Exploring Gender Differences in Shaping Total Tourism Experience Quality among Eco-Tourists

Janiffa Saidon[1], *Nurul Ainun Ahmad Atory[1]*, Hairulnizam Hashim[1], Rosidah Musa[2], Mohd Khalid Mohd Abas[1],
Liatul Izian Ali Husin[1], Ahmad Nizam Mohd Yusof[1], Farez Adry Murad[3]
[1]Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Selangor, Malaysia
[2]Asia E University, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia
[3]Lagenda Properties Berhad, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
janiffa@uitm.edu.my
Corresponding Author: Nurul Ainun Ahmad Atory

Abstract: This research explored the role of gender as a moderating effect on the relationship between factors affecting ecotourism experiential value. Previous studies have investigated tourist satisfaction; however, the role of gender towards the experiential value remains unclear. More importantly, the tourist's actual behavior at a destination is a critical determinant factor of tourist loyalty compared to the perception. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to explore the role of gender in the relationship between factors influencing the Ecotourist Experiential Value on Actual Tourist Behaviour. More specifically, this study delved into the consequences of destination experience (i.e. attachment and advocate) and investigated the influence of Ecotourist Experiential Value on Actual Behaviour between genders. A survey was conducted among the Taman Negara patrons in Malaysia. The research model was tested and confirmed with 243 tourists. The data was analyzed using Smart Partial Least Squares which is the variance-based structural equation modelling. The results evoked from the survey indicate that aesthetics is very much important as the influential factors towards positive total experience quality among male compared to female. In contrast, Customer Return on Investment becomes the main concern of female tourists towards Total Experience Quality as compared to male tourists. In light of the major finding, this study accentuates the importance of understanding gender behavior to provide valuable insights for destination marketers to establish positioning plans for the tourism industry.

Keywords: *Ecotourism, Experiential value, Advocate, Attachment, Multigroup Analysis*

1. Introduction and Background

In the past few decades, the tourism sector has developed into one of the most substantial sources of external income (Adil, Nasir, & Kumar, 2021a, Adil et al., 2021b). As one of the most significant sectors nowadays (Tasia & Yasri, 2021), the tourist experience has concerned a lot of study consideration in the extent of tourism studies (Chakraborty, Adil, & Sadiq, 2023), with the notion of memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) (Zhong et al., 2017). A study by Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick (2012) explains that "an MTE is selectively constructed from tourism experiences based on the individual's assessment of the experience". Similarly, previous studies also state that MTEs are the concept that defines the "experience economy", emphasizing the significance of experience in the tourism sector (Zhou et al., 2022a, 2022b). Furthermore, ecotourism' has been defined as a "*practice of traveling to relatively less exploited natural destinations to appreciate the natural settings, acquire knowledge about wildlife and enjoy local cultures in authentic settings while conserving the environments of the destinations*" (Khanra et al., 2021). In other words, ecotourism is a subsector of tourism that is exceptional and portrays ethical meanings, care for the environment and its effect on them (Ansari et al., 2022; Fennell, 2001; Rafiq et al., 2022a, 2022b; Sadiq & Adil, 2021). Instead, 'ecotourism experience' is "*a subjective phenomenon, which involves visitors' experience of interacting with the firms/nature at 'pre-visit', 'on-site visit' and 'post-visit' of ecotourism sites.*" This will support in considering the intricate nature of the tourist experience that varies with diverse phases of consumption (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020). In reality, ecotourism experiences differ liable on the destination and/or activities.

Ecotourism can be considered one of the vital subsectors of tourism in Malaysia that has been recognized by the Malaysian government. Based on past research, about 35% of visitors from developing countries came to Malaysia because of its tourist sites attraction (The Star, 2003). The increasing trend in ecotourism is related to the shifting of consumer affection for retreats, especially in their curiosity towards nature-based vacations. They have confidence that these sorts of holidays afford them educational experience engagement and also improve their environment and social accountability as a traveller (Parks, Parks and Allen, 2009). In the

Malaysian setting, ecotourism is defined as, "*travel and visitation that is environmentally responsible to relatively undisturbed natural areas to enjoy and appreciate nature (including any accompanying cultural features; both past and present), promotes conservation, has low visitor impact and provides for beneficially active socioeconomic involvement of local populations*" (World Wide Fund for Nature Malaysia. 1996). There is quite a wide-ranging ecotourism literature that permits evidence relating to the development and management of eco-tourists profiles, expectations, satisfaction, and motivation (Musa et al, 2010; Palacio & McCool, 1997; and William, 1992). Nevertheless, there is slight empirical evidence in the literature that studies indirect predictors of experiential value related to ecotourism and its significance. Still, empirical studies on 'ecotourism' and 'customer experience' have progressively improved over the past twenty years, existing literature on 'ecotourism experience' appears to be mostly uneven and disjointed. For example, Godovykh and Tasci (2020) measured 'customer experience' as a whole, observing the general tourism experience that confines the scope of their results. Likewise, Liu and Li (2020) and Khanra et al. (2021) studied ecotourism research trends over bibliometric analysis, nonetheless mostly ignored the experiences of ecotourists.

Recently, the significant role of experiential value has been recognized by researchers (Mathwick, Malhotra and Rigdon; 2001), and the overall customer experience has inclined the customer loyalty level (Berry, Carbone & Haeckel, 2002; Mascarenhas, Kesavan & Bernacchi, 2006; and Musa, Putit & Kassim, 2009) Consequently, marketing trend has transformation beyond the customer loyalty in this globalization era, then further into producing the attractive experience that is be certain of last longer for the customer (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). This study intends to explore gender differences as a moderating effect in determining total experience quality in eco-tourism.

2. Literature Review

Previously, the world economy was mostly grounded on products and services, but nowadays the phenomenon has transformed a lot. Nowadays, experience is an important substance for users (Oh, Fiore & Jeong, 2007, Kim, Ritchie & McCormick, 2012). Thus, a memorable quality experience will have a positive effect on a business. Many studies have been done in the context of retailing and hospitality, which have taken into account the issues of experience, but studies in the context of tourism are still very limited, except the study by Oh, Fiore and Jeong (Oh, Fiore & Jeong, 2007).

This study was carried out using environmental psychology theory, which was accepted by many researchers, namely the S-O-R model by Mehrabian-Russell (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). They assume that the relationship between the three variables is a stimulus-organism reaction.

Ecotourism Experiential Value (EEV): Customers are looking more toward the value they will receive, the options being offered, and the experience they gain. From the retailing point of view (Keng, Huang, Zheng & Hsu, 2007; Mathwick, Malhotra & Rigdon, 2001) experience in the services sector plays a very critical and important role. Therefore, retailers need to focus on providing the environment with fun elements, entertainment with fun and promoting greater participation among consumers. In this research, experimental value means 'Preferred, relativistic priority for product characteristics or service performance that yield from interactions in usage settings that facilitates or obstructs the achievement of customer goals" (Mathwick, Malhotra & Rigdon, 1997) And in the context of this research also, the value concept of ecotourism experience (EEV) is seen as a beneficial when it involved in ecotourism product offerings and services. These EEV estimates will be based on the value of the ecotourist gained. The enrichment of knowledge when visiting this ecotourism spot and feeling the excitement deviates to a new one when immersed in the ecotourism environment Bitner, W. Faranda, A. Hubbert, and V. Zeithaml, 1997; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). EEV is conceptualized as an experience-based value consisting of aesthetics, excellent service, social, return on customer investment, education component and escapism; hence it is a hierarchical model. Bitner and Brown (2000) suggest that the level of experience value utilization can affect customer satisfaction and subsequently loyalty.

Total Ecotourist Experience Quality (TEQ): Literature is very limited in the field of research that engages the customer experience as the concept since it is new and has begun to gain a lot of attention through the study of Macarenhas, Kesavan and Bernacchi (2006) [9]. Many researchers have emphasized the importance of overall customer experience, as it will lead to lasting loyalty. Researchers also agreed that 'emotional

involvement' is also very important in all interactions between customers and sellers. They practice the total customer experience as a truly positive, interesting, enduring and social experience physically and emotionally across all major stages of one's consumption chain (Mascarenhas, Kesavan & Bernacchi, 2006). Customer experience is conceptualized as a customer affective response (attachment, advocate) when engaging and taking the offering of products and services. On the other hand, the quality of the experience is seen as the excellence or superiority of experience (Lemke, Clark & Wilson, 2010). The quality of experience in the ecotourism context revolves around every touch point during interaction with service providers and travel sites. It can be said that affective or emotional elements form the basis for evaluating the quality-of-service experience. In conclusion, this study focuses on the overall quality of customer experience and stimulus to respond to the sense of being served and maintained by its expectations or standards, throughout the holistic journey of consuming the ecotourism experience.

Aesthetics and Total Experience Quality: Aesthetics in tourism includes the sensory experiences resulting from the environment, architecture, art, and overall environment of a destination. According to Agapito, Valle, and Mendes (2020), aesthetics contributes meaningfully to generating unforgettable tourist experiences by engaging the senses, which in turn affects emotional responses and satisfaction levels. The study emphasizes those destinations with well-curated aesthetic elements, such as art installations, architectural beauty, and natural landscapes, enhance the sensory appeal and contribute to the overall positive perception of the destination. Furthermore, Kim and Kim (2019) highlight the importance of aesthetic value in heritage tourism. Their research displays that aesthetic gratitude for cultural heritage sites not only enhances tourists' satisfaction but also nurtures a deeper emotional connection with the destination. This connection is principally important in the context of cultural and heritage tourism, where the aesthetic experience is frequently secured to the historical and cultural significance of the site.

Total experience quality refers to the inclusive valuation of all aspects of a tourist's experience, together with service quality, environmental factors, and personal interactions. Current studies have shifted focus from individual elements of service quality to a more holistic understanding of the tourist experience. For example, Tsaur, Yen, and Yan (2018) claim that total experience quality covers both tangible and intangible elements, for instance, the emotional and psychological effects of the tourist experience. Their study proposes that destinations that prioritize a holistic approach to experience quality, integrating aesthetics, service, and emotional engagement, are more likely to accomplish high levels of tourist satisfaction and loyalty. A comparable study by Ali, Ryu, and Hussain (2018) underlines the part of experiential factors, as well as aesthetics, in enhancing total experience quality. The study finds that tourists' perceptions of beauty, design, and atmosphere meaningfully affect their total gratification and inclination to endorse the destination. This discovery brings into line with the larger understanding that total experience quality is a complex concept, where aesthetics plays a critical role.

The relationship between aesthetics and total experience quality is multifaceted and complex. According to a study by Oh, Fiore, and Jeong (2020), aesthetic experiences act as a mediator between service quality and overall satisfaction. The study highlights that the aesthetic appeal of a destination increases the apparent value of the experience, leading to higher satisfaction levels. This mediating role of aesthetics proposes that destinations that capitalize on creating aesthetically attractive environments can significantly increase their overall experience quality. Additionally, current research by Sthapit and Jiménez-Barreto (2019) discovers the role of co-creation in enhancing aesthetic experiences and total experience quality. The study suggests that when tourists are actively involved in the creation of their experiences, mainly in aesthetically rich environments, their overall satisfaction and perception of quality increase. This partaking approach not only improves the aesthetic value but then again also contributes to a more personalized and memorable experience.

Service Excellence and Total Experience Quality: Service excellence is a key driver of achievement in the tourism sector, impelling both customer satisfaction and competitive advantage. Based on Martínez and Del Bosque (2021), service excellence includes some dimensions, comprising reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibles. These dimensions contribute to a whole service experience that can meaningfully strengthen the perceived quality of a tourism experience. In addition, a Study by Wu and Ko (2020) focuses on the significance of personalized service in achieving service excellence in tourism. The study showed that

personalization-adapting services to meet individual customer needs play a fundamental part in creating memorable experiences. This study recommends that service excellence is not just about high-quality service delivery but also about creating a unique and personalized experience for each customer. Furthermore, Kabadayi, Ozturk, and Bilgihan (2022) emphasize the role of digital technologies in improving service excellence. They discovered in what way the integration of technology in service delivery, for example, mobile apps and artificial intelligence, can develop service efficiency and customer satisfaction. The study claims that digital transformation in tourism services is essential for supporting service excellence in a fast-developing sector.

The relationship between service excellence and TEQ is well recognized in the literature, with many findings demonstrating that high levels of service excellence indicate higher TEQ. A study by Lee, Lee, and Choi (2020) studied the effect of service excellence on TEQ from the perspective of luxury hotels. Results establish that exceptional service quality, specifically in terms of responsiveness and empathy, considerably improves the overall quality of the guest experience, leading to higher satisfaction and loyalty. Likewise, Xu, Huang, and Su (2022) investigated the relationship between service quality and TEQ from the perspective of cultural tourism. Their results identify that service excellence in the areas of guiding services, cultural interpretation, and customer care significantly contributes to a positive overall experience. Furthermore, Kwon, Yoon, and Kim (2021) establish that engaged and motivated employees are more prone to deliver superior service, which in turn increases the overall experience quality.

The results from the current study have important effects on tourism management and service delivery. To attain service excellence and improve TEQ, the tourism sector must emphasize continuous training and development of their employees to ensure high levels of service quality. Personalized service, enabled by digital technologies, can also play a crucial role in creating memorable experiences for tourists (Wu & Ko, 2020). Furthermore, tourism businesses should deliberate incorporating customer feedback into their service improvement strategies to ensure that the services offered associate with customer expectations and contribute positively to TEQ. Ritchie and Hudson (2019) highlighted that understanding the factors that influence TEQ can assist businesses plan better experiences that boost customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Social and Total Experience Quality: Social interactions are a main factor in the tourism experience, impelling tourists' perceptions, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions. Cohen and Cohen (2019) explained that social interactions in tourism could be considered into three main categories: interactions with service providers, interactions with other tourists, and interactions with local communities. Each of these interactions contributes differently to the overall experience quality. Research by Wu, Li, and Park (2020) highlights the significance of positive social interactions with service providers in improving tourists' satisfaction and loyalty. Their analysis discovered that personalized and friendly interactions with staff significantly increase the perceived quality of the experience, leading to higher levels of satisfaction.

In addition, a study by Kim, Song, and Choe (2021) discovered the role of socialization in tourists' in-group travel situations. The analysis discovered that positive interactions and shared experiences among group members lead to a more enjoyable and memorable experience, improving the overall quality of the trip. This research highlights the importance of social bonds and communal experiences in tourism. Also, social interactions with local communities play an important role in TEQ. Hwang, Baloglu, and Choi (2022) explained that engaging with locals and partaking in cultural activities provide tourists with a greater understanding of the destination, leading to a more authentic and fulfilling experience. This report proposes that meaningful interactions with local communities can improve the emotional and cultural dimensions of the tourism experience and contribute to higher TEQ.

Research by Wang, Zhang, and Li (2020) studied the effect of social interactions on TEQ in the context of cultural tourism. They establish that meaningful interactions with local communities, such as participating in traditional ceremonies or festivals, significantly improve TEQ in offering tourists authentic and culturally amusing experiences. Likewise, research by Lee and Kim (2021) investigated the role of social interactions in luxury tourism. They discovered that personalized service and attention from staff, accompanied by positive interactions with other guests, contribute to a higher overall experience quality. This study underlines the significance of social interactions in producing a sense of exclusivity and personalized attention, which are the

main mechanisms of luxury tourism experiences. Besides that, in terms of adventure tourism, social interactions also play a vital role in determining TEQ. A study by Park, Lee, and Hwang (2022) showed that social interactions among participants in adventure activities, for example, group hiking or white-water rafting, improve the overall experience by nurturing a feeling of comradeship and shared achievement. This analysis indicates that social bonds and group dynamics are significant elements in shaping TEQ in adventure tourism settings.

The relationship between social factors and TEQ has important effects on tourism management and service delivery. Tourism businesses should emphasis on aiding positive social interactions between tourists, service providers, and local communities to improve TEQ. For instance, training employees to provide personalized and friendly service can increase the quality of interactions with tourists, leading to higher satisfaction and loyalty (Wu et al., 2020). Furthermore, tourism operators must deliberate producing opportunities for tourists to engage with local communities and participate in cultural activities. By promoting authentic and meaningful interactions, businesses can enhance the emotional and cultural dimensions of the experience, contributing to higher TEQ (Hwang et al., 2022). Marketing strategies should also highlight the social aspects of the tourism experience, emphasizing the chances for socialization, cultural exchange, and personalized service. By encouraging these components, tourism businesses can attract tourists who value social interactions and obtain a high-quality overall experience (Kim et al., 2021).

Customers' Return on Investment and Total Experience Quality: Customers' ROI in the tourism sector is complex, concerning financial, emotional, and experiential returns. Conventionally, ROI has been assessed based on the cost-benefit analysis of tourism investments from a business viewpoint. Nevertheless, from a consumer viewpoint, ROI is more subjective and tangled to the overall satisfaction and perceived value of the tourism experience. According to a study by Lee and Xue (2019), tourists reflect not only the direct financial costs but also the emotional satisfaction and the quality of the experiences when estimating their ROI. The research showed that the perceived value of the experience, when it surpasses the cost, improves customer satisfaction and raises the probability of recurrence visits (Lee & Xue, 2019).

Experience quality is a critical element of perceived ROI in tourism. Experience quality states the overall assessment of the tourism experience, including service quality, destination attributes, and personal interactions. A study by Ali, Hussain, and Raghavan (2020) highlights that high-quality experiences lead to higher perceived ROI among tourists. The study shows that when tourists perceive that they have received high-quality service, enjoyed unique attractions, and had meaningful interactions, they are more likely to feel that their investment was valuable. This sense of value improves their overall satisfaction and increases their willingness to return or recommend the destination to others (Ali et al., 2020).

Emotional and psychological returns are also important mechanisms of customers' ROI in tourism. These returns are regularly resulting from the feelings of joy, relaxation, and personal growth that tourists experience during their travels. A study by Zhang, Zhang, and Li (2021) discovered the relationship between emotional experiences and perceived ROI in luxury tourism. The results propose that tourists who experience strong positive emotions, such as happiness and contentment, during their trips report a higher ROI, although the financial costs are large. This underlines the importance of making emotionally appealing experiences to improve perceived ROI (Zhang et al., 2021).

Besides that, cultural and educational experiences also play a substantial role in shaping customers' ROI in tourism. Tourists who are involved in culturally inspiring activities or educational programs regularly perceive a higher ROI because these experiences offer lasting benefits, for example, increased knowledge and personal growth. According to a study by Packer and Ballantyne (2019), tourists who join educational tours or cultural exchanges report a higher perceived ROI, as these experiences contribute to their personal development and offer unique, memorable experiences. The study highlights that destinations offering educational and cultural experiences can improve tourists' perceived ROI, leading to greater satisfaction and recurrence visits (Packer & Ballantyne, 2019).

The literature indicates that the perceived ROI in tourism is closely linked to the total experience quality. High-quality experiences, particularly those that offer emotional, cultural, and educational value, significantly

enhance tourists' perceptions of ROI. This suggests that tourism providers should focus on delivering exceptional experience quality to ensure that customers feel their investment in travel is worthwhile, leading to higher satisfaction and loyalty.

Educational and Total Experience Quality: Educational tourism, a niche segment within the larger tourism sector, highlights the learning aspect of travel. It comprises activities for instance cultural tours, historical site visits, language immersion programs, and other forms of travel where education is a main goal. According to a study by Ritchie and Crouch (2020), the addition of educational content in tourism improves the intellectual engagement of tourists, leading to higher satisfaction levels and perceived value of the experience. The study illustrates that educational tourism not only improves the tourists' knowledge but also deepens their emotional connection to the destination, which is a significant contributor to overall experience quality (Ritchie & Crouch, 2020). Furthermore, heritage tourism is another area where education plays a critical role in determining the total experience quality. Interpretation, as a form of educational delivery in heritage sites, has been shown to significantly influence tourists' experiences. A study by Zhang et al. (2019) found that well-designed interpretive programs at heritage sites enhance visitors' understanding and appreciation of the cultural significance of the site, which in turn increases their overall satisfaction. The research suggests that when tourists feel they have gained new knowledge or insights from their visit, their perception of the quality of the experience is elevated (Zhang et al., 2019).

The concept of experiential learning in sustainable tourism is another area of interest. Experiential learning encompasses active participation in meaningful activities, where tourists learn through direct experience. A study by Packer and Ballantyne (2018) explored the impact of experiential learning programs on tourists' environmental awareness and overall experience quality. The study concluded that tourists who engage in experiential learning activities, such as eco-tours or conservation projects, report higher satisfaction levels and a stronger commitment to sustainable practices post-visit. This suggests that education, when integrated into tourism experiences, not only enhances the immediate quality of the experience but also promotes long-term positive outcomes (Packer & Ballantyne, 2018). Museums and cultural institutions are major examples of venues where education directly affects the total experience quality of visitors. Falk and Dierking (2019) examined the relationship between educational content delivery and visitor satisfaction in museum situations. Their study shows that interactive and engaging educational exhibits meaningfully improve the overall visitor experience. The study found that when visitors are actively involved in the learning process, they are more likely to have a positive and memorable experience, which enhances the perceived quality of their visit (Falk & Dierking, 2019).

Recent literature underscores the significant impact of education on the total experience quality in tourism. These findings suggest that integrating educational components into tourism experiences is a valuable strategy for improving overall experience quality and fostering deeper connections between tourists and destinations.

Escapism and Total Experience Quality: Escapism is a psychological concept that has long been related to tourism. It indicates the need to momentarily leave behind the routine, stress, and demands of everyday life in pursuit of leisure and freedom. As said by Kim, Lee, and Uysal (2019), escapism is one of the main reasons for travel, driving individuals to seek out new environments, activities, and experiences that offer a mental and emotional respite. Chen, Lin, and Kuo (2020) highlight the role of escapism in adventure and nature-based tourism where tourists requesting escape through adventure activities, such as hiking or diving, often experience a heightened sense of freedom and thrill, which considerably contributes to their overall satisfaction and well-being. The analysis also notes that the desire for escapism is narrowly related to the search for novelty and excitement, which are the main factors of the tourism experience. Besides, escapism has been discovered to influence the choice of destination and type of tourism. For example, a study by Wang, Li, and Song (2021) discovers the role of escapism in luxury tourism, where tourists look for exclusive and tranquil environments that offer a break from their chaotic lifestyles. The analysis implies that the desire to escape is an important aspect of the choice of high-end resorts and destinations that promise peace, privacy, and comfort.

In addition, a study by Lee, Lee, and Choe (2021) investigates the effect of escapism on TEQ in the aspect of wellness tourism. Tourists who requested escape through wellness activities, for example, spa treatments and meditation, testified higher levels of emotional satisfaction and overall experience quality. This recommends

that escapism can improve the emotional and psychological dimensions of TEQ. Relatedly, a study by Lin, Wu, and Tsai (2022) inspects the role of escapism in cultural tourism. The analysis initiated that tourists who engaged in cultural activities as a form of escapism, for example visiting museums or attending traditional festivals, experienced a deeper feel of completion and satisfaction. The study focuses on the cultural immersion afforded by these activities permits tourists to disengage from their normal environments and engage in meaningful and enriching experiences, thus improving TEQ. Also, research by Huang, Liu, and Li (2022) discovers the effect of escapism on TEQ in the setting of adventure tourism. The analysis establishes that the adventure and thrill accompanying adventure activities, for example, skydiving or white-water rafting, meaningfully contribute to the overall quality of the experience. The study recommends that the feeling of liberty and excitement provided by these activities fill the escapist desires of tourists, leading to higher TEQ.

Tourism operators should consider incorporating elements of escapism into their service offerings to cater to the emotional and psychological needs of tourists. For example, designing experiences that allow tourists to disconnect from their routine and immerse themselves in novel and exciting activities can enhance TEQ and lead to higher levels of satisfaction and loyalty (Chen et al., 2020). Moreover, marketing strategies should emphasize the escapist potential of tourism experiences, highlighting the mental and emotional benefits of travel. By promoting services that offer a break from the mundane, tourism businesses can attract tourists seeking escapism and enhance their overall experience quality (Wang et al., 2021).

Total Experience Quality and Attachment: Attachment in tourism is often studied through the lens of "place attachment," a psychological concept that defines the attachment between people and specific locations. Place attachment is multidimensional, encompassing emotional, functional, and symbolic relations to a place (Lewicka, 2019). Current findings have highlighted that place attachment is critical in determining tourist behavior, comprising repeat visitation, loyalty, and word-of-mouth recommendations. For example, a report by Ramkissoon, Smith, and Weiler (2019) discovers how place attachment affects environmental behaviors in ecotourism settings. They establish that tourists with strong emotional connections to a place are more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviors, implying that attachment can improve the overall quality of the experience by nurturing a sense of responsibility and care for the destination.

Besides, Prayag et al. (2020) studied the role of place attachment in improving tourists' emotional experiences. Their results propose that strong place attachment can meaningfully intensify the positive emotions experienced during a trip, leading to a higher perception of TEQ. The relationship between attachment and TEQ is multifaceted and complex. Research implies that attachment can both directly and indirectly influence TEQ. A study by Zhang, Wu, and Buhalis (2022) discovered how place attachment mediates the relationship between experience quality and tourist satisfaction. They discovered that tourists with strong place attachments are inclined to sense higher TEQ, which in turn leads to greater satisfaction and loyalty. Furthermore, Yuksel, Yuksel, and Bilim (2020) recommend that attachment can act as a moderating factor in the relationship between TEQ and behavioral intentions, such as revisiting intentions and positive word-of-mouth. Their study displays that the stronger the attachment, the more likely tourists are to overlook minor flaws in the experience, thereby maintaining a high perception of TEQ.

Destination marketers can leverage place attachment by creating and promoting experiences that foster emotional connections with the destination. For instance, offering personalized services, emphasizing local culture, and ensuring environmental sustainability can enhance both attachment and TEQ (Zhang et al., 2022). Additionally, tourism operators can focus on creating memorable experiences that resonate emotionally with tourists, as this can lead to stronger attachment and higher TEQ. As suggested by Ramkissoon et al. (2019), encouraging responsible tourism behaviors can also strengthen the bond between tourists and the destination, contributing to a higher overall quality of experience.

Total Experience Quality and Advocate: Advocate behavior means the willingness of customers to recommend a destination or service to others, often seen as an expression of customer loyalty. Advocacy goes afar satisfaction, as it includes aggressively encouraging the service or destination to others. Current findings have focused on finding the backgrounds of advocate behavior in tourism. For example, Lu et al. (2021) discovered the relationship between destination image, service quality, and advocate behavior in the context of cultural tourism. They discovered that a positive destination image and high service quality significantly

enhance tourists' likelihood of advocating for the destination. Likewise, Rahman et al. (2022) studied the influence of emotional experiences on advocacy, exhibiting that tourists who have emotionally engaging and positive experiences are more likely to recommend the destination to others.

The relationship between advocate behavior and TEQ is vital for understanding how an inclusive and high-quality experience can lead to active promotion by tourists. Findings have recommended that TEQ act as a precursor to advocacy, as tourists who experience high-quality service across all dimensions are more likely to engage in advocate behavior. A study by Lee et al. (2020) underlined the direct impact of TEQ on advocacy in the context of luxury tourism. They establish that tourists who perceive high TEQ are not only more satisfied but also more likely to recommend the luxury destination to others, thus acting as advocates. Likewise, Al-Ansi and Han (2021) focused on the role of cultural and environmental factors in shaping TEQ and, subsequently, advocating behavior. They concluded that destinations that excel in delivering a holistic and high-quality experience are more likely to see their visitors become advocates.

Gender and Total Experience Quality: The recent study debates that gender forms the relationships between destination service quality (DSQ), destination affective image (DAI), and revisit intention (Tosun, Dedeoglu & Usakli, 2024). Undeniably, both the agency–communion theory and the empathizing–systemizing theory propose that the attitudes and behaviors of females and males can differ based on their social identities and biological structures (Bakan, 1966; Greenberg & Baron-Cohen, 2020). Earlier research has established that this variation is also apparent in consumption habits. Consistent with this, the tourism literature discloses that the factors influencing the attitudinal loyalty of tourists may vary depending on their gender (Boo et al., 2013; Dedeoğlu et al., 2016; Suki, 2014; Yang et al., 2022). Nonetheless, it is worth noticing that studies on how gender shapes the effect of DSQ on DAI and revisits intention is limited (Aliedan et al., 2021; Dedeoglu, 2019; Dedeoğlu et al., 2016), representing a significant gap in the literature. This study mainly pursues to address this research gap and extend the remaining body of research in tourism by examining how gender moderates the relationships among DSQ, DAI, and tourists' revisit intention. Highlighting the role of gender in shaping DSQ, DAI, and revisit intention can afford a deeper understanding of personalized marketing strategies that boost visitor loyalty.

Besides that, a study by Tosun, Dedeoglu & Usakli, (2024) examines the moderating role of gender on the relationships between destination service quality, affective image, and revisit intention. The results show that "*accommodation*, *local transport*, *hospitality,* and *airport services*" have positive effects on affective image, and affective image, in turn, positively influences revisit intention. The study also discloses three significant results concerning the moderating role of gender. Whereas the positive impact of *hospitality* on the affective image was found to be stronger for female visitors, the positive impacts of *local transport* and *airport services* on the affective image were found to be stronger for male visitors.

Figure 1 signifies the conceptual framework between factors affecting Total Experience Quality and further influencing the attachment and advocate. Thus, the study hypothesizes:
H1: There was a significant positive relationship between Aesthetic and Total Experience Quality
H2: There was a significant positive relationship between Service Excellent and Total Experience Quality
H3: There was a significant positive relationship between Social and Total Experience Quality
H4: There was a significant positive relationship between CROI and Total Experience Quality
H5: There was a significant positive relationship between Educational and Total Experience Quality
H6: There was a significant positive relationship between Escapism and Total Experience Quality
H7: There was a significant positive relationship between Total Experience Quality and Attachment
H8: There was a significant positive relationship between Total Experience Quality and Advocate

3. Research Methodology

Questionnaires are developed by adapting previous research done to suit the current study. The findings from the focus group sessions are also taken into consideration. The process is then followed by an interview session and validation of the questionnaire with two industry personnel in the eco-tourism and also professors who are experts in the area of study.

Data were then collected at Taman Negara in Malaysia. 243 respondents completed the questionnaire and deemed it to be valid. Respondent ranges from age above 20 to 60 years old. Since this is an exploratory study, therefore these usable data were then analyzed using Smart Partial Least Squares (SmartPLS) version 4.1.0.6.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
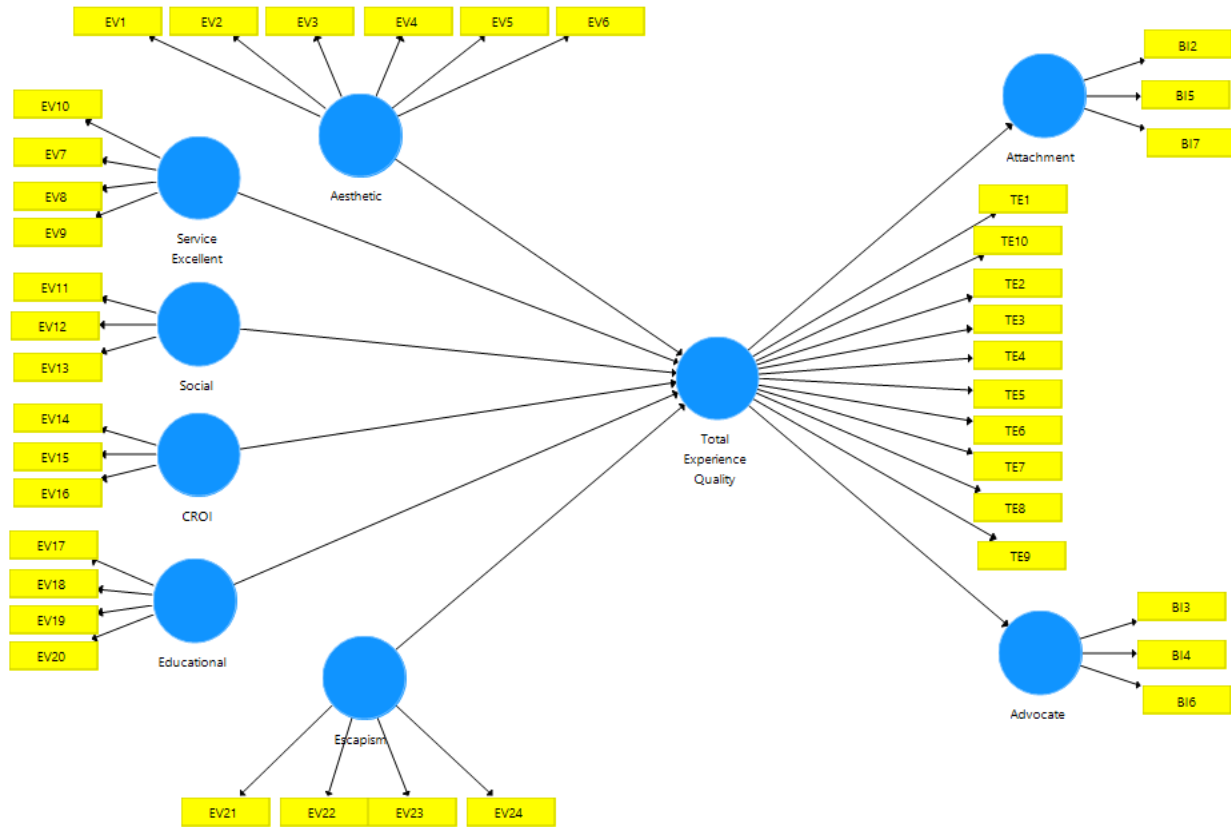
4. Results

Validity was measured by using two criteria, which were convergent validity and discriminant validity. Convergent validity consists of factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) as in Table 1. Within this study, the factor loadings mostly exceeded 0.620 at the acceptance rate of 0.6 (Hair, Hult, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2017). The factor loadings ranged from 0.625 to 0.935. The AVE of the result indicates that all the variables have a value greater than 0.5, which means that less error remains (Hair, Babin & Anderson, 2010). The highest AVE is CROI which is 0.801 followed by Escapism 0.682. The lowest AVE is Advocate, which is 0.530. While the lowest CR value was 0.771, which was above the cut-off point of 0.7 (Hair, Hult, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2017). Based on Table 1, it is initiated that all of the AVE and CR values are more than 0.5 and 0.7 respectively.

While discriminant validity using the Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) is summarized in Table 2. HTMT analysis summarized in Table 2 also showed that all the values are below 0.90. Hence, all variables achieved reliable and valid results (Hair, Hult, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2017).

Discussion
The results shown in Table 3 indicate that gender moderates the relationship between Aesthetics and CROI toward Total Experience Quality, where Aesthetics is the main concern for male tourists with a significant positive relationship at a 99% confidence level toward Total Experience Quality. Meanwhile, CROI is the main concern for female tourists with a significant positive relationship at a 95% confidence level toward Total Experience Quality. The findings are consistent with studies by Boo et al., (2013), Dedeoğlu et al., (2016),

Suki, (2014) and Yang et al., (2022). Unexpectedly, contradicting previous studies, Service Excellent, Social and Escapism did not influence their total experience quality for both genders.

Table 1: Convergent Validity (Factor Loadings, CR and AVE)

Construct	Items	Factor Loadings	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	R-square
Attachment	BI2	0.791	0.837	0.632	0.206
	BI5	0.767			
	BI7	0.825			
Advocate	BI3	0.805	0.771	0.530	0.265
	BI4	0.639			
	BI6	0.732			
Aesthetic	EV1	0.785	0.920	0.657	
	EV2	0.803			
	EV3	0.748			
	EV4	0.867			
	EV5	0.861			
	EV6	0.791			
Service Excellent	EV7	0.863	0.879	0.648	
	EV8	0.866			
	EV9	0.781			
	EV10	0.697			
Social	EV11	0.858	0.839	0.641	
	EV12	0.908			
	EV13	0.603			
CROI	EV14	0.847	0.924	0.801	
	EV15	0.928			
	EV16	0.909			
Educational	EV17	0.742	0.876	0.640	
	EV18	0.809			
	EV19	0.850			
	EV20	0.795			
Escapism	EV21	0.816	0.895	0.682	
	EV22	0.815			
	EV23	0.837			
	EV24	0.834			
Total Experience Quality	TE1	0.788	0.949	0.651	0.401
	TE2	0.860			
	TE3	0.796			
	TE4	0.774			
	TE5	0.785			
	TE6	0.793			
	TE7	0.835			
	TE8	0.846			
	TE9	0.794			
	TE10	0.793			

Table 2: Discriminant Validity

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Advocate (1)									
Aesthetic (2)	0.694								
Attachment (3)	0.891	0.545							
CROI (4)	0.636	0.577	0.472						
Educational (5)	0.421	0.467	0.500	0.431					
Escapism (6)	0.560	0.665	0.629	0.567	0.579				
Service Excellent (7)	0.581	0.564	0.392	0.616	0.414	0.519			
Social (8)	0.416	0.525	0.337	0.446	0.652	0.405	0.437		
Total Experience Quality (9)	0.660	0.583	0.546	0.489	0.534	0.415	0.408	0.489	

Table 3: Multigroup Structural Analysis (Comparison between Male and Female)

		Std Beta (Male)	Std Beta (Female)	t-value (Male)	t-Value (Female)	p-Value (Male)	p-Value (Female)
H1	Aesthetic -> Total Experience Quality	0.485***	0.176*	7.043	1.821	0.000	0.069
H2	Service Excellent -> Total Experience Quality	0.077	-0.036	0.801	0.490	0.423	0.624
H3	Social -> Total Experience Quality	0.004	0.172	0.057	1.618	0.954	0.106
H4	CROI -> Total Experience Quality	0.132*	0.234**	1.657	2.028	0.098	0.043
H5	Educational -> Total Experience Quality	0.223***	0.296***	3.036	4.257	0.002	0.000
H6	Escapism -> Total Experience Quality	-0.019	-0.068	0.208	0.681	0.835	0.496
H7	Total Experience Quality -> Attachment	0.473***	0.506***	6.128	7.085	0.000	0.000
H8	Total Experience Quality -> Advocate	0.545***	0.518***	6.594	7.520	0.000	0.000

*** indicates significance at a 99% confidence level
** indicates significance at a 95% confidence level
* indicates significance at a 90% confidence level

It is also found that education is a factor that affects Total Experience Quality for both male and female tourists with a positive relationship at a 99% confidence level toward Total Experience Quality. Besides that Total Experience Quality was found to have a significant positive impact on Attachment and Advocate for both male and female tourists with a significant positive relationship at a 99% confidence level.

5. Managerial Implications and Recommendations

This study found gender roles in factors affecting the total experience quality of tourists particularly in the eco-tourism industry. Thus, it is recommended that the service provider of the eco-tourism industry highlight aesthetics in attracting male tourists while focusing on customer return on investment in influencing female tourists. In addition, in targeting both male and female tourists, the service provider of the eco-tourism industry might highlight on educational aspect.

Since this study is limited to forest nature eco-tourism in Taman Negara, future study is recommended to observe another type of Eco-Tourism such as marine eco-tourism to get further validation on gender roles towards the relationship between factors affecting Total Experience Quality in Eco-Tourism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Aesthetics is deemed a huge difference between both groups, where it is more concerned with males as compared to female eco-tourists. Contrarily, CROI has more influence on total experience quality among female tourists as compared to the male eco-tourist. However, education was the main factor that significantly influenced positively to total experience quality for both groups females and males but it showed higher among female eco-tourists. Surprisingly Service Excellent, Social and Escapism did not influence their total experience quality for both genders. Finally, it could be seen through the result, that when the tourists had a positive total experience quality, they tended to be more advocates than attachments for both groups. These findings will be beneficial to the tourism industry and service providers in strategizing and improving their services.

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