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The Impact of Guest Experience and e-WOM Intention Towards Five-Star-Rated Hotels in Kuala Lumpur

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Abstract: In the digital age, e-WOM shared by experienced hospitality guests is highly valuable, as its perceived authenticity helps reduce potential consumers' uncertainty when selecting accommodation. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the characteristics of guest experience that contribute to electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) intention at Five-star rated hotels in Kuala Lumpur. It entails examining aspects like entertaining, educational, aesthetic and escapist. Data for this study were gathered through self-administered questionnaires on 130 hotel guests who had experienced staying in Five-star rated hotels in Kuala Lumpur. SPSS was used to analyze the proposed hypotheses. This highlights the importance for key stakeholders in the hotel industry, particularly the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC), as well as hotel managers and operators, to prioritize these factors to gain a competitive edge and secure long-term profitability.

Keywords: *e-WOM, Guest Experience, Entertaining Experience, Educational Experience, Esthetic Experience, Escapist Experience*

1. Introduction and Background

In 2023, Tourism Malaysia reported 20.14 million international visitors, a remarkable 100% increase from 2022's 10.07 million visitors, generating RM71.3 billion in tourism revenue. Despite this growth, the number of visitors is still 22.8% below the pre-pandemic figures of 2019, when Malaysia welcomed 26.1 million visitors (The Edge Malaysia, 2024). This highlights the critical role of the hotel industry in accommodating diverse traveler needs. The hotel industry is highly competitive, with guest satisfaction being a key determinant of success (Razli et al., 2022). Online reviews on platforms such as Booking.com and TripAdvisor.com significantly influence travelers' decisions (Anastasiei et al., 2019). One way to measure the quality of a hotel's services is via electronic word of mouth or known as e-WOM. According to Salah et al. (2023), it has had a significant influence on the hotel sector in recent years. This is because social media and online review platforms have made it easier for consumers to share their particular experiences with others.

According to Becker and Jaakkola (2020), the idea of customer experience is still poorly understood, with much uncertainty regarding its origins, implications, and bounds. Consumers are increasingly relying on e-WOM to influence their purchase decisions, taking advantage of numerous online shopping possibilities and comprehensive customer feedback (Lee et al., 2021). Social media influencers shape positive e-WOM by distributing brand-related material on their platforms and influencing audience attitudes via personal experiences (Kapoor et al., 2021). However, there is still a lack of understanding of e-WOM behavior from a managerial perspective (Ngarmwongnoi et al., 2020). It is crucial for managers and practitioners to effectively harness e-WOM to influence customer journeys and enhance brand performance. According to Verma and Dewani (2020), the credibility of e-WOM messages is more influenced by the substance of the content rather than the identity of the source.

There is also a concern about customer experience and online expression, as highlighted by Anastasiei et al. (2019). Sustainable marketing not only aims to boost brand awareness and sales but also encourages consumers to support ethical companies. Some hotels, however, raise expectations by not publishing e-WOM on their websites. Therefore, understanding how online feedback on OTAs, including satisfaction and recommendation ratings, correlates with business success is vital (Tseng et al., 2020). Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to examine the e-WOM intention of hotel guests towards their experience at a five-star hotel in Kuala Lumpur.

2. Literature Review

Entertaining Experiences and e-WOM Intention

The guest experience is defined as the perceptions of consumers or users, conscious and subconscious, of their relationship with the brand as a result of all interactions during the life cycle. According to (Ali et al., 2022; Su et al., 2022), a positive experience for guests has to be created by direct or indirect interactions between guests and service providers through multi-dimensional responses such as cognitive, emotional, physical, sensorial, and social factors during their stay in the hotel. According to Kim et al. (2022), guest experience is a complicated issue for hospitality businesses, regardless of its critical position in company strategy to fulfill customer, brand, and business-related goals. More precisely, the experiential focus of the hospitality experience is crucial for memorability, which develops a behavioral intention for consumers to return or suggest.

Positive recommendations are usually less expensive and more successful than other forms of advertising (Kurdi et al., 2022). According to Parolin et al. (2019), in the case of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), elements like sharing one's image with other customers, feeling good about oneself, and projecting one's social image while expressing thoughts have become more common and significant variables impacting buying decisions. Rasoolimanesh et al. (2021) also mentioned that it is important to have a memorable experience since it may encourage travelers to share, compare, and assess their experiences on social media or other online platforms. Hence, the hypothesis proposed:
H1a: There is a relationship between entertaining experiences and e-WOM intention.

Educational Experiences and e-WOM Intention

According to Hwang et al. (2019) and Ali et al. (2022), travel provides a learning experience like no other. It inspires people to seek out new places, keeping their pool of knowledge constantly topped up. It's a great way to not only learn new things and immerse yourself in a new culture, but it also provides a constant urge to continue learning. Improving your confidence enables you to deal with the challenges of higher education.

Ismagilova et al. (2021) stated that researchers contend that users will be more inclined to share their experiences and the website with others if they are knowledgeable of the importance of trusting user-generated media when using it. Generally speaking, educational experiences that actively engage visitors' minds, pique their curiosity, and inspire them to learn something new are crucial for achieving satisfaction, encouraging positive behavior, and spreading good word of mouth (Ali & Gaber, 2022).
H1b: There is a relationship between educational experiences and e-WOM intention.

Aesthetic Experiences and e-WOM Intention

According to Han et al. (2020), an aesthetic experience is connected to visitors' propensity to recognize and value the beauty and harmony of the physical surroundings. Examples of these include the atmosphere of a resort hotel, the hotel's aesthetics, which include eye-catching paintings, endearing wall décor, excellent lighting, calming music, a convenient and comfortable temperature, and an easily navigable layout. Loureiro et al. (2017) stated that, according to earlier theories, brand engagement and e-WOM may be mediated by satisfaction. Hence, the hypothesis proposed:
H1c: There is a relationship between aesthetic experiences and e-WOM intention.

Escapist Experiences and e-WOM Intention

Garrod and Dowell (2020) said that breaking away from everyday life is beneficial to people's health as well as the welfare of society as a whole. Kim et al. (2020) stated that one of the most well-acknowledged motivators in the travel literature is escapism. The modern world is seeing the monetization of culture and a growing disconnection from the natural world. In addition to these beneficial impacts, it was shown that e-WOM volume amplifies the effect of increased e-WOM valence in raising consumers' willingness to pay for hotel services. Thus, the hypothesis proposed:
H1d: There is a relationship between escapist experiences and e-WOM intention.

3. Research Methodology

The subject of this research study focuses on hotel guests who have experienced stays in Five-star rated hotels in Kuala Lumpur. Data for this study were gathered through self-administered questionnaires. Of the 135 questionnaires distributed, only 130 questionnaires were returned and 5 questionnaires were found to be unusable because of incomplete information or the respondents were not the subject of focus in this study. Therefore, 130 questionnaires were coded and analyzed. The non-probability convenience sampling was used to select the sample for this study. The convenience sampling is categorized into two major types, which are purposive sampling and judgmental sampling. In this study, purposive sampling was used because of the filtering questions in the questionnaire and the selection of the respondents was described. In answering the research objectives of this study, the statistical tool used in this study was the Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS).

4. Results

Descriptive Analysis

The demographic features of the present study include gender, age, nationality, marital status, purpose of stay, travel composition, number of stays and length of stay. As presented in Table 1, the results indicated that out of the 130 respondents, 84 were male.

Table 1: Summary of Demographic Profile

Demographic variables	Categories	Frequencies	Percentages
Gender	Female	84	64.6
	Male	46	35.4
Age	18-20 years old	14	10.8
	21-25 years old	79	60.8
	30-40 years old	24	18.5
	41 years old and above	13	10.0
Nationality	Malaysian	127	97.7
	Foreign	3	2.3
Marital status	Single	88	67.7
	Married	42	32.3
Purpose of stay	Business trip	11	8.5
	Family trip	41	31.5
	Medical purposes	3	2.3
	Shopping	18	13.8
	Traveling	57	43.8
Travel composition	Alone	28	21.5
	Family members	60	46.2
	Friends	39	30.0
	Others	3	2.3
Times of stay	More than 3 times	10	7.7
	First time	67	51.5
	3 times	15	11.5
	2 times	38	29.2
Length of stay	1 night	51	39.2
	2 nights	72	55.4
	3 nights	6	4.6
	More than 3 nights	1	0.8

Mean and Standard Deviation of Study Variables

Table 2 shows that the research variables' means varied from 3.50 to 3.76. Participants in this study acknowledged that e-WOM intention towards Kuala Lumpur's Five-star rated hotels was influenced by the guest experience.

Table 2: Mean for Study Variables (n=130)

Variable	n	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)
e-WOM Intention	130	3.76	1.06
Guest Experience			
Entertaining Experience	130	3.55	0.99
Educational Experience	130	3.50	1.14
Aesthetic Experience	130	3.75	0.97
Escapist Experience	130	3.75	0.96

Pearson Correlation

Table 3 exhibits the results of a correlational research design between variables. Strength of correlation as follows: r=1 was a perfect relationship, r≥0.7 with a strong relationship, meanwhile 0.5<r <0.7 as a moderate relationship, Next r ≤ 0.5 was a weak relationship, the last strength was r=0 means no relationship (Bhandari, 2022).

Table 3: Summary Correlations Analysis of Guest Experience and e-WOM Intention

		e-WOM Intention	Entertaining	Educational	Aesthetic	Escapist
e-WOM Intention	Pearson Correlation	1	.787**	.757**	.795**	.785**
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	130	130	130	130	130
Entertaining	Pearson Correlation	.787**	1	.813**	.825**	.822**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	130	130	130	130	130
Educational	Pearson Correlation	.757**	.813**	1	.801**	.780**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	130	130	130	130	130
Esthetic	Pearson Correlation	.795**	.825**	.801**	1	.848**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.000
	N	130	130	130	130	130
Escapist	Pearson Correlation	.785**	.822**	.780**	.848**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	130	130	130	130	130

From Table 3, the results showed a value to be r = 0.787 and p < 0.001, which was regarded as strong. It demonstrates that there is a favorable association between entertaining experience and e-WOM intention. Therefore, hypothesis 1 was supported.

Additionally, the table shows that the correlation coefficient was r = 0.757 with a p-value of < 0.001, implying that there is a strong association between e-WOM intention and educational experience at the Five-star rated hotel in Kuala Lumpur. Thus, hypothesis 2 is justified.

Hence, the results revealed a correlation coefficient of r = 0.795 and a p-value <0.001 less than 0.01, which demonstrates a strong relationship between the goal of esthetic experience and e-WOM intention. Consequently, hypothesis 3 is validated.

The findings, which showed a substantial association between escapist experience and e-WOM intention, were conclusive and included a correlation coefficient of r = 0.785 and a p-value < 0.001. Thus, hypothesis 4 is fully supported.

Discussion

This study investigates the predictors of e-WOM intention. Specifically, it examined the relationship between hotel guest experience and e-WOM intention towards Five-star rated hotels in Kuala Lumpur.

Based on the findings of this study, entertainment experience has given impact on e-WOM intention. Entertainment is one of the necessities of human life. As the world is experiencing more technological advancements, more ways of entertainment are coming into play in the daily lives of human beings. These findings were aligned with Su et al. (2022) and Ahn et al. (2019), enjoying various amenities, activities, facilities, or events can produce entertaining experiences that engender life satisfaction during hotel stays.

Additionally, there is a significant relationship between the educational experience and e-WOM intention. This finding is aligned with the statement mentioned by Hwang et al. (2019) and Ali et al. (2022) that educational experiences that pique visitors' interest, stimulate their curiosity, and encourage learning are essential for fostering positive behavior, positive word-of-mouth and visitor satisfaction. The findings indicate that the hotel guests enhance their interest in learning, novel skills or knowledge during their stay.

Moreover, the aesthetic experience has a significant relationship with e-WOM intention. As discussed by Loureiro et al. (2017) and Han et al. (2020), spending time in an aesthetically pleasing environment can help lower stress levels and alleviate symptoms of depression. Hotel guests are inclined to appreciate the hotel's atmosphere when they focus on the smaller design details. The visual experience creates an initial impression of the hotel, such as eye-catching paintings, endearing wall décor, excellent lighting, calming music, a convenient and comfortable temperature, and an easily navigable layout.

In addition, the majority of respondents expressed that they felt at home during their stay, particularly when reflecting on the escapist experience. Many associate comfort, security and safety with the feeling of "home." These emotional connections play a significant role in the goal of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), encouraging visitors to share their opinions about the hotel. Given the hotel's affordable rates and family-friendly atmosphere, guests are likely to recommend it to friends. They will also share their experiences, including photos and videos, on social media, which further amplifies their importance (Kim et al., 2020 & Garrod et al., 2020).

5. Conclusion and Future Research

According to the research findings, guest experiences at hotels significantly impact electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). Whether a guest's experience is highly positive or disappointing directly affects the type of review they leave. Positive experiences generally lead to favorable reviews, while negative ones result in critical feedback. Consequently, the experiences shared through review platforms are crucial in shaping a hotel's reputation and influencing future guests' booking decisions. Hopefully, this study benefited and offered strong evidence for recognizing the impact of guest experience and e-WOM intention towards Five-star rated hotels

in Kuala Lumpur. The findings and suggestions can also be used to inform future research and the growth of future e-WOM intention.

From a theoretical perspective, this study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on guest experience and e-WOM intention within the context of the hotel industry. By analyzing the impact of these factors on hotel guests in Kuala Lumpur, the study can provide valuable insights into consumer behavior and decision-making processes, thus enriching the academic literature on hospitality management and marketing. From a practical perspective, this research study can offer practical implications for improving service delivery, customer engagement, and management reputation. By understanding the impact of guest experience and e-WOM intention, the Malaysian government, especially the Ministry of Tourism, Art and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC), hotel managers and operators and industry players can identify areas for improvement and develop targeted strategies to enhance the overall guest experience and encourage positive online reviews and recommendations.

A number of shortcomings have been identified in the study. The researchers' collected data is limited in scope and primarily focuses on that specific location. As a result, the future should widen the scope by concentrating on another state in Malaysia. Another drawback is that the survey only looked at the perspective of hotel guests. As a consequence, beforehand spreading the survey, the future researcher might conduct a focus group with industry players, hotel management, and hotel providers to confirm the dimensions for each hotel guest experience.

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