



The 'Insta' effect on the intention to visit a destination: a case for conspicuous consumption?

O efeito 'Insta' na intenção de visitar um destino: um caso de consumo conspícuo?

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Abstract

This study analyzes the influence of expected social return derived from content shared on Instagram on the process of selecting a holiday destination. A research model was tested, entailing the impact of Positive and Negative Attitudes, Subjective Norm, Perceived Control, e-Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) and Social Return on the intention to visit a destination. The findings showed that e-WOM can evoke both positive and negative attitudes, but these attitudes are not antecedents of destination choice. Instead, expected social return, e-WOM and subjective norm directly influence the intention to visit a destination, thus highlighting the importance of expected positive feedback. This paper expands the theory of planned behavior by reinforcing the importance of e-WOM as an antecedent of positive attitude formation. The paper also introduces expected social return via Instagram within the framework of the theory of conspicuous consumption. As a recommendation, destination and tourism managers should use social media marketing to generate hedonic and aspirational value for tourism destinations' positioning.

Keywords: Conspicuous Consumption, Social Media Influence, Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM), Travel Decision-Making, Destination Marketing, Instagram.

Resumo

Este estudo investiga a influência do retorno social esperado, derivado de conteúdos partilhados no Instagram, no processo de escolha de um destino de férias. Para isso, testou-se um modelo que examina o impacto das atitudes positivas e negativas, da norma subjetiva, do controlo percebido, do Boca a Boca Eletrónico (e-WOM) e do retorno social na intenção de visitar um destino. Os resultados indicam que o e-WOM pode gerar tanto atitudes positivas quanto negativas, porém essas atitudes não são determinantes diretas na escolha do destino. Em contraste, o retorno social esperado, o e-WOM e a norma subjetiva exercem influência direta na intenção de visita, ressaltando a importância do feedback positivo esperado. Este estudo contribui para a teoria do comportamento planeado, reforçando o papel do e-WOM na formação de atitudes e introduzindo o conceito de retorno social esperado via Instagram no contexto da teoria do consumo conspícuo. Como implicação prática, sugere-se que gestores de destinos turísticos adotem estratégias de marketing digital que promovam valor hedónico e aspiracional, fortalecendo o posicionamento competitivo dos destinos.

Palavras-chave: Consumo Conspícuo, Influência das Redes Sociais, Boca a Boca Eletrónico (e-WOM), Tomada de Decisão no Turismo, Marketing de Destinos, Instagram.

1. Introduction

Travel decisions are significantly influenced by factors associated with projecting social status, prestige-seeking, and social symbolism attached to destinations (Beall *et al.*, 2021). This phenomenon has its roots in the theory of conspicuous behavior, i. e. using resources to consume goods to display the consumer's social position to others (Patsiaouras & Fitchett, 2012). Social networks (SNs) have introduced a new scenario for conspicuous consumption, making individual choices socially visible (Fox *et al.*, 2018). Conspicuous consumption is evidenced in SNs via the desire for self-promotion (Taylor, 2020). Traveling is considered a conspicuous form of consumption (Boley *et al.*, 2018; Correia *et al.*, 2016), generating the development of a scale for conspicuous consumption when individuals post travel pictures in SNs (Russell *et al.*, 2022).

The social network Instagram is commonly used to express actions of conspicuous consumption (Shah *et al.*, 2023), show status, and generate feelings of envy among other consumers (Nguyen & Tong, 2022). The images posted by tourists on Instagram map hot spots to be visited by other tourists (Paül i Agustí, 2020) and contribute to shaping the destination image (Qian, 2022; Guerreiro *et al.*, 2024). Further, reputation in SN has implications for visit intention (Baber & Baber, 2023). The concept of e-Wom considers



the reputation of an idea, a brand, or a product expressed within consumers' interactions in the digital environment (Rosario *et al.*, 2020; X. Wang *et al.*, 2012). In this sense, 'instagrammability' refers to how attractive holiday photos and videos look and how worthy they are of being posted on Instagram. The value of this concept became an important reason for choosing a travel destination (Ibrahim, 2023; Unger & Grassl, 2020), outweighing other motivations (Daxböck *et al.*, 2021).

Social return refers to the positive feedback travel posts have on SNs (Boley *et al.*, 2018). It is a motivation for ecotourism (Beall *et al.*, 2021) or wine/craft beer tourism (Bachman *et al.*, 2021). As narcissism becomes a mainstream and normalized concept in the context of SNs, it is very important to study the influence of socially symbolic factors on tourism decisions (Moran *et al.*, 2018). While the recently developed conspicuous consumption posting scale considers conspicuous motivations behind the act of posting travel pictures for the sake of status (Russell *et al.*, 2022), the inclusion of e-WOM and social return as antecedents of visit intentions remains unexplored. This paper analyzes the phenomenon by including e-WOM and social return in the context of Instagram. Hence, we aim to extend the current knowledge on motivations to post travel photos on SNs (Russell *et al.*, 2022; Taylor, 2020) and look at the behavioral effect of expected social return from displaying holiday destination photos on SNs, which is a favorable environment for e-WOM.

We designed this research under the lens of the conspicuous consumption theory of Veblen (1994) and the Theory of planned behavior (TPB). The conspicuous consumption theory holds that people spend money on goods and services not for their inherent value but to display social status and wealth. It also provides insights into consumers' motivations and behaviours when purchasing decisions in various domains. TPB, on the other hand, sustains that three factors: attitudes, subjective norm, and behavioral control, determine behavioral intentions. The integration of these two frameworks considers that conspicuous consumption affects the variables of TPB, and such a connection is usually mentioned in the literature, including in the context of social media (Wallace & Buil, 2023). E-WOM is an important driver of TPB constructs and, in light of the conspicuousness of destination choices (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Lee *et al.*, 2021), was included in an expanded version of TPB in this context (Soliman, 2021). We propose an integrated extension of the TPB, including e-WOM and expected social return through Instagram, considering the Conspicuous consumption theory and extant research on the connection between social return and travel intentions (Boley *et al.*, 2018). This expanded research model contributes to extending the knowledge on conspicuousness in the context of traveling and discusses how Instagram is changing tourist destinations by influencing the intention to visit places based on e-WOM and the expectation of social return associated with visiting and posting about these destinations. This topic has direct managerial implications regarding the need to design, adapt and promote tourist destinations to fit the requirements of Instagrammability (Unger & Grassl, 2020).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Intention to Visit a Destination

The process of choosing a vacation destination is an important topic of research (Wong *et al.*, 2017; Kumail *et al.*, 2022; Pan *et al.*, 2021; Pandey & Joshi, 2021). Besides objective factors, such as traveling distance to the destination, trip duration, and associated costs, there are also subjective factors, such as the traveler's personality, culture, reference groups, relationships between individuals and their environments, and perceived risks. In addition, the more fashionable the act of traveling to a particular destination, the more likely an individual is to visit it (Lewis *et al.*, 2013).

TPB considers that an individual's intention and behavior can be anticipated by analyzing attitudes, beliefs, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 2012). This theory, and its expanded versions (Abbasi *et al.*, 2021; Han *et al.*, 2011), have been widely used in the scope of studies predicting intentions to visit a destination (Yuzhanin & Fisher, 2016).

Attitudes are the determinants of intention that describe the psychological tendencies expressed by favorable/unfavorable evaluations of a given behavior (Ajzen, 2012). This effect has been studied in the context of choosing a vacation destination and most literature agrees that tourists' attitude towards a given destination has a direct and positive impact on visit intention (Al Ziadat, 2015; Chien *et al.*, 2012; Hsu & Huang, 2012; Ibrahim, 2023). We followed this assumption in formulating the hypotheses, although older studies contradict these findings (Lam & Hsu, 2006; Sparks, 2007). Possible contextual factors, ie. cultural or geopolitical issues, may explain the not unanimous connection between attitudes and behavior in choosing a vacation destination. Thus, we propose to differentiate between positive and negative attitudes in order to understand whether favorable or unfavorable attitudes have a different impact on the intention to visit. Therefore, we propose the following two hypotheses:

H1: A positive attitude has a positive impact on the intention to visit a vacation destination;

H2: A negative attitude has a negative impact on the intention to visit a vacation destination;

The subjective norm is a social factor that refers to the perceived influence or expectation to either engage in or abstain from performing the behavior (Ajzen & Driver, 1992). This means that the intention to visit a particular destination is influenced by other people's perception of that same destination (Chien *et al.*, 2012; Hsu & Huang, 2012; Lam & Hsu, 2006), therefore individuals are more inclined to select a travel destination that other people consider desirable (Yuzhanin & Fisher, 2016). The evidence in previous literature of the effect of the subjective norm on the intention to visit a vacation destination led to the formulation of the following hypothesis:



H3: The subjective norm regarding visiting a vacation destination has a positive impact on the intention to visit that same destination;

For Ajzen and Driver (1992), perceived behavioral control is the antecedent of intention that refers to the perceived ease/difficulty of engaging in the behavior, taking into account past experiences as well as barriers (Sparks & Pan, 2009). Perceived behavioral control over a range of factors largely predicts intentions to travel to a specific vacation destination (Lam & Hsu, 2006; Yuzhanin & Fisher, 2016). Thus, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H4: Perceived behavioral control has a positive impact on the intention to visit a vacation destination.

SNs improve the visibility of a destination's image (Nautiyal et al., 2023) and can therefore influence users' choices (Tham et al., 2013; Yilmazdoğan et al., 2021). For example, tourists may change their minds about a given travel destination based on Instagram posts (Zhou & Xue, 2022). Nguyen and Tong (2022) have found that access to online-generated content in SNs impacts the intention to visit a given destination, mediated by the desire and attitude towards that destination and envy towards other tourists who have visited it. According to these authors, the attitude towards a vacation destination can be perceived positively or negatively, depending on the user-generated content to which the tourist is exposed. Since envy elicited from exposure to online user-generated content is a driver of visit intention, the anticipation of social return from such a travel experience may also influence this intention, mitigate the unpleasant feeling of envy (Latif et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2019), and elicit envy in others. In this sense, in addition to the constructs of TPB as antecedents of the intention to visit a vacation destination, we also include the effect of social return and the antecedent effect of e-WOM on destination choice.

2.2 The importance of SNs and e-WOM in the tourism sector

SNs play an important role in information search, product/service consumption and sharing of tourism experiences (Chu et al., 2020) and are crucial in shaping tourists' behaviors and attitudes (Lee et al., 2021; Ibrahim, 2023; Liu & Li, 2021; Ballester et al., 2023). Moreover, user-generated content shared on SNs strongly impacts the process of choosing a vacation destination (Cheung et al., 2022; Nguyen & Tong, 2022; Tugores-Ques & Bonilla-Quijada, 2022; Ballester et al., 2023).

Increasingly, tourists like to share their memorable experiences on their SN profiles (Lin & Rasoolimanesh, 2022), influencing other tourists' decision-making process (J. W. C. Wong et al., 2020). This motivation to share can stem from intrinsic or extrinsic factors (X. Wang et al., 2016). However, some clusters of tourists are more prone to use SNs in the tourism sector, as is the case of creators of travel-related content (Amaro et al., 2016). The possibility of gaining and/or maintaining respect and recognition and strengthening and/or bolstering social bonds and self-esteem are examples of personal expectations arising from self-centered motivations (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Oliveira et al., 2020).

e-WOM refers to online communications about consumption targeting other consumers, and its creation and evaluation can be a motivation to reinforce the involvement with the product or to achieve social recognition (Rosario et al., 2020; X. Wang et al., 2012). This means that e-WOM may be connected to consumer behavior outcomes, such as attitudes, social norms and behavior control, and consequently, purchase intention (Ballester et al., 2023; Akbari et al., 2022; Thourmrungrroje, 2014). e-WOM has already been integrated into an expanded version of TPB, validating its effect on attitudes, subjective norms, perceived control and intention to visit (Soliman, 2021).

e-WOM visual resources have significantly grown in importance, and a growing number of photos and videos are used to share personal experiences (Li & Xie, 2020). This is also enhanced by tourists visiting places with mobile devices, intensifying emotions regarding the experience (Kokkinou et al., 2022). Instagram was the first social network to focus primarily on photo sharing (Hooker & Cooper, 2022; Liu & Li, 2021). This trend is predicated upon sharing self-portraits (selfies) so that individuals can not only satisfy their desire to share experiences but also fulfill a much sought-after goal of self-representation (Fox et al., 2018), because photos shared on SNs facilitate social comparison (Lo & McKercher, 2015). The photo in front of a destination's landmark has shifted from a memory of 'I've been here' to the goal of creating social relationships through the message that 'I am here right now and this is the proof' (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016; Lyu, 2016).

The literature shows that user-generated content (UGC), which is one of the forms of e-WOM, significantly impacts attitudes, both positive and negative, depending on the direction of the shared content (Guerreiro et al., 2024; Nguyen & Tong, 2022). e-WOM provided by SN influencers and user reliance on their opinions also affect visit intention (Baber & Baber, 2023; Pop et al., 2022), given the need to follow destination trends and overcome the feeling of envy (Liu et al., 2019). e-WOM also impacts the subjective norm and perceived behavioral control, whose variables contribute to the intention to visit a destination (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H5: e-WOM has a positive impact on positive attitude.

H6: e-WOM has a positive impact on negative attitudes.

H7: e-WOM has a positive impact on the subjective norm.



H8: e-WOM has a positive impact on perceived behavioral control.

H9: e-WOM has a positive impact on the intention to visit a destination.

2.3 Conspicuous Consumption and Social Return

Conspicuous consumption was defined by Veblen (1994) as the act of spending money on unnecessary or luxury goods to gain social recognition (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014; Patsiaouras & Fitchett, 2012) and be perceived as holding a higher status in society (Zheng et al., 2018). The use of SNs can intensify conspicuous consumption (Taylor & Strutton, 2016; Thourmrunroje, 2014) by sharing users' material possessions and lifestyles (Lehdonvirta, 2010). Instagram is the platform of choice for conspicuous consumption, particularly in the age groups between 18 and 30 years old (Shah et al., 2023).

Traveling is a relevant area to study the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption (Bronner & de Hoog, 2018; Russell et al., 2022), and the rise of SNs contributes to its dissemination (Boley et al., 2018). Vacations are an exclusive experience driven by the unique character of destinations, thus translating into happiness and social status (Correia et al., 2020). Tourists develop loyalty to a particular image of a destination based on functional attributes and the destination's ability to provide a suitable venue for the propagation of self-concept, social identity, and lifestyle enhancement (Ekinci et al., 2013). Phillips and Back (2011) mentioned that individuals who value consumption for reasons of social status are more likely to visit destinations associated with prestige or emulate the experiences of others (Pan et al., 2021). In brief, garnering admiration from others is a central reason for people to travel (Ekinci et al., 2013), and the motivations to share travel experiences on SNs are associated with conspicuous consumption (Li, 2020; Russell et al., 2022), particularly in the case of extrovert tourists (G. Wang et al., 2023).

Instagram is perceived as the ideal tool for posting images of a vacation destination (Molinillo et al., 2018; Zhou & Xue, 2022). 'Instagram hikers' are travelers who get inspired by other Instagram users to travel (Hooker & Cooper, 2022). Instagrammability of a certain place is a key factor in choosing a vacation destination (Liu & Li, 2021) since pictures shared in SNs are a concrete proof of such a travel experience (Lyu, 2016).

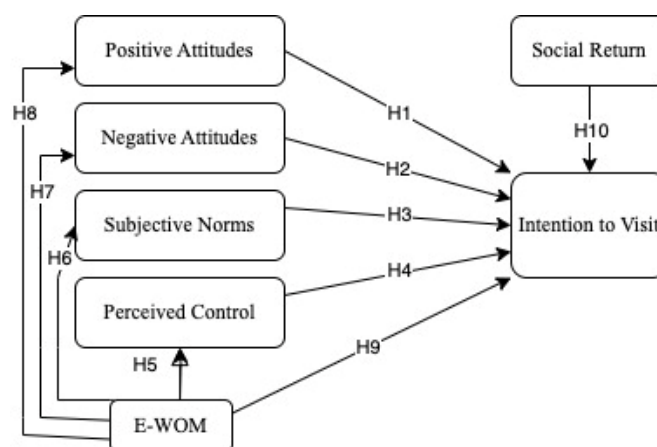
Social return is the amount of positive feedback that travel posts can generate on SNs (Boley et al., 2018). This feedback, in the form of 'likes,' 'comments' and 'shares,' provides immediate gratification and recognition (Sabik et al., 2020). The social return scale created by Boley et al. (2018) measures the influence of early feedback from a SN sharing on the process of selecting a vacation destination. This goes beyond the dimensions of conformity, snobbism, or hedonism (Correia et al., 2016). The studies on social return consider that destinations with high content potential for SN sharing can tap into the hype effect as they increase and decrease in popularity and, consequently, in social value. A tourist's decision to visit a given destination is a complex mix of these two functional attributes that can be transformed into worth-sharing experiences on SNs (Boley et al., 2018). Social return significantly impacts the intention to visit a given tourist destination (Mittal et al., 2022). In fact, the concept of destination coolness considers social perceptions about the hedonic value of places (Kock, 2021). However, the concept of social return through Instagram posts as a driver to visit intention is still untapped.

Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H10: Social return received on Instagram has a positive impact on the intention to visit a given destination.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of the research.

Figure 1 - Research model



Source: Authors.



3. Methodology

To test the proposed model, a quantitative approach was followed. An online questionnaire was developed, and all constructs were operationalized using seven-point Likert multiple-item scales adopted from the literature totaling 30 items, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Operationalization of constructs

Variables (Author)	Items used in the questionnaire
e-WOM (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I often read other tourists' online travel reviews to know what destinations make good impressions on others. 2. To make sure I choose the right destination, I often read other tourists' online travel reviews. 3. I often consult other tourists' online travel reviews to help choose an attractive destination. 4. I frequently gather information from tourists' online travel reviews before I travel to a certain destination. 5. If I don't read tourists' online travel reviews when I travel to a destination, I worry about my decision (R). 6. When I travel to a destination, tourists' online travel reviews make me confident in travelling to the destination.
Positive attitudes (Boley et al., 2018)	How... would travelling to Marrakech be: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. enjoyable 2. worthwhile 3. satisfying 4. fascinating 5. authentic
Negative attitudes (Boley et al., 2018)	How... would travelling to Marrakech be: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. risky 2. scary 3. uncomfortable
Subjective Norm (Hsu and Huang, 2012; Sparks & Pan, 2009)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Most people who are important to me think that I should visit... 2. The people in my life whose opinions I value would approve of me visiting... 3. Most people who are important to me would visit... 4. Friends or family would recommend a visit to...
Perceived behavioural control (Sparks & Pan, 2009)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I feel I have enough money to take a holiday to visit... 2. I feel I have enough time to take a holiday to visit... 3. I feel there is nothing that prevents me from visiting ...
Social return (Boley et al., 2018)	Social media posts of travel to Marrakech make: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The traveler look cool; 2. the traveler more popular; 3. the traveler stand out; 4. the traveler look unique; 5. the traveler look savvy; 6. me envious of the traveler.
Intention to visit (Han et al., 2011)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I plan to visit ... in the future. 2. I am willing to visit ...in the future. 3. I intend to visit ... in the future.

Source: Authors.

Because all scales were originally in English, the questionnaire was translated into Portuguese using the back-translation method (Buil et al., 2012).

We evaluated several alternatives regarding the choice of a destination to develop a questionnaire to test our conceptual model. We selected Marrakesh as the destination for this research, as it was not only a trendy destination on Instagram for our target population at the time of data collection (Instagram users in Portugal) but also due to the promotion of available airline routes to Marrakesh. Based on our analysis of Instagram users, Morocco is a culturally different and exciting country to visit, embodying the extravagance factor required in a study focused on conspicuous consumption and social return. Instagram was the SN platform chosen because of its popularity in terms of conspicuous consumption, especially in the age groups between 18 and 30 years old, as reported in the literature (Shah et al., 2023).

After a pre-test to check for clarity and understandability, we collected the data in February 2020, sharing the online survey through a snowball list of contacts and SNs. Only respondents with an Instagram account could complete the questionnaire.

Data was analyzed using the structural equation modeling package AMOS. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was deemed the best option for data analysis since it allows the assessment of complex models, entailing relationships between observed variables and underlying latent constructs (Hair et al., 2019). We began by assessing the model fit through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and subsequently, we ran structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the model.



4. Results

We obtained a total of 177 valid responses: 81.4% of the respondents are female, 57,6% are between 21-30 years old, 58,2% are students, and 66% attended/graduated from college or had post-graduate education.

To match the thresholds recommended by Schreiber *et al.* (2006), we carried out a number of purification processes, resulting in the exclusion of items from the measurement scales. As a result, a total of nine indicators were removed: one for e-WOM, one for the subjective norm, one for perceived behavioral control, four for social return, and two for positive attitudes.

We checked the reliability of the 14 indicators. The Cronbach's alpha values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Netemeyer *et al.*, 2003), and composite reliability (CR) scores surpassed 0.90 for all the constructs, except for e-WOM, thus providing further evidence of reliability. Similarly, the analysis showed that all standardized factor loadings are significant, exceeding the recommended minimum of 0.50. Average variance extracted (AVE) varies from 0.68 to 0.94, exceeding the minimum cut-off of 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), thus supporting the convergent validity of the latent constructs (Table 2).

Table 2. Factor loadings and indicators of internal consistency and reliability

Constructs	Items	Standardized	Alpha	CR	AVE
e-WOM	E-WOM1	0.813	0.844	0.894	0.680
	E-WOM3	0.908			
Positive attitudes	ATTPOS1	0.948	0.910	0.944	0.849
	ATTPOS2	0.928			
	ATTPOS3	0.722			
Negative attitudes	ATTNEG1	0.716	0.889	0.931	0.818
	ATTNEG2	0.932			
	ATTNEG3	0.858			
Subjective Norm	SN2	0.801	0.896	0.935	0.828
	SN3	0.869			
	SN4	0.913			
Perceived behavioral control	PBC2	0.943	0.920	0.961	0.925
	PBC3	0.874			
Social return	SR2	0.914	0.942	0.972	0.945
	SR3	0.983			
Intention to visit	INT1	0.969	0.947	0.966	0.905
	INT2	0.855			
	INT3	0.905			

Source: Authors.

The discriminant validity of the model is adequate, considering that the square roots of AVE (Table 3) are higher than the correlation values (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 3. Discriminant validity and matrix of correlations

	e-Wom	pos	neg	sub	perc	soc	int
e-Wom	0.825						
Positive attitudes	-0.245	0.921					
Negative attitudes	0.251	0.296	0.904				
Subjective norm	0.077	0.525	-0.430	0.910			
Perceived behavioral control	0.123	0.374	-0.080	0.530	0.962		
Social return	0.237	-0.263	0.148	0.184	0.185	0.972	
Intention to visit	0.010	0.481	-0.278	0.605	0.380	0.237	0.951

Source: Authors.

Note: Values in bold diagonal cells represent the square root of the AVE.

We estimated a structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the proposed hypotheses. We used a variety of fit indexes to assess the overall model fit: normed chi-square (CMIN/DF), goodness of fit index (GFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), normed fit index (NFI); Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), and comparative fit index (CFI). Our results indicate that the proposed model presents a reasonably good fit to the data (Table 4).

**Table 4. Structural modeling adjustment indexes**

Absolute fit measures						Incremental fit measures					Parsimony Measures
Chi-square	df	p	GFI	RMSEA	RMR	AGFI	NFI	IFI	TLI	CFI	Normed Chi-square
288.46	157	0.00	0.86	0.07	0.05	0.81	0.90	0.95	0.94	0.95	1.849

Source: Authors.

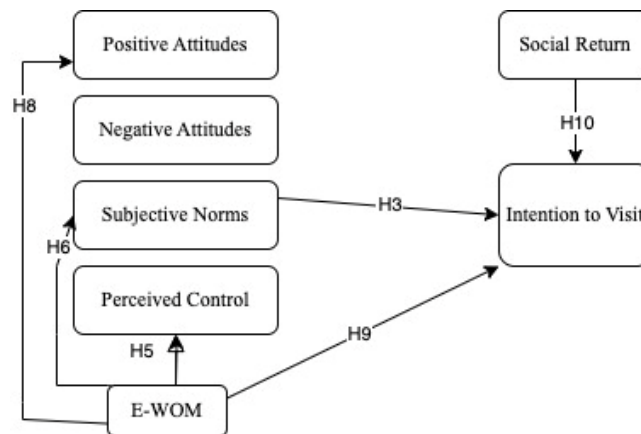
Standardized coefficients show that e-WOM impacts positive and negative attitudes ($\beta = 0.211$ and $\beta = 0.254$, $p < 0.05$, respectively) and perceived behavioral control ($\beta_4 = 0.169$, $p < 0.05$), but not the subjective norm. Hence, hypotheses H5, H6 and H8 are supported, but not H7. Regarding the hypotheses referring to the intention to visit as a dependent variable, only social return (H10; $\beta = 0.116$, $p < 0.05$) and subjective norm (H3; $\beta = 0.683$, $p < 0.05$) have a significant impact. The remaining hypotheses, H1 and H2, are not supported (Table 5). Figure 2 shows the supported hypotheses in the model.

Table 5. Hypotheses test of the proposed structural model

Proposed relationships	Direct effects (stand. coef.)	T values	Hypotheses test
H1 - Positive attitudes \rightarrow Intention to visit	$B_7 = 0.053^{ns}$	0.665	Not supported
H2 - Negative attitudes \rightarrow Intention to visit	$B_8 = 0.001^{ns}$	0.020	Not supported
H3 - Subjective norm \rightarrow Intention to visit	$B_9 = 0.683^{**}$	7.153	Supported
H4 - Perc. behavioral control \rightarrow Intention to visit	$B_{10} = 0.072^{ns}$	0.301	Not supported
H5 - e-WOM \rightarrow Positive attitudes	$\beta_1 = 0.211^{**}$	2.603	Supported
H6 - e-WOM \rightarrow Negative attitudes	$\beta_2 = 0.254^{**}$	3.006	Supported
H7 - e-WOM \rightarrow Subjective norm	$\beta_3 = 0.036^{ns}$	0.433	Not Supported
H8 - e-WOM \rightarrow Perc. behavioral control	$\beta_4 = 0.169^{**}$	2.014	Supported
H9 - e-WOM \rightarrow Intention to visit	$B_5 = 0.120^{**}$	1.992	Supported
H10 - Social return \rightarrow Intention to visit	$\beta_6 = 0.116^{**}$	1.969	Supported
$R^2(\text{Intention to visit}) = 0.511$			

ns=not significant / ** significant ($p < 0.05$)

Source: Authors.

Figure 2. Supported Conceptual Model

Source: Authors.

5. Discussion

In this paper, we address the issue of whether sharing content online about traveling destinations is a modern-day version of conspicuous consumption. Conspicuous consumption refers to the consumption of goods (and services) with the purpose of communicating social position. The conspicuous nature of traveling has been pointed out by several authors (Boley et al., 2018, Hooker & Cooper, 2022, Correia et al., 2016, 2020). More recently, with the advent of social networks, the conspicuousness of traveling has been highlighted by the number of destination-related content in the form of posts, pictures, and videos. This fact illustrates the extent to which traveling is used to signal and leverage prestige and social status. Instagram became a particularly relevant platform for sharing visual content.



Our findings show that the intention to visit a given destination is impacted by e-WOM, social return and subjective norm. The results support the body of research that holds that factors related to social influence impact the intention to travel to a given destination (Beall *et al.*, 2021; Boley *et al.*, 2018; Correia *et al.*, 2016; Hooker & Cooper, 2022). Particularly, this paper underlines that posting on Instagram promotes expectations of gaining social recognition. While previous literature stated that self-promotion through SNs motivates sharing travel photos (Taylor, 2020), our study associates this content creation with e-WOM and expected social return through Instagram as antecedents of choosing a given vacation destination. Also in line with previous findings, e-WOM influences positive and negative attitudes (Ibrahim, 2023; Liu *et al.*, 2019; Nguyen & Tong, 2022; Pop *et al.*, 2022) and perceived behavior control (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Surprisingly, the results do not align with the impact of e-WOM on subjective norm.

Equally unexpected is that attitudes and perceived behavioral control do not impact the intention to visit a given destination, thus corroborating recent findings by Hooker and Cooper (2021) regarding attitudes, and by Chien *et al.* (2012) concerning perceived behavioral control. These unexpected results may be attributed to other constraints limiting the respondents' ability to visit the destination in question, such as available time or costs.

6. Conclusion

We conclude that reputation and social influence through Instagram are important factors in the process of choosing a vacation destination. E-WOM is an important driver of positive attitude formation, and social return affects the intention to visit the place.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions and Managerial Implications

Our results support an extended model of TPB combining the impact of e-WOM and social return through Instagram on the intention to visit a destination. The novelty of this paper lies in the significance of social return via Instagram as an antecedent of visit intention in the framework of TPB.

This study has several relevant implications for theory, managers, and public bodies in the tourism and hospitality sectors. Our results support the impact of e-WOM and Social Return on social media on the intention to visit a destination. This contributes to previous knowledge about the social influence on destination choice. This research considers social media as an important context for enhancing such social influence by promoting e-WOM and Social Return, which have implications for the intention to visit a place. In this sense, managers and public bodies, in addition to the official communication of destinations on SNs, should promote opportunities for tourists to share their travel experiences and make more recommendations online. As our study shows that e-WOM affects attitudes towards the destinations, tourism marketers should clearly understand what is perceived as 'Instagrammable' to create and promote those opportunities and advertise the experiences with the highest level of social return. In particular, enhancing this effect by engaging in influencer marketing and collaborating with digital influencers to promote vacation destinations (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, encouraging influencers to involve their followers in content creation (ex, hashtag campaigns) can further leverage the positive impact of e-WOM and the expected social return on the intention to visit a destination.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

Despite the relevant results obtained, our sample was not random, and the generalizability of the results is limited. The number of responses corresponds to the minimum standards accepted for sample size. The fact that young people mainly constitute the sample is also a limitation. However, conspicuous consumption on Instagram is mainly reported by people between 18 and 30 years old (Shah *et al.*, 2023). We acknowledge that the sample comprising only Instagram users can also skew the results. The limitations for generalization also occur because of the effect of cultural factors on attitudes and visit intention. The survey did not assess the respondents' monthly income or previous Marrakech visits.

Future research may analyze the consumer profiles most influenced by social return and e-WOM because this segmentation process could indicate a preferred target audience for promotion strategies. The expanded TPB model with e-WOM and social return might be applied in hospitality services such as hotels and restaurants. Future studies may analyze the specific characteristics of a destination or hospitality services that are more likely to contribute to social return. Another promising avenue for research is to look at the bandwagon effect and its relationship with social return and engagement (Tugores-Ques & Bonilla-Quijada, 2022).

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