REIMAGINING TRAVEL INTENTIONS TO CHINA IN THE POST COVID-19 ERA: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF PERCEIVED SAFETY, ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH AND DESTINATION IMAGE

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Abstract: The past decade has seen the rapid proliferation of theory, literature, and research, in the field of tourism disaster and crisis management, however empirical studies linking Covid-19 to destination image are limited and have not been well understood. Nations are certainly gearing up to pursue various tourism recovery strategies in the hopes of tourism activity returning to normal. As informed by the S-O-R theory this study tests an empirical model that investigates the influence of Iranian's perceived safety and electronic word of-mouth (eWOM) on destination image and travel intention to China in the post Covid-19 era. Data were obtained from a sample of 305 respondents in Shiraz, Iran. The findings revealed that perceived safety and eWOM were able to predict destination image which subsequently had a positive effect on intention to travel. Additionally, destination image significantly mediates the relationship between perceived safety, eWOM and behavioural intention. The study certainly adds to the dearth of literature pertaining to destination image and tourist behavioural intention in a post Covid-19 context from the lens of the SOR paradigm. The study confirms the validity and salience of the SOR framework as a theoretical cornerstone in uncovering tourist behaviours and responses; whose use within tourism related research is gaining traction.

Key words: SOR Theory, perceived safety, eWOM, destination image, intention to travel, Post Covid-19

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INTRODUCTION

Safety and security are the primary conditions for tourism development of a destination, region, or country, and thus are some of the basic determinants of its growth (Mawby et al., 2021). International tourism is highly sensitive to safety and security issues (Hashemi et al., 2018) as safety concerns strongly influence tourists' decision-making processes (Yi et al., 2020). Travelers select destinations that best match their needs, offer the most benefits, and have the lowest possible costs or risks. If a tourist feels insecure or threatened at a specific destination, an overall negative impression is likely to result (Pan et al., 2021). Over the past few decades, the tourism industry has been seriously undermined by a growing lack of safety and security caused by crime, terrorism, food safety, health issues and natural disasters (Estevão and Costa, 2020). The prospect of these consequences underscores a compelling motivation for the tourism sector to seriously reimagine tourist travel intentions and adeptly strategize for crisis management. Hence, organizations should adopt a proactive stance to swiftly manage and navigate crises within their control as substantiated by the study of Yozcu and Cetin (2019).

Recent researches indicate that the most important apprehensions for tourists relate to safety and security (Preko, 2021; Mawby et al., 2021; Zou and Mawby, 2020). Five main areas of safety and security include; crime, terrorism, food safety, health issues, and natural disasters (Yozcu and Cetin, 2019). The growing lack of safety and security by such risks i.e. natural disaster, political instability, terrorism, crime, food hygiene amongst other factors have undermined the tourism industry. Hence, the perception of travel safety and security has become a major determinant in travellers' decisions to visit a place (Poku and Boakye, 2019). In December 2019, a novel coronavirus, now commonly known as the COVID-19, emerged in Wuhan, China, causing pneumonia and acute respiratory failure. This highly contagious virus has been spreading rapidly worldwide with more than 50 countries being currently affected (Wang et al., 2020). Therefore, this highlights the importance of this current study which reviewed tourism crisis based on coronavirus in the China context, which may also be of interest to other countries. The goal of this study is derived to guide the direction and scope of the

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study reported herein, which examined a proposed model in the realm of travel decision making to China. Therefore, this research seeks to understand whether perceived safety and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) can affect destination image and subsequently affect travel decision-making amongst tourist in era of post Covid-19.As inbound tourists will play a vital role in China's future tourism development, it is considerable to examine the destination image from the perspectives of Iranian's (as part of the tourism market) intending to travel to China in the era of post Covid -19.

Given the context, this research aims to adopt the stimulus, organism, response theory (SOR) to investigate peoples travel intention to China in the post covid-19 era. The use of SOR model in exploring tourist related behavioural responses are limited (i.e. Hashemi et al., 2023), although it's use has been observed in purchase related contexts (Abbasi et al., 2019). In addressing these gaps, the SOR theory has been used to model the relationships between perceived safety, eWOM, destination image and travel intentions. While researchers have begun delving on the various aspects of tourism recovery in the post pandemic era, research exploring an integrated framework consisting perceived safety, eWOM, destination image and travel intentions remains limited. Examining the interaction of these factors in the post Covid-19 era can provide a deeper understanding of their combined impact. Therefore, the objectives of this study are to firstly investigate whether perceived safety and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) can influence destination image that is formed in the minds of people planning to travel to China in the post Covid19 era.

Secondly, the study seeks to investigate if destination image can influence people's travel intentions to China in the post Covid-19 era. Finally, the study seeks to investigate the mediating effects of destination image in the relationships between perceived safety, eWOM and travel intentions in the post Covid-19 era. The study hopes to advance existing understanding of different stimulus (i.e. perceived safety and eWOM), organism (destination image that is formed in the minds of travellers) and its ability to influence a response (i.e. people's intention to travel). Specifically, the study may provide policy makers and destination marketers sound insights on factors that has an impact on destination image and travel intentions and efforts that can be taken to enhance perceived safety and eWOM so as to create a positive destination image and foster travel intentions. The subsequent section of the paper discusses the underpinning theory, the hypotheses as well as puts forth the proposed research model.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT
Underpinning Theory-Stimulus Organism Response (S-O-R) Model

Researchers have used the S-O-R framework (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974) to characterize tourist' decision-making processes in a variety of scenarios. Along with its widespread application in the online context and various other domains, the SOR framework has been used to explain consumer online purchasing behaviour (Abbasi et al., 2019). Furthermore, this approach has not been applied to tourism-related behavioral objectives to a great extent (Hashemi et al., 2023).

Thus, it would be worthwhile to explore the framework's appropriateness in the perspective of Iranians' tourists' travel intentions in the post-COVID era. According to the SOR paradigm, environmental cues have the potential to arouse individuals, hence changing the inner organismic emotions that mediate their approach or avoidance reactions. Stimuli are a collection of features that influence customers' perceptions and operate as the beginning point for the decision-making process in the SOR framework. As such, this study will employ perceived safety and electronic word of mouth as triggers to elicit an intention to travel as a response via destination image as an emotionally formed idea (Figure 1).
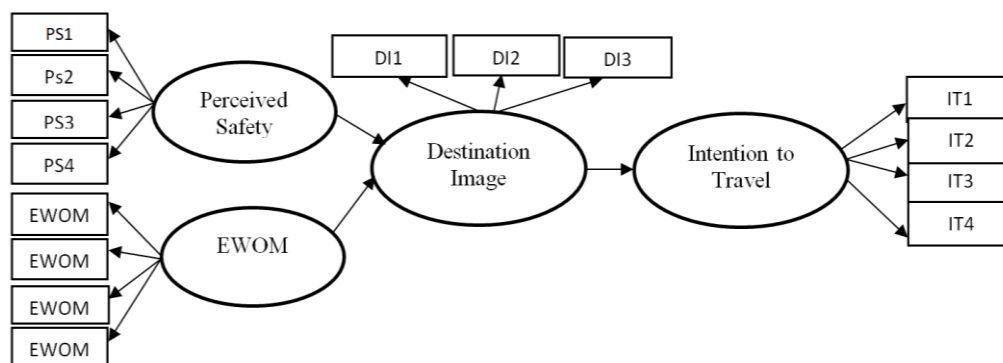

Figure 1. The proposed hypothesized hierarchical model of perceive safety, eWOM, destination image and intention to travel

Recent Studies Deploying the SOR Model in Tourism Context

Some of the most recent studies deploying the SOR paradigm to investigate tourist reactions and behaviours include; Que et al. (2023), Sahin and Kiliclar (2023), Baber and Baber (2022) and González-Rodríguez et al. (2022). In their study Que et al. (2023) used the SOR theory to examine the relationships between destination source credibility (as a stimulus), destination image and place attachment (as the organism) and tourist environmentally responsible behavior (as the behavioural response). Their study found that destination source credibility indeed had an influence on destination image and place attachment, which subsequently had an effect on tourist environmentally responsible behavior. Their study also found that destination image and place attachment had mediating effects on the relationship between destination source credibility and tourist environmentally responsible behavior, amongst which place attachment emerged as a more powerful mediator than destination image. The study was however conducted amongst domestic tourist visiting three different tourist destinations in China with data sets collected separately on three different

times (i.e. first study: March – June 2017, second and third study: August – November 2021). The study also did not take into account international tourist perspectives more so in the post Covid-19 context where perceptions of safety and destination image may have differed than before Covid-19; which is what the present study seeks to examine.

The study of Sahin and Kiliclar (2023) is one of the first studies to adopt the SOR model to examine gastronomic behaviours. The study investigated the influence of gastronomic experiences (stimulus) on food consumption emotions (organism) and experiential value (organism) and its subsequent effect on behavioural intentions. Based on data received from 491 foreign tourist visiting Turkey, the study found that gastronomic experiences had a positive influence on experiential value and food consumption emotions, with only experiential value having a significant influence on behavioural intention of tourists. The study demonstrated the applicability of the SOR framework to measure food tourism related behaviours, further amplifying SOR framework's salience in tourism related research context. Conversely, Baber and Baber (2022) utilized the SOR model to investigate the effect of social media marketing and e-reputation (an outcome of eWOM) on destination image and its implications on tourist visit intentions. Based on data collected from 209 domestic and international tourist staying at five-star hotels at Khajuraho (a UNESCO heritage site in India), the study found that both social media marketing and e-reputation had a significant influence on destination image. The study also found the destination image fully mediated the relationships between social media marketing, e-reputation and visit intentions. The study of Baber and Baber (2022) was conducted in the post Covid-19 era and took into account the effect of e-reputation in enabling people to form destination image. E-reputation is formed from various means including a tourist destination's web content, social media marketing strategies and most importantly experience based user generated content which is how electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is spread, leading to e-reputation. This is the main object of the present study which seeks to investigate the direct impact of eWOM on destination image and visit intention amongst travelers in the post Covid-19 era. Baber and Baber (2022) further proposed the need for future researches to explore the influence of different variables on destination image and travel intentions.

In another recently published research article, González-Rodríguez et al. (2022) also adopted the SOR paradigm to analyze the influence of eWOM source credibility (as stimulus) on travellers' willingness to visit a destination and online involvement (as a response) through perceived risk and information usefulness (as organism). Based on data of 209 respondents, the study found that eWOM source credibility was able to reduce travellers perceived risks that is connected with the destination visited. Conversely tourist with lower perceived risks tend to feel a higher information usefulness deriving from eWOM and thereby eliciting their online involvements and intentions to visit a destination. The study of Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al. (2022) once again has validated the saliency of SOR framework in predicting tourist behavioural responses towards eWOM and destination visit intentions. However, their study involved primarily domestic tourist in China and was carried out during pre-pandemic phase between March to November 2019. A study involving foreign tourist intending to visit China in the aftermath of Covid-19 may tell a different story, which is what inspireS the present research endeavour.

Perceived Safety

In the tourism context, safety and security are the most important travel considerations (Korstanje and George, 2020). The importance of safety at tourist destinations cannot be overemphasised to enable tourist to achieve their travel objectives i.e. leisure, food, cultural, history, heritage or simply for business. Safety is a vital construct as it has a remarkable effect on passengers' decision-making process in selecting a destination (Bae and Chang, 2021; Korstanje and George, 2020). With a continued emphasis on safety in the tourism industry, it makes logical sense why there has been a steady increase in research concerning the topic (Caber et al., 2020; Bae and Chang, 2021). As proof of this growing interest, there is now at least one international journal dedicated to issues of safety in the context of tourism and hospitality, with many journals having special issues dedicated to the topic. Research in the field of travel and tourism is diverse, the work surrounding security and safety in the context of tourism is also quite varied including topics such as health epidemics, food security, natural disasters, terrorism, war, political instability, cross-cultural differences, and petty crime (Zou and Meng, 2020). Safety as perceived by tourist has often been considered as an important determinant to measure destination image (Ban, 2016). In a relatively recent study involving 410 outbound Chinese tourist visiting Taipei, Hsu et al. (2017) found that perceived safety had an impact on tourism destination image. In another recent study, Rahman et al. (2023) found that perceived risks associated with the safety of tourist destination had a positive impact on destination image and the selection of a destination by tourists. Given the consensus among scholars that safety concerns largely impact tourist decision making (Woodside and King, 2001; Mawby et al., 2021), the research posits that:

HI: Perceived safety has a positive influence on destination image.

Electronic word of mouth (EWOM)

The advances of information technology and the emergence of online network sites have profoundly changed the way information is exchanged and have transcended the traditional limitations of WOM (Hernández-Méndez et al., 2015).These days consumers share their product-related experiences on the internet through email, bulletin boards, chat rooms, forums, fan clubs, brand, and user groups (Bigné et al., 2016). Internet has led word of mouth to be simultaneously ubiquitous and removed the necessity of physical presence (Assaker and O'Connor, 2021); a trend is known as eWOM. Ababneh (2022) argued that the transmission of favourable eWOM was attributed to tourism destination operator's ability in carrying out their marketing activities in a manner that allows accessibility, interactivity and is seen as credible. The study of Jalilvand and Samiei (2012) found that online WOM communications has a significant impact on attitudes toward visiting destination and intention to travel. Jalilvand (2017) investigated the

influence of information sources including word-of-mouth (WOM) and mass media on destination image, tourists' attitude and consequently, on travel intention at historical attractions of Shiraz, Iran. Their findings indicated that WOM and mass media had a positive influence on destination image and WOM was found to have the most significant influence on destination image and attitude than mass media. Therefore the following hypothesis is put forth:

H2: eWOM has a positive influence on destination image.

Destination Image

Destination image is crucial and plays many roles in the decision-making process, because all decision-making factors, such as time, money, and family, are based on the image of each destination to satisfy the decision maker's motivation (Khan et al., 2020; Abbasi et al., 2021). Also, the familiarity and the complexity of the images held plays a large role in this decision-making process. Moreover, consumer's decision-making process is complex and it's very difficult to identify. Studies indicate that the image of a destination influences tourist behaviour and the stronger the relationship between the image of the destination and customer needs and desires; the more likely they are to have purchase intentions for that destination (Bronner and de Hoog, 2020). The evaluation of destination image has been the subject of much attention in social science literature. In a relatively recent study, Rahman et al. (2023) found that destination image indeed was a strong predictor of tourists' motivation to travel. Past studies (Bronner and de Hoog, 2020; Kyriakaki et al., 2020; Abbasi et al., 2021) have confirmed that destination image influences tourist in the process of choosing a destination, the post evaluation of their trip and their future intentions to travel. In a study investigating post-crisis destination image (i.e. post Covid-19), Rapti and Gkauna (2022) found that the combination of factors such as positive views about an area, tourist friendly environment and most importantly the reassurance that a destination has been classified as safe had the highest impact on potential tourists visit intention. Against the backdrop of past studies, the study proposes that destination image is indeed an important predictor of tourists' intention to travel in the post Covid-19 era and hence postulates the following hypothesis:

H3. Destination image has a positive influence on intention to travel.

EWOM, Destination Image and Intention to Travel

Abubakar et al. (2016) employed a sample of 308 customers in Cyprus and suggested the following results: (i) e-Referral does influence brand image, (ii) eWOM influences brand image, and (ii) eWOM and brand image influence purchase intention. Xie (2014) studied the impact of promotional videos, online reviews, and travel notes on destination image changes and found that the three forms of information significantly changed destination image. Busby et al. (2013). examined film tourism and destination image concepts. They found that television plays an important role in the creation of a heritage destination image. Without direct personal experience the images of a place are formed by information provided by the media and other secondary or external sources. Hence, the type, quality, and quantity of information available to the individual would determine the type of image he would be likely to develop. In a study involving domestic tourist in Indonesia, Andriani et al. (2019) found that destination image had a significant and positive mediating effect on the relationship between eWOM and tourist visit intention. In another fairly recent study, Nechoud et al. (2021) found that destination image had a mediating effect in the relationship between perceived credibility of eWOM and intentions to visit a tourist destination. In yet another recent study, Farrukh et al. (2022) found that while eWOM had a direct effect on tourist travel intentions within the medical tourism context, destination image proved to exert a positive mediating effect on the link between eWOM and intention to travel. Hence, based on the foregoing discussion the following hypothesis is postulated:

H4: Destination image mediates the relationship between EWOM and intention to travel.

Perceived Safety, Destination Image and Intention to Travel

With frequent outbreaks of health-related crises in recently (Covid 19), tourists now consider safety as one of the most important elements when formulating their travel decision making and choosing safe destination. Accordingly, many studies (Hsu et al., 2017; Chaulagain et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2017) have documented the relationship between perceived safety and travel intentions, whereby the safer people felt, the higher their likelihood to visit a destination. Perceived safety reflects peoples' feelings and indicates their level of confidence to overcome uncertainties (Chaulagain et al., 2019). Past studies have found that individuals' perceived risk associated with certain crisis events (hurricanes, outbreaks of infectious diseases, and terrorist attacks) is related to their evaluation of the overall safety and travel decisions during times of crisis (Cahyanto et al., 2014; Rittichainuwat and Chakraborty, 2009). Albeit limited studies reporting the mediating effects of destination image on perceived safety and intention to travel, in a recent study Hsu et al. (2017) found that destination image was fully able to mediate the relationship between travel safety and tourist decision making. In a recent study, Purwanto et al. (2022) found that destination image was able to mediate the relationship between risk factors and visitor's intention to visit a destination. In yet another relevant study, Lu and Atadil (2021) found that US travellers had low travel intentions to China during the pandemic phase, while safety and security issues had the highest impact on destination image formation which led to low travel intentions. Since research in the post pandemic phase is limited, the study postulates that:

H5: Destination image mediates the relationship between perceived safety and intention to travel.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research targeted respondents from the Shiraz city of Iran. This place is located in the southwest of Iran and is the capital of the Fars Province. The respondents had to be 18 years old and above and must be amongst those who had at least

travelled once overseas for holidays. Roscoe (1975), whose guidelines on sample size selection have been used for the past decades, posits that a sample size greater than 30 and less than 500 is most suitable for most behavioural studies.

Hence, the study targeted a sample size of 320 respondents. The study deployed a non-probability sampling approach as the respondents were chosen from amongst the general population living in Shiraz, Iran. The study specifically utilized the snowball sampling strategy (one of the approaches under non-probability sampling strategy). Since the study deployed a quantitative method in uncovering the relationships between the variables, the questionnaire was deemed as a suitable research instrument to gauge target respondents' perceptions and perspectives. Although edited to be appropriate in the context of tourism, the measurement scales presented in the questionnaire were acquired from past studies with established reliability and validity. The measures for perceived safety were adapted from Woosnam et al. (2015), while the scales to measure eWOM were adapted from Abubakar (2016). As for the mediating variable (destination image), the measures were adapted from Jalilvand et al. (2012). Finally, four items measuring intention to travel were adapted from Andriani et al. (2019).

The questionnaires were designed according to two sections i.e. Section A comprised demographic questions while Section B, contained questionnaire items that were organized according to the variables of the study. While section A used a nominal scale, section B items were ordinal in nature and anchored on a seven-point point Likert-scale allowing respondents to state the extent to which they 'very strongly disagreed (1) or very strongly agreed (7)' with the statements.

However, before the official survey was distributed to respondents, a pilot study took place using seven stakeholders in order to assess the face and content validity for all the questionnaire items in the study. Based on feedback and constructive suggestions, the questionnaire underwent minor adjustments. The data collection began in February 2023 and ended in March of the same year. The researchers distributed 335 questionnaires to the local community located in Shiraz, Iran. Of the 335 questionnaires distributed, 320 were returned and 15 questionnaires not fully completed. Hence, the total usable responses stood at 305 respondents which were close to the targeted respondents of 320. To test the hypotheses, the authors used partial least squares and SmartPLS 3.3.2 tools for data analysis (Ashaari et al., 2021; Ramasamy et al., 2020; Ringle et al., 2015). Because of the current study's prediction - oriented function, which aims to investigate how well exogenous constructs can predict endogenous constructs, this variance-based SEM technique has been given priority over covariance-based SEM statistical approaches. Figure 2 summarizes the steps deployed in the research methodology.
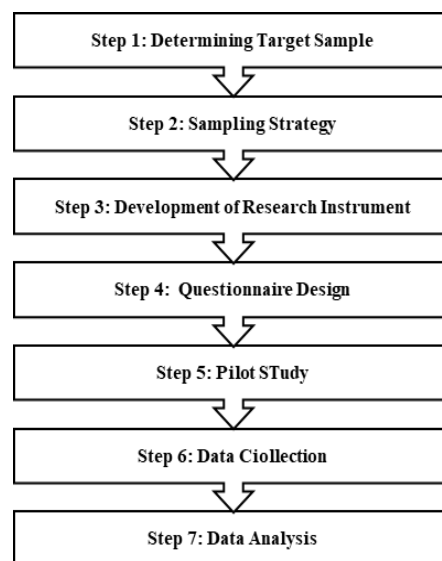

Figure 2. Steps in the Research Methodology

Profile of respondents

The table below depicts the summary of the demographic profile of respondents followed by a brief description. A total of 305 useable responses were collected and deemed fit for data analysis. Among them (51.6%) were females whereas (48.4%) were male respondents. As for age, the majority of respondents (40.3%) were between the age 18-30 years followed by (32.8%) were between the age 31-40 years. Regarding educational level, majority of the respondents i.e. 115 were having master's degree closely followed by 105 respondents who had only certificate / diploma. Moreover, concerning marital status of respondents, 57.3% of respondents were married whereas 42.6% were single.

Common Method Bias

When it comes to behavioural research, the problem of traditional process bias (CMB) is inevitable (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Therefore, the researchers used Harman's single-factor analysis to address these issues. The overall variance tested by a single factor was found to be 40.781 percent, which is less than 50%, according to the Harman single factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

RESULTS
Measurement Model

As directed by Hair et al. (2019), this study tests the inner model (validity and reliability of the constructs, factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and the Hetrotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT). Table 1indicates the outcomes of the outer model. Factor loadings, CR, and AVE are all above 0.7, 0.7, and 0.5, according to the performance (Hair et al., 2019, for further reading see Ashaari et al. (2021). The measurement model's results show that all of the constructs in the sample are reliable, and the studied objects account for more than half of the variance in the construct. As a result, the constructs' convergent validity was established. In addition to convergent validity, the current research looked at the outer model's discriminant validity using Henseler et al. (2015) HTMT criteria. Since all HTMT values were less than 0.85 (Table 3), there were no problems with discriminant validity in this analysis. This confirms that the examined constructs are distinct from the other variables investigated in the analysis.

Table 1. Summary of Demographic Profile of Respondents

No	Items	Category	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Gender	Male	157	51.6%
		Female	148	48.4%
2.	Age	18 – 30 years	123	40.3%
		31 – 40 years	100	32.8%
		41 – 50 years	70	22.9%
		>51 years	12	4%
3.	Educational Level	Bachelor / Masters	115	37.7%
		Certificate/Diploma	105	34.4%
		High School	85	27.9%
4.	Marital Status	Single	130	42.6%
		Married	175	57.3%

Structural Model

A nonparametric bootstrapping procedure of 2000 iterations was used to evaluate the validity of the hypotheses (Hair et al., 2019). Table 3's findings show that all of the direct relationships are supported. Similarly, the findings backed up the conceptual model, describing 31.6 percent of behavioural intention and 32.4 percent of destination image, respectively. In addition to R^2, the current analysis looked at the effect size (f^2) according to Cohen's guidelines (1998). The researcher used Stone and Geisser's model to examine the predictive relevance of the path models used in the study (Q^2). The findings show that the Q^2 for all endogenous constructs are greater than zero (Fornell and Cha, 1994), i.e. BI (0.220) and DI (0.220). (0.226). Table 4 also shows the effects of the significant route coefficient, R^2, and effect size tests.

The problem of lateral collinearity was also explored in this analysis. According to Kock and Lynn (2012), lateral collinearity issues may lead to researcher misinterpretation, so it was decided to investigate. Researchers say that an outer VIF value of 10 or higher indicates a possible collinearity problem (Mason and Perreault, 1991; Shieh, 2010). Table 4 indicates that there was no concern about multicollinearity because all of the variance inflation factors (VIF) were found to be within the appropriate range, i.e. less than 10.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study sought to examine the impact of perceived safety and eWOM on destination image and subsequently how destination image impacted Iranian tourist intention to travel to China in the post Covid-19 era. Additionally, the study also examined the mediating effect of destination image on both perceived safety and eWOM in relation to intention to travel. Deducing from the results, perceived safety was significantly related to destination image (H1).

Table 2. Convergent Validity and Reliability
AVE: Average Variance Extracted; CR: Composite Reliability

Construct	Items	Loadings	CR	AVE
Perceived Security	PS1	0.776	0.89	0.575
	PS2	0.795		
	PS3	0.707		
	PS4	0.735		
	PS5	0.735		
	PS6	0.798		
E-word of Mouth	EWOM1	0.719	0.905	0.658
	EWOM2	0.781		
	EWOM3	0.821		
	EWOM4	0.862		
	EWOM5	0.863		
Destination Image	DI1	0.828	0.911	0.719
	DI2	0.865		
	DI3	0.847		
	DI4	0.852		
Behavioural Intention	BI1	0.892	0.911	0.719
	BI2	0.844		
	BI3	0.787		
	BI4	0.865		

Table 3. Discriminant Validity

Construct	1	2	3	4
1. Behavioural Intention				
2. Destination Image	0.638			
3. E-word of Mouth	0.625	0.592		
4. Perceived Security	0.470	0.595	0.829	

Table 4. Path Coefficient and hypothesis testing (Note: ***p<0.001)

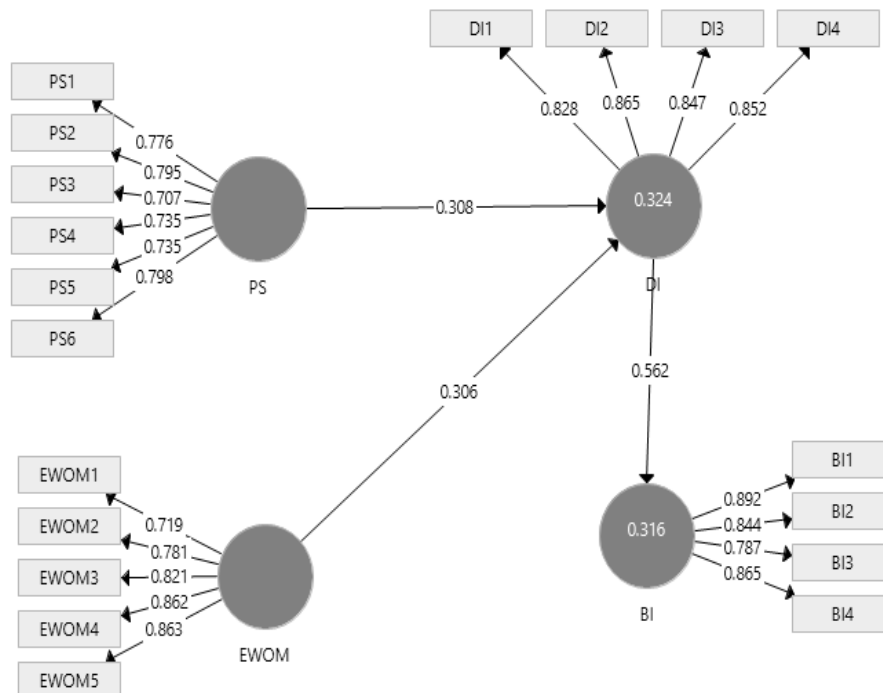| Hypothesis	Path	Beta	t-value	p-value	f^2	VIF	Decision
H1	PS→DI	0.308	3.798	0.000***	0.068	2.06	Yes
H2	EWOM→DI	0.306	4.462	0.000***	0.067	2.06	Yes
H3	DI→BI	0.562	12.583	0.000***	0.462	1.00	Yes
H4	EWOM →DI → BI	0.172	3.944	0.099	0.246	0***	Yes
H5	PS → DI →BI	0.173	3.585	0.092	0.253	0***	Yes

Figure 3. PLS-Path analysis of Beta value and R-square values

The results meant that the destination image of China in the post Covid-19 era will continue to be affected by the perception about safety held by Iranian tourist. Our findings were consistent with the past findings of Hsu et al. (2017). As for hypothesis 2, the study found that eWOM was able to influence destination image consistent with past studies of Jalilvand (2017) and Jalilvand and Samiei, (2012). Undoubtedly, the various sources of information contributing to eWOM is an important precursor to China's destination image in the eyes of tourist in the post Covid-19 era. The findings of the research revealed that destination image was significantly related to tourist intention to travel (H3) with the highest predictive impact. Our results conform to a host of past studies (Bronner and de Hoog, 2020; Kyriakaki et al., 2020) indicating that decision making and future intentions were highly hinged on the image of the particular tourist destination.

In the path relationship for mediating variable (H4 and H5), significant mediating relationships were evidenced. The study found that destination image was successfully able to mediate the relationship between eWOM and intention to travel. Our findings were consistent with the past studies of Nechoud et al. (2021), Andriani et al. (2019) and Farrukh et al. (2022). The final hypothesis (H5) was also supported as destination image fully mediated the relationship between perceived safety and intention to travel which was consistent with the past study of Hsu et al. (2017). This meant that in the post Covid-19 era, tourists are going to continue to be concerned about the destination image of China, and the perceived safety of the locality prior to making their decision to travel. Our study demonstrated the importance of perceived safety and eWOM as predictors of destination image thereby enriching the existing literature on destination image; particularly contributing to the dearth of literature available on perceived safety and destination image. The study also contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical validation on the role of destination image as a mediator in the link between eWOM and visiting intention as well as the link between perceived safety and visiting intentions. The role of destination image particularly in the post Covid-19 era is likely to impact tourist destinations of all nations affecting tourist behavioural intentions. The way the pandemic is contained successfully is going to also affect perceived safety which may have a strong bearing on the image of the destination as well as the resulting behavioural intention consistent with current literature suggesting that people are only willing consider a destination when they felt that the destination is safe and is free from harmful elements (Chaulagain et al. 2019). Hence our study confirmed that perceived safety and eWOM are indeed important stimulus in influencing how people viewed and felt about certain destination which created a certain image in their minds which is our study have been contextualized as destination image (organism), which subsequently affected their intention to travel to the destination (response).

This study provided empirical support to the destination image and behavioural intention model proposed in the study that was based on the S-O-R framework. Although various studies have utilized S-O-R in consumer behaviour and tourism related contexts, studies using the S-O-R model to predict the combined effects of perceived safety, eWOM, destination image and its subsequent effect on behavioural intention in the post Covid-19 era remains limited. Our study therefore supports the applicability of the S-O-R model in explaining tourist behavioural intentions through our findings which revealed that both perceived safety and eWOM (as stimulus) had an effect on destination image (organism) which in turn had a full mediating effect between perceived safety, eWOM and behaviour intention (representing response) in the S-O-R model.

As for managerial implications, our study confirmed that perceived safety, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), destination image, and travel intention are indeed vital factors that can influence travellers' behavioural intentions and decision-making processes. Understanding the relationship between these variables can help tourism organizations and destinations devise effective marketing strategies. As perceived safety is crucial, nations are expected to ensure that they have successfully been able to contain and curb the further spread of the virus in order instil confidence in the tourism sector for the benefit of tourist and various tourism players alike who have been struggling to revive their business due to intermittent lockdowns and mobility restrictions following new waves of the virus reported in many nations around. Governments should take appropriate efforts and make the required investments in safety measures which should be effectively communicated to potential travellers through various communication channels (traditional and electronic). This can include implementing sound and reliable security protocols, enhancing emergency response systems, and creating safety awareness campaigns. By virtue of committing to visitor safety, destinations can alleviate tourists' concerns and enhance their perceived safety and thereby create a favourable impression (destination image) amongst potential travellers. By prioritizing safety measures, effectively communicating them, and creating a safe environment, destinations can enhance their image, alleviate traveller concerns, build trust, stimulate positive travel intentions, and support sustainable tourism. Understanding and addressing the importance of perceived safety is crucial for destination marketers and managers to attract and retain tourists in an increasingly competitive global tourism industry.

Conversely, destination managers and government agencies should leverage on eWOM as a promotional tool for destination, tourism products and service recommendations. Since post disaster communication via social media has been proven to be an effective tool to enhance destination image and visit intention (Hunag et al., 2023), managers should fully exploit social media by way of creative and captivating videos to reinforce positive eWOM and boost destination image to influence tourists travel intentions (Nechoud et al., 2021). Collaborative promotional efforts with social media influencers and famous vloggers (i.e. Nas daily) may be a strategy worth exploring to attract and influence the current generation of travellers that mostly represent the millennials. Apart from being able to create a compelling content that aligns with a nations unique selling points, influencers are able to amplify the reach of positive eWOM owing to their large online following. However, destination managers should ensure that any form of social media reviews, videos or sharing of tourist experiences on social media should be credible as past studies have established that perceived credibility of eWOM can significantly influence behavioural intentions (Teng et al., 2017; Nechoud et al., 2021). Post disaster communication via social media has been proven be an effective tool in destination image and destination management literature. Engaging with travellers through these channels, sharing authentic stories, and promoting user-generated content can create a positive buzz and solicit favourable

eWOM. Encouraging travellers to share their experiences through images, videos, and reviews can create a sense of authenticity and trust. Tourism organizations can run social media campaigns or contests that encourage users to share their content using specific hashtags or tagging the destination's official accounts. This user-generated content can serve as powerful testimonials, showcasing the destination's attractiveness and safety to a wider audience (Kim and Wang, 2020).

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In an attempt to investigate Iranian tourist perceptions pertaining to destination image and their intentions to travel in the post Covid-19 era to China, the study found that perceived safety and eWOM were both important determinants of destination image. The study also found that destination image had a positive effect on tourist intention to travel. The study also indicated that relationship between perceived safety and tourist intentions to travel in the post Covid-19 era is also mediated by destination image. Likewise, destination image also had a mediating effect in the relationship between eWOM and tourist intention to travel. However, the study is certainly not without its limitations. The conceptual model was developed and tested in the context of Iranian tourists who may consider travelling to China in the post Covid-19 era.

The results therefore should be treated with caution when drawing generalizations. The conceptual model should be subjected to further research involving tourist from western counterparts and high-income nations where outbound tourism is growing in order to obtain further validation. A comparative study involving tourists from Western, Asian and African nations will shed better light in truly understanding tourist behavioural intentions and perceptions of destination image in the post Covid-19 era. Future studies could also consider a moderated-mediation approach by adding a moderator such as government commitment and perceived risks. Since Covid related travel restrictions have been lifted and travel and tourism have picked up pace, longitudinal studies tracking changes in perceived safety, eWOM, destination image and travel intentions overtime could provide more insights and perspectives into the evolving nature of post-pandemic tourism behaviour and hence provide a better understanding of the recovery trajectories. As social media influencers have been commonly deployed by companies offering various consumer products and services including tourism, studies specifically investigating the role and impact of social media influencers towards destination image and tourist behavioural intention (Raafat et al., 2023) will certainly be a worthwhile research endeavour.

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