An Assessment of the Impact of Destination Image in the Selection of a Destination: Mediating role of e-WOM

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Abstract

The main intent of this investigation is to ascertain the impact of diverse facets of a destination's image, encompassing online word-of-mouth, on the selection of travel destinations by tourists. Furthermore, this study examines how e-WOM impacts travellers' perceptions of a destination and their ultimate decision to visit that place. The instrument's validity and reliability were determined through a pilot study based on previous research. The present study employs a descriptive research design and a positivist approach. A sample of 380 valid questionnaires was analyzed for the present study. The convenience sample technique was used to obtain data from travellers who visited Kashmir Valley. SPSS.20 and AMOS software were utilised for data analysis. Using AMOS software and the Structured Equation Modelling (SEM) methodology, the stated assumptions were tested. According to the evidence, decisions made by tourists are heavily influenced by how a destination is perceived. The study's results validate that electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) functions as a mediator in the relationship between

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travellers' pre-existing perceptions of a particular destination and their final determination to travel there.

Keywords: Destination Image, e-WOM, Destination Selection, Infrastructure, Enjoyment, Attraction

Introduction

The behaviour of tourists in choosing a travel destination has received significant attention from both businesses and academics. A plethora of scholarly investigations has been conducted to explore the determinants that impact the decision-making process of tourists when choosing a particular destination. (Bi & Gu, 2019; Lee et al., 2010). Tourists' purchasing decisions are profoundly affected by their behaviour. Within the literature of tourism, some of the extensively examined factors in the decision-making process include attitudes, usefulness, decision rationale, and peer influence (Mottiar & Quinn, 2004; Humphreys, 2014). The image of a destination is a crucial factor in influencing the decision-making process of prospective visitors when selecting a travel destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Chon, 1990). The preconceived notions that travelers have about a destination also influence the satisfaction they are having with their journey has attracted the attention of many researchers (Jani & Hwang, 20111; Nicoletta & Servidio, 2012; Papadimitriou & Gibson, 2008; Bosnjak et al., 2011). Mackay & Fesenmaier (2000), Donaldson & Ferreira (2009), Crompton (1992) and Choi et al. (2007) all note that tourists' opinions of a destination are shaped by the information they obtain and evaluate during their stay. The image of the destination influences how people envision it and how they feel about it as a whole (Lawson & Baud-Bovy, 1977). Consequently, destination marketing now includes the destination image as a key component (Santos, 1998).

Tourists are active consumers of information concerning a particular destination image. Visitors dynamically create their own image and share them using various virtual platforms (Dwivedi, 2009). We all know that customer opinions and actions are influenced by what they hear from others (Bartosiak, 2021; Muller & Peres, 2019; Cheung

et al., 2009; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). In contradistinction to the data proffered by the sundry service providers, appraisals from patrons are perceived as being more current, engaging, and trustworthy (Pinthong & Cherapanukorn, 2020). The use of e-WOM, or electronic word of mouth, can have far-reaching consequences for managers in the areas of new product development, brand building, and quality assurance (Dellarocas, 2003). Additionally, positive online reviews boost the credibility of businesses in the eyes of future customers (Filieri, 2016).). E-word-of-mouth (e-WOM) has been shown to influence a variety of consumer behaviours, including product selection (Leong et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Sánchez-González & González-Fernández, 2021; Erkan & Evan, 2016), purchase decision making (Erkan& Evan, 2016; Perera et al., 2019), and vacation plans (Sakshi et al., 2022; Yetimoğlu & Uğurlu, 2020; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012).

Numerous studies have examined the elements including location, event planners, amenities, service standards, pricing, popularity, and entertainment possibilities that people consider when deciding where to go on vacation (Patwardhan et al., 2020; Para & Kachniewska, 2014; Brownstein & Kitterlin, 2022; Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Fiedler, 2007; Petrick et al., 2001). Likewise, many authors have highlighted the role of another factor significant in determining the choice of destination selection includinga beneficial image by Tapachai & Waryszak (2000), visitor satisfaction and service quality by Tian-Cole & Crompton (2003), social media by Mazme & Albattat, (2022), cultural, sports, scientific and religious events by Salamzadeh et al., (2022). The present study aims to examine the impact of e-WOM as a mediating variable on the association between a tourist's cognitive representation of their intended destination and their final decision to visit that destination. Despite studies demonstrating a strong association between e-WOM and destination image, not much research has been done on the subject. This research will make an effort to fill up the aforementioned knowledge gap by investigating the relative importance of several parameters.

Review of Literature:

A tourism destination as per UNWTO, 2022 is a "A physical area, with or without administrative and/or analytic boundaries, where a

guest can stay the night. It is the grouping (co-location) of products and services, activities and experiences along the tourism value chain and a fundamental unit of tourism analysis. A destination includes a variety of stakeholders and can network to create larger destinations. Additionally intangible, its image and identity may affect its market competitiveness". It is a place that offers a bundle of services and experiences to tourists when staying outside their usual environment overnight (Volgger, 2021). To achieve longevity, to sustain and maintain competitiveness in the market, the destinations must provide an unforgettable tourism experience (Neuhofer et al., 2012, 2015). As a result, it has turned into an absolute necessity for the tourist and hospitality industry to deliver an experience of a high standard to customers (Yang et al., 2020). The term "destination marketing" refers to an approach to boosting a place's economy and culture that aims to please everyone involved, from tourists to locals to companies (Varghese, 2013).The destination image, due to its simplicity, dynamism, and flexibility, represents an ideal framework for destination management. Moreover, it possesses the potential to integrate various aspects, such as the quality of the tourist's experience and location (Royo-Vela, 2009).

Destination Image

Successful marketing of tourist destinations relies heavily on destination image because of its effect on both supply and demand (Stylidis et al., 2015; Stepchenkova & Shichkova, 2017). In the process of selecting a destination, it is commonly recognised that tourists tend to scrutinise and ultimately opt for destinations that possess robust positive images (Beerli & Martin, 2004a). It is crucial to build and sustain a positive reputation for the location in order to distinguish it in a crowded market (Stylos et al., 2016). Baloglu and McCleary (1999a) posit that the image theory traces its origins in the earlier research conducted by Martineau (1958). The theory suggests that the world is a subjective or altered portrayal of physical reality, which is present and subsists in the psyche of the individual. Tourists place greater weight on their preconceived notions than on hard data when selecting a destination to visit (Haarhoff, 2018). Sanchez-Garcia et al. (2012) cite a substantial corpus of research on the subject as evidence of the importance of Destination Images for predicting tourist behaviour. Various researchers have reported that

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the destination image influences tourist behaviour in three ways, which makes up a tourist's experience: first, prior to embarking on a journey, tourists typically make a determination to visit a particular destination based on their pre-existing knowledge of the said destination, commonly referred to as the a priori image.; second, after actually visiting the destination and evaluating it by comparing the experience at the destination with expectations met (image in loco); and third, after leaving the destination, tourists evaluate the destination by comparing the experience at the destination with expectations met (image in retrospectand finally, once the experience is over, they form their future intentions, factors such as the intention to revisit and the inclination to recommend the location to acquaintances are noteworthy considerations. (Matos et al., 2012; Stylos et al., 2016; Tasci & Gartner, 2007).

Selection of a Destination:

The act of selecting a destination refers to the deliberate and systematic procedure of electing a particular location to be visited, as stated by Decrop and Snelders (2005). This process involves cognitive aspects, but it also takes into account psychological and hedonic needs (Cassidy, 2006; Decrop & Snelders, 2005). Cognitive and psychological processes are necessary to narrow down the options and make a final decision to visit a particular destination (Crompton, 1992; Seddighi & Theocharous, 2002). The destination selection is a funnelling process consisting of three main phases: 'the awareness set' (initial pool of destinations), 'the consideration or evoked set' (elimination of most destinations to form a smaller selection), and 'the final selection' of a destination from the remaining options (Crompton & Ankomah, 1993). Various motivational models have been employed to examine the patterns of destination selection.

E-WOM:

Using digital platforms and responding to any comments, shares, or likes they receive, businesses may now engage with their target audiences quickly (Donthu et al., 2021). Social media interactions such as "likes, comments, ratings, reviews, video testimonials, tweets, photographs, and blog" entries are examples of e-WOM (Babi'c et al., 2016; Rietveld et al., 2020). The phenomenon of

electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) is observed when consumers share their feedback and evaluations regarding a product or service that they have procured through online channels such as e-commerce platforms, social media platforms, blogs, and online communities (Donthu et al., 2021). Internet consumers have more faith in e-WOM than in other types of media (Cheung &Thadani, 2010). The physical distance between customers no longer influences the rate of word-of-mouth communication (Donthu et al., 2021). These rapidly disseminated assessments influence the purchasing decisions of prospective clients (Lee & Youn, 2009). The majority of consumers increasingly consult online reviews before making significant purchases (Babi'c et al., 2016).

Hypothesis Development:

Destination image and Selection of a destination:

The selection of services is not random; rather, consumers are pushed in one direction or another based on the perceived reputation of the organisation (Lancaster, 1966). According to studies (Pantano & Servidio, 2011; Golmohammadi et al., 2011; Al-Kwifi, 2015), the notion of the destination image is fundamental in the construction of the attitudinal construct that creates the tourist's view towards selecting a particular place to visit. Um and Crompton (1990) found that the vast majority of would-be vacationers knew very little about their intended destination. The portrayal of a destination in the minds of potential tourists has a profound influence on their intentions and decision-making processes (Rahman et al., 2017). It appears that the concept of destination image influences a consumer's inclination towards destination selection (Saraniemi, 2011). Moreover, the utilization of product or service symbols can contribute to the creation of a positive mental image, which can subsequently influence a tourist's decision to visit a particular destination (Chung & Shin, 2004). Therefore, positive cues in a place's image correlate directly with the number of tourists who have a good attitude on visiting the destination (Rahman et al., 2016). From this discussion, the following hypothesis can be deduced:

H1: Destination image has a highly significant favorable effect on vacation destination selection.

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Destination image and e-WOM:

According to Tasci and Gartner (2007), visitors' post-trip behaviours are significantly influenced by how they felt about the place that they visited. Wu and Li (2017) contend that if visitors have a favourable impression of the venue, they will have a favourable opinion of the quality of their experience.Satisfied visitors are more likely to recommend an attraction to others, according to a number of studies (e.g., Tasci & Gartner, 2007; Zhang et al., 2018). Positive opinions about a location may also boost your online word-of-mouth (e-WOM; Zhang et al., 2018). Today, many travelers use e-word-of-mouth (e-WOM) to tell others about their vacation spots, which in turn encourages even more people to visit the area. The information adoption theories predict that customers' actions in response to online evaluations will change (Filieri & McKay, 2014). The following assumption can be drawn from this discussion:

H2: Significantly beneficial association exists between destination image and e-WOM.

E-WOM & Selection of a Destination:

Even as the digital economy progresses, consumer interest in e-WOM will not diminish (King et al., 2014). Numerous studies (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Chan & Ngai, 2011; Erkan & Evan, 2016; Park et al., 2007; See-To & Ho, 2014) indicate that it is a crucial factor for consumers to consider prior to making a purchase. E-word-of-mouth (E-WOM) from potential consumers' peers influences their purchasing decisions (Goldenberg et al., 2001). E- WOM is expected to have a significant effect on the tourism industry, and consumers (tourists) have high aspirations for this (Tapanainen et al., 2021). It's an important tool for figuring out where to go on vacation. Multiple studies (Grewal et al., 2003; Soderlund & Rosengren, 2007; Yun & Good, 2007; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012b, 2012c) corroborate this. Prior to making a definitive decision on a vacation destination, it is essential to evaluate the credibility and accuracy of an online information source (Tapanainen et al., 2021). Given this context, we can formulate the following hypothesis:

H3: There is a significant positive relationship between e-WOM and the selection of destination.

Mediation of e-WOM:

Numerous tourism-related research have demonstrated the effectiveness of e-WOM as a facilitator. E-WOM mediates the relationship between destination satisfaction and trust (Kakirala & Singh, 2020), destination image and tourist loyalty (Kanwel, 2019), perceived quality and utilisation intentions (Shome, 2020), and website quality and trust (Kakirala & Singh, 2020; Al-Debei et al., 2015; Septiari, 2018). However, e-WOM's position as a mediator between a destination's image and a traveler's ultimate decision to visit has not been studied. This research will fill the gap in the current body of knowledge. As a result, we can form the following hypothesis:

H4: e-WOM moderates the link between the destination's image and the decision to visit.

Research Methodology
Research framework

This research aims to evaluate how "Destination Image" influences "Destination Selection" in the context of Kashmir Valley. The function of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) as a mediator in the association between travellers' preconceived notions of a destination and their ultimate decision to visit the place is also explored. A comprehensive literature review was conducted on these variables, resulting in the development of a research framework. (Figure 1).
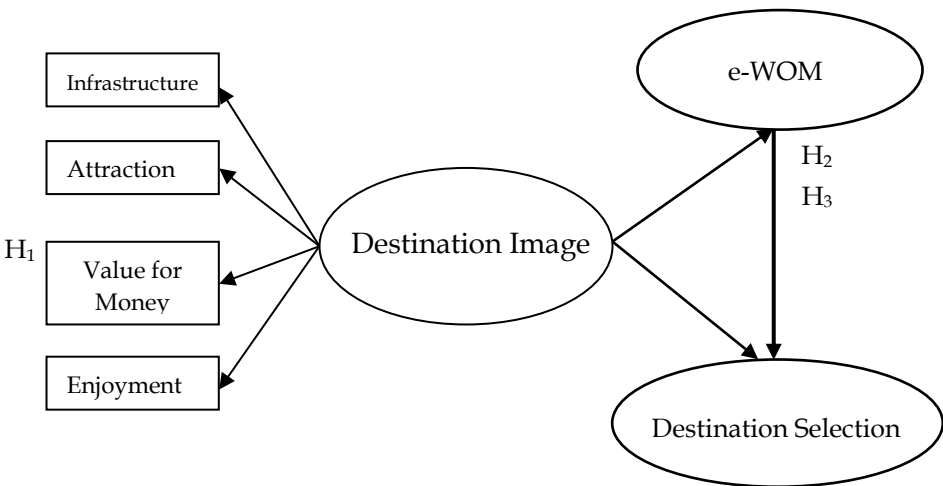

Figure 1: Research Framework

Design

The current investigation employed a quantitative research approach by adopting an instrument developed from the previous studies. In order to check the reliability and validity, the instrument was tested well before collecting the actual data. In order to get to the heart of the investigation, five researchers, three faculty members, and four industry specialists conducted preliminary testing on the instrument. Upon completion of the preliminary testing, the questionnaire was administered to thirty participants in the pilot study in order to assess its reliability. The reliability of every single construct was much higher than the minimum required value of 0.70. (Nunnally, 1978).

Research Instrument

For the present study, a selection of constructs was made from previously validated scales and then adapted to suit the specific requirements of this research.

Destination Image

a). Byon et al., (2010) devised a measurement tool to assess the construct of destination image. This measurement comprises four subfactors: Infrastructure (consisting of five items), Attraction (comprising six items), Value for money (comprising three items), and Enjoyment (comprising four items).

The dimension of Infrastructure was measured through 05 statements i.e. "Destination has the quality infrastructure (roads, airport, and/or utilities) (INF1); Destination has suitable accommodations (INF2); Destination has a good network of tourist information (tourist centers) (INF3); Destination has a good standard of hygiene and cleanliness (INF4) and Destination is safe" (INF5).

a) Attraction

The following 06 items evaluated Attraction. "Destinationhas good shopping facilities (ATT1); Destination has beautiful natural attractions (parks, forests, and/or trails) (ATT2); Destinationhas beautiful scenery (ATT3); Destinationhas a good climate (ATT4); Destinationoffers interesting cultural events (festival and/ or concerts) (ATT5) and Destinationoffers

interesting historical attractions" (museums and/or art centers) (ATT6).

b) Value for money

The dimension value for money was measured through 03 statements viz. "Destination'saccommodationsare reasonably priced (VFM1); Destinationis an inexpensive place to visit (VFM2) and Destinationoffers good value for my travel money" (VFM3)

c) Enjoyment

The sub-dimension Enjoyment was assessed through 04 statements viz. "Destinationis a pleasing travel destination (ENJ1); Destinationis an enjoyable travel place (ENJ2); Destinationis an exciting travel destination (ENJ3) and Destinationis a novel travel destination" (ENJ4).

The mediator e-WOM was taken from the study of Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold's (2011). This construct was measured through 05 statements. The statements are "*I often read other tourists' online travel reviews to know what destinations make good impressions on others* (e-WOM1); *To make sure I choose the right destination, I often read other tourists' online travel reviews* (e-WOM2); *I often consult other tourists' online travel reviews to help choose an attractive destination* (e-WOM3); *I frequently gather information from tourists' online travel reviews before I travel to ascertain destination* (e-WOM4) and *When I travel to a destination, tourists' online travel reviews make me confident in travelling to the destination*" (e-WOM5).

The endogenous construct Destination Selection was captured through 04 indicators namely "*Quality hotels and restaurants*; *Vacation met all expectations*; *Superior value for money* and *Fine local transportation system*". This variable was taken from the study of Rahman (2012).

Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strong disagreement) to 5 (strong agreement). The unidimensionality of the study's variables was examined using the CFA (confirmatory) method. Finally, the proposed hypotheses were tested and the relationship between the constructs was assessed using a Structured Equation Model (SEM). Unidimensionality and internal consistency

of the variables were tested using AMOS and SPSS, respectively. Researchers also imputed the CFA results and tested the hypotheses using AMOS.

Common Method Bias
Common method bias was investigated using the Harman single-factor method in this study. This study's Harman single-factor analysis revealed that it explained 44,389 percent of the variance, indicating that there is no significant common method bias present in the current examination.

Study Design
Data was gathered from travellers who visited the Kashmir valley between May and September 2022. Using the convenience sampling method, 635 questionnaires were given to respondents. Only 380 of the submitted surveys were deemed to be legitimate for further research.

About Study Area
The Kashmir valley is surrounded by the mighty Himalayan ranges with lofty snow-covered peaks at an altitude of 5200 feet above sea level. It is approximately 84 miles long and 20 to 25 miles wide, with an area of about 5,992.4 square miles (Naik, 2008). The scenic beauty, invigorating climate, sacred shrines, opportunities for various adventurous activities, and the hospitable nature of the people have made the Kashmir valley an internationally well-known tourist destination. Many beautiful tourist places in the Kashmir valley are visited by a lot of tourists every year from almost all parts of the globe.

Data Analysis and Results
The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 01, which includes details such as gender, age, marital status, education level, occupation, number of visits, and purpose of their visits.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Characteristics	Number (n)	Percentage
	Male (232)	61.10%
Gender	Female (148)	38.90%
Age	18 -30 years (118)	31.10%
	31 – 43 years (154)	40.50%
	44 – 56 years (95)	25.00%
	57 Above (13)	03.40%
Marital	Unmarried (120)	31.60%
Status	Married (260)	68.40%
	10th Standard (26)	6.80%
Education	10+2 Level (77)	20.30%
	Graduation (124)	32.60%
	Masters (136)	35.80%
	Ph.D. (17)	4.50%
Occupation	Govt. Employee (84)	22.10%
	Private Job (101)	26.60%
	Business (79)	20.80%
	Student (82)	21.60%
	Homemaker (34)	8.90%
No. of Visits	1st Visit (195)	51.30%
	2nd Visit (170)	44. 70%
	More than 2 visits (15)	03.90%
Purpose of Visit	Leisure (186)	48.90%
	VFR (27)	07.10%
	Adventure (90)	23.70%

Characteristics	Number (n)	Percentage
	Religious (71)	18.70%
	Business (6)	1.60%

Among the respondents, a majority were male, accounting for 61.10% of the total, while the remaining respondents identified as female, comprising 38.90%. The largest age group among the participants was 31-43 years, representing 40.50% of the sample, followed by the age group of 18-30 years, which accounted for 31.10%. The smallest age group was 57 years and above (3.40%). Most respondents were married (68.40%), while a smaller proportion were unmarried (31.60%). The highest number of respondents had a Masters degree (35.80%), followed by Graduation (32.60%). The lowest proportion had a Ph.D. (4.50%), and the smallest group had completed 10th Standard (6.80%). The most common occupation among the respondents was a Private Job (26.60%), followed by Govt. Employee (22.10%). Homemakers had the lowest representation (8.90%). A majority of respondents made their first visit (51.30%), followed by the second visit (44.70%). Only a small proportion made more than two visits (3.90%). The most common purpose of visit was leisure (48.90%), followed by adventure (23.70%). The least common purpose was business (1.60%).

Overall, the findings indicate that the sample population consisted of more male respondents, with the majority falling into the age range of 31-43 years. The respondents in this study were primarily married, indicating that marriage was the predominant marital status among them. Furthermore, the participants had a diverse range of educational backgrounds, suggesting that they represented various levels of education attainment. The most common occupations were private jobs and government employment. The majority of respondents made their first or second visit, with leisure being the primary purpose of visit for most of them.

After the data was collected, the researchers first looked over it to see if there were any responses that were missing or unengenged responses. In order to evaluate the reliability of the instrument's internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha was applied. The Cronbach's alpha values that were calculated for each construct were higher

than the recommended minimum threshold of 0.70 that was established by Nunnally (1978). Table 02 displays the findings of Reliability Test.

Table 2: Results of Reliability Test

Dimension	No. of items	Chronbach Alpha (α) Value
Infrastructure	05	.922
Attraction	06	.926
Value for money	03	.854
Enjoyment	04	.875
Destination Image	18	.941
e-WOM	05	.913
Destination Selection	04	.921
Overall Scale	27	.950

Note: Cronbach Alpha (α) for all the constructs is above the threshold level.70"

Measurement Model

Infrastructure, Attraction, Value for Money, and Visitor Experience Enjoyment were determined to be the primary components of the Destination Image construct. These variables were utilised to quantify and operationalize the Destination Image as a second-order construct. To confirm the reliability and validity of the main Destination Image construct, second-order confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed to examine the relationships among the four sub-constructs. Following the guidelines proposed by Byrne (2013) and Hair et al. (2006), a set of items were utilised to evaluate the underlying constructs. All of the indices revealed by CFA in this study support a good model-data fit, as measured by the criteria established by Hair et al. (2010). Absolute Fit Indices "*(chi-square statistic = 170.102, degree of freedom = 131 at Probability level=.000 (P0.05); CMIN/DF= 1.298; Goodness of fit indices (GFI) = 0.952; Adjusted Goodness of fit indices (AGFI) =.937; Incremental Fit Indices (Comparative*

Fit Index (CFI) = 0.992; Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.991; Incremental Fit Index (IFI)= 0.992); Root Mean Residual (RMR)= 0.048 and Root Mean Square Error Approximation (RMSEA)= 0.028".

The factor loadings for Destination Image to Infrastructure (0.86), Destination Image to Attraction (0.75), Destination Image to Value for money (0.80), and Destination Image to Enjoyment (0.75) all exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, as recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). These factor loadings were statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level (Figure 2). Additionally, the second-order construct of Destination Image demonstrated convergent validity. The Average Extracted Variance (AVE) was calculated to be 0.626, which surpassed the recommended threshold of 0.5, and the Composite Reliability (CR) was 0.870, exceeding the threshold of 0.70. These results indicate that the second-order construct is reliable and exhibits convergent validity, as suggested by Hair et al. (2014). The 18-item Destination Image scale was subjected to second-order confirmatory factor analysis, which confirmed its convergent validity and fulfilled the requirements for model fit. The predicted factor structure of Destination Image was validated (Table 3).

Table 3: Construct Reliability and Validity for the Second-Order Construct (Destination Image) and its Components

Construct	Item	Factor Loading	CR (above 0.7)	AVE (above 0.5)
Destination Image	Infrastructure	**.86**		
	Attraction	**.75**	**0.870**	**0.626**
	Value for money	**.80**		
	Enjoyment	**.75**		
Infrastructure	INF1	.82		
	INF2	.84		
	INF3	.88	**0.923**	**0.706**
	INF4	.83		
	INF5	.83		
Attraction	ATTR1	.82		
	ATTR2	.89		
	ATTR3	.84	**0.929**	
	ATTR4	.82		**0.685**
	ATTR5	.77		

Construct	Item	Factor Loading	CR (above 0.7)	AVE (above 0.5)
	ATTR6	.82		
Value for money	VFM1	.82		
	VFM2	.83	**0.860**	**0.672**
	VFM3	.81		
Enjoyment	ENJ1	.84		
	ENJ2	.81	**0.879**	**0.645**
	ENJ3	.75		
	ENJ4	.81		

Analysis of Measurement Model (Overall CFA)

E-WOM, with its five items, and Destination Selection, with its four, were the other two variables that formed up the overall measuring model. The total measuring model also employed the four-dimensional Destination Image (Infrastructure with 5- items, Attraction with 6- items, Value for money with 3- items and Enjoyment with 4- items). In a single measurement model, correlations between all the study's constructs — seven 06-order constructs and one second-order construct (Destination Image) — were allowed. CFI, IFI, GFI, AGFI, and RMSEA were also employed to assess goodness of fit alongside Chi-square. It was shown that the data for the model fit and, thus, the total measurement model was evaluated with the following parameters: "($X2 = 614.511$, df = 317; CMIN/DF=1.641; CFI = 0.975; IFI = 0.9772; GFI = 0.907; AGFI = 0.888; RMSEA = 0.041)". Therefore, it indicates a satisfactory agreement with the model. Afterwards, the scale's reliability and validity were further evaluated by examining additional psychometric properties. Table 4 displays the results, indicating that all the measured constructs in the model had Composite Reliability (CR) values greater than 0.60, as required. This finding aligns with previous research by Koufteros (1999). In accordance with Fornell and Larcker's (1981) recommendations, the obtained results provide support for the constructs' reliability and convergent validity. In addition, the square roots of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were compared with the correlations between the constructs to determine the discriminant validity of the constructs. The findings revealed that the AVE values were higher than the correlations, providing additional evidence for the uniqueness of the constructs. These findings are consistent with the principles outlined by Fornell and Larcker (1981). The comprehensive results of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) can be seen in Tables 4 and 5, providing an
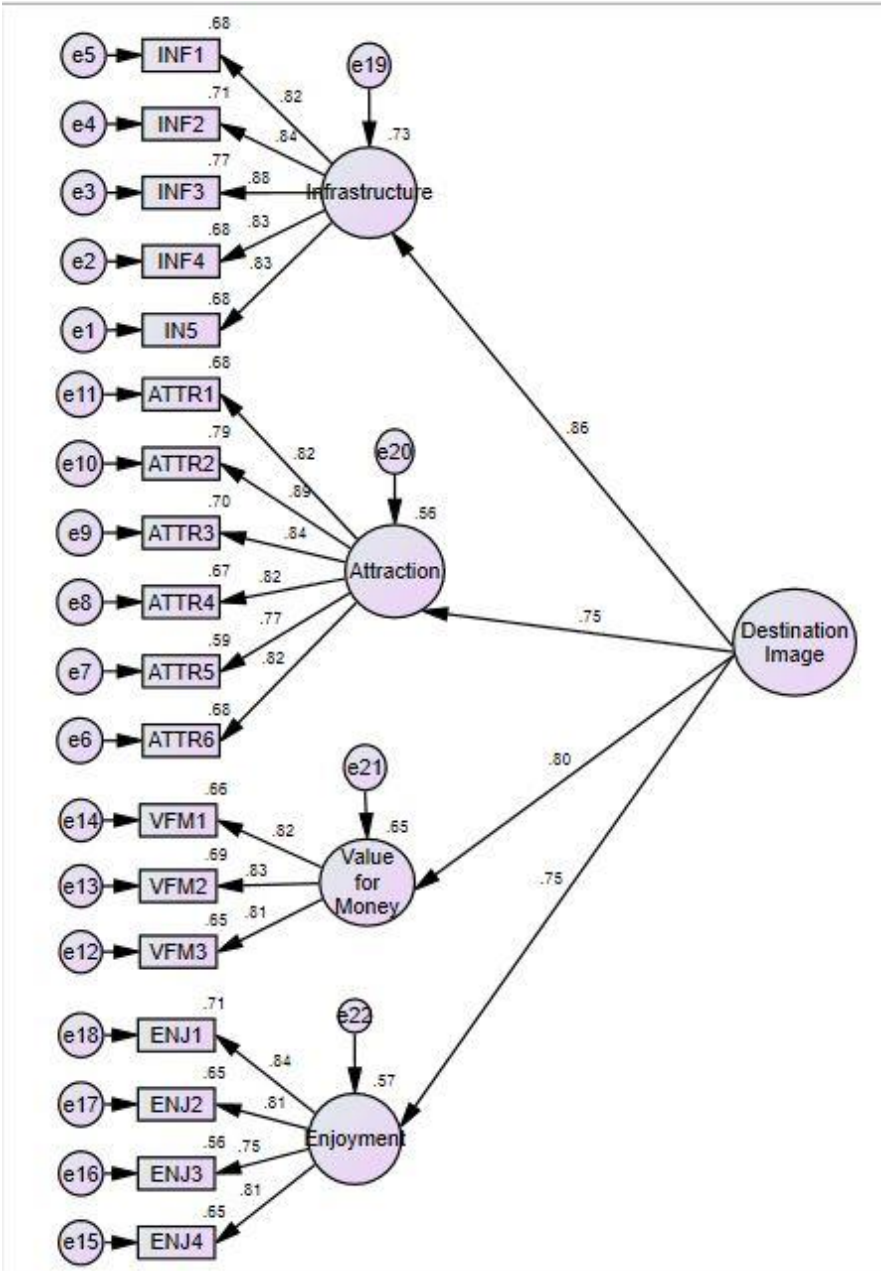
Figure 2: 2nd order CFA

overview of the findings related to the reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the investigated constructs.
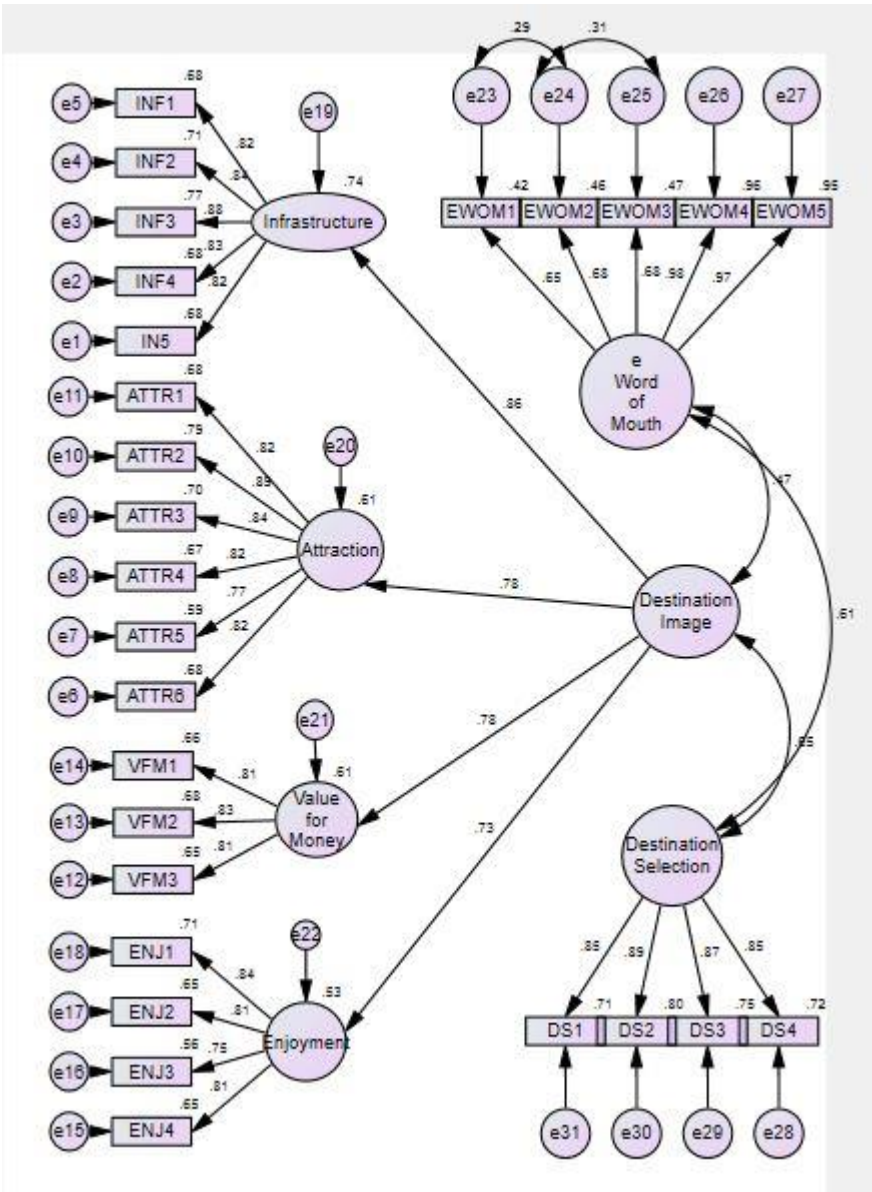

Figure 3: Overall Measurement Model

Table 4: Results of the Overall Measurement Model

Construct	Item	Factor Loading	CR (above 0.7)	AVE (above 0.5)
Infrastructure	INF1	.82		
	INF2	.84		
	INF3	.88	0.923	0.706
	INF4	.83		
	INF5	.83		
Attraction	ATTR1	.82		
	ATTR2	.89		
	ATTR3	.84	0.929	
	ATTR4	.82		0.685
	ATTR5	.77		
	ATTR6	.82		
Value for money	VFM1	.82		
	VFM2	.83	0.860	0.672
	VFM3	.81		
Enjoyment	ENJ1	.84		
	ENJ2	.81	0.879	0.645
	ENJ3	.75		
	ENJ4	.81		
E-WOM	E-WOM1	.65		
	E-WOM2	.68		
	E-WOM3	.68	0.650	0.900

Construct	Item	Factor Loading	CR (above 0.7)	AVE (above 0.5)
	E-WOM4	.98		
	E-WOM5	.97		
Destination Selection	DS1	.85		
	DS2	.89	0.749	0.922
	DS3	.87		
	DS4	.85		
Destination Image	Infrastructure	.86		
	Attraction	.78	0.868	0.622
	Value for money	.78		
	Enjoyment	.73		

Table 5: Discriminant Validity Results

	CR	AVE	e-WOM	Destination Image	Destination Selection
e-WOM	0.900	0.652	0.807		
Destination Image	0.868	0.622	0.474	0.789	
Destination Selection	0.921	0.745	0.609	0.649	0.863

Hypotheses Testing

The next stage is to conduct hypothesis testing once confirmatory factor analysis has been completed. Using the AMOS programme, researchers conducted SEM tests on the hypotheses. Fitting the data very well, the structural model shows ($X2 = 517.044$, df = 315; Probability level =.000; CMIN/DF=1.641; CFI = 0.975; IFI = 0. 975; GFI = 0.907; AGFI = 0.888; RMR = 0.088; RMSEA = 0.041). In this

study, researchers found statistically significant correlations between different variables. Specifically, researchers found a significant correlation between destination image and destination choice (correlation coefficient = 0.65, t-value = 10.46, p < 0.05), indicating a strong relationship. Similarly, there was a significant correlation between destination image and e-WOM choice (correlation coefficient = 0.47, t-value = 7.42, p < 0.05), suggesting a moderate association. Furthermore, a significant correlation was found between e-WOM choice and destination choice (correlation coefficient = 0.61, t-value = 10.06, p < 0.05), indicating a strong connection. Based on these results, researchers concluded that hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 are supported. This implies that the variables of destination image, e-WOM choice, and destination choice are indeed related as hypothesized. A summary of the hypotheses and their corresponding results can be found in Table 6. Additionally, the structural equation modeling and path coefficient results, illustrating the relationships between the variables, are depicted in Figures 4, 5, and 6.

Table 6: Hypotheses testing results

Hypotheses			Estimate	C.R.	P	Results
H1	Destination Image ·······▸	Destination Selection	0.65	10.46	***	Supported
H2	Destination Image ·······▸	e-WOM	0.47	7.42	***	Supported
H3	e-WOM ······▸	Destination Selection	0.61	10.06	***	Supported

Mediation Results

In the study, researchers conducted an analysis to investigate how electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) impacts the connection between tourists' perceptions of a destination and their final decision to visit. The statistical findings indicated a notable direct effect of Destination Image on both Destination Selection and e-WOM, with a coefficient of 0.52 and a p-value below 0.05. Additionally, the analysis demonstrated that e-WOM acts as a mediator between the independent variable of destination image and the outcome of the travel decision. The study also revealed the significance of indirect

effects (β=0.19, p<0.05), indicating that e-WOM plays a role in mediating the relationship between travelers' destination images and their ultimate destination choices. Figure 7 shows the overall results.
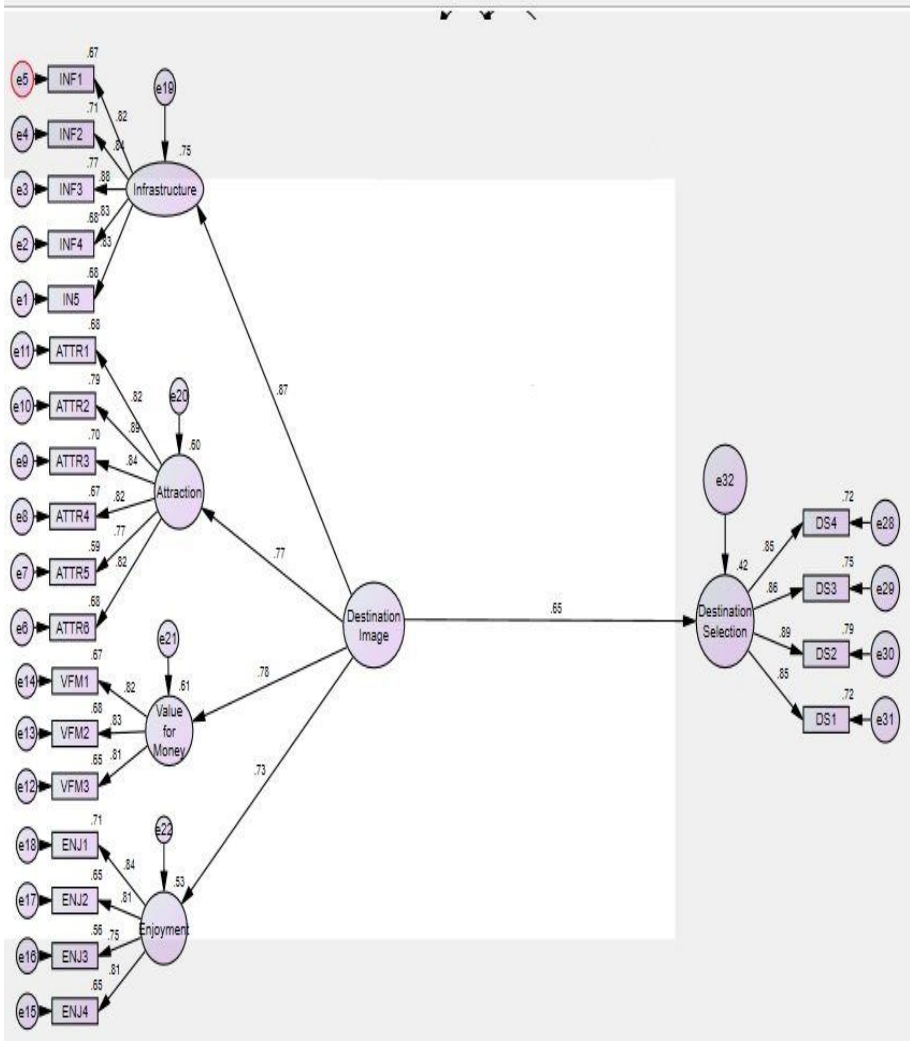

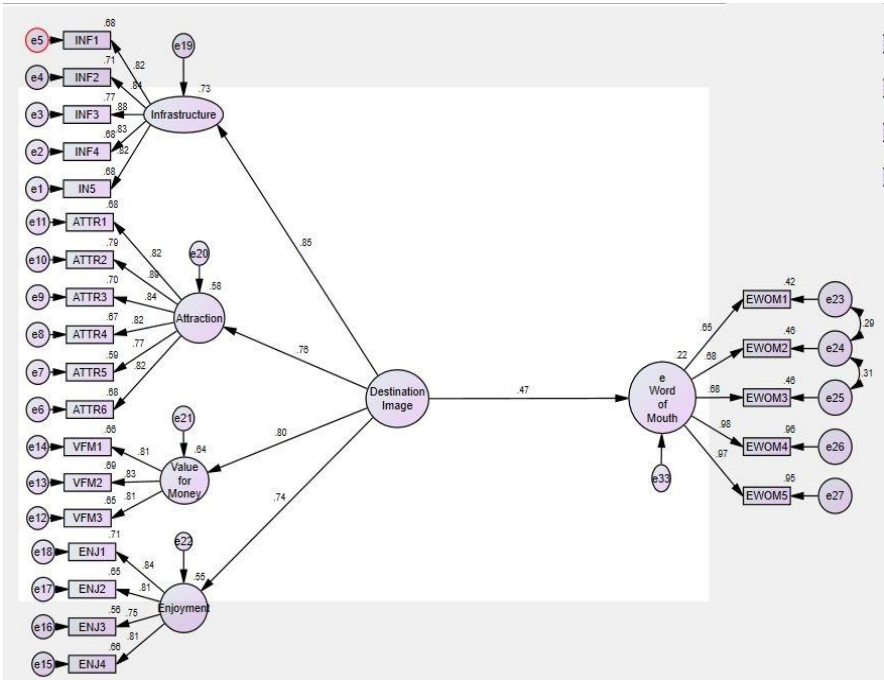Figure 4: The estimated SEM path model. Source: Authors' elaboration

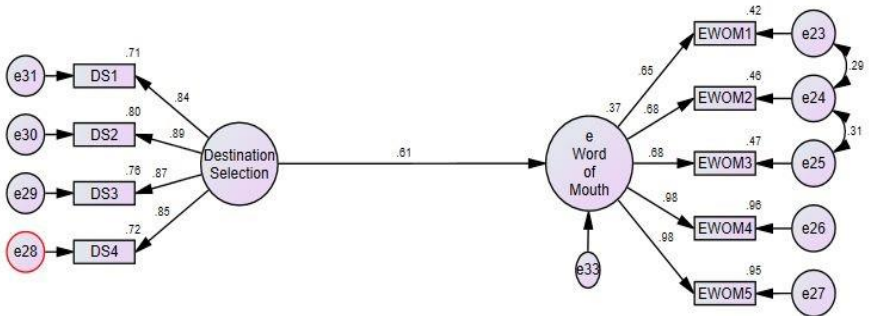Figure 5: The estimated SEM path model. Source: Authors' elaboration

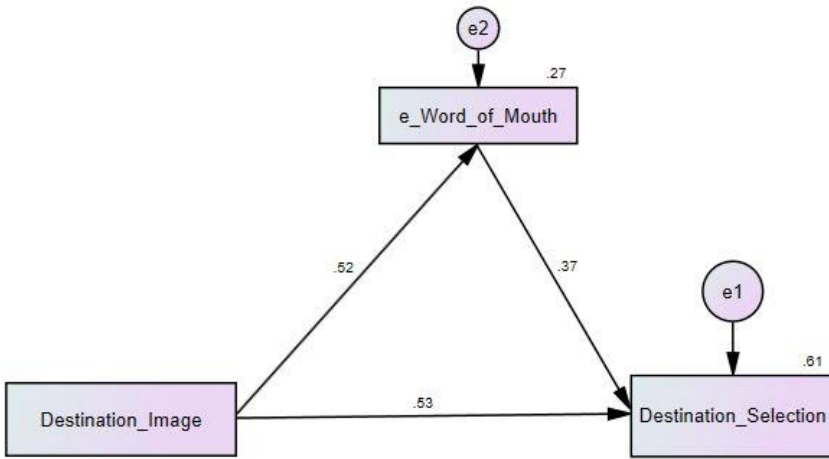Figure 6: The estimated SEM path model. Source: Authors' elaboration

Figure 7: The estimated SEM path model. Source: Authors' elaboration

Discussion & Conclusion:

The study's major objective was to investigate the relationship between e-WOM and destination image of Kashmir as a tourist destination. The study aimed to investigate how e-WOM, both in its direct form (such as online reviews and recommendations) and indirect form (such as discussions with friends or family), influences the decision-making process of travelers when it comes to choosing J&K as their destination. To provide a comprehensive analysis, the research examined several aspects that contribute to travelers' destination decisions. The study focused on several key aspects, namely the infrastructure quality in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), the overall appeal and attractiveness of the destination, the perceived value for money concerning the travel experience, and the anticipated level of enjoyment for travelers during their visit to J&K. By examining these dimensions, the research aimed to uncover the significance of e-WOM in shaping travelers' perceptions and decision-making processes regarding J&K as a tourism destination. The study aimed to provide valuable insights into the factors that play a significant role in travelers' decision-making processes and how e-WOM can impact their perceptions of J&K as a desirable place to visit.

The results of this study align with prior research, emphasizing the importance of destination image in the decision-making process when choosing a vacation destination. The study aligns with the works of Pan et al. (2021), Sultan et al. (2021), Vashu et al. (2018), Khan et al. (2016), Cheng & Lu (2013), McCartney et al. (2008), Baloglu & McCleary (1999), and Chon (1992), all of which highlight the importance of destination image in travelers' choices. Additionally, this research corroborates earlier studies by emphasizing the impact of online portrayals on electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), as demonstrated by Rasoolimanesh et al. (2021) and Zhang et al. (2018). The findings of this study are consistent with previous research conducted by Tapanainen et al. (2021), Jalilvand & Samiei (2012b), and Jalilvand & Samiei (2012c), which also emphasize the significant role of e-WOM in the selection of a destination. It is important to note that this study is the first of its kind to examine the mediating effect of e-WOM in the relationship between destination image and destination choice. The results confirm that e-WOM serves as a mediator, influencing the connection between these two variables. By validating existing research and providing new insights, this study enhances our understanding of the impact of destination image and e-WOM on destination choice. It highlights the moderating role of e-WOM in the decision-making process, contributing to a more comprehensive comprehension of travelers' decision-making behavior.

When people intend to travel, they have a wide range of choices from which they can choose a destination. Then they look for the destination that suits them from all aspects (economical, comfortability, availability of time, etc.). The destination which has built a good image will attract them but the destination which possesses a better image will modify their behaviour to be the best bet for them. Thus, destination image assists potential tourists in the selection of a destination from a pool of available options. This prerequisite necessitates the presence of word of mouth. Since we live in an electronic age, e WOM has replaced traditional WOM because it travels farther in less time. The positive e-WOM aids the potential visitor in making a decision and also persuades others to visit that particular destination. Better destination image and positive e-WOM assist the tourist in the selection of a destination.

From a practical standpoint, this study provides essential marketing knowledge, particularly for those who promote tourism initiatives and seek to enhance the tourist footfall to J&K. The destination image serves as a valuable predictor in determining the selection of a destination, providing important guidance for Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) responsible for marketing and branding tourism-related activities. By understanding the perception and mental representation that potential visitors have of a destination, DMOs can tailor their marketing strategies and initiatives accordingly. Additionally, by identifying specific aspects of the destination that contribute to a positive image, DMOs can focus their efforts on promoting those unique features and experiences. Additionally, positive e-WOM remodels the attitude of prospective visitors regarding the selection of a destination, which poses a significant opportunity for the growth of tourism in J&K. Therefore, efforts should be made to highlight the feedback of tourists who have already visited or currently visiting tourists. It can be done by way of developing a tourism campaign to extract good feelings about a destination among both former and potential visitors.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Indeed, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study and identify areas for future research. One limitation is the lack of exploration of political risk and emotional experience and their impact on destination selection. It would be valuable for future studies to investigate how these factors influence travelers' decision-making processes. Additionally, the study could benefit from considering the perspectives of repeat visitors, as their motivations and decision-making factors may differ from first-time visitors. Another suggestion for future research is to utilize longitudinal data instead of cross-sectional data. Longitudinal studies would provide insights into how destination image and e-WOM evolve over time and their long-term effects on destination choice. In future studies, it would be beneficial to explore the potential moderating effects of demographic variables such as gender and social status. Investigating how these variables impact the relationship between destination image, e-WOM, and destination choice would offer a more nuanced comprehension of travelers' decision-making

processes. Additionally, it would be valuable to examine the mediating role of variables such as place attachment, visitor satisfaction, and destination image between destination image and destination choice. Understanding the interactions and influences of these variables on travelers' decisions would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the decision-making process in tourism.

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