E–B
Environment - Behaviour
Proceedings Journal

A*icE-Bs2022KotaKinabalu*

https://www.amerabra.org

e-IPH
e-International
Publishing House Ltd.,
United Kingdom

10th Asia-Pacific International Conference on E-B Studies
The Magellan Sutera Resort, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, 07-08 Sep 2022

Inbound Tourism In Malaysia: Unlocking the potential traveling experience of European and Oceanian Tourists

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Abstract
This study explores the memorable traveling experience (MTE) of 143 tourists from Europe and Oceanian in Malaysia. The researchers conducted a survey to investigate the factors that influence their revisit intention to Malaysia as an attractive destination. Partial least square structural equation modeling (SEM-PLS) results indicated that tourist attitudes, destination images, electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), and perceived quality have positive and significant influences on travel intention. However, the eWOM failed to mediate the tourists' attitudes, perceived quality, and destination image towards their revisit intentions.

Keywords: eWOM, Malaysia, Memorable Travelling Experience, Revisit Intentions

1.0 Introduction
Malaysia's inbound tourism is a high-yield business, steadily contributing to Malaysia's gross domestic product (GDP) until 2019, right before the Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) outbreak. The 12th Malaysia Plan (2021-2025) focuses on the industry's sustainability (Bernama, 2021). The plan aims to restore tourist confidence, provide better quality products and services, enhance the sustainability of tourism products, strengthen brand position and promotion, institute governance reforms, and intensify domestic tourism after the impact of COVID-19 on the global travel industry. At the global level, Malaysia has received significant recognition from around the world. It was ranked as the 16th Most Peaceful Country by the Global Peace Index 2019, ranked first among the Top Muslim Women-Friendly Destinations, listed in the Top 10 Halal-friendly holiday destinations 2019, and was one of six countries with the Best Healthcare in the World 2019 (Tourism Malaysia, 2019). Moving towards 2030, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has targeted five significant areas referred to as source, origin, or generating areas: Europe, Asia-Pacific, the Middle East, the Americas, and Africa. In line with the UNWTO's target and that foreign tourism should recover by 2023 (Bernama, 2021), the purpose of this study is to investigate if

electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) plays a mediating role in memorable traveling experiences (MTEs) among European and Oceanian tourists to travel again to Malaysia. The main objective of the current study is to determine if tourism in Malaysia should depend on eWOM or not. It is crucial to reposition tourism in Malaysia as our close neighbors such as Singapore and Thailand have improved the competitiveness and attractiveness of their tourism industry plans (Nair et al., 2014).

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Memorable Traveling Experience and Revisit Intention

The literature has abundantly demonstrated that memorable experiences always draw repeat customers to the locations, goods, or services. Recent tourism literature has revealed that social media reviews about searching for information while traveling (Kim et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2022), authentic destination images (Gardiner et al., 2022; Lee & Jan, 2022), and other factors have increased tourists' MTE. Taking the definition of "memorable experience" from several scholars quoted by Li et al. (2022), "MTE" could be thought of in this study as the behaviors of satisfaction experience in which customers can remember the values after the trip. While the concepts of tourist experience and MTEs are interrelated, several scholars have proposed that MTEs are more significant in influencing tourists' future decision-making (Kim et al., 2010). MTE in this study refers to constructs, namely, destination image, perceived quality, tourist's attitude, and eWOM.

The theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is commonly applied to explain an individual's behavioral intention in predicting natural behavior (Ajzen, 2001). One definition of behavioral intention is the perceived probability of participating in a specific activity in a particular setting that converts motivation into behavior (Lu et al., 2016). Travel intention is an important link between what motivates tourists and what they might do when they travel. So, "travel intention" can also mean how ready a tourist is to go to a travel destination since "travel intention" can accurately predict how tourists will act based on what they want to do. Other studies have shown that tourists' travel plans are made through a smart decision-making process that involves weighing the costs and benefits of different tourist locations (Hennessey et al., 2010).

2.2 Attitude, Destination Image, and Perceived Quality

Ajzen (2001) posited that a person's intention to behave a specific way depends on how they feel about it which is very important to the tourism industry. This can affect how the local society, economy, and culture grow and change and how likely tourists are to return (Jafari, 1987). Previous studies showed that travel intentions are based on tourist attitudes and destination choice (Chen et al., 2014). Attitudes and preferences can also measure tourists' behavior (Wu, 2015). Lu et al. (2016) found that tourists with a higher travel intention will travel. Travel intention influences tourists' commitment and motivation to visit their preferred destination (Ahn et al., 2013). Several studies show that a destination's image influence tourists' decision-making, destination choice, post-trip evaluation, and future behaviors (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Destination image influences tourists' plans to return, leading to positive online reviews and acts as one of the components that attract tourists' emotional attachment and lead to their satisfaction (Dolnicar & Grün, 2013).

Perceived quality is the tourists' opinion of a product or service's overall quality or superiority for its intended use (Jiang & Wang, 2006). In tourism, quality is defined by service delivery process factors such as friendliness, courtesy, efficiency, reliability, staff competence, and service products, including accommodation, food, and leisure facilities (Zabkar et al., 2010). Meanwhile, the perceived quality of destination refers to the tourists' perception of the quality of a destination's infrastructure, hospitality service, and amenities (Pike et al., 2010). Some studies have shown that service quality has a significant positive influence on tourist satisfaction, leading to tourist loyalty for repeat visitations (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016).

2.3 eWOM as a mediator role

Tourism marketing matters for any tourism product promotion (Saad et al., 2022). eWOM refers to online positive or negative product reviews (Woo et al., 2015). eWOM on Facebook and personal blogs have become a modern, fun, powerful tourism medium due to its anonymity and ability to reach large audiences quickly (Abubakar, 2016; Ladhari & Michaud, 2015). eWOM impacts on how tourists choose where to go on their trips. Yadav et al. (2021) found that eWOM in India is significant for marketing tourism because it successfully mediated 435 consumers' involvement and destination preference in their travel intentions. Song et al. (2021) discovered that eWOM communication has significantly helped young tourists in Malaysia plan their trips. eWOM also significantly mediated the attitudes of 288 Indian urban millennials when they booked their trips (Anubha & Shome, 2021). Snowball data from 411 Vietnamese individuals confirmed that positive eWOM depends on consumer experiences, opinion leadership, self-reflection, and uniqueness (Ha & Thu, 2020). Jalilvand and Heidari (2017) found that eWOM has a more positive effect on attitude and travel plans than WOM. Online reviews affect how tourists act and plan to act (Oday et al., 2021), but eWOM readers must evaluate them (Verma & Dewani, 2021). Iriobe et al. (2019) found that eWOM did not affect tourists' intention to revisit Nigerian religious destinations. The findings suggested that information from reliable sources or authorities may be required to influence tourists to visit faith-based destinations. Sirichareechai et al. (2018) also found no correlation between eWOM and Thai tourists' return intentions. Based on the presented literature, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: there is a positive relationship between attitude and travel intention.
Hypothesis 2: there is a positive relationship between destination image and travel intention
Hypothesis 3: there is a positive relationship between perceived quality and travel intention.
Hypothesis 4: there is a positive relationship between e-word of mouth and travel intention.

Hypothesis 5: there is a mediation effect on eWOM from perceived quality, destination image, attitude, and travel intention.

3.0 Research Methodology
In this study, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Russia, Turkey, and Bosnia represent Europe, while Australia and New Zealand represent Oceania. This study examined the relationship between European and Oceanian tourists' MTE and their plans to return to Malaysia. Using a quantitative method at the cross-sectional level, a Google Form was used as a snowball sampling technique to obtain responses to identify potential international tourists as a conventional survey would be difficult. The researchers distributed questionnaires to European and Oceanian tourists who had visited Malaysia via friends and relatives. The survey questions adapted question items from Maneerat (2006) with a 6-point Likert scale to avoid the possibility of a midpoint (Croasmun & Ostrom, 2011). The researchers used Version 26.0 of the SPSS to clean up data and produce descriptive statistics for all variables. This study used the Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach, SmartPLS 3.0, to examine the relationship between latent variables.

4.0 Data Analysis and Results
4.1 Demographic Profile
This study snowballed via Google Forms questionnaires and received 149 responses in a month. The researchers removed six incomplete responses. The analysis comprised 143 completed questionnaires. The results showed that more men (55%) completed the survey, with most respondents being individuals aged between 36 and 45 (38.5%). Only 7.7 % were aged 55 and above. As shown in Table 1, most of the respondents were from European countries (66%), namely Bosnia, the Netherlands, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Russia, and Spain. 22 % were from Turkey, forming the largest group of European respondents. Approximately 34% of the respondents were from Oceania, Australia, and New Zealand, with a 26 % Australian majority.

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents by Continent (Country)

Continents (Countries) 8AN	No. of respondents	%
Oceania (Australia and New Zealand)	49	34
Europe (Bosnia, Turkey, Russia, Netherlands, UK, France, and Spain)	94	66
Total	143	100

Table 2 shows that the purposes of the respondents' visit to Malaysia were to go on holiday (73 %), followed by business (15 %), and visit family and friends (6 %).

Table 2. Purpose of Traveling

Purpose of Traveling to Malaysia	No. of respondents	%
Business	22	15
Education	1	1
Holiday	105	73
Shopping	6	4
Visiting Family and Friends	9	6
Total	143	100

Table 3 demonstrates that most respondents stayed between four and six days in Malaysia (41 %). However, 34 % stayed for more than seven days, and 25 % between one and three days. Thus, approximately 66 % of the respondents were in Malaysia for less than a week. It is interesting to learn that European tourists have been active and have frequently visited Malaysia (Table 4). Table 5 shows that the preferred style of travel is casual (44 %), backpacking (35 %), and pre-organized (11 %).

Table 3. Duration of Stay

Continents	1 - 3 days	4 - 6 days	7 days and above	Total
Oceania (Australia and New Zealand)	10	24	15	49
Europe (Bosnia, Turkey, Russia, Netherlands, UK, France, and Spain)	26	35	33	94
Total	36	59	48	143

Table 4. Frequency of Visits to Malaysia

Continents	Once	Twice	Thrice	more than 3 times	Total
Oceania (Australia and New Zealand)	18	20	10	1	49
Europe (Bosnia, Turkey, Russia, Netherlands, UK, France, and Spain)	25	29	10	30	94
Total	43	49	20	31	143

Table 5. Preferred Traveling Style

Travelling Style	No of respondents	% (%)

Backpacking	50	35
Casual	63	44
Formal	14	10
Pre-organized	16	11
Total	143	100

4.2 Model Assessment Using PLS-SEM

The current study used a two-part analysis approach: measurement assessments and structural models to evaluate the model using PLS-SEM. As shown in Table 6, values of Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability for all constructs were higher than 0.6 as prescribed by Hair et al. (2017). This study applied Fornell and Larcker's (1981) method and confirmed that the square root of average variance extracted was higher than 0.5, establishing the convergent validity of the constructs and proving their validity.

Table 6: Items' loadings, p-values, AVE, rho_A, CA and CR.

Constructs	Items	Loadings	P-Values	AVE	rho_A	CA (CR.)
Attitude				0.799	0.877	0.874 (0.923)
I think a vacation within Malaysia would be fun	ATT1	0.876	0.000*			
I think that travel and tour within Malaysia would be a good experience.	ATT2	0.922	0.000*			
I think that travel and tour in Malaysia would be interesting.	ATT3	0.883	0.000*			
Destination Image				0.625	0.700	0.700 (0.833)
I expect the destination to be relaxing	DI1	0.781	0.000*			
The vacation gives me an opportunity to experience the local culture.	DI4	0.774	0.000*			
The vacation allows me to learn the history of tourism destinations.	DI5	0.810	0.000*			
Perceived Quality				0.731	0.823	0.818 (0.891)
Having quality accommodation choices is important for a vacation	PQ2	0.875	0.000*			
Having quality facility choices is important for a vacation	PQ3	0.864	0.000*			
Having quality service at the destination is important for a vacation	PQ5	0.824	0.000*			
Travel Intention				0.721	0.815	0.808 (0.886)
I am interested in having a vacation within Malaysia	TI3	0.863	0.000*			
There is a high chance that I would travel and tour within Malaysia	TI4	0.848	0.000*			
I am willing to travel and tour within Malaysia	TI1	0.837	0.000*			
eWOM				0.740	0.938	0.930 (0.945)
Information about vacation on social media is clear.	eWOM1	0.875	0.000*			
Content from social media is similar to the destination facts.	eWOM4	0.853	0.000*			
The content in the social media about vacation is interesting.	eWOM5	0.840	0.000*			
I can easily get tourist's online reviews about travel destination from the social media.	eWOM7	0.846	0.000*			
Social media's travel reviews on travelling destinations are an influential source of information.	eWOM8	0.841	0.000*			
Social media's travel reviews are an acceptable source of information.	eWOM9	0.908	0.000*			
Information about vacation on the social media is clear.	eWOM1	0.875	0.000*			
*Note. *p<0.001*						

4.3 Mediation Assessment

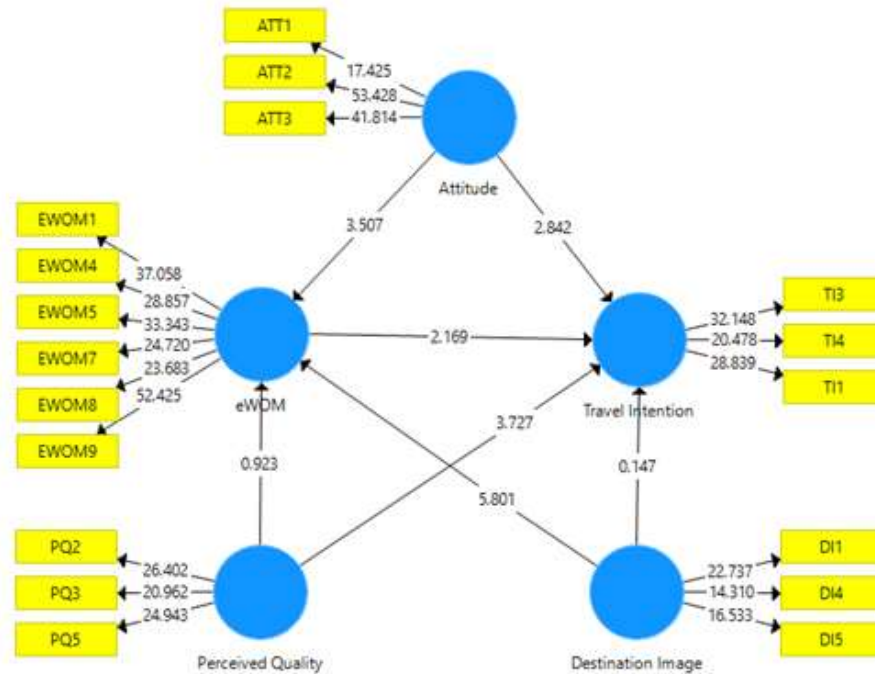Based on Fig. 1, there are possible mediation routes.

Fig. 1: Structural Model

However, Table 7 suggests that all the mediation routes are insignificant.

Table 7. Specific Indirect Effects

	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values
perceived quality_ -> eWOM -> travel intention_	-0.016	0.022	0.735	0.462
attitude -> eWOM -> travel intention_	0.060	0.034	1.773	0.076
destination image_ -> eWOM -> travel intention_	0.102	0.056	1.762	0.078

5.0 Discussion

Although Europe and Oceania are substantial contributors to Malaysia's tourism industry, Malaysia needs to encourage an even larger volume of repeat tourists. Descriptive results show that 69% of the respondents have visited Malaysia more than once, while 74% have stayed for more than four days, indicating that these markets are lucrative. The PLS-SEM results showed that three latent variables of MTE—perceived quality, attitude, and eWOM—positively affect tourists' intentions to return. Based on these results, tourism officials and businesses should keep investing to ensure tourists' positive feelings about Malaysia as a tourist destination. Tourism authorities should encourage tourism businesses and operators to provide high-quality services since the findings revealed that tourists from Europe and Oceania place a high value on the quality of tourist products and services to return to Malaysia.

This study supported the first to fourth hypotheses. Europeans and Oceanians enjoy traveling to experience other cultures, landscapes, and delicacies. They are also interested in self-satisfaction, soul-searching, life-balance programs, and developing their self-awareness of the places they visit as proven in Ahn et al. (2013), Chen et al. (2014), and Lu et al (2016). To make Malaysia a prime destination, it must adapt to psychological needs and visitor behavior. For attitude, value-for-money needs to be worked on as tourists calculate the cost of the tour, including traveling, accommodation, and local site seeing. Due to currency exchange value, Malaysia may have a positive attitude from the tourists as it is a cheap destination. This study found a positive relationship between destination image and travel intention. Destination image influences behavioral travel intention, which can be favorable or unfavorable. If the destination is safe, the visitor will

attempt to revisit. The result is consistent with previous studies such as Chen and Tsai (2007) and Dolnicar and Grun (2013). For this study, it is interesting to note that destination image had no direct effect on European and Oceanian tourists' intention to revisit Malaysia. It indicates that to gain revisits from tourists, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and relevant tourism authorities do not necessarily have to utilize excessive resources when building their destination images, which could instead utilize eWOM. It is also interesting to infer from the results obtained that the differences in geographical location and profile of the respondents may be unique to Malaysia, which could also be generalized toward other countries or destinations as well.

The third hypothesis supported a positive relationship between perceived quality and travel intention. European and Oceanian holidaymakers have also developed certain behaviors when considering visiting Malaysia again after the first or last few visits. For traveling style behavior, 35% of the respondents prefer to travel to Malaysia as backpackers, 44% casual, 10% informal, and 11% require pre-organized travel using travel agents or tour operators. These behaviors of European and Oceanian tourists may be due to the tourism products on offer like adventure, rural areas, nature, and cultural-based attractions available and the mode of transport in Malaysia's low-cost airlines, trains, taxis, and buses. The quality of products and services is always of primary concern to tourists, local or overseas. It is no different for these long-haul tourists. High-quality international standards is vital to ensure their return to a destination, ranging from quality of service at immigration checkpoints, transfer, and check-in from airports and hotels and attractions, quality of food and drink, room service, and so on. The behavior may change towards a destination if the perceived quality is compromised. Significant results of perceived quality and travel intention are consistent with past studies such as Zabkar et al. (2010), Pike et al. (2010), and Cetin and Bilgihan (2016). These results indicate that eWOM influenced respondents' intentions to visit Malaysia. Therefore, the respondents' perceived quality is an essential factor in predicting the respondents' travel intention. Despite accepting other people's reviews, these respondents are unwilling to share their own on social media or e-platforms. This study also supported the fourth hypothesis that eWOM significantly influences the travel intention of tourists from Europe and Oceania. This is consistent with previous investigations such as Abubakar (2016), Jalilvand and Heidari (2017), Chen et al. (2014), and Oday et al. (2021). eWOM is a new platform and is used as a marketing tool. It changes the perception and behavior of tourists towards a destination. Unlike the traditional way, especially for those in Europe, the US, Oceania, and the Far East, social media and digital platforms for information are strongly evidenced. Therefore, a destination like Malaysia must upgrade its digital infrastructure for better access to tourism information in the country.

Interestingly, the current study did not support the fifth hypothesis. eWOM failed to mediate all MTE variables and is inconsistent with Yadav et al. (2021), Song et al. (2021), and Anubha and Shome (2021). The insignificant mediation shows that visitors did not rely on eWOM for their trip decision to Malaysia, maybe due to favorable and strong MTE from a previous travel experience. They might have enjoyed their time in Malaysia, which is enough to create positive impressions. In this study, tourism experience trumps media reviews and substance. eWOM was insignificant in past research such as Sirichareechai et al. (2018) and Iriobe et al. (2019). These scholars' findings concluded in their investigations that eWOM was ineffective for traveling decision-making for two main reasons. First, perceived behavioral control and revisit intention do not depend on eWOM. Second, the eWOM was possibly ineffective due to poor online marketing and advertising content. Based on the LOS of Europe and Oceania and the primary reason for travel, in the current study, we conclude that tourists have a positive image of Malaysia after their visit. Even though tourists do not rely on eWOM to make travel decisions, they are willing to share their vacation experiences with other tourists via various electronic media. Data show that European and Oceanian tourists are more likely to spend more than three days in this country, and many respondents are repeat visitors. eWOM also explains the expected behavior of Digital Citizens in reducing promotion costs for Europe and Oceania due to proximity and currency exchange.

6.0 Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Direction

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the entire business ecosystem worldwide. Experts predict it will be among us for at least a few more years, and Malaysia seems to be no exception to this circumstance. Thus, future studies should re-examine these MTE factors once people can travel to all countries. eWOM is an insignificant mediator when two markets are combined. More countries or regions (Central, Western, and Eastern Europe) can give different perspectives. As part of the study's limitations, we did not capture respondents from Germany, Italy, Austria, Luxembourg, and other countries that are international tourism markets. Tourism marketers should examine the credibility of eWOM through e-influencers in future studies as deeper content, exposure, and images can improve eWOM measurement and give different results.

Tourists are consumers and have their tastes and preference in pursuing their holiday needs and requirements. This study emphasized the importance of managing and improving service quality, the image of the destination, the right attitude, and the method of information sharing regarding travel intentions. As for recommendations, our results indicate that State and National level DMOs such as Tourism Malaysia and the State Tourism Promotion Boards need to leverage digital technology and social media in reaching out further to potential visitors in Europe and Oceania. Viz affective needs imagery for Malaysian tourism; social media must project joy, fun, excitement, and freedom. The government, as a policymaker, must organize workshops and training centers, promote frequent participation in webinars, and reward high-performing tourism businesses. For practitioners, using blogs that incorporate dialogue and discussion groups with tact and candor will improve Malaysia's brand image. Back-and-forth dialog will help dissipate the somewhat too religious perception of Malaysia and help bring about Malaysia's multi-cultural reality. Overall, MTEs influenced travel intentions and a better understanding of these relationships could benefit many stakeholders, especially in obtaining more extended tourist revisits to Malaysia.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to the literature on inbound tourism about repositioning tourism in Malaysia.

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