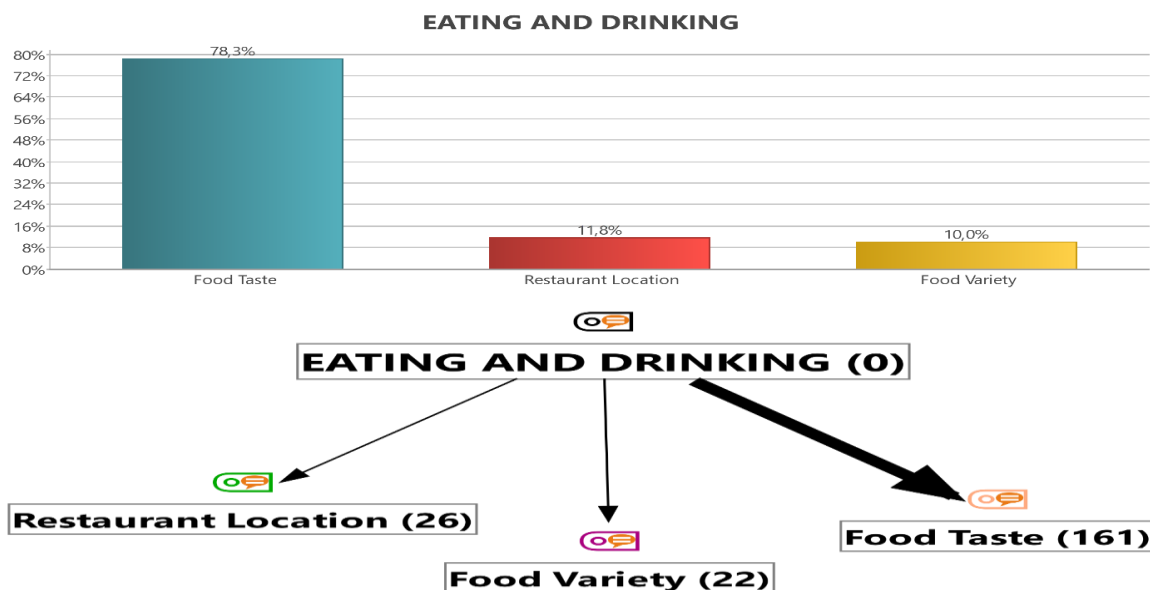


Figure 6. Subcode Statistics and Code-Subcodes-Segments Model for the Eating and Drinking Main Theme Showing the Digital Image of Travel Agencies

Figure 6 shows the subcode statistics and code-subcodes-segments model of the eating and drinking main theme. The frequencies of the sub-themes related to the eating and drinking main theme were determined by the analyses, and the most coded sub-themes in the code-subcodes-segments model appear with the thickest arrows. In this context, the most frequently coded sub-themes related to the eating and drinking main theme were food taste ($f=78.3\%-161$), restaurant location ($f=11.8\%-26$), and food variety ($f=10\%-22$). Figure 6 includes only positive themes. However, there were a few negative comments about the sub-theme of food taste ($f=12$) under the eating and drinking main theme. All comments on the sub-themes of restaurant location and food variety were positive. The results showed that the eating and drinking main theme was coded 221 times, including positive and negative codes, and it was the third most coded main theme. Among 221 codes, 209 were positive, while 12 were negative. In general, travel agencies had a positive image in food and beverage services. A few expressions for the eating and drinking main theme are as follows: *"The food was delicious at the restaurant where the travel agency took us"* (**Eating and Drinking-Food Taste**). *"Lunch was incredible. They served a variety of traditionally prepared Turkish dishes, not an ordinary open buffet"* (**Eating and Drinking-Food Variety**). The sample expressions belong to the most and least coded sub-themes and reflect the positive opinions of the tourists.

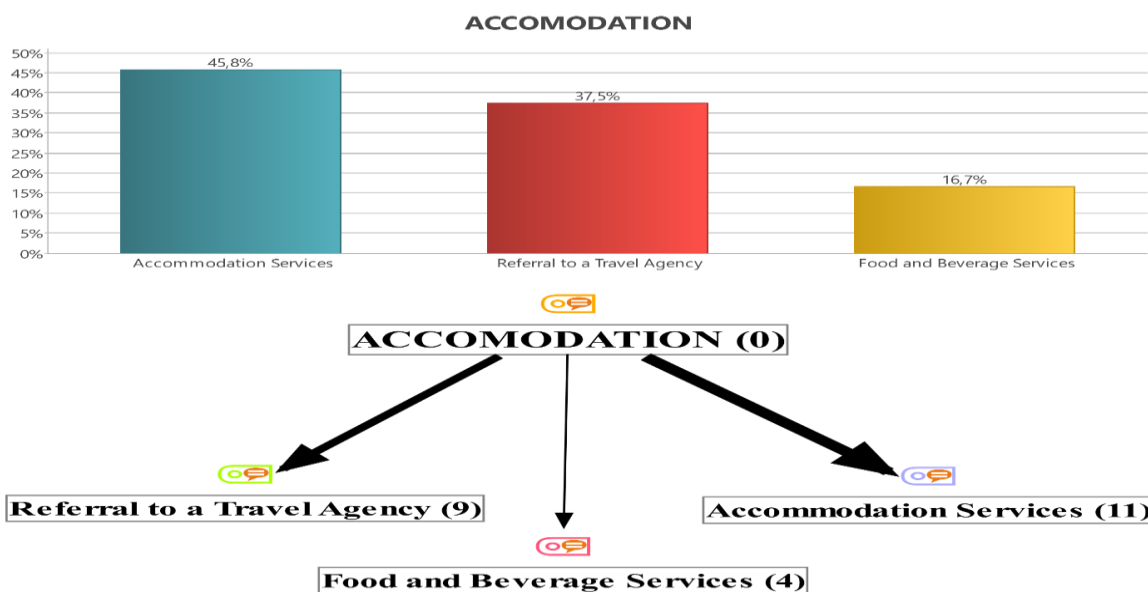


Figure 7. Subcode Statistics and Code-Subcodes-Segments Model for Accommodation Main Theme Showing the Digital Image of Travel Agencies

Figure 7 shows the subcode statistics and code-subcodes-segments model for the accommodation main theme. As in the analyses made for the other main themes, firstly, the frequencies related to the accommodation main theme were determined. The code-subcodes-segments model shows the most coded sub-themes using thick arrows. The most frequently coded sub-themes related to the accommodation main theme were accommodation services ($f=45.8\%-11$), referral to a travel agency ($f=37.5\%-9$), and food and beverage services ($f=16.7\%-4$). Figure 7 shows only positive sub-themes. There were no negative comments about the accommodation main theme, similar to the transportation main theme, and all the codings for the accommodation main theme were purely positive. As the least coded main theme, the accommodation main theme was coded 24 times. The reason why accommodation was the least coded main theme might be that travel agencies in Nevşehir did not focus on accommodation services. In other words, travel agencies were generally recommended by accommodation establishments, and thus tourists can get the service offered by travel agencies. Therefore, tourists have made very few comments about accommodation on TripAdvisor. In general, tourists were satisfied with the accommodation services in Nevşehir, and thus, the accommodation establishments had a positive image. A few examples of expressions regarding the accommodation main theme were as follows: *"We stayed two nights in Cappadocia. We were so happy because the hotel was close to the travel agency. The location of the hotel was excellent, the rooms were immaculate and comfortable"* (**Accommodation-Accommodation Services**). *"The travel agency was recommended to us by our hotel. The service provided by the agency was great"* (**Accommodation-Referral to a Travel Agency**). *"I can't help but mention the breakfast served at the hotel restaurant was great. Thanks to everyone"* (**Accommodation-Food and Beverage Services**). We thought it would be more appropriate to give an example statement for each sub-theme rather than the most and least coded sub-themes to make it more understandable how accommodation

establishments directed tourists to travel agencies. The sample statements reflected each sub-theme and showed that tourists had positive opinions.



Figure 8. The Word Cloud Showing Digital Image of Travel Agencies

Figure 8 shows the word cloud created to determine the digital image of travel agencies. To analyze word cloud, the MAXDicto tab of the Maxqda program was used. This analysis first requires a word frequency analysis. Therefore, the word frequency in the program was clicked first, and then the apply the standard except list option was ticked without any differentiation, and punctuation marks were included in the characters to be cut section. By entering the minimum number of characters as 1, we detected 65.508 total words and 8.555 frequencies. However, considering that it would be more accurate to determine the minimum number of characters as 3, some irrelevant words were excluded. In total, 58.585 words and 8.391 frequencies were obtained by entering the minimum number as 3. Then, while combining some words, some words were excluded, and the word frequency analysis was completed. Finally, the word cloud was created with the most frequently repeated 50 words.

In the word cloud analysis (Figure 8), words are visualized with different colors; some words are bigger than others. This situation is related to the frequency of the words. The most frequently repeated words are larger than the others, and the size of the word is directly proportional to its frequency. In this context, the most repeated words were the tour ($f=2.382$), guide ($f=1.548$), great ($f=1.165$), good ($f=912$), recommendation ($f=717$), Cappadocia ($f=638$), beautiful ($f=516$), time ($f=474$), experience ($f=460$), knowledgeable ($f=377$), green ($f=370$), excellent ($f=341$), funny ($f=327$), historical ($f=294$), food ($f=292$), red ($f=285$), pleasure ($f=278$), visit ($f=273$), travel ($f=242$), interesting ($f=192$). Tourists have frequently used these words when commenting on travel agencies. The most used words were tour and guide. The words great, good, and recommendation suggest an overall positive image about travel agents.

CONCLUSION and DISCUSSION

The research focused on travel agencies, which have a critical role in national and international tourist mobility. The current study has evaluated the online comments about travel agencies—whose number has increased with the development of information and communication technologies—within the framework of electronic word-of-mouth communication. It has been assumed that electronic word-of-mouth communication regarding travel agencies is influential in the formation of digital image. This research carried out in-depth analyses with this assumption and evaluated the results in the theoretical and practical contributions they provided.

The most significant result of the research is that tourists share their opinions about their experiences with travel agencies on online platforms via electronic word-of-mouth communication, and these comments affect the digital image of travel agencies. Previous similar studies have produced similar results (Armawana et al., 2023; Civelek & Dalgın, 2013; Eren & Çelik, 2017; Wang & McCarthy, 2021). On the other hand, many positive or negative factors impact the formation of the digital image (Sarıışık & Özbay, 2013; Zhang et al., 2010). This research has examined all the online comments to determine the factors that are effective in the digital image formation of travel agencies, and by making detailed analyzes, presented the results about how effective the main themes are. In this context, the current study has concluded that the tour, tourist guide, transport, eating and drinking, and accommodation services offered by travel agencies play a substantial role in forming the digital image of travel agencies. The results showing that online comments are effective in the formation of the digital image are in line with the results of similar studies (Armawana et al., 2023; Civelek & Dalgın, 2013; Eren & Çelik, 2017; Wang & McCarthy, 2021). However, the current research has revealed that the content related to the main themes of the tour and the tourist guide has the most dominant role in forming the digital image, depending on the number of coding. This result shows that tourists pay attention to the elements directly related to the tour and the tourist guide. Other complementary factors, such as transport, eating and drinking, and accommodation, are less decisive.

Another significant research subject was the issues the tourists using TripAdvisor had commented on the longest. In this context, the most dwelt subject by tourists concerning travel agencies was the accumulation of knowledge and detailed explanation of the tourist guide and the re-preference and recommendation of the travel agency. Therefore, it turns out that the tour guide, who performs the tour on behalf of the travel agency, decisively affects the tourist experience. On the other hand, it is understood that the tourists not only evaluate the tourist guide but also make a holistic evaluation by considering all the factors related to the travel agency and finally make a final comment for revisit or recommendation. According to the word cloud analysis results, the fact that the words tour and guide take place the most in the comments shows that the tourists pay more attention to the situations related to the tour and the guide. After evaluating all the results in general, it has been concluded that the tourist experiences about the main issues of tour, tourist guide, transport, eating and drinking, and accommodation are effective in the digital image formation of the travel agency in the word-of-mouth communication.

Theoretical Implications

The current study evaluated the comments on the TripAdvisor travel site within the framework of electronic word-of-mouth communication and focused on the digital image of travel agencies. Although similar studies in the literature have also addressed electronic word-of-mouth communication, these studies were generally from a tourist perspective (Bozkurt & Yarimoğlu, 2020; Hermawan, 2022; Soleimani & Einolahzadeh, 2018). This research has similarly dealt with electronic word-of-mouth communication but evaluated electronic word-of-mouth communication in terms of the formation of digital images of travel agencies. In other words, this study, which aimed to fill a gap in the literature, focused on travel agencies, unlike other studies. On the other hand, evaluating electronic word-of-mouth communication in terms of digital image—not in terms of brand image (Armawana et al., 2023; Hoang & Tung, 2023; Wang & McCarthy, 2021) or destination image (Assaker & O'Connor, 2020)—is one of the significant contributions of this research to the literature.

Studies examining online reviews of travel agencies have only made content analysis (Çamlıca et al., 2022). This study made several descriptive analyses and evaluated the determined contents concerning the digital image. This study is believed to be a continuation of the literature. On the other hand, the fact that the main themes of the tour, tourist guide, transport, eating and drinking, and accommodation related to travel agencies in terms of their effects on digital image has been systematically revealed using tourist feedback will provide valuable information to the literature.

Practical Implications

This research examined tourists' online feedback and evaluated the digital image of travel agencies. In this context, it is possible to talk about some of the sociological and administrative implications of the research. Based on the tourist feedback, this research has determined that the types of tours, tour content and service, price alternatives, organization and timing, transfer services, and shopping opportunities are the most prominent issues for tourists' travel agency choices. Tourists also attach importance to the fact that the tour guide representing the travel agency is knowledgeable, detail-oriented, skilled in a foreign language, and attentive to the tourist. In this context, travel agencies should consider all elements related to tours and tourist guides and improve or add new services through feedback. In this way, it is possible to say that the image of travel agencies in digital media can increase even more.

Other issues affecting the digital image of travel agencies were eating and drinking, transport, and accommodation. Even though these issues are in the back rows among the ones that tourists are concerned about in the research, even the tiniest elements can affect tourist satisfaction because of the nature of tourism. In other words, tourists evaluate all factors holistically and shape the quality of their experience accordingly. Therefore, it is possible to say that travel agencies can improve their transport, food-beverage, and accommodation services through tourist feedback, and positive developments on these issues can also contribute positively to their digital image.

In general, it has been determined that most tourists have positive experiences regarding tours, tourist guides, transport, eating and drinking, and accommodation services of travel agencies. The general positive experiences in online tourist reviews contribute positively to choosing and recommending the travel agency again, which is one of the most critical issues for digital image. In other words, online tourist comments can affect the preferences of other tourists by forming a general opinion about the travel agency. In today's world, where information and communication technologies are worldwide, people are doing intensive online research about destinations and tourism businesses, and they can quickly learn about other people's previous experiences. Therefore, reporting negative experiences online to the travel agency will actually encourage the travel agency to improve the services and thus enable the tourists to purchase improved higher quality services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are some limitations in this study, which examines the effect of electronic word-of-mouth communication on the formation of the digital image based on the tourists' experiences with travel agencies. The most critical limitation is the evaluation of travel agencies only in Nevşehir, which is only known as core Cappadocia. Another limitation is that the travel agencies analyzed in the study are only the most commented ones registered on TripAdvisor in 2022. The study results were obtained only from the selected tourist comments. In this context, examining the online comments about travel agencies or other tourism businesses in different destinations in future research can provide valuable information to reach a general conclusion. On the other hand, evaluating electronic word-of-mouth communication to correct service failure and conducting in-depth interviews on this issue can significantly contribute to the literature. In addition, tourist guides stand out as a crucial element in this research. For this reason, conducting studies on which criteria travel agencies consider to employ tourist guides can provide various benefits in tourism literature.

ETHICAL TEXT

"In this article, the journal writing rules, publication principles, research and publication ethics, and journal ethical rules were followed. The responsibility belongs to the author (s) for any violations that may arise regarding the article. This research did not require ethical committee permissions or legal or special permission."

Authors' Statement of Contribution: The contribution rate of the authors to this article is equal.

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