



The Role of Word-of-Mouth in Determining Tourist Destinations

A Case Study The Hajar Al-Milh Region

دور الكلمة المنطوقة في تحديد الوجهة السياحية

دراسة حالة عينة من السياحة بمنطقة حجر الملح

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Received: 26/11/2025

Accepted: 18/01/2026

Published: 02/06/2026

Abstract

Keywords

This case study explores the pivotal role of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) in shaping the destination image and tourism choices for the "Hajar Al-Milh" region. Through interviews and field observations, the study reveals that WOM, driven by authentic personal accounts and local narratives, is significantly more credible than formal advertising. Findings show that oral storytelling creates a vivid sensory image, builds positive expectations, and reinforces local cultural heritage.

The study concludes that WOM is a key strategic asset for sustainable tourism development in emerging destinations.

Word-of-Mouth;
Cultural Tourism ;
Hajar Al-Milh ;
Destination Image ;

JEL Classification Codes : L83; Z32; M31

الكلمات المفتاحية

الملخص

تمحورت الدراسة حول الدور المحوري للكلمة المنطوقة (Word-of-Mouth) في تشكيل الصورة الذهنية لوجهة "منطقة حجر الملح" وتحديد الخيارات السياحية المتعلقة بها، ومن خلال المقابلات والملاحظات الميدانية، تكشف الدراسة أن الكلام الشفهي، المدفوع بالروايات الشخصية الحقيقية والسرديات المحلية، يتمتع بمصداقية تفوق بشكل كبير الإعلانات الرسمية. وتُظهر النتائج أن السرد القصصي الشفهي يساهم في تكوين صورة حسية حية، وبناء توقعات إيجابية، وتعزيز التراث الثقافي المحلي، وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن الكلمة المنطوقة يُعد رصيذاً استراتيجياً أساسياً لتحقيق التنمية السياحية المستدامة في الوجهات الناشئة.

تصنيف JEL: L83; Z32; M31

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I.INTRODUCTION:

It often starts with a simple moment. A friend, back from a trip, pulls out their phone. Their eyes light up as they swipe through photos, but it's not the images that captivate you; it's the excitement in their voice... a place you'd never heard of becomes a possibility, a destination. However, reality, especially in the tourism sector which fundamentally relies on building trust and selling intangible experiences, proves quite the opposite. Word-of-Mouth (WOM), whether in the form of a warm recommendation from a friend, a passing comment from a previous visitor, or a direct conversation with locals, remains one of the most powerful drivers shaping the image of tourist destinations and influencing travel decisions. It represents an organic communication channel characterized by high credibility, as it stems from genuine and unpaid personal experiences, giving it an influential power that surpasses the most expensive and complex advertising campaigns.

When someone recounts their experience at a tourist destination, they are not just conveying abstract information; they are sharing feelings, impressions, and insights that collectively form the "spirit of the place." This living narrative embodies the sights, smells, and sounds, and builds an emotional bridge between the narrator and the listener, planting the seeds of curiosity and the desire to explore the destination. In the context of emerging destinations or those off the traditional tourist trails, WOM becomes the lifeline that fuels the flow of visitors, acting as a natural and sustainable marketing tool that gradually and reliably builds reputation and attracts interest.

The "Hajar Al-Milh" region, with its unique geological features and pristine natural character, emerges as a destination with promising tourism potential. However, like many similar destinations, it does not receive extensive media coverage or organized marketing campaigns. This reality raises a fundamental question about the actual mechanisms that attract visitors.

This personal question forms the core of this study's research problem:

How does word-of-mouth, in its various forms (from local guides, previous visitors, and locals), influence the decision-making process of tourists and the formation of the destination image of the "Hajar Al-Milh" region as a tourist destination?

Several sub-questions branch out from this main problem:

-Among the whispers and stories, which sources of word-of-mouth for potential visitors to the "Hajar Al-Milh" region?

-What are the contents and narrative features of the word-of-mouth about the region, and how do they contribute to building its destination image in its three dimensions (cognitive, affective, and conative)?

-What role do storytelling and the local dialect play in enhancing the credibility of the oral message and its emotional impact?

-To what extent does live word-of-mouth outperform digital advertising and official content in stimulating the intention to travel to "Hajar Al-Milh"?

Study Problem :

How does word-of-mouth, in its various forms (from local guides, previous visitors, and locals), influence the decision-making process of tourists and the formation of the destination image of the "Hajar Al-Milh" region as a tourist destination?

Several sub-questions branch out from this main problem:

- Among the whispers and stories, which sources of word-of-mouth are most trusted by potential visitors to the "Hajar Al-Milh" region?

- What are the contents and narrative features of the word-of-mouth about the region, and how do they contribute to building its destination image in its three dimensions (cognitive, affective, and conative)?
- What role do storytelling and the local dialect play in enhancing the credibility of the oral message and its emotional impact?
- To what extent does live word-of-mouth outperform digital advertising and official content in stimulating the intention to travel to "Hajar Al-Milh"?

In an effort to answer these questions, the objectives of the study are as follows:

- **Analyze the impact of word-of-mouth** To measure and analyze the extent of the influence of oral communication on tourists' decisions to choose the "Hajar Al-Milh" region as their destination.
- **Understand the dynamics of information transfer** To explore the channels and mechanisms through which oral information about the region is transmitted, and to identify the main actors in this process.
- **Uncover the dimensions of the destination image** To identify the cognitive (what the tourist knows), affective (what the tourist feels), and conative (the likelihood of visiting) dimensions that word-of-mouth builds about the destination.
- **Provide practical recommendations** Based on the analysis results, to formulate applicable recommendations for decision-makers and actors in the local tourism sector to enhance oral communication strategies and leverage them as an effective and sustainable marketing tool.

Study Significance

The significance of this study lies in two aspects:

- **Theoretical Significance:** The study fills a gap in Arab tourism literature, which has largely focused on digital marketing and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), while neglecting the deep impact of traditional and live word-of-mouth, especially in the context of non-traditional natural and cultural destinations.
- **Practical Significance:** The study's findings provide valuable insights for tourism policymakers, local entrepreneurs, and guides in the "Hajar Al-Milh" region and similar areas, on how to leverage the power of authentic oral narrative as a priceless marketing asset, instead of relying solely on promotional strategies that may not be suitable for the nature of the destination or its potential.

Study Hypotheses:

In response to the aforementioned problem, this study seeks to test the following hypotheses:

- **Main Hypothesis:** "There is a statistically significant effect of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) on the formation of the destination image of the Hajar Al-Milh region."
- **Sub-Hypothesis One:** "Live WOM sources (local guides, previous visitors, and local residents) are perceived as more credible and influential in the decision to visit the Hajar Al-Milh region compared to official sources."
- **Sub-Hypothesis Two:** "The narrative and emotional content of WOM significantly contributes to building the affective component of the destination's image."
- **Sub-Hypothesis Three:** "WOM positively and directly affects the conative component of the destination image, represented by the intention to visit and the likelihood of recommending it to others."

Study Limitations:

This study was subject to certain limitations that may affect the generalizability of its findings:

- **Spatial Limitations:** This study was exclusively conducted in the "Hajar Al-Milh" region in Djelfa, Algeria. This means the findings may be specific to the context of this unique geological and cultural

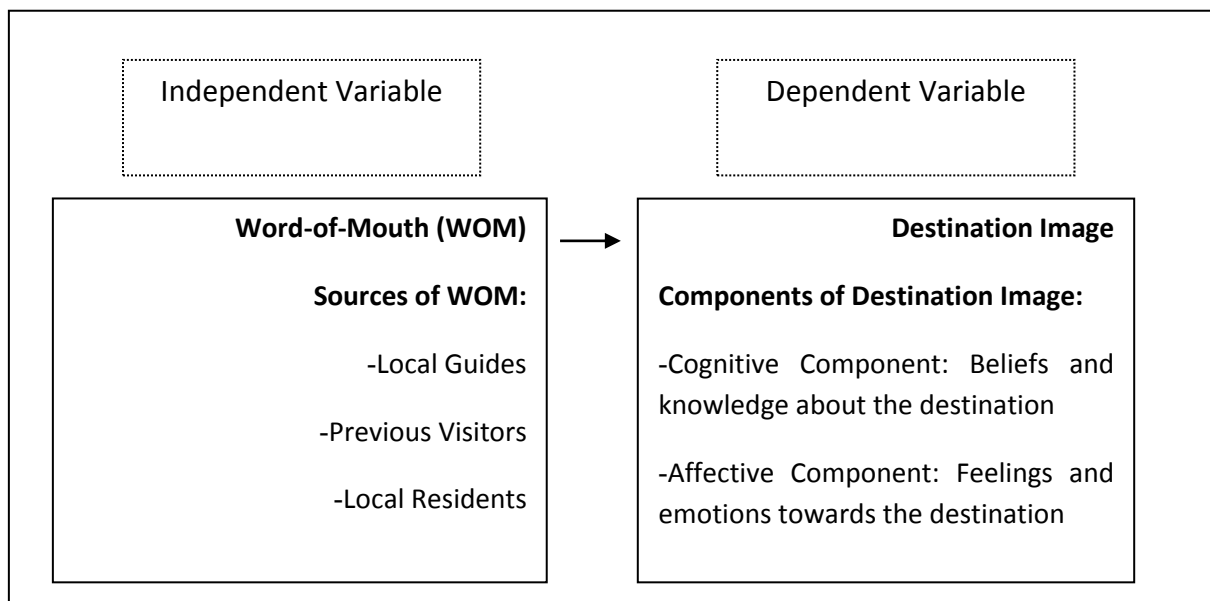
destination and may not necessarily apply to other types of tourist destinations (such as major cities or coastal resorts).

- **Temporal Limitations:** Data were collected during a specific timeframe. Therefore, the sample's opinions and perceptions could be influenced by seasonal conditions or current events that coincided with the study period.
- **Methodological Limitations:** The study adopted a qualitative case study approach, which prioritizes in-depth understanding and contextual insight over statistical generalization. Consequently, the results reflect the perceptions and experiences of the studied sample and cannot be quantitatively generalized to all potential visitors to the region.

Study Model:

To illustrate the relationship between the study variables, the following conceptual model was designed. It demonstrates how the independent variable (Word-of-Mouth and its dimensions) influences the dependent variable (Destination Image and its three components).

Figure (01): Study Model



Source: Developed by the researcher, drawing on insights from prior studies .

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND PREVIOUS STUDIES:

This term reviews the foundational theories and existing literature that underpin this study. It examines the concepts of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) and its digital counterpart (e-WOM), the theoretical framework of destination image, and the unique power of live, narrative-based communication in the tourism context.

2.1. Word-of-Mouth (WOM)

At its core, Word-of-Mouth is deceptively simple: it's any informal, person-to-person communication between consumers regarding the use or characteristics of particular goods or services (Arndt, 1967, p 291).

Yet, in the tourism sector, which is characterized by the intangibility and experiential nature of its products, WOM gains heightened importance.

The decision to travel to a new destination involves a degree of financial and psychological risk. Consequently, tourists heavily rely on the experiences of others to reduce this uncertainty and make informed choices (Litvin et al., 2008, p 460).

A vast body of research has demonstrated a strong positive relationship between WOM and travel intention. Recommendations from peers, such as friends and family, are consistently perceived as more credible and reliable than information from commercial sources like advertisements or brochures.

A study by Jalilvand and Samiei (2012, p 461) empirically showed that WOM directly influences the destination image, which in turn affects the attitude towards the destination and, subsequently, the intention to visit. This cascade effect highlights WOM not merely as a communication channel but as a fundamental component in the architecture of tourist choice.

The digital age, however, complicates this straightforward picture. The rise of social media... has given birth to electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), taking the form of reviews on booking websites (e.g., TripAdvisor), posts on social media (e.g., Instagram), and ratings on travel blogs.

This form, known as e-WOM, has democratized information sharing and massively increased its reach. However, the dynamics of its impact differ from traditional WOM. While e-WOM can reach a global audience instantaneously, it often lacks the warmth and credibility of a face-to-face conversation.

The digital world is rife with fake reviews, information overload, and a general sense of anonymous detachment that can dilute the power of the message.

A study by Saoudi and Bichari (2020, p 55) on desert tourism in Algeria found that the perceived credibility and quality of online content were crucial factors in influencing the decision to visit, suggesting that not all e-WOM is created equal.

2.2. Theoretical Framework of Destination Image

The destination image is a central concept in tourism research, widely defined as "the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person holds of a destination" (Crompton, 1979, p 18).

It is not a reflection of objective reality but a subjective interpretation constructed in the mind of the potential tourist.

Researchers largely agree that this image is comprised of three interacting components, a framework most notably advanced by Baloglu and McCleary (1999, p 870).

- The Cognitive Component refers to the beliefs and knowledge an individual has about the tangible and intangible attributes of a destination. It is the "thinking" part of the image, encompassing perceptions of climate, attractions, infrastructure, safety, and prices. WOM is a primary source for building this component, as it conveys factual information and practical details from a trusted, non-commercial source.
- The affective Component relates to the feelings and emotions that a destination evokes in an individual. This component is highly personal and subjective, shaped by vivid descriptions and emotional narratives. WOM is particularly powerful in shaping this dimension.

Phrases like "a place that inspires deep tranquility" or "an unforgettable, adrenaline-fueled adventure" are examples of how storytelling within WOM constructs the affective image, going beyond mere facts to convey a palpable mood or feeling.

- The Conative Component represents the behavioral outcome of the cognitive and affective evaluations. It manifests as the intention or decision to visit (or not visit) the destination and the likelihood of recommending it to others (Pike & Ryan, 2004, p 333). Positive WOM directly enhances this component, as a strong, enthusiastic recommendation from a trusted source often serves as the final catalyst that translates passive interest into a concrete decision to travel.

The literature consistently shows that WOM is an exceptionally effective tool for shaping all three components in an integrated manner. Unlike advertising, which often focuses narrowly on the cognitive (e.g., listing attractions) or affective (e.g., showing happy people), WOM seamlessly blends facts with feelings, culminating in a powerful and persuasive call to action.

2.3. Live Word-of-Mouth

Despite the ubiquity of e-WOM, face-to-face WOM retains a unique potency. Direct interaction allows for the adaptation of the message, the use of non-verbal cues like body language and tone of voice, and the building of a rapid personal rapport, all of which increase trust and satisfaction. This is particularly relevant in interactions with on-site tourism providers.

The role of the local guide, for instance, extends far beyond that of a mere information provider. A good guide is a "storyteller" who weaves together history, folklore, and personal anecdotes to create an immersive and meaningful tourist experience.

Their use of local dialect, idioms, and shared folk tales does not just enrich the tourist's knowledge; it creates a deep emotional connection to the place, making the destination feel alive and authentic.

This type of live, narrative-based communication is exceptionally difficult to replicate in a digital format. Its value is therefore magnified in destinations like Hajar Al-Milh, which rely on their unique cultural and natural identity as their primary attraction.

Authentic storytelling becomes a powerful tool for cultural preservation and community empowerment, transforming a simple visit into a memorable exchange.

2.4. Research Gap

The preceding literature review makes it clear that a significant scholarly focus has been placed on e-WOM and its impact on well-established urban or resort-based tourism. In contrast, there is a relative scarcity of research exploring the role of traditional, live word-of-mouth in shaping travel decisions toward specialized natural and geological destinations, especially within the Algerian and broader North African context.

While the power of WOM is universally acknowledged, its specific mechanisms, content, and influence channels in a developing tourism ecosystem, largely untouched by mass marketing, remain under-explored.

This study aims to contribute to filling this gap by providing a deep, contextualized analysis of the dynamics of oral influence in the unique case of the Hajar Al-Milh region.

Background of the "Hajar Al-Milh" Region

Geographical Location and Historical Significance

The "Hajar Al-Milh" region, also known as the Rocher de Sel, is a prominent and unique geological landmark located in the Djelfa province of Algeria. Situated within the Ouled Nail Range of the Saharan Atlas, it is a striking diapir, or salt dome, a large geological formation composed of a mixture of salt and clay.

Over millennia, erosion has sculpted the salt rock into breathtaking natural forms, creating a stark and beautiful landscape that resembles massive, otherworldly sculptures. The colors of the rock formations shift dramatically with the changing light of the day, offering a dynamic spectacle for photographers and nature enthusiasts.

Historically, salt was a strategic and highly valuable commodity, often referred to as "white gold." It was central to the trans-Saharan trade networks that connected North Africa with Sub-Saharan Africa for centuries.

Regions rich in salt, like the area around Djelfa, likely played a pivotal role in these ancient trade routes, serving as key points for caravans. This history adds a deep cultural and economic dimension to the region's natural value, linking it to a long heritage of travel, trade, and cultural exchange.

The surrounding environment combines rugged rocky terrain with vast steppes, supporting a unique ecological diversity.

Distinctive Features and Current State of Tourism

The most distinctive feature of Hajar Al-Milh is its dual appeal: it is a premier geological and environmental destination while simultaneously embodying a rich cultural heritage tied to the history of the salt trade and the nomadic peoples of the region.

- The salt formations are the primary attraction. Beyond their visual appeal, there is a local belief that the air in the region possesses therapeutic qualities due to its saturation with salt ions, hinting at a potential for wellness or health-based tourism. The landscape provides an exceptional setting for activities such as hiking, photography, and geological tourism.

- Tourism in Hajar Al-Milh is still in its nascent stages. It is primarily known at the local and regional levels and particularly attracts enthusiasts of adventure tourism, ecotourism, and desert camping. The tourism infrastructure is minimal and relies heavily on individual and community-led initiatives rather than large-scale commercial development. There are no major promotional campaigns, and access to the more remote parts of the area often requires the assistance of local guides who possess intimate knowledge of the unmarked desert tracks. This reality makes the region almost entirely dependent on its reputation, which is built and disseminated orally among visitors and local communities.

Sources of Word-of-Mouth in Hajar Al-Milh

In the absence of formal marketing channels, multiple oral sources collaborate to shape the destination's image. The most prominent of these are:

- Local Guides are the cornerstone of the tourist experience in Hajar Al-Milh. Their role transcends simple navigation; they are the narrators of history, the keepers of oral heritage, and the cultural mediators between visitors and the local environment.

Their stories about the "legends of the salt mountain," their personal experiences growing up in the region, and their deep ecological knowledge form the core content of the word-of-mouth that visitors subsequently share.

- Interaction with the local population, whether in nearby villages or with nomadic families encountered during treks, provides visitors with an authentic and memorable human experience. The traditions of hospitality, the spontaneous conversations over a shared glass of tea, and the genuine warmth of the welcome are powerful elements that leave a strong emotional impression. These interactions become central to the stories that visitors tell their friends and family upon returning home.

- Previous Visitors are the most effective channel for spreading word-of-mouth on a wider scale. When a visitor returns from Hajar Al-Milh with a positive and transformative experience, they become a de facto ambassador for the destination.

Their sharing of photos, accompanied by an enthusiastic oral narrative of their personal journey through their social circles (both real-world and digital), stimulates the curiosity of others and plants the seed of intention to visit.

- Small, locally-owned initiatives, such as providing homestays, organizing traditional meals, or offering craft workshops, create direct and profound interactions. These experiences make the entire visit a story worth telling, significantly enhancing the power and reach of positive word-of-mouth.

III. METHOD AND PROCEDURES:

To achieve the study's objectives and explore the research questions in depth, a qualitative research approach was adopted. Specifically, an interpretive case study design was employed. This design is ideal for understanding a complex phenomenon within its real-life context, allowing for a rich, holistic exploration of the dynamics of WOM in the Hajar Al-Milh region. The methodology focuses on gathering nuanced data through direct interaction with participants to understand their subjective experiences and perceptions, rather than producing generalizable statistics.

3.2 Population and Sample

The study's participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure they could provide rich and relevant information. The sample consisted of 15 tourists who had recently visited Hajar Al-Milh and 5 local guides with extensive experience in the area. This combination allowed for a multi-faceted perspective, capturing the experiences of both the receivers and transmitters of word-of-mouth.

3.3 Data Collection Instrument and Statistical Methods

The primary tools for data collection were:

- **Semi-structured, in-depth interviews:** Conducted with all participants to explore their experiences, the sources of information they trusted, the stories they heard and told, and how these influenced their perceptions and decisions.

Field observations: The researcher undertook guided tours and spent time in the local community to observe interactions between tourists, guides, and locals firsthand. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved a systematic process of reading transcripts, identifying recurring patterns and

concepts, coding the data, and organizing these codes into broader, overarching themes that directly address the research questions.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Instrument Reliability

The reliability of the questionnaire was first established to ensure the validity of the findings, The results are presented in Table 1.

Table (01): Cronbach's Alpha Values for Questionnaire Dimensions

Questionnaire Axes	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient
Credibility of eWOM	0.875
Intensity of eWOM	0.891
Content of eWOM	0.866
Positivity/Negativity of eWOM	0.902
Electronic Word-of-Mouth Axis (Total)	0.924
Destination Image Axis	0.913
Overall Questionnaire	0.945

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on outputs from (SPSS v 27)

The overall Cronbach's alpha value of 0.945, along with high coefficients for each individual axis, demonstrates excellent internal consistency. This confirms that the questionnaire is a reliable and stable instrument for measuring the intended variables.

4.2 The Overall Impact of Electronic Word-of-Mouth

The first hypothesis sought to determine the general effect of eWOM on Djelfa's destination image.

Table (02): Simple Linear Regression for eWOM and Destination Image

Model	Correlation Coefficient (R)	Determination Coefficient (R ²)	F Calculated	Significance Level
1	0.639	0.408	67.611	0.000b

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on outputs from (SPSS v 27)

The analysis revealed a strong positive correlation ($R = 0.639$) between eWOM and destination image. More importantly, the coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.408$) indicates that 40.8% of the variance in Djelfa's destination image can be statistically explained by electronic word-of-mouth.

This robust finding substantiates that eWOM is not a peripheral influence but a primary driver in shaping perceptions. For an emerging destination like Djelfa, this underscores the critical importance of the online narrative.

4.3 The Most Influential Dimensions of eWOM

To dissect which components of eWOM were most impactful, a stepwise multiple regression was performed. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table (03): Stepwise Multiple Regression for eWOM Dimensions and Destination Image

Model	B	T Calculated	Significance Level
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(Constant)	0.957	-	-
Positive and Negative Word-of-Mouth	0.400	5.227	0.000
Intensity of Word-of-Mouth	0.295	3.566	0.001
Credibility of Word-of-Mouth	-	1.885	0.062 (Excluded)
Content of Word-of-Mouth	-	0.942	0.349 (Excluded)

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on outputs from (SPSS v 27)

The analysis yielded a crucial insight: the influence of eWOM is not monolithic. The model retained only two dimensions as statistically significant predictors:

1. Positive and Negative Word-of-Mouth (Valence): This emerged as the most powerful predictor (Sig. = 0.000). This implies that the emotional tone of the online conversation—whether it is overwhelmingly positive or negative—is the single most decisive factor in forming a potential tourist's impression. The affective component of the destination image is thus heavily shaped by the shared feelings of previous visitors.

2. Intensity of Word-of-Mouth: The volume of online discussion was the second significant factor (Sig. = 0.001). This suggests that a high frequency of posts, reviews, and mentions—creating a digital "buzz"—serves to increase awareness and solidify the destination's presence in the public consciousness, regardless of the specific details being discussed.

Strikingly, the dimensions of Credibility and Content were excluded from the model as their impact was not statistically significant. This surprising result suggests that in the fast-paced, high-volume environment of social media, users may be more swayed by the sheer volume of opinions and the prevailing sentiment than they are by a critical evaluation of the source's trustworthiness or the depth of the information provided. The general feeling and visibility of the online discourse appear to trump a detailed, analytical assessment.

IV. STUDY RESULTS (ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION) :

The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and field notes revealed several key themes that illuminate the powerful role of live WOM in shaping the tourism landscape of Hajar Al-Milh.

5.1 The Primacy of Authenticity and Trust:

A dominant theme was the overwhelming trust placed in live, personal sources over any other form of information. Participants consistently ranked recommendations from friends/family and the stories told by local guides as far more credible than online reviews or official brochures (which were almost non-existent for this region). As one tourist stated, "I can look at a thousand pictures online, but when my friend told me about the silence of the salt mountain at sunrise, with passion in his voice... that's what made me book the trip." This finding strongly supports Sub-Hypothesis One, confirming that live WOM sources are perceived as more credible and influential. The authenticity of the source was paramount; the fact that the storyteller had no commercial incentive was repeatedly cited as a reason for their high credibility.

5.2 Storytelling as a Vehicle for Affective Image Creation:

The analysis showed that WOM about Hajar Al-Milh was rarely a simple list of facts. Instead, it was rich with narrative, sensory details, and emotion. Local guides did not just point out geological

formations; they told "legends of the salt mountain" and shared personal anecdotes about growing up in the area. This narrative content was instrumental in building the affective component of the destination's image. Visitors described forming a picture of the region as "mystical," "deeply peaceful," and "a journey back in time"—feelings that were directly transmitted through stories. This finding validates Sub-Hypothesis Two, demonstrating that the emotional and narrative content of WOM is a significant contributor to the destination's affective image.

5.3 From Passive Interest to Active Intention:

The final theme relates to the conative impact of WOM. The data revealed that an enthusiastic oral recommendation often served as the final push needed to convert a vague interest into a concrete travel plan. Furthermore, visitors who had a positive experience felt a strong compulsion to share their stories with others. One participant explained, "You feel like you've discovered a secret, and you want to share it, but only with the right people who will appreciate it." This demonstrates a powerful, self-perpetuating cycle of recommendation. This result provides strong qualitative support for Sub-Hypothesis Three, showing that positive WOM directly influences the intention to visit and the likelihood of recommending the destination to others.

V.CONCLUSION:

The researcher and / or researchers provide a summary of their research, which includes a list of the main findings or ideas that have been developed, as well as the set of suggestions or recommendations, as well as prospects for future research.

This study confirms that for an emerging, nature-based destination like Hajar Al-Milh, traditional, live Word-of-Mouth is not merely a marketing channel; it is the primary engine of its tourism ecosystem. The findings demonstrate that authentic, narrative-driven communication from trusted sources (previous visitors and local guides) is exceptionally powerful in building a positive and compelling destination image across all three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and conative. The credibility of face-to-face storytelling far surpasses that of detached digital content, creating a deep emotional connection that inspires travel.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Empower Local Storytellers:** Local authorities and tourism bodies should invest in training programs for local guides, focusing not on memorizing scripts, but on enhancing their natural storytelling abilities. Workshops on local history, folklore, and geology can enrich the content of their narratives.
- **Cultivate Visitor Advocacy:** Encourage the creation of authentic visitor testimonials. Instead of glossy advertisements, tourism promotion should feature short videos or written stories of real visitors sharing their personal experiences in their own words.
- **Facilitate Authentic Interactions:** Support small-scale, community-based tourism initiatives (e.g., homestays, traditional craft demonstrations) that foster genuine interaction between tourists and the local population, as these interactions are the seeds of the most powerful WOM stories.

- Preserve the Narrative: Document and preserve the local oral heritage and folklore related to the region. This cultural capital is a priceless asset that forms the core of the destination's unique identity and the stories that make it so attractive.
- By strategically leveraging the organic power of WOM, destinations like Hajar Al-Milh can achieve sustainable tourism growth that is rooted in their authentic cultural and natural identity, ensuring that the "spirit of the place" remains its most valuable asset.

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