

THE MODERATING EFFECTS OF eWOM ON THE RELATIONSHIP  
BETWEEN E-SERVICE QUALITY AND ONLINE HOTEL BOOKING  
INTENTION

NORHAFIZAH BINTI ADAM

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*To my beloved Dad and Mum, Siblings, Amirrudin and Intan  
Nursyazwani.....*

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## ABSTRACT

Growing competitiveness in the marketplace pushes the hoteliers to fully take advantage of their website as marketing tools. The internet are playing an increasing important role as information sources for travellers and online reviews reconstruct the decision making process. The main objective of this research is to investigate the relationship between e-service quality model (website design, usability, information, trust and empathy) towards online hotel booking intention which in this case, Hotel A as the target hotel. Besides, this study also tested the moderating effect of online reviews (eWOM) on the relationship between e-service quality and online hotel booking intention. A total of 120 questionnaires were distributed to the UTM students as the target respondents of this research. Referring to the nature of this research which is the experimental design research, the respondents has been divided into three group, 40 respondents answered without any influence of eWOM, 40 respondents with the influence of positive eWOM and another 40 respondents with negative eWOM. Correlation, regression and hierarchical regression were used to analyze the data. The finding showed that the overall ESQ model influence the intention of the customers to book the hotel through online while the negative review has stronger effect on the intention compared to positive review. To improve consumer online hotel booking intention, the hoteliers should provide service with high service quality and also giving attention and taking action on how to solve the blooming of the online reviews that in this era, influencing customer's booking intention the most. This study provides valuable insight on the impact of ESQ model towards online hotel booking intention and the contribution of eWOM on customer's intention.

## ABSTRAK

Daya saing semakin meningkat di pasaran memaksa pengusaha hotel untuk mengambil kesempatan menjadikan laman web mereka sebagai alat pemasaran. Internet memainkan peranan yang penting sebagai sumber maklumat untuk pelancong dan ulasan dalam talian pula membantu proses pelanggan membuat keputusan untuk menempah bilik hotel. Objektif utama kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji hubungan antara model e-perkhidmatan yang berkualiti (ESQ) (reka bentuk laman web, kebolehgunaan, maklumat, kepercayaan dan empati) ke atas niat untuk menempah hotel secara dalam talian di mana di dalam kes ini, Hotel A adalah sebagai medium kajian. Selain itu, kajian ini juga menggunakan ulasan pelanggan dalam talian (eWOM) sebagai penguji pengantara di dalam hubungan antara kualiti e-perkhidmatan dan niat untuk menempah hotel secara dalam talian. Sebanyak 120 soal selidik telah diedarkan kepada pelajar UTM. Merujuk kepada sifat penyelidikan yang berbentuk eksperimen, para responden telah dibahagikan kepada tiga kumpulan, 40 responden menjawab tanpa apa-apa pengaruh eWOM, 40 responden dengan pengaruh eWOM positif dan 40 responden dengan eWOM negatif. Korelasi, regresi dan regresi hierarki telah digunakan untuk menganalisis data kajian ini. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa model ESQ keseluruhan mempengaruhi niat untuk pelanggan membuat tempahan hotel dalam talian manakala ulasan pelanggan dalam talian yang bersifat negatif lebih mempengaruhi pelanggan berbanding ulasan bersifat positif. Untuk meningkatkan jumlah pengguna hotel untuk menempah melalui dalam talian, pengusaha hotel hendaklah memberi perkhidmatan yang berkualiti tinggi dan juga memberi perhatian terhadap ulasan-ulasan dalam talian yang sememangnya mempengaruhi para pelanggan untuk membuat keputusan untuk menempah dari dalam talian. Kajian ini secara keseluruhan telah memberikan pandangan yang berharga mengenai kesan model ESQ terhadap niat tempahan hotel dalam talian dan sumbangan eWOM terhadap hasrat pelanggan untuk menempah hotel secara dalam talian.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

ESQ	Electronic Service Quality
eWOM	Electronic Word of Mouth
MyFEST	Malaysia Year of Festivals
MHA	Malaysian Hotel Association
MIDA	Malaysian Investment Development Authority
MTSA	Malaysia Tourism Satellite Account
NKEA	National Key Economic Area
OHBI	Online Hotel Booking Intention
OTA	Online Travel Agent
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science
TPB	Theory of Planned Behaviour
VMY	Visit Malaysia Year

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

This chapter provided a general understanding of the entire research study. The background of the study explains the trends of online hotel booking specifically in Malaysia and also discusses about the problem statement, which clarifies the reason for the topic to be selected and the purpose of the study. Besides, the research questions are also included in this chapter together with the specific objectives for the study. This chapter also explains the scope of the study, research contribution, the operational and conceptual definition of the key terms and also the summary of the whole Chapter 1.

#### **1.2 Background of the Study**

Over the past decade, online bookings have been increasing gradually from year to year. Emerging markets such as China and Malaysia are rapidly embracing online travel (Vinod, 2010). According to Eric et al (2006), the travel sector is rated among the top three products or services categories purchased via the Internet. A summit of more than 160 leading Asian hotel industry professionals has delivered

key insights into the impact online bookings and social media are having on the regional hotel sector, with 90 percent of respondents predicting that hotel bookings from online sources will grow by more than 20 percent in the coming two years (Ideas Revenue Solution, 2014). Phelan et al., (2011) stated in their study that customers always have a perception that hotel amenity and accommodation information that are provided through online is often more accurate, consistent and reliable. Referring to The Economic Report of 2013/2014, the number of the Internet subscribers in Malaysia is expected to reach the 25 million for the next three consecutive years. This representing approximately a 23% increase over the 18 million estimated subscribers for year 2012.

Besides that, Google Malaysia together with TNS research founded in their survey in 2013 that 9 in 10 Malaysian travellers researched for hotels online. Most of the traditional retailers in Malaysia has seen the opportunities in online presence for them to wider their market locally and also for abroad market. The basic reasons for transition of traditional booking into the electronic booking process is to ensure opportunities such as better information management, better supply integration, better distribution channel partners, lower processing costs, better knowledge about the market, global accessibility and rapid communication (Pritwanie & Sharma, 2011; Haghtalap, Tarzeh & Nabizadeh, 2012; Moharer, Tahayori & Sadeghian, 2013; Cetinsoz, 2015). In this hospitality industry, the internet has revolutionized business operations as powerful operational and marketing tools since the late 1990s (IP et al., 2012). Thus, the richness of the websites shows that the company experience more and utilizing their utmost resources for the development of their business operations along with the purpose of fulfilling their customer's needs (Schmidt et al., 2008).

In 2014, Malaysia celebrated its fourth *Visit Malaysia Year* (VMY) with the theme "Celebrating 1Malaysia Truly Asia". The purpose of the campaign is to promote Malaysia Tourism along with the 2020 vision. Apart from that, the promotion of the country continues with the *Malaysia Year of Festivals* (MyFEST) campaign in 2015

with the theme “Endless Celebrations” emphasising the various festivals celebrated by its multicultural society. Both campaigns are key drivers towards achieving the country’s target of 36 million tourist arrivals and RM168 billion in receipts by 2020, as outlined in the Tourism National Key Economic Area (NKEA) (Corporate Tourism Malaysia, 2015). Thus, the internet has rapidly developed in the tourism industry which enables the tourism and hospitality industry to capture a share in the market and develop their competitiveness (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2013; Ho & Lee, 2007; Cetinsoz, 2015).

**Table 1.1** Tourist Arrivals & Receipts to Malaysia (2015)

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>ARRIVAL</b>	<b>RECEIPTS (RM)</b>
2014	27.44 Million	72.00 Billion
2013	25.72 Million	65.44 Billion
2012	25.03 Million	60.60 Billion
2011	24.71 Million	58.30 Billion
2010	24.58 Million	56.50 Billion
2009	23.65 Million	53.40 Billion
2008	22.05 Million	49.60 Billion
2007	20.97 Million	46.10 Billion
2006	17.55 Million	36.30 Billion
2005	16.43 Million	32.00 Billion

Source: Corporate Tourism Malaysia Website

Table 1.1 shows the increasing number of the tourist that visited Malaysia from year 2005 until year 2015. The hospitality industry needs to compete not only to get the high profit but also to remain as the player in the intense market competition for their survival. Hoteliers in Malaysia needs to improve the quality of services that they offer to the customers because of the availability of the internet’s nowadays allows the customers to compare the services amongst the hotels before they book through online. The customers tend to compare the prices, promotion, and the view of the hotels through website before confirming any rooms to stay.



Services are difficult to manage due to certain inherited characteristics such as intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perish ability (Amisshah, 2015). As stated by Wang and Hui (2003), delivering high service quality allows organization to differentiate themselves from their competitors by increasing sales and market share which also resulted in the customers retention and satisfaction of customers and employees, thus reducing turnover rates and leading to repeat purchase behaviour and brand loyalty and eventually enables an organization to attract new customers through positive word of mouth.

Besides that, it is a common things when people often seek the advice of others as part of their decision making process. Online reviews are proxy of eWOM and are different from ratings that could be assimilated to an overall service evaluation (Duverger, 2013). According to Sparks and Browning (2011), e-WOM, both in terms of negative and positive reviews has the potential to influence customer purchase intentions and significantly influence on the sales (Duverger, 2013; Ye et al., 2011). Thus, words of mouth communication has been of interest to marketing personnel for some time (Anderson, 1998; Richins, 1984) through generating the feedback of the quality, ambience and services which are then positively associated with its online popularity (Zhang et al., 2011). The most satisfied and unsatisfied customers will generate more commentary while customers who are neither satisfied nor unsatisfied will share less reviews (Bansar and Voyer, 2000; Roman et al., 2013).

As for conclusions, most of scholarly research on e-service quality (ESQ) included some aspects of behavioural intentions for example repurchases intention and recommendation intention as the measuring factor of the study (Wang et al, 2015; Yoon et al, 2011). The quality of the e-services provided by the company's website and other electronic media influence the purchasing intention of the customers. Different researcher will consider different measurement of the ESQ that relate to their purpose of study. Some researcher will indicate five dimensions and other might indicate up to eleven dimensions for their study. High quality

information content not only can meet the needs of the consumers but also avoid from information overload being attached to the websites which can greatly improve and influence the purchasing intention of the customers (Bao, 2015). Besides, Van Riel (2004) stated in his study that ESQ is strongly related with the purchase and repurchase intention of the consumers on the websites. Thus, it is important for the hoteliers to provide utmost great service quality through their website in order to attract consumers to purchase and recommend the websites to the others and generated positive feedback on the online platform for the better image of the hotels.

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

Hotels built websites in order to explore the potential customers and focus on competitive strategies on improving the website quality that lead in making their customers satisfied through offering the services like online hotel booking. It is necessary for the hotels to recognize the effect of website quality in fulfilling their customer needs and expectations. Accordingly, online hoteliers have invested considerable amounts of money and effort in order to entice tourists into visiting their website. E-shoppers may initiate the checkout process, but leave before completing their purchase. Decision dropout is one of the most commonly reported difficulties to online commerce revenue generation and profitability (Mzoughi, Negra & Habacha, 2012; Gutzman, 2000). There were millions of websites competing for attention and most of online shoppers are likely to checkout more than 10 websites before making any decision.

Many studies that are related to e-service quality are focuses into the relationship between e-service quality and customers' satisfaction, customer's loyalty intentions and customer's repurchase intention (Bao, 2015; Sobihah et al., 2015; Dolatabadi and Gharibpoor, 2012; Yoon et al, 2011) and many papers probe into the various effects of the e-service quality on customers' satisfaction from every

different dimension (Sheng and Liu, 2010). Past researches exposed that hotel's official websites were not convincing in reacting to consumers wants and needs for supporting the process of online reservation. Hotel market falls into a category which they are competing for the consumer's disposable income and thus, have to be aware of the quality issues instead of the price. In order for the hotel to stay competitive in the intense competition markets nowadays, they have to improve the service quality of the website in order to attract more customers to book through their hotel website.

Apart from that, although Internet provides detailed information about the hotels, there are still asymmetry information exists before and after the purchased. Online reservation involves non physical qualities such as room services which mean the quality cannot be judged before they experienced it themselves. Consumers always have the perception that the information provided on the website about the hotel amenity and accommodations are more accurate and up to date. Thus, the website informational content should enable visitors to clarify their ambiguity, improve their understanding of issues and ameliorate their purchase decisions (Mzoughi, Negra & Habacha, 2012).

Nowadays, consumers are relying more on online search strategies by using blog pages, forums or review sites to make any decision in purchasing a products or services (Li and Bernoff, 2008; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Sparks and Browning, 2010). Apart from that, in recent years, the rising of new technologies such as Web 2.0 has rapidly increased the numbers of consumer-generated media platforms which resulted in the leading of electronic words of mouth (e-WOM) communications to be transformed into several types of electronic communities and virtual networks. Over one third of consumers would not book a hotel without reading reviews first (Davies, 2012). This is because the hotel experiences contain non-physical qualities such as room service which means the quality cannot be judged before the customer's experienced it by them. Thus, eWOM is recognized as one of the platform that the most suitable to be rely on by the customers in order for them to reduce their uncertainty before booking the hotels.

Most of the previous research included online reviews (eWOM) as one of the factor that affect online hotel booking intention (OHBI) (Michaud and Ladhari, 2015; Zhang and Liu, 2014; Cezara and Oguta, 2012). As reported by Tnooz (2014), a recent global PhoCusWright survey indicated that over 80% of travellers read numerous reviews before making a decision in which hotel to stay and 53% indicated that they would not be willing to book a hotel that had no reviews. According to eMarketer (2014) report, respondents still read more online reviews before putting trust in any types of local business. It is clear that the e-WOM or online customer's reviews bring impact towards the purchase intention of the users. Most of the previous research (Ladhari and Michaud, 2015; Xie et al., 2014; Sparks and Browning, 2011) concluded that eWOM influences the hospitality sector the most because it enables the customers to exchange information, opinions or recommendations about the hotel destinations and other things that are related to their purpose of booking the hotels.

Besides, Chang and Chin, (2010) also stated in their study that e-WOM were found to have positive influence on customer's purchase intention. Cezara and Oguta, (2014) stated in their study that 45 % of the customers make personal travel plans and 54% make business travel plans based on the online reviews and more people are sharing their experiences on the Internet in order for them to guide other prospective customers. Most of the previous studies have mainly focused on the increased use of reviews sites and the influence that online reviews have on firm performance indicators such as hotel room bookings ( Chen, 2011) and trust in the hotel intention to book the hotel (Sparks and Browning, 2011).

As for the conclusions, there have been numbers of previous study on e-service quality with different variables and models proposed that suits their dimensions of study. For example, Yoon *et al.* (2011) has tested e-service quality models in repurchase intention of online hotel booking developed by Bauer et al (2006) that consists of 5 elements (Functionality/Design, Enjoyment, Process, Reliability and Responsiveness). According to their findings of study, most of the hotel consumers are reluctant to repurchase the hotel services through online because

of the e-service quality issues of their websites that are not promising like been stated on the websites. There have been previous study that proposed website quality and e-service quality can directly influence purchase intention (Bao, 2015; Chang et al, 2014; Sam and Tahir, 2009). However, a further understanding of the relationship between e-service quality and online hotel booking intention in the present study is to study whether the relationship are moderated by eWOM. A study on the influences of eWOM on the relationship between e-service quality and online hotel booking intention would certainly be useful for organizers for better understanding about the importance of eWOM in their business operation specifically in hotel industry.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

According to the problem statement mentioned above, this study specifically focuses on the issue related to e-service quality, online hotel booking intention and eWOM.

Therefore, in addressing the underlying issues related to this study, the following questions were raised:

1. What are the relationship between e-service quality and online hotel booking intention?
2. Does e-WOM moderate the relationship between e-service quality and online booking intention?

#### **1.5 Research Objectives**

This study highlights several research objectives in order to answer the research questions, thus, the following objective are as below:

1. To study the relationship between e-service quality and online hotel booking intention.
2. To examine the moderating effect of e-WOM on the relationship between e-service quality and online hotel booking intention.

## **1.6 Scope of Study**

This research highlights were focusing on how e-service quality can affect online hotel booking intention and moderated by eWOM. There are several key dimensions under e-service quality of the hotels' website that is believed by the researcher can affect customer's online booking intention which are the website design, usability, information, trust and empathy.

This experimental study targeted the students from UTM Johor Bahru as the respondents. 120 respondents were participated in this research which consists of three group; 40 students for no review group, 40 students provided with positive reviews and another 40 students were provided with negative reviews while answering the survey questionnaires. The researcher chose students as the target respondents due to the nature of the study which is experimental design study. This study specifically investigated the moderating effect of eWOM on the relationship between ESQ and OHBI. Hotel A website was chosen as the experiment medium due to reported as the most booked hotel by TripAdvisor, 2015.

## 1.7 Significant of the Study

The findings of this study contributed especially to Hotel A on how the existing website was evaluated by their potential customers. This study also proved whether the service that they provide through their website influence their customers purchase intention provided eWOM as the moderating variable. Since the competition in hospitality industry becomes intense due to the rapid growing of Internet and technology, the hotel needs to find the problems such as the quality of their website services and fulfil the needs and requirements of their consumers in order to attract and maintain their consumers.

Through the analysing of eWOM content, hotel managers gain a deep understanding of customers feeling about their experiences at the hotel. Online hotel reviews are important for both sides, the customers and the hoteliers. The hotel should have better understanding on how eWoM can affect customer's booking intention and finding the solution on overcoming the blooming of online reviews both positive and negative from the platform that beyond their control. As the study targeted the students as the respondents, the result of the study found that students nowadays were already fall into the potential hotel customers category regardless their level of purchasing power. Thus, the hotel should be by now focusing on the aspects that can increase their sales by including students or in other words, this Gen Y as their targeted potential customers.

Apart from benefitting the hotels, the travel agency website was also benefitted in this study. The travel agency website such as TripAdvisor, Trivago and others, might as well cooperate with the hotels in releasing the reviews by their customers together with the action taken. Thus, it will influence the potential customer's intention to book the hotels in the future. Last but not least, by increasing the sales, it will eventually contribute to the development of the hotel industry and Malaysian economics.

## **1.8 Operational Definitions**

### **1.8.1 E-Service Quality (E-SQ)**

According to Parasuraman et al., (2000), e-service quality is a multiple function of website that facilitate efficient and effective shopping, purchasing and delivery. Meanwhile, Lee and Lin (2005) defined E-SQ as the overall customer evaluations and judgements regarding the quality of e-service delivery in the virtual marketplace. On the other hand, E-SQ is a basic requirement for the evaluation of the electronic performance of the website. In this study, the researcher has chosen the model developed by Barnes and Vidgens (2002) which consists of five elements (Website Design, Usability, Information, Trust and Empathy) in order to measure the intention of the respondents in online hotel booking.

### **1.8.2 Online Hotel Booking Intention**

Poon et al., (2014) defined in the context of online hotel booking; it is similar to purchase intention. Booking intention is defined as the intent of the consumers to book a room in a hotel. It is a conscious plan or intention to make an effort to purchase a product or services provided through online. In this study, the researcher will elaborate the explanation of the variable with the support of The Theory of Planned Behavior.



### **1.8.3 E-Words of Mouth (eWOM)**

eWOM is defined as any positive or negative statement made by customers about a product or company which is made available to a multitude of people and institution via the internet, Henning-Thurau et al., (2004). eWOM is seen as a reliable and impartial source of information. People often refers to the online reviews that are available on the certain websites before making any decision in purchasing the products or services (Xie at al., 2011). Therefore, in this study, eWOM was tested as the moderating variables of the study that believed has s moderating effect towards the relationship between ESQ and OHBI.

## **1.9 Summary**

In line with different conceptualizations of electronic services, previous efforts to measure e-service quality also display different approaches and outcomes. There are many researchers that create their own dimensions according to their field of study. Thus, many dimensions were present in order to get the results required. The literature of this study will be clearly explain on the next chapter which included the comparison of this study with previous study in order to make this study more relevant and comprehensive.

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