



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



The effect of brand experience and E-WOM on brand loyalty with brand love as a mediation variable (A Study of Sri Phala Resort & Villa Customers)

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Abstract

The increasingly competitive hospitality industry has driven changes in the way customers build relationships with brands and has influenced their level of loyalty. This study was conducted on *200 customers of Sri Phala Resort & Villa* who had stayed at the resort at least once. The sampling technique employed was *probability sampling* using the *simple random sampling* method, and data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via Google Form. The data were analyzed using *path analysis* with the assistance of *SmartPLS 4.0* software. The results show that brand experience and E-WOM have a positive and significant effect on brand love. In addition, brand experience has a positive and significant effect on brand loyalty, while E-WOM does not have a significant direct effect on brand loyalty.

Furthermore, brand love has a positive and significant effect on brand loyalty and partially mediates the relationship between brand experience and E-WOM on brand loyalty. The findings of this study emphasize that positive brand experiences are able to build strong emotional bonds with customers, thereby encouraging the formation of customer loyalty. Meanwhile, E-WOM plays an important role in building brand love, but does not directly influence brand loyalty. Therefore, the results of this study are expected to serve as a reference for hospitality marketing practitioners in designing marketing strategies that focus on creating memorable brand experiences, strengthening emotional connections with customers, and building long-term customer loyalty.

Keywords: Brand Experience; Electronic word of mouth (E-WOM); Brand Love; Brand Loyalty

1. Introduction

The tourism industry plays a vital role in Bali's economy and the lives of its people. Sri Phala Resort & Villa, one of the resort accommodation companies in Bali, is located at Jl. Bypass Ngurah Rai No. 35, Sanur Kaja, South Denpasar, Denpasar City, Bali 80227. The resort is approximately 550 meters from Sanur Beach and approximately 450 meters from the harbor, providing easy access to tourist attractions and sea transportation. Sri Phala Resort & Villa features two swimming pools and a total of 41 rooms with classic Balinese interiors that highlight local cultural and aesthetic elements. It has been in operation for 23 years since its establishment in 2003.

Although Sri Phala Resort & Villa has been operating for over two decades and boasts a strategic location, customer loyalty remains a crucial issue, as loyalty is not automatically formed based solely on physical presence and operational history (Rahmiati et al., 2024). Increased competition and market expectations make loyalty a source of competitive advantage, as loyal guests tend to return to familiar services rather than switch to competitors. They also act as advocates, promoting the resort organically (Hartanto et al., 2025).

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Current issues at Sri Phala Resort & Villa were identified based on internal company data regarding customer retention, namely, low levels of customer loyalty, characterized by repeat visits and a reliance on new guest acquisition. This situation is of concern to management because, despite the resort's long-term operation and strong cultural character, customer loyalty levels have not shown the desired stability. This low level of customer loyalty indicates that customer experiences and relationships with the brand are not yet fully capable of fostering long-term commitment. Therefore, further investigation into the factors influencing customer loyalty at Sri Phala Resort & Villa is warranted.

Tabel 1 Data *Customer Retention* di Sri Phala Resort & Villa

Year	Number of Reservations	Number of Reservations by Customers Who Came More Than Once	Percentage of Reservations by Customers Who Came More Than Once
2023	3573	1183	33%
2024	4312	979	23%
2025	4432	898	20%

Source: Processed data (2025)

Table 1 shows a decline in the percentage of reservations by customers who visited more than once in a row, indicating a customer loyalty issue at Sri Phala Resort & Villa. This condition indicates that the increase in the number of visits has not been accompanied by the resort's ability to retain repeat customers. Management stated that this increase in visits was largely influenced by reservations from online travel agents (OTAs) and digital promotions reaching new markets.

Customer loyalty in the hospitality industry is influenced by the holistic experience experienced by guests, including the quality of interactions and the emotional value gained during their stay (Rather & Hollebeek, 2023). Therefore, brand strengthening is a crucial strategy in building loyalty, as a strong brand can create differentiation, increase trust, and strengthen lasting emotional bonds in the minds of guests (Iglesias et al., 2023).

Customer loyalty to a brand can be conceptualized as brand loyalty, which is the tendency of customers to consistently choose, use, and recommend a brand over the long term (Rather et al., 2022). Research by Khairullah et al. (2025) suggests that a positive brand experience can create emotional engagement and customer trust, ultimately strengthening long-term commitment to the brand. According to Sari et al. (2025), a consistent and meaningful brand experience not only enhances perceived quality but also strengthens the psychological connection between consumers and the brand, thus encouraging repeat purchases and brand advocacy.

The brand experience at Sri Phala Resort & Villa is built from the initial stages of customer interaction through various digital channels such as the resort's official website, social media, and Online Travel Agent (OTA) e-commerce channels. The customer's initial interaction with the brand, before directly consuming the service, occurs on the resort's digital channels. Several digital channels commonly used in the accommodation industry provide guest reviews and ratings, which function as a form of electronic word of mouth (E-WOM). E-WOM is informal communication via the internet, both between producers and customers and among customers (Santika et al., 2024).

According to Kesumahati et al. (2025), E-WOM can influence potential new customers and also function to convert non-loyal customers into loyal ones, through a combination of social validation, increased trust, and emotional attachment. E-WOM is explained to strengthen brand loyalty because of its nature, which helps form positive perceptions of the brand and encourages customer engagement, such as revisit intentions and brand advocacy (Hilmy et al., 2025).

Research by Rahmiati et al. (2024) in the hospitality industry also shows that customer experiences serve primarily as an initial trigger, but are not strong enough to generate behavioral loyalty without additional internal processes. Similar results are also demonstrated by several recent studies, which state that the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty is indirect, requiring a mediating mechanism for brand experience to translate into long-term commitment (Iglesias et al., 2024; Tarigan & Yobeanto, 2025).

Similar results were also found for e-WOM, a specific form of brand experience in the pre-consumption stage that plays a role in shaping customers' initial perceptions, expectations, and evaluation frameworks of a brand before the experience occurs (Cheung & Thadani, 2023). Several studies have shown that e-WOM does not always have a direct positive effect on brand loyalty. Recent research by Tarigan & Yobeanto (2025) confirms that e-WOM serves as an initial trigger in the customer journey, but is not strong enough to generate long-term loyalty commitment without the support of other internal mechanisms.

The inconsistency of previous research findings (a research gap) regarding the influence of brand experience, specifically electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), on brand loyalty suggests that the relationship between the two variables is not always straightforward, necessitating additional theoretical explanation (Kim & Thapa, 2023). Several recent studies have shown that brand experiences gained through e-WOM predominantly shape affective responses before influencing loyalty behavior (Rather & Hollebeek, 2023).

According to Rather & Hollebeek (2023), brand love is a strong emotional bond between a customer and a brand that develops through the accumulation of positive experiences and meaningful interactions. Research by Rahmiati et al. (2024) in the hospitality sector also shows that customers with high levels of brand love tend to demonstrate stronger commitment, resistance to competing brands, and a tendency toward sustained loyalty.

According to the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Theory framework, customer behavior, such as brand loyalty, is viewed as a response to environmental or brand stimuli, which then influence their internal state before generating a behavioral response (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974).

The stimulus (S) in this study is represented by brand experience and electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM) received by customers, both through direct interactions with the brand and through information obtained from various digital channels. These stimuli trigger an internal process in the organism (O) in the form of brand love, which is reflected in customers' emotional and affective attachment to the brand, including feelings of pleasure, satisfaction, and psychological connectedness with the accommodation brand. This affective process then drives the response (R) in the form of brand loyalty, manifested through repeat visits, recommendations to others, and brand advocacy. SOR Theory provides a comprehensive conceptual framework to explain how brand experience and exposure to E-WOM shape customers' emotional bonds, which ultimately play a role in fostering long-term loyalty to the accommodation brand.

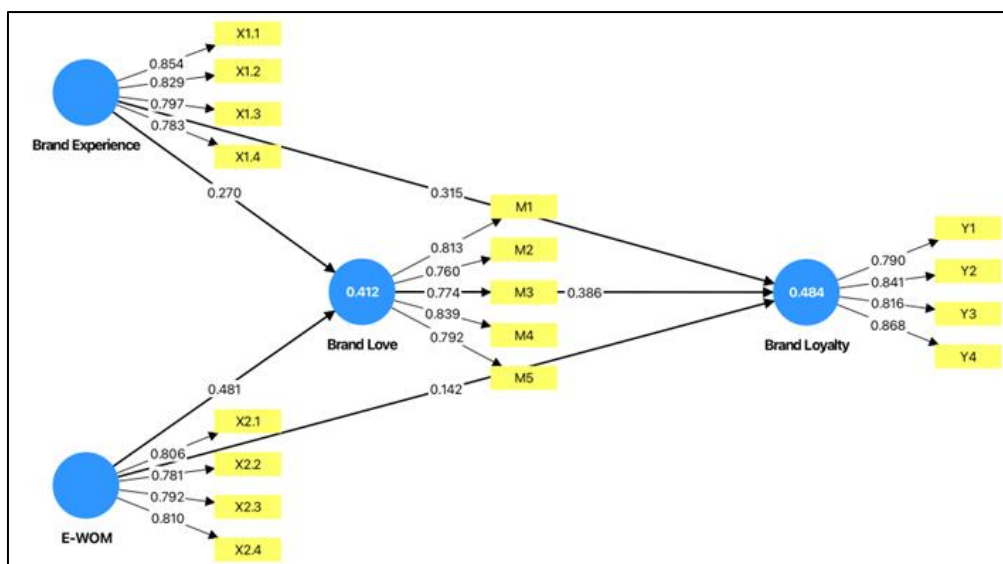
Based on the results of previous research, the following hypotheses are formulated: H1: Brand experience has a positive effect on brand loyalty, H2: E-WOM does not affect brand loyalty, H3: Brand love has a positive effect on brand loyalty, H4: Brand experience has a positive and significant effect on brand love, H5: E-WOM has a positive effect on brand love, H6: Brand love can mediate the effect of brand experience on brand loyalty, H7: Brand love can mediate the effect of E-WOM on brand loyalty.

2. Research methods

The research design used in this study is an associative quantitative approach. The study was conducted at Sri Phala Resort & Villa, a company engaged in the resort accommodation sector. Sri Phala Resort & Villa is located at Jl. Bypass Ngurah Rai No. 35, Sanur Kaja, South Denpasar, Denpasar City, Bali Province. In this study, the independent variables are brand experience and E-WOM (X). In this study, the dependent variable is brand loyalty (Y). In this study, the mediating variable is brand love (M). The population of this study is all customers who have stayed at Sri Phala Resort & Villa at least once from October to December 2025. Based on these population characteristics, the research population in this case is determined to be 397 customers. Based on the Slovin Formula, the number of samples obtained is 199.3, which is then rounded to 200 respondents because the sample cannot be a decimal. The sampling technique used in this study uses probability sampling. The method used to collect data in this study is the survey method. This study uses Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach.

3. Result and discussion

Outer model evaluation (also called measurement model evaluation) is used to assess the model's validity and reliability. Indicator criteria are measured using convergent validity, discriminant validity, and the root mean variance extracted (AVE), while reliability is measured using composite reliability. The following is a diagram of the outer model evaluation:



Source: Processed data (2025)

Figure 1 PLS Algorithm

In this study, the results are valid, meaning that the reflective indicators have a good correlation with the scores of the latent variables. Convergent validity testing was also conducted by examining the average variance extracted (AVE) value for each latent variable. All cross-loading values for each indicator on each variable were greater than 0.50. Thus, it can be stated that the data in the study are valid, meaning that the latent variables have become good comparators for the research model. Based on the reliability test using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, the parameter values for all constructs are above 0.7. Thus, the results of the reliability test using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability for all constructs have good internal consistency for use in testing this model.

Table 2 R-Square Value Results

	R-Square	R-Square Adjusted
Brand Love (M)	0.412	0.406
Brand Loyalty (Y)	0.484	0.476

Source: Processed data, 2025,

The R-Square (R^2) value for the brand love variable is 0.412, which means that 41.2 percent of the variation in the brand love variable can be explained by the brand experience and E-WOM variables. In comparison, the remaining 58.8 percent is influenced by other constructs outside the research model. Furthermore, the R-Square (R^2) value for the brand loyalty variable is 0.484, which means that 48.4 percent of the variation in the brand loyalty variable can be explained by the brand experience, E-WOM, and brand love variables. In comparison, the remaining 51.6 percent is influenced by other constructs not included in the research model. The Q-square value obtained in this study is 0.697 or 69.7 percent. It can be concluded that the model in this study has a relevant predictive value because it can explain the information in this study.

Brand experience and e-WOM influence brand loyalty to Sri Phala Resort & Villa. The stronger the brand experience perceived by customers, the higher their brand loyalty to Sri Phala Resort & Villa. This finding aligns with the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Theory. Similar results were found by Sutomo et al. (2024) and Dewi & Purnami (2024), who examined the influence of brand experience on brand loyalty in the food and beverage industry.

Brand experience has also been shown to influence brand love, indicating that a positive brand experience can increase customers' emotional attachment to the brand. Meanwhile, e-WOM has been shown to influence brand love, indicating that information and reviews circulated electronically can increase customers' emotional attachment to the brand. The findings of a study by Christiarini et al. (2025), which examined electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), align with this research.

Table 2 Hypothesis Testing Results

	<i>Original Sample (O)</i>	<i>Sample Mean (M)</i>	<i>Standard Deviation (STDEV)</i>	<i>T statistics (O/STDEV)</i>	<i>P values</i>	<i>Information</i>
Direct effect						
<i>Brand Experience (X1) -> Brand Loyalty (Y)</i>	0.315	0.315	0.052	6.002	0.000	Significant
<i>Brand Experience (X1) -> Brand Love (M)</i>	0.270	0.271	0.063	4.272	0.000	Significant
<i>E-WOM (X2) -> Brand Loyalty (Y)</i>	0.142	0.144	0.074	1.921	0.055	Not Significant
<i>E-WOM (X2) -> Brand Love (M)</i>	0.481	0.483	0.062	7.762	0.000	Significant
<i>Brand Love (M) -> Brand Loyalty (Y)</i>	0.386	0.385	0.069	5.629	0.000	Significant
Indirect Effects						
<i>Brand Experience -> Brand Love -> Brand Loyalty</i>	0.104	0.105	0.031	3.339	0.001	Significant
<i>E-WOM -> Brand Love -> Brand Loyalty</i>	0.186	0.186	0.042	4.439	0.000	Significant

Source: Processed data, 2025,

However, e-WOM did not significantly influence brand loyalty, indicating that information or reviews circulated electronically do not directly influence customer loyalty to Sri Phala Resort & Villa. Brand love has been shown to influence brand loyalty, indicating that the greater a customer's love for a brand, the greater their loyalty to that brand. This study's findings reinforce previous research. Research by Kamaluddin et al. (2025) and Rahayu & Ruswanti (2024) demonstrated that a strong emotional bond between consumers and a brand can foster long-term commitment, leading customers in the retail sector to demonstrate loyal behaviors such as repeat purchases and resistance to competing brands.

Brand love has been shown to mediate the influence of brand experience and e-WOM on brand loyalty. This indicates that increased brand loyalty is not only directly influenced by brand experience but is also strengthened through the brand love customers feel for Sri Phala Resort & Villa. This finding aligns with the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Theory. These results align with those of Fitriana & Tuti (2025). Similar results were reported by Wijaya & Putra (2024). This research demonstrates that a superior brand experience in the food and beverage sector can strengthen consumers' emotional connections and increase sustained brand loyalty.

The results of this study indicate that the paths from brand experience (X1) → brand love (M) and brand love (M) → brand loyalty (Y) are positive, and the path from brand experience (X1) → brand loyalty (Y) is also positive and significant. Therefore, it can be concluded that brand love can mediate the effect of brand experience on brand loyalty through complementary partial mediation. This finding aligns with the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Theory proposed by Mehrabian & Russell (1974), where brand experience acts as a stimulus received by customers through various interactions with the brand, such as service, environmental atmosphere, and facility quality.

However, the E-WOM path (X2) → brand loyalty (Y) showed insignificant results, although the E-WOM path (X2) → brand love (M) and brand love (M) → brand loyalty (Y) showed a positive influence. In addition, the indirect effect of E-WOM on brand loyalty through brand love also shows significant results with a path coefficient value of 0.186 and a p-value of 0.000. Therefore, it can be concluded that brand love is able to mediate the effect of E-WOM on brand loyalty through full mediation (indirect-only / full mediation). Based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Theory, information received by consumers through E-WOM acts as a stimulus that is processed cognitively and affectively before producing a behavioral response (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974).

4. Conclusion and suggestion

Based on the analysis and discussion in the previous chapter, several key research findings can be concluded as follows: Brand experience has a positive effect on brand loyalty. Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) does not affect brand loyalty. Brand love has a positive effect on brand loyalty. Brand experience has a positive effect on brand love. Memorable and

meaningful brand experiences can build customers' emotional attachment to Sri Phala Resort & Villa. Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) has a positive effect on brand love. Brand love mediates the effect of brand experience on brand loyalty. Brand love also mediates the effect of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) on brand loyalty.

Management is advised to strengthen strategies to increase customer loyalty, including through retention programs specifically targeting first-time customers, strengthening strategies to enhance brand experience, strengthening digital communication strategies by encouraging guests to provide positive reviews and share their experiences through social media, email, or review channels, while responding responsively to feedback to build a stronger online reputation, and strengthening strategies to build emotional connections. Recommendations for further research include developing the research model by adding other relevant variables.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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