

From Content to Intention: How Employee Mentions and Perceived Empathy Shape the Impact of Online Reviews on the Intention to Visit a Tourist Office

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Cite as:

Chaouachi Emna, Soulez Sébastien (2026), From Content to Intention: How Employee Mentions and Perceived Empathy Shape the Impact of Online Reviews on the Intention to Visit a Tourist Office. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 55th, (133559)

Paper from the 55th Annual EMAC Conference, Bath, United Kingdom, June 2-5, 2026



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Abstract

This research examines how online review characteristics shape tourists' intention to visit a local tourism office. Across two experiments, we analyze the cognitive and socio-affective mechanisms activated by review content. Study 1 shows that valence strongly predicts visit intention, an effect fully mediated by organizational image, while employee mentions influence this image without altering valence effects. Study 2 reveals that empathic tone does not directly affect intention but unexpectedly reduces perceived empathy; however, it strengthens the impact of positive reviews. Together, the studies identify two pathways—organizational image and perceived empathy—through which reviews influence behavioral intentions in tourism.

Keywords

Service Marketing; Online Reviews; Perceived Empathy toward Employees

Track

Tourism Marketing

1. Introduction

The acceleration of digital transformations is profoundly reshaping tourism dynamics, with online reviews becoming central informational tools through which tourists evaluate organizations and shape their decisions (Yoo and Gretzel, 2011; Li and al., 2023). Beyond their informational function, such reviews contribute significantly to the construction of tourism organizations' image and influence visitors' perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions (Bigné and al., 2021; Xiang and al., 2015). Consequently, tourism stakeholders must integrate these user-generated contents into experience management and reputation-building strategies (Gretzel, 2006; Hays and al., 2013).

While prior research has extensively examined general review characteristics—such as valence or credibility—a key dimension remains underexplored: the fine-grained content of reviews, particularly references to employees within service narratives (Lai and al., 2018). How tourists portray staff professionalism, relational competence, or service constraints provides relational cues that readers may use to infer service quality and organizational performance.

This focus highlights a central socio-cognitive mechanism: perceived empathy toward employees, understood as the reader's capacity to recognize or resonate with the emotions or challenges mentioned in the review. Such empathy can amplify or attenuate the impact of the signal conveyed by the review's author.

In markets characterized by information asymmetry, online reviews operate as signals in the sense of signaling theory (Spence, 1973). Valence, employee mention, and emotional tone function as informational, relational, and affective signals that help readers assess service quality, organizational reliability, and the likelihood of a satisfactory experience. These signals guide cognitive processing, shape the destination management organization's image, and influence visit intentions.

Against this backdrop, a central research question emerges: to what extent do the discursive characteristics of online reviews—valence, employee mention, and empathic tone—shape the tourism organization's image and visit intentions, and how are these effects explained or moderated by socio-cognitive processes such as perceived empathy and individual characteristics? This question structures two complementary research models and provides an analytical framework for understanding how the narrative and emotional complexity of online reviews shapes tourist attitudes and intentions in an evolving digital environment.

2. Literature Review

1.1. Online Reviews in Services and Tourism Marketing

Online reviews are defined as “peer-generated evaluations of a product, service, or content” (Zheng, 2021). They represent an especially influential source of information in tourism services, where the experience cannot be fully assessed prior to consumption (Choi and al., 2017; Li and al., 2023). Research shows that online reviews strongly affect consumers’ opinions, attitudes, and behaviors (Gretzel, 2006; Müller and Christandl, 2019), largely because they are perceived as credible, authentic, and useful in reducing uncertainty surrounding visitation decisions. They thus directly influence the intention to visit a destination or use a tourism service.

In this dynamic, online reviews may strengthen the image of a tourism organization or, conversely, weaken it when they describe negative experiences (Kwok and al., 2017). Analyzing their characteristics—valence, descriptive content, and emotional dimension—therefore appears crucial to understand how visitors form perceptions and shape behavioral intentions.

1.2. The Role of Employees in Service Interactions

In service contexts, employees play a central role in perceived quality, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions (Tansuhaj and al., 1988). The interpersonal relationship between employees and customers influences satisfaction, trust, revisit intentions, and recommendations (Guenzi and Pelloni, 2004).

Service process quality—beyond the service outcome itself—relies on task execution as well as relational aspects (Mattila and al., 2003; Surprenant and Solomon, 1987; Mohr and Bitner, 1995). Positive emotions expressed by employees increase customer satisfaction (Mattila and al., 2003). In tourism settings, employee reactions are strongly associated with visitor satisfaction and perceived service quality (Lai and al., 2018).

Yet, although online reviews frequently recount interactions with staff, to our knowledge no study has specifically examined how review content related to employees affects readers’ responses—even though such interactions constitute a key component of the tourism experience.

1.3. Review Characteristics (Valence, Content, Empathy) and Their Importance for Tourism Organizations

Online reviews, whether quantitative or qualitative, have become a major evaluation and influence mechanism in the tourism sector. Quantitative dimensions—such as star ratings or review volume—directly contribute to organizational image and perceived popularity (Zheng, 2021; Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012; Smith and al., 2012; Xie and al., 2014; Kwok and al., 2017).

Beyond these metrics, textual reviews reveal the qualitative richness of visitor experiences and allow the identification of recurring themes that structure service evaluations. Prior research shows that online reviews can be categorized into sub-dimensions capturing both tangible attributes and relational aspects of the experience (Cheng and al., 2019; Kim and al., 2017). Among these dimensions, staff mention may reflect a key interactional component of the tourism service. Indeed, employee–visitor interactions strongly influence satisfaction, perceived quality, and the overall service experience (Lai and al., 2018). Yet it remains unknown whether reviews mentioning employees generate quantitative (ratings) or qualitative (sentiment) evaluations that differ from reviews that do not refer to staff—an empirical question this research aims to address.

Another mechanism must be considered to understand how consumers react to such content: perceived empathy toward employees. While prior research has largely examined empathy directed toward the firm or its managerial responses (Allard and al., 2020), several recent works encourage examining consumer empathy and its effects on post-experience behaviors (Abend and al., 2023). Allard and al. (2020) show that organizational responses emphasizing employees can enhance this empathy and shape public reactions. From this perspective, it is plausible that the simple explicit mention of employees in tourism reviews may elicit empathy directed at staff, which in turn may influence the interpretation of review narratives and subsequent behavioral intentions, such as intention to visit.

3. Methodology

The research adopts an experimental approach to test, under controlled conditions, the relationships proposed in two conceptual models examining the influence of online review content. A sample of potential French-speaking tourists was recruited through an online panel and randomly assigned to manipulated review scenarios. After exposure to the stimulus (see the appendix for stimuli examples), participants completed a questionnaire measuring their perceptions and behavioral intentions. The final samples consist of 213 respondents for Study 1 and 221 other respondents for Study 2.

Two experimental designs were implemented, each corresponding to one research model.

1.1. Model 1 — Valence × Review Content (Employee Mention)

A 2 (valence: positive vs. negative) × 2 (content: employee mention vs. no mention) factorial design was used to examine the combined effect of these two dimensions on the image of the tourist office (mediator) and, subsequently, on visit intention. The scenarios were constructed from adapted real reviews to standardize length, style, and emotional intensity. The

employee mention condition included explicit descriptions of staff (attitude, behavior, constraints). In the control condition, the review focused exclusively on structural or general service elements (overall reception), with no reference to staff.

1.2. Model 2 — Empathic Tone × Valence

The second experimental design relied on a 2 (tone: empathic vs. non-empathic) × 2 (valence: positive vs. negative) structure. The empathic tone was manipulated through formulations expressing understanding, compassion, or acknowledgment of staff difficulties, whereas the non-empathic tone presented the facts without emotional coloring. Valence was manipulated using strictly positive or negative elements of equivalent length. This model aimed to assess the effect of tone on perceived empathy toward employees (mediator) and its influence on visit intention.

4. Results

1.1. Study 1

Table 1: Direct and indirect effect of valence on visit intention

	Mediating Variable M (Tourist Office Image)		Dependent Variable Y (Visit Intention)	
	coeff	t	coeff	t
X: Valence	-4,4257	-30,8535***	,0916	,2989
W: Review Content	-,3963	-2,7680**	-,3803	-2,8790**
X x W (interaction on M)	,1200	,4182	-	-
M: Tourist Office Image	-	-	,7461	11,9054***
X x W (interaction on Y)	-	-	-,1322	-,5084

***: $p < 0,001$; **: $p < 0,01$; *: $p < 0,05$.

Results reveal a strong effect of review valence on visit intention: positive reviews lead to significantly higher intentions than negative ones ($F = 339.80$; $p < .001$). However, when the image of the tourist office is included in the PROCESS model, the direct effect of valence becomes non-significant, indicating full mediation. Valence strongly influences the perceived image ($b = -4.4257$; $p < .001$), and this image is a major predictor of visit intention ($b = .7461$; $p < .001$).

Review content also exerts a direct influence: reviews mentioning employees reduce both the perceived image ($b = -.3963$; $p < .01$) and visit intention ($b = -.3803$; $p < .01$), independently of valence. No significant interaction is observed between valence and content on either image or intention, indicating that employee mention does not alter the effect of valence.

Overall, Study 1 highlights (1) a substantial indirect effect of valence through image, and (2) a direct but non-moderating role of review content.

1.2. Study 2

Table 2: Direct and indirect effect of online review tone on visit intention

	Mediating Variable M (Perceived empathy)		Dependent Variable Y (Visit Intention)	
	coeff	t	coeff	t
X: Empathic tone	-1,1919	-6,7982***	,0983	,5084
W: Valence	2,1167	12,0728***	,9136	4,0264***
X x W (interaction on M)	,3957	1,1285	-	-
M: Perceived empathy	-	-	,3226	4,7478***
X x W (interaction on Y)	-	-	1,1059	3,1417**

***: $p < 0,001$; **: $p < 0,01$; *: $p < 0,05$.

In Study 2, empathic tone does not have a direct effect on visit intention ($p > .05$), whereas valence remains a strong determinant ($b = .9136$; $p < .001$). A significant interaction emerges on visit intention ($b = 1.1059$; $p < .01$): empathic tone amplifies the impact of positive reviews and attenuates the impact of negative ones.

At the mediator level, empathic tone decreases perceived empathy toward employees ($b = -1.1919$; $p < .001$), while valence strongly increases it ($b = 2.1167$; $p < .001$). Perceived empathy significantly predicts visit intention ($b = .3226$; $p < .001$), indicating a robust indirect effect. However, valence does not moderate this mediation, as the conditional indirect effects do not differ significantly across conditions.

Overall, Study 2 highlights three key outcomes: valence exerts a strong influence on both perceived empathy and visit intention; the interaction between tone and valence significantly shapes visit intention; and perceived empathy plays a meaningful mediating role in this process, while remaining unaffected by valence.

5. Discussion

The results of the two studies provide valuable insights into the socio-cognitive and emotional mechanisms through which consumers interpret online reviews in a tourism context. By examining valence, employee-related content, empathic tone, and associated socio-affective reactions, this research deepens our understanding of the influence processes embedded in online reviews, extending prior work highlighting their central role in shaping organizational image and behavioral intentions (Bigné and al., 2021; Xiang and al., 2015; Gretzel, 2006).

1.1. Valence as a dominant signal in review interpretation

Across both studies, valence emerges as the most powerful signal shaping consumers' cognitive and behavioral responses. This predominance aligns with prior research showing that valence represents a key informational cue in decisions involving intangible services (Li and al., 2023; Choi and al., 2017). The full mediation of valence by the image of the tourist office

observed in Study 1 further indicates that valence does not act directly, but rather through a structuring cognitive process: the construction of organizational image. This finding is consistent with research emphasizing the pivotal role of organizational image in shaping behavioral intentions in tourism (Kwok and al., 2017; Smith and al., 2012).

1.2. Employee mention as an underestimated but influential relational signal

One of the key contributions of this research lies in explicitly integrating employees as a narrative element within online reviews, addressing a gap identified in the literature (Lai and al., 2018). Although employee mention does not amplify nor moderate the effect of valence, it significantly influences the perceived image of the tourist office. This result suggests that staff-related cues serve as relational indicators that readers use to infer service quality, echoing foundational research highlighting the central role of personnel in service experiences (Mohr and Bitner, 1995; Tansuhaj and al., 1988; Surprenant and Solomon, 1987).

1.3. Empathic tone as an ambivalent emotional signal

Study 2 reveals an unexpected pattern: an empathic tone decreases perceived empathy among readers. This counterintuitive effect may be explained by several mechanisms, such as over-attribution or perceived artificiality of the expressed empathy, suspicion of persuasive intent, or emotional saturation, as suggested in recent research on consumer empathy (Abend and al., 2023; Allard and al., 2020). Readers may interpret the empathic tone as excessive or illegitimate, leading to a reverse emotional reaction. This finding represents an original contribution, pointing to the need for more nuanced analyses of the potential risks associated with emotional tonality in online reviews.

1.4. Toward an integrative framework for understanding review influence

Overall, this research shows that employee mentions operate as relational signals influencing organizational image, while empathic tone produces ambivalent effects that challenge classical assumptions about textual empathy. By revealing two distinct psychological pathways—one cognitive, via organizational image, and one socio-affective, via perceived empathy—it proposes an integrative framework for understanding the formation of tourism intentions. From a managerial perspective, these findings encourage tourist offices to stimulate the generation of positive reviews, monitor how employees are portrayed online, and use empathic tonalities with caution, while prioritizing high-quality service interactions upstream.

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7. Appendix

Examples of stimuli used in Studies 1 and 2:

	Study 1	
	Avis négatif mentionnant un employé homme	Avis positif sans mention employés
Original Stimuli	Je me suis rendu à l’office de tourisme pour acheter une visite guidée, on a été très mal accueilli par Thomas, qui préférait manifestement discuter avec ses collègues, il était hyper froid et pas souriant ; il ne nous a pas fourni de plans où sont notés les points à voir et les dépliants et circuits conseillés !	Je me suis rendu à l’office de tourisme pour acheter une visite guidée, tout est rénové, les peintures, le sol, ça donne envie d’être là. En plus le comptoir est bien disposé, on trouve tout facilement. Des plans où sont notés les points à voir sont à disposition ! Et aussi des dépliants et circuits conseillés ! Toutes

	Aucune des informations nécessaires n'étaient disponibles, très décevant !	les informations nécessaires étaient disponibles, très pratique !
Translated Stimuli	Negative review mentioning a male employee	Positive review without mentioning employees
	I went to the tourist office to buy a guided tour, we were very badly welcomed by Thomas, who obviously preferred talking with his colleagues, he was super cold and not smiling; he did not provide us with maps where the points to see are marked and the recommended leaflets and circuits! None of the necessary information was available, very disappointing!	I went to the tourist office to buy a guided tour, everything is renovated, the paint, the floor, it makes you want to be there. Besides, the counter is well arranged, you find everything easily. Maps where the points to see are marked are available! And also leaflets and recommended circuits! All the necessary information was available, very convenient!

	Study 2	
Original Stimuli	Avis négatif sur un employé homme non empathique	Avis positif sur un employé homme empathique
	Je me suis rendu à l'office de tourisme pour acheter une visite guidée, on a été accueilli par Thomas, un grand gars aux cheveux bruns qui ressemble vaguement à un de mes cousins... Il ne nous a pas fourni de plans où sont notés les points à voir et les dépliants et circuits conseillés ! Les informations nécessaires n'étaient pas disponibles, très décevant ! Bof bof la visite...	Je me suis rendu à l'office de tourisme pour acheter une visite guidée, on a été accueilli par Thomas, je me suis bien rendu compte qu'il avait l'air très souffrant et ne sentait pas bien. Je me suis vraiment sentie trop mal pour lui. Mais malgré cela, il nous a fourni les plans où sont notés les points à voir et les dépliants et circuits conseillés ! Toutes les informations nécessaires étaient disponibles, très pratique ! Merci Thomas !
Translated Stimuli	Negative review of a non-empathetic male employee	Positive review of an empathetic male employee
	I went to the tourist office to buy a guided tour, we were welcomed by Thomas, a tall guy with brown hair who vaguely looks like one of my cousins... He did not provide us with maps where the points to see are marked and the recommended leaflets and circuits! The necessary information was not available, very disappointing! The visit was so-so...	I went to the tourist office to buy a guided tour, we were welcomed by Thomas, I clearly realized that he looked very sick and wasn't feeling well. I really felt so bad for him. But despite that, he provided us with the maps where the points to see are marked and the recommended leaflets and circuits! All the necessary information was available, very practical! Thank you Thomas!