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THE NEXUS BETWEEN VIRTUAL TOURISM EXPERIENCES, VISIT INTENTIONS, AND THE MEDIATING INFLUENCE OF E-WORD OF MOUTH

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines the profound effects of virtual tourism in the present period of technological progress, with a specific emphasis on its impact on persons' inclinations to travel. The objective of the study is to comprehend the link between virtual tourist experiences (VTE), electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and visit intentions (VIN). The study employed a quantitative approach, using structured questionnaires and analysing the data with the SPSS macro PROCESS. The results highlight the beneficial effects of Virtual Tourism Experiences on electronic Word-of-Mouth and Virtual Influencer Networks, emphasising the significance of genuine virtual interactions in shaping traveller intentions. The study emphasises the importance of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) as a critical mediator, underscoring the necessity for strategic communication endeavours to cultivate favourable impressions. Moreover, acknowledging the role of e-WOM susceptibility as a mediator highlights the significance of customising communication techniques to cater to various audience preferences. These insights provide destination marketers significant advise on investing in sophisticated virtual infrastructure, harnessing social influence, and actively controlling the virtual destination image.

Keywords: Virtual tourism, Travel intentions, Virtual tourism experiences, Electronic word-of-mouth, Immersive experiences

INTRODUCTION

This is a transitional time for the tourist industry, with tremendous technological breakthroughs taking place. The emerging phenomenon of virtual tourism has developed as an intriguing sector that provides a singular means of global travel and cuts beyond physical limits (Rijal & Ghimire, 2016). Imagine yourself ready to go off on a voyage that crosses geographical boundaries, standing at the nexus of reality and virtual reality. What influence does virtual tourism's immersive experience have on people's plans to go to actual locations? Gaining insight into the complex mechanisms that underlie the relationship between virtual experiences and the intention to visit real locations later on is essential as we continue to explore the unexplored domain of virtual tourism (Berger et al., 2007). This study attempts to disentangle the complex link that exists between intentions to visit and virtual tourism experiences, with an emphasis on the critical role that e-word of mouth plays in affecting this relationship (Ye et al., 2020, Pizam, 2010). Virtual tourism, which is commonly described as

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the use of technology to mimic travel experiences, is becoming more and more popular as a useful tool for discovery, amusement, and even making travel-related decisions (Nechoud et al., 2021). Understanding how these virtual experiences affect people's intentions to travel in real life is crucial as more and more people rely on them to sate their wanderlust. Prior studies have demonstrated the impact of virtual experiences on travel decision-making; yet, the processes by which these experiences convert into visitation intentions are still being investigated.

Furthermore, the idea of virtual tourism is especially important in a country like India, which is immersed in a rich cultural legacy and a variety of landscapes. India offers a unique setting for investigating the dynamic interaction between virtual tourism experiences and the desire to visit real-world places because of its diverse range of experiences, which includes the breathtaking Himalayas and the sun-kissed beaches of Goa. Here, at the nexus of history and technology, picture the Taj Mahal coming to life on a screen in front of you, providing a virtual tour through its illustrious past (Gupta et al., 2022). In a nation where every corner of the earth has a story to tell, how do these virtual travels influence people's aspirations to physically see India's diverse landscapes?

In the Indian context, virtual tourism has emerged as an exciting aspect of trip exploration, particularly for those looking to fully immerse themselves in the nation's rich cultural legacy (Paliwal et al., 2022). The increasing use of digital platforms has made it relevant to investigate how virtual experiences affect travellers' decisions to travel. Even while research from around the world has illuminated the larger dynamics, it is essential to comprehend how virtual tourist experiences fit into the Indian cultural context. This study is important because it can provide light on the complex relationships that exist between e-word-of-mouth, virtual tourism experiences, and travel intentions to India. These findings can help businesses, politicians, and stakeholders improve virtual tourism experiences and influence travel inclinations as the nation's tourism sector develops.

This study makes a substantial contribution to our knowledge of how humans and their environment interact as we move towards an information age. It explores the complexities of the emotional connections people have with virtual settings in the context of travel. Furthermore, this study clarifies how virtual tourism influences users' travel inclinations, which advances our understanding of the complex interaction between people and virtual locations. The results provide insightful information as well as workable solutions for bringing people and tourism locations together in the information era. Furthermore, this research has applications in the development of virtual tourism experiences, creative destination marketing, and bolstering visitor loyalty, particularly in the post-COVID-19 period. The study tries to address the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of virtual tourism experiences on people's inclinations to travel to actual locations?
2. How much does the electronic word of mouth, influence the link between virtual travel experience and visit intention?

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The rest of the paper is arranged as follows: The aim of the current study and the rationale are to carefully look into and address the research questions that were stated before. Section 2 provides a comprehensive overview of the literature on virtual tourism, covering key terms, ground-breaking research, and the evolving industry. Section 3 describes the research methodology adopted to investigate the ideas that have been proposed. In the section 4, the findings are examined and presented, followed by section 5 which covers discussion and implications of the study. The last section of the paper concludes the study and shedding light not only on the inherent limitations and also on the future avenues for further investigation.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The complex terrain that exists at the junction of behavioural intents, experience elements, and credibility in the dynamic field of virtual tourism calls for a thorough review of the existing literature.

Research has focused on the credibility of information sources in both traditional offline settings and the changing online environment. While Ismagilova et al. (2020) expanded this investigation into the digital sphere, Walters and Mair (2012) led the way in investigating source credibility offline. Based on these pillars, Seraphin et al. (2017) defined credibility as people's belief that advice and views are reliable, accurate, and grounded in reality or experience. Grewal et al. (1994) emphasised that consumers are more likely to trust communications from reliable sources, underscoring the importance of perceived source credibility. Verma and Dewani (2020) emphasised the preference for electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) messaging in the context of virtual tourism, attributing it to the availability of thorough and reliable information not usually supplied by businesses on public platforms.

One important aspect of the tourism experience is the behavioural intentions of tourists, which include both the intention to visit and the intention to suggest a location. The intention to visit was defined by Sigala and Christou (2002, 2006) and Chen et al. (2014) as the readiness to investigate a place, based on a logical comparison of potential destinations obtained from outside sources like websites, blogs, and social media. Prior research (Qiang et al., 2018; Daowd et al., 2020) has demonstrated a clear correlation between customer purchase intentions and perceived credibility. According to Seraphin et al. (2018), for communications to persuade listeners and spur them to action, they must possess the three essential elements of credibility, emotional appeal, and informativeness. This trio, lessens resistance to outside disruptive components by educating and persuading potential guests.

According to a study by Anubha and Shome (2020), which is pertinent to the Indian context, Indian urban millennials' behavioural intentions are strongly influenced by their perception of the trustworthiness of eWOM shared on social media. These results are consistent with previous research (Doosti et al., 2016; Teng et al., 2017), which has repeatedly demonstrated the significant influence that consumers' perceptions of the reliability of reviews have on their behavioural intentions.

Moving on to the domain of experiencing elements in virtual travel, it is determined that the travel experience is a psychological need that is objectively present (Packer & Ballantyne,

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2016). Morrison et al. (2016) showed that amenities, lighting, and music are examples of physical environmental elements that have a favourable impact on patron mood. According to Lee et al., (2016), user acceptability and engagement are influenced by the calibre of online material. Ghose and Huang (2016) emphasised how personalised services and products made possible by contemporary technology may improve the quality of services.

The capacity to give tailored information, comprehend the wants and preferences of visitors, and enable tailored interactions are all critical components of interaction quality in the context of virtual tourism (Chang, 2021). Chang (2021) revealed the significant experiential impact that her augmented reality (AR)-based cultural heritage tour system had on visitors. The importance of personalised services, augmented reality technology, and system quality in affecting visitors' experiences and, ultimately, their happiness was emphasised by Jung's (2016) study.

2.1 Virtual Experience and Travel Intention:

Studies on the relationship between virtual experience and intention to travel has been considerable and has provided insight into how experiential elements affect people's propensity to travel. Researchers Ekanayake and Gnanapala (2016) examined visitors' experiences in Sri Lanka's eastern area and found that they had a favourable impact on travellers' plans to go. By utilising the diffusion of innovation theory, Kim et al. (2020) investigated virtual reality tourism and shown how authentic experiences have a beneficial impact on travel intention. Kim and Jung (2018) found a strong association between travellers' behavioural goals and the authenticity of their virtual reality tourism experiences. With a focus on the relationship between experiences and travel intentions, Rather (2019) investigated how marketing initiatives in popular tourist locations influence travellers' behavioural intentions, underscoring the significance of experiential marketing. As the basis for our investigation, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Virtual tourism experience positively affects visit intention.

2.2 Mediating Effect of eWOM Susceptibility:

Examining how e-word-of-mouth (eWOM) susceptibility functions as a mediator, the study looks at how normative and informational elements affect consumers' decision-making. Bearden et al., (1989) make a distinction between normative and informational impacts, emphasising that the former depend on consumers actively seeking out information from other consumers and the latter on consumers conforming to others' expectations. People who are easily swayed by information actively seek out views, therefore electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communications are an important source of information when making decisions (Mavragani et al., 2019). Under these circumstances, the association between virtual tourism experiences and travel intention is moderated by eWOM susceptibility, which becomes a significant component.

Although prior research has demonstrated the direct influence of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on behavioural intentions (Mehmood et al., 2018; Dissanayake & Malkanthie, 2018) and its function as an indicator of attitude and intention to travel (Jalilvand & Heidari,

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2017), this study's distinctive contribution is its investigation of the mediating role of eWOM susceptibility on the association between virtual tourism experiences and visitation intention. To the best of our knowledge, no previous research has dabbled in this uncharted area, therefore our study is a first for destination marketing and tourism literature.

According to Bearden et al. (1989), being susceptible to interpersonal sources indicates a readiness to meet expectations from others and solicit input from them while making decisions. Because of their perceived reliability, consumers are more likely to favour interpersonal sources and are hence more receptive to eWOM communications (Mourali et al., 2005; Halkiopoulos et al., 2020). Consequently, we put up the following theory:

H2: eWOM susceptibility moderates the link between virtual tourism experience and the intention to visit a destination.

The following conceptual model was suggested by the study based on the previously listed literature.

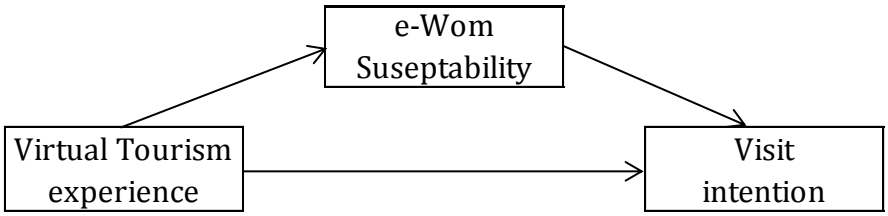

Fig. 1: Conceptual model

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This was a quantitative research conducted on students studying in North Indian higher education institutes. The study was deemed suitable for university students because the most recent data indicated that individuals in India between the ages of 15 and 25 made up the biggest proportion of social media users, with 60% of them utilising six to nine sites concurrently (Basuroy, 2024). With structured questionnaires built on a previously developed measuring scale, data was gathered with students serving as the analytic unit. The present research used a cross-sectional methodology to examine the potential beneficial impact of virtual tourism experiences on travel intention in North India. It looks into how crucial eWOM susceptibility is for encouraging travel intention as well.

3.2. Data Collection

Data was collected using structured questionnaires. More precisely, to choose participants who satisfied certain requirements pertaining to the study's topic or the features of the population being studied, purposive selection techniques were applied in this study (Bryman, 2016, p. 251). Purposeful sampling is appropriate and advised when the researcher wants to concentrate on a certain group or subgroup that is most likely to generate critical and in-depth information (Patton, 2002; Guest et al., 2006). The sole requirements set forth for the sample's selection were that the respondent be exposed to and active on any social media platform. Google Forms and direct email were used to distribute the questionnaires.

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University students were among the respondents. Only 391 of the 543 questionnaires that were given to participants could be completed and used for analysis after 421 of them were returned after a month to check for missing or incomplete data. Eleven surveys were removed because they were not thorough enough to be useful for additional research. The questionnaire was returned by 72% of respondents. To ensure the validity of research tools, experts and academics assessed the questionnaires before they were distributed and addressed any concerns they had. The purpose and scope of the study were explained to these experts prior to their evaluation. Two sections make up the questionnaires for this study. Section 2 provides elements used for research constructions, whereas Section 1 includes demographic characteristics including age and education.

3.3. Variable's Measurement

The variables in this study were all calculated using a standardised scale. Pilot testing was used to assess the measures' accuracy, reliability, and validity using questionnaires. A 5-point Likert scale was used to score the items, with 1 representing strongly agree and 5 representing strongly disagree. Further explanations of the variables' measurements are provided below.

3.3.1. Virtual Tourism experience

For the measurement of Virtual Tourism experience, we used standardized scale adapted from (Ye et al., 2022).

3.3.2. eWOM susceptibility

Our study used scales for the measurement of leader's cognitive engagement, which was adapted from (Nechoud et al., 2021)

3.3.3. Visit intention

The AI adoption is measured through adapted from (Nechoud et al., 2021).

3.4 Analysis

Numerous statistical techniques were employed to arrive at the findings. Common method bias (CMB), which can arise in studies utilising self-report measures, was first evaluated in the data (Nunnally, 1978). The Harman single factor test and the EFA feature of the SPSS programme were used to assess CMB. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to assess the research model's validity, reliability, and correctness prior to structural model evaluation. AVE and standardised loadings of the items were used to assess the convergent validity of the exogenous and endogenous constructs (Hair et al., 2010). Items with a standardised loading larger than 0.6 are more likely to be valid, according to Kline (2005), however Bagozzi et al. (1991) found that an AVE value more than 0.5 suggests strong convergent validity.

Discriminant validity tests were proposed by Hair et al. (2010) to assess the degree to which a particular measurement model component varied from the others. The square root of AVE must be bigger than the inter-construct correlation coefficients in order for discriminant validity to hold, suggesting a weak relationship between the components. The study used the structural model link to evaluate the exploratory potential of the model and the importance of

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the individual path. The route coefficient (β) was suggested by Hair et al. (2019) as a means of evaluating the strength of structural models. The suggested link's strength is shown by the standardised value (Weston & Gore, 2006).

3.5 Quality checks

Before the final analysis, a number of preliminary checks were performed. In order to test for non-response bias, we compared the mean difference between 50 early and 50 late responders. The results showed that there was no significant difference, indicating the absence of non-response bias. For additional research, the final sample of 391 was utilised. Because the variation for a single element was smaller than the threshold, at 26.96%, we were able to rule out the possibility of CMB.

DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Sample statistics

Table 1: Sample statistics

Demographic Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	201	51.41
	Female	190	48.59
Age (Years)	15-20	129	32.99
	21-25	262	67.01

Source: Authors' Computation

Table 1 displays the profiles of survey respondents. Male students made up 51.41% of the participants, while female students made up 48.59%. The age range with the largest representation (67.01%) was 21 to 25.

4.3 Measurement model

The measurement model provided a goodness of fit values for different indices: chi-square (410) = 1240.87, $p < 0.05$, $\chi^2/df = 3.03$, CFI = 0.907, IFI = 0.911 TLI = 0.913, RMSEA = 0.061. We used Kline's (2005) recommendation for convergent validity, and as a result, all item loadings for all sub-constructs were higher than the suggested threshold value of 0.60, ranging from 0.611 to 0.975. Further, the critical ratios for every scale item were also all over 1.96. Thus, these findings exhibit convergent validity. The constructs' composite reliabilities (CRs), which vary from 0.647 to 0.935, show strong internal consistency.

Table 2: Measurement Model

Construct		Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	p-value
Virtual Tourism Experience	VTE1	0.826			
	VTE2	0.935	0.07	17.278	***
	VTE3	0.848	0.032	41.014	***
	VTE4	0.825	0.059	15.386	***
e-WOM	EWM1	0.663			
	EWM2	0.727	0.083	13.463	***
	EWM3	0.724	0.085	13.431	***

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	EWM4	0.647	0.087	10.485	***
Visit intention	VIN1	0.791			
	VIN2	0.777	0.058	19.517	***
	VIN3	0.771	0.053	20.136	***
	VIN4	0.705	0.057	16.961	***

Source: Authors' Calculations

The results show that the constructs are not significantly associated, as indicated by the square root of AVE values, which vary from 0.70 to 0.84 (see Table 3). These values are bigger than the inter-item correlation coefficients. Thus, all the conditions for discriminant validity have been satisfied. With strong overall validity and reliability, the measurement model is prepared for structural testing.

Table 3: Measures' discriminant validity.

Variable	Virtual Tourism Experience	e-WOM	Visit intention
Virtual Tourism Experience	**0.84**		
e-WOM	0.03	**0.70**	
Visit intention	0.17	0.61	**0.77**

Source: Authors' Calculations (Values in bold are the square root of the AVE.)

4.4 Mediation test

This study uses SPSS macro PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) for simple mediation (Model 4), as opposed to the multistep technique that is often used to evaluate mediation. The mediation role of e-WOM in the link between Virtual Tourism Experience and Visit intention was taken into consideration in the current study by applying Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro.

4.4.1 Simple mediation analysis

Using simple mediation analysis, the hypothesis of the routes and causation from Virtual Tourism Experience to Visit intention via e-WOM was investigated. Hayes (2013) PROCESS (Model 4) is employed to do this.

Table 4. Regression results from simple mediation

Model	Coeff.	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	Outcome
constant	2.672	0.1628	17.8133	0.000	2.3689	3.0009	EWM
VTE	0.34	0.0398	12.5926	0.000	0.2789	0.4269	EWM
constant	1.761	0.2468	7.52564	0.000	1.2919	2.2549	VIN
VTE	0.288	0.0508	7.57895	0.000	0.2049	0.3969	VIN
EWM	0.306	0.0598	6.51064	0.000	0.2059	0.4319	VIN
constant	2.616	0.1988	14.0645	0.000	2.2429	3.0149	VIN
VTE	0.401	0.0478	11.4571	0.000	0.3229	0.5039	VIN

Source: Authors' Calculations

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Table 5. Sobel Test

Effect	se	Z-value	P-value (2-tailed)	Lower bound	Upper bound
0.131	0.017	5.624	0.000	0.058	0.172

Source: Authors' Calculations

Table 4 shows the outcomes of the mediation analysis for hypotheses 1 and 2. According to Table 4, VTE has a significant influence on EWM (β = 0.34 while p-value = 0.000). Furthermore, the findings show that VTE has a substantial influence on VIN (β = 0.401, p-value = 0.000). Similarly, the data demonstrate that EWM has a statistically significant influence on criteria VIN (β = 0.306 while p-value = 0.000) and that VTE has a substantial effect on criterion i.e. VIN in the presence of EWM (β = 0.288 while p-value = 0.000). According to the study's findings, EWM partially mediates the action of VTE on VIN. The confidence intervals for the lower and upper levels do not contain a zero. Table 5 displays the results of the Sobel test. The table clearly illustrates that the effect size is more than zero and the p-value is significant, indicating that mediation between predictor and criteria occurs. As a result, EWM appears to be mediating the action of VTE on VIN. As a result, hypotheses H1 and H2 are accepted.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the mediation study, which made use of Hayes' PROCESS Model 4 (2013), provide a deep understanding of the intricate interactions that exist between visit intentions (VIN), electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and virtual tourist experiences (VTE). The results, which are shown in Table 4, validate that virtual tourism experiences have a major impact on e-WOM and visit intentions. This establishes the groundwork for a thorough examination of the mediated routes and their implications for tourism strategies and destination marketing.

The findings unequivocally confirm Hypothesis 1 (H1), which holds that visit intentions are positively impacted by virtual tourism experiences. This is in line with the more general knowledge that people are more likely to visit real-world places when they have immersive and genuine virtual tourism experiences (Christou, 2010; Ayeh, Au & Law, 2013; Ponte et al., 2015; Chatzigeorgiou, 2017).

Moreover, the results provide significant support for Hypothesis 2 (H2), which suggests that the relationship between the intention to visit a location and the virtual tourism experience is moderated by e-WOM susceptibility. The findings support the literature on normative and informational influences (Ayeh et al., 2013; Chatzigeorgiou & Christou, 2020), showing that people who are sensitive to informational influences actively seek out and value e-WOM, which in turn modifies the relationship between virtual tourism experiences and travel intentions.

The study's conclusions have significant implications for destination marketing strategy in the emerging field of virtual tourism. The significance of creating engaging and genuine virtual

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experiences is shown by the verified beneficial impact of virtual tourist experiences (VTE) on electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) and visit intentions (VIN). By making smart investments in top-notch virtual infrastructure, such as augmented reality and virtual reality platforms, destination marketers may take advantage of these results and increase the allure of their locations online. The necessity for destination marketers to constantly monitor and promote good online interactions is highlighted by the mediating function of e-WOM in the link between VTE and VIN. To increase the beneficial influence of e-WOM on travel intentions, this entails interacting with influencers, promoting user-generated content, and building online communities. The study's discovery of e-WOM susceptibility as a moderator emphasises how crucial it is to modify communication tactics in order to correspond with target audiences' informational preferences and provide a customised approach to virtual destination experiences. Furthermore, the focus of the study on how external disruptive components affect destination image calls for proactive reputation management techniques and open communication to handle any issues. Together, these implications serve as a roadmap for destination marketers as they embrace innovation, adjust to technology changes, and adopt a comprehensive strategy to create a favourable and powerful online presence that will eventually affect travellers' intents to visit actual locations.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SCOPE

To summarise, this study has provided insight into the complex dynamics of virtual tourism, revealing the relationship between virtual tourist experiences (VTE), electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and visit intentions (VIN). The empirical findings, supported by rigorous mediation analysis, have offered useful insights for destination marketers and scholars alike. The established beneficial impact of Virtual Tourism Experiences (VTE) on both electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) and Virtual Influencer Networks (VIN) highlights the crucial importance of immersive and genuine virtual experiences in altering the intents of travellers. The involvement of e-WOM as a mediator in this connection highlights the importance of online chats and the necessity of deliberate communication efforts to promote positive feelings. Furthermore, recognising e-WOM susceptibility as a mediator emphasises the significance of customising communication methods to match the informational preferences of various audience segments. These implications together provide destination marketers with valuable insights into the strategic significance of investing in top-notch virtual infrastructure, harnessing social influence, and actively maintaining the virtual image of the destination. As destinations continue to use digital platforms, it is crucial to comprehend and implement these insights to develop successful destination marketing strategies, encourage innovation, and position destinations for success in the changing realm of virtual tourism.

6.1 Limitations and future scope

Although this study has provided helpful insights, it is important to recognise its limits. Initially, the study concentrated on a certain demographic or market sector, which may restrict the applicability of the results to a wider audience. In addition, the study mostly used quantitative approaches, perhaps neglecting nuanced qualitative features that might enhance

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the comprehension of virtual tourist dynamics. In addition, the study focused mainly on investigating the impact of e-WOM as a mediator, without examining possible moderating factors that may affect the connection between virtual tourist experiences and visit intentions. This work paves the way for future research to tackle the stated shortcomings and enhance our comprehension of virtual tourist phenomena. To improve the generalizability of findings, future research should consider using a more varied and inclusive sample, encompassing multiple demographic groups and cultural situations. By using qualitative techniques, such as conducting in-depth interviews or analysing online discussions, a more comprehensive investigation of the subjective elements of virtual tourist experiences may be achieved. Longitudinal research would provide valuable insights into the dynamic progression of virtual tourism trends over a period of time. Examining supplementary moderating factors, such as variations in individuals or unique attributes of destinations, might enhance our comprehension of the intricate connections at play. Furthermore, exploring the influence of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence or developments in virtual reality, on virtual tourism experiences and their subsequent impact on visit intentions, gives a potential direction for future study in this dynamic and growing sector.

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