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The 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Marketing and Retailing**THE EFFECT OF E-WOM ON TOURISTS' EXPERIENCE AT  
MALAYSIAN ISLAND BEACH RESORTS**

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**Abstract**

In recent years, customer experience has strengthened its presence within the global tourism industry generally viewed as an experience-intensive sector. Despite that, major influences of customer experience are still debatable amongst academics and business practitioners alike. This study aimed to examine the extent to which electronic word-of-mouth (or eWOM) forms of communication influenced total guest experience, involving both escapism and aesthetic experience elements. Using a quantitative research design, 433 usable survey feedbacks were collected from target respondents comprising tourists staying at major island beach resorts in Malaysia. Data analyses were carried out using a structural equation modelling approach in testing the hypothesized assumptions. Findings revealed a significant relationship between eWOM and escapism experience. On the contrary, no significant relationship was observed between eWOM and aesthetic experience. This study makes a contribution to the academic literature in which it establishes the importance of eWOM on tourists' experience. Several practical implications also were further discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Lately, a discernible change has occurred within the global tourism sector towards prioritizing guest experience. Ali and Omar (2014) observed that this shift is largely driven by increasing dissatisfaction among travelers with their overall travel and visit experiences. Bharwani and Jauhari (2013) further stated that potential guests generally seek valued exclusive, personalised, and hedonistic hospitality experiences. Additionally, Hashim et al. (2015) noted that resort guests have their own expectations and individual desires that they hope to fulfil. To address these concerns, Rahimian et al. (2020) recommended that service providers enhance their competitiveness by offering superior guest experiences, which can lead to positive intentions towards their services. Similarly, Popp, Mukhambetova et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of managing guest experiences in the tourism sector to gain a competitive advantage while ensuring sustainability.

## 2. Problem Statement

To date, extensive conceptual and empirical research has concentrated on identifying the key drivers of customer experience across various business domains, including retail, services, tourism, hospitality, and online purchases (Brun et al., 2020; Choudhury & Ranjit, 2021; Hsia et al., 2020; Smaliukienė & Kregždė, 2020). These studies indicate that factors such as omnichannel platforms, platform synergy, and personalized incentives play a positive role in shaping situational involvement. Moreover, significant elements influencing customer experience encompass the pleasant and inviting atmosphere within organizations, the availability of multiple service channels, brand reputation, pricing strategies, online store layout, interactive features, secure payment systems, social media presence, and affective or sensory aspects.

However, Chan et al. (2017) and Popp et al. (2021) have observed a lack of focus on how electronic word-of-mouth (referred to as e-WOM) communication impacts customer experience, particularly in the context of resorts. Concurrently, significant advancements have occurred in the hospitality and tourism sector due to the widespread availability and usage of the Internet (Mishra & Singh, 2020), positioning it as a frontrunner in effectively leveraging technological advancements. Mishra and Singh (2020) further highlighted that Internet accessibility enables customers to access hassle-free transaction options through eWOM within the tourism and hospitality industries. Likewise, eWOM serves as a digital communication platform for online users to express their opinions and views, which potential customers may rely on before making purchasing decisions. Additionally, Yan et al. (2018) emphasized that eWOM reviews offer businesses opportunities for potential customer acquisition. Consequently, it can be inferred that the eWOM communication format, encompassing online reviews and customer feedback from platforms such as TripAdvisor, Booking.com, and Agoda.com, is likely to shape customers' perceptions by providing multiple perspectives on similar experiences.

According to Chan et al. (2017), eWOM plays a role in shaping guests' perceptions of hotel resorts' actual environments, potentially mitigating risks and uncertainties associated with future travel experiences. The online narratives of these experiences serve as windows into the minds of hotel guests, offering detailed insights into the environment and services of the hotel in question. Additionally, Popp et

al. (2021) noted that eWOM offers valuable insights into the consumption experience, aiding individuals in making informed purchase decisions. On the other hand, Gavilan et al. (2018) stated that an eWOM presence could provide a platform for expressing varied opinions among tourists towards their resort's stay experience and in turn, could aid them in making future purchase decisions. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate whether eWOM, specifically concerning the dimensions of escapism and aesthetics, influences the stay experience of resort guests at island beach resorts in Malaysia.

### **3. Literature Review**

#### **3.1. The Role of eWOM in the Tourism and Hospitality Industry**

According to Hu et al. (2008), eWOM refers to the online exchange of non-commercial information about a product or brand through interpersonal communication channels. Additionally, Pourfakhimi et al. (2020) noted that this form of communication extends beyond verbal or face-to-face interactions to include the sharing of multimedia content, such as photos, audio, videos, text, ratings, and rankings, across social media platforms or commercial websites. Sulthana and Vasantha (2019) recognized that the emergence of Web 2.0 technology has facilitated a transition from traditional commerce to e-commerce platforms, leading to the migration of conventional word-of-mouth practices to the digital realm, thereby giving rise to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Consequently, this allows current tourists or customers to instantly share their purchase experiences with others via various social media platforms, blogs, or the company's website.

Prior to any purchase decisions, many potential hotel and resort guests depend on the eWOM communication method of online reviews as it delivers valuable information from other guests' previous stay experiences. Yang et al. (2018) found that this circumstance commonly occurs because tourism products and services are relatively difficult for individuals to pre-purchase as they are generally highly involved in the experience. For instance, an individual may not be inclined to book a room offered by any resort in advance since he or she needs to pay for the room beforehand and stay before being able to assess the room's quality and experience for themselves. Hence, eWOM communication is important within the context of hospitality and tourism so that it can assist individuals in making their travel, hotel and resort stay decisions effectively (Yan et al., 2018).

#### **3.2. The Experience Economy**

Since the mid-1980s, there has been a rapid expansion of literature on customer experience (Skard et al., 2011). Specifically, scholars within the marketing literature have extensively explored and elucidated the concept of customer experience from various theoretical perspectives. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) were among the first to emphasize the importance of emotion in consumer behavior, suggesting that consumers engage in hedonic consumption beyond rational decision-making. Consequently, the concept of customer experience has garnered significant attention from academic researchers and has been acknowledged as a valuable theoretical contribution to existing literature. Moreover, this managerial concept has been introduced, developed, and observed across marketing and management literature. Notable examples include experiential or experience marketing (Pine & Gilmore,

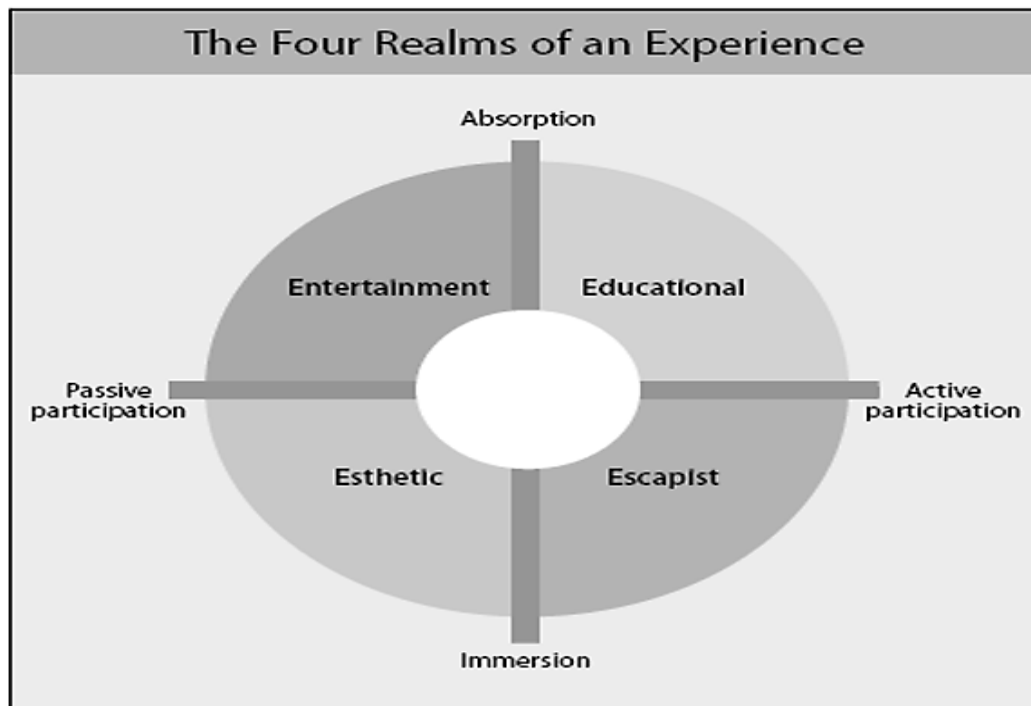
1998; Schmitt, 1999; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009), customer experience management (Verhoef et al., 2009), and experience design (Pullman & Gross, 2004; Skard et al., 2011).

Pine and Gilmore (1998) advocated for various dimensions of customer experience, which they categorized as entertainment, educational, escapism, and aesthetic experiences, collectively termed as the Experience Economy concept. The authors defined entertainment experience as the sensation of enjoyment, pleasure, and relaxation that individuals experience when engaging in activities. For instance, at Hard Rock Hotel locations worldwide, guests can engage in entertaining activities such as poolside games facilitated by Rock Agents during the day. Additionally, guests can enjoy live music performances by the hotel's featured artists of the month at the café and lobby lounge.

Pine and Gilmore (1998) also noted that individuals can obtain educational experiences by expanding their knowledge and skills, which may inspire them to explore new pursuits. In the context of beach resorts, educational experiences could involve inviting guests to participate in activities such as tasting regional and exotic cuisines, attending cooking classes led by local chefs, and engaging in adventurous pursuits such as jungle tracking, snorkeling, horseback riding, and mountain hiking, which are often offered by resort operators.

Regarding aesthetic experiences, individuals find their senses stimulated by appreciating the ambiance of the resort location. To enhance these experiences, resort operators should enhance the overall resort design to meet the guests' needs appropriately. This may entail room decorations, particularly since millennial guests are inclined to choose resorts based on their leisure-oriented lifestyles, contrasting with earlier generations of resort patrons. Therefore, resort operators should develop a room design that is adaptable and versatile, prioritizing comfort, technology integration, and coziness to cater to their intended resort guests effectively.

Pine and Gilmore (1998) also emphasized that the escapism experience involves individuals' innate desire to break away from their daily routines at home and in the office, seeking relief from the associated stress. This desire for escapism is particularly evident in a resort setting. For instance, guests may find solace in listening to the soothing sounds of nature while relaxing in their resort rooms. The tranquil environment contributes to the rejuvenation of guests' well-being and enhances the quality of their sleep, fostering a sense of peace and tranquillity. Figure 1 depicts the four realms of experience within the Experience Economy concept developed by Pine and Gilmore (1998).



**Figure 1.** The Experience Economy (Source: Pine & Gilmore, 1998)

The authors explained that these four facets are distinguished along two axes, which center on the level of guests' engagement and their interaction with the environment. In this investigation, resort guests may actively engage in travel-related services, such as jungle trekking, mountain hiking, swimming, city bus tours, horseback riding, and appreciating the resort's landscape and decor. Ali et al. (2014) noted that resort operators might provide these activities, and the interplay among these activities could cater to their guests' desires for escapism and aesthetic enjoyment.

However, this study exclusively examines the two primary dimensions of customer experience: escapism and aesthetics. Its specific objective is to ascertain whether these dimensions impact tourists' experiences during their stay at island beach resorts. This focus stems from previous research demonstrating the significant influence of these two dimensions on guest behavior within the tourism and hospitality industry (Ali et al., 2014; Cetin & Dincer, 2014; Rather, 2018). For instance, Rather (2018) asserted that both escapism and aesthetic experiences exert considerable influence on guest loyalty in the hotel sector in India.

### **3.3. The Influence of eWOM on Guest Experience**

Chan et al. (2017) asserted that online reviews of hotel experiences assist guests in creating a perceptual representation of the actual circumstances of a hotel which could moderate the risk and unreliability with regard to their subsequent hotel visits. In other words, online accounts of guest stay experiences may serve to illustrate potential guests' detailed visualisation regarding the hotel's service and environment. Similarly, Al-Gasawneh and Al-Adamat (2020) suggested that individuals could benefit from understanding others' varied experiences and opinions shared by previous guests via the Internet.

Previous studies (Cetin & Dincer, 2014; Fernandes & Fernandes, 2018) found that most hotel guests with previous stay experience offered WOM recommendations on the hotels' aesthetic and escapism aspects such as the degree of relaxation, comfort, and resting environment. Similarly, Parolin and Boeing (2019) and Rather (2018) found that eWOM communication on escapism and aesthetic experiences by previous guests at boutique hotels were the most significant dimensions that influenced customers' perception on their stay experience. The focus included environment, landscape, decoration, relaxation, and well-being respectively. Accordingly, any endorsements by experienced guests about their resort experiences would encourage potential guests to stay in these resorts. In view of the above, two (2) main hypotheses are thus postulated as follows:

Hypothesis 1: eWOM significantly affects the escapism experience.

Hypothesis 2: eWOM significantly affects the aesthetic experience.

#### **4. Research Methods**

This study utilizes a quantitative research approach with the aim of examining whether eWOM affects guest experiences within a beach resort setting. Using a 7-point Likert scale, a survey questionnaire design was developed, to which most item measurements for escapism and aesthetic experience were adopted and adapted from past research including Ali et al. (2014), Cetin and Dincer (2014), Jing (2010) and Oh et al. (2007). On the other hand, the item measurements for eWOM were adopted from Almana and Mirza (2013) and Cheung et al. (2008) respectively.

The target respondents included both domestic and international guests who have experienced staying at any major island and beach resorts in Peninsular Malaysia. These included popular tourist destinations such as Penang Island, Langkawi Island, Port Dickson Beach, Tioman Island, Perhentian Island, Desaru Beach and Pangkor Island. The guests must also have stayed at their resorts for a minimum duration of one night and have reviewed information about the resorts online. Employing a non-probability purposive sampling method, 500 questionnaires were distributed to selected respondents over a span of three months. This aligns with the recommended sample size guidelines for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) models outlined by Hair et al. (2010), which suggest a sample size of 100 or more. However, following the exclusion of incomplete responses, only 433 usable feedbacks were gathered for data analysis.

#### **5. Findings**

##### **5.1. Descriptive Analysis**

A total of 433 usable data was carried out for descriptive analyses. As illustrated in Table 1, majority of the respondents were female (N=276; 63.4%) as compared to male respondents (N=157; 36.1%). In terms of marital status, most respondents were married (N=248; 57%), followed by single ones (N=171; 39.3%) whereas the remaining respondents were under the category of others (N=16, 3.7%). Majority have also completed their undergraduate studies (N=179; 41.1%), followed by 134 respondents having high school or diploma level qualifications, while only 122 (28%) respondents had postgraduate degree qualifications. The results also provide insight into the respondents' countries of

origin. The majority of respondents hailed from Asian countries (N=373; 85.7%), followed by those from Europe (N=47; 11%). A smaller proportion of respondents were from Australia and Oceania (N=9; 2%), North America (N=4; 0.9%), and African countries (N=2; 0.4%).

**Table 1.** Demographic Profile of the Respondents and General Information (n=433)

Demographic Characteristic	Percentage	
Gender	Male	36.1
	Female	63.4
Marital Status	Married	57
	Single	39.3
	Others	3.7
Education Level	Undergraduate	41.1
	Higher school or diploma level	30.9
	Postgraduate degrees.	28
Country of Origin	Asia	85.7
	Europe	11
	Australia and Oceania	2
	Nort America	0.9
	African	0.4
Tourist Category	Domestic	75.2
	International	24.8
Purpose of Visit	Mainly holiday	24.8
	Visiting family/ friends	3.7
	Short/ city break	34.5
	Leisure	31.7
	Others	5.3

## 5.2. Measurement Model

The hypotheses in this study underwent testing using the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) method (Ringle et al., 2015). Following the guidance from Anderson and Gerbing (1988), this study initially assessed the reliability and validity of the measurement model before proceeding to evaluate the structural model to test the proposed hypotheses. The first step in PLS-SEM involves examining convergent validity, which was assessed in this study through composite reliability (CR), factor loadings, and average variance extracted (AVE). As depicted in Table 2, it is evident that the composite reliability exceeded the suggested threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2017). Additionally, all indicator loadings were above 0.70. Regarding average variance extracted, the findings indicated that the values for all constructs surpassed the minimum threshold of 0.50 (Hair et al., 2017). Based on the obtained data, the constructs explained more than half of the variance of their indicators.

**Table 2.** Summary of Validity and Reliability for the Constructs

	<b>Outer Loading</b>	<b>CR</b>	<b>AVE</b>
<b>eWOM</b>		.940	.839
WOM1	.735		
eWOM2	.896		
eWOM3	.933		
eWOM4	.919		
<b>Escapism Experience</b>		.930	.727
ECE1	.841		
ECE2	.902		
ECE3	.878		
ECE4	.803		
ECE5	.835		
<b>Aesthetic Experience</b>		.902	.755
ESE1	.897		
ESE2	.865		
ESE3	.843		

Discriminant validity within the measurement model was further examined. The Fornell-Larcker Criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) was utilized in this study to assess discriminant validity. According to this criterion, indicators should demonstrate stronger loadings on their respective constructs compared to other constructs within the model, and the average variance shared between each construct and its measures should exceed that shared between the construct and other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As shown in Table 3, all key constructs exhibited satisfactory discriminant validity, indicating distinctiveness between the constructs.

**Table 3.** Summary of Discriminant Validity Result

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
eWOM	<b>.840</b>		
Escapism Experience	.399	<b>.812</b>	
Aesthetic Experience	.397	.761	<b>.801</b>

### 5.3. Structural Model

Once reliability and validity testing have been conducted, the structural model results were further assessed. The first procedure involved in the structural model was to determine the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ), that is, to examine how effectively the exogenous latent variables influence on the endogenous latent variable (Hair et al., 2010). As shown in Table 4, the  $R^2$  value ranged from .264 to .268. This clarifies that the modelled variables can explain 26.4 to 26.8 percent variance of the respective endogenous variables.

**Table 4.** Summary of  $R^2$  Value of Endogenous Constructs

<b>Endogenous Constructs</b>	<b><math>R^2</math> Value</b>
Escapism Experience	.268
Aesthetic Experience	.264



The next evaluation in the structural model was to test the path coefficient. The test was conducted with the aim of examining the structural model relationship of the hypothesized constructs. To reiterate, two hypotheses were developed in this study. As illustrated in Table 5, the results showed a strong support for H1 (H1:  $b = 0.292$ ,  $t = 6.846$ ,  $\text{sig} < 0.05$ ). On the other hand, H2 was not supported (H2:  $b = 0.073$ ,  $t = 1.58$ ,  $\text{sig} < 0.05$ ).

**Table 5.** Significance Testing Result of the Structural Model Path Coefficient

Hypothesis	Relationship	Standard Beta	t Values	Decision
H1	eWOM → Escapism Experience	.292	6.84	Supported
H2	eWOM → Esthetic Experience	.073	1.58	Not Supported

## 6. Discussion

To reiterate, the results in this study revealed that Hypothesis 1 (H1) was only supported. An eWOM method of communication significantly affects escapism experience, thus indicating that online accounts of prior experience uploaded on the Internet by past guests have focused on escapism experience. This result supports prior studies (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2015), Chan et al. (2017) asserting that a degree of expectations towards service experience could be formed by means of a eWOM communication. Also, experienced resort guests generally shared their stay experiences of relaxation and comfort with other potential travellers or tourists, and hence inevitably, would influence the latter to also visit the said resorts. This is consistent with Parolin and Boeing (2019) and Rather (2018) who mentioned that previous guests' online reviews on escapism experiences at boutique hotels significantly influence customers' perception of their stay experience. Fernandes and Fernandes (2018) further supported this finding, to hotel guests with previous stay experience offered WOM recommendations on the hotels' degree of relaxation, comfort, and resting environment.

Nevertheless, there was no statistical evidence to support Hypothesis 2 (H2). The result revealed that eWOM's online review on aesthetic experience did not exhibit any noteworthy impact on the potential guests' perception towards the resorts because tourists would have essentially sought for leisure and relaxation while travelling to a specific island beach resort, instead of appreciating its overall physical environment, landscape, and decorations. This can be further observed by resort definition in itself, delineated as a place to be visited by people meant for relaxation and enjoying other recreational activities (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). Moreover, the descriptive analyses illustrated in Table 1 revealed that many respondents (34.5%) visited resorts to undertake a brief holiday, as well as a similarly sized segment comprising of those who did so for leisure (31.7%) purposes. Accordingly, aesthetic experience was thus proven to be of lesser significance for these resort guests when travelling to the resort destinations of their choice.

## 7. Conclusion

Essentially, this study aimed to explore how eWOM impacts guest experience, encompassing both escapism and aesthetic dimensions within an island beach resort environment. The findings have generated insightful practical implications. It is recommended that beach resort operators should post

frequent email reminders inviting previous guests to compose reviews on their memories and activities that can promote relaxation whilst holidaying at the beach resorts. They should also encourage their experienced guests to share photos and videos to influence potential tourists or travellers to stay at their beach resorts. Incentives could also be given by these resort operators as an appreciation gesture and recognition for sharing the best online review of their guests' memorable escapism experience as it would entice them to be more involved.

Although eWOM had no significant influence on aesthetic experience, it is still considered an important element within the general hotel and resort context. Hence, resort operators should further improve their resort environment, landscape and decorations. Moreover, resort operators should also embark on the appropriate marketing and promotional campaigns that could emphasize both escapism and aesthetic values respectively. This in turn, would encourage potential guests to share their favourable escapism and aesthetic experience with others as well. Several limitations were however noted. This study was carried out via a quantitative research design approach. A qualitative study is thus recommended to further explore the influence of eWOM on resort guests' stay experience at their favourite hotels and resorts respectively. A comparative study is also warranted between two or more countries to determine the extent of eWOM's impact towards tourists' or guests' stay experience.

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