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Unravelling the dynamics of behavioral loyalty: A model for domestic tourists exploring Terengganu

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ABSTRACT

This study examines a model for domestic tourists exploring Terengganu. The Terengganu Tourism Department is tasked with increasing tourist numbers, enhancing their expenditures through heightened allure and superior services, creating an indelible experiential milieu, and establishing Terengganu as a prominent destination. However, recent statistics depict Terengganu as experiencing a diminutive influx of domestic tourists and corresponding tourism receipts compared to other states. In 2018, Terengganu ranked ninth in domestic tourist visitations and associated receipts. Hence, this study aims to ascertain the determinants influencing behavioral loyalty among domestic tourists towards Kuala Terengganu. Data collection transpired through an online questionnaire deployed via Google Forms, synchronized with the global advent of COVID-19, which precipitated ramifications across nations. Respondents included domestic tourists visiting Kuala Terengganu. Data analysis involved 201 respondents, using structural equation modeling. The empirical findings describe that the attractiveness of the destination substantiates a discernible impact on tourist satisfaction. Furthermore, the outcomes highlight that tourist satisfaction exerts a noteworthy influence on eWord-of-mouth (eWOM) and behavioral loyalty. The findings indicate that tourist satisfaction comprehensively mediates the relationship between destination attractiveness and both eWOM and behavioral loyalty. It asserts that Kuala Terengganu's distinctiveness from competing Malaysian destinations is facilitated by destination attractiveness, involving recreational amenities, leisure facilities, infrastructural attributes, and overall appeal. Consequently, proficient promotional strategies can be devised by Tourism Terengganu, accentuating the advantageous and captivating features of Kuala Terengganu's attractions. These aspects are strategically tailored to resonate with the cognitive and emotional assessments of domestic tourists, instigating a proclivity to recurrently choose Kuala Terengganu as their preferred travel destination.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the literature in the tourism destination discipline and tourist behaviour, where the model for the present study proved that the effectiveness of the constructs, namely

destination attractiveness, tourist satisfaction, and eWord-of-mouth, has contributed to the behavioural loyalty of the tourist, especially in Kuala Terengganu.

1. INTRODUCTION

The contribution of domestic tourists has had a significant impact on the survival of tourism industries in numerous nations. Despite Malaysia's primary orientation towards attracting international visitors, an annual increase of approximately 15% in domestic tourism revenue is recognized by the Malaysian Tourism Ministry, previously known as the Malaysian Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Tourism (MOCAT). Tourism Malaysia (2018) actively promotes the significant economic benefits of domestic travel through a number of channels, including travel fairs, travel marts, and strategic partnerships. Furthermore, the establishment of compelling and informative websites by the majority of tourism destinations is proactively pursued to engender interest among tourists, recognizing the predilection of prospective travelers to seek information online prior to embarking on a journey to a specific destination (Nasir, Mohamad, & Ghani, 2021). Given the role of Tourism Malaysia as a promotional entity dedicated to fostering the expansion of domestic tourism (Tourism Malaysia, 2018) the imperative lies in discerning the requisites of domestic tourists for the development of targeted and pertinent destination promotions.

As per the 2019 report by the Department of Statistics Malaysia, a significant growth of 7.7% was observed in the year 2018, resulting in a total of 221.3 million domestic visitors. This signifies an upsurge in tourism trips within the country by domestic visitors, reaching a total of 302.4 million. The expenditure by domestic tourists experienced a noteworthy double-digit increase of 11.4% in 2018, exceeding the previous year's growth rate of 11.1%. The commendable performance of domestic tourism has prompted each state in Malaysia to implement diverse initiatives aimed at showcasing their unique tourism offerings and attracting a greater influx of domestic visitors, thereby stimulating the local economies of their respective regions.

Located on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia, Terengganu possesses a rich traditional cultural heritage with a historical timeline spanning millennia. The tourism products of the state emphasize the Malay traditional lifestyle and cultural distinctiveness, eliciting appeal from both local and international tourist interests. Various measures have been instituted by the Terengganu state government to ensure sustained demand for these offerings. Consisting of seven distinct districts, each marked by its individual strengths in heritage, culture, and the natural environment, Terengganu foresees the emergence of the tourism industry as a significant contributor to the state's gross domestic product. This positioning is projected to make it the second most critical economic sector after the petroleum and gas industry, as forecasted by Terengganu State Economic Planning (2008).

The Terengganu Tourism Department has set a goal of attracting 6.5 million tourists by 2025, bringing in an estimated total of Ringgit Malaysia (RM) 6 billion in tourist receipts, acknowledging the significant impact of the tourism industry on economic growth and employment. Achievement of this objective necessitates a focus on attracting domestic tourists while concurrently ensuring the satisfaction of existing visitors. The cultivation of favorable word-of-mouth and the fostering of behavioral loyalty towards Terengganu are anticipated outcomes through the prioritization of their needs and the orchestration of positive experiences. Regrettably, a lower ranking for Terengganu in terms of domestic tourist numbers and tourism receipts compared to other states was revealed in a 2019 report by the Department of Statistics Malaysia. The top five states in 2018 were Selangor, Sabah, Sarawak, W.P. Kuala Lumpur, and Pahang, relegating Terengganu to the ninth position in both categories, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

Number of domestic visitor arrivals by State, 2018
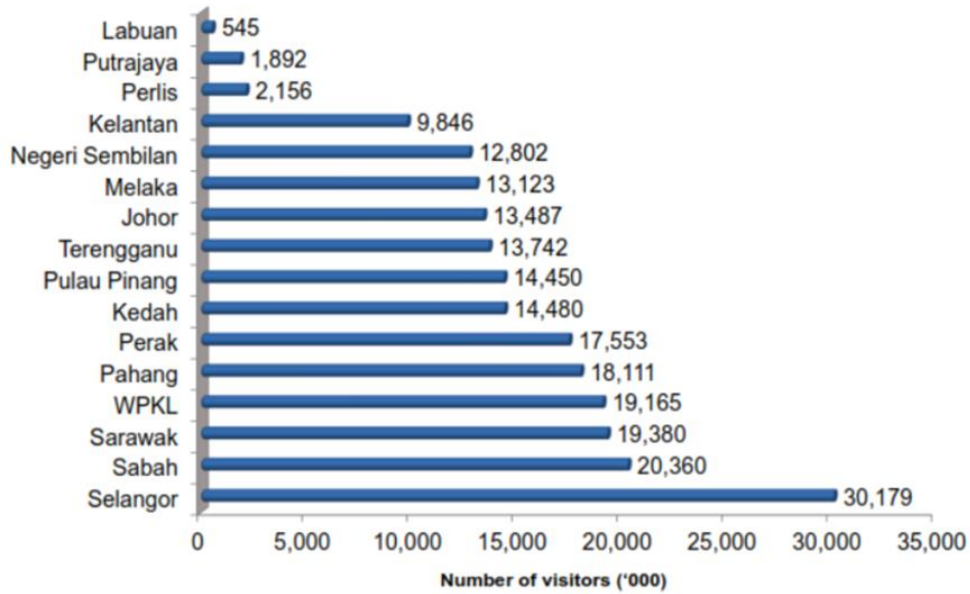
Figure 1. The number of domestic tourist arrivals by State in 2018.

Source: Department of Statistic Malaysia (2019).
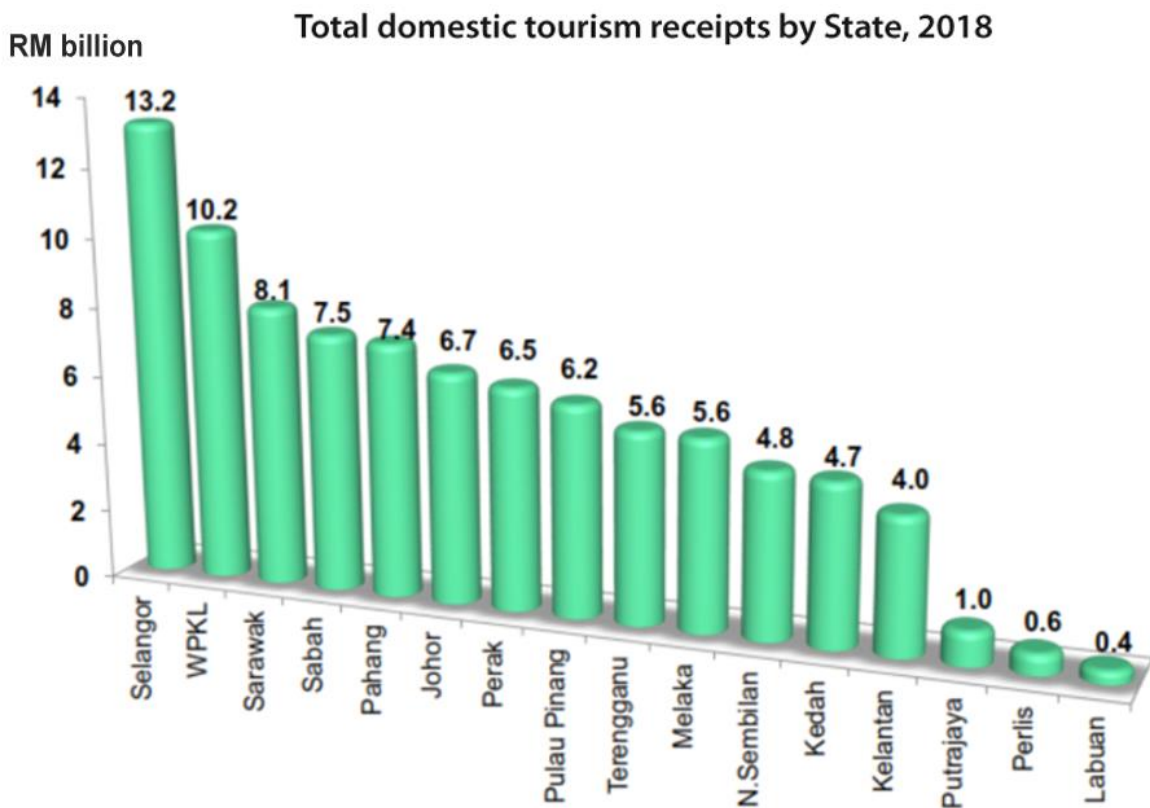
Figure 2. The total domestic tourism receipts by State in 2018.

Source: Department of Statistic Malaysia (2019).

Given these challenges, the imperative arises to conduct a study on behavioral loyalty and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). While the influence of word-of-mouth (WOM) has been thoroughly explored in marketing, its application in tourism research remains relatively constrained, despite its significant impact on destination selection. Recently, heightened research attention has been directed toward electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM),

particularly in the context of online travel, eWOM incorporates diverse forms such as online travel reviews, travel blogs, and travel information searches. It has emerged as a potent instrument for reaching expansive markets through internet marketing, presenting novel opportunities for capturing, analyzing, interpreting, and managing the impact of marketing communications within the hospitality and tourism industry.

An essential role is assumed by customer loyalty in the decision-making process, influencing whether a destination is revisited by a loyal customer or an alternative is chosen, thereby impacting the profitability of a business. Traditionally, emphasis was placed by marketing managers on attracting new customers through marketing investments (Su, Cheng, & Huang, 2011). However, in the contemporary industry, the recognition of the importance of retaining existing tourists has gained prominence as a more cost-effective approach compared to acquiring new ones. The significance of cultivating loyal relationships with customers, particularly in a mature market characterized by increased competition and budgetary constraints, is highlighted by Su et al. (2011). Furthermore, advocacy for destination managers to identify the factors influencing tourist loyalty and address them to enhance the attractiveness of the destination is provided by Chen and Gursoy (2001). Therefore, it becomes imperative for the Terengganu Tourism Department to focus on comprehending the determinants of behavioral loyalty to increase the proportion of repeat visitors to Terengganu, specifically Kuala Terengganu, compared to previous years and to augment the number of domestic tourist arrivals.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Destination Attractiveness

As outlined by Hu and Ritchie (1993) the concept of destination attractiveness is centered on the sentiments, beliefs, and opinions held by individuals concerning a destination's perceived ability to meet their specific vacation requirements and offer satisfaction. A close interconnection between destination attractiveness and destination image is asserted by Damir Krešić and Prebežac (2011) with destination image significantly influencing the degree of destination attractiveness and vice versa. Conversely, the assertion by Ariya, Wishitemi, and Sitati (2017) suggests that discussions on destination attractiveness often focus on the distinctive features or attributes of a particular destination. Thus, it can be inferred that destination attractiveness and destination image are intricately linked, with destination features playing a pivotal role in shaping the perception of a destination's allure.

The geographical dimension of destination attractiveness, as defined by Buhalis (2000) involves places or geographic regions that provide a combination of tourism products and services within specific physical and administrative boundaries, thereby influencing the management and market competitiveness of the destination. This aspect incorporates all locally accessible facilities, services, sociocultural and environmental resources, as well as public goods (Buhalis, 2000). Building upon this concept, Krešić (2008) characterizes attractiveness as the aggregation of attributes possessing distinctive characteristics that entice or motivate tourists to visit a specific tourism destination. Similarly, Cho (2008) asserts that attractiveness represents an amalgamated indicator of attributes that render a specific location appealing as a potential destination for travelers. Consequently, destination attractiveness can be construed as the amalgamation of various distinctive features that generate interest and appeal to prospective visitors.

The term "tourism destination attractiveness" in this study refers to the qualities of a destination that meet the needs and objectives of tourists. This perspective is shaped by the recognition of a gap in existing literature regarding the identification of industry-specific attributes that significantly influence individuals' preferences for particular tourist activities and their selection of one destination over another (Tam, 2012). The impact of destination attractiveness on destination loyalty has been well-established in previous research, with studies demonstrating its influence on variables such as perceived value, satisfaction, intention to return, and willingness to recommend the destination (Akroush, Jraisat, Kurdieh, AL-Faouri, & Qatu, 2016; Liu, Wang, Huang, & Chen, 2017; Xu & Zhang, 2016). Mahasuweerachai and Qu (2011) have argued that destination attractiveness holds considerable

sway over both satisfaction and loyalty. Additionally, the positive relationships between destination attractiveness and satisfaction, as affirmed by Chen and Tsai (2007) further reinforce the pivotal role played by destination attributes in shaping tourist satisfaction, loyalty, and the overall selection of a destination.

H₁: A significantly higher level of destination attractiveness will result in a significantly higher level of tourist satisfaction.

H₂: A significantly higher level of destination attractiveness will lead to a significantly higher level of positive eWOM.

H₃: A significantly higher level of destination attractiveness will result in a significantly higher level of behavioral loyalty.

2.2. Tourist Satisfaction

Regarded as a crucial factor in maintaining a competitive advantage within the tourism sector (Meng, Tepanon, & Uysal, 2008), the exploration of customer satisfaction has been a prominent focus in tourism research over an extended period (Rajesh, 2013). The assurance of tourist satisfaction holds significant importance for promoting repeated visits to a destination and fostering its economic growth (Nasir, Mohamad, Ghani, & Afthanorhan, 2020). Destination managers are confronted with the challenge of prioritizing customer satisfaction while simultaneously seeking to attract an increased number of tourists to their respective destinations (Meleddu, Paci, & Pulina, 2015). Additionally, Meng, Liang, and Yang (2011) assert that studies in customer behavior suggest that customers with moderate satisfaction levels are prone to shifting to more superior offers. As highlighted by Pizam and Ellis (1999), the universal experience of satisfaction is absent; individual satisfaction levels are shaped by unique needs, objectives, and past experiences. Hence, the acknowledgment and consideration of diverse customer expectations emerge as essential for attaining satisfaction within the tourism industry.

In the field of research on tourism destinations, Som and Badarneh (2011) suggest that satisfaction can be characterized as the fulfillment of expectations, perceived worthiness of visitation, and comparison with other destinations. Researchers have ascribed satisfaction to either an emotional state, cognitive processes, or a combination of both (Som & Badarneh, 2011). Emphasizing the importance of understanding the causal relationship between tourist satisfaction and loyalty, Seebaluck, Ramseook-Munhurrun, Naidoo, and Rughoonauth (2015) assert that this comprehension enables destination managers to develop an appealing destination and enhance marketing efforts for optimal resource utilization. Furthermore, multiple studies Chi and Qu (2008), Dmitrović et al. (2009), Kim, Holland, and Han (2013), Lee, Yoon, and Lee (2007a), Mohamad, Ali, and Ab Ghani (2011), Wang, Zhang, Gu, and Zhen (2009) and Yoon and Uysal (2005) have validated satisfaction as a reliable predictor of customers' intentions to revisit a destination and recommend it to others.

H₄. A significantly higher level of tourist satisfaction will result in a significantly higher level of positive eWOM.

H₅. A significantly higher level of tourist satisfaction will lead to a significantly higher level of behavioral loyalty.

H₆. The relationship between destination attractiveness and eWOM is mediated by tourist satisfaction.

H₇. The relationship between destination attractiveness and behavioral loyalty is mediated by tourist satisfaction.

2.3. eWord-of-Mouth (eWOM)

Word-of-mouth (WOM) assumes a pivotal role in the marketing strategies of businesses, functioning essentially as unpaid advertising. For several decades, academics have extensively studied this phenomenon. Arndt (1967) defined WOM as non-commercial communication between individuals concerning products, services, or companies, and Westbrook (1987) characterized it as informal consumer conversations wherein individuals share their opinions about products or services post-experience. Customers have the freedom to express either positive or negative reviews based on their own experiences because WOM is personal. Positive WOM can significantly benefit a business by fostering growth in its market segment, while negative WOM can be detrimental. Consequently, consumers often seek out individuals with greater knowledge about specific products or services, termed opinion leaders, as their WOM can profoundly influence or alter the purchasing behavior of other customers (Muzamil, Qadeer, Makhija, & Jahanzeb, 2018).

Advancements in technology have facilitated the proliferation of word-of-mouth (WOM) through electronic devices via the Internet, giving rise to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). The widespread availability of eWOM can be attributed to the increasing number of consumers turning to the Internet to seek information about products or companies (Jeong & Jang, 2011). In the contemporary landscape, customers possess the ability to articulate their thoughts, opinions, and experiences regarding products and services through various online channels, including direct communication with organizations or by sharing their views on blogs and social media platforms (Schindler & Bickart, 2005). Customers have found eWOM to be advantageous, offering alternative channels for acquiring information about products and services from their peers.

Numerous factors can affect a traveler's choice of destination, but it is still difficult for marketers to predict traveler behavior using single models (Shen, Wang, Sun, & Xiang, 2013). However, the sharing of experiences among tourists through blogs and social media channels can serve as a motivational factor for them to visit specific tourist attractions. Additionally, tourists tend to place trust in the information shared online by their peers who have previously visited these places (Luo & Zhong, 2015). In summary, positive word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) play a crucial role in enhancing customers' intentions to make a purchase, building a favorable image for a company and its brand, and reducing promotional expenses. As a result, the focus of this research is directed towards evaluating tourists' motivations to disseminate positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), contingent upon their perceptions of the attractiveness and satisfaction associated with Kuala Terengganu as their selected holiday destination.

2.4. Behavioural Loyalty

In tourism research, the measurement of behavioral loyalty often involves tangible actions, such as the frequency of visits or repeat visitation (Chen & Gursoy, 2001; Zhang, Fu, Cai, & Lu, 2014). Nevertheless, Chen and Gursoy (2001) contend that merely equating behavioral loyalty with repeat visitation may overlook cases where tourists exhibit loyalty to a destination without revisiting, opting to explore new destinations. Aligning with this viewpoint, Zhang et al. (2014) emphasize the utilization of 'repurchase intention' as a metric for behavioral loyalty, asserting that intention and action represent sequential behavioral stages, with intention serving as a reliable predictor of behavior. Consequently, Zhang et al. (2014) categorize visit intention and revisit intention as integral components of behavioral loyalty. Additionally, Jacoby and Kyner (1973) previously defined behavioral loyalty as the concrete actions of tourists, including patronage or the expressed intention to revisit a destination.

2.5. Research Framework

The research framework of the current study is grounded in Oliver (1999) Four-Stage Loyalty Theory. According to this theory, customer loyalty evolves through four consecutive stages: cognitive loyalty, affective loyalty, conative loyalty, and action loyalty. In this study, cognitive loyalty is reflected as destination attractiveness, affective loyalty as tourist satisfaction, and conative loyalty as eWOM and behavioral loyalty. The theory suggests that when tourists are content with the destination's attractiveness, it can influence both eWOM and behavioral loyalty. Figure 3 shows the proposed theoretical framework for this study. It includes a number of variables that can be thought of as independent like (destination attractiveness and tourist satisfaction), mediating (tourist satisfaction), and dependent (eWOM and behavioral loyalty).
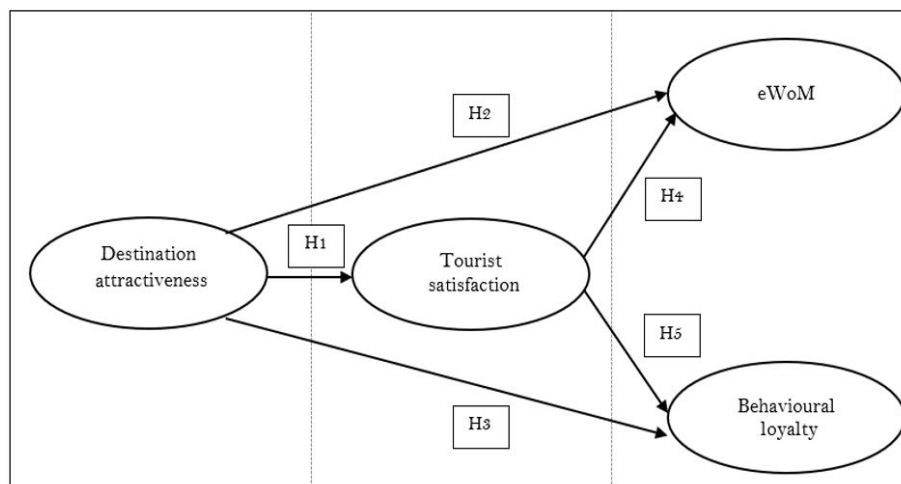
Figure 3. Research model.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research design, focusing on the analysis of individual-level data. The target population comprised domestic tourists visiting Kuala Terengganu, as defined by the criteria in the Kabote, Mamimine, and Muranda (2017). Domestic tourists, regardless of nationality, were individuals residing in Malaysia, traveling a minimum of 40 kilometres away (one way) from their usual residence, and staying for at least one night or less than one night for purposes other than engaging in a paid activity at the destination. Respondents were selected for the study using a non-probability purposive sampling method, with the inclusion criterion being prior experience in visiting Kuala Terengganu.

3.2. The Questionnaire Design

Data collection utilized a closed-ended structured questionnaire, where all items measuring constructs were devised on a 10-point interval scale, spanning from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). The adoption of a 10-point scale, following recommendation from Awang (2015) was considered suitable due to its heightened independence and alignment with the requirements for parametric analysis. The questionnaire, organized into five sections, featured 41 items in the first section to gauge destination attractiveness, adapted from the work of Islam, Hossain, and Noor (2017). The second section concentrated on tourist satisfaction, encompassing eight items adapted from Kim et al. (2013) and Lee, Petrick, and Crompton (2007b). The third section, which evaluated eWOM, consists of six items adapted from Sun, Chi, and Xu (2013) and Mohamad et al. (2011). Behavioral loyalty was measured in the fourth section using 27 items adapted from Moutinho, Albayrak, and Caber (2012). The final section collected demographic information and specifics regarding respondents' trips to Kuala Terengganu.

3.3. Pre Test and Pilot Test

Ensuring the clarity and comprehension of the questionnaire is imperative, necessitating the execution of a pre-test for the instruments to identify potential issues in wording (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). The pre-testing phase entails administering a trial version of the questionnaire to a limited number of actual respondents (Zikmund & Babin, 2010). This procedure facilitates feedback collection and allows for refinements to the questionnaire before advancing to the main study. Subsequently, a pilot test was undertaken, and data from the pilot study involving 90 respondents underwent reliability analysis and exploratory factor analysis prior to the commencement of the actual survey. Reliability is a statistical measure used to assess the research instruments' consistency and the absence of bias or random error (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). It evaluates the degree of consistency between multiple measurements of a variable (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2014). In this study, the internal reliability of

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constructs such as destination attractiveness, tourist satisfaction, eWOM, and behavioral loyalty were tested. To assess internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha was utilized, as it is widely recognized and used to measure reliability. Table 1 illustrates that the instruments of this study meet the requirement for internal consistency since the Cronbach's Alpha values of all constructs are greater than the required value of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2014).

Table 1. Reliability statistic of destination image, tourist satisfaction, eWOM and destination loyalty.

Variables	Cronbach's alpha
Destination attractiveness	0.976
Tourist satisfaction	0.916
eword-of-mouth (eWOM)	0.959
Behavioral loyalty	0.914

3.4. Field Study

The study involved the participation of 201 respondents who completed an online survey using Google Forms, software employed for survey administration and data collection. Several factors influenced the decision to distribute questionnaires via an online channel: 1) nearly ninety percent of people actively use the internet, facilitating easy access to target respondents online; and 2) online questionnaire tools offer high flexibility for designing user-friendly questionnaires, thereby reducing respondents' fatigue and potential biases.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedures

Statistical Package for Social Science program (SPSS version 22) and Analysis of Moment Structure (AMOS version 23) were used to do different kinds of statistical analyses on the collected data during the field study. SPSS served the purposes of data editing, screening, and conducting descriptive analyses, while the AMOS software facilitated the examination of both the measurement model and structural model. The validation of the measurement model involved the implementation of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), including evaluations of model fitness, unidimensionality, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Multiple indices were employed to gauge construct validity, comprising absolute fit (RMSEA < 0.08), incremental fit (TLI > 0.90 and CFI > 0.90), and parsimonious fit (Chi-square < 3.0). The unidimensionality of items was ascertained through an evaluation of factor loadings, with values equal to or surpassing 0.6 indicating satisfactory outcomes. Convergent validity was assessed through the average variance extracted (AVE), with a threshold of 0.5 or higher deemed acceptable, and composite reliability (CR), with values meeting or exceeding 0.7 considered satisfactory. Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the square root of AVE with correlation values between constructs, wherein the square root of AVE for each latent construct should exceed the correlation values. Furthermore, to prevent redundancy, the correlation values among constructs should remain below 0.85 (Hair et al., 2014).

Finally, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to examine the relationships between the latent constructs explored in the study. The application of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in modeling travel behavior research dates back to 1980 and has experienced rapid acceleration due to the availability of improved software (Golob, 2003).

4. RESULTS

4.1. Respondent's Profile

The study findings revealed that a notable proportion of domestic tourists visiting Kuala Terengganu originated from Negeri Sembilan (33.3%) and Selangor (32.2%). The marital status of the majority of these tourists was reported as married (92.2%), with a predominance of female participants (63.3%) falling within the age group of 32 to 52 years old and above (52.3%). Moreover, a substantial portion (62.2%) indicated a history of visiting Kuala Terengganu more than five times. Approximately 75 percent of the tourists visited Kuala Terengganu for holiday

purposes. On average, a majority (40.0%) of domestic tourists spent a minimum of three days in Kuala Terengganu, with nearly all (90.0%) allocating expenditures ranging from RM101 to RM1600. Predominantly, their expenses were directed towards food and beverages, as well as local shopping (83.3%). In selecting accommodations in Kuala Terengganu, the majority (51.1%) expressed a preference for hotels over other lodging options.

4.2. Measurement Model

Table 2 presents the fitness indices for the measurement model illustrated in Figure 4. Three fitness indices, namely RMSEA, CFI, and Chi-square/df, were employed in this study. RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error Approximation) stands as a widely used goodness-of-fit statistic in Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), including AMOS (Analysis of Moment Structures). It evaluates the fit of a model to the data and is particularly relevant in confirmatory factor analysis and path analysis. A value between 0.05 and 0.08 suggests that the model's predictions closely align with the observed data, indicating a favorable representation of variable relationships.

CFI (Comparative Fit Index), another prominent goodness-of-fit index in SEM, measures the enhancement in fit of the proposed model relative to a baseline model, typically the independence model, accounting for model complexity. Ranging from 0 to 1, with 1 denoting a perfect fit, higher values indicate improved fit. Generally, a CFI of 0.90 or above is deemed acceptable, while 0.95 or above is considered very well. The Chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (Chi-square/df) assesses the similarity of the proposed model with observed data by comparing differences between the observed and implied covariance matrices. The Chi-square test yields a statistic, 'χ^2', quantifying the misalignment between the model and data. A Chi-square/df ratio between 2 and less than 3 is indicative of a good fit, signifying reasonable concordance between the predicted and observed covariance matrices and a well-represented model of variable relationships (Hair et al., 2014). Consequently, the study fulfilled construct validity criteria, with the measurement model achieving acceptable goodness-of-fit index values (Chi/df < 3.0, CFI > 0.90, and RMSEA < 0.08), as demonstrated in Table 2.
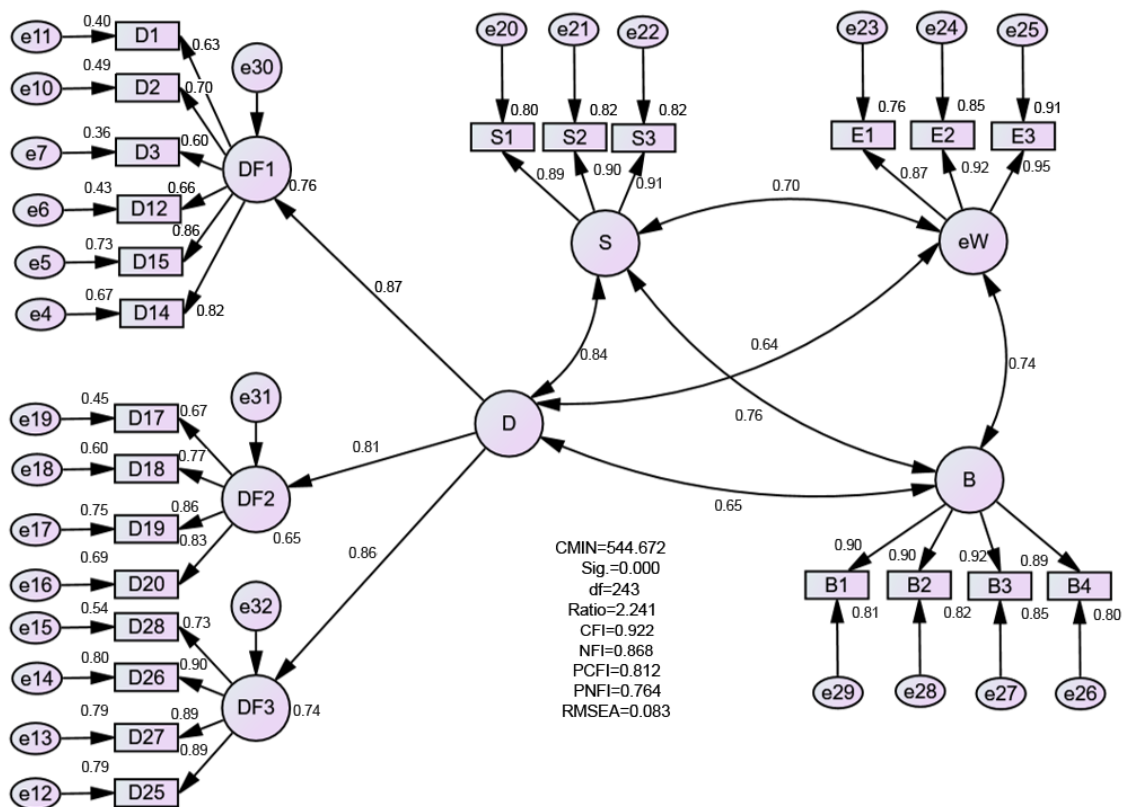

Figure 4. Measurement model.

Table 2. Goodness-of-fit indices.

Index	Level of acceptance	Measurement model final	Remarks
Absolute fit:			
RMSEA	Value between 0.05 and 0.08	0.08	Achieved
Incremental fit:			
CFI	> 0.90	0.92	Achieved
Parsimonious fit:			
Chi-square/df	< 3.00	2.241	Achieved

Table 3 provides an overview of factor loading, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and Composite Reliability (CR) within the measurement model. The strength of the relationship between each measurement items and its corresponding latent construct (factor) is shown by the factor loading. Items with higher factor loadings are better at indicating the underlying construct. Generally, factor loadings exceeding 0.6 are deemed acceptable to ensure the items accurately represent their respective factors (Hair et al., 2014). Average Variance Extracted (AVE) measures the proportion of variance captured by the latent construct relative to the total variance observed in the measurement items. It serves as an indicator of convergent validity, assessing the degree to which items in a construct converge. AVE values exceeding 0.5 are generally considered satisfactory, signifying that the construct elucidates a significant portion of the variance in the observed variables (Hair et al., 2014).

Composite Reliability (CR) checks how consistent and reliable the latent construct is by looking at how items within it are related to each other and how well they are measured. CR values surpassing 0.7 are typically deemed acceptable, suggesting that the items reliably indicate the underlying construct (Hair et al., 2014). The examination of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) presented in Table 3 reaffirms the stringent standards adhered to in this study. The findings indicate that the factor loading of each item surpasses the 0.6 threshold, ensuring the achievement of unidimensionality. Furthermore, the measurement model exhibits robust convergent validity and reliability, with AVE values surpassing 0.5 and CR values surpassing 0.7, respectively.

Table 3. Factor loading, average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR).

Construct/Items	Factor loading	CR (>0.7)	AVE (>0.5)
Behavioural loyalty		0.946	0.815
I will frequently visit Kuala Terengganu (B1)	0.96		
If I need to decide, I will choose Kuala Terengganu again (B2)	0.90		
I would like to revisit Kuala Terengganu in the near future (B3)	0.92		
Kuala Terengganu would be my first choice over other destinations (B4)	0.89		
eWord-of-Mouth (eWOM)		0.938	0.835
I am willing to/ will share positive information about my visit to Kuala Terengganu with others through social media (ex. Facebook and Instagram) (eW1)	0.87		
I am willing to encourage friends and relatives to visit Kuala Terengganu through social media (ex. Facebook and Instagram) (eW2)	0.92		
I am willing to recommend Kuala Terengganu on social media (ex. Facebook and Instagram) (eW3)	0.95		
Tourist satisfaction		0.928	0.810
Kuala Terengganu is one of the best cities I have ever visited	0.89		
My overall experience with Kuala Terengganu was higher than my expectations	0.90		
Visiting Kuala Terengganu is a beautiful experience	0.91		
Destination attractiveness		0.884	0.718
Factor 1: Recreation, leisure and amenities	0.87		
Factor 2: Accessible	0.81		
Factor 3: Allures	0.86		
Factor 1: Recreation, leisure and amenities		0.863	0.516
There are varieties of water sports offered (D1)	0.63		

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Construct/Items	Factor loading	CR (>0.7)	AVE (>0.5)
Variety of festivals as well as special events around the city (D2)	0.70		
Discounted tourism packages offered throughout the year (D12)	0.66		
Sports opportunities can be accessed in the city (D3)	0.60		
Well-decorated and comfortable accommodations in all properties (D15)	0.86		
Good quality of accommodation offered in the city (D14)	0.82		
Factor 2: Accessible		0.865	0.618
The city of Kuala Terengganu is easily accessible (D17)	0.67		
Public transportations are easily available (D18)	0.77		
The transportation services are easily booked (D19)	0.86		
Local travel information is easily available (D20)	0.83		
Factor 3: Allures		0.916	0.732
Islamic tourist attractions [e.g.: The Islamic civilization park (TTI) & Tengku Tengah Zaharah Mosque (Known as Floating Mosque)] (D25)	0.89		
Variety of cultural attractions (ex. China Town, Noor Arfa Craft Complex & Kota Duyong) (D27)	0.89		
Variety of natural attractions (ex. Batu Buruk Beach, Pantai Teluk Ketapang Beach, Tok Jembal Beach & Marang River Estuary) (D26)	0.90		
The iconic Terengganu drawbridge is amazing (D28)	0.73		

Discriminant validity relates to the ability of a latent variable to distinguish itself from other latent variables (Farrell, 2010). This is done by checking the discriminant validity of two constructs next to each other. Two constructs are considered separate if the hypothesis that they together form a single construct is not supported (Jitpaiboon, 2005). In this context, discriminant validity is established when the square root of AVE for all constructs exceeds the correlation value between the respective constructs (Awang, 2015). The correlation between constructs should not surpass 0.85 (Awang, 2015). Table 4 presents the outcomes of the discriminant validity test for the final measurement model. The results demonstrate that all constructs successfully passed this test, with none of the correlations exceeding the corresponding squared AVE values (highlighted in bold).

Table 4. The Discriminant validity index summary.

Construct	Destination attractiveness	Tourist satisfaction	eword-of-mouth	Behavioural loyalty
Destination attractiveness	0.85			
Tourist satisfaction	0.84	0.90		
eword-of-mouth (eWOM)	0.64	0.70	0.91	
Behavioural loyalty	0.65	0.76	0.74	0.90

4.3. Structural Model

We made the structural model in Figure 5 after making sure that the pooled measurement model from the previous section was good enough. It showed good qualities in terms of goodness of fit, unidimensionality, reliability, validity, and normality assessment. In this concluding stage, the transformation of the pooled measurement model into a structural model was accomplished through the utilization of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Within the structural model, the intricate relationships among destination attractiveness, tourist satisfaction, eWOM, and behavioral loyalty are outlined. This study incorporated seven hypotheses, where H1, H2, H3, H4, and H5 were formulated to examine the direct effects between the constructs through path analysis. Simultaneously, H6 and H7 were designed to explore mediation effects, employing the bootstrapping approach.
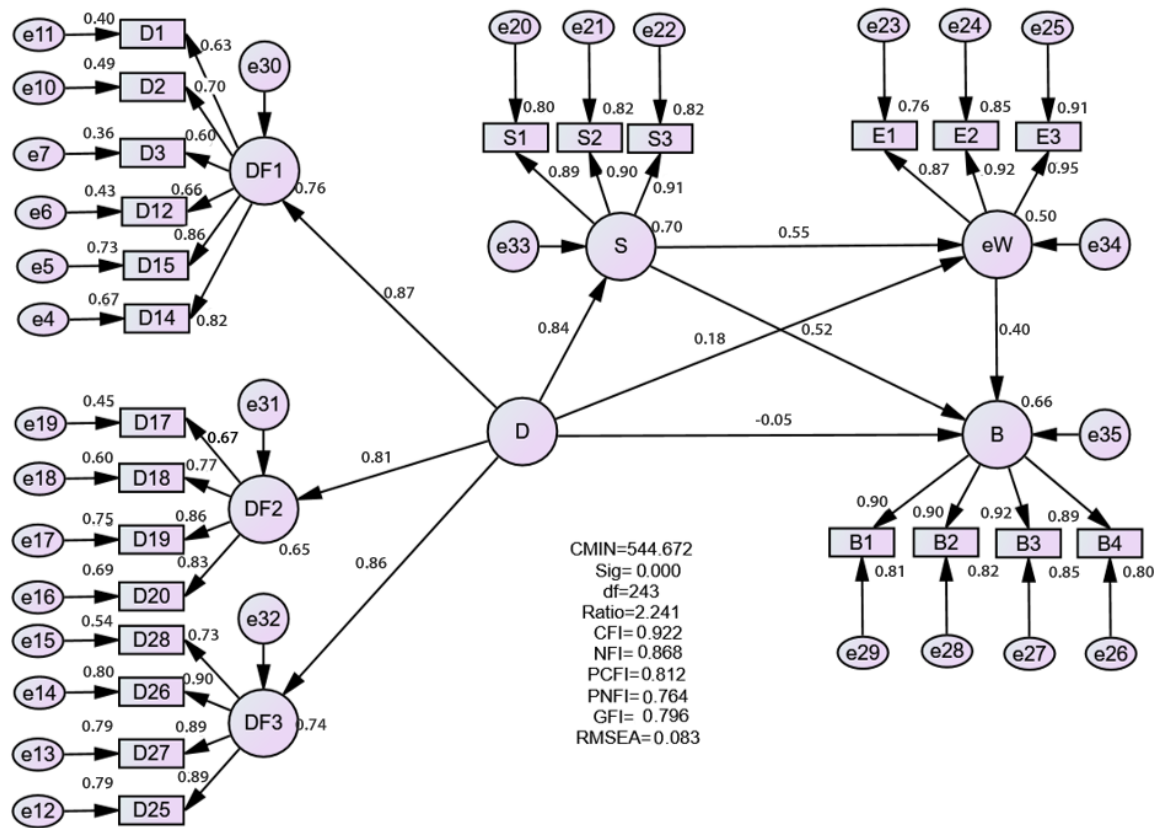
Figure 5. Structural equation model.

The result of testing hypotheses, shown in Table 5, support H1, H4, and H5. However, H2 and H3 do not have enough evidence to support them. Specifically, the initial hypothesis (H1) asserts a positive correlation between destination attractiveness and tourist satisfaction, revealing a significant relationship ($\beta = 0.903$, $Z = 8.729$, $p = 0.000$). Additionally, H4 establishes that tourist satisfaction significantly influences eWOM, with a notable impact ($\beta = 0.416$, $Z = 4.004$, $p = 0.000$). Further results reveal H3 confirming a significant association between tourist satisfaction and behavioral loyalty ($\beta = 0.491$, $Z = 2.738$, $p = 0.006$), while H4 demonstrates that service quality significantly impacts tourist satisfaction ($\beta = 0.301$, $Z = 4.106$, $p = 0.000$). In contrast, H2 and H3 suggest that destination attractiveness does not exert significant effects on eWOM and destination loyalty (H2: $\beta=0.145$, $Z=1.272$, $p=0.203$; H3: $\beta=-0.049$, $Z=-0.401$, $p=0.688$).

Table 5. The path regression analysis.

Structural relationship	Standardised estimate/Beta	S.E.	C.R.	P-value	Hypotheses	Result
D→ S	0.903	0.103	8.729	***	H1	Significant
D → eW	0.145	0.114	1.272	0.203	H2	Not significant
D → B	-0.049	0.123	-0.401	0.688	H3	Not significant
S → eW	0.416	0.104	4.004	***	H4	Significant
S → B	0.491	0.120	4.106	***	H5	Significant

Note: Destination attractiveness (D), Tourist satisfaction (S), eWord-of-mouth (eW), Behavioral loyalty (B).
Significant level: *** p < 0.001.

4.4. Mediation Testing

Mediation analysis, aimed at identifying the type of mediation present in the model (Aimran, Ahmad, & Afthanorhan, 2016), was conducted for two out of the eight hypotheses. These hypotheses propose that tourist satisfaction could be considered a mediator between destination attractiveness, eWOM, and behavioral loyalty. Specifically, the hypotheses examined were:

i.   Destination attractiveness → tourist satisfaction → eWord-of-mouth (H6).

ii.   Destination attractiveness → tourist satisfaction → behavioral loyalty (H7).

Preacher and Hayes (2008) advised using the bootstrapping method to evaluate the mediation effect. In essence, the existence of mediation is indicated when the upper and lower bounds of indirect effects do not straddle a zero, with both bounds being either above or below zero (Nasir et al., 2021). Partial mediation is observed when the p-values of direct and indirect effects are significant. In contrast, full mediation occurs when the p-value of the direct effect is significant while the p-value of the indirect effect is not significant. Table 6 outlines the procedure for analyzing the mediating effect of tourist satisfaction between destination attractiveness and eWOM, as well as destination attractiveness and behavioral loyalty. The table indicates that tourist satisfaction fully mediates the relationship between destination attractiveness, eWOM, and behavioral loyalty, as evidenced by the non-significant p-value of the direct effect and the significant p-value of the indirect effect, aligning with the findings of Mohamad, Mohammad, Mat Ali, and Awang (2018); Awang (2015) and Kenny, Korchmaros, and Bolger (2003).

Table 6. The mediating effects of tourist satisfaction (S) on destination attractiveness eWord-of-Mouth (D → Ew), destination attractiveness-behavioural loyalty (D→B) relationships.

Details	D→eWOM via S (H6)	D→B via S (H7)
Standardized estimates (Indirect effect):	0.463	0.694
Lower bound	0.244	0.504
Upper bound	0.671	0.909
P-value (Indirect effect)	0.007	0.002
Results (Indirect effect)	Mediation occurs because the lower bound and upper bound of indirect effects do not straddle a zero in between.	Mediation occurs because the lower bound and upper bound of indirect effects do not straddle a zero in between.
P-value (Direct effect)	0.249	0.766
Result (Direct effect)	Full mediation because p-value of direct effect is not significant.	Full mediation because p-value of direct effect is not significant.
Conclusion	Tourist satisfaction is fully mediates the relationship between destination attractiveness and eWOM. H2 is supported.	Tourist satisfaction is fully mediates the relationship between destination attractiveness and behavioural loyalty. H3 is supported.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Theoretical Contribution

Theoretically, this tourism study contributes to the existing literature in the fields of tourism destinations and tourist behavior in several significant ways. A noteworthy theoretical implication arising from the findings is the affirmation of the designed theoretical framework. The model in this study is crafted to establish the efficacy of constructs, namely destination attractiveness, tourist satisfaction, and eWOM, in influencing the behavioral loyalty of tourists, particularly in the context of Kuala Terengganu.

Oliver (1999) four-stage loyalty framework has been implemented in this study, serving as the foundational theory and substantiating the development of the current model. The rationale behind selecting this theory lies in its demonstration of the sequential evolution of loyalty, progressing from cognitive to affective, conative, and eventually manifesting as actual behavior. Within this theoretical framework, cognitive evaluations emanate from the beliefs held by customers concerning the destination, including attributes, received value, and the experience of service quality (Kwenye, 2015; Zhang et al., 2014). Consequently, cognition in this study affects the attractiveness of destination. Affective loyalty is tied to emotional responses or sentiments toward the destination, involving attributes (Choi & Cai, 2012; Kwenye, 2015). Hence, affective loyalty signifies the satisfaction of tourists derived from the perceived attractiveness of Kuala Terengganu as a travel destination. Conative loyalty entails a steadfast commitment to make repeat purchases or a plan to travel there again (Oliver, 1999). In this study, conative loyalty

encompasses both eWOM and behavioral loyalty, where positive cognitive functions influence affection, thereby exerting a substantial impact on conation (behavioral intention).

Moreover, the results substantiate that tourist satisfaction fully mediates the relationship between destination attractiveness and eWOM, as well as the relationship between destination attractiveness and behavioral loyalty. While Cohen, Prayag, and Moital (2014) contended that most studies have identified satisfaction as a mediating factor in determining loyalty, there is still limited evidence on the mediating role of satisfaction in the connection between destination attractiveness and behavioral loyalty, particularly in the tourism destination context.

5.2. Managerial Contribution

Several practical insights that could prove beneficial, particularly for the Terengganu tourism authority in devising strategies to enhance behavioral loyalty in Terengganu, are discerned from this study. It suggests that both destination attractiveness and tourist satisfaction constitute pivotal focal points in the formulation of tourism development strategies. Destination attractiveness assumes a pivotal role in determining the success of the tourism industry, wielding substantial influence over the creation of a favorable and acceptable image for potential tourists. The data explained in this study reveals the underlying structures that impact the decisions of domestic tourists when choosing their destination. The destination attractiveness of Kuala Terengganu, as perceived by the domestic tourists participating in the study, is characterized by three principal factors: 1) recreation, leisure, and amenities; 2) accessibility; and 3) allures. Fundamentally, these domestic tourists construe Kuala Terengganu as presenting a diverse range of tourism activities (festivals, water sports, and tourism packages), complemented by accommodation amenities that are both high-quality and comfortable. Concurrently, their perceptions of amenities are intimately tied to a supportive infrastructure, predominantly characterized by easy access to local transportation services and travel information. Additionally, local tourists perceive Kuala Terengganu as possessing diverse attractions, primarily defined by cultural and natural elements, followed by Islamic tourist attractions, and, lastly, the new iconic Terengganu drawbridge. Based on the findings of this study, the distinctiveness of Kuala Terengganu in comparison to other competing destinations in Malaysia is facilitated by destination attractiveness characterized by recreation, leisure, and amenities, infrastructural features, and overall allure. Hence, the formation of Terengganu's brand image relies on thorough research conducted from the perspective of tourists. The strategic enhancement of distinctive local characteristics that are significant to domestic tourists, can be pursued by the Tourism Terengganu agency, guided by the insights derived from this study. These findings, which go against international studies that say different target markets need different marketing strategies, allow Tourism Terengganu to come with advertising campaigns that highlight the good things about Kuala Terengganu as a destination, which are in line with what domestic tourists think and feel (Ariya et al., 2017). This approach is likely to incline them towards selecting Kuala Terengganu as their recurrent travel destination. Moreover, intense competition among tourist destinations across Malaysian states necessitates heightened efforts from tourism management in Terengganu to attract domestic tourists. Consequently, Terengganu tourism management should be fully leveraged through online platforms, including the development of a travel blog and engagement on review and rating websites (e.g., Trip Advisor). These platforms enable tourists to share their interests and experiences post-trip. The findings also indicate that tourists satisfied with destination attractiveness are inclined to disseminate positive information through social media, encouraging friends and relatives to visit Kuala Terengganu, and expressing a willingness to revisit in the near future.

6. CONCLUSION

The firm commitment of the Terengganu Tourism Department to enhance tourist arrivals is demonstrated through the increase in the destination's attraction and the delivery of exceptional services. The overarching objective involves curating unforgettable encounters to establish Terengganu as an immensely coveted travel

hotspot. The recognition of substantial contributions from the tourism sector to economic growth and employment opportunities has led to the establishment of an ambitious target, aiming to attract 6.5 million tourists by 2025 and projecting an estimated cumulative sum of RM6 billion in tourist expenditures. To realize this aspiration, efforts are to be focused on captivating the attention of domestic tourists, while concurrently ensuring the contentment of the existing visitor base. Prioritizing their requirements and orchestrating positive experiences through these endeavors will stimulate favorable word-of-mouth promotion and nurture enduring loyalty towards Terengganu.

In summary, the findings of this study provide evidence supporting the positive and significant correlation between destination attractiveness and tourist satisfaction. This suggests that destination attractiveness plays a crucial role in influencing tourists' satisfaction with a given destination. Additionally, tourist satisfaction was identified as a factor supporting a positive relationship with eWOM and behavioral loyalty. While the direct relationship between destination attractiveness and eWOM, as well as behavioral loyalty, was not confirmed in this study, tourist satisfaction emerged as a key mediator, influencing loyalty beyond its direct effects. The results indicate that tourist satisfaction fully mediates the relationship between destination attractiveness and eWOM, as well as destination loyalty. This implies that tourists who express satisfaction with the attractiveness of their destination are inclined to share positive information, encourage friends and relatives to visit Kuala Terengganu through social media, and express a willingness to revisit Kuala Terengganu in the near future.

Ultimately, the results presented constitute a partial understanding of the evolution of the loyalty model. Future research initiatives may choose to explore and incorporate additional relevant loyalty antecedents, such as tourist experience, tourist involvement, and tourist motivation, with the aim of refining and expanding upon the model put forth in this study. Such investigations could be applied to diverse populations, facilitating comparative analyses. The researcher holds the belief that these findings will contribute to the continual enhancement of the knowledge base, providing valuable insights for managers tasked with overseeing the enhancement of destination attractiveness and the augmentation of the quality of recreation, leisure, amenities, accessibility, and attractions within a destination-areas warranting heightened focus in the realm of tourism development.

7. LIMITATION AND RECOMMENDATION

This research is not without limitations, and it is imperative to recognize and address these constraints for the purpose of informing future research initiatives. The primary limitation is associated with the geographical emphasis of this inquiry, which concentrated solely on explicating the attractiveness of Kuala Terengganu. Subsequent studies ought to extend their purview to comprehend the entirety of the Terengganu state, facilitating a more thorough investigation into the perceived image of the state among domestic tourists. Moreover, for the purpose of augmenting the validation of the perceived destination attractiveness in Kuala Terengganu, it is recommended to incorporate a neighboring city on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia, specifically Kota Bharu, Kelantan, as a comparative capital city. A further limitation stems from the implementation of this study during the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring the collection of data through online Google forms from domestic tourists with previous experiences in Kuala Terengganu. Future research should incorporate in-person data collection at the tourism sites in Kuala Terengganu to elicit more profound insights into perceptions of destination attractiveness.

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