Title Visualising the trip: how visual eWOM shapes travel intentions via mental imagery

Visualising the Trip: How Visual eWOM Shapes Travel Intentions via Mental Imagery

Abstract

Purpose - The proliferation of picture and video-based visual electronic word-of-mouth (VeWOM) is gaining popularity. However, few studies have compared the effects of traditional text-based eWOM against next-generation VeWOM. The study fills this gap by drawing on the cognitive theory of multimedia processing and dual coding in investigating the effects of positive and negative VeWOM on travel intentions via mental imagery processing, attitude towards information and perceived message credibility. We further examine the moderating role played by destination image.

Design/methodology/approach - Collecting data from Zambian frequent travellers and using a 2x2 between-subjects factorial design, PLS-SEM was employed to test research hypotheses.

Findings - The results show that when compared to text-based eWOM, both positive and negative VeWOM significantly influence tourists' travel intentions.

Implications - These findings advance understanding of VeWOM effects on tourist behaviours. Destination marketers should leverage user generated visual content to build trust and manage negative VeWOM to reduce reputational risks.

Originality/value - Unlike previous papers that solely focused on traditional text-based eWOM, we study new-generation VeWOM and make several contributions towards eWOM, tourism, hospitality and mental imagery processing literature.

Keywords: eWOM, VeWOM, visual cues, eWOM valence, travel intention, mental imagery processing

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

With the rapid growth of online travel platforms, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) has emerged as a pivotal information source for travellers, often perceived as more trustworthy than traditional advertising (Litvin et al., 2008; Teng et al., 2014; Wei et al., 2025). Among its forms, user generated visual content, or visual eWOM (VeWOM), conveys richer, more immersive experiences through images and videos (Xu et al., 2015; Filieri et al., 2021b; Nicolau et al., 2024). Yet VeWOM's impact on travel intentions remains underexplored, particularly in developing markets (Banerjee et al., 2025). Understanding this influence is crucial because visuals enhance mental imagery processing, making destinations more tangible and desirable (Cai et al., 2024; Lee & Gretzel, 2012; Elliott, 1973).

While credibility has been extensively examined in text based eWOM (Filieri et al., 2021a; Tsao et al., 2015; Li et al., 2025), its role in VeWOM remains insufficiently understood. Similarly, message valence (positive vs. negative) is well studied in text based eWOM (Bigne et al., 2019; Filieri et al., 2021c; Yang et al., 2018) but not in visual contexts, where positive visuals may evoke desire and negative visuals deter travel (Jalilvand et al., 2017). Additionally, existing research has focused on developed markets, leaving a gap in developing economies (Khan et al., 2018).

To address these gaps, this study investigates how user generated VeWOM influences travel and hospitality decisions, emphasising the moderating role of destination image. Grounded in cognitive theory of multimedia learning (Mayer, 2002) and dual coding theory (Paivio, 1986), we use a 2 (picture vs. text) × 2 (video vs. text) factorial design to assess positive (Study 1) and negative (Study 2) VeWOM effects on mental imagery, credibility, and travel intention. Our findings from 375 Zambian frequent travellers, analysed via PLS SEM, offer novel insights into VeWOM in underrepresented markets.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 eWOM and VeWOM in the tourism and hospitality context

The influence of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) on consumer decisions in tourism and hospitality is well established. Yet the digital landscape has shifted decisively towards visual user generated content (Gan et al., 2023). Recent reviews confirm the significant impact of visual eWOM (VeWOM) on consumer trust and decision making (Kumar et al., 2025), but critical gaps remain in understanding its mechanisms. Visual elements influence tourist intentions (Teng et al., 2014; Filieri et al., 2021b). VeWOM shapes purchase intentions by enhancing mental imagery vividness and social presence (Vazquez et al., 2023), creating lifelike destination representations (Elliott, 1973; Lee & Gretzel, 2012). Short video formats have further strengthened VeWOM's influence on travel attitudes (Gan et al., 2023). VeWOM affects emotions and mood, with visual stimuli impacting consumer attitudes positively and negatively (Wadlinger & Isaacowitz, 2006). Extant research often applies text centric models to visual phenomena, failing to explain how visual and verbal channels jointly shape persuasion. Message valence remains underexplored in multimedia contexts (Pires et al., 2025). This study addresses these gaps by investigating how pictorial and video VeWOM of positive and negative valence influence travel intentions.

2.2 Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (CTML)

Mayer's (2002) multimedia learning theory posits that combining verbal and visual information enhances understanding. This supports the notion that VeWOM, which integrates images and videos with text, facilitates mental imagery processing (Lee & Gretzel, 2012). Richer sensory input leads to better retention and cognitive engagement, making multimedia formats more effective than text alone (Miller & Stoica, 2004). Visual stimuli activate multidimensional mental imagery, enhancing comprehension (Vazquez et al., 2023). Recent

developments in immersive technologies, such as virtual and augmented reality, further deepen consumer learning and emotional connection in tourism contexts (Li et al., 2023; Shen, 2023).

2.3 Dual Coding Theory (DCT)

Paivio's (1986) dual coding theory holds that cognition operates through two interdependent systems: verbal and visual. Text based eWOM activates the verbal system, while visual VeWOM stimulates the non verbal system, enhancing recall and persuasiveness (Filieri et al., 2021b). Video based eWOM influences consumer perceptions more effectively than static images or text alone (Filieri et al., 2023), and integrating visual, auditory, and textual elements increases cognitive engagement and emotional resonance (Shen, 2023), supporting deeper engagement and stronger purchase intentions (Paivio, 2013; Gan et al., 2023).

While CTML and DCT provide robust frameworks for understanding multimodal information processing, complementary perspectives such as social influence theory (Latané, 1981) and the Heuristic Systematic Model (Chaiken, 1980) can further capture how VeWOM shapes trust and behavioural intention. Recent studies using the Stimulus Organism Response framework show that VeWOM's effect on purchase intention is mediated by internal cognitive and affective states (Banerjee et al., 2025). Visual eWOM enhances perceived credibility, which drives booking intentions (Wei et al., 2025; Banerjee et al., 2025), while information adoption mediates the relationship between visual eWOM quality and purchase decisions (Haq et al., 2025). This validates our focus on mental imagery, credibility, and attitude as central mediators of travel intention.

2.4 VeWOM

Visual information plays a pivotal role in message retention and persuasion (Lin et al., 2012), with pictorial elements often outperforming text in recall and attitude formation (Pieters & Wedel, 2004; Babin et al., 1992). Within hospitality and tourism, the full impact of VeWOM

on consumer decision making remains underexplored (Miller & Stoica, 2004; Walters et al., 2007; Lee & Gretzel, 2012). Emerging research highlights how immersive experiences (Mladenović et al., 2024), AI driven content, and algorithmic curation amplify VeWOM's persuasiveness and reach (Shen, 2023; Gan et al., 2023). Because pictures enable consumers to imagine travel experiences, combining textual and visual elements enriches information. Accordingly, the following is hypothesised:

H1a: Positive pictorial consumer reviews on a destination website will have a positive influence on mental imagery processing.

H1b: Negative pictorial consumer reviews on a destination website will have a negative influence on mental imagery processing.

Evidence indicates that perceived eWOM credibility significantly affects purchase intention (Ismagilova et al., 2020). VeWOM in pictorial form enhances message persuasiveness (Filieri et al., 2021b), and consumers often use site design as a credibility cue. Those presented with visual information tend to perceive it as more credible than text alone. Thus, pictorial VeWOM can shape consumers' credibility perceptions. As a result, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: Positive pictorial consumer reviews on a destination website will positively influence perceived credibility

H2b: Negative pictorial consumer reviews on a destination website will negatively influence perceived credibility

2.5 Video and Audio Information

Multimedia reviews enhance persuasiveness through visual, verbal, and auditory stimuli (Lee & Gretzel, 2012). Video based reviews improve working memory and trust (Jiang & Benbasat, 2007), with short video content strongly impacting travel intentions via visual storytelling (Gan et al., 2023). Video offers richer information than text (Zhang, 2003), influencing attitudes and intentions (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). Mental imagery enables tourists to experience destinations through their mind's eye (Elliott, 1973; Lee & Gretzel, 2012). Emerging AI generated content, interactive media (Shen, 2023), and algorithmic personalisation (Li et al., 2023) further enhance engagement, while user generated narratives foster trust (Mladenović et al., 2024). Thus, we hypothesise:

H3a: Positive video consumer reviews on a destination website positively influence mental imagery processing

H3b: Negative video consumer reviews on a destination website negatively influence mental imagery processing

Adaval et al. (2007) argued that multimedia in stories enhances perceptual links, increasing believability. In eWOM, credibility affects attitude and behavioural outcomes (Shome, 2021). Contemporary models confirm that eWOM valence impacts brand attitudes and purchase intentions, but this relationship is moderated by credibility (Wei et al., 2025; Banerjee et al., 2025). These challenges applying text-based negativity effects to visual content. The richer, contextual nature of pictures and videos may alter credibility assessments for negative versus positive messages (Nicolau et al., 2024). This study tests these differential effects across text, picture, and video formats. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4a: Positive video consumer reviews on a destination website positively influence perceived credibility

H4b: Negative video consumer reviews on a destination website negatively influence perceived credibility

2.6 Mental Imagery Processing

Mental imagery processing influences consumer attitudes and behaviours (MacInnis & Price, 1987). Visual elements in online reviews heighten engagement and decision making (Filieri et al., 2021b), and platforms like Instagram and TikTok enhance travel aspirations through visually rich VeWOM (Li et al., 2023). Augmented and virtual reality enable immersive destination experiences (Shen, 2023), while AI driven recommendation systems personalise content, increasing persuasiveness (Gan et al., 2023). As sensory rich experiences become more prevalent, mental imagery processing plays a central role in consumer decision making. Based on these findings, we propose:

H5a: Positive mental imagery processing will positively influence the attitude toward information

H5b: Negative mental imagery processing will negatively influence attitude towards information

Kim and Lennon (2008) found that visual information in online apparel shops significantly affects product attitudes. Visual information also improves decision quality (Lurie & Mason, 2007). Drawing on vividness, vivid information influences consumer judgment and behaviour more strongly than non vivid information (Lee et al., 2010). Accordingly, individuals exposed to pictorial eWOM exhibit more vigorous responses than those viewing text only messages

(Cheung et al., 2009a; Lee et al., 2010). Consumers are also more likely to adopt presented information due to the attitudes formed (Cheung et al., 2009a). Thus, it is hypothesised that:

H6a: Positive attitude towards information will positively influence travel intention.

H6b: Negative attitude towards information will negatively influence travel intention.

2.7 Perceived Credibility

eWOM credibility influences purchase decisions (Ismagilova et al., 2020), and consumers regard visually rich reviews as more persuasive and credible. Short form video eWOM boosts credibility perceptions through enhanced realism and engagement (Cheng & Ho, 2015; Gan et al., 2023). AI generated and influencer driven content, along with platform reputation and engagement metrics such as likes and shares, further shape credibility assessments (Shen, 2023; Filieri et al., 2023). These evolving factors require a more nuanced understanding of VeWOM's impact on consumer decision making. Based on this, we hypothesise:

H7a: Positively perceived credibility generated through VeWOM positively influences travel intention.

H7b: Negatively perceived credibility generated through VeWOM negatively influences travel intention.

2.8 Destination Image

Destination image, shaped by cognitive and affective perceptions, influences travel decisions (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). It includes tangible and intangible elements such as environmental attributes, cultural representation, and infrastructure. Social media based VeWOM significantly alters destination perceptions (Pereira et al., 2022), and digital platforms

enable real time image construction (Li et al., 2023). Immersive technologies like AR and VR allow virtual destination experiences, reshaping perceived image before travel (Shen, 2023). Thus, destination image has become a fluid, interactive construct influenced by multimodal content and personalised recommendations. Accordingly, we propose:

H8a: Positive destination image moderates the relationship between mental image processing and attitude towards information.

H8b: Negative destination image moderates the relationship between mental image processing and attitude towards information.

Perceived credibility influences reliance on eWOM communications (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). A positive mental image strengthens the relationship between perceived credibility and travel intention, as individuals with favourable images are more likely to trust the information, resulting in higher travel intention. Conversely, a negative destination image weakens this relationship, as individuals may question information credibility, leading to lower travel intention (Litvin et al., 2008; Su et al., 2022). Thus, the following is proposed:

H9a: Positive destination image moderates the relationship between perceived credibility and travel intention.

H9b: Negative destination image moderates the relationship between perceived credibility and travel intention.

Attitude towards information shapes evaluation and perception (Ajzen, 1991). A positive destination image strengthens the relationship between attitude towards information and travel intention, as individuals are more likely to act on the information (Liang & Lai, 2023). Conversely, a negative image weakens this relationship, as unfavourable destination

perceptions lead individuals to discount the information, resulting in lower travel intention (Ong et al., 2023). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H10a: Positive destination image moderates the relationship between attitude towards information and travel intention.

H10b: Negative destination image moderates the relationship between attitude towards information and travel intention.

Based on the proposed hypotheses, the research theoretical framework is depicted in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

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3. Methods

3.1 Overview of Experiments

This study examines the effects of text-based eWOM against VeWOM using a 2 (picture vs. text) x 2 (video vs. text) between-subjects factorial design to determine the effects of positive (Study 1) and negative (Study 2) picture- and video-based stimuli on mental imagery processing and message credibility, ultimately shaping attitudes toward information and travel intention. We employed a 2 (Picture: Present vs. Absent) × 2 (Video: Present vs. Absent) between-subjects factorial design for each valence condition. This resulted in four experimental cells per valence: 1) Text-only (control), 2) Text + Picture, 3) Text + Video, and 4) Text + Picture + Video. Study 1 used positive valence across all cells; Study 2 used negative valence across all cells. This design allows for a clean comparison of the unique and interactive effects

of pictorial and video VeWOM against text-based eWOM. Variance-based Structural Equation Modelling (VB-SEM) was used to assess the structural relationships and measurement models.

3.2 Stimuli and Valence Check

Two experiments used carefully produced stimuli to test the hypotheses. Stimuli included pictorial information (positive or negative valence) featuring experiential attributes such as accommodation and flowing water, as well as video content in showreel style with audio narration. These reflected authentic user generated traveller experiences. Stimuli were validated through a rigorous, multi stage procedure to ensure methodological rigor and ecological validity, ruling out confounding variables related to image content. Within each valence condition, the only systematic variation was the presence or absence of the visual medium itself.

First, Content Sourcing and Expert Panel Review: Authentic user-generated content related to Zambian tourism and hospitality was sourced from platforms like TripAdvisor and Instagram. A panel of five experts in tourism, hospitality marketing, and consumer behaviour evaluated this pool for realism, clarity of valence (positive/negative), and relevance to core hospitality and tourism experiences (e.g., accommodation quality, food and beverage, attractions, service environments). From this pool, a standardized set of experiential attributes was defined for all conditions: Accommodation, Food & Beverage, Memorabilia/Souvenirs, and Natural Attractions (e.g., waterfalls).

Second, Stimuli Construction and Standardization: For the positive textual review, a coherent narrative praising four attributes was created. For the negative condition, the same structure was used with inverted sentiment (Xu et al., 2015). Visual stimuli were constructed to directly illustrate the specific attributes (Bui et al., 2025). For the no picture or no video

conditions, the textual review remained identical; the visual component was simply omitted (Xu et al., 2015; Chu et al., 2025). This design ensures that outcome differences are attributable to the presence and type of visual cue, not to discrepancies in the described experience.

Third, pre-testing for valence and authenticity: A pre-test was conducted with 32 frequent travellers (16 per valence condition) to assess the perceived valence and authenticity of the integrated stimulus sets (text+image, text+video, text-only). Participants were asked to identify the review's valence and rate its realism (Haq et al., 2025). The pre-test confirmed the manipulations were successful and perceived as intended, with high inter-rater reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.89 for valence perception). Furthermore, the pre-test confirmed that the visual content for a given valence was consistently interpreted (e.g., the "waterfall without water" in the negative condition was unambiguously perceived as a negative depiction of a dry attraction, matching its textual description).

Fourth, Pilot Testing and Final Validation: The full experimental design, including attention checks and the survey flow, was pilot-tested. Feedback led to refinements in question clarity and cultural appropriateness for the Zambian context. This comprehensive process ensured that the stimuli are valid, the manipulations are robust, and the collected data reliably reflects the impact of VeWOM format rather than extraneous content differences. Appendix 1 provides sample stimuli from this validated set.

3.3 Participants, Ethical Considerations and Manipulation Procedure

The study received ethics approval from the lead author's university and complied with its Research Ethics Policy, international standards, and host country protocols. Participants provided informed consent, were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and no personal

data was collected. Participation involved no potential risks. All data were securely stored on encrypted, university approved systems, accessible only to the research team, and used exclusively for academic purposes in compliance with the Data Protection Act, GDPR, and relevant local regulations.

Participants answered eligibility questions. A total of 375 Zambian residents aged 18 to 45 took part. Sample size was determined using GPower 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007) for a 2×2 between subjects factorial design. An a priori power analysis (effect size 0.25, α 0.05, power 0.80) indicated a required sample of 128 per study (Wei et al., 2025). Our final sample of 375 exceeded this, ensuring robust statistical power. To ensure relevance, participants were screened as frequent travellers who regularly used online destination platforms such as hotel booking and travel review sites for travel inspiration and decision making (Chu et al., 2025). This purposive sampling approach ensured the sample possessed the key characteristic of reliance on online information for travel, enhancing validity of findings for this growing consumer segment in developing markets (Bui et al., 2025).

Participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions. For VeWOM, they viewed positive or negative pictures, videos with audio, or both. Positive or negative textual eWOM was also randomly assigned. Participants imagined themselves as tourists searching for a holiday destination and encountering a consumer review. After exposure, they identified the review's valence. Incorrect responses (e.g., labelling a negative review as positive) automatically terminated the survey. This ensured data integrity and participant awareness of contextual elements in consumer reviews.

Pre tests verified manipulation reliability. Experimental links were shared with five consumer behaviour experts and 32 tourism consumers (16 positive, 16 negative stimuli).

Feedback refined the questionnaire for clarity, ethnicity, gender, culture, and language, ensuring cultural sensitivity and contextual appropriateness for a developing market. Appendix 1 provides a sample of the study stimuli.

3.4 Measures

To measure the research constructs, validated scales from previous studies were adapted. Mental imagery processing was measured using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) adapted from Miller et al. (2000), and Lee et al. (2012). This scale captured dimensions such as vividness, valence, quantity, and modality. Perceived credibility was assessed using five items adapted from Xu et al. (2015), measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = very low, 7 = very high). Similar scales have been successfully applied in prior studies (Xu et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2012; Filieri et al., 2021b). Attitude toward information was measured using five items on a 7-point Likert scale, based on MacKenzie and Lutz's (1989) value, pleasure, and importance dimensions. These scales were further validated by Lee et al. (2012) and adapted by Tang et al. (2012) to fit consumer purchase intentions. Finally, travel intention was measured using four items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely), adapted from Xu et al. (2015), Jin et al. (2014), and Chen et al. (2016). These measures have been widely employed in previous studies to assess purchase and travel intentions.

4. Analysis and Results

The research model used observed variables. Variance based Structural Equation Modelling (VB SEM) was selected for analysis, following prior experimental research on mental imagery, video reviews, and VeWOM credibility (Lee et al., 2012; Xu et al., 2015). Partial Least Squares SEM (PLS SEM) was chosen due to factors such as non normal or coarsely measured item level data, sample size requirements, and unreliability (Hair et al.,

2011). To validate the reflective measurement model, we assessed internal consistency, indicator reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity using factor loadings, reliability analysis, construct validity, Fornell and Larcker criterion, cross loadings, and the heterotrait monotrait ratio (HTMT) (Straub et al., 2004; Goodhue et al., 2012). Both positive and negative predictor variables were used to assess the structural models of experiment 1 and experiment 2. Model fit was evaluated using variance explained (R^2), effect size (f^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2) (Hair et al., 2011; 2016; Lee et al., 2012). Analyses were performed using SmartPLS software (Ringle, Wende & Will).

4.1 Validity and reliability

To ensure construct validity and reliability, measures were assessed (Hair et al., 2007). Internal consistency reliability met thresholds, with Cronbach's Alpha (CA) exceeding 0.7 for all constructs (Hair et al., 2011). Composite reliability ranged from 0.876 to 0.969, and CA from 0.824 to 0.957. Convergent and discriminant validity were assessed using Fornell and Larcker criterion, cross loadings, and the heterotrait monotrait ratio (HTMT) (Hair et al., 2011; 2016). Average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.558 to 0.886, exceeding the 0.5 threshold, confirming convergent validity (Hair et al., 2011). Discriminant validity was supported as the square roots of AVE exceeded correlations with other constructs, satisfying Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion. These findings strongly support discriminant validity.

4.2 Experiment 1: Assessment of positive VeWOM

Figure 2 shows the structural model for experiment 1. The findings indicate that paths yielded significant parameter estimates (i.e., H1a, H2a, H3a, H4a, H5a, H6a, H7a) and the results for the positive predictor variables indicated that mental image processing, perceived credibility of information and attitude towards information can explain 46.1% of the variance in travel

intention. According to the results of the blindfold procedures, the positive predictor variable's predictive relevance measure was 0.216; 0.028; 0.122 and 0.401, respectively. In the context of the impact of positive pictorial and video reviews (VeWOM) positively impacting mental imagery processing H1a ($\beta = 0.780$, $t = 4.466$, $p = 0.000$) and H3a ($\beta = 0.573$, $t = 2.674$, $p = 0.004$; $\beta = 0.454$, $t = 2.016$, $p = 0.022$) are supported. In the tourism and hospitality context, this implies that when mental imagery processing is evoked by positive consumer reviews with visuals such as a picture or video reviews supported by an auditory item, a consumer's recall capacity is greater (Frick 1984; Lee et al. 2012). This result theoretically validates that tourists learn more when they receive relevant verbal and visual stimuli rather than just verbal information (Pavio 1971; Mayer 2002; Lee et al., 2012).

Perceived credibility plays a significant role in consumer decision-making using online information. Hypothesis H2a ($\beta = 0.581$, $t = 3.038$, $p = 0.001$) and H4a ($\beta = 0.373$, $t = 1.879$, $p = 0.030$; $\beta = 0.086$, $t = 0.417$, $p = 0.338$) are also supported regarding a positive impact of video and pictorial consumer reviews on the perceived credibility of VeWOM. According to Filieri et al. (2015), visual cues facilitate information processing by being distinctive and contextualised without adding cognitive load. Consumers are likely to travel based on positive visual and narrative information, as it is more believable (Filieri et al., 2020). Fellow tourists thus make informed decisions based on the positivity of VeWOM available on destination websites. According to Lee et al (2012), evoked mental imagery leads to communication effects such as attitude formation. H5a ($\beta = 0.226$, $t = 4.567$, $p = .000$) results positively ascertain the effect of mental imagery on attitude towards information. The results confirm that pictures or sounds in a narrative enhance story processing and mental representation compared to text alone. Dual coding theory (Paivio, 1991) suggests mental imagery is more robust with multiple visual cues, motion pictures, and sound (Filieri et al., 2020). In this study, adding sounds to

pictures and videos enriched information, facilitated immersion, and encouraged more thorough processing of tourism content (Lee et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2015; Filieri et al., 2020).

H6a ($\beta = 0.392$, $t = 3.575$, $p = .000$) validated a positive relationship between a positive attitude towards visual information and travel intention. Visuals of the hotel room, memorabilia, food, and an outdoor experience aided the study (Figure 1). The results show that consumer decision-making is enhanced by processing visuals and not text-only, thus making accurate judgments. The vivid information influenced the judgment and behaviour of the consumers in this case (Lee et al., 2010). Theoretically, this aligns with the assumptions of the mental imagery framework as attitude is a crucial motivator of behavioural change (Lee et al., 2012). Positive attitudes increase information's effectiveness (Filieri et al., 2020). Thus, consumers' travel intentions are positively influenced by their attitudes towards information. Positive VeWOM positively impacted perceived credibility at H2a and H4a. Consequently, the positively perceived credibility of information was validated as a strong predictor of travel intention at H7a ($\beta = 0.207$, $t = 2.906$, $p = 0.002$). Images, videos, and sounds enhance stories by improving perception and realism. Adaval et al. (2007) argue these elements increase coherence and credibility. The results confirm that positive VeWOM positively impacts travel intention through favourable destination perceptions.

A direct relationship exists between perceived credibility and purchase choices (Litvin et al., 2008; Park et al., 2008). For credence goods, eWOM positivity is more important than for search goods (Tsao et al., 2015). Mixed valence user opinions are perceived differently by consumers (Kaushik et al., 2018). Image and text can influence source credibility and product perception, affecting purchase likelihood (Cheng et al., 2015). Thus, when consumers perceive

VeWOM positively, they are more likely to use the information for travel decisions. Figure 2 shows the hypothesised structural model paths with all significant parameter estimates.

Insert Figure 2 about here

4.3 Experiment 2: Negative VeWOM

Figure 3 depicts the structural relationship between the constructs of Experiment 2. Unlike experiment 1, not all paths yield significant parameter estimates (i.e., H1b, H2b, H3b, H4b, H5b, H6b, H7b). For the negative predictor, mental image processing perceived credibility of and attitude towards information can explain 51.2% of the variance in travel intention. Meanwhile, mental image processing explains a 66.2% variance in attitude towards information, with predictive relevance measures (Q^2) of 0.218; 0.008;0.112, and 0.401. In the context of the impact of negative pictorial and video reviews (VeWOM) negatively affecting mental imagery processing H1b and H3b were evaluated. H1b predicted that negative pictorial consumer reviews on a destination website would negatively affect mental imagery processing. The result does not support this hypothesis (β = -0.386, t = 1.812, p = 0.035). The non-significant effect of negative pictorial reviews on mental imagery processing (H1b) may be attributed to desensitisation or scepticism among travellers. Unlike videos, static images might not convey the intensity of negative experiences effectively, leading to weaker mental imagery. This finding aligns with prior research suggesting that the impact of negative eWOM is contingent on the medium's vividness (Filieri et al., 2021b). On the other hand, mental imagery processing was predicted to be negatively affected by consumer video reviews on destination websites through H3b (β = -0.620, t = 4.358, p = 0.000; β = -0.520, t = 2.619, p = 0.004) and

was validated by the results. Video in consumer reviews provides better mental recall than textual reviews due to motion picture and sound narrations. However, negative review videos harm mental imagery, as dissatisfaction portrayed by other tourists can negatively impact potential tourists' perception of the destination.

Hypothesis H2b (β = - 0.125, t = 0.516, p = 0.303) and H4b (β = -0.357, t = 1.913, p = .028; β = 0.042, t = 0.198, p = 0.421) are supported regarding the negative impact of video and pictorial consumer reviews on the perceived credibility of VeWOM. A negative statistical correlation result confirms that videos and pictures of a destination influence the image and the destination capital emotion (Filieri et al., 2021); Attitudes and interaction of tourists (Lee et al., 2012); tourists' photos have cognitive and affective latent attributes that influence their emotions (Filieri et al., 2021) and destination's ability to attract consumers (Kim et al., 2015). This finding aligns with Lin et al. (2012), Xu et al. (2015), and Kaur et al. (2020), who also find that consumers' perception of credibility is significantly affected by visual information in eWOM. Since mental imagery leads to communication effects, such as attitude formation. H5b (β = 0.229, t = 4.653, p = 0.000) results validated the effect of negative mental imagery on attitude towards information. Results show that pictures or sounds in a narrative enhance story processing and mental representation compared to text alone. This aligns with cognitive theory of multimedia learning (Mayer, 2002), confirming that deeper understanding is retrieved through multimedia such as video, sound, and pictures. Additionally, H6b (β = 0.392, t = 3.573, p = .000) validated a negative relationship between positive attitude towards visual information and travel intention. Results affirm that negative attitudes towards information negatively influence both information usage and travel intention.

Similarly, negative VeWOM negatively impacted perceived credibility at H2b and H4b. Henceforth, the negatively perceived credibility of information was validated as a strong predictor of travel intention at H7b (β = 0.207, t = 2.895, p = 0.002). This implies that negative

visual consumer reviews can negatively impact travel. This finding confirms that the perception of negative messages is more trustworthy when it comes to experiencing goods when compared to positive messages (Pang et al., 2008; 2011). Study 1 confirms that consumer travel intentions increase when other consumers share positive product experiences. Conversely, negative perceptions of VeWOM lead to unfavourable outcomes for travel decisions. Figure 3 shows the hypothesised structural model paths with the generated parameter estimates.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Moreover, the results (Figure 2 and Figure 3) indicated that both structural models obtained an acceptable R^2 statistic in predicting human behaviour based on the recommended > 0.03 to 0.10 cut-off value (Falk and Miller, 1992; Zikmund et al., 2000). In line with Q^2, these results are considered far more significant than the heuristic of zero (Chin, 1998). The effect size (Q^2) for the predictive relevance of travel intention for both positive and negative predictor variables was 0.401. There is a predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2016) for the positive and negative independent variables that affect the Q^2. Additionally, the Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) can be used to measure the effect size (F^2). Hu and Bentler (1999) consider a fit of less than 0.10 as good. The value of SRMR in the positive and negative predictor variables is 0.096 and 0.098, respectively. The proposed model for the study showed a fit with a reliable predictive ability. Table 1 below shows the summary of structural determinants, model relationships and hypothesis validation.

Insert Table 1 about here

4.4 Moderation Results

In the experiments, the moderation investigated the impact of the positive (negative) destination image on travel intention. This was validated through three positive (negative) parameters, i.e. H8a/b, H9a/b and H10. At H8a ($\beta = 0.153$, $t = 3.264$, $p = 0.001$), destination image positively moderated mental imagery and attitude. The three-way interaction (e.g., Negative Text x Picture x Video) was tested by including the product term in the PLS-SEM analysis. The results revealed a significant amplification effect: the combination of negative text, picture, and video led to a stronger negative impact on perceived credibility ($\beta = -0.42$, $p < 0.01$) compared to any single or dual modality. This suggests that multimodal negative VeWOM compounds credibility loss, which is consistent with the cognitive load theory (Sweller, 2011) as multiple negative cues increase cognitive processing and emotional arousal, highlighting scepticism (Filieri et al., 2021b). The results confirm that positive VeWOM about a destination can positively impact tourists' travel. Thus, a positive destination image strengthens the relationship between mental image processing and attitude towards information (Kim et al., 2018). On the other hand, H8b ($\beta = 0.153$, $t = 3.290$, $p = 0.001$) showed that there is a negative relationship as a negative image increases the scepticism of tourists toward the information (Ross et al., 1975). This confirms that the more positive the information, the more attractive a destination, and the inverse for negative information (Ahmed 1991; Molinillo et al., 2021). At H9a ($\beta = 0.143$, $t = 2.678$, $p = 0.004$), destination image positively moderated perceived credibility and travel intention, and negatively at H9b (0.143, $t = 2.692$, $p = 0.004$). These results show that there is a high consideration for more positive information as compared to negative information. A positive (negative) mental image affects the relationship between travel intention and perceived credibility (Sue et al., 2022). H10a ($\beta = -0.119$, $t = 1.972$, $p = 0.024$) destination image positively moderated attitude towards information and travel

intention, and negatively at H10b (β = -0.119, t = 1.975, p = 0.024). Results align with prior studies. A positive destination image strengthens the link between information attitudes and travel intentions by increasing receptiveness (Liang & Lai, 2023). Conversely, a negative image weakens this link, as unfavourable perceptions lead to dismissed information and lower travel intention (Ong et al., 2023).

5. Conclusion, Implications, Limitations and Future Research

5.1 Conclusions

This study provides the first systematic experimental comparison of text-only, picture-based, and video-based electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) across both positive and negative valence within the context of a developing market. Drawing on dual coding theory (Paivio, 1986) and the cognitive theory of multimedia learning (Mayer, 2002), we demonstrate that visual eWOM (VeWOM) influences travel intentions through distinct cognitive pathways—mental imagery processing, perceived credibility, and attitude toward information—and that destination image moderates these effects. Our findings confirm that, compared to traditional text-based reviews, both positive and negative VeWOM exert a stronger impact on travel intentions, yet the mechanisms differ: positive visuals enhance mental imagery and credibility uniformly, while negative videos significantly dampen mental imagery, but negative pictures do not. By uncovering these valence-by-format interactions and validating the central mediating roles of mental imagery, credibility, and attitude, this study confirms that the shift toward visual user-generated content fundamentally alters how consumers process and trust online travel information, with important implications for theory and practice in hospitality and tourism.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

This research advances theoretical understanding in several ways. First, it extends dual coding theory (Paivio, 1986) and the cognitive theory of multimedia learning (Mayer, 2002) by demonstrating that the combination of visual and verbal information in VeWOM not only enhances recall but also differentially shapes the cognitive mediators such as mental imagery, credibility, and attitude depending on message valence. Unlike prior studies that treated visuals as a generic enhancement, we show that negative valence interacts with format: video-based negative reviews strongly inhibit mental imagery, whereas static negative pictures do not, suggesting that motion and sound amplify the cognitive impact of negative information (Filieri et al., 2021b; Gan et al., 2023).

Second, we contribute to the growing body of research on eWOM credibility (Ismagilova et al., 2020; Wei et al., 2025) by revealing that visual formats enhance credibility in both positive and negative conditions, but the effect is more robust for positive content. This nuance challenges the assumption that negative information is always more credible; instead, the richness of visuals may lend authenticity to positive experiences, encouraging travel intentions (Banerjee et al., 2025). Third, by situating the study in an under-researched developing market, Zambia, we respond to calls for greater contextual diversity in hospitality and tourism research (Khan et al., 2018). Our findings show that the cognitive processing of VeWOM operates similarly in developing economies, yet cultural and infrastructural factors (e.g., digital literacy) may moderate effects, opening avenues for cross-cultural theorising (Hofstede, 2011). Finally, we integrate destination image as a moderator, showing that it amplifies or attenuates the relationships between mental imagery, credibility, attitude, and travel intention, thereby extending the destination image literature (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Pereira et al., 2022) into the VeWOM context.

5.3 Practical Implications

For hospitality and tourism practitioners, the findings offer actionable guidance. First, destination marketing organisations (DMOs), hotel chains, and online travel platforms should actively curate and encourage user-generated video content. Because video-based VeWOM strongly influences mental imagery and credibility, featuring such content on websites and social media can increase traveller confidence and intention. Second, the asymmetric effect of negative valence across formats suggests that managers should monitor video-based reviews especially closely: a single negative video may disproportionately harm destination image. Thus responding to negative videos with transparent service recovery through proactive engagement can mitigate this risk (Filieri et al., 2021a). Third, destination image is a strategic lever. Our moderation results indicate that when consumers already hold a positive image of a destination, VeWOM's positive effects are strengthened. Marketers can thus use image-building campaigns (e.g., showcasing cultural and natural assets) to make VeWOM more persuasive. Fourth, platforms should adopt accessibility standards and support digital literacy in underserved regions (W3C, 2018). As AI generated visuals and deepfakes rise, hospitality stakeholders must advocate for transparent content verification to preserve VeWOM authenticity.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations that suggest future research directions. First, the sample was drawn from frequent travellers in Zambia, which limits generalisability to other cultural and economic contexts. Future studies should replicate the experimental design in high-destination-power countries (e.g., France, Japan) and across low- vs. high-context cultures to examine cross-cultural variations in VeWOM processing (Hofstede, 2011). Second, we did not account for individual differences in visual literacy, cognitive style, or prior

destination familiarity, which may moderate the effects of VeWOM (Mayer, 2002). Incorporating these as individual-level moderators could enhance predictive power. Third, the study used pre-designed stimuli to ensure internal validity; future research could adopt a more naturalistic approach using actual user-generated content from platforms like TikTok or Instagram Reels, leveraging machine learning to analyse large-scale visual data (Park et al., 2025). Fourth, our design focused on short term intentions; longitudinal studies could examine actual booking behaviour. Fifth, future work should explore how AI generated and synthetic media affect mental imagery and credibility compared to authentic VeWOM (Shen, 2023; Law et al., 2024). Finally, mixed methods could enrich understanding of cognitive and emotional processes in VeWOM persuasion.

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Appendix 1: Samples of stimuli

1. Text x No Picture x No Video (Control Condition)

Positive Stimuli

Rating ★★★★★

Lumwana. What a pleasure! Firstly, we got an excellent welcome to the resort because the bungalows were neat and tidy. The food selection is broad and fits all tastes. It was during the wet season, so the view of the falls was an impressive experience. The memorabilia is affordable. I recommend this destination for a perfect getaway!

Negative Stimuli

Rating ★★☆☆☆

Lumwana. What a disappointment! Firstly, we never got an excellent welcome to the resort because the bungalows were not neat and tidy. The food selection is limited and does not fit all tastes. It was during the dry season, so the view of the falls was not an impressive experience. The memorabilia is unaffordable. I do not recommend this destination for a perfect getaway!

2. Text x Picture x Video

Positive Stimuli

Rating ★★★★★

Lumwana. What a pleasure! Firstly, we got an excellent welcome to the resort because the bungalows were neat and tidy. The food selection is broad and fits all tastes. It was during the wet season, so the view of the falls was an impressive experience. The memorabilia is affordable. I recommend this destination for a perfect getaway!

Negative Stimuli

Rating ★★☆☆☆

Lumwana. What a disappointment! Firstly, we never got an excellent welcome to the resort because the bungalows were not neat and tidy. The food selection is limited and does not fit all tastes. It was during the dry season, so the view of the falls was not an impressive experience. The memorabilia is unaffordable. I do not recommend this destination for a perfect getaway!

3. Text x Picture x No Video

Positive Stimuli

Rating ★★★★★

Lumwana. What a pleasure! Firstly, we got an excellent welcome to the resort because the bungalows were neat and tidy. The food selection is broad and fits all tastes. It was during the wet season, so the view of the falls was an impressive experience. The memorabilia is affordable. I recommend this destination for a perfect getaway!

Negative Stimuli

Rating ★★☆☆☆

Lumwana. What a disappointment! Firstly, we never got an excellent welcome to the resort because the bungalows were not neat and tidy. The food selection is limited and does not fit all tastes. It was during the dry season, so the view of the falls was not an impressive experience. The memorabilia is unaffordable. I do not recommend this destination for a perfect getaway!

4. Text x No Picture x Video

Positive Stimuli

Negative Stimuli

Rating ★★★★★

Lumwana. What a pleasure! Firstly, we got an excellent welcome to the resort because the bungalows were neat and tidy. The food selection is broad and fits all tastes. It was during the wet season, so the view of the falls was an impressive experience. The memorabilia is affordable. I recommend this destination for a perfect getaway!

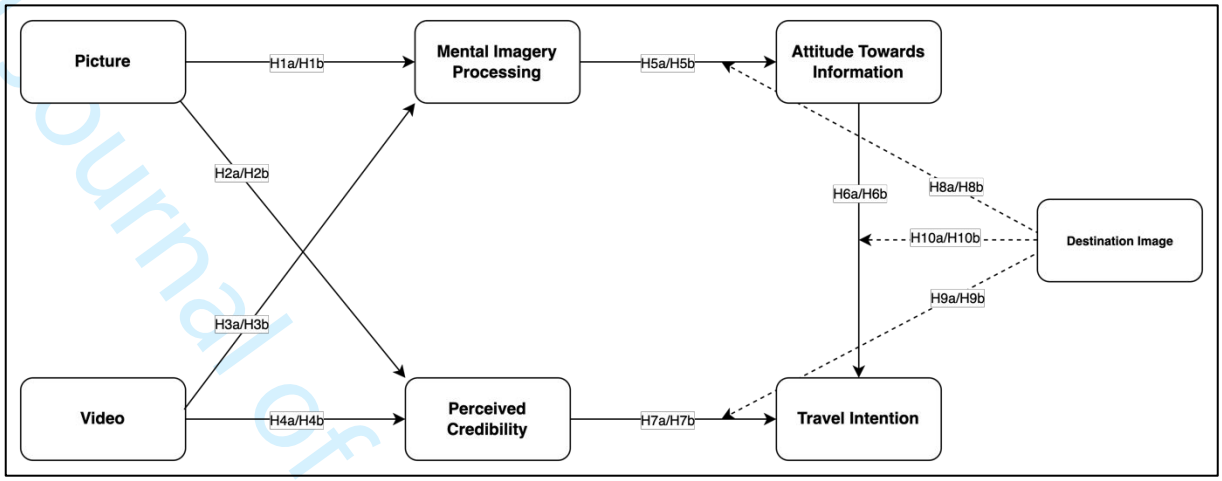
Rating ★★★★★

Lumwana. What a disappointment! Firstly, we never got an excellent welcome to the resort because the bungalows were not neat and tidy. The food selection is limited and does not fit all tastes. It was during the dry season, so the view of the falls was not an impressive experience. The memorabilia is unaffordable. I do not recommend this destination for a perfect getaway!

Table 1: Summary of structural determinants, model relationships and hypothesis validation

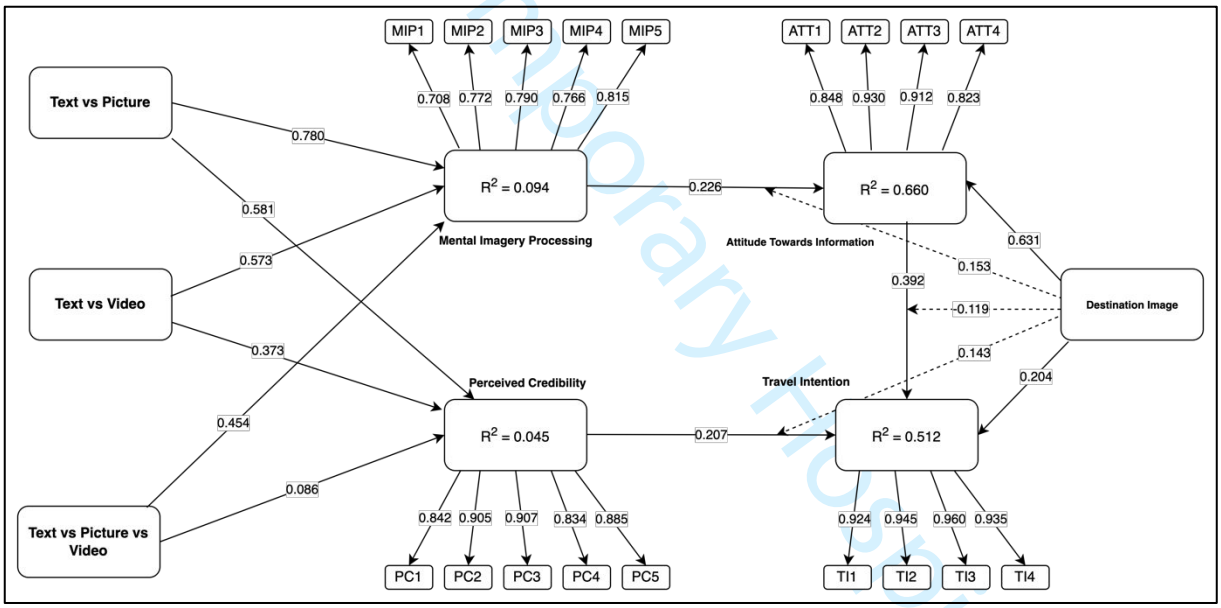
Hypotheses Validation		Constructs	Coefficient	STDEV	T Statistics	P Values
H1	a) Supported	Positive Text x Picture -> Mental image processing	0.780	0.175	4.466	0.000
	b) Not supported	Negative Text x Picture -> Mental image processing	-0.386	0.213	1.812	0.035
H2	a) Supported	Positive Text x Picture -> Perceived Credibility	0.581	0.191	3.038	0.001
	b) Supported	Negative Text x Picture -> Perceived Credibility	-0.125	0.242	0.516	0.303
H3	a) Supported	Positive Text x Video -> Mental image processing	0.573	0.214	2.674	0.004
	a) Supported	Positive Text x Picture x Video -> Mental image processing	0.454	0.225	2.016	0.022
	b) Supported	Negative Text x Video -> Mental image processing	-0.620	0.142	4.358	0.000
	b) Supported	Negative Text x Picture x Video -> Mental image processing	-0.520	0.198	2.619	0.004
H4	a) Supported	Positive Text x Video -> Perceived Credibility	0.373	0.198	1.879	0.030
	a) Supported	Positive Text x Picture x Video -> Perceived Credibility	0.086	0.206	0.417	0.338
	b) Supported	Negative Text x Video -> Perceived Credibility	-0.357	0.187	1.913	0.028
	b) Supported	Negative Text x Picture x Video -> Perceived Credibility	0.042	0.210	0.198	0.421
H5	a) Supported	Positive Mental image processing -> Attitude towards Information	0.226	0.049	4.567	0.000
	b) Supported	Negative Mental image processing -> Attitude towards Information	0.229	0.049	4.653	0.000
H6	a) Supported	Positive Attitude towards Information -> Travel intention	0.392	0.110	3.575	0.000
	b) Supported	Negative Attitude towards Information -> Travel intention	0.392	0.110	3.573	0.000
H7	a) Supported	Positive Perceived Credibility -> Travel intention	0.207	0.071	2.906	0.002
	b) Supported	Negative Perceived Credibility -> Travel intention	0.207	0.072	2.895	0.002
		Positive Predictor Variables			***Negative Variables***	***Predictor***
		Q^2	***R^2***	***SRMR***	***Q^2***	***R^2***	***SRMR***
Attitude Towards Information		0.221	0.407	The total value of 0.096, which is <0.10	0.218	0.401	The total value of 0.098, which is <0.10
Mental Image Processing		0.040	0.136		0.008	0.050	
Perceived Credibility		0.071	0.104		0.112	0.172	
Travel Intention		0.385	0.443		0.401	0.461	

Figure 1: Research Model



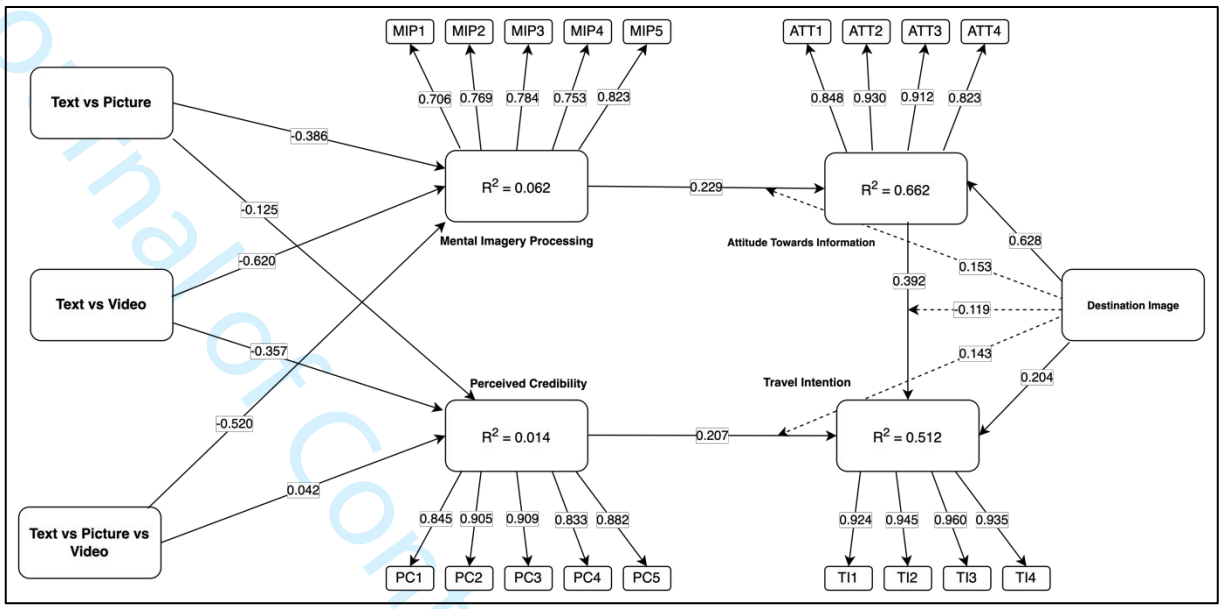
(Source: Developed by Authors)

Figure 2. Structural model and items loading for experiment 1



(Source: Developed by Authors)

Figure 3. Structural model and items loading for experiment 2



(Source: Developed by Authors)