



Studying the role of effective factors in electronic word-of-mouth marketing in the growth of urban tourism economy (Study: Karbala City)

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Abstract

With the development of the digital world and the internet, word-of-mouth marketing has found a new platform for activity. Social media marketing has transformed the concept of word-of-mouth marketing. One of the most important outcomes of social media is the emergence of online word-of-mouth marketing among members of these networks, which is one of its most important applications. Tourism has always been a phenomenon of great importance, and based on expectations, it will become the most profitable industry in the world, including urban tourism. Therefore, this research aims to examine the factors influencing online word-of-mouth marketing in the growth of the urban tourism economy (case study: Karbala). The research is a descriptive survey. The statistical sample included, as a first stage, 13 workers after obtaining the expert approval as a first stage for interviews, and 56 tourists from Karbala, who were selected and interviewed non-randomly. Data and scenarios were analyzed using fuzzy cognitive mapping techniques, and a research model was designed using social network analysis. These factors were considered the most important by tourists, given their centrality. Finally, based on the results, proposals were presented for developing online word-of-mouth marketing to grow the urban tourism economy (case study: Karbala).

Keywords: marketing - Electronic verbal marketing - Economy of tourism - Urban tourism

Introduction

Urban tourism is one of the most important economic sectors, contributing to the development of cities and enhancing their status as attractive tourist destinations. With the rapid advancement of technology, e-WOM has become an effective tool for shaping the image of tourist destinations and influencing tourist decisions. Word-of-Mouth marketing is defined as the exchange of ideas and experiences between users through digital platforms, which directly impacts the reputation of tourist destinations and increases visitor numbers (Pop et al., 2021).

In recent years, the city of Karbala has witnessed significant growth in religious and urban tourism, attracting millions of visitors annually due to its religious and historical sites of global significance. However, to fully capitalize on this growth, a deep understanding of the factors influencing word-of-mouth marketing and how to use it to improve the tourism economy is needed. Recent research indicates that factors influencing online word-of-mouth marketing include the quality of services



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provided, visitor experience, and the extent to which stakeholders engage with comments and reviews through digital platforms ((Gabeur, 2015; Wibowo et al., 2021).

A study by Al-Badri (ALBDAIRI, 2022) found that the use of social media in marketing religious tourism in Karbala significantly contributed to increasing visitor numbers and improving their experience. Furthermore, recent research has shown that direct interaction with visitors through digital platforms increases trust and makes visitors more likely to return or recommend the place to others (Wang & Hsu, 2010).

This study aims to analyze the role of factors influencing online word-of-mouth marketing in developing the urban tourism economy in Karbala. Using a comprehensive research methodology that includes quantitative and qualitative analysis, it will examine how these factors influence tourists' decisions and increase visitor numbers. The study will also contribute to providing practical recommendations for stakeholders to promote the use of online word-of-mouth marketing as a strategic tool for developing urban tourism in the city.

Based on this, the research hypothesis was developed: There is a strong relationship between satisfaction and recommendation intention.

Theoretical Foundations and Research Background

Marketing is widely used today and enjoys a strategic and important position in various economic and service sectors. This field is experiencing rapid academic and professional development, becoming a major focus in modern business environments. The volume of academic and practical publications related to marketing, as well as the media's interest in highlighting its concepts and applications, demonstrates the critical importance of this field (Evans et al., 2021). This development has led to marketing breaking new ground, as it can be applied at various levels, from small and emerging companies to large international organizations. All companies and industries operating in the economic sphere recognize the importance of marketing and are actively involved in its issues (Keller & Cherney, 2024).

Currently, production and service organizations rely on customer satisfaction as the primary criterion for measuring the quality of their operations, a trend that is significantly increasing. Customer satisfaction is a critical component in the fierce global competition, as companies strive to achieve excellence and superiority (Arafei et al., 2023). In this context, the concept of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) emerges as one of the most influential marketing tools. Electronic word of mouth is defined as any positive or negative advertising about a product or company by potential, actual, or former customers, exchanged online. With the continuous growth of social media, electronic word of mouth has become increasingly important due to its rapid spread and impact (Abdullah et al., 2023).

Electronic word of mouth is considered more influential than traditional word of mouth due to its ease of access and the speed with which users interact with it. It also provides new opportunities to improve the competitiveness and profitability of organizations and tourism destinations (Donthu et al., 2021). In the past few decades, the tourism sector has experienced tremendous growth and has become one of the largest economic sectors in the world. With the advancement of technology, information technologies have penetrated various aspects of life, including the tourism industry, leading to radical transformations in how tourist destinations are marketed and services are delivered (Gato et al., 2022).



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Urban tourism is one of the most dynamic and growing types of tourism, focusing on exploiting the cultural, historical, and recreational attractions of cities to attract visitors. Urban tourism includes visits to museums, monuments, cultural festivals, and urban leisure activities, making it an important source of economic income for cities (Novy & Colomb, 2021). However, the success of urban tourism depends largely on how these destinations are marketed and visitors are attracted through modern communication methods, including online word-of-mouth marketing.

According to statistics, 85% of tourists rely on online reviews and recommendations when choosing their tourist destinations, making online word-of-mouth a crucial marketing tool (Yang et al., 2023). Many cities provide comprehensive information about their tourist attractions on their websites and social media platforms, allowing potential visitors to learn about others' experiences before making a travel decision (Keelson et al., 2024).

Despite the growing importance of online word-of-mouth in the urban tourism industry, there is a lack of studies that analyze the factors influencing this type of marketing, especially in the context of cities of religious and cultural significance such as Karbala. This study contributes to filling this research gap by analyzing the role of online word-of-mouth marketing factors in the growth of the urban tourism economy, focusing on the city of Karbala as a case study.



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Table (1) Previous studies

Title	Objective	Key Results	Practical Benefit
The impact of electronic word of mouth on a tourism destination choice: Testing the theory of planned behavior (TPB)	This study aims to examine the impact of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on tourist destination selection, using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). Efforts were also made to determine the influence of previous travel experiences on the use of eWOM and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB).	85% of tourists rely on online reviews. The quality of reviews and stakeholder engagement play a pivotal role.	Improving stakeholders' engagement with comments and reviews to enhance Karbala's image as a tourist destination.
Development of information and communication technology: from e-tourism to smart tourism (Leung, 2022)	Reviewing the stages of development of e-tourism through suppliers, tourists, and educational needs	Decision support systems integrate external data with operational and management data to make strategic decisions. Smart tourism networks and their applications also support the three stages of tourist travel. Smart applications not only enable tourists to enhance their travel experience but also improve interactions with tourism practitioners.	Providing automated services in hospitality and tourism that do not require human intervention.



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<p>Inclusive and regenerative urban tourism: Capacity development perspectives (Bellato & Cheer, 2021)</p>	<p>This research aims to examine the application of capacity development perspectives, which are a critical point towards inclusive and regenerative urban tourism.</p>	<p>Marginalized people possess valuable knowledge and skills in specialized urban tourism. Their development leads to the development of urban tourism.</p>	<p>This study contributes to the growing debate on stakeholder capacity development and readiness for inclusion in urban tourism initiatives. Modern and advanced development approaches implemented within capacity development frameworks represent a unique attempt to integrate stakeholders into the design, support, and implementation of tourism planning processes that take into account comprehensive and evolving priorities.</p>
<p>Electronic word-of-mouth and online reviews in tourism services: the use of twitter by tourists (Sotiriadis & Van</p>	<p>This study aims to develop a conceptual framework for understanding the foundations of digital communication and to empirically examine its validity by examining the factors influencing tourism consumer behaviour.</p>	<p>The results reveal the factors influencing tourists' decision-making and indicate that this social media platform is not a magic bullet, but rather another marketing channel that can be wisely used in integrated communications marketing for tourism services.</p>	<p>This study relies on a conceptual model of e-WOM and explores tourists' use of Twitter.</p>



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Machine Learning and Artificial Intelligence for a sustainable tourism: A case study on Saudi Arabia (Louati et al., 2024)	This research expands on how machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI) innovations contribute to sustainable tourism practices, addressing key aspects such as resource management, economic resilience, and environmental stewardship, by integrating AI-based predictive analytics and operational efficiencies.	The results demonstrate the powerful capabilities of these machine learning techniques in predicting complex economic patterns and promoting sustainable tourism practices. The study not only contributes to the growing body of literature on AI-based tourism forecasting but also provides practical insights that can be applied to other emerging tourism markets worldwide.	The study provides strategic insights for future planning and decision-making, with the aim of supporting stakeholders in developing resilient and sustainable strategies for the tourism sector. This approach does not enhance the ability to deal with economic complexities.
Implications of modern technology development for the tourism sector of the Republic of Serbia. (Ilić & Nikolić,	Study of the degree of contribution of the ICT readiness pillar to the competitiveness of the tourism sector in the Republic of Serbia.	The quality of ICT infrastructure is not a major obstacle to the business of tourism companies in our country, as most of them are concentrated in urban areas, where quality meets high standards that enable smooth e-business operations.	Expanding our understanding of the impact of modern technology on the tourism sector in the Republic of Serbia and the ways it contributes to increased competitiveness.



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From the table above, the following points can be drawn for practical use in the research:

1. Improving visitor engagement: Responding to comments and reviews via digital platforms to enhance Karbala's image.
2. Enhancing information quality: Providing comprehensive and accurate information about Karbala's tourist attractions via digital platforms.
3. Encouraging positive comments: Motivating visitors to share their positive experiences via social media.
4. Utilizing modern technology: Adopting technologies such as virtual reality and artificial intelligence to enhance the tourist experience.
5. Increasing digital presence: Enhancing Karbala's presence on social media platforms to increase the spread of positive online word of mouth.

Research method

The study is descriptive-survey type. From the methodological point of view, this research is conducted based on the "mixed research" method, which was carried out in four steps. In the first stage, based on the results of the study of libraries regarding the theoretical foundations and background of the research, the initial conceptual framework of the effective factors on electronic verbal marketing in the growth of the urban tourism economy (case study: kerbala city) was extracted. In this research, samples were taken from two statistical communities. The first sample was 10 experts in the field of tourism management, who had work experience in the field of urban tourism, who were selected non-randomly and were interviewed. In this stage, 17 factors were obtained by reviewing the literature and research background, and as a result, they were prepared from the list A number of factors were removed, merged or added, and finally 13 factors were approved by the experts. The basis of the agreement was the significance of the concepts in the field of electronic word marketing in the growth of the urban tourism economy (case study: Karbala city).

Through their interviews, the experts identified the most important elements that the researcher could rely on to achieve the desired goal of this research. These were as follows:

Increasing access to urban information, promoting urban services, gaining tourists' trust, increasing interaction with tourists, increasing sales of urban services, attempting to attract new tourists, receiving government support, improving the tourist experience, providing accurate and reliable information about urban services, attracting public attention to Karbala as an urban tourist destination, increasing tourist satisfaction with urban services, designing websites with appropriate content, and promoting word-of-mouth advertising to users.

The second sample consisted of 56 urban tourists from Karbala who were selected to participate in building the model. In the second step of the qualitative modeling process, the experts' causal maps were extracted and analysed. To this end, a matrix questionnaire was prepared and presented to tourism industry experts.

Demographic data (n=400)

Table (2) Demographic information

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage%
Sex	Male	190	47.5%
	Female	210	52.5%



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Age	<25 years	112	28%
	26-35	148	37%
	36-45	92	23%
	>45	48	12%
Educational level	academic	276	69%
	Postgraduate	124	31%

Descriptive analysis

Table (3) Descriptive analysis

Item (Average Score)	Average	standard deviation	Interpretation
Relying on electronic assessments	4.35	0.72	High impact
Trust in social media content	3.89	1.05	Medium impact
The impact of personal recommendations	4.52	0.68	Very high impact
Quality of services versus expectations	3.67	1.18	Room for improvement
general satisfaction	4.21	0.85	Good level
attention to recommend a visit	4.43	0.77	positive indicator

deductive analysis

A. Correlation coefficients (Pearson)

Table (4) Deductive analysis

relationship	Correlation coefficient (r)	significance (p)
Satisfaction × Recommendation	0.79**	0.000
Online Reviews × Satisfaction	0.63**	0.001
Service Quality × Satisfaction	0.41*	0.012

Based on the results of the statistical analysis, the research hypothesis has been proven. There is a strong relationship between satisfaction and intention to recommend ($r=0.79$) supporting the main research hypothesis.

T-test

Table (5) T-test

variable	Males (M)	Females (M)	t-value	p-value
general satisfaction	3.98	4.41	3.87	0.000**
Relying on evaluations	4.12	4.55	2.95	0.003**



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The table above shows that females are more dependent on electronic evaluations ($p < 0.01$) and more satisfied ($p < 0.001$).

Multiple regression analysis

Table (6) Multiple regression analysis

The Prophet (fixed)	β	t-value	p-value	R ² (rate)
	-	5.12	0.000	0.68
eneral satisfactio	0.58	7.33	0.000**	
Quality of service	0.22	2.89	0.004**	
online assessment	0.31	4.01	0.000**	

Regression equation:

Recommendation = 0.58 (satisfaction) + 0.22 (service quality) + 0.31 (ratings)

Qualitative analysis (content analysis)

Table (7) Qualitative analysis

Suggestions category	repetition	Examples of text data
Improving infrastructure	38%	The roads need maintenance
Enhancing security	25%	"Increase police patrols"
Improving digital content	20%	"Integrated tourism application"
Diversification of activities	17%	"More cultural festivals"

The research results demonstrated the following:

The power of word-of-mouth marketing was the most influential factor in choosing Karbala as an urban tourism destination, as it is a fundamental component of urban tourism. Personal recommendations scored 4.52/5.

Service quality, on the other hand, scored 3.67/5, requiring improvement to enhance satisfaction.

The findings

Based on the results obtained from the Spearman test, there was no significant relationship between the variables of complexity index (number of relationships, density of relationships, map density) and territory index (total intensity of relationships) with personal characteristics of experts. Then, considering that in the Kruskal test There is a significant difference in the Wallis error level of less than 0.05, so there is no difference between the density of relationships between different educational levels, work experience and age. In the Mann-Whitney U test, the significance level is 0.68 Therefore, there is no difference between the intensity of relationships between women and men. The results of correlation analysis (QAP, similarity data) and distance ratio (difference data) between the causal maps of the experts showed a difference between the causal roles of each group of experts. According to the results of the above tests, the integration of the experts' cognitive maps was found to be unhindered. The matrix of the experts' mental maps is shown in Table 1.

Table 1- The matrix of the distance between the experts' integration causal map extracted from the FCMapper software³



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Map	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	0	0.6	1	0.4	1	1	0	0.8	0.2	1	0.9	0	0.4
2	0.3	0	1	0	1	0.6	0	0	0.4	0	0.4	0.8	0.5
3	0.5	0.2	0	0.7	1	1	0	0.5	0.1	0.6	0.3	0.5	1
4	0.5	0.4	1	0	1	0.9	0	1	0.5	0.9	0.5	0.6	1
5	0.4	1	0	0.3	0	0.3	0	0.4	0	0	0.2	0.5	0.4
6	0	0.9	0	1	0.5	0	0	0.5	0	0.4	0	0	0
7	0	1	0.3	0	1	0.2	0	0	0	0.2	0	0.2	0
8	0.9	1	0.5	0.6	1	1	0	0	0.2	1	0.7	0	1
9	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0.7	1	1	1
10	0.2	0	0.2	1	1	0.8	0	1	0.5	0	0.8	0.8	0.5
11	0.5	0.8	0.7	0	1	0.6	0	1	0	1	0	0.3	1
12	1	1	0.5	0.8	1	1	0	0.7	0.9	0.8	0.4	0	0.7
13	0.7	1	1	1	1	1	0	0.9	0.4	1	0.5	0.6	0

The numbers of this matrix show the effect of each variable on another based on the summary of experts' opinion. After integrating the opinions of experts, the degree of influence and effectiveness of each factor was analyzed in FCMapper software. These results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2- The degree of influence, effectiveness and centrality of the effective factors on electronic verbal marketing in the growth of the urban tourism economy of Karbala city

Agents	Influencing	Influence	centrality	rank
Increasing access to urban information	7.3	6	13.3	10
Promotion of urban services	5	8.9	13.9	7
Gaining the trust of tourists	6.4	7.2	13.6	9
Increasing interaction with tourists	8.3	6.8	15.1	3
Increasing sales of urban services	3.5	11.5	15	4
Efforts to attract new tourists	3.3	9.4	12.7	11
Having the support of the government	2.9	0	2.9	13
Improving the experience of tourists	7.9	7.8	15.7	2
Providing accurate and reliable information about urban services	10.7	3.2	13.9	8
Attracting audience's attention to Karbala as urban tourism destination	6.8	7.6	14.4	5
Increasing tourists' satisfaction with urban services	6.9	5.7	12.6	12
Designing websites with appropriate content	8.8	5.3	14.1	6
Verbal advertising of users	9.1	7.5	16.6	1

Influence shows the applied effects of a concept, and influenceability shows the amount of influence received from other factors, and centrality shows the sum of influence and influence ability of factors. Therefore, the higher the degree of centrality of a factor, the more important it will be in the network of



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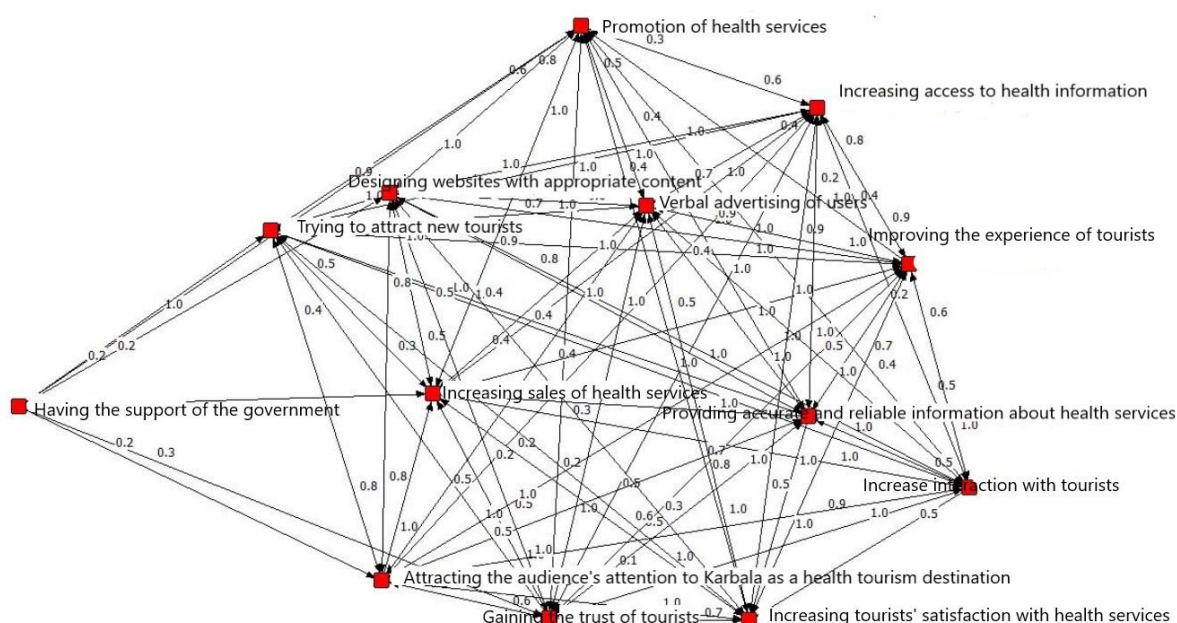
factors compared to other factors, and in Table 2, the ranking of factors is based on the degree of importance and centrality of factors. According to Table 2 and the evaluation of the role of factors in improving the situation of other factors, scenarios have been written, and these scenarios were written according to the factors that have the highest degree of centrality. One of the advantages of scenario writing is that in situations where we cannot provide all the factors together for any reason, using scenario writing we can measure the effects of other factors if one or more factors are removed. The research has three scenarios, the first scenario is considered fixed to measure the changes of the other two scenarios. In the second scenario, a situation has been simulated in which, despite paying attention to the verbal advertising of users, nothing is done to improve the experience of tourists and increase the interaction with tourists, in such a way that the factor of verbal advertising of users is activated (one) and the factors of improvement and experience of tourists and the increase of interaction with tourists was considered passive (zero). In the third scenario, improving the experience of tourists and increasing interaction with tourists has been studied regardless of the verbal advertising of users, which means that the factors of improving the experience of tourists and increasing interaction with tourists are one and The factor of verbal advertising of users is considered to be zero, which is shown in Table 3, the changes and the results of the scenarios.

Table 3 - The results of the simulation of the scenarios on the proposed model

Factors	politics			Policy results			Comparison policies		Scenario changes	
	1	2	4	1	2	3	second and first	Third and first	2	3
Increasing access to urban information	1			1	0.99	0.994	-0/008	-0/002	7	7
Promotion of urban services	1			0.999	0.998	0.999	-0/0007	-0/0004	8	8
Gaining the trust of tourists	1			0.999	0.995	0/997	-0/003	-0/001	7	7
Increasing interaction with tourists	1	0	1	0/998	0	1	-0/998	0/001	1	0
Increasing sales of urban services	1			0/999	0/998	0/995	-0/0001	-0/0003	9	8
Efforts to attract new tourists	1			0/999	0/993	0/997	-0/0005	-0/000	8	8
Having the support of the government	1			0/5	0/5	0/5	0	0	10	10
Improving the experience of tourists	1	0	1	0/99	0	1	-0/99	0/0004	1	0
Providing accurate and reliable information about urban services	1			0/96	0/92	0/94	-0/03	-0/01	6	6
Attracting audience's attention to kerbala as a urban tourism destination	1			0/999	0/995	0/998	-0/003	-0/001	7	7

Increasing tourists' satisfaction with urban services	1			0/996	0/98	0/994	0/008	-0/000	7	7
Designing websites with appropriate content	1			0/994	0/98	0/98	-0/005	0/000	7	7
Verbal advertising of users	1	1	0	0/996	1	0	0/0005	-0/99	1	0

According to the results of Table 3, the results of the second and third scenarios show that, if only the factor of word of mouth advertising is paid attention to, but no effort is made to improve the experience of tourists and increase interaction with tourists, all factors are in a negative direction and to a small extent. , medium and large changes) by using the comparison analysis of the policy comparison columns and scenario changes according to which if these changes are between the number of 1 to 5, they are positive changes, but if the amount of changes are in the category of 6 to 9, they indicate negative changes and The number 10 indicates no effect and no change of the factors. Also, the smaller the number is, the more changes there will be. For example, the number 6 indicates more negative changes compared to 7, as well as 7 compared to 8 and the number compared to 9. Paying attention to the tourists and ignoring the verbal propaganda of the users, all the factors will move in the negative direction to a very low, low, medium and high level. Then the data of the integration matrix of the experts was entered into the Ucinet software and a graph of the model was drawn Figure 1 is shown.



Fuzzy cognitive map of effective factors on electronic word of mouth marketing in the growth of the urban tourism economy of Karbala city - Figure 1

Figure 1 shows the most important factors affecting electronic word of mouth marketing in the growth of the urban tourism economy (case study: kerbala city). According to the causal relationships between the factors, each factor that plays a more important role in the development of electronic word of mouth



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marketing in the growth of the urban tourism economy The case of study: kerbala city, is located in the center of the shape, in this image, the factors of verbal advertising of users, improving the attention of tourists and increasing interaction with tourists are placed in the center of the shape. This graph has 13 factors and 121 arcs, which show the relationships between factors.

Discussion and conclusion

Research findings showed that the model of effective factors on electronic verbal marketing in the growth of urban tourism economy (case study: Karbala city) includes factors of increasing access to urban information, promoting urban services, gaining the trust of tourists, increasing interaction with tourists, increasing the sale of urban services. Trying to attract new tourists, enjoying government support, improving tourists' experience, providing accurate and reliable information about urban services, attracting the attention of audiences to Karbala as a urban tourism destination, increasing tourists' satisfaction with urban services, designing websites with appropriate content. Based on the degree of centrality, the factors of users' verbal advertising, improving the tourists' experience and increasing interaction with tourists, were at the top of the list, based on the results of the fuzzy cognitive mapping, it can be interpreted as the most effective factor, the verbal advertising factor. It is the users that this factor has a great role in creating any kind of improvement in the development of electronic word of mouth marketing in the growth of urban tourism economy (case study: Karbala city). (1400 Andruage et al.) (2020) matches. Also, the effectiveness of the development of electronic verbal marketing in the growth of the urban tourism economy (case study: Karbala city) of improving the experience of tourists, which is considered in the model, is consistent with the results presented by Zhang et al. (2022). The role of the factor of increasing interaction with tourists which is emphasized by the model, is supported by the results presented by Lin et al. (2019)

Also, the results of scenario writing show that if only the factor of word of mouth advertising is paid attention to, but no effort is made to improve the experience of tourists and increase interaction with tourists, all factors will change in a negative direction and to a moderate to large extent. Also, if only the factors of improving the experience of tourists and increasing interaction with tourists are paid attention to and the factor of verbal advertising of users is ignored, all the factors will move in a negative direction again. Therefore, it is necessary to pay equal attention to all three factors in order to witness the development of electronic verbal marketing in the growth of the urban tourism economy (case study: Karbala city), hence the following suggestions are presented according to the research findings:

- ✓ Creating a website that allows tourists to access urban information and related services.
- ✓ Using social media to promote the urban services of Karbala city and attract new tourists.
- ✓ Providing feedback and surveys to tourists in order to build trust and improve services.
- ✓ Holding educational events and workshops about urban and related services with the aim of increasing interaction with tourists.
- ✓ Creating a platform for online booking of urban services and offering discounts and special offers to tourists.
- ✓ Providing accurate and reliable information about the urban services of Karbala city through articles, videos and opinions of other tourists.
- ✓ Creating 24-hour online support services to respond to tourists' questions and needs.

Resources

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