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## STRENGTHENING E-BRAND EQUITY IN THREE-STAR HOTELS IN MALAYSIA: THE ROLE OF E-CRM AND E- BRAND EXPERIENCE

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### Abstract:

This study examines the development of electronic brand equity (EBE) through the integration of electronic customer relationship management (e-CRM) and e-brand experience in Malaysia's three-star hotel industry. Amid growing digital competition and post-pandemic recovery challenges, many hotels encounter challenges in maintaining brand equity online. Using a quantitative approach with a total of 251 valid responses were collected and analysed to test the hypothesized relationships through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The study found that e-CRM positively impacts e-brand experience but has a negative direct effect on e-brand equity. Importantly, e-brand experience plays a mediating role, serves as a mediating mechanism that translates digital interactions into enhanced e-brand equity outcomes. Theoretically, study contributes to and extends the literature on e-brand equity by incorporating e-CRM as antecedent and e-brand experience as a mediating mechanism, thus offering an enriched conceptual framework for hospitality branding. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of PLS-SEM in capturing complex relationships among multiple constructs. Moreover, the findings offer practical insights for hoteliers aiming to improve brand equity and competitiveness through strategic digital engagement.

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### Keyword:

E-Brand Equity, E-Brand Experience, E-Customer Relationship Management



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## Introduction

The travel and tourism industry constitutes a significant global sector, representing 10.3% of the world's gross domestic product (GDP) (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2021). Tourism industry in Malaysia is expected to contribute to Malaysia's economic growth (Tan & Soon, 2023). The tourism and hospitality industry plays a crucial role in Malaysia's economy, ranking as the third-largest contributor to the nation's GDP after manufacturing and commodities (MIDA, 2022). However, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically impacted this sector, leading to a sharp decline in tourist arrivals and a loss estimated at over RM100 billion (Tourism Malaysia Marketing Plan 2022–2026, 2022). Three-star hotels were among the most severely affected, experiencing declining occupancy rates and increasing pressure to remain competitive in a rapidly evolving market. To sustain their competitiveness, these hotels need to strengthen their brand. This is because a brand attains positive brand equity when consumers respond more favourably to its marketing mix elements (Keller, 1993).

The Malaysian government responded by launching the National Tourism Policy 2020–2030, which emphasizes the adoption of digital technologies to revive and future-proof the industry (MIDA, 2022). In this digital shift, the concept of e-brand equity—how a brand is perceived online has become increasingly important. Despite the need to strengthen their brand, a considerable number of three-star hotels in Malaysia continue to face significant challenges in this regard. Evidence from online review platforms frequently points to recurring issues, including outdated and poorly maintained facilities, limited or basic service offerings, and instances of unprofessional staff behaviour (Agoda, 2022). These shortcomings collectively contribute to unfavourable customer evaluations, ultimately diminishing perceived service quality and weakening overall brand trust (Kayaman & Arasli, 2007). In addition to these internal limitations, three-star hotels are also confronted with intensifying external competition. The rapid growth and widespread popularity of alternative accommodation platforms, particularly Airbnb, have further intensified market pressures by offering consumers greater flexibility, competitive pricing, and more personalized experiences. As a result, the market shares of traditional hotels, especially within the mid-scale segment, continues to decline as more travellers opt for these alternative lodging options (Balasubramanian & Ragavan, 2019). In light of the challenges outlined above, this study seeks to provide a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of how digital tools, particularly electronic customer relationship management (e-CRM), can be effectively leveraged to enhance the e-brand experience and, in turn, strengthen overall e-brand equity within the context of three-star hotels in Malaysia. As the hospitality industry becomes increasingly shaped by digital interactions, it is essential to examine how these technologies influence customers' perceptions, experiences, and long-term relationships with hotel brands.

More specifically, this research aims to investigate the direct effects of e-CRM on e-brand equity and e-brand experience. In addition, the study places particular emphasis on examining the mediating role of e-brand experience in the relationship between these digital marketing strategies and brand equity outcomes. By doing so, it attempts to uncover not only whether these tools are effective, but also how and through what mechanisms they contribute to building stronger brand value. By focusing on these critical digital strategies, the study ultimately aspires to generate meaningful and actionable insights for hotel managers, marketers, and industry practitioners. These insights are intended to assist them in designing more effective digital engagement initiatives, fostering stronger emotional and experiential connections with guests, and maintaining competitiveness in an increasingly dynamic and digitally driven hospitality landscape.

## **Literature Review**

There are three points will be discussed in LR which are e-brand equity, e-CRM and e-brand experience.

### ***Definition of E-Brand Equity***

E-brand equity, as an extension of traditional brand equity into the digital realm, has been defined and interpreted differently by various scholars. Farquhar (1989) introduced the concept as the “added value” a brand gives to a product, while Aaker (1991) expanded this by identifying dimensions such as brand awareness, loyalty, perceived quality, and associations. Keller (1993) shifted the focus to a customer-based perspective, defining brand equity as the differential impact of brand knowledge on consumer responses to marketing activities. As online commerce expanded, researchers adapted these definitions to fit digital contexts. For example, Rios and Riquelme (2008) included trust and loyalty in their e-brand equity model, emphasizing the importance of online service quality and website functionality. Similarly, Christodoulides, De Chernatony, Furrer, Shiu and Abimbola (2006) proposed that emotional connection and responsive service are vital in e-retail settings. Despite these variations, a consistent thread across literature is that e-brand equity incorporates both the traditional foundations of brand equity and the unique dynamics of online engagement, such as interactivity and trust in virtual platforms

In the context of this study, understanding e-brand equity is crucial for examining how digital strategies influence customer perception and behavior. Prior research suggests that e-CRM can directly impact key components of e-brand equity, particularly brand loyalty and perceived quality. For instance, studies by Shanab and Anagreh (2015) and Nicoline and Kaplan (2020) highlight how personalized digital communication can strengthen trust and commitment, which are critical to building e-brand loyalty. Furthermore, Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou (2013) argue that e-brand experience plays a mediating role by shaping emotional responses during digital interactions. Based on these insights, this study hypothesizes that e-CRM significantly affect e-brand equity either directly or through the mediation of e-brand experience.

### ***Definition of Electronic Customer Relationship Management***

Electronic Customer Relationship Management (e-CRM) is an extension of traditional CRM that leverages internet technologies to improve customer interactions, satisfaction, and retention. While traditional CRM focuses on managing customer relationships through

databases, call centers, and personal interactions, e-CRM uses digital platforms such as email, websites, and customer portals to deliver personalized services and communication (Azila, 2011; Fjermestad & Romano, 2003). According to Mahdavi, Cho, Shirazi and Sahebjamnia (2008), e-CRM integrates a set of tools and processes aimed at maximizing value in an e-business environment. It also differs in terms of interface and technology, as noted by Dawn and Chowdhury (2011), who highlight how e-CRM enhances an organization's ability to manage real-time interactions and feedback. Al-Dmour, Algharabat, Khawaja and Al-Dmour (2018) further categorize e-CRM into components like process fit, system support, and customer information quality as key dimensions that reflect how well an organization understands and responds to its customers in a digital context

The importance of e-CRM in building e-brand equity is grounded in its ability to foster strong, trust-based relationships online. Research by Shanab and Anagreh (2015) indicates that effective e-CRM improves customer satisfaction and loyalty which is core components of brand equity as defined by Aaker (1991). In hotel settings, e-CRM facilitates better service delivery, streamlined booking processes, and personalized communication, which collectively enhance perceived quality and brand loyalty (Tian & Wang, 2017). Moreover, Sivaraks, Krairit, and Tang (2011) demonstrate that e-CRM contributes to relationship outcomes such as trust, retention, and the willingness to recommend a brand. These findings justify the hypothesis that e-CRM has a significant effect on both e-brand experience and e-brand equity and may indirectly strengthen brand perception by influencing customer interaction and engagement through digital means. Hence, below are the hypotheses tested for e-CRM:

*H1: E-CRM has a significantly affect with e-brand equity of hotel industry in Malaysia.*

*H2: E-CRM has a significantly affect with e-brand experience of hotel industry in Malaysia.*

### ***Definition of E-brand Experience***

E-brand experience is about how people feel and react when they interact with a brand online. Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou (2013) describe it as a person's internal and personal response to a digital brand encounter. Unlike traditional brand experiences that might involve walking into a physical store or touching a product, e-brand experiences happen through websites, apps, or social media platforms. In this study, e-brand experience is seen as a bridge or mediator between strategy like e-CRM and the overall perception of brand value, or e-brand equity. This makes sense because while technology and online campaigns can attract attention, it's the *experience* how smooth, engaging, or satisfying it feels that really shapes how customers view and connect with a brand. By including e-brand experience as a mediator, we get a clearer picture of how online tools actually influence customer perceptions and loyalty

To build on that, we look at why this relationship matters. Research by Lee and Jeong (2014) shows that a great online experience can leave a lasting impression and strongly influence how customers feel about a brand, especially in industries like hospitality. When a hotel uses e-CRM effectively responding quickly, remembering guest preferences, or making booking easy which it makes guests feel valued. These positive experiences then lead to trust, satisfaction, and loyalty key ingredients of strong brand equity. So, it's not just the tools that matter, but how they make people *feel*. That's why this study proposes that e-brand experience plays a key role in turning digital efforts into meaningful brand value for three-star hotels in Malaysia.

*H3: E- brand experience has a significantly effect with e-brand equity of hotel industry in Malaysia.*

*H4: E- brand experience mediate the effect between e-CRM and e-brand equity.*

## Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research approach to provide a systematic and empirical examination of the effects of electronic customer relationship management (e-CRM) on e-brand equity, while also incorporating e-brand experience as a potential mediating variable in this relationship. The quantitative approach is particularly suitable for this study as it enables the testing of hypothesised relationships between constructs through statistical analysis, thereby offering objective and generalisable findings. In line with this approach, a cross-sectional survey design was employed, as it facilitates the collection of data from a relatively large and diverse population at a single point in time. Such a design is widely recognised and frequently utilised in brand management and consumer behaviour research, especially when the aim is to identify associations and examine causal inferences between variables within a specific context.

The data collection process was carried out through structured questionnaire, which served as the primary research instrument. The questionnaire was distributed to Malaysian guests who had previously stayed at three-star hotels located across various states in the country. Respondents were carefully selected based on their prior experience with these hotels, ensuring that they possessed sufficient familiarity with the services, digital engagement efforts, and branding strategies implemented by three-star hotel operators. This criterion-based selection enhances the relevance, accuracy, and reliability of the data collected, as it reflects informed evaluations grounded in actual customer experiences rather than hypothetical perceptions.

Furthermore, the survey instrument was thoughtfully designed and organised into several key sections to capture different dimensions of the study. These sections included items related to respondents' demographic characteristics, their perceptions of e-CRM practices, their overall e-brand experience, and their evaluation of the hotel's e-brand equity. Each of these constructs was operationalised and measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." This scaling technique allows respondents to express varying degrees of agreement, thereby enabling the researcher to capture the intensity of their opinions. In turn, this facilitates more precise quantitative analysis and contributes to the robustness and validity of the study's findings.

To ensure representativeness, the study employed a stratified sampling method based on the distribution of three-star hotels across Malaysian states. A total of 251 valid responses were collected and analysed, exceeding the minimum sample size required for statistical analysis using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). This method was selected because of its ability to handle complex models with multiple constructs and indicators, and because it works well with small to medium sample sizes. Furthermore, PLS-SEM is suitable for exploratory research, particularly when testing mediation effects and examining latent constructs such as e-brand equity.

The development and validation of the questionnaire were guided by existing literature to ensure content validity. Items for each construct were adapted from previously published studies and refined to suit the hotel context. Before the main data collection, a pilot study was conducted to test the clarity and reliability of the instrument. The feedback from the pilot study was used to make minor adjustments, ensuring that the final survey was both user-friendly and statistically sound.

Overall, the methodological framework of this study was carefully and systematically developed to ensure close alignment with the stated research objectives and hypotheses. By adopting a structured and well-justified research design, the study provides a comprehensive and rigorous basis for examining the proposed relationships among the key variables. This methodological approach enables a more in-depth and reliable investigation into how digital relationship-building strategies, particularly those involving e-CRM and related online engagement practices, shape and influence customers' perceptions of e-brand equity.

Furthermore, by situating the analysis within the context of Malaysia's highly competitive three-star hotel industry, the framework allows for a more contextually grounded understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by hotel operators. As a result, the study is able to generate meaningful empirical insights into the role of digital strategies in enhancing brand value, strengthening customer relationships, and supporting long-term competitiveness within an increasingly dynamic and digitally driven hospitality environment.

## Data Finding

### *Demographic Profile*

A total of 251 respondents participated in this study, all of whom had experience staying at three-star hotels across various states in Malaysia. The gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 54.6% female and 45.4% male, indicating a fairly even engagement with this hotel segment. In terms of age, the majority of respondents (42.2%) were between 26 and 35 years old, followed by 25.9% aged 36 to 45, and 18.7% aged 18 to 25. Only 13.2% were aged 46 and above, showing that the majority of 3-star hotel guests fall within the young to middle-aged adult categories.

Occupationally, 44.6% of respondents were working professionals, while 23.5% were students, 17.1% self-employed, and 14.7% retirees or others. Most participants had a higher level of education, with 56.2% holding a bachelor's degree, 24.3% with diplomas, and 13.1% with postgraduate qualifications. This indicates that a large proportion of the respondents are likely to possess a relatively high level of digital literacy and are well-acquainted with the use of online platforms and services. Such a characteristic is particularly important when assessing the effectiveness of e-CRM initiatives, as familiarity with digital tools can influence how customers interact with, respond to, and evaluate these systems. Taken together, the overall demographic profile of the respondents offers a solid and credible basis for interpreting the study's findings, as it reflects informed perspectives grounded in actual user experience. Consequently, this strengthens the relevance and applicability of the results within the context of real consumer behaviour in Malaysia's three-star hotel industry.

*Measurement Model Analysis***Table 1: The Measurement Model Analysis Result**

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Loading</b>	<b>CR</b>	<b>AVE</b>
e-CRM	ECRM7	0.616	0.910	0.594
	ECRM8	0.745		
	ECRM9	0.732		
	ECRM10	0.721		
	ECRM11	0.834		
	ECRM12	0.861		
	ECRM13	0.856		
e-BEP	EBE1	0.784	0.908	0.677
	EBE2	0.819		
	EBE3	0.821		
	EBE4	0.837		
	EBE5	0.816		
EBE	EB1	0.818	0.993	0.665
	EB2	0.838		
	EB3	0.818		
	EB4	0.818		

*Note: e-BEP: Electronic brand experience; EBE: Electronic Brand equity.  
e-CRM: Electronic customer relationship management*

To assess the reliability and validity of the constructs in this study, a measurement model analysis was conducted using SmartPLS 4.0 which constructed in Table 1. This step is essential in determining whether the constructs are both statistically sound and conceptually appropriate for further analysis. Three key indicators were examined: Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and item loading values.

The results revealed that all constructs met the acceptable thresholds for CR, with values exceeding 0.8, indicating strong internal consistency. Specifically, e-CRM recorded a CR of 0.910, Electronic Brand Experience (e-BEP) stood at 0.908, and Electronic Brand Equity (EBE) achieved an excellent 0.993. These values reflect that the items within each construct consistently measure the intended underlying concept, as suggested by Hair, Hult, Ringle and Sarstedt (2016) and Henseler & Chin (2010). In terms of convergent validity, the AVE for each construct also surpassed the minimum recommended value of 0.5. The AVE for e-CRM was 0.594, for e-BEP was 0.677, and for EBE was 0.665. These results suggest that a substantial portion of the variance in each construct is explained by its respective indicators, thus confirming convergent validity

Regarding item loadings, most indicators demonstrated values above the recommended threshold of 0.708, affirming their strong contribution to their respective constructs. Although a few items such as ECRM7 (0.616) showed slightly lower loadings, it was retained due to their theoretical significance and because the overall CR and AVE values for their constructs remained acceptable. In conclusion, the findings confirm that the measurement model is both reliable and valid. This provides a strong foundation for proceeding with the structural model

analysis, ensuring that the relationships examined in the next stage are built on a robust measurement framework.

### *Discriminant Validity*

**Table 2 : The HTMT Stringent Criterion**

	e-BEP	EBE	e-CRM
e-BEP			
EBE	0.395		
e-CRM	0.165	0.521	

(HTMT established at HTMT.85)

Note: e-BEP: Electronic brand experience; EBE: Electronic Brand equity.  
e-CRM: Electronic customer relationship management;

Discriminant validity ensures that each construct in the study is truly distinct from the others, measuring separate and unique concepts showed in table 2. This study assessed discriminant validity using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT), a more reliable method compared to traditional approaches like the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). As a rule of thumb, HTMT values below 0.85 are considered acceptable and confirm that the constructs are not excessively correlated (Hair et al., 2016). In this study, all HTMT values fell well below this threshold, supporting the model's discriminant validity.

Specifically, the HTMT value between e-CRM and e-BEP was 0.165, while e-BEP and EBE showed 0.395. Additionally, e-CRM and EBE recorded 0.521. These values clearly indicate that all constructs are measuring different aspects of the digital brand equity framework in Malaysia's three-star hotel industry. Therefore, it can be concluded that discriminant validity is satisfactorily established, reinforcing the integrity of the measurement model and allowing for confident progression to structural model analysis.

### *Path Coefficient*

**Table 3: The Path Coefficient Result**

Relationship	Hypothesis	Direct Effect (β)	T-Statistic	P-Value	Significant
e-CRM > EBE	H1	-0.131	1.788	0.037	Significant
e-CRM > e-BEP	H2	0.377	4.581	0.000	Significant
e-BEP > EBE	H3	0.230	5.285	0.000	Significant
e-CRM > e-BEP > EBE	H4	0.078	3.269	0.001	Significant

Note: e-BEP: Electronic brand experience; EBE: Electronic Brand equity;  
e-CRM: Electronic customer relationship management;

The path coefficient analysis is used to examine the strength and direction of the relationships between variables in the model. This study applied the SmartPLS bootstrapping method with 5,000 samples, as recommended by Hair et al. (2016), to assess the statistical significance of

the hypothesized paths. As shown in Table 4.9, all four direct paths were found to be statistically significant with p-values less than 0.05 and t-values greater than 1.645. Electronic Customer Relationship Management (e-CRM) had a significant positive effect on e-BEP ( $\beta = 0.377$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), though its effect on EBE was negative but still statistically significant ( $\beta = -0.131$ ,  $p = 0.037$ ). Furthermore, e-BEP significantly contributed to EBE ( $\beta = 0.230$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), highlighting its mediating role in the relationship between marketing strategies and brand equity.

In terms of indirect effects, the mediation analysis revealed that e-BEP significantly mediated the effects of e-CRM on EBE. This is evident in the indirect paths: e-CRM  $\rightarrow$  e-BEP  $\rightarrow$  EBE ( $\beta = 0.078$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) as presented in Table 4.10. These findings indicate that the enhancement of customer experiences through digital interactions is a crucial factor in effectively converting electronic customer relationship management (e-CRM) efforts into stronger and more sustainable brand equity. In other words, simply implementing digital CRM tools is not sufficient on its own; rather, the quality of the customer experience generated through these digital touchpoints plays a decisive role in determining the overall impact on brand perception and value.

Furthermore, the results provide strong empirical support for the proposed conceptual framework, as they confirm that e-brand experience (e-BEP) functions as a significant and meaningful mediating mechanism within this relationship. Specifically, e-BEP serves as a critical bridge that connects digital marketing strategies with customers' perceived brand value, thereby explaining how and why e-CRM influences e-brand equity. Within the context of Malaysia's three-star hotel industry, these findings highlight the importance of designing and managing digital interactions in a way that enhances customer engagement, satisfaction, and emotional connection, ultimately leading to stronger brand equity outcomes.

## Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate the presence of significant relationships between electronic customer relationship management (e-CRM), e-brand experience (e-BEP), and electronic brand equity (EBE) within the context of Malaysia's three-star hotel industry. In particular, the results indicate that e-CRM exerts a statistically significant yet exerts a negative direct effect on e-brand equity. This outcome is somewhat unexpected, as it differs from the general consensus in previous studies, which have typically reported that customer relationship management strategies tend to have a positive influence on brand-related outcomes (Ismail & Hussin, 2013).

The observed inconsistency may be explained by several contextual and operational factors. One plausible reason is the possibility that e-CRM practices within three-star hotels are not being implemented in a fully effective or consistent manner. For instance, limitations such as a lack of personalised communication, inadequate system integration, or occasional technical difficulties may hinder the overall effectiveness of these digital tools. As a result, instead of enhancing customer satisfaction and strengthening brand perceptions, poorly executed e-CRM initiatives may unintentionally create frustration or dissatisfaction among users. This, in turn, could weaken positive customer evaluations and reduce the anticipated impact on loyalty and brand equity formation.

E-brand experience emerged as a vital mediator between the marketing strategy (e-CRM) and brand equity. This supports the assertions of Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou (2013), who emphasized the role of digital brand interactions in forming customer trust and satisfaction. Khan, Hollebeek, Fatma and Islam (2016) also identified brand experience as a key mediator influencing brand satisfaction and loyalty. In this study, it was found that customers who experienced richer, more meaningful, and highly engaging interactions with hotel brands tended to develop more positive perceptions toward those brands. Such enhanced experiences not only improved their immediate evaluations of the hotel services but also contributed to a stronger emotional connection with the brand over time. As a result, these customers were more inclined to form and sustain long-term relationships with the hotel, demonstrating higher levels of trust, satisfaction, and loyalty compared to those with less engaging experiences.

Furthermore, the study reinforces the relevance of Aaker's (1991) Brand Equity Model, especially its emphasis on brand loyalty as a core component influenced by customer experience. The integration of e-BEP as a mediating construct strengthens the model's applicability in digital contexts. As also proposed by Beig and Khan (2018), the experiential dimension of branding whether sensory, emotional, or behavioral has become increasingly important in online environments, especially where service quality and differentiation are key to brand success.

In conclusion, the findings of this study highlight that e-CRM serves as a critical strategic tool for building and enhancing brand equity. However, its overall effectiveness is not solely determined by its implementation, but rather by the extent to which it can be translated into meaningful, engaging, and value-adding customer experiences. In other words, the success of e-CRM initiatives depends heavily on how well they foster positive interactions, satisfaction, and emotional connections between the brand and its customers.

Within the context of the hotel industry particularly among three-star hotels that are confronted with intense market competition and ongoing challenges related to service quality perceptions, these insights carry significant practical implications. It suggests that prioritising the enhancement of digital experiences, including seamless online interactions and personalised engagement, may represent one of the most effective pathways for strengthening overall brand value and customer loyalty.

Furthermore, this study not only reinforces the conclusions drawn in prior research but also contributes to the existing body of knowledge by offering a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which digital relationship-building strategies influence brand outcomes. As such, it provides valuable and actionable insights for hotel managers and marketers who are seeking to refine and adapt their branding strategies in response to the rapidly evolving digital landscape.

## **Conclusion**

This study was undertaken with the primary objective of examining how electronic customer relationship management (e-CRM) influences e-brand experience (e-BEP) and, subsequently, contributes to the development of electronic brand equity (EBE) within the context of Malaysia's three-star hotel industry. The findings provide strong empirical support for the significant role of e-CRM in shaping customers' online experiences, highlighting its importance as a key driver of digital engagement. In particular, the results indicate that well-

executed e-CRM practices can positively influence how customers perceive, interact with, and evaluate hotel brands in the digital environment. Furthermore, e-BEP was identified as a crucial mediating variable in this relationship, underscoring the importance of delivering immersive, engaging, and memorable digital experiences that resonate with consumers on both functional and emotional levels.

These findings offer meaningful and practical implications for a range of stakeholders, including hotel managers, marketing professionals, and tourism industry practitioners. Specifically, they highlight the need for organisations to strategically design and manage their digital touchpoints—such as websites, social media platforms, and online service interfaces—in order to foster stronger customer relationships, enhance brand loyalty, and improve long-term customer retention. By focusing on the quality and consistency of digital interactions, hotels can better position themselves in an increasingly competitive and technology-driven marketplace.

Despite the valuable contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. One notable limitation lies in the study's focus on three-star hotels within Malaysia, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings to other hotel categories, such as budget, luxury, or boutique establishments, as well as to different geographical contexts. In addition, the study relied exclusively on a quantitative research approach, which, although effective in generating statistically reliable results, may not fully capture the deeper emotional, psychological, and behavioural dimensions of customer–brand relationships. Another potential limitation relates to the use of self-administered questionnaires as the primary data collection method, which introduces the possibility of response bias, as respondents may provide socially desirable answers or may not accurately recall and reflect upon their experiences.

In light of these limitations, several directions for future research are recommended. Expanding the scope of investigation to include a wider range of hotel classifications could provide a more comprehensive and comparative understanding of how e-brand equity is developed across different segments of the hospitality industry. Additionally, the incorporation of qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, or case study analyses, would allow researchers to gain richer and more nuanced insights into customers' perceptions, emotions, and engagement with hotel brands in digital contexts. Moreover, future studies could explore the influence of additional variables, including user-generated content, the usability and functionality of mobile applications, and the integration of artificial intelligence (AI)-driven customer service technologies. Examining these emerging factors would further enhance understanding of the key drivers of e-brand equity in an increasingly dynamic, digitalised, and competitive business environment.

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**Ethics Statement:** This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. All procedures involving human participants were reviewed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

**Author Contribution Statement:** All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. [Author A] as a student and [Author B] as a supervisor.

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