



**EFFECT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT, CORPORATE IMAGE AND
PERCEIVED VALUE ON TOURIST LOYALTY IN HOTEL INDUSTRY IN
MALAYSIA**

By

KHAN MD ASHRAFUL AZAM

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

April 2022

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DEDICATION

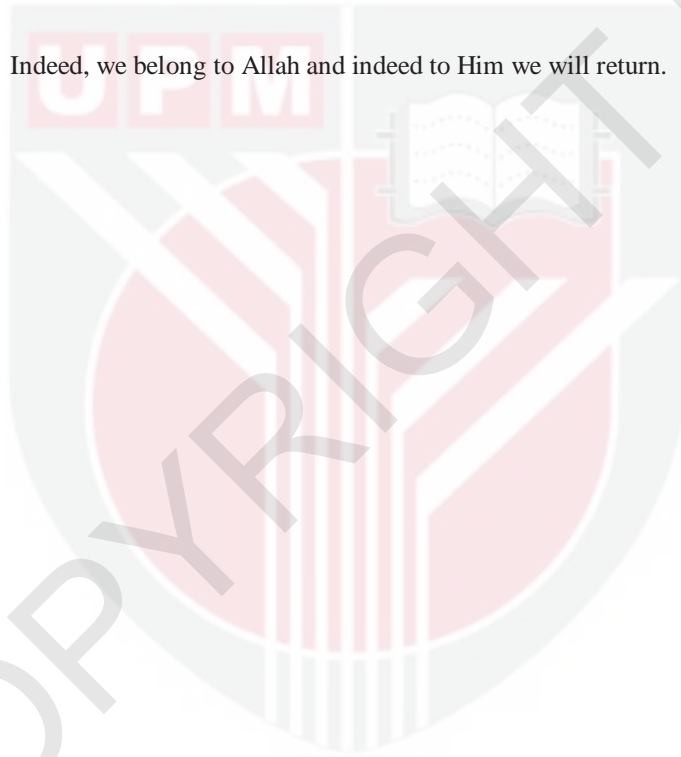
This thesis is dedicated to

My late Grandparents:

Kazi Alfaz Uddin & Sahera Begum

With love, respect and a bunch of memories

Indeed, we belong to Allah and indeed to Him we will return.



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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April 2022

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Nurturing tourist loyalty is a top priority for Malaysian hotels in the contemporary competitive business environment. In recent years, tourist loyalty in the Malaysian hotel industry has declined which negatively impacted hotels' occupancy rates and survival. For instance, according to a hotel survey report released by Tourism Malaysia (2020), the hotel occupancy rate in the industry recorded a 2% decline in 2019 compared to 2018. Furthermore, the recent surge in the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation and hit the hotel industry hard, resulting in many hotels being temporarily or permanently closed. Scholars and industry experts have postulated that effective customer social media engagement and the repositioning of hotels with a positive corporate image are effective for the resurgence in the post-pandemic era. Despite the growing interest in social media engagement and corporate image to enhance the perceived value of tourists to generate loyalty in the hospitality industry, the empirical evidence for linking these constructs is still limited. In particular, from the perspective of the hotel industry, little effort has been made to explore the mediating role of perceived value in the relationship between social media engagement and tourist loyalty, and between corporate image and tourist loyalty. Therefore, the general purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of social media engagement, corporate image, and perceived value on tourists' loyalty to the Malaysian hotel industry. Using the quantitative methodology, a self-administrative questionnaire was used to collect data from Malaysian and international hotel customers via online (email, WhatsApp, Facebook) and face-to-face data collection methods. A total of 360 samples were used for data analysis. Structural equation modeling (SEM) results using Smart-PLS suggests that social media engagement does not have a direct positive impact on tourist loyalty. However, social media engagement positively influences tourist loyalty through the mediating effect of perceived value in the hotel industry. While perceived value and corporate image show a direct positive impact on tourist loyalty. Corporate image through the mediating effect of perceived value was found to have a substantial effect on tourist loyalty. Theoretically, the outcome of this study supports the generally discussed theories to examine the relationship between

social media engagement, corporate image, perceived value, and tourist loyalty to better understand the complex relationships (antecedents and consequences) among these constructs in the hotel sector. Practically, findings from this study would benefit the hoteliers in Malaysia to have better insights into recognizing social media engagement and corporate image as a powerful marketing tool to influence their customers' perceived value and loyalty towards the hotels. Limitations of the study were also highlighted. One of the major limitations of this study is that due to Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns, it was not possible to collect data proportionately from the Malaysian and international tourist groups. Therefore, only 81 (23%) of the 360 respondents were international tourists, thus the sample may not be a complete representation of the population under study. Finally, recommendations for future research were discussed.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

KESAN PENGLIBATAN MEDIA SOSIAL, IMEJ KORPORAT DAN NILAI YANG DIPERLIHATKAN TERHADAP KESETIAAN PELANCONG DALAM INDUSTRI PERHOTELAN DI MALAYSIA

Oleh

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Memupuk kesetiaan pelancong adalah keutamaan terpenting hotel-hotel di Malaysia dalam persekitaran perniagaan kontemporari yang kompetitif. Sejak beberapa tahun kebelakangan ini, kesetiaan pelancong dalam industri perhotelan Malaysia telah menurun serta memberi kesan negatif kepada kadar penghunian dan kemandirian hotel. Sebagai contoh, menurut laporan tinjauan hotel yang dikeluarkan oleh Pelancongan Malaysia (2020), kadar penghunian hotel dalam industri mencatatkan penurunan 2% pada 2019 berbanding 2018. Tambahan pula, lonjakan kes pandemik Covid-19 memburukkan lagi keadaan dan menjajaskan industri perhotelan dengan teruk, menyebabkan banyak hotel ditutup buat sementara waktu atau selama-lamanya. Para sarjana dan pakar industri telah menganggarkan bahawa penglibatan media sosial yang berkesan oleh pelanggan dan penjenamaan semula hotel dengan imej korporat yang positif adalah efektif untuk bangkit semula dalam era pasca pandemik. Walaupun terdapat minat yang semakin meningkat dalam penglibatan media sosial dan imej korporat untuk meningkatkan nilai yang diperlihatkan pelancong bagi menjana kesetiaan mereka dalam industri perhotelan, bukti empirikal untuk menghubungkan konstruk ini masih terhad. Khususnya, daripada perspektif industri perhotelan, hanya sedikit usaha telah dibuat untuk meneroka peranan pengantara nilai yang diperlihatkan dalam hubungan antara penglibatan media sosial dan kesetiaan pelancong, serta antara imej korporat dan kesetiaan pelancong. Oleh itu, tujuan umum kajian ini adalah untuk menyiasat kesan penglibatan media sosial, imej korporat, dan nilai yang diperlihatkan terhadap kesetiaan pelancong kepada industri perhotelan Malaysia. Menggunakan kaedah kuantitatif, soal selidik pentadbiran sendiri telah digunakan untuk mengumpul data daripada para pelanggan hotel di Malaysia dan antarabangsa melalui kaedah pengumpulan data dalam talian (emel, WhatsApp, Facebook) dan secara bersemuka. Sebanyak 360 sampel telah digunakan untuk analisis data. Keputusan Pemodelan Persamaan Struktur (SEM) menggunakan Smart-PLS menunjukkan bahawa penglibatan media sosial tidak mempunyai kesan positif langsung terhadap kesetiaan pelancong. Walaubagaimanapun, penglibatan media sosial secara positif mempengaruhi kesetiaan pelancong melalui kesan pengantara nilai yang

diperlihatkan dalam industri perhotelan. Manakala nilai yang diperlihatkan dan imej korporat menunjukkan kesan positif secara langsung terhadap kesetiaan pelancong. Imej korporat melalui kesan pengantaraan nilai yang diperlihatkan didapati mempunyai kesan yang besar terhadap kesetiaan pelancong. Secara teorinya, hasil kajian ini menyokong teori yang dibincangkan secara umum untuk mengkaji hubungan antara penglibatan media sosial, imej korporat, nilai yang diperlihatkan, dan kesetiaan pelancong bagi lebih memahami hubungan yang kompleks (anteseden dan akibat) antara konstruk ini dalam sektor perhotelan. Secara praktikalnya, dapatan daripada kajian ini dapat memberi manfaat kepada para pengusaha hotel di Malaysia untuk membina pandangan yang lebih baik dalam mengiktiraf penglibatan media sosial dan imej korporat sebagai alat pemasaran yang berkuasa untuk mempengaruhi nilai dan kesetiaan pelanggan mereka. Batasan kajian juga dibincangkan. Salah satu batasan utama kajian ini ialah disebabkan oleh pandemik Covid-19, data tidak dapat dikumpulkan secara setara daripada kumpulan pelancong dari Malaysia dan antarabangsa. Oleh itu, hanya 81 (23%) daripada 360 responden adalah pelancong antarabangsa, sekaligus menjadikan sampel tidak mewakili populasi yang dikaji dengan selengkapnya. Akhir sekali, cadangan untuk penyelidikan masa depan juga telah dibincangkan.

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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of the Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

GDP	Gross Domestic Product
PLS-SEM	Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modeling
AVE	Average Variance Extracted
CFA	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
EFA	Exploratory Factor Analysis
USD	United States Dollar
CR	Composite Reliability
HTMT	Heterotrait- Monotrait Ratio

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

In recent decades, the world has realised an impressive transformation in the tourism industry as one of the largest and fastest growing economic sectors in the world. Thus, it is one of the main economic drivers in most developed and developing countries. Between 2009 and 2019, the real growth of international tourism receipts increased by 54%, which exceeded the global GDP growth of 44% (UNWTO, 2021). Rapid development of transportation systems, especially in the aviation industry, visa facilitation and cross-country integration have increased mobility and movement of people around the world, thus helping to drive the rapid growth of the global tourism industry. In 2019, global tourism recorded 1.5 billion international tourist arrivals and generated \$1.5 trillion in international tourism revenue. In other words, a steady growth of 4% and 3%, respectively, is notable in international tourist arrivals and international tourism receipts. Tourism contributed a significant part (USD 9.2 trillion, 10.4%) to the world gross domestic product (GDP) (WTTC, 2021). In addition to economic contributions, the tourism industry has also created millions of jobs. The expansion of the global tourism industry has benefited 334 million people through job opportunities, or the industry has created one in ten jobs (WTTC, 2021). In addition, world tourism was the third most important export category after fuels and chemicals. Total world tourism exports in 2019 were USD 1.7 trillion, or 28% of world services exports.

In the Malaysian economy, tourism is the largest contributor to national gross domestic product (GDP) (Ali, Kim, Li, and Jeon, 2016; Keshavarz & Nezakati, 2013). The tourism sector in Malaysia experienced significant growth of 11.2%, from 56.4 billion Malaysian Ringgit (RM) in 2005 to RM 201.4 billion in 2017 (see Figure 1.1). This sector has continued to expand, contributing 14.9 percent to total GDP (see Figure 1.1) and employing 3.4 million people, representing 23.2 percent of total national employment of Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2018).



Figure 1.1 : Annual revenue from tourism sector and share to Malaysia’s GDP
(Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2018)

The hotel industry is one of the most important sectors for the reception and attraction of tourists in Malaysia (Hassan, Pourabedin, Sade & Chai, 2018; Teo, Bernhard & Chee, 2017). The expected development and contribution of the tourism industry to the general economy of the country have opened opportunities for the expansion of the hotel sector (Azureen, Rahman & Nordin, 2018; Yadegaridehkordi, Nilashi, Nasir & Ibrahim, 2018). It is a major contributor to the tourism industry, accounting for 12.8% of the total tourism contribution to Malaysia's GDP, valued at \$20.7 billion (inbound) in 2017 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2018). The contribution of the hotel sector to the economic and social development of modern Malaysia cannot be overlooked. According to Tourism Malaysia (2019), there were 4,750 hotels registered in Malaysia with ratings from 1 to 5 stars in 2018. This shows an increase in the number of hotels of 53.5% since 2013 (Yadegaridehkordi et al., 2018).

The arrival of new entrants and many aggressive promotions from existing hotel operators resulted in the closure of some less competitive hotels. As a result, competition and customer churn in the hotel industry has increased due to pressure from the incoming supply of hotels in Malaysia (Yadegaridehkordi, Nilash, Nasir & Ibrahim, 2018; Marais, du Plessis & Saayman, 2017). Besides the oversupply of hotel rooms and lower trend in tourist arrival, the influx of presence of Online Travel Agencies (OTA) such as booking.com, Agoda has tremendously intensified the competition for occupancies in the hotel industry (Focus Malaysia, 2018). Therefore, there has been fierce competition among industry players to capture the sizeable portion of the customer and remain competitive in the market (Yadegaridehkordi, Nilash, Nasir & Ibrahim, 2018; Hassan, Pourabedin, Sade & Chai, 2018).

In addition, the competitive situation in the Malaysian hotel industry has intensified with the recent outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which hit the hotel industry hard (Paulose & Shakeel, 2022). Hoteliers had the most challenging time in history due to the pandemic (Shari et al., 2020). The Malaysian hotel industry has suffered huge losses from this pandemic. Due to the unpredictable and massive effects of the pandemic, the Malaysian hotel industry is restructuring the organization through cutbacks, bankruptcies, and temporary or permanent closures (Awan et al., 2020). In Malaysia, more than 100 three- to five-star hotels closed temporarily or permanently from March 2020 to early 2021 (Kathy, 2021). While it is very understandable for hotel owners to make such extreme decisions due to sales and supply chain limitations, there is still hope if hotels managed to redesign their services and adapt them to the changing dynamics of the industry (Awan et al., 2020). One of the most effective strategies that hoteliers can adapt in the new stages of this pandemic is to understand and emphasize the value of promoting tourist loyalty (Deloitte, 2020). Several academic and industry experts have urged hoteliers to shift their mindset from "serving" to "adding value" to current and potential loyal customers (e.g., Kathy, 2021; Farazad, 2020; Deloitte, 2020). Therefore, hotel managers must understand the factors that influence tourists' needs to promote the hotel, attract new customers, and retain loyal customers (Awan et al., 2020).

Customer loyalty is the outcome of customers' positive behavioral intentions towards the service provider (Tuncer et al., 2021; Liat et al., 2017). It is perceived that customer's intentions to continue with the same organization without being attracted to competitors' lucrative market offerings and they would recommend the organization to others (Ramanathan, Subramanian, & Parrott, 2017). There are many advantages associated with managing customers' loyalty relationships. Similarly, by managing a long-term loyalty relationship with customers, hotel operators can strengthen their market positioning since repeat visitation and recommendation are crucial for the sustainability and profitability of the hotel business (Mat Som et al., 2012).

Studies have shown several factors that could give the hotel an advantage over its competitors in the industry is to create tourist loyalty, such as social media engagement, corporate image, and perceived value (Kumar, Konar & Balasubramanian, 2020; Moorthy et al, 2018; Hassan, Pourabedin, Sade, and Chai, 2018). Hospitality organisations use social media engagement strategies to build intimate relationships with tourists through interactive communication (Leung et al., 2019). Hotels benefit from social media engagement in numerous ways. Social media platforms allow hotel managers to interact with tourists online to gather reviews, collect useful information, analyse, and effectively manage the information to achieve greater benefit for the consumers compared to their competitors (Sotiriadis, 2017; Leung & Bai, 2013). Hotels also post messages including advertising and promotional pricing on social media to market their products, while social media platforms allow companies to conduct market research in a unique way (Leung et al., 2019).

On the other hand, tourists can post and share extensive information on social media platforms such as Facebook and Trip Advisor quickly and easily. These platforms also produce user-generated content (UGC) that has become a powerful source of information

in influencing tourists' decision-making processes (Zhao et al., 2015). Social media has been shown to have an impact on the entire trip planning processes, including before, during and after the trip (Leung et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2013). Numerous scholars have argued that social media engagement plays a significant role in influencing tourists' perceived value and loyalty to the hotel industry (Kumar, Konar & Balasubramanian, 2020; Leung et al., 2019). Therefore, evaluating social media engagement and perceived value can be an effective strategy for increasing hotel financial performance by creating tourist loyalty.

A positive corporate image is another factor that could increase customer loyalty by improving customers' perception of value (Wai Lai, 2019; Moorthy et al., 2018). Corporate image emerged as a critical component for a business organisation to the external patrons, especially customers to attract their focus and attention (Kim, Lee, & Prideaux, 2014). Improved corporate image not only has a higher competitive advantage to maintain a long-term customer relationship, but is also considered a key success factor for the preservation and success of the hotel industry (Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Yang, Chen, and Huang, 2017). Academics advocated superior corporate image as an effective marketing tool for the sustainability of hotel companies (e.g., Triatmanto et al., 2021; Moorthy et al., 2018). A distinctive corporate image can influence tourists' perceived value and consequently keep them loyal to the hotel (Triatmanto et al., 2021; Yang, Chen, and Huang, 2017).

A review of the literature to date shows that a substantial number of studies have been conducted on social media engagement, corporate image, perceived value, and customer loyalty in the hospitality industry. However, academic research on these variables with an integration model is limited. In addition, there continues to be a knowledge gap regarding social media engagement and its relationship with perceived value and tourist loyalty in the hotel and tourism sectors (Kumar, Konar & Balasubramanian, 2020; Hua et al., 2017), particularly in the context of the hotel industry. Given the research deficit, the aim of the study is to examine the relationship between social media engagement, corporate image, perceived value, and tourism loyalty in the Malaysian hotel industry. The study also aims to fill the gap in current literature by examining how perceived value mediates the relationship between social media engagement, corporate image, and tourist loyalty.

1.2 Problem Statement

Hotel customers in the current global competitive situations have become less loyal and more demanding in their expectations and perception of the value of service providers (Vision critical, 2019; Hassan, Pourabedin, Sade, and Chai, 2018). Tourist loyalty serves as an important source of competitive advantage and as an indicator of business success in the industry (Cossío-Silva et al., 2019). Tourist loyalty in various tourism sectors, including the hotel industry, was reported to decline worldwide across various regions due to intense market competition (WTTC, 2018; Gomes, 2016). For instance, according to the Global Hotel Study 2019 (STR, 2020), in the Asia Pacific Region, there was a 3.2% drop in room revenue per available room (RevPAR) driven by declines in both the

1.3% occupancy rate and 2.0% in average daily rate (ADR). While hotels in the Regional United Kingdom (UK) recorded a decline in both occupancy (0.6%) and RevPAR (1.9%) in the Regions. New York, recorded a 2.4% decline in ADR, respectively.

In Malaysia, tourist loyalty in the hotel sector has declined due to fierce competition and the entry of new hotel operators into the market (The Star Online, May 23, 2019). According to a hotel survey report released by Tourism Malaysia (2020), the hotel occupancy rate in the industry recorded a 2% decline in 2019 compared to 2018. Keshavarz and Jamshidi (2018) revealed that the customer loyalty rate in the hotel industry in Malaysia is low and gradually decreasing, which has a strong negative impact on hotel occupancy. For example, the IOI Resort's sales manager revealed that the expected customer loyalty for the hotel was 10 percent, while the actual rate was only 3 percent (Keshavarz & Jamshidi, 2018). Hotels that experience negative trends in customer loyalty are prone to have fewer customers, which impacts financial performance that would interrupt the growth and sustainability of their business in the long term (Yap et al., 2018; Kandampully et al., 2015). In addition, the situation has been exacerbated by the recent surge of Covid-19 pandemic around the world, which has hit the hotel industry hard. Hoteliers have been through the most challenging time in history due to the pandemic. Many leading scholars in the field of tourism and hospitality agree that it is high time for hotels to take complete advantage of loyalty initiatives (e.g., Paulose & Shakeel, 2022; Li et al., 2021). It was highly recommended to incorporate various customer loyalty schemes into the overall corporate strategy to revive the trust and enhance the perceived value perception of their guests to fuel their growth in the post-pandemic period (e.g., Le & Phi, 2021; Singh, 2021; Farazad, 2020). To do so, as people become increasingly digital today, customer data can be used to understand their preferences, offer free room upgrades, and spa or restaurant using hotels' social media sites (e.g., Facebook, TripAdvisor) (Awan et al., 2020). Therefore, hotels' social media engagement strategies should be designed that way. In addition, to reposition the image of the hotel in the minds of tourists, cleanliness and efficient hygiene practices should become part of the hotels' value proposition which will provide reassurance to the customers in their subconscious (Deloitte, 2020; Awan et al., 2020). For enhancing the corporate image, hotels' should engage with the tourists using social media platforms to demonstrate their commitment to hygiene and cleanliness to make them return, feel comfortable and maintain their loyalty (Singh, 2021; Le & Phi, 2021).

Therefore, the Equity theory, proposed by Adams (1965) was used to measure loyalty intention of tourists towards the hotels in this study. This theory suggests that it is possible to understand and predict customer motivation for their future transactional and behavioral attitudes towards a particular exchange of social and business relationships (Crosno & Brown, 2015).

Social media engagement is a key factor of tourist loyalty in the hospitality sector through simplifying two-way mutual interaction between the hotel and the tourists using social media platforms (Kumar et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2019). According to Pansari and Kumar (2017) tourists' activity on social media such as reviews, suggestions for further improvement, recommendations to others, and interaction with the hotel are recognised

as an integral part of social media engagement. On the other hand, hotel's social media engagement using tourism social media sites such as Facebook, TripAdvisor, Booking.com, and Expedia has emerged as a better strategy to connect with their customers to gather reviews, collect useful information, post messages to advertise and market their products (Khan et al., 2020; Harrigan et al., 2017; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2015).

Engagement through social media with current and prospective customers is perceived as a reliable source of relationship management, which can influence their value perception and loyalty behaviour (Kandampully et al., 2015; Ramanathan et al., 2017). However, many hotel operators have failed to get benefits from social media platforms due to managerial ignorance to effectively engage with their customers to improve their management relationship practices (Dolan, Seo, & Kemper, 2019). Previous research has shown that social media engagement has a broader and positive impact on building loyalty in the hospitality industry (Roque & Raposo, 2015; So, King, Sparks, & Wang, 2016). However, there is a lack of empirical research on the effect of social media engagement on tourist loyalty (Leung et al., 2019; Van Asperen, de Rooij & Dijkmans, 2017), especially in the context of the Southeast Asian region, including Malaysia. Consequently, hotel operators do not understand the practical importance of integrating social media engagement as a critical communication channel into their integrated mix of marketing and advertising communications to provide superior perceived value to customers (Le & Phi, 2021; Li, Cui & Peng, 2017; Dijkmans et al., 2015). Thus, the Affect Theory of Social Exchange, suggested by Lawler (2001) was used to measure the effect of social media engagement on tourist perceived value and loyalty to the hotel. This theory proposed that social exchange is understood as a joint activity of two or more parties in which each party has something that the other actor has value (Jussila et al., 2012). According to this theory loyalty in the context of service can be universally understood as a process of social exchange by creating a sense of shared responsibility on social media platforms to affect their emotions and perceptions of value (Lawler, 2001).

Corporate image is another crucial factor of tourist loyalty in the hospitality sector which serves consumers as an external indication of the exceptional service value of a hotel (Awan et al., 2020 Ozkan et al., 2019). A unique corporate image has a positive association with the highest perceived value of customers (An et al., 2019). Perceived value here refers to the customers' psychological evaluation of the benefit or value they receive compared to the time invested and other efforts to acquire certain services and products (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000). An improved corporate image and greater consumer perceived value not only have a higher competitive advantage to maintain a long-term relationship with customers, but also, they are also considered as successful key factors for the hotel business sustenance by keeping their customers loyal (Yang, Chen, & Huang, 2017; Prayag & Ryan, 2012). In the past, numerous studies have been carried out on corporate image and its relationship with customer loyalty. However, most studies focus on functional aspects (e.g., reputation, quality of service) of corporate image (e.g., Ka & Lai, 2019; Liat et al., 2017; Cheng & Rashid, 2015), while there is a dearth of research highlighting the importance of psychological aspects of a corporate to create a hotel corporate image profile.

In this aspect, a view asserted by Minkiewicz et al. (2011) in the hospitality and leisure sector paves an advancing meaning of the corporate image concept from the customers' psychological point of view. They recognised corporate image based on customers' perceptions, feelings, beliefs, and attitudes in response to the company's strategic intent. Similarly, Ka and Lai (2019) posited that due to the competitive market pressure and push for being a socially responsible organisation, operators in the hospitality sectors are likely to value customers' emotion and trustworthiness. Therefore, hotels intend to establish themselves as a socially responsible identity, efficient, exciting, and innovative in their product and service offerings to establish a unique corporate image profile (Ozkan et al., 2019; Minkiewicz et al., 2011). According to the Resource-based View (RBV) theory (Barney, 1991), business organisations are heterogeneous in terms of resources and skills, because the more heterogeneous their skills and resources, the greater the competitive advantages in the market (Pires & Trez, 2018; Spyropoulou, Skarmeas & Katsikeas, 2010). Based on this theory, this study argues that a unique corporate image is imperfectly difficult and inimitable for hotel firms due to its intangible nature which is a source of competitive advantage for the them to enhance customer perceived value and loyalty (Wai Lai, 2019). Studies on how a unique corporate image profile can enhance customer perceived value to influence tourists' loyalty are still not well prevalent in the current hospitality literature, particularly in the context of the hotel industry.

Past studies have suggested that without creating superior perceived value for the customers, hospitality businesses are unable to sustain (e.g., An et al., 2019; Hassan, Pourabedin, Sade, and Chai, 2018). Kim and Park (2017) opined that tourists seek various sorts of perceived value and experience from a hospitality organisation that they visit such as functional, emotional, and social value. Yost et al. (2021) and Itani et al. (2019) postulated that social media content has functional and emotional and social value for customers while engaging in social media. While Zhang, Guo, Hu & Liu (2016) argued that finding and sharing experiences related to services directly on social media affects customers' perception of perceived value. They suggested that the functional, emotional, and social value dimensions of perceived value are the most potential dimensions of consumer perceived value to capture the overall service experience of customer perceived value. From the previous literature, it is evident that extensive attention has been paid to examine the effect of perceived value on customer loyalty in the hospitality sector (El-adly, 2018; Campón Cerro et al., 2017). However, little or no attention has been paid to how perceived value mediate the relationship between social media engagement and tourist loyalty in the hotel industry.

A positive corporate image eliminates the expectations gap with an influence of higher value perceptions (An et al., 2019). Perceived value derives from the firm's corporate image (Wai Lai, 2019). In hospitality and tourism literature, numerous studies have tested the direct effect of corporate image on customer loyalty (e.g., Ka & Lai, 2019; Kim et al., 2014), a little or no study has considered corporate image as a value adding antecedent of customer loyalty (e.g., Özkan et al., 2019; Gronroos, 2000). So far, most of the studies examined the mediating effect of customers' satisfaction and considered it as a highly acceptable and well-established mediator in the relationship between customer loyalty antecedents and customer loyalty. However, researches have shown that

customer perceived value has a much stronger influence than satisfaction to predict the effect on customer behavioral intentions outcome such as customer loyalty from its various antecedents (Mat Som et al., 2012; Zhang, Guo, Hu, & Liu, 2017). For example, it has been reported empirically by Moorthy et al. (2018), who found in their study in the context of customer loyalty to Internet service providers in Malaysia that corporate image does not have a positive relationship with customer satisfaction to convey loyalty to customer loyalty. They suggested that perceived value could potentially be the strongest mediating construct to more effectively predict customer loyalty based on the company's image. Wai Lai (2019) and Hassan et al. (2018) also argued in their study that perceived value is more likely to stimulate tourists' loyalty behavior in the hotel industry. Little or no attention has been paid to investigating the mediating role of perceived value in the relationship between corporate image and tourists' loyalty in the hotel industry. Therefore, to fill this gap, this study examined the mediating effect of perceptual value on the relationship between corporate image and tourist loyalty in the context of the Malaysian hotel industry.

1.3 Research Questions

After discussing the research problems, the study has come out with several research questions that require answers through empirical research. The study aims to come out with appropriate answers to the following specific research questions.

RQ 1. Is there a direct relationship between social media engagement, corporate image, and tourist loyalty in Malaysian hotel industry?

RQ 2. Is there a direct relationship between social media engagement, corporate image, and perceived value in Malaysian hotel industry?

RQ 3. Is there a direct relationship between perceived value and tourist loyalty in Malaysian hotel industry?

RQ 4. Does perceived value mediate the relationship between social media engagement and tourism loyalty, as well as the relationship between corporate image and tourism loyalty?

RQ 5. Do the sociodemographic characteristics of tourists, considering age, gender, and type of tourist (Malaysian and international); moderate the relationship between perceived value and tourist loyalty in the Malaysian hotel industry?

1.4 Research objectives

The main objective of this research is to examine and understand the effects of social media engagement, corporate image, and perceived value on tourist loyalty. Furthermore, to examine the moderating effect of tourists' sociodemographic characteristics, considering age, gender and type of tourists (Malaysian and international) in the relationship between perceived value and tourist loyalty in the Malaysian hotel industry.

RO1. To examine the positive relationship between social media engagement and tourist loyalty in the Malaysian hotel industry.

RO2. To examine the positive relationship between social media engagement on perceived value in the Malaysian hotel industry.

RO3. To examine the positive relationship between corporate image and perceived value in the Malaysian hotel industry.

RO4. To examine the positive relationship between corporate image and tourist loyalty in the Malaysian hotel industry.

RO5. To investigate the positive relationship between perceived value and tourist loyalty in the Malaysian hotel industry.

RQ6. To investigate the mediating role of perceived value in the relationship between social media engagement and tourist loyalty in the Malaysian hotel industry.

RO7. To investigate the mediating role of perceived value in the relationship between corporate image and tourist loyalty in the Malaysian hotel industry

RO8. To test the moderating effect of tourists' socio-demographic characteristics, considering age, gender and type of tourist (Malaysian and International), in the relationship between perceived value and tourist loyalty in the Malaysian hotel industry.

1.5 Significance of the Research

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the existing tourism marketing literature by providing empirical evidence for the importance of tourist social media corporate image on customer perceived value and tourist loyalty in the hotel sector. The research is also expected to provide valuable insights to hotel industry marketers. This section explains the theoretical and economic importance of the study in more detail.

1.5.1 Theoretical Significance

The findings of this study would contribute to the existing theory by providing empirical evidence on the effect of social media engagement, corporate image, perceived value, and tourist loyalty based on the relevant theories in an integrated model. Considering the current Covid-19 pandemic situation, researchers have highlighted the urge for investigating the importance of these factors for hotel businesses' sustenance, but little attention to empirical research has been done on this matter to date. Therefore, this study is amongst the first noble approaches to examine the relationship between social media engagement, corporate image using a corporate characteristics scale, perceived value, and tourist loyalty in the Malaysian hotel industry. Numerous studies had examined the mediating effect of customers' satisfaction and considered it as a highly acceptable and well-establish mediator in the relationship between customer loyalty antecedents and

customer loyalty. Nevertheless, several researchers have argued that the mediating role of customer perceived value is more effective than customer satisfaction to foresee the customer loyalty behavioral intentions (Mat Som et al., 2012; M. Zhang, Guo, Hu, & Liu, 2016). However, from the literature, it is evident that the mediating role of perceived value in tourist loyalty studies has not been given much attention in the hotel industry (Li et al., 2021; Zhang, Fu, Cai, & Lu, 2014). Therefore, addressing this literature gap to the best knowledge of the researcher will contribute theoretically, in two ways. Firstly, by testing and establishing an empirical relationship between social media engagement, corporate image, perceived value, and tourist loyalty from the hotel industry perspective. Secondly, the examination of perceived value as a mediating construct in the relationship between social media engagement as well as between corporate image and tourist loyalty.

According to the Equity theory (Adams, 1965) participation of individuals in social relationship expect to produce an equal amount of outcome compared to the number of resources invested in that relationship. The theory suggests that individuals feel extremely comfortable and content when it is balanced between their perceptions of giving and receiving of invested resources in those relationships (Hatfield, Salmon & Rapson, 2011; Miles & Cromer, 2016). Thus, the results of this study are expected to provide a valuable theoretical understanding of the concept of a mediating role of perceived value in explaining customers' behavioral outcomes of loyalty in the hospitality industry perspective.

Several previous researchers posited to consider the notion of heterogeneity in tourism research (Cheah et al., 2020; Matthews, 2017). It was repeatedly highlighted that assuming data in empirical research stems from a single homogenous population often leads to threatening the PLS-SEM results, the incorrect conclusion of the study, and affect the underlying validity of the research model (Cheah et al., 2020; Sarstedt et al., 2017; Sarstedt & Ringle, 2010). In response to this call, this study aims to contribute to the body of knowledge by comparing how the relationship from perceived value to loyalty may differ based on the customers' socio-demographic characteristics (considering age, gender, and type of tourist) as moderating variable in the Malaysian hotel industry.

The conceptual model proposed and validated in the current study would integrate the various streams of literature and concepts that encompass social media engagement, corporate image, perceived value, and tourist loyalty in a tourism-dominated developing country like Malaysia. Therefore, the conceptual model of this study could enrich the precursors of tourist loyalty in the context of the hotel industry in a developing country.

Finally, this study expected to provide a methodological contribution by adopting a multi-method approach for data collection using both online and traditional paper data collection to distribute the questionnaire. In doing so, the use of social media considering Facebook, WhatsApp as survey distribution channels for online data collection was adopted in this study. Although, several researchers (e.g., Rife et al., 2016; Wolfe et al., 2014; Dolnicar, Laesser, & Matus, 2009) have recommended Facebook as an effective

platform for online survey questionnaire distribution and data collection for tourism research, a little or no attention has been given to adopt Facebook as a data collection channel in hospitality research. The current study could contribute to this aspect by providing empirical evidence that can provide a milestone for future researchers. It was highlighted that the combination of both traditional pen and paper-based and social media as survey distribution channels for collecting meaningful empirical data increases the research validity, and extend the geographical scope of the sample (Schneider & Harknett, 2019; Wolfe et al., 2014; Baltar & Brunet, 2012).

1.5.2 Managerial Significance

The study equally has its practical importance for marketing practitioners and policymakers in the hotel industry. Due to stiff global and domestic competition among hotel marketers, tourists have access to ample choices to consider while booking a hotel in a particular destination. In addition, the emergence of unprecedented popularity of social media in the tourism and hospitality sector has further paved the hotel customers to be more sophisticated in their needs and expected perceive value (Itani et al., 2019). It was highlighted in numerous research that many tourism brands are using social media the same as other marketing tools, neglecting its full potential to engage, creating value and positive attitude towards the tourism brands (e.g., Leung, 2019; Hays, 2012). Findings from this research would benefit the hotel operators in Malaysia to have more insights in this area recognising social media engagement and corporate image as a powerful marketing tool and how this affects their customers' perceived value and loyalty towards the hotels.

The findings of this study are expected to benefit the government bodies and the policymakers (e.g., Ministry of Tourism and Culture) by providing empirical insights on the significance of social media engagement, corporate image, perceived value, and tourist loyalty in the Malaysian hotel industry. For the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, it will assist them in their comprehensive digitalisation journey to comprehend that the sincere acceptance of social media engagement practices is essential for the hotel industry. By introducing the necessary strategies and schemes to adapt the whole spectrum of social media engagement by the hotel industry, the policymakers will be able to assist them to well connect with their local and international customers. Consequently, it is expected to enhance customers' value perception and loyalty intention towards the hotels in Malaysia.

It is hoped that the conceptual model of tourist loyalty derived from this study will support hotels in their future decision-making process. Especially for those who wish to focus on social media engagement and collectively develop a unique corporate image to increase perceived value and tourist loyalty. In addition, the outcome of this study is expected to provide empirical evidence of how tourists may differ in terms of the manifestation of their perceived value and loyalty behaviours based on sociodemographic characteristics. This will help Malaysian hotel managers understand how they should treat their customers from different demographics and develop tailor-made products according to their customers' perceptions of perceived value. Therefore,

it would help and be useful to foster collaboration between hotel operators and improve the competitiveness of the Malaysian hotel industry.

1.6 Scope of study

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between social media engagement, corporate image, perceived value, and tourist loyalty through a quantitative study. These constructs were chosen because they are well established and featured in various hospitality and tourism researches and tested against many other variables (e.g., Triatmanto et al., 2021; An et al., 2019; Harrigan et al., 2017). However, a review of the literature revealed that these concepts had not been tested in an integrated model in the context of hotel industry. Although there are multiple dimensions of social media engagement, this study considered only the dimensions proposed by Zhang et al. (2016) and Harrigan et al. (2017) which include identification, absorption, and social interaction. The reason for choosing these three dimensions is because previous researchers have found that these three dimensions are the most widely used dimensions of social media engagement to influence the perceived value and loyalty intent of tourists to tourism businesses and hospitality (Vivek, 2012; Harrigan et al., 2017). In terms of social media platforms, this study focused on the tourism social media sites offering online reviews, such as Facebook, Trip Advisor, Expedia, booking.com (Harrigan et al., 2017). According to the “Malaysia Tourists Profile 2018” report these are the major social media platforms with which tourists in Malaysia intend to engage for securing tourism-related information (Tourism Malaysia, 2019).

Regarding the construct of corporate image, the research shows that there are multiple dimensions of corporate image, but only three dimensions suggested by Minkiewicz et al. (2011), and Chun and Davies (2006). The dimensions of corporate image construct are competence, agreeableness, and enterprise. In addition, perceived value is examined from the perspective of emotional, functional, and social interaction value. These are the highly recommended dimensions of perceived value in the context of social media engagement in various service industry including tourism and hospitality (Kam, So, King, Sparks & Wang, 2016; Jahn & Kunz, 2012). Both Malaysian and international tourists were surveyed as respondents to achieve the objectives of the study. The respondents of the study were chosen based on two criteria. Firstly, they must have experience in booking and staying in a hotel in Malaysia using social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, TripAdvisor, Expedia, Booking.com). Secondly, the last stay should be within the last one year in a hotel in Malaysia.

The tourist loyalty constructs in the current study are measured using the composite loyalty dimension. This is because, the composite dimension of loyalty has been found to be more appropriate for tourism and hospitality industry perspective (Chen & Gursoy, 2001; Campón-Cerro, Alves, & Hernández-Mogollón, 2015). The composite dimension of loyalty dominates the tourists’ intention to revisit and recommend to others as a sign of loyalty behaviour (Zhang et al., 2014). With regards to the demographic factors, this study will consider only age, gender, and type of tourist (Malaysian and international). The drive for selecting these demographic factors is because they are widely accepted

and associated with tourism related research (Mechinda, Serirat, & Gulid, 2009; Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2018). Thus, this study wants to validate the moderating effects of these demographic factors in the relationship between perceived value and tourists' loyalty in the Malaysian hotel industry.

Finally, the rationale for choosing hotels over other services organisations is due to the following reasons. Firstly, the current global trend is shifting towards tourism-focused economies which causes the emergence of new destinations along with increased demand for differentiated tourism services and products. Hence, it has engendered the requisite for hotels to develop customer-centred strategies to attract more tourists and improve their loyalty behaviours to sustain in the competitive global economy (Abidin et al., 2016). Secondly, hotel industry players in Malaysia ranging from budget hotels to star rating hotels have confronted a struggle to compete with their counterparts due to the lack of suitable business practices in building a unique corporate image and customer loyalty (Shamsudin et al., 2019; Liat et al., 2015).

1.7 Operational definition of key concepts

Upon reviewing the existing concepts related to tourist loyalty research from past studies, several concepts relevant to this study need to be defined based on the researcher's interpretation. These concepts are social media, social media engagement, corporate image, perceived value, tourists, types of tourist, and tourist loyalty.

Social Media

Social media can be defined as a Web 2.0 application, which is a computer-mediated social networking opportunity to facilitate mutual interaction between individuals online. In tourism and hospitality, social media refers to the tourism social media sites that facilitate online sales and reviews related to tourism and hospitality products (Harrigan et al., 2017). For the study, social media refers to online social media platforms that enable mutual interaction between the hotel and its current and future customers such as TripAdvisor, Expedia, Trivago and Facebook.

Social media engagement

Social media engagement refers to the process of a two-way mutual interaction between the businesses and the customers using social media platforms (Kumar et al., 2020). In this study, social media engagement refers to the process of hotels' interacting with tourists via social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Expedia etc.) to gather reviews, collect useful information, post messages to advertise and market their products. Simultaneously, enabling tourist active interaction and engagement with the hotel to share their experience, reviews, and recommendations using these social media platforms besides online bookings.

Corporate image

Corporate image is the beliefs, feelings and experiences, impressions, knowledge and thoughts that the customers have about an organisation to differentiate itself from other alternative decisions (Minkiewicz et al., 2011). In the study, corporate image refers to the characteristics that describe the hotel's image as if it is a person.

Perceived Value

Perceived value is the customers' psychological assessment of the benefits or value they receive compared to the sacrifices of time and other efforts to acquire certain services and products (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000). In the study, perceived value refers to the tourists' perception, functional, emotional and social value that they received from the hotel.

Tourist

Tourist refers to the visitor who stays at least one night in a collective or private accommodation at the place that he or she visits (UNWTO, 1994). In the study, tourist refers to the visitor who spends at least one night in a hotel in Malaysia.

Types of tourist

Prosser (1998) has categorised tourists mainly into two types which are international tourists and domestic tourists based on destination-origin relationships. 'International tourists' refers to foreign visitors to a destination while 'domestic tourists' refers to the citizens of the country visiting local destinations (Prosser, 1998). In the study, tourists are categorised into two types: Malaysian and international tourists. Tourists who are Malaysian citizens are considered Malaysian (domestic) tourists, and tourists from other countries are considered international tourists.

Tourist Loyalty

Tourist loyalty is generally defined as the intent of a tourist to return to the same destination and recommend it to other people such as their acquaintances, friends and family (Campón Cerroetal., 2015). Tourist loyalty in the current study refers to the intention of tourists to return to the same hotel in future and recommend the hotel to others through both offline (social community) and online platforms such as social media sites.

Organisation of Thesis

This study is organised into five chapters. Chapter one represents the introduction of this proposal focusing on the background of the study, problem statement, research questions

followed by the research objectives. It also clarifies the significance and the terms used as a guide throughout the study. Chapter two expands the literature on topics related to social media engagement, corporate image, perceived value, and tourist loyalty. It also introduces the conceptual model of research proposed for testing.

Chapter three discusses the methodology to be employed in perusing this study. This chapter focuses on research design, sampling procedure, sample population, sampling plan, sampling size, and justification of using survey method, the procedure for measurement of items and instrument development, mode of data collection, and the proposed data analysis techniques to achieve the objectives of this research.

Chapter four presents the results from the data analysis and findings of the study. Chapter five discusses the research summary and findings extensively. The outcome in achieving the objectives of this study is also discussed in this chapter. Then, contributions from both theoretical and managerial perspectives, recommendations for future research are presented. Limitations of the research are also discussed in the final section of this chapter.

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