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STRENGTHENING E-BRAND EQUITY IN MALAYSIA'S THREE-STAR HOTELS: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING AND E-BRAND EXPERIENCE

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Abstract:

This study explores the process of developing Electronic Brand Equity (EBE) through Social Media Marketing (SMM) in the three-star hotel business in Malaysia. Many hotels are struggling to preserve brand trust and loyalty online in an era of digital competition and post-pandemic recovery pains. The study used quantitative methods and obtained 251 valid replies. The study used Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) and discovered that SMM considerably improves brand equity. Importantly, e-brand experience translates digital interaction into meaningful brand value. These findings confirm the applicability of Aaker's Brand Equity Model (1991) in the hotel industry and emphasise the importance of digital interaction methods in building brand equity. The findings give practical implications for hoteliers to strategically engage the digital ecosystem to enhance brand equity and competitiveness.

Keyword:

E-Brand Equity, E-Customer Relationship Management, Social Media Marketing

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Introduction

The travel and tourism sector constitutes a significant global industry, accounting for around 10.3% of the global gross domestic product (GDP) (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2021). It is an important industry in the economy, supporting and sustaining livelihoods worldwide. Notably, the travel and tourism sector grew by 6.7% annually in Southeast Asia – the highest of all sectors and much above the region's total economic growth of 3.7%. In the Middle East, the industry expanded 3% compared with a meagre 0.3% increase in the region's wider economy.

Tourism and hospitality significantly bolster the Malaysian economy, ranking as the third greatest contributor to the nation's GDP, following manufacturing and commodities (MIDA, 2022). This industry alone contributed RM240.2 billion in 2019, which indicates its huge economic potential. Nonetheless, this industry saw significant repercussions from the COVID-19 epidemic, leading to a drastic decline in tourist numbers and a loss exceeding RM100 billion (Tourism Malaysia Marketing Plan 2022-2026, 2022). Three-star hotels had significant challenges, grappling with declining occupancy rates and heightened competition in a rapidly evolving sector.

The tourism sector in Malaysia is expected to enhance the nation's economic development (Tan & Soon, 2023). In reaction, the Malaysian government instituted the National Tourism Policy 2020–2030, emphasising the use of digital technologies to rejuvenate and safeguard the industry for the future (MIDA, 2022). In the context of digital transformation, the concept of e-brand equity, which refers to a brand's perception in the digital realm, has become increasingly significant.

Unfortunately, many three-star hotels in Malaysia are struggling here. Online reviews often highlight shortcomings such as outdated facilities, minimal services, and unprofessional staff behaviour (Agoda, 2022), all of which negatively impact customers' perceptions of quality and brand trust (Kayaman & Arasli, 2007). Essentially, all the negative comments represent the perceived quality of three-star hotels in Malaysia as perceived by the public. It is explained that good e-brand equity creates a competitive advantage and gives a positive perception to customers (Le, Tran, Pham, & Tran, 2018). On top of this, competition from platforms like Airbnb continues to erode the market share of traditional hotels (Balasubramanian & Ragavan, 2019). Therefore, hotels also need to make some efforts in branding to gain brand loyalty as well, such as actively using social media to survive in the online environment (Manyanga, Kanyepe, Chikazhe, & Manyanga, 2024).

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This study aims to provide a deeper and broader understanding of the strategic utilisation of digital platforms, particularly social media marketing (SMM), in enhancing the total electronic brand equity (e-brand equity). The study thus identifies e-brand experience (e-BEP) as a significant process of transforming digital engagement into meaningful and value-driven customer perceptions. In recognition of the increasingly complex challenges faced by the Malaysian hospitality industry, particularly in the highly competitive three-star hotel segment. More specifically, the research seeks to investigate the direct effects of social media marketing on brand equity and e-brand experience, and also the indirect effects where e-brand experience mediates to enhance and extend these interactions. By analysing these interconnected processes, the study hopes to provide a greater understanding of how digital contact contributes to brand-building in a technology-driven setting.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of consistent, engaging, and emotionally appealing online experiences that align with customer expectations and preferences, achieved through the strategic use of social media marketing. In this regard, the research is intended to provide hotel managers, marketers, and industry stakeholders with useful and practical information to boost brand positioning, nurture stronger emotional relationships with customers, and develop long-term customer loyalty. To summarise, the study highlights the importance for three-star hotels in Malaysia to migrate from a basic digital footprint to a more integrated and experience-based approach to stay competitive, relevant and resilient in the ever-changing and digitised hospitality industry.

Literature Review

Three topics will be examined in the literature review: e-brand equity, social media marketing, and e-brand experience.

Definition of E-Brand Equity

A brand is generally characterised as the designation and symbol of a product or service (Erciş, Ünal, Candan & Yıldırım, 2012). Aside from that, a brand is also a product characterised by a unique persona, particularly with its image or design (Bhatia & Tandon, 2025). Aaker (1991) defined a brand as a name and/or emblem that identifies and distinguishes goods and services, intended to safeguard both consumers and producers from rivals. A robust brand results in heightened revenue, expanded market share, and a competitive edge (Chaudhuri, 1999). A robust brand will enhance confidence in intangible goods, hence aiding consumers in their purchasing decisions (Berry, 2000).

Farquhar (1989) presented the notion of "added value" that a brand contributes to a product, whereas Aaker (1991) characterises brand equity as a compilation of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and its symbol, which either augment or reduce the value provided by a product or service to a business and/or its clientele, further elaborated by recognising dimensions such as brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand associations, and proprietary assets (including patents and trademarks). Keller (1993) redirected attention toward a customer-centric viewpoint, characterising brand equity as the varying influence of brand awareness on consumer reactions to marketing efforts. He further said that a brand will exhibit favourable brand equity when consumers react more positively to a component of the marketing mix linked to the brand. These straightforward formulations highlight the significance of client understanding and perception, beyond mere financial value.

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As e-commerce grew, experts applied these criteria to the digital environment. E-brand equity is a term that is defined and understood differently by different scholars as the extension of traditional brand equity into the digital domain. From the perspective of brand management, Na and Marshall (2005) claimed that the concepts of online and offline branding are similar since they are both driven by consumer behaviour. It is predicated on the assumption that the same approaches and tactics that work in the offline world can be used effectively in the online world. Therefore, they concluded that digital brand equity models are relevant not only for digital enterprises but also for offline firms. Rios and Riquelme (2008) incorporated trust and loyalty into their e-brand equity framework, highlighting the significance of online service quality and website performance. Similarly, Christodoulides et al. (2006) found that emotional engagement and attentive service are crucial in online retail environments. Notwithstanding these distinctions, the research collectively posits that e-brand equity encompasses both conventional forms of brand equity and the unique aspects of online interaction, including interactivity and trust within digital contexts.

The investigation into e-brand equity is crucial for this analysis as it facilitates the examination of the influence of digital activities on consumer perception and behaviour. Prior research has demonstrated that social media marketing (SMM) can directly influence essential elements of e-brand equity, specifically loyalty and perceived quality. Shanab and Anagreh (2015) as well as Nicoline and Kaplan (2020) have demonstrated that tailored digital communication is crucial for fostering confidence and commitment, essential components in establishing e-brand loyalty. Leung, Bai, and Erdem (2017) discovered that social media promotions positively influenced brand awareness and perceived value, reinforcing the idea that SMM enhances brand equity. Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou (2013) additionally propose that e-brand experience facilitates the formation of emotional reactions throughout the digital interaction. This research posits that social media marketing significantly influences e-brand equity either directly or via the mediation of e-brand experience.

Definition of Social Media Marketing

Client involvement and brand reputation are essential in the hotel sector. Social Media Marketing (SMM) has become a crucial element of digital branding strategy. SMM is generally defined as the utilisation of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter for product marketing, brand recognition, and fostering interactive relationships with consumers (Yazdanparast, Joseph, & Muniz, 2016). It brings real-time reactivity and interactivity to traditional marketing, enabling firms to build community and trust in the fluid digital world. Leung et al. (2017) suggest that SMM is not merely a promotional tool, but a relationship-building tool that can have a massive impact on customer perceptions. Moreover, the importance of information created by consumers such as reviews, ratings and comments has made social media a crucial place for brands to maintain their image and connect directly with their audience (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). As consumers progressively rely on digital platforms for their travel choices, the influence of social media marketing on hotel brand equity is becoming increasingly evident.

Social media channels suitable for advertising products and services to a diverse range of enterprises encompass mobile devices, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, Google+, LinkedIn, Instagram, and YouTube (Javed Parvez, Moyeenudin, Arun, Anandan, & Kumar Janahan, 2018). Individuals disseminate content including movies, photographs, and images on various

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social media sites. These mediums encompass blogs, vlogs, social networking sites, forums, podcasts, public bookmarking platforms, and wikis (Drury, 2008).

All the definitions point to one main thing: that SMM is not only advertising in one direction but also involves active participation of the consumer and co-creation of brand meaning. In the academic literature, Dwivedi et al. (2015) and Stoycheff et al. (2017) emphasise the dialogic nature of SMM, which co-creates value by continuous interaction between brands and consumers. This shift from firm-controlled messages to consumer-driven engagement reflects the evolution of marketing and is particularly relevant to the service industries in which experiential elements are highly powerful in brand evaluation.

Social media marketing is linked to e-brand equity and e-brand experience due to its demonstrated ability to affect consumer perceptions, loyalty, and emotional ties. Sasmita and Mohd Suki (2015) claimed that SMM is helpful to develop favourable brand associations and to boost perceived quality by visual storytelling and responsive communication. Social media interactions can also construct immersive brand experiences that emotionally engage consumers. This is crucial for fostering allegiance and enduring brand devotion (Godey, Manthiou, Pederzoli, Rokka, Aiello, Donvito, & Singh, 2016). The findings of this research indicate that social media marketing directly influences e-brand experience and e-brand equity, serving as a strategic advantage for three-star hotels in Malaysia to thrive in the digital hospitality sector. Consequently, the following possibilities were examined for SMM:

H1: Social media marketing has a significantly affect with e-brand equity of hotel industry in Malaysia.
H2: Social media marketing has a significantly affect with e-brand experience of hotel industry in Malaysia.

Definition of E-brand Experience

Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello (2009) asserted that comprehending customer brand experiences is essential for formulating efficient marketing tactics. Consequently, brand experience has gained significant appeal and attracts substantial focus in marketing practices. Brand experience refers to the conceptualisation of sensations, emotions, thoughts, and behavioural reactions triggered by brand-related stimuli included in a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and surroundings. Brand experience may be characterised as "the customers' view of the products and services offered by firms at each interaction with the brand (Alloza, 2008).

The expansion of the virtual marketplace has led to an increase in attention to e-brand experience. According to Limba, Kiskis, and Jurkute (2014), the conventional notion of brand experience remains applicable to the definition of online brand experience. The distinction lies solely in the method of application due to the unique brand and consumer touchpoints. Brand experience and e-brand experience are conceptually related but analytically distinct constructs, particularly within digitally mediated service industries such as the hotel sector. While both constructs refer to consumers' internal responses to brand-related stimuli, they differ fundamentally in terms of interaction context, touchpoints, and experiential formation mechanisms.

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Digital brand experience pertains to the emotions and responses individuals exhibit when engaging with a brand in the online realm. Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou (2013) characterise it as an individual's internal and subjective reaction to an interaction with a digital brand. With e-brand experiences, the interaction happens through websites, apps or social media platforms, as opposed to traditional brand experiences, which may include touching a product or visiting a physical store. In this research, e-brand experience is viewed as a conduit or intermediary between strategies like social media marketing and the comprehensive assessment of brand value or e-brand equity. This is logical, as although technology and digital marketing might generate interest, it is the quality of the experience—its seamlessness, engagement, or satisfaction—that profoundly influences customer perceptions and connections with a company. The incorporation of e-brand experience as a mediating factor enhances comprehension of the true influence of online instruments on consumer perceptions and loyalty. To summarise, brand experience is consumers' responses to physical interactions with a brand, and e-brand experience is experiential responses to digital contacts. Given the increasing use of online platforms by hotel guests in their decision-making process, e-brand experience is a more relevant and theoretically sound construct to investigate the building of digital brand equity in the hospitality environment.

To elaborate on that, we analyse the significance of this link. Lee and Jeong (2014) assert that an exceptional online experience can create a memorable impression and significantly influence customer sentiments about a firm, particularly within the hotel sector. Such enjoyable interactions subsequently foster trust, satisfaction, and allegiance, which are vital components of substantial brand equity. It is not solely about the instruments, but rather the emotions they evoke in individuals. Consequently, this research demonstrates that e-brand experience is an essential element in transforming digital initiatives into substantial brand equity for three-star hotels in Malaysia.

H3: E- brand experience has a significantly affect with e-brand equity in the hotel industry in Malaysia.
H4: E- brand experience mediates the effect between social media marketing and e-brand equity.

Methodology

This research examines the influence of social media marketing (SMM) on electronic brand equity, including e-brand experience as a possible mediating factor, employing a quantitative research approach. The cross-sectional survey method was selected because it facilitates the gathering of data from a broad demographic at one specific moment. This is a prevalent approach in brand and customer analysis and is appropriate for establishing correlations between variables through statistical examination. Data were gathered using self-completed questionnaires from participants who had previously stayed at three-star hotels in Malaysia. Data were gathered by direct intercept surveys at designated sites in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Johor, Malacca, and Penang. Potential participants were contacted according to their accessibility and readiness to engage in the research. As the data for all dimensions were obtained from identical respondents through a self-administered questionnaire, common technique bias could potentially influence the study's findings. Consequently, procedural and statistical methodologies were employed to mitigate and evaluate the possible impact of common method bias. Respondents were advised that their replies would be kept anonymous and that there were no correct or incorrect responses. The survey was crafted using items that

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are both clear and comprehensible. Statistical evaluation of common technique bias was conducted utilising a suitable approach during the data analysis phase. The assessment outcomes were utilised to ascertain if common technique bias represented a notable issue in the research.

To ascertain the relevance of the respondents to the study's aims, preliminary screening questions were incorporated prior to the distribution of the whole questionnaire. Participants needed to possess prior experience lodging at a three-star hotel in Malaysia and familiarity with social media sites. Only those participants who met the designated requirements were solicited to take out the survey. This aimed to ensure that participants met the study's screening requirements, including having prior experience with three-star hotels and engaging with the hotels' digital interfaces. The questionnaire was segmented into three parts: demographic data, social media marketing, and e-brand experiences together with perceptions of brand equity. All characteristics were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale that spanned from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" to capture the degree of respondents' opinions.

Although the study focused on selected states with a substantial concentration of three-star hotels, the respondents were not randomly selected from a complete sampling frame. To ensure representation, this study adopted a stratified sampling technique considering the distribution of three-star hotels among the Malaysian states. Respondents were chosen based on a convenient sampling. In the context of this study, obtaining a comprehensive list of hotel guests was not feasible due to confidentiality policies maintained by hotel management. Therefore, convenience sampling provided a practical and efficient approach to collect data from hotel guests who were present and accessible during the data collection period. In this research, participants with previous stays at the hotel and familiarity with the digital platforms of three-star hotels in Malaysia are selected as respondents. A total of 251 valid responses were collected, exceeding the minimum sample size necessary for statistical analysis by Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). This approach was selected due to its capability to manage intricate models comprising multiple constructs and indicators, and it is suitable for small to medium sample sizes. PLS-SEM is suitable for predictive, exploratory, and theoretical development studies.

The questionnaire was developed and validated for content validity according to the existing literature. Elements for each construct were derived from earlier research and adjusted to fit the hotel environment. A preliminary investigation was conducted prior to the primary data gathering to assess the precision and dependability of the tool. Slight modifications were implemented in the final survey based on feedback from the pilot study to guarantee its user-friendliness and statistical validity. The dependability of the measuring items was evaluated by Cronbach's alpha utilising SPSS. The findings indicated that the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all constructs varied between 0.716 and 0.852. Specifically, e-brand equity recorded a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.809, e-CRM recorded 0.852, social media marketing recorded 0.838, and e-brand experience recorded 0.716. These results indicated an acceptable level of internal consistency among the measurement items. The methodological framework was carefully designed to match the research hypotheses, enabling a robust investigation of how digital relationship-building strategies influence customer perceptions of brand equity in Malaysia's competitive three-star hotel industry.

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Data Finding

Demographic Profile

A cumulative of 251 participants engaged in this study, all of them have resided in three-star hotels throughout different regions in Malaysia. The gender distribution was relatively equal, comprising 54.6% female and 45.4% male, indicating a balanced participation in this hotel industry. In terms of age distribution, the majority of participants (42.2%) fell within the 26 to 35 age bracket; succeeded by 25.9% who were aged 36 to 45, and 18.7% who were between 18 and 25 years old. The information indicates that only 13.2% of the patrons were aged 46 and above, suggesting that the majority of customers in the three-star hotels are youthful to middle-aged individuals.

Professionally, 44.6% were employed individuals, 23.5% were students, 17.1% were self-employed, and 14.7% were retirees or others. The majority of the attendees possessed a high level of education. 56.2% of the respondents possessed a bachelor's degree, 24.3% held diplomas, and 13.1% attained postgraduate credentials. This suggests that most participants are probably proficient in technology and at ease with online services - a crucial factor in evaluating the effectiveness of social media marketing. The comprehensive demographic profile provides a solid foundation for interpreting the study's findings concerning actual consumer behaviour in Malaysia's three-star hotel sector.

Measurement Model Analysis

Table 1: The Measurement Model Analysis Result

Construct	Item	Loading	CR	AVE
SSM	SSM1	0.733	0.885	0.527
	SSM2	0.847		
	SSM3	0.756		
	SSM4	0.702		
	SSM6	0.546		
	SSM7	0.673		
	SSM8	0.788		
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;
SMM: Social Media Marketing

The constructs' reliability and validity in this research were assessed by measurement model analysis utilising SmartPLS 4.0, as illustrated in Table 1. The significance of this stage lies in its ability to evaluate the statistical robustness and conceptual appropriateness of the constructs

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for subsequent research. This research has taken into account three significant metrics: Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and item loading values.

The findings indicated that all constructs exhibited satisfactory CR values over 0.8, signifying robust internal consistency. Social Media Marketing (SMM) scored 0.885, Electronic Brand Experience (e-BEP) achieved 0.908, and Electronic Brand Equity (EBE) reached 0.993, indicating favourable results. These metrics indicate that the components inside each construct reliably assess the intended underlying concept, as proposed by Hair, Hult, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2016) and Henseler & Chin (2010). Concerning convergent validity, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct exceeds the necessary threshold of 0.5. The average value estimate (AVE) for SMM was 0.527, for e-BEP it was 0.677, and for EBE it was 0.665. These findings suggest that a significant portion of the variance in each construct is elucidated by its respective indicators, hence confirming convergent validity.

The majority of the indicators had item loadings beyond the designated threshold of 0.708, signifying their substantial impact on their corresponding constructs. Certain elements, such SSM4 (0.702), exhibited considerably diminished loadings yet were retained due to their theoretical significance, while the overall CR and AVE metrics for the corresponding structures remained satisfactory. The findings demonstrated that the measuring model exhibited both reliability and validity. This establishes a solid foundation for advancing the study of the structural model, ensuring that the relationships examined in the subsequent phase are grounded in a robust measurement framework.

Discriminant Validity

Table 2: The HTMT Stringent Criterion

	e-BEP	EBE	SMM
e-BEP			
EBE	0.395		
SMM	0.469	0.547	

(HTMT established at HTMT.85)
Note: e-BEP: Electronic brand experience; EBE: Electronic Brand equity; SMM: Social Media Marketing

Discriminant Validity refers to the degree to which each construct in the research is genuinely distinct from the others, assessing separate and unique concepts outlined in Table 2. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT), a method deemed superior to the traditional Fornell-Larcker criterion (Henseler, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2015). According to the guidelines, HTMT values under 0.85 are deemed acceptable and indicate that the constructs exhibit little correlation (Hair et al., 2016). All HTMT values acquired in this study were significantly beneath this threshold, thus confirming the model's discriminant validity.

Particularly, e-BEP and EBE exhibit a value of 0.395. Furthermore, SMM yielded HTMT values of 0.547 in conjunction with EBE and 0.469 alongside e-BEP. These values suggest that these constructs are reflecting various facets of the digital brand equity framework within Malaysia's three-star hotel sector. This results in the determination that discriminant validity is adequately established, so reinforcing the robustness of the measurement model and permitting confidence in proceeding with structural model analysis.

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Path Coefficient

Table 3: The Path Coefficient Result

Relationship	Hypothesis	Direct Effect (β)	T-Statistic	P-Value	Significant
SMM > EBE	H1	0.364	5.310	0.001	Significant
SMM > e-BEP	H2	0.350	5.130	0.000	Significant
e-BEP > EBE	H3	0.230	5.285	0.000	Significant
SMM > e-BEP > EBE	H4	0.081	2.525	0.006	Significant

Note: e-BEP: Electronic brand experience; EBE: Electronic Brand equity; SMM: Social Media Marketing

Path coefficient analysis is employed to examine the intensity and orientation of the relationships between the model variables. The hypothesised pathways' statistical significance was evaluated by the SmartPLS bootstrapping method utilising 5,000 samples (Hair et al., 2016). Table 4.9 illustrates that all five direct paths exhibited statistical significance, with p-values below 0.05 and t-values exceeding 1.645. Social Media Marketing (SMM) shown a beneficial impact on both Electronic Brand Experience (e-BEP) ($\beta = 0.350$, $p < 0.001$) and Electronic Brand Equity (EBE) ($\beta = 0.364$, $p < 0.001$). Moreover, e-BEP significantly influenced EBE ($\beta = 0.230$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting it mediates the connection between marketing strategies and brand equity.

Concerning indirect effects, the mediation analysis revealed that e-BEP significantly mediated the influence of SMM on EBE. This is evident in the indirect pathways SMM → e-BEP → EBE ($\beta = 0.081$, $p = 0.006$) as illustrated in Table 4.10. The results suggest that enhancing customer experiences via digital engagement is crucial for elevating brand equity through the evolution of social media marketing. The findings are in line with the conceptual framework, and they indicate that e-BEP is a crucial bridge between digital marketing techniques and perceived brand value in the three-star hotel sector in Malaysia.

Discussion

The findings of this research indicate robust associations among social media marketing (SMM), electronic brand experience (e-BEP), and electronic brand equity (EBE) within the Malaysian three-star hotel sector. Social media marketing exerted a considerable and positive influence on e-brand experience and e-brand equity. This validates the finding of Bilgin (2018) that strategic social media participation enhances brand loyalty and brand image. Facebook, Instagram and other platforms can have a significant effect on customer sentiments, offering opportunities for interactive and user-driven marketing (Yazdanparast et al., 2016). The results indicate the rising importance of online presence and consumer participation in shaping brand views, especially in the highly competitive hospitality industry.

The e-brand experience was recognised as a significant intermediary between social media marketing and brand equity. This corroborates the assertions of Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou (2013), who examined the significance of digital brand engagements in fostering customer trust and satisfaction. Khan, Hollebeek, Fatma, and Islam (2016) acknowledged

brand experience as a significant intermediary that affects brand satisfaction and loyalty. The research revealed that patrons who enjoyed more immersive and enriching interactions with hotel brands tended to hold more positive views of those brands and develop lasting relationships with the companies.

Furthermore, the research underscores the significance of Aaker's (1991) Brand Equity Model, especially its emphasis on brand loyalty as a crucial element cultivated through customer experience. The use of e-BEP as a mediating element enhances the model's relevance to digital contexts. Beig and Khan (2018) further suggest that the experience aspect of branding, encompassing sensory, emotional, or behavioural elements, has gained significance in online contexts, particularly where service quality and distinctiveness are crucial for brand success.

These results imply that SMMs are important mechanisms for developing brand equity. However, their usefulness hinges on how well they can be translated into meaningful customer experiences. For the hotel company, especially for three-star hotels that are facing tough competition and service perception concerns, the greatest chance to increase brand value could be to focus on increasing the digital experience and interaction. The findings support and extend prior studies and offer useful guidance for marketers to adapt brand strategy to the changing digital environment.

Conclusion

The Malaysian hotel business has faced major challenges in recent years, from the fall in the number of hotels to the increase in negative comments on the service quality of three-star hotels. While the benefits of great brand equity (e.g. better sales performance and increased market share) are well established, the industry continues to find it challenging to maintain positive customer perceptions and to develop long-term loyalty. The emergence of alternative housing platforms like Airbnb intensified competition and called for more tactical ways to build e-brand equity. In this regard, previous studies have highlighted the significance of social media marketing and e-brand experience as key strategies to deal with these difficulties.

Thus, this study will investigate the influence of social media marketing (SMM) on e-brand experience (e-BEP) and its implications for the enhancement of electronic brand equity (EBE) within Malaysia's three-star hotel sector. Social media marketing is becoming ever more acknowledged as a dynamic and engaging communication tool enabling hotels to contact guests directly, convey brand values, and jointly create valuable digital experiences. Therefore, it is a crucial platform to increase the visibility of the brand and build consumer interactions.
The findings of this study show that SMM is a substantial and multi-dimensional factor in customers' online experiences, and there is solid empirical support for its direct effect on brand equity. Moreover, e-brand experience is an important mediating variable that enhances the effect of SMM by transforming digital interactions into exciting, memorable and emotive events. These results point to the need not only to adopt social media platforms but also to manage them effectively to offer high-quality content and interactive participation that generates more profound consumer relationships. The combination of social media marketing with e-brand experience is a promising strategy to enhance brand performance, which is consistent with earlier literature.

The results of the study also indicate that e-brand experience is an important mediating factor between online interactions and offline service encounters and ultimately influences customers' views, expectations and choice of hotel. Such integration of digital and physical experiences is especially important in the hotel sector as client happiness depends on virtual touchpoints as well as the delivery of real-world service. Three-star hotels in Malaysia will be able to build their e-brand equity, increase customer retention and develop sustainable competitive advantages in a dynamic and digitally driven market environment by implementing social media marketing strategies effectively and improving e-brand experiences.

To recap, the findings of this study have major theoretical and practical implications for hotel managers, marketing practitioners, tourism stakeholders, and policymakers by providing a strategic framework for improving brand performance and competitiveness in the Malaysian hotel business.

This study has essential contributions; however, there are several drawbacks that need to be addressed. The emphasis on three-star hotels in Malaysia constrains the applicability of the findings to other hotel classifications including budget, luxury, or boutique establishments, as well as to different geographical or cultural contexts. Furthermore, certain methodological limitations exist within the data gathering process. The study employed a stratified sample procedure to ensure representation from the many Malaysian states. However, the researcher had little control over the respondents' participation, which may have led to potential biases. The sample comprised 251 respondents selected by chance sampling processes; the validity of results hinges on the premise that the participants answered accurately and truthfully. It should also be mentioned that some of the respondents were not fully engaged in the survey, which could have affected the data obtained and the quality of the data collected.

Taking the above limitations into consideration, future research should be encouraged to take a broader and inclusive approach by studying different categories of hotels such as budget hotels, luxury and boutique hotels so that a more comprehensive understanding of e-brand equity strategies in the hospitality industry can be gained. Also, qualitative research techniques such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and case studies would allow for the collection of more detailed and nuanced insights into customers' perceptions, attitudes, and emotional connections with hotel brands in digital settings. Subsequent investigations might explore additional elements such as user-generated content, mobile app functionality, digital trust, and AI-enhanced customer support to enhance comprehension of the factors influencing e-brand equity in a progressively competitive and technology-oriented landscape. In addition, improvements in survey design, questionnaire clarity and the provision of appropriate incentives could help to raise response rates, reduce respondent reluctance and improve overall accuracy and reliability of the data.

The results of this research indicate that digital approaches, particularly social media marketing, do not uniformly result in improved e-brand equity. Their success is largely contingent upon the calibre of e-brand experiences they provide, their uniformity, and the emotional reactions they elicit. This insight is more critical to Malaysia's three-star hotel industry, where the ability to deliver consistent, immersive and meaningful customer experiences online and offline is more critical to branding success than simply embracing digital technologies per se.

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