



# **The Effect of e-WOM on Foreign Students' Travel Intention Related to Visiting Tourism Destinations along Thailand's Andaman Coast in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Mediating Roles of Destination Image**

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## **Abstract**

Domestic tourism will play an important role in driving the economy of the country in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aims to investigate the effect of e-WOM on travel intention and the mediating role of the destination's image to determine if the COVID-19 pandemic has caused any changes to this well-established paradigm. Data was collected from two-hundred and eighty foreign students in Thailand using an online questionnaire. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to analyze the data and test the hypotheses related to the confirmatory factors. The foreign students saw Phuket Province as the most popular destination that they intended to visit and Google was the most online platform they used to obtain information about their intended destinations. Results from the SEM revealed positive relationships between e-WOM and travel intention, as well as the positive effect of destination image on travel intention. In addition, not only was the travel intention of the foreign students had influenced by e-WOM, it was also indirectly affected by the tourism destination's image. In terms of implications, our findings would suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened the power of e-WOM and Destination image affect travel intention and that online tourism public relations and destination image development should be enhance to increase domestic tourism along Thailand's Andaman Coast, especially with regard to the target group of foreign students studying in Thailand.

**Keywords:** e-WOM, Destination Image, Travel Intention, Foreign Students, Thailand's Andaman Coast

## **Introduction**

In the digital era, one of the most wide-spread technological transitions regarding information is electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) that is shared on social networks on the internet. In comparison to traditional word-of-mouth, the current concept of electronic word-of-mouth embraces wider audiences through online social media applications, which are usually the form of written messages on the platform channel and are generally posted by experienced, or previous, visitors (Abubakar, Shneikat, & Oday, 2014). In the context of tourism, most tourists evaluate tourism destinations by looking for existing reviews on an internet platform which contains elaborative information about the experiences and feelings of previous visitors, such as a destination's attractiveness, points of interest, and highlights. Thus, e-WOM is the most widely used source of tourism information which influences tourist's behaviors and is considered to be twice as influential as traditional advertisements, especially in tourism industry, because of the intangible nature of tourism services (Casaló, Flavián, Guinalíu, & Ekinci, 2015; Hung & Li, 2007). The social media stats in Thailand from December 2019 to December 2020, show the audience share of the various platforms that people used. The most used platform was Facebook (68.49%), which was followed, in descending order, by Twitter (14.11%), YouTube (6.09%), Pinterest (5.11%), Reddit (4.12%), and VKontakte (1.5%) (Statcounter GlobalStats, n.d.).

In Thailand, the tourism and hospitality industry has received brunt of the negative economic impact from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 which has caused the interruptions for all business in the



sector, with the number of tourists having decreased 46.3% compared to the same period in the previous year (TAT Intelligence Center, 2019). Because of this situation, in Thailand, the government sector is trying to promote domestic tourism in order to drive the economic recovery in the country by launching several campaigns and policies to enhance the tourism sectors. In addition, many tourism businesses have attempted to reboot their business and improve the prevention of COVID-19 to improve tourists' confidence in traveling to the destinations. One of the target groups that is very interesting for rebooting the domestic tourism market is the foreign students who are studying in Thailand because the main group of tourists travelling to the provinces along Thailand's Andaman Coast is foreign tourists. The number of international students coming into Thailand is continuing to increase, and varies between 10,000 and 20,000 international students per year (Authority Scholarships, 2020). Because the COVID-19 pandemic has prevented foreign tourists from other countries from travelling to Thailand as easily as in the past, foreign students already present and studying in Thailand have become a prime target group among foreign tourist.

Provinces along Thailand's Andaman Coast, such as Phuket, Krabi, and Trang, are popular tourism destinations for both Thai and foreign tourists. These destinations have a lot of tourism resources that can impress tourists and motivate their intention to visit. Some of the elements affecting the visiting intention of tourists are the destination's image and information posted about it by previous tourists (Kesumayuda, Mahrinasari, & Rouly, 2020). Domestic tourism in Thailand is also important for supporting tourism businesses and requires the motivating of both Thai and foreign expatriates who live in Thailand to travel and to visit these tourism destinations. While the paradigm of how e-WOM and destination image affect is well established, at this point what is unknown is if the COVID-19 pandemic has caused any changes, and, if so, what those changes are. This leads to the research questions regarding how e-WOM and destination image influence the travel intention of tourists in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, because understanding this will benefit the tourism and hospitality sectors by improving their ability to motivate their customers' travel intentions, especially among the groups of foreign tourists who live in Thailand and able to travel to the provinces along Thailand's Andaman Coast. In this study, the effects of e-WOM and destination image were investigated as the first research objective related to the research question about what the effects of e-WOM and destination image on travel intention actually are. The second research objective was to examine how the destination's image mediated the effect of e-WOM on travel intention.

### **Literature Review and Hypothesis Development**

#### **The Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, foreign tourists who are not required to obtain a visa are still required to obtain a Certificate of Entry and undergo a quarantine period upon entering Thailand for tourism purposes (CNN Travel, 2021). In addition, all foreign tourists must arrange, and show proof of, an insurance policy that covers treatment for COVID-19 up to \$1,000,000 USD. Thus, it is more difficult and complex for them to travel to Thailand because of COVID-19. Meanwhile the foreign expatriates who were staying in Thailand, and foreign students who were studying in Thailand, before the restrictions were put in place, have the potential to travel to tourism destinations.

#### **Travel Intention**

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) people engage in behaviors because of reasoned action, or, in other words, the performance of a behavior is combined with the roles of intentions and perceived behavioral

control (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of travelling, researchers have mainly focused on travel intention, which depends on the attitudes and preferences of the tourists toward a particular tourism destination (Chen, Yeh, & Huan, 2014; Wu, 2015). Travel intention is also influenced by functional and psychological variables, which then lead to actual travel behavior (Krishnapillai & Ying, 2017). The main focus in this study is travel intention, specifically, the travel intentions of foreign students who have been studying in Thailand related to visiting tourism destinations along Thailand's Andaman Coast, and how their travel intentions is affected by the foreign students' perception of the destination's image and the information that they have accesses to through different platforms.

#### **e-WOM and Travel Intention**

Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), which has evolved from traditional word-of-mouth, and is basically a message that someone communicates to other people regarding their experiences and perceptions of a company's product, service quality, comments about product performance, hospitality, and other things via electronic communication channels (Hamdani & Maulani, 2018). This communication can be either a positive or negative message, depending on the feelings and experiences of the senders (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). e-WOM plays a crucial role in providing the incentive for consumers and tourists take action on their intentions and to engage in consumption through online platforms, where tourists are able to seek out elaborative information from reviews, opinions, and the venting of negative feelings by previous customers / guests, especially with regard to intangible products or services such are involved in the hospitality and tourism industry (Hawapi, Sulaiman, Kohar, & Talib, 2017; Kesumayuda et al., 2020). Thus, e-WOM in the context of the exchange of information, is a medium of communication which is shared over the internet via online social networks (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016). In this study, e-WOM is defined as a platform conveying information and opinions regarding tourism destinations over the internet and online networks which the foreign students can search and find this information, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, websites, and other online sources.

According to previous literature on the effects of e-WOM on travel intention, Abubakar & Ilkan (2016) for example, stated that online e-WOM positively influences travel intention in respect to medical tourism. Kesumayuda et al. (2020) pointed out that e-WOM is also positively related to travel intention to visit island tourism destinations, and Krishnapillai & Ying (2017) showed that e-WOM significantly influenced foreign students' intentions to travel in Malaysia. Thus, in the context of this study, perceived and adopted e-WOM may influence travel intention to visit tourism destinations. Given the existing literature, the following hypotheses are proposed.

**Hypothesis 1:** *e-WOM has a significant influence on travel intention to visit tourism destinations.*

#### **Destination Image and Travel Intention**

Destination image, in a general context, is composed of three components, including cognitive, affective, and conative aspects, and is considered a multidimensional construct with regard to the overall knowledge, feelings, and perceptions that a visitor holds about a destination (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Kim, 2018). Firstly, the cognitive dimension refers to the perceived destination image of the visitors regarding its attributes, features, or uniqueness (Agapito, Oom do Valle, & da Costa Mendes, 2013; Chen & Phou, 2013; Hernández-Mogollón, Duarte, & Folgado-Fernández, 2018). Secondly, the affective dimension refers to the feelings of the visitors about the destination, such as pleasure and arousal (Agapito et al., 2013). Finally, the cognitive dimension refers to the actions of the visitors based on their realization of the cognitive and affective images, such as recommending or visiting intentions (Agapito et al., 2013; Prayag, 2009). In this study, the researchers focused on the cognitive



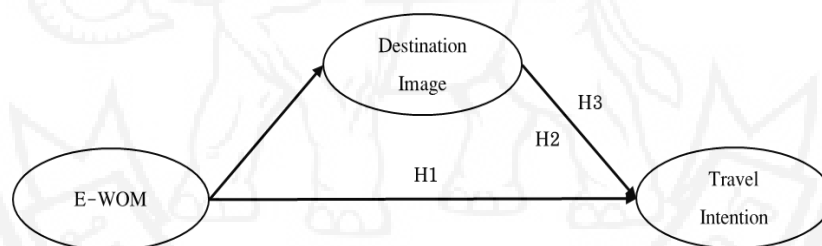
dimension of destination image because it is directly observable and measurable and it reflects the perceptions of the foreign students regarding the tourism destination's image. Previous literature that referred to the influence of a destination's image on travel intention showed that a good destination image positively influences intention to visit (Chaulagain, Wiitala, & Fu, 2019; Liu, Li, Yen, & Sher, 2018; Park, Hsieh, & Lee, 2017; Wu & Liang, 2021). Thus, the following hypothesis is presented.

**Hypothesis 2:** *A destination's image has a significant influence on travel intention to visit that tourism destination.*

#### **Mediating Roles of Destination Image**

The direct effect of destination image on behavioral intentions has been clearly demonstrated by previous researchers that have pointed out the positive effect of the image on tourists' behavioral intentions toward tourism destinations. Whereas, the indirect effects of destination image, which were studied in the past, depended on the context of the researcher's perspective. For example, Kim, Park, & Kim (2016) pointed out that destination image has an indirect impact through spectator satisfaction on revisit intention in relation to an international sporting event, and Wong, Xu, Tan, & Wen (2019) studied the boundary condition of travel satisfaction related to a tourism event that focused on the mediating role of the destination's image. In this study, we focused on the mediating role of the destination's image on e-WOM and the travel intention of foreign students and the effect they may have on the students' tendency to visit tourism destinations if the information they received through electronic word-of-mouth created a good destination image. Thus, the following hypothesis is presented.

**Hypothesis 3:** *A destination's image will have a mediating effect on the relationship between e-WOM and travel intention.*



**Figure 1** Research Framework.

### **Methodology**

#### **Sample Design and Procedure**

The target population for this study was foreign students who were studying in Thailand, had used social media to determine their choice of tourist destination, and had never previously visited the destinations along the Andaman Coast in Thailand. This population is an appropriate target for the context of this study during the COVID-19 pandemic because they are already in Thailand and can travel to the destinations in question. Purposive sampling, which is a type of Non-probability sampling, was chosen as the sampling procedure for the study to provide the best information related to research's aims. Data collection was conducted from October 2020 to December 2020 using online surveys which consisting of a questionnaire originally developed in English after approaching foreign students and asking the screening questions ("Are you a foreign student studying in Thailand", "Have you ever received information about the destinations along Thailand's Andaman Coast", and "Have you ever visited any of the destinations along Thailand's Andaman Coast") through social networks. Two-hundred and eighty respondents



made up research sample in this study. This number is sufficient because the rule of thumb for effective parameter estimation required to run Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) should be 10 times the maximum number of arrowheads pointing at a latent variable (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2014).

### Measures

The online survey questionnaire included multi-item scales to measure each construct in this study. Validated scales from previous studies were identified and adapted to fit the study setting. First, e-WOM was measured using five items that were adopted from studies by Abubakar & Ilkan (2016) and Reyes-Menendez, Saura, & Martinez-Navalon (2019). Items included “When I travel to a destination, tourists’ online travel reviews make me confident in traveling to the destination”; “To make sure I choose the right destination, I often read other tourists’ online travel reviews”; “I frequently gather information from tourists’ online travel reviews before I travel to a certain destination”; “I will follow the suggestions about a destination’s information given by consumers”; and “Tourism destination reviews motivate me to visit”. The respondents were asked to evaluate the e-WOM scale items on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from not at all (1) to very much (7). Second, Perceived Destination Image (PDI) was measured using six items that were adopted from Chaulagain et al. (2019) and Styliadis, Shani, & Belhassen (2017). Items included “Local Attractions”; “Hospitality and Entertainment Service”; “Amenities”; “Social Environment”; and “Natural Environment”. In addition, we added one question on the destination image variable for “Protective Measures for COVID-19” to reflect the current opinion of the respondents after the onset of the spread of COVID-19. The respondents were asked to evaluate the PDI scale items on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from not at all (1) to very much (7). Finally, travel intention to visit (TIV) was measured using three items that were adopted from Chaulagain et al. (2019). Items included “I intend to travel to destinations along the Andaman Coast in Thailand in the future”; “I predict that I will travel to destinations along the Andaman Coast in Thailand in the future”; and “I am willing to visit destinations along the Andaman Coast in Thailand in the future”. The respondents were asked to evaluate the TIV scale items on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from not at all (1) to very much (7).

### Estimation Method

This research is confirmatory research with a quantitative approach. The research sample was 280 respondents who were studying in Thailand, had used social media to determine their choice of tourist destinations, and had never previously visited the destinations along the Andaman Coast in Thailand. SPSS version 23.0 and LISREL version 8.8 were used to conduct the confirmatory factor analysis which was utilized in this study. Estimating and testing structural equation models (SEMs) for the research model were estimated with LISREL, and several goodness of fit indices were evaluated, including Chi-Square statistic/degree of freedom ( $\chi^2/df$ ), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). The goodness of fit for the model in this study produced the following results:  $\chi^2/df = 2.01$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , GFI = 0.91, AGFI = 0.86, CFI = 0.90, NFI = 0.90, and RMSEA = 0.063, which means the model was acceptable.

### Results

As shown in Table 1, two-hundred and eighty responses were provided by 162 women (57.86%) and 118 men (42.14%). Moreover, 45% of the respondents were aged 21–30 years. In terms of the educational level of students, 37.86% of the respondents were studying in university. The most popular Andaman Coast province to





visit among the perspective of the study's target group was Phuket Province (92.86%), which was followed, in descending order, by Krabi (88.57%), Phang-nga (76.43%), Satun (56.07%), Trang (52.14%), and Ranong (29.29%). Whereas, the most commonly online platform used by the respondents for obtain information about a destination was Google (95.36%), which was followed, in descending order, by Facebook (87.17%), Twitter (84.29%), Instagram (72.86%), YouTube (60.36%), Destination's Website (48.21%), and Other Platforms (15.00%).

**Table 1** Demographic Characteristic Profile of Respondents (N = 280)

Variables		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	118	42.14
	Female	162	57.86
<b>Age</b>	20 and below	64	22.86
	21 – 30	126	45.00
	31 – 40	54	19.29
	41 and over	36	12.85
<b>Level of Student</b>	High School	42	15.00
	College	44	15.71
	University	106	37.86
	Graduate School	88	31.43
<b>Preferences of Province along Thailand's Andaman Coast</b>	Phuket	260	92.86
	Krabi	248	88.57
	Phang-nga	214	76.43
	Trang	146	52.14
	Satun	157	56.07
	Ranong	82	29.29
<b>Platforms Used for Online Searches for a Destinations' Information</b>	Twitter	236	84.29
	Facebook	244	87.14
	Instagram	204	72.86
	YouTube	169	60.36
	Destination's Website	135	48.21
	Google	267	95.36
	Others	42	15.00

In terms of validity and reliability testing for the model, internal consistency measures and convergent validity estimates, such as Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ), Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and standardized loadings, were used to ensure that the model fits were reasonable as suggested by Hair et al. (2014, pp. 631–632) regarding the preferred threshold of acceptability for the measurements. Cronbach's alphas were between .82 and .91, which is above the threshold point of 0.7. Composite reliability values ranged from .82 to .95, which is also above the threshold point of 0.7, and AVE values ranged from .60 to .76, which is above the threshold point of 0.5. In addition, standardized loadings were above the threshold of 0.5. Whereas, the discriminant validity was assessed by testing the correlation between variables, as shown in Table 3, and the results revealed that the correlations among variables were below the 0.85 level needed to verify the discriminant validity, as suggested by Kline (2011). The results show that e-WOM still has a significant impact on perceived



Destination Image (DI) ( $r = .831$ ,  $P < .01$ ) and TIV ( $r = .643$ ,  $P < .01$ ). Whereas, perceived DI had a significant impact on TIV ( $r = .517$ ,  $P < .01$ ).

In the context of the foreign students' perspectives, the mean values revealed that the most utilized method of gathering information was using e-WOM from online reviews before traveling (Mean = 6.13). Whereas, although natural environment remained on top of the factors affecting their travel intention (Mean = 6.24) it was now closely followed by protective measures for COVID-19 (Mean = 6.14), which has vaulted ahead of traditional factors such as, in descending order, local attractions, hospitality, and entertainment services, social environment, and amenities.

**Table 2** Validity and Reliability of the Measurement

Scale Items	Loadings	Mean	S.D
<b>Perceived e-WOM (<math>\alpha = .87</math>; CR = .91; AVE = .67)</b>			
When I travel to a destination, tourists' online travel reviews make me confident in traveling to the destination.	.76	5.78	1.02
To make sure I choose the right destination, I often read other tourists' online travel reviews.	.73	5.96	.78
I frequently gather information from tourists' online travel reviews before I travel to a certain destination.	.86	6.13	.94
I will follow the suggestions about a destination's information given by consumers.	.89	5.74	.84
Tourism destination reviews motivate me to visit.	.84	6.08	.83
<b>Perceived Destination Image (<math>\alpha = .91</math>; CR = .95; AVE = .76)</b>			
Local attractions.	.86	6.03	.96
Hospitality and entertainment services.	.85	5.99	.88
Protective measures for COVID-19.	.88	6.14	.74
Amenities.	.91	5.75	.75
Social environment.	.85	5.98	.75
Natural environment.	.87	6.24	.87
<b>Travel Intention to Visit (<math>\alpha = .82</math>; CR = .82; AVE = .60)</b>			
I intend to travel to destinations along the Andaman Coast in Thailand in the future.	.77	6.12	1.03
I predict that I will travel to destinations along the Andaman Coast in Thailand in the future.	.81	6.06	1.04
I am willing to visit destinations along the Andaman Coast in Thailand in the future.	.74	6.11	1.01

**Notes:**  $\alpha$  = Cronbach's Alpha; CR = Construct Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted

KMO = Measure of Sampling Adequacy = .88; Bartlett's Test of Sphericity = 2431.2; df = 91;  $P < .001$

**Table 3** Correlations among Variables

Variables	1	2	3
1. e-WOM	–		
2. Perceived Destination Image	.381**	–	
3. Travel Intention to Visit	.643**	.517**	–

**Note:** \*\* Correlations are significant at the 0.01 level

The structural equation model technique was used to test the hypotheses in this study as follows. Firstly, the R-square value was used to evaluate the explanation of the exogenous variable on the endogenous variable assessed by the variance. Approximately 53% of the variance in travel intention was explained by electronic WOM (e-WOM) and 45% of the variance in travel intention was explained by the destination image, independently, making the interpretation of the path coefficients meaningful. In addition, 62% of the variance in travel intention



was explained by e-WOM and destination image combined. Secondly, the results provided confirmatory support for the hypothesized associations shown in Table 4. Hypothesis 1 predicted e-WOM would have an influence on the travel intention of foreign students. The results confirmed that e-WOM positively influences their travel intention ( $\beta = .641$ ,  $t = 4.468$ ,  $P = .000$ ). This suggests that electronic word of mouth is a crucial element forming the foreign students' travel intention to visit destinations along the Andaman Coast in Thailand ( $H_1$  was statistically supported). Hypothesis 2 predicted that the perceived destination image would have an influence on the travel intention of foreign students. The results confirmed that the perceived destination image positively influences their travel intention ( $\beta = .524$ ,  $t = 2.761$ ,  $P = .009$ ). This suggests that the perceived destination image is an important component influencing the foreign students' travel intention to visit destinations along the Andaman Coast in Thailand ( $H_2$  was statistically supported), which emphasizes that foreign students are more likely to travel to visit destinations when they perceived them as having a good image among the tourist destinations along the Andaman Coast in Thailand.

Finally, the results provided confirmatory support for the hypothesized interaction of perceived destination image as a mediator. In the first step, we investigated the relationship between e-WOM and PDI, which confirmed a positive association between them and was statistically supported ( $\beta = .161$ ,  $t = 2.238$ ,  $P = .033$ ). Next, both e-WOM and PDI were investigated for an association with travel intention. The results of this inquiry confirmed the positive influence of PDI on travel intention ( $\beta = .386$ ,  $t = 2.631$ ,  $P = .013$ ) and e-WOM was still positively associated with travel intention ( $\beta = .112$ ,  $t = 2.337$ ,  $P = .026$ ). The mediating effect of perceived destination image was examined using the Sobel Test, which is recommended by Meule (2019), to evaluate mediation. The results confirmed the partial mediating role of PDI, which had a significantly positive effect on the relationship between e-WOM and travel intention ( $\beta_{e-WOM \rightarrow PDI} = .161$ ,  $SE_{e-WOM \rightarrow PDI} = .071$ ,  $\beta_{PDI \rightarrow TI} = .386$ ,  $SE_{PDI \rightarrow TI} = .084$ ,  $P\text{-value} = .042$ ). This suggests that the perceived destination image's effect on the travel intention of foreign students is a supportive component of an e-WOM tending to increase travel intention to visit destinations along the Andaman Coast in Thailand ( $H_3$  was statistically supported).

**Table 4** Results of Parameter Estimation for the Model (Maximum Likelihood)

Exogenous Variables	Endogenous Variables	Coefficient Estimates	Standard Error	t- Statistics	P-Value	R-Square
e-WOM	Travel Intention	.641	.064	4.468	.000**	.53
Destination Image	Travel Intention	.524	.081	2.761	.009**	.45
<b>Interaction Effect in the Model (PDI as Mediator: Sobel Test Statistic = 2.033, P-Value = .042)</b>						
e-WOM $\rightarrow$ PDI	Travel Intention	.161/.386	.071/.084	2.238/2.631	.033*/.013*	.62

\* Significant at the  $P < .05$  level (two-tailed).

\*\* Significant at the  $P < .01$  level (two-tailed).

## Discussion

This research sought to investigate the effect of e-WOM on the travel intention of foreign students, with an emphasis on the mediating role of destination's image in the light of the COVID-19, the evidence strongly suggests that e-WOM continues to play an essential role when searching for online tourism information, and has become an important component for enhancing foreign students' travel intention to visit destinations along the Andaman Coast in Thailand. When the foreign students receive positive tourism information via electronic word of mouth,





via sources such as Google, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms, they are more likely to travel to the destinations. Thus, this results provide support for previous literature regarding the influence of e-WOM on travel intention (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016; Albarq, 2014; Gosal, Andajani, & Rahayu, 2020; Krishnapillai & Ying, 2017; Rizky, Kusdi, & Yusri, 2017). Online platforms are productive tools that have become important information sources for tourists who tend to travel to the destinations they have researched, especially in the era of technology. In addition, this phenomenon is a reflection of the trend related to changes in the behavior of tourists in the contexts of travel behaviors and how they obtain the information that they base their travel intentions on.

In addition, destination's image has also become a crucial element for tourism destinations to motivate and inspire foreign students to travel to those destinations. Especially the destinations' image related to preventative measures for controlling or preventing the spread of COVID-19. The good image of a tourism destination, for example, local attractions, hospitality, and entertainment services, amenities, social environment, and natural environment, which has the highest impact on foreign students' travel intention to visit destinations along the Andaman Coast in Thailand. However, COVID-19 prevention measures has been catapulted into the second position, barely behind the environmental factor, in the hierarchy that controls this domain. Two most crucial elements of destination image for the foreign students during the COVID-19 pandemic have become the natural environment and protective measures for COVID-19 of the destinations. Although tourists were really impressed by the natural environments of their chosen destination and how fascinating they were, they also needed to be ensured that the destination's providers had good protective measures and screening in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This is generally consistent with previous research about the influence of destination image on the travel intention of visitors (Chaulagain et al., 2019; Jalilvand, Samiei, Dini, & Manzari, 2012; Liu et al., 2018; Park et al., 2017; Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2017; Rizky et al., 2017), but the emergence of COVID-19 prevention as being a prime motivator is a new wrinkle caused by the ongoing pandemic which must be taken into consideration.

Finally, the findings suggest that the foreign students' perceived destination image based on e-WOM has a great influence on their travel intentions to visit destinations along the Andaman Coast in Thailand. Additionally, when they have search for, and find, tourism information disseminated by electronic word of mouth and that creates a good perceived image of the tourism destinations, their intentions to travel will be increased. This mediating effect of the destination's image provides support for previous literature in the context of the roles in travel intention (Kim et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2019). Thus, the travel intention of the foreign students is not dependent on only one factor, but it depends on the combination of several factors.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

In conclusion, our findings reveal that the e-WOM and perceived destination image paradigms continue to have significant influence on the travel intention of foreign students who are studying in Thailand and have never travelled to the destinations along the Andaman Coast in Thailand. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused the destinations' reputations and images for having good COVID prevention practices on place has exploded on the scene and is not the second most important factor affecting destination image among this group of potential tourists. The tourism information about destinations can be easily and rapidly searched via online platforms nowadays, which makes electronic word of mouth one of the social mediators for conveying information through online networks to the receivers. Foreign students are more likely to visit a tourism destination when their receive



or find positive e-WOM when looking for tourism places that are beautiful and impressive, and are reported to have excellent COVID-19 mitigation policies in place, to them because they perceive that the e-WOM will be more up-to-date, honest, and reliable than information provided by traditional advertisers. In spite of the severe effects of the measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 causing the interruption of international travel plans for everyone who wanted to enter Thailand, domestic tourism is still operating and helps to drive the country's tourism and hospitality economic sectors. The image of the destinations is one of several factors which visitors attach great emphasis and importance and priority to because it is easy express and recognize through e-WOM. Additionally, in today's environment, COVID-19 protection policies and programs on the destinations now play a major role in influencing these potential visitors' decisions regarding travel intention. In addition, when foreign students both receive information about a tourist destination via e-WOM and it creates a good image, especially with regard to the natural environment and COVID-19 countermeasures, they are more likely to travel to that tourism destination. In the context of theoretical implications, our findings not only confirm that theory of planed behavior is still valid because it shows that foreign students' travel intention depends on their perceptions of behavioral controls, it also reveals that COVID-19 prevention measures, something that had not been a factor considered in prior research, is now a major factor influencing intention.

As a recommendation, in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, the marketing teams for the tourism destinations along Thailand's Andaman Coast should organize and create revised online public relation programs on all platforms for increasing the distribution and sharing of reviews and the feelings of the visitors who have traveled to the tourism destinations to promote and enhance the destination's perceived e-WOM among the target groups who can visit that emphasize the destinations COVID-19 mitigation strategies and how they create confidence and a feeling of safety among visitors to that destination. For example, e-WOM platforms that can be adopted for engaging potential guests include Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and other social networks. These activities could effectively provide information to groups of foreign students who have never traveled these destinations before and serve to increase their intentions to travel in Thailand during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, improving the destination's image, especially with regard to the protective measures for COVID-19, should be a key issue for the stakeholders with regard to the destinations' ability to present the image of being a highly attractive, safe to visit, tourism destination and, eventually, impress foreign students enough to visit. Thus, during this period, tourism destination providers should take advantage of e-WOM to boost the perceptions of foreign students and enhance their travel intentions in order to help increase incomes and drive business within the tourism and hospitality sectors along Thailand's Andaman Coast in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the interesting findings in this study, there are some weaknesses that need to be discussed. First, the data used in this study only covers a group of foreign students already in Thailand that may be target visitors in the future. Therefore, it is a small target group in the context of Thailand's Andaman Coast tourism sector. In terms of future research, studies should be conducted to explore the effects e-WOM, in light of the changes wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, on other potential sample groups to make the implications of the research constructs more generalizable and beneficial to the tourism sector.



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