The Role of e-CRM, Social Media Marketing in Strengthening E-Brand Equity in Three-Star Hotels in Malaysia : The Mediating Effect of E-Brand Experience

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Abstract – This study investigates how electronic customer relationship management (e-CRM) and social media marketing (SMM) influence e-brand experience and ultimately build electronic brand equity (EBE) within three-star hotel industry in Malaysia. Amid growing digital competition and post-pandemic recovery challenges, many hotels face difficulties maintaining brand equity online. The study employed a stratified sampling method based on the distribution of three-star hotels across Malaysian states. Using a quantitative approach with 251 valid responses analyzed through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), the study found that SMM significantly enhances both e-brand experience and e-brand equity, while e-CRM positively impacts experience but has a negative direct effect on e-brand equity indicating that higher levels of e-CRM implementation are associated with lower e-brand equity. Importantly, e-brand experience plays a mediating role, transforming digital interactions into meaningful brand equity. These findings offer practical insights for hoteliers aiming to improve brand equity and competitiveness through strategic digital engagement.
Keywords: "E-brand equity", "E-customer relationship management", "E-brand Experience", "Social media marketing".

1. Introduction

Malaysia experienced significant growth in tourism in 2024 (MIDA, 2025). In 2019 alone, the industry generated RM240.2 billion, showcasing its significant economic potential. 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). Among the hardest hit were three-star hotels, many of which faced reduced occupancy rates and growing pressure to stay competitive in a rapidly evolving market.

In this digital shift, the concept of e-brand equity on how a brand is perceived online has become increasingly important. Unfortunately, many three-star hotels in Malaysia are

struggling in this area. Online reviews often highlight shortcomings such as outdated facilities, minimal services, and unprofessional staff behavior (Agoda, 2022), all of which negatively impact customers' perceptions of quality and brand trust (Kayaman & Arasli, 2007). On top of this, competition from platforms like Airbnb continues to erode the market share of traditional hotels (Balasubramanian & Ragavan, 2019). The three-star hotel was chosen for this study because, in Malaysia, most upscale and luxury hotels have performed better and face fewer problems than lower-rated hotels (Choo & Tan, 2017).

Recognizing these challenges, this study aims to explore how digital tools like electronic customer relationship management (e-CRM) and social media marketing (SMM) can help improve the e-brand experience and strengthen overall e-brand equity for three-star hotels in Malaysia. Specifically, the research investigates the direct effects of e-CRM and SMM on brand equity and experience, as well as how e-brand experience mediates these relationships. By focusing on these digital strategies, the study seeks to offer practical insights for hotel managers and marketers looking to build stronger connections with guests and stay relevant in a digitally-driven hospitality landscape.

2. Literature Review

2.1. 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 et al. (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 and social media marketing (SMM) 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. Similarly, Leung et al. (2017) found that social media campaigns positively influence brand recognition and perceived value, supporting the rationale that SMM contributes to stronger brand equity. 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 both e-CRM and SMM significantly affect e-brand equity either directly or through the mediation of e-brand experience.

2.2. 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, social media, and customer portals—to deliver personalized services and communication (Azila, 2011; Fjermestad & Romano, 2003). According to Mahdavi et al. (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 et al. (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 et al. (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 significant effect on with e-brand equity of hotel industry in Malaysia.
H3: E-CRM has a significant effect on with e-brand experience of hotel industry in Malaysia.

2.3. Social Media Marketing

Social Media Marketing (SMM) has become a cornerstone of digital brand strategy, particularly in the hospitality sector where customer engagement and reputation play pivotal roles. SMM is generally defined as the use of social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to promote products, build brand awareness, and foster two-way communication with consumers (Yazdanparast et al., 2016). It extends traditional marketing by adding real-time responsiveness and interactivity, enabling brands to cultivate community and trust in dynamic digital environments. Leung, Bai, and Erdem (2017) emphasize that SMM is not just a promotional tool but a relationship-building mechanism that can significantly affect customer perceptions. Moreover, the role of user-generated

content—such as reviews, ratings, and comments—has made social media an essential space for brands to manage their image and engage directly with their audience (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). As customers increasingly rely on online channels for travel decisions, the influence of SMM in shaping hotel brand equity has become more pronounced.

The justification for linking social media marketing with e-brand equity and e-brand experience lies in its proven ability to affect consumer attitudes, loyalty, and emotional connections. According to Sasmita and Mohd Suki (2015), SMM contributes to building positive brand associations and enhances perceived quality through visual storytelling and responsive communication. Social media interactions can also deliver immersive brand experiences that emotionally engage users, which is crucial for fostering loyalty and long-term brand commitment (Godey et al., 2016). Furthermore, research by Kumar (2020) shows that integrating social media into CRM systems enhances personalization and reinforces brand trust. Given these insights, this study hypothesizes that SMM has a direct impact on both e-brand experience and e-brand equity, making it a strategic asset for three-star hotels in Malaysia aiming to compete in the digital hospitality marketplace. Hence, below are the hypotheses tested for SMM:

H2: Social media marketing has a significant effect on with e-brand equity of hotel industry in Malaysia.
H4: Social media marketing has a significant effect on with e-brand experience of hotel industry in Malaysia.

2.4. E-Brand Experience

Ridhwan, Moko & Hadiwidjojo, (2021) stated that a brand's overall experience serves as a benchmark for fostering loyalty, encompassing multiple facets such as sensory perceptions, emotional connections, cognitive evaluations, and behavioral responses. However, 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 strategies like e-CRM and social media marketing, 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.

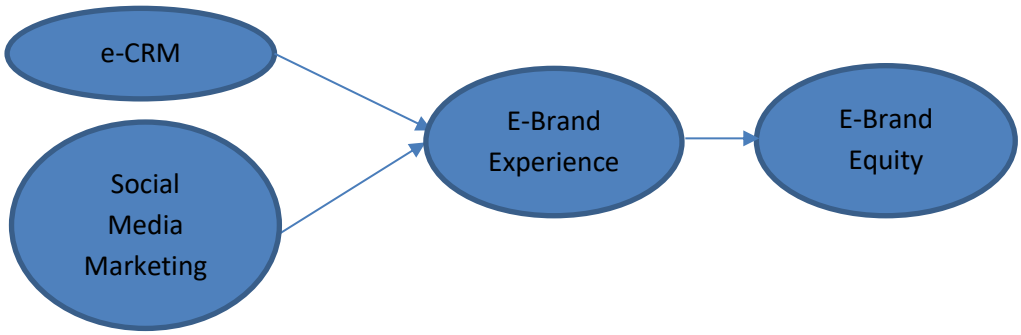
Research by Lee and Jeong (2014) shows that a great online experience can leave a lasting impression and strongly influence how customers feel about a brand, especially in industries like hospitality. When a hotel uses e-CRM effectively responding quickly, remembering guest preferences, or making booking easy which it makes guests feel valued. Similarly, good social media marketing can create emotional connections by being relatable, informative, or even entertaining. 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.

H5: E- brand experience has a significant effect on e-brand equity of hotel industry in Malaysia.
H6: E- brand experience mediate the effect between e-CRM and e-brand equity.
H7: E- brand experience mediate the effect between social media marketing and e-brand equity.

2.5. Conceptual Framework
Conceptual Framework for Social Media Marketing and e-CRM of Three-star hotels in Malaysia

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



3. Methodology of Study

3.1. Research Approach and Study Design
This study adopts a quantitative research approach to examine the effects of electronic customer relationship management (e-CRM), social media marketing (SMM) and e-brand experience on e-brand equity, with e-brand experience as a potential mediating factor. A cross-sectional survey design was chosen because it allows the collection of data at a single point in time from a broad population. This approach is widely used in brand and consumer research and is appropriate for establishing relationships between variables through statistical testing.

3.2. Population and Sample Size
To ensure representativeness, the study employed a stratified sampling method based on the distribution of three-star hotels across Malaysian states. The study used G-power tools and a total of 251 valid responses were collected 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 study sample consists of hotel guests who have stayed at three-star hotels in Malaysia and have been exposed to the hotels' digital platforms. Each respondent serves as an individual unit of analysis, providing data on their perceptions and experiences, which are captured through the structured questionnaire.

3.3. Constructs Measurement

The scale for Yoo et al., (2000) for measuring Brand Equity was adapted and utilised in this study whilst that of Yazdanparast et al., (2016) in measuring social media marketing, Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsu, (2013) in measuring e-brand experience and Lee-Kelley et al., (2003) were adapted in the measuring e-crm. 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.

3.4. Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into two main sections. Section A captured respondents' demographic information, including gender, age, race, marital status, education background, occupation, monthly income, and hours per day spent on social media platform. Sections B to E measured the main constructs of the study: social media marketing, e-crm, e-brand experience and e-brand equity.

3.5. Procedure for Data Collection and Analysis

This study is a cross-sectional study, which means the data were collected at one point in time and not repeated. Several methods are available for data collection in gathering related information. In this study, data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire (in the form of a booklet) distributed through face-to-face interaction at selected three-star hotels in Malaysia. This approach was adopted to ensure that respondents met the study's screening criteria, particularly having prior experience staying at three-star hotels and interacting with the hotels' digital platforms.

Respondents were chosen based on a convenient sampling. According to Hair et. al (2021), convenience sampling is non-probability sampling that been used when the samples are drawn based on convenience. According to them, interviewing individuals in high traffic areas is a common method of generating convenience samples. In the context of this study, obtaining a comprehensive list of hotel guests was not feasible due to confidentiality policies maintained by hotel management. Potential respondents were approached in common areas within the hotel premises, including hotel lobbies, lounges, and other public spaces. Prior to participation, respondents were screened to ensure that they met the study's eligibility

criteria, specifically that they had stayed at a three-star hotel in Malaysia and had experience using the hotel's digital platforms. Eligible respondents were then provided with a brief explanation of the study's objectives and informed that their participation was entirely voluntary. They were also assured that all responses would be treated confidentially and used solely for academic research purposes. After providing their consent, respondents were given sufficient time to complete the structured questionnaire.

To enhance the representativeness of the sample and improve the external validity of the findings, respondents who had previously stayed at other three-star hotels within the participating states were also invited to provide responses based on those experiences. This approach enabled the study to capture a broader range of customer perceptions across multiple three-star hotels in Malaysia.

Overall, the methodological framework was carefully designed to align with the research objectives and hypotheses, allowing for a robust investigation into how digital relationship-building strategies influence customer perceptions of brand equity in Malaysia's competitive three-star hotel industry.

4. Findings and Discussion

Both measurement and structural models were evaluated for this study. However, the evaluation of the structural model was preceded by the measurement model's assessment.

4.1. 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 suggests that the majority of respondents are likely to be digitally savvy and familiar with online services—an important consideration when evaluating e-CRM and social media marketing effectiveness. Overall, the demographic profile provides a strong foundation for interpreting the study's findings within the context of real consumer behavior in Malaysia's three-star hotel industry.

4.2. Measurement model

Table 1: The Measurement Model Analysis Result

Construct	Item	Loading	CR	AVE
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		
SMM	SMM1	0.733	0.885	0.527
	SMM2	0.847		
	SMM3	0.756		
	SMM4	0.702		
	SMM6	0.546		
	SMM7	0.673		
	SMM8	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; e-CRM: Electronic customer relationship management; SMM: Social Media Marketing

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, Social Media Marketing (SMM) reached 0.885, 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 et al. (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 SMM was 0.527, 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) and SMM4 (0.702) showed slightly lower loadings, they were 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.

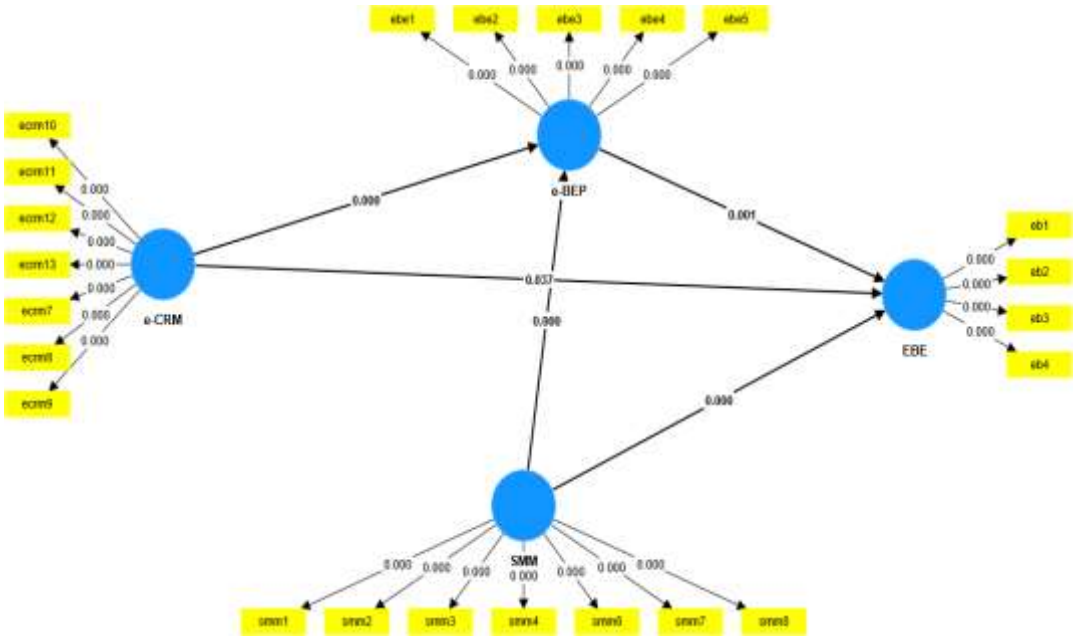


Figure 1: PLS-SEM OUTPUT

Table 2: Discriminant validity

	e-BEP	EBE	e-CRM	SMM
e-BEP				
EBE	0.395			
e-CRM	0.165	0.521		
SMM	0.469	0.547	0.487	

(HTMT established at HTMT.85)

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

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, and SMM showed HTMT values of 0.547 with EBE and 0.469 with e-BEP. 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.

4.3. Structural model

Lateral collinearity testing identifies multicollinearity concerns between components following bootstrapping by the researcher. Table 3 displays the lateral collinearity results from this investigation.

Table 3: Lateral Collinearity result

	EBE	**EB**
EBE		1.222
ECRM	1.194	1.198
SMM	1.194	1.436

Note: EBE: Electronic brand experience; EB: Electronic Brand equity;

ECRM: Electronic customer relationship management; SMM: Social Media Marketing

The value of the variance inflator factor (VIF) was used to calculate the lateral collinearity test based on Table 17. Consequently, all of the VIF values in this investigation are below 3.3, as recommended by (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2006). As a conclusion, based on the bootstrapping, there is no problem with multicollinearity among constructs in this study. Therefore, below figure shows the structural model analysis in this study.

Table 4: 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
SMM > EBE	H2	0.364	5.310	0.001	Significant
e-CRM > e-BEP	H3	0.377	4.581	0.000	Significant
SMM > e-BEP	H4	0.350	5.130	0.000	Significant
e-BEP > EBE	H5	0.230	5.285	0.000	Significant
e-CRM > e-BEP > EBE	H6	0.078	3.269	0.001	Significant
SMM > e-BEP > EBE	H7	0.081	2.525	0.006	Significant

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

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, all five direct paths were found to be statistically significant with p-values less than 0.05 and t-values greater than 1.645. Specifically, Social Media Marketing (SMM) positively influenced both Electronic Brand Experience (e-BEP) ($\beta = 0.350$, $p < 0.001$) and Electronic Brand Equity (EBE) ($\beta = 0.364$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, 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 both e-CRM and SMM on EBE. This is evident in the indirect paths: e-CRM → e-BEP → EBE ($\beta = 0.078$, $p = 0.001$) and SMM → e-BEP → EBE ($\beta = 0.081$, $p = 0.006$), as presented in Table 4. These findings suggest that enhancing customer experiences through digital interactions plays a vital role in translating CRM and social media marketing efforts into stronger brand equity. The results validate the conceptual framework, confirming that e-BEP acts as a significant bridge between digital marketing strategies and perceived brand value in the context of Malaysia's three-star hotel industry

5. Discussions

The findings of this study reveal significant relationships between electronic customer relationship management (e-CRM), social media marketing (SMM), e-brand experience (e-BEP), and electronic brand equity (EBE) in the Malaysian three-star hotel industry. Notably, e-CRM had a significant but negative direct effect on e-brand equity, which contrasts with some prior research suggesting that CRM strategies generally improve brand outcomes (Ismail & Hussin, 2013). The finding that e-CRM has a significant but negative direct effect on electronic brand equity is contrary to the conventional view that customer relationship management strengthens brand value. One possible explanation is that the effectiveness of e-CRM depends not merely on its adoption but on how it is implemented. In the context of Malaysian three-star hotels, digital customer relationship initiatives may be perceived negatively when communications are excessive, poorly personalized, or primarily promotional in nature. Frequent marketing messages, unsolicited emails, repetitive notifications, and generic communications may create customer irritation, message fatigue, and privacy concerns, ultimately reducing trust and weakening customers' perceptions of the hotel's online brand. Moreover, resource limitations commonly experienced by three-star hotels may restrict their ability to implement sophisticated e-CRM systems capable of delivering timely, relevant, and individualized interactions. Consequently, e-CRM alone may not be sufficient to strengthen electronic brand equity unless it is translated into a positive customer experience. This interpretation is supported by the significant mediating role of e-brand experience observed in this study, indicating that e-CRM enhances electronic brand equity only when it successfully creates meaningful, engaging, and customer-centric digital experiences.

On the other hand, social media marketing showed a strong and positive influence on both e-brand experience and e-brand equity. This aligns with the work of Bilgin (2018), who found that strategic social media engagement enhances brand loyalty and image. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram offer interactive and user-driven marketing opportunities that can significantly shape customer attitudes, as supported by Yazdanparast et al. (2016). These findings highlight the increasing importance of digital presence and consumer interaction in shaping brand perceptions, especially in the competitive hospitality sector.

E-brand experience emerged as a vital mediator between the two marketing strategies (e-CRM and SMM) 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 et al. (2016) also identified brand experience as a key mediator influencing brand satisfaction and loyalty. In this study, customers who had richer, more engaging experiences with hotel brands were more likely to perceive those brands favorably and maintain long-term relationships with them.

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, these findings suggest that while both e-CRM and SMM are critical strategies for building brand equity, their success largely depends on how they translate into meaningful customer experiences. For the hotel industry, especially among three-star hotels facing intense competition and service perception challenges, focusing on enhancing digital experiences and interactions may be the most effective route to strengthening brand value. This study not only confirms but also extends previous research, offering valuable insights for marketers aiming to adapt brand strategies in the evolving digital landscape.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study examined the effects of electronic customer relationship management (e-CRM) and social media marketing (SMM) on electronic brand equity (EBE), with e-brand experience (e-BEP) serving as a mediating variable in the context of Malaysia's three-star hotel industry. The findings demonstrate that both e-CRM and SMM significantly influence customers' online brand experiences, with SMM exerting a stronger direct effect on electronic brand equity. Although e-CRM exhibited a negative direct relationship with EBE, its positive indirect effect through e-brand experience underscores the importance of delivering meaningful and engaging digital interactions. These findings highlight the pivotal role of e-brand experience in translating digital marketing and customer relationship management initiatives into stronger electronic brand equity. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on digital branding in the hospitality industry and offers practical implications for hotel managers, marketers, and tourism stakeholders by emphasizing the strategic management of digital touchpoints to enhance customer engagement, strengthen brand equity, and foster long-term customer loyalty. Furthermore, this study endeavors to contribute to the growth of the hotel sector in Malaysia by highlighting the importance of strategic financial resource allocation for revenue generation by improving e-brand equity through added some strategies which are e-CRM and social media marketing as well as e-brand experience.

7. Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. One key constraint was the focus on only three-star hotels in Malaysia, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other categories of hotels or regions. Additionally, the study relied solely on quantitative data, which, while statistically robust, may not fully capture the deeper emotional and behavioral nuances of customer-brand relationships. There is also the potential for response bias, as data was collected through self-reported questionnaires, and some respondents may not have provided completely accurate or reflective answers.
Another limitation of this study relates to the demographic composition of the sample. The majority of respondents were aged 35 years or younger and possessed at least a bachelor's degree, indicating that the sample largely comprised digitally literate individuals who are

more likely to engage with online hotel platforms and digital marketing initiatives. Consequently, the findings may be more reflective of the perceptions and experiences of younger, technology-oriented guests than those of older or less digitally literate customers. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing the results to the broader population of hotel guests. Future research is encouraged to include a more balanced demographic representation, particularly older adults and individuals with varying levels of digital literacy, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships among e-CRM, social media marketing, e-brand experience, and e-brand equity across diverse customer segments.

8. Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should expand the scope of this study by including different hotel classifications, such as budget, luxury, and boutique hotels, to provide a broader understanding of how digital marketing strategies influence electronic brand equity across diverse segments of the hospitality industry. Given that the current study primarily involved younger and highly educated respondents, future studies should also consider a more demographically diverse sample, particularly older adults and individuals with varying levels of digital literacy, to enhance the generalizability of the findings. In addition, adopting qualitative or mixed-methods approaches, such as interviews, focus groups, or case studies, would provide deeper insights into customers' perceptions, emotions, and experiences during their interactions with hotel brands in digital environments. Finally, future research could incorporate additional variables, including user-generated content, mobile application usability, artificial intelligence (AI) which is driven customer service, perceived privacy, and customer trust, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape electronic brand equity in an increasingly digital and competitive hospitality landscape.

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