

Online Reviews as a Determinant of Homestay Choice in Community-Based Tourism: The Case of Ba Bể Lake tourism area, Thái Nguyên

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ABSTRACT: *The development of digital platforms has fundamentally transformed tourists' decision-making processes in the tourism industry. In the context of community-based homestays - where formal branding is limited and marketing resources are constrained - online reviews may play a central role in shaping customer choices. However, the cognitive mechanisms through which reviews influence decision-making in community accommodation settings remain insufficiently examined.*

This study conceptualizes online reviews as a cognitive structuring mechanism and adopts a qualitative case study approach in the Ba Bể Lake tourism area (Thái Nguyên). Data were collected from 14 in-depth interviews with tourists, 9 interviews with homestay owners, and a content analysis of 180 publicly available online reviews across major platforms. The findings reveal that online reviews operate through four primary mechanisms: competitive screening, trust formation, risk negotiation, and restructuring of selection criteria. In addition, reviews generate an indirect feedback loop that stimulates service adjustment among homestay operators.

The study contributes to the e-WOM literature by extending the perspective from "impact" to "market-structuring mechanism" in non-branded accommodation environments.

KEYWORDS: *Online reviews; e-WOM; homestay choice decision; community-based tourism; digital reputation management.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital platforms has fundamentally altered how tourists search for information and make decisions in the tourism industry. In online environments, prior customer evaluations - commonly referred to as electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) - have become a highly influential source of information shaping consumer perceptions and behavior (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Litvin et al., 2008). Empirical studies demonstrate that both review ratings and textual content significantly affect booking intentions and accommodation choices (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009; Sparks & Browning, 2011).

From a theoretical standpoint, online reviews function as a mechanism for reducing information asymmetry in service markets, where consumers cannot experience the service prior to purchase (Erdem & Swait, 1998). By aggregating previous consumers' experiences, reviews provide signals regarding quality and reliability, thereby fostering trust and mitigating perceived risk (Filieri & McLeay, 2014; Babić Rosario et al., 2016). Consequently, online reviews influence not only cognitive evaluations but also behavioral decisions.

Nevertheless, most prior studies have focused on large-scale hotels or developed markets, where brand reputation plays a substantial role in trust formation. In contrast, community-based homestays - particularly in developing destinations - are typically small-scale, lack formal branding, and depend heavily on online platforms for market access. In such contexts, online reviews may serve as a central mechanism shaping digital reputation and competitive capacity.

Ba Bể Lake tourism area represents a typical community-based tourism destination in Vietnam, where homestays are operated by local residents. Due to limited marketing resources and weak brand presence, these homestays rely significantly on reviews on online travel agencies (OTAs) and social media platforms. However, the mechanisms through which online reviews influence homestay choice decisions in this context - and their reciprocal impact on managerial behavior - remain underexplored.

Drawing upon e-WOM theory, trust theory, and signaling theory, this study conceptualizes online reviews as an intermediary mechanism transforming social information into trust and selection decisions. Through a qualitative case study of Ba Bể Lake tourism area, the study aims to: (1) analyze how tourists use and interpret reviews when selecting homestays; (2) identify salient review attributes influencing decisions; and (3) clarify the impact of online reviews on homestay managerial practices.

This research contributes to the understanding of digital reputation in small-scale accommodation settings within developing economies and offers managerial implications for community homestays seeking to leverage online reviews for sustainable competitiveness.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. e-WOM in digital accommodation environments

Recent research on e-WOM in tourism has shifted from measuring direct effects of reviews to examining influence structures and internal cognitive mechanisms (Xiang et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2019). Rather than treating reviews merely as supplementary information, scholars increasingly conceptualize them as a social information system capable of shaping evaluation norms and consumer expectations.

Post-2018 studies indicate that the impact of reviews depends not only on valence (positive vs. negative) but also on information structure, detail richness, and consensus among reviewers (Lu et al., 2020; Shen et al., 2021). Reviews thus function as a social interpretive mechanism, whereby consumers infer representativeness and credibility from aggregated feedback.

In high-uncertainty service environments such as accommodation, consumers rely more heavily on user-generated content than on official information (Li et al., 2020). However, most studies focus on standardized hotel settings, while the role of reviews in non-branded accommodation contexts remains underexamined.

2.2. Market signaling and brand substitution in non-standardized accommodation

Recent marketing research emphasizes the role of secondary signals when primary signals such as strong branding or formal certifications are weak or absent (Connelly et al., 2018). In small-scale accommodation markets lacking standardized classification systems, online reviews may substitute for brand signals.

Wang et al. (2021) argue that average rating scores and review volume generate inferential effects, enabling consumers to deduce overall quality from indicators such as “8.9/10” or “over 300 reviews”. Managerial responses to negative reviews further serve as signals of professionalism and accountability (Zhang et al., 2020).

Thus, online reviews constitute a dynamic signaling system, in which both user-generated content and provider responses jointly shape market perceptions. Yet, little research has explored how tourists interpret these signals in community-based homestay contexts.

2.3. Trust formation in community-based accommodation

Recent studies conceptualize online trust as multidimensional, including competence-based, benevolence-based, and integrity-based trust (Filieri et al., 2018; Ert et al., 2019).

In community-based accommodation models, interpersonal interaction and social elements are particularly salient. Liang et al. (2018) show that host descriptions and personal experiences significantly influence affective trust in peer-to-peer platforms. Accordingly, review content not only evaluates service performance but also constructs the social image of hosts.

Prayag et al. (2019) further suggest that trust mediates the relationship between review information and behavioral intentions. However, most studies focus on Airbnb or developed markets, leaving community-based homestays in developing economies insufficiently analyzed.

2.4. Perceived risk and accommodation choice behavior

Perceived risk is central to service consumption decisions (Liang et al., 2018). In online accommodation contexts, risks include functional risk (room quality), financial risk (value for money), and psychological risk (mismatch with expectations). Reviews reduce perceived risk by providing experiential evidence from prior guests.

Recent research indicates that the impact of reviews on perceived risk depends on perceived similarity between reviewer and reader and on authenticity cues (Ert et al., 2019; Shen et al., 2021). Thus, reviews represent socially constructed interpretive structures rather than neutral information sources.

2.5. Theoretical gap

Despite recent advances, three gaps remain:

First, many studies rely on quantitative variable-testing models, while cognitive mechanisms - how consumers read, interpret, and integrate review information - remain underexplored qualitatively.

Second, research primarily addresses standardized hotels or global peer-to-peer platforms, overlooking community-based homestays in developing economies.

Third, the bidirectional role of reviews - shaping tourist decisions while influencing managerial practices - has not been integrated into a unified analytical framework.

Accordingly, this study conceptualizes online reviews as a cognitive structuring mechanism transforming social information into trust and selection decisions in small-scale accommodation contexts.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore the mechanisms through which online reviews influence homestay selection decisions in the context of community-based tourism. This design is appropriate when the research objective is to analyze cognitive and interpretive processes in real-world settings rather than to test causal relationships between predefined variables. The Ba Bê Lake tourism area was selected as a representative case of community-based homestay development in a developing destination, where small-scale accommodation providers rely heavily on online reviews on OTAs and social media platforms.

Data were collected between March and August 2025 through semi-structured in-depth interviews and content analysis of publicly available reviews. A total of 14 tourists who had stayed in homestays within the previous 12 months were selected using purposive sampling. The primary inclusion criterion required participants to have used online reviews during their booking decision process. In addition, 9 homestay owners operating on OTA platforms or Google Reviews were interviewed to capture managerial perspectives on online reviews. Interviews lasted between 35 and 60 minutes, were audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

In parallel, 180 publicly available reviews of homestays in the Ba Bê Lake tourism area were collected from Booking.com, Agoda, and Google Reviews over the most recent two-year period. Reviews were selected based on the presence of detailed experiential descriptions to ensure informational richness. The combination of interview data and publicly available review content enabled data triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility of findings.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analytical process began with repeated reading of interview transcripts and review content to achieve data familiarization. Open coding was then conducted to identify meaning units related to how tourists interpret reviews, form trust, and make decisions. Initial codes were subsequently grouped into higher-level themes reflecting the mechanisms through which online reviews exert influence, including trust formation, perceived risk reduction, competitive comparison, and managerial behavioral adjustment. Qualitative analysis software was used to organize and manage coding systematically.

To ensure methodological rigor, the study applied established qualitative quality criteria, including credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Cross-verification between interview data and review content reduced subjective interpretation bias. The analytical process was thoroughly documented to ensure transparency and traceability. All participants' identities were anonymized in accordance with research ethics standards.

This methodological approach allows the study not only to identify the degree of influence of online reviews but also to clarify the cognitive and interpretive processes underlying tourists' decision-making in community-based homestay settings.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1. Online reviews as an information processing and competitive comparison mechanism

Interview results indicate that online reviews function as an initial "filter" in the homestay selection process. Within the research sample, all tourists (n = 14) reported reading reviews before booking; however, their patterns of usage were not uniform but formed a behavioral sequence consisting of: (i) rapid screening based on rating scores and the number of reviews; (ii) selective reading of recent reviews, particularly negative ones; and (iii) verification of information through guest-uploaded photos or responses from homestay owners.

Table 1 shows that the most common behavior was comparing rating scores among homestays (11/14 tourists), followed by reading negative reviews (12/14) and prioritizing negative reviews before positive ones (10/14). Viewing guest-uploaded images (9/14) and checking host responses (8/14) were also frequently mentioned. A noteworthy finding is that many tourists regarded negative reviews as "diagnostic information," which helped them detect potential risks; therefore, they tended to read negative reviews before making a decision (10/14). This finding reinforces the argument that reviews not only provide information but also structure the way tourists process information and establish evaluation criteria.

Table 1. Patterns of review usage in decision-making (n=14)

Review usage behavior	Number of tourists (n)	Percentage (%)
Comparing star ratings across homestays	11	78.6
Reading negative reviews	12	85.7
Prioritizing negative reviews first	10	71.4
Viewing guest-uploaded photos	9	64.3
Checking homestay owner responses	8	57.1
Changing choice due to negative reviews	7	50.0

(Source: Authors' analysis of interview transcripts, 2025)

Interview excerpts clearly illustrate this filtering mechanism. One tourist stated: "I usually filter places rated 8.5 and above first, then read carefully to see if there are any complaints" (T2). Another participant

emphasized the role of negative reviews: “I read critical comments first to see what ‘bad’ actually means; if the complaints are about noise or dampness, I reconsider immediately” (T5).

Thus, online reviews operate as a comparative screening mechanism, enabling tourists to quickly narrow down their choice set and move to the stage of information verification.

Cross-analysis of the 180 collected reviews indicates that quantitative indicators such as rating scores and review volume tend to be used to infer overall quality, while detailed review content helps tourists interpret the actual experience. This provides the foundation for subsequent mechanisms: trust formation and perceived risk reduction.

4.2. Online reviews and the process of trust formation

Thematic analysis indicates that trust constitutes the central axis linking review reading to booking decisions. Trust formation occurs along two dimensions: competence-based (cognitive) trust and benevolence-based (affective) trust. In the homestay context, trust is associated not only with “rooms and facilities” but also with “people” (hosts) and the authenticity of the experience.

Table 2 synthesizes review attributes that strongly influence trust, based on interview data and their frequency of occurrence in 180 reviews. The two most prominent themes are “friendly/helpful host” (124/180 reviews) and “clean/tidy room” (102/180). These attributes are commonly interpreted by tourists as signals of overall quality and reliability.

Table 2. Key review attributes influencing trust formation (Interview + 180 reviews)

Review Attribute (Theme)	Frequency in 180 Reviews (n)	Trust Implication
Friendly/helpful host	124	Affective trust (benevolence)
Clean/tidy room	102	Cognitive trust (service competence)
Quiet/beautiful scenery	95	Reinforcement of experiential expectations
Good value for money	71	Trust in fairness of exchange
Local cuisine/authentic experience	63	Signal of authenticity
Wi-Fi/facilities	42	Functional trust (fit for purpose)
Polite response to complaints	38	Signal of responsibility and professionalism

(Source: Authors’ analysis of interview data and online reviews, 2025)

Interview excerpts show that tourists often “trust the person” before trusting the physical facilities. One participant stated: “In a homestay, the host matters most; if many guests praise the host’s kindness, I feel more reassured” (T3). Another highlighted the importance of managerial responses: “I trust places where the host replies politely to comments; it shows responsibility” (T10).

From the homestay owners’ perspective, trust is perceived as a “digital asset” that must be maintained. One owner explained: “Guests read reviews before deciding; if our rating drops or complaints are not addressed properly, bookings decrease significantly”. (H2)

These findings suggest that in community-based homestays, trust is constructed simultaneously through service competence and perceived social benevolence.

4.3. Online reviews as a mechanism for reducing perceived risk

The findings further indicate that online reviews operate as a mechanism for reducing perceived risk, particularly in contexts where tourists cannot verify service quality prior to the experience.

Table 3 summarizes three primary categories of risk frequently mentioned by tourists and the ways in which reviews help mitigate them. In interviews, functional risk (rooms not matching descriptions, hygiene issues, dampness) was mentioned most frequently, followed by psychological risk (experience not aligned with expectations of “authentic” homestay) and financial risk (price not commensurate with experience).

Table 3. Online reviews as risk reduction mechanism

Type of risk	Common manifestations	How reviews help reduce risk
Functional risk	Room differs from photos; hygiene issues; dampness	Detailed reviews and guest-uploaded images; cross-checking multiple sources
Financial risk	Experience not commensurate with price	References to “value for money” in reviews; comparison of rating scores
Psychological risk	Experience not aligned with expectations	Descriptions of atmosphere, host attitude, and local authenticity

(Source: Authors’ thematic analysis, 2025)

Tourists emphasized the role of real images and detailed reviews as verification mechanisms. One participant shared: “I don’t really trust promotional photos; I look at guests’ photos to make sure the room is actually like that” (T7).

Importantly, negative reviews did not always result in rejecting a homestay. Their impact depended on how tourists interpreted the severity and controllability of the issue. If a problem was considered unacceptable (e.g., poor hygiene), the decision typically shifted immediately. Conversely, if the issue was deemed tolerable (e.g., slight noise), tourists tended to seek additional signals - such as host responses or recent reviews - to determine whether improvements had been made.

Thus, online reviews function not merely as a warning mechanism but as a risk negotiation mechanism, through which tourists assess acceptable levels of uncertainty.

4.4. Online reviews as a Mechanism for restructuring selection criteria

Beyond providing information and reducing risk, findings indicate that online reviews fundamentally restructure tourists' selection criteria in the context of community-based homestays.

Rather than relying primarily on traditional factors such as location, price, or official descriptions, tourists increasingly prioritize overall rating scores, recent review content, and the responsiveness of homestay owners.

Several participants reported that promotional descriptions were no longer their primary decision reference. One tourist stated: "I don't really trust the description; I trust what previous guests say more" (T6).

Importantly, reviews not only influence comparisons among homestays but also alter the hierarchy of evaluation criteria. Although some tourists initially prioritized price or location, after reading reviews, overall ratings and confirmed experiential accounts became decisive factors. As one participant remarked: "That place was slightly cheaper, but the reviews here were better, so I chose this one" (T2).

Content analysis of the 180 reviews also shows that frequently repeated attributes - such as host friendliness and cleanliness - gradually form shared evaluative norms for homestays in the Ba Bể Lake tourism area. This creates a collective evaluation structure, whereby tourists rely not only on individual expectations but also on collectively constructed standards established by previous users.

Additionally, the public visibility of reviews generates an indirect feedback loop: homestay owners adjust service practices to maintain ratings and positive reputations, thereby reinforcing the evaluation criteria used by tourists.

Overall, the findings indicate that online reviews do not merely serve as informational inputs in the decision-making process. Rather, they operate as a socio-digital governance structure within the community-based homestay market. Through standardizing evaluation criteria, reorganizing priority hierarchies, and stabilizing collective decision norms, reviews become a determining factor - rather than merely an influencing factor - in homestay selection decisions in the Ba Bể Lake tourism area, Thái Nguyên.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that online reviews not only influence homestay selection decisions but also restructure the way tourists establish and prioritize evaluation criteria. This finding extends recent research on e-WOM in accommodation contexts, which has primarily focused on the direct impact of rating scores or review content on booking intention (Lu et al., 2020; Shen et al., 2021). Rather than treating reviews as input variables in predictive behavioral models, this study demonstrates that reviews operate as a social interpretive structure, within which evaluation criteria are standardized and reorganized according to the logic of digital platforms.

First, the identification of a "competitive screening mechanism" reinforces and extends signaling theory in non-branded accommodation environments. In contexts where formal signals such as strong brands or standardized classification systems are weak or absent, rating scores and review volume function as secondary signals, enabling tourists to infer overall quality (Connelly et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2021). However, findings from the Ba Bể Lake tourism area indicate that these signals do not operate independently; rather, they are embedded within a complex interpretive process, in which negative reviews and managerial responses jointly shape market perception.

Second, this study contributes to the literature on trust formation in peer-to-peer accommodation and homestay settings. Recent studies emphasize the multidimensional nature of trust in online environments (Filiari et al., 2018; Ert et al., 2019). Findings from Ba Bể demonstrate that trust in community-based homestays is constructed simultaneously through functional attributes (cleanliness, facilities) and social attributes (host attitude, local authenticity). Notably, reviews related to "people" (hosts) carry equal - if not greater - weight compared to material attributes. This expands existing knowledge on trust formation in small-scale accommodation contexts within developing economies.

Third, the study clarifies the role of reviews as a mechanism for reducing perceived risk. Consistent with previous research on perceived risk in tourism (Liang et al., 2018), findings indicate that reviews mitigate functional, financial, and psychological risks. However, the novel contribution lies in demonstrating that reviews not only reduce perceived risk but also recalibrate acceptable risk thresholds. Negative reviews do not automatically eliminate a homestay from consideration; instead, tourists assess the severity and controllability of

issues, particularly through managerial responses. This suggests that reviews operate as a risk negotiation mechanism rather than a simple warning device.

More importantly, the study contributes an integrated perspective by conceptualizing online reviews as a platform-based market governance structure. In the context of community-based homestays at Ba Bê Lake, reviews not only shape individual decisions but also exert pressure on service providers to adjust operational practices. The feedback loop between experience – evaluation – improvement – and re-selection contributes to stabilizing shared evaluation norms within the market. This finding extends the e-WOM literature from an individual-level influence perspective to a broader market-structuring perspective.

From a methodological standpoint, the combination of in-depth interviews and analysis of 180 publicly available reviews enables the study to capture both micro-level interpretive processes and macro-level evaluation patterns. This approach complements previous quantitative research by illuminating the underlying cognitive mechanisms embedded in decision-making processes.

Finally, the study contributes to the literature on community-based tourism in developing economies. In environments characterized by weak branding and limited marketing resources, online reviews function as a central signaling infrastructure through which homestays sustain competitiveness. This implies that digital transformation in community-based tourism is not merely a technological issue but fundamentally a matter of reputation governance and experiential standardization.

VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study aimed to clarify the role of online reviews in shaping homestay selection decisions within the context of community-based tourism at the Ba Bê Lake tourism area. Through a qualitative case study approach combining in-depth interviews and content analysis of 180 publicly available reviews, the findings demonstrate that online reviews do not merely provide information to support decision-making. Rather, they restructure evaluation criteria, facilitate trust formation, recalibrate acceptable levels of perceived risk, and contribute to stabilizing shared evaluative norms within the community-based homestay market.

At the theoretical level, this study extends the e-WOM literature by shifting the analytical focus from “impact” to “structuring mechanism”. Instead of conceptualizing reviews as input variables in predictive behavioral models, this research shows that reviews operate as a socio-digital governance structure, within which evaluation criteria are standardized through collective interaction on digital platforms. Furthermore, the study expands signaling theory in non-branded accommodation contexts by demonstrating that rating scores, review volume, and managerial responses jointly construct a dynamic signaling system within the market. The identification of “risk negotiation” as a core mechanism also contributes to the literature on perceived risk in tourism, highlighting that reviews not only reduce perceived risk but also redefine acceptable risk thresholds.

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that community-based homestays should regard online reviews as a strategic asset rather than merely as customer feedback. Homestay owners should actively monitor rating scores, respond transparently and promptly to reviews, and utilize negative feedback as a basis for service improvement. In contexts characterized by weak branding and limited marketing resources, digital reputation becomes a central competitive instrument. For destination management authorities, strengthening digital capacity among homestay operators is essential, including training in platform management, online response strategies, and service standardization. Destination image construction cannot be separated from the quality and structural patterns of online reviews associated with individual accommodation providers.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focuses on a single destination, which may limit generalizability. Second, the data rely primarily on interviews and publicly available reviews and do not include actual booking behavior data from digital platforms. Third, the study does not examine differences among tourist segments based on age, travel experience, or familiarity with digital platforms.

Future research may proceed in three directions. First, comparative studies across multiple community-based tourism destinations could examine the stability of the identified “criteria structuring mechanism”. Second, quantitative approaches may be employed to test the mediating roles of trust and perceived risk within structural models. Third, platform-level behavioral data could be analyzed to clarify the relationship between rating scores, platform visibility, and booking conversion rates.

Overall, the study affirms that in the context of community-based tourism within developing economies, online reviews function not merely as communication tools but as regulatory market infrastructures that shape homestay choice decisions and restructure competitive logic.

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