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# Does eWOM affect Guests' Experience Expectation? An Empirical Analysis within the Hotel and Tourism Sector

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**Abstract** – Nowadays, progressive developments in information technology and latest communication techniques have brought about increasingly significant variations in consumer behaviour. These changes have created a focused shift in companies' business and marketing strategies. The hotel and tourism industry in particular, has been histrionically influenced by an electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) form of communication. This study aims to examine the extent to which e-WOM influences customer experience in a resort hotel setting. Using purposive sampling technique, a total of 135 usable online survey questionnaire feedbacks were collected from targeted respondents and subsequently used for data analyses. The data were analysed using SmartPLS software. Empirical results have revealed positive and significant relationships between e-WOM and all four dimensions of customer experience. The results emphasized the importance of e-WOM in the resort hotel industry and provided practical implications for the resort operators to enhance their guests' level of expected experience.

**Keywords** - *electronic word of mouth (eWOM), customer experience, escapism experience, aesthetic experience, service employees, resort hotel*

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## I. Introduction

Since the 1980's, literature on customer experience has been developing at a rapid pace (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). The focus is on exploring and defining the concepts of customer experience from theoretical

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perspectives which, in turn, have been widely researched in the marketing domain. In time, this unique idea of customer experience concept has finally been getting its deserved attention from practitioners and thus recognized as a distinctive theoretical contribution to the academic literature. Over the recent years, experience has also paved its way in the tourism industry such as hotels and holiday resorts because it is viewed as an experience-intensive industry. In other words, travellers are looking for unique, individualized, hedonistic, integrated, and outstanding quality of hospitality experience, as well as fulfilling their expectations and personal needs (Hashim, Haque & Wahab, 2015). Although experiences have attracted considerable interests in recent years, the tourism industry is still facing major challenges in creating and managing these experiences (Cetin & Dincer, 2014; Bolton, McColl-Kennedy, Cheung, Gallan, Orsingher, Witel & Zaki, 2018; Batra, 2019). As such, further studies are continually needed to understand customer experience (Vesci, Conti, Rossato & Castellani, 2020), and examine their influencing factors, particularly, in a tourism industry (Almohaimmed, 2020).

There are several empirical studies being conducted to examine factors that influence customer experience (Blázquez, 2014; Hanif & Gafar, 2017; Ren, Wang & Lin, 2016). However, these current studies did not examine how online or electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) could be a potential factor towards influencing customer experience, specifically in a resort hotel context. The decision on a resort hotel's location is an important factor to be considered when travellers are involved in the trip planning process. In an attempt to evaluate the suitability of resorts to stay, travellers will review the advice amongst other travellers from various technological platform sources such as social media, travel blogs, forums and travel review sites (Pourabedin & Migin, 2015). It is believed that having an eWOM presence could provide some ideas and thoughts in every traveller's mind towards the resort's stay experience (Gavilan, Avello & Martinez-Navarro, 2018) and thus, would assist them in their respective purchase decisions. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to examine the influence of eWOM on customer experience in a Malaysian resort hotel context.

## **II. Literature Review**

### ***Customer Experience***

Customer experience is a determining strategy in making customers feel the effect of services that have been provided by every business firm. Appropriate management of customer experience by business organizations can lead customers into advocates, upon which long-term competitive advantage and profitability can be subsequently achieved. Customer experience plays a crucial role in various contexts including the resort sector. This is because customers not only purchase products and services, but they also pay for the experience achieved. Since customers can get the same products or services from other competitors, thus experience becomes an added value. This is supported by Wong (2013) who mentioned that services are intangible, and it is difficult to be described compared to tangible goods. Only service experience can enhance a customer's memorable experience.

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) are among the scholars who made the first attempt to introduce the role of emotion on consumer behavior. These scholars argued that, apart from being rational, consumers are also involved in the state of hedonic consumption. They viewed hedonic consumption as a personal outcome resulting from the feeling of fun, playfulness, increased arousal, perceived freedom, fantasy and escapism. Subsequently, the unique idea of customer experience concept has been getting attention from practitioners and was recognized as a distinctive theoretical contribution to the academic literature. As a result of this development in literature, the managerial concept has been introduced and emerged as in both the marketing and management literatures, such as experiential and/or experience marketing (Schmitt, 1999; Tynan & McKechnie 2009), customer experience management (Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros, & Schlesinger, 2009) and experience design (Pullman & Gross, 2004; Skard, Nysveen, & Pedersen, 2011).

The idea of experiential marketing has developed into another new paradigm of customer experience. For instance, Pine and Gilmore (1998) introduced the concept of Experience Economy. This concept argues that firms that offer commodities, products and services only to their customers are no longer relevant. In fact, it must be complemented with memorable experience. In other words, these authors argued that, besides customers purchasing functional benefits, they also seek memorable experience from businesses. The memories are viewed as a product and customers are willing to pay for it. In this concept, Pine and Gilmore (1998) suggested that experiences can be characterized by two levels - level of customer participation and the environmental relationship (Figure 1.0). The level of customer participation views customers as passive participants and active participants. Passive participants reflect a condition whereby the customers become observers only with no real involvement in the experience stage, whereas active participants view customers as active and fully engaged in the experience.

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**Figure 1.0:** Realms of Experience

Source: Pine & Gilmore (1998)

On the other hand, environmental relationship level views customers' connection with the experience. It ranges from absorption and immersion. Pine and Gilmore (1998) further illustrated their concept into four (4) realms (that is, entertainment, educational, escapism and aesthetic). The entertainment realms describe customers as passive participants and absorption attitude, while educational realms view customers as active participants and immersed approach. On the contrary, escapist realm is a blend of entertainment and educational realm, whereas aesthetic realm illustrates the customers as active participants, but with little or no immersion in the surrounding. These scholars further argued that the combination of all four realms will lead towards flourishing customer experience. They described entertainment experience as an individual being aroused with feelings of fun, pleasure and relaxation. This will happen when the individual is involved in any sort of activities, such as listening to music.

In an educational-based experience, Pine and Gilmore (1998) explained that an individual will engage their mind to enhance their knowledge and skills. As for the esthetical experience, individuals will stimulate their senses by enjoying the environment. The last dimension proposed in the Experience Economy concept is escapism experience. This dimension refers to an individual's desire to escape from their daily routine stressfulness at home and office. In the tourism context, Mahdzar, Saiful Raznan, Ahmad Jasmin & Abdul Aziz (2020) has explored visitors' experience and satisfaction in a rural tourism destination by adopting the Four Experience Economy. The finding shows a positive relationship between the four realms of experience economy; visitors with aesthetics' experience has the highest means, followed by escapism, education and entertainment.

From a dissimilar perspective, Wong (2013) suggested that functional and emotional attributes should be combined. Functional attributes are described as tangible or actual functions of products or services, whereas emotional attributes refer to the sensorial aspects that stimulate customer's experience such as sound, smell, sight, taste and environment (Berry, Carbone & Haeckel, 2002). Thus, Wong (2013) proposed dimensions of customer experience by blending both functional (e.g. service environment such as amenities, decoration, signs, symbols and service convenience such as location, parking, operating hours) and emotional experience (e.g. an interaction between customers and service employees and hedonic service, such as pleasure, fun, and excitement). Furthermore, Shobri, Putit and Fikry (2018) posited that both concepts are relevant and useful in conceptualizing guest experience in a resort setting.

There are various definitions of experience depending on the situation and grounds of experience. Gentile, Spiller, and Noci (2007: p. 397) describe customer experience as "...the customer experience originates from a set of interactions between a customer and a product, a company, or part of its organization, which provoke a reaction". According to Pine and Gilmore (1998), experience involves personal characters which exist only in the mind of individuals who have been engaged at emotional, physical, intellectual as well as spiritual levels. Meyer and Schwager (2007) however stated that customers would respond to any direct or indirect contact with a company. Direct contact generally occurs during both product or service purchase and usage stage, whereas indirect contact most often involves unexpected interactions with representatives of a company's products or service. Based on these definitions, experience thus varies accordingly. Many scholars interpret the concept of customer experience differently. There are different characteristics of customer experience during consumption. It involves the mixture of rational, emotional, physical, sensory, and social interaction.

### ***Factors Influencing Customer Experience***

Extensive literature has focused on identifying factors that influence customer experience. Hanif and Gafar (2017) suggest service interface, retail atmosphere and assortment as determinants of customer experience in a retail environment. In investigating the determinants of customer experience in the telecom industry, Subramanian and Palaniappan (2016) propose service delivery, network performance, customer care culture, marketing promotions and communication, and brand value and brand image that would create positive customer experience. In an attempt to better understand the customer experience concept, Jaiswal and Singh (2020) analysed this issue in online purchase context. The authors found that economic value, customization, post-purchase experience and customer services are the major factors to which customers evaluate their overall online experience.

In the context of tourism and hospitality, various studies have examined the factors influencing customer experience. For example, a study by Giddy and Webb (2016) investigates relative strength and nature of environment as the factors influencing experience in adventure tourism. Another study by Åstrøm (2017) identified that name, employee interaction and lighting were found to be the most important drivers for the customer experience in a cruise setting. Furthermore, Kempiak, Hollywood, Bolan and McMahon-beattie (2017) suggested that in heritage attractions context, audio and visual communication, atmospherics, on-site engagement, information, and heritage preservation were the most influential factors influencing experience during a visit. Moliner, Monferrer, Estrada and Rodriguez (2019) analysed this issue in a tourist accommodation context. They identified that environmental sustainability and customer experience in the hospitality industry can be demonstrated. A recent study in culinary tourism by Kaushal and Yadav (2020) found that food, hygiene and cleanliness, tour guide, customization, locations of food tastings, infrastructure and facilities, digital presence and brand perception were identified as key factors in determining experience.

Based on the literature review, it has been revealed that limited studies were conducted to examine online word-of-mouth (eWOM) as a factor in influencing customer experience. Having the presence of eWOM is believed to provide some ideas and thoughts in every customer's mind towards such an experience (Gavilan, Avello & Martinez-Navarro, 2018) and thus, could assist travellers in their respective purchase decisions. Similarly, Plotkina, (2019) also agreed that eWOM tends to enhance customers' cognitive effort and lead to high purchase intention. Therefore, this study intends to examine the influence of eWOM on customer experience in Malaysian resort context.

### ***Online Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) and Customer Experience***

Over the past decades, many marketers have tended to focus on the traditional marketing tools, such as advertisement, sales promotion, telemarketing, public relation, and personal selling as their strategies. However, recent literature revealed that WOM has become the most powerful method in influencing consumer behaviour. Harrison-Walker described WOM as "informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organization, or a service" (Harrison-Walker, 2001 p. 63). Growth of network technologies and their easy usage have transformed the traditional person-to-person communication into network medium (eWOM).

Nowadays, it is very common for customers to seek other people's opinions or recommendations from the Internet (Wang, Wang & Wang, 2018). This is because consumers who make WOM recommendations do not have personal interests in a brand, product, or service respectively. Thus, individuals who review the recommendations will put high credibility on it (Hussain, Jafar, Ilyas, Mustafa & Jianzhou, 2018). WOM plays an important role in the tourism and hospitality industry (Durmaz & Yüksel, 2017). It has also been revealed that positive word of mouth (WOM) communication was one of the factors that influence customers to choose and remain faithful to a service provider (e.g. Putit & Abdullah, 2019)

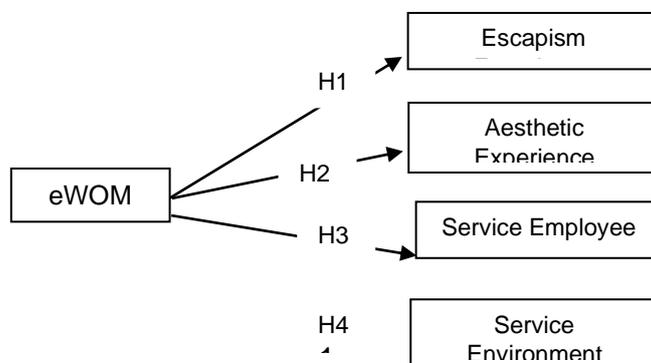
Service is relatively difficult for individuals to pre-purchase as it is high in experience (Chang, Jrmg & Abdul Hamid, 2013). For instance, a customer may not be able to pre-purchase a room offered by a resort as he/she needs to pay for the room and stay in order to evaluate the room's quality and experience of staying at the resort. Therefore, WOM communication is relevant within the hospitality and tourism context in an attempt to assist people with their travel decisions (Yan, Zhou, & Wu, 2018). In lieu of the above, this present study shows that customers, who read positive comments, opinion and experience of others about particular resorts, may believe that the resorts are generally good. According to Chan, Hsiao & Tang, (2017), eWOM information regarding resort experience helps guests form a mental image of the resort's real situation, to which it could reduce risks and uncertainties about their future travel. In other words, eWOM is believed to give some ideas and thoughts in a customer's mind towards the experience. Hence, this study hypothesized the followings:

H1: eWOM has a significant influence on escapism experience.

H2: eWOM has a significant influence on aesthetic experience.

H3: eWOM has a significant influence on service employees.

H4: eWOM has a significant influence on the environment.



**Figure 2.0:** Research Model  
Source: Developed for this study

### III. Methodology

#### *Research Instruments*

As mentioned earlier, the main objective of this study is to examine the influence of eWOM on customer experience within a resort context. In order to achieve this objective, eWOM was measured by adopting four items from the literature (Almana & Mirza, 2013; Cheung, Lee & Rajohn, 2008). As for customer experience dimensions, the measurement scale was also adopted from the literature (Wong, 2013; Donnelly, 2009; Cetin & Dincer, 2014); Ali, Hussain & Ragavan, 2014; Oh et al. 2007); Jing, 2010). This scale includes 23 items related to the four experience dimensions: service environment, service employee, esthetic and escapism. The survey was in the form of a structured questionnaire consisting of three parts. The first part captured the respondent's profile. The second part captured on eWOM and the last part captured on customer experience.

#### *Sampling and Data Collection*

This study has adopted a purposive sampling method in determining its targeted sampled respondents. These respondents were qualified to participate online upon answering the initial screening questions of having stayed at any resort hotels in Malaysia over the past two years prior to the data collection period. Using an online survey questionnaire approach, data were distributed to 200 targeted respondents via Facebook's WhatsApp Messenger platform. Distributing questionnaires through an internet assistance is a common practice for some researchers in the field of hospitality and tourism (Han, Hsu & Lee, 2009).

Since the survey questionnaires were distributed online during the country's movement control order (MCO) phase amidst the Corona Virus or COVID 19 global pandemic, the population number in this research is unknown. Hence, the sample in this study was expected with a minimum of 100 respondents. Based on Roscoe's rule of thumb, in determining a proper research, the sample size is between 30 and 500 respondents (Roscoe, 1975). As such, a minimum sample size of 100 was sufficient based on Roscoe's idea. When the population is unknown, Roscoe's rule is the best technique to define the sample size for the study (Hanif & Gafar, 2017).

### IV. Data Analysis and Finding

#### *Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents*

Respondents who completed the survey reached 135 feedbacks and all data were validated to be analysed in the study using Partial Least Squares structural equation modelling method (PLS-SEM). Table 1 provides a frequency analysis of the demographic profiling of respondents. Upon examination of these respondents (n=135), the result indicated that the majority of them were female (67%; n=90), as compared to male

respondents. In the case of age, most of the respondents were between age 36 to 45 years old (33%; n=44) and the rest are as stated in Table 1.0. In terms of marital status, most of the respondents were married (64 %; n=87) as compared to the rest. Most of the respondents were public sector employees (23%; n=31), followed closely by those employed in the private sector (17%; n= 23) and others as illustrated in Table 1.0

**Table 1.0:** Demographic Profile of Respondents

Profile	Descriptive Profile	Percent	Frequency (n=135)
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>90</b>
	Male	33	45
<b>Age</b>	18 - 25 years old	14	19
	26 – 35 years old	29	39
	<b>36 – 45 years old</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>44</b>
	46 – 55 years old	18	24
	56 – 65 years old	6	9
	66 and above	0	0
<b>Level of Education</b>	High school/ diploma level or lower	24	33
	Undergraduate level	24	33
	<b>Postgraduate level</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Marital Status</b>	Single	34	46
	<b>Married</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>87</b>
	Divorced	1	1
	Widowed	1	1
<b>Occupational Status</b>	<b>Public Sector</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>31</b>
	Private Sector	17	23
	Retiree	3	4
	Self-employment	2	3
	Unemployed	3	4
	Student	11	15
	Others	41	55

### **Measurement Model**

The measurement model was evaluated through convergent validity and discriminant validity. The convergent validity was verified by the factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and construct reliability (CR), with a minimum value of 0.7, 0.5 and 0.7 respectively (Hair et al., 2017). It is presented in Table 2.0, to which all the standardised loading factors were greater than 0.7. It was also recorded that the AVE values obtained were between 0.633 and 0.863. Similarly, the CR items were within the range of 0.905 to 0.950 (Hair, Hult, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2017). The convergent validity of these constructs was thus deemed adequate.

Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion and Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) criterion (Henseler, Hult, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2015) were used to assess discriminant validity. Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion was examined by comparing the square root of the AVE with the correlations between the constructs. As displayed in Table 3, all square roots of AVE (diagonal values) were greater than the correlation coefficients between the constructs (off-diagonal values), hence suggesting that discriminant validity was adequate. In contrast, HTMT can be assessed by comparing the values obtained with the required threshold of HTMT.85 (Kline, 2016) or HTMT.90 (Gold, Malhotra & Sagars. 2001) and HTMT inference did not contain value 1. Table 4.0 illustrated that all values passed the HTMT.90 and the HTMT inference criterion, thus indicating that discriminant validity was established. It was further discovered that the collinearity problem did not exist with all the VIF values for independent variables less than 5 as shown in Table 5.0 (Hair et al., 2017).

**Table 2.0:** Measurement Model

Construct	Items	Loading	CR	AVE
eWOM	EWOM1	0.920	0.950	0.863
	EWOM2	0.952		
	EWOM3	0.916		
Escapism Experience	ESC1	0.777	0.934	0.741
	ESC2	0.808		
	ESC3	0.930		
	ESC4	0.900		
	ESC5	0.884		
Aesthetic Experience	EST1	0.903	0.905	0.706
	EST2	0.885		
	EST3	0.824		
	EST4	0.739		
Service Employee	SEMP1	0.831	0.943	0.733
	SEMP2	0.900		
	SEMP3	0.876		
	SEMP4	0.850		
	SEMP5	0.881		
	SEMP6	0.795		
Service Environment	SENV1	0.840	0.940	0.633
	SENV2	0.860		
	SENV3	0.827		
	SENV4	0.817		
	SENV5	0.898		
	SENV6	0.738		
	SENV7	0.771		
	SENV8	0.751		

**Table 3.0:** Discriminant Validity using Fornell– Larcker Criterion

Construct	1	2	3	4	5
Escapism Experience	0.861				
Aesthetic Experience	0.800	0.840			
Service Employee	0.666	0.762	0.856		
Service Environment	0.702	0.738	0.767	0.814	
eWOM	0.490	0.557	0.584	0.603	0.929

**Table 4.0:** Discriminant Validity using HTMT Criterion

Construct	1	2	3	4
Escapism Experience				
Aesthetic Experience	0.885			
Service Employee	0.716	0.839		
Service Environment	0.752	0.814	0.825	
eWOM	0.532	0.617	0.631	0.644

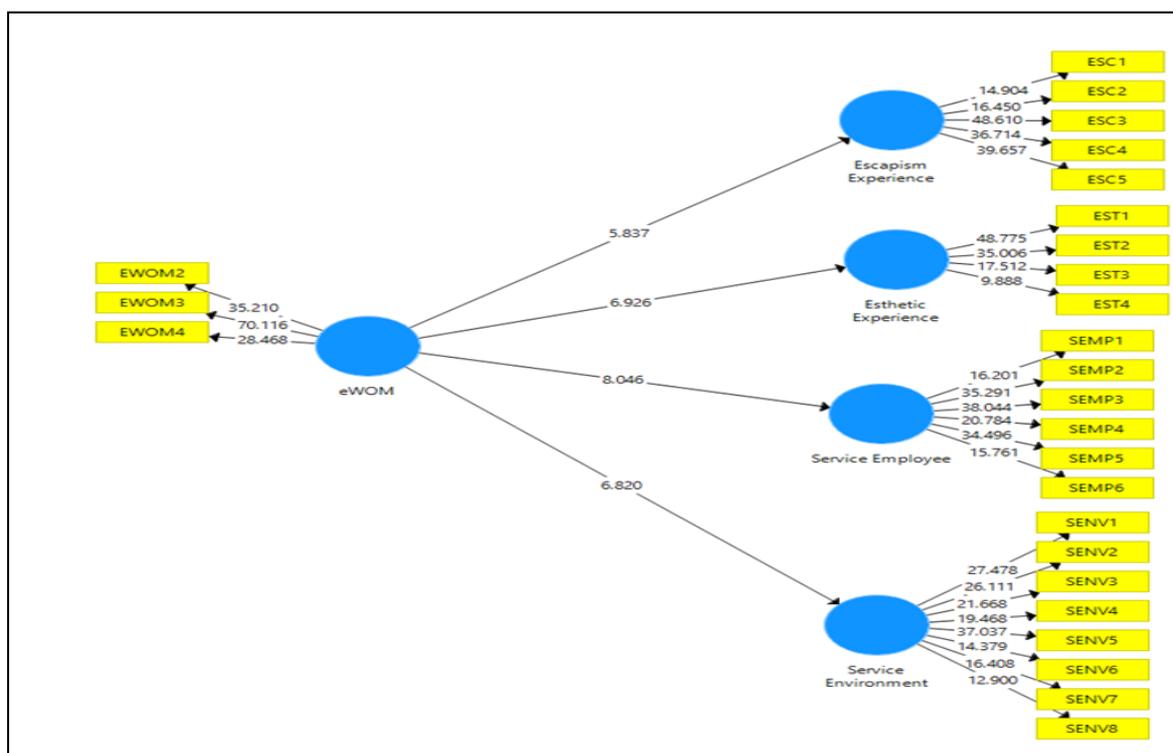
**Structural Model**

Table 5.0 demonstrates the structural model that was performed using a bootstrapping procedure with a resample of 5,000 based on the suggestion made by Hair et al. (2017). The results revealed that the R<sup>2</sup> value for escapism experience was 0.243; aesthetic experience was 0.313; service employee was 0.336; and service environment was 0.362. The results correlated with Chin’s (1998) guideline, to which a model is classified as being substantial (0.67), moderate (0.33), and weak (0.19). Accordingly, escapism experience, aesthetic experience, service employee and service environment can be described as moderate. All paths tested in the structural model (Figure 3.0) were significant with the t-values of H1a, H1b, H1c and H1d greater than the critical value of 1.96. It was further discovered that eWOM has a positive effect on escapism experience, aesthetic experience, service employee and service environment. Additionally, all effect sizes (f<sup>2</sup>) were greater than 0.02 in this study (Cohen & Cohen, 1983).

**Table 5.0:** Results of Partial Least Square

Hypotheses	Relationship	Std. Beta	Std. Error	t-values	Decision	R <sup>2</sup>	f <sup>2</sup>	VIF
H1a	eWOM → Escapism Experience	0.491	0.084	5.837	Supported	0.243	0.317	1
H1b	eWOM → Aesthetic Experience	0.560	0.081	6.926	Supported	0.313	0.457	1
H1c	eWOM → Service Employee	0.584	0.073	8.046	Supported	0.336	0.517	1
H1d	eWOM → Service Environment	0.605	0.089	6.820	Supported	0.362	0.579	1

Note: Critical t-values. \*\*2.58 (P<0.01); \* 1.96 (P<0.05)



**Figure 3.0:** Structural Model

## V. Discussion and Conclusion

In essence, the findings in this study have highlighted the fact that eWOM is a good predictor of guest experience expectation (i.e. escapism experience, aesthetic experience, service employee and service environment) within the Malaysian resort context. This finding is consistent with that reported by Bansal and Voyer (2000). The authors found that eWOM communication would form some expectations towards a service experience. Similarly, Lu and Stepchenkova (2015) described that the information which has been shared by others on the Internet benefits the users based on reading other people's experience and opinions. In addition, Chan et al. (2017) claimed that online reviews on hotel experience help guests form a mental image on the real situation of the hotel, which could reduce risks and uncertainties about their future travel. The review acts as a photograph in the guests' mind to describe the hotel's service and environment.

The above findings may also be influenced by online reviews posted on the Internet by the experienced guests (e.g. Tripadvisor), in which the reviews focused on specific experience (e.g. service environment, service employee, esthetic experience and escapism experience). According to Sparks and Browning (2011), the online reviews on hotel or resort are categorized into two dimensions namely, the hotel's core features (e.g. service environment), and interpersonal service shortcomings (e.g. service employee). In other words, most respondents shared their experience with regards to the hotels or resorts' core functions (e.g. rooms, cleanliness, and facilities) and customer service (e.g. pleasant interactions with the resort employees) on the Internet. In a similar vein, Cetin and Dincer (2014) found that the hotel's physical environment is related to eWOM. In other words, most respondents shared their experiences with others regarding a hotel's physical environment.

Besides sharing experience on the service environment and service employees, Simpson and Sigauw (2008) suggested that place satisfaction also encourages people to share this experience with others. Place satisfaction refers to a condition where the visited place offers relaxation, comfort and rest environment which are deemed relevant in a resort context. Vuuren and Slabbert (2011) in their study on travel motivation found that the main factors that encourage people to visit resorts are to escape from their surrounding environment and to have a rest on a holiday. Thus, these two statements suggest that sharing escapism experience during resort stay with others is important since it is one of the traveller's motivational factors.

Based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that the positive and significant relationship between eWOM and guest experience (i.e. service environment, service employee, aesthetic experience and escapism experience) are evidenced by the fact that online reviews provide valuable information about resort experience and help people in their travel decision-making. In addition, this study also revealed that online reviews made by experienced guests are reliable. In other words, the reviews are trustworthy as indicated by the positive and significant relationship between eWOM and guest experience. This is in line with the claims in a previous study that eWOM is a trustworthy source that potentially influences consumers' purchase intentions (e.g. Baber, Ramayah, Malik, Sadiq, Islam and Sajjad, 2016).

The researchers can therefore argue that eWOM is an important predictor of guest experience expectation. As the finding shows, eWOM plays a main role in developing service employee experience. In this study, service employees are being referred to during guests' interactions with the staff. The finding indicates that staffs' personal care, knowledge, willingness to help and level of friendliness has a heavier weightage. As such, Malaysian resort operators should enhance the staffs' knowledge, skills, motivation, incentives, training, and commitment to ensure that the latter could provide greater service employee experience. Hence, guests will be able to share their positive experience with others on the Internet.

The findings further reveal that eWOM plays a greater role in developing aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience reflects both interior architecture and landscaping that can stimulate the guests' aesthetic senses during their stay at the resort. In view of this, Malaysian resort operators can enhance their guests' aesthetic experience through innovations in the resorts' architecture design, landscape, lobby and room layout, and facilities. For example, these innovations can include lush greenery with a distinctive waterfall, stunning infinity rooftop pools overlooking the city skyline, indulgent massages in pool cabanas, and sky gardens for pure rejuvenation. Despite the above discussion, several limitations were observed in this study. A quantitative approach was only identified herewith in regards to this study. Future research could be enhanced by undertaking a qualitative study in an attempt to identify richer data. Sampled population could be further generalized by taking into considerations of the origins of tourist nationalities, including foreign travellers.

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