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Research paper

Make it delightful: Customers' experience, satisfaction and loyalty in Malaysian theme parks

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ABSTRACT

Responding to the need of studies covering the interplay between customer experience and emotions within specific facets of the tourism industry, this study proposed a model to assess visitor experience and its effect on their delight, satisfaction and loyalty in Malaysian theme parks. Based on convenience sampling, a sample of 292 visitors at two theme parks in Malaysia was selected. Data was subjected to partial least squares analysis based on structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). Findings showed that all of the hypotheses were supported, indicating that physical setting, interaction with staff and interaction with other customers had a significant impact on both customer delight and satisfaction. Moreover, customer delight influenced customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. The results suggest that theme park managers need to pay attention to maintaining a good physical setting, managing their human resources well and managing the behaviour of other customers in order to ensure that their customers receive delightful experiences.

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1. Introduction

The global theme park industry has grown rapidly since the opening of Disneyland in Anaheim, California in 1955. By end of 2010, about 189.1 million people had visited the top 25 theme parks worldwide (Milman, Li, Wang, & Yu, 2012), a number greater than the volume of international tourists who visited North America, the Caribbean, Central America, and South America combined in 2011 (World Tourism Organization, 2012). This tremendous growth in the theme park industry has also been witnessed in Asia and the Pacific Rim. The Asian theme park attendance grew by 16.5% from 2007 to 2012, while visitor spending rose from \$6.4 billion to \$8.4 billion over that period (Tsang, Lee, Wong, & Chong, 2012). Asia is presently the second fastest growing segment of the worldwide amusement park industry and is home to four of the world's top 10 most-visited theme parks (International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions, 2012).

Malaysia is considered to be an ideal place for people to enjoy theme parks due to its facilitative environment and weather. Many theme parks have long been established in Malaysia, including Genting Highlands Theme Park, Sunway Lagoon Theme Park,

A'Famosa Water World, Cosmo's World Theme Park and Bukit Merah Laketown Resort. These theme parks offer fun and excitement to visitors (Aziz, Ariffin, Omar, & Evin, 2012). Newer theme parks include Asia's first LEGOLAND, which debuted in southern Malaysia in 2013, while a 20th Century Fox theme park is due to open in Malaysia in 2016 (Theme Park Post, 2014). The available evidence points to the continued development and increasing significance of the theme park industry in Malaysia. Dong and Siu (2012), for example, predict that attractions such as theme parks will continue to prosper, since people associate them with new and diverse vacation experiences, and theme parks offer the convenience of on-site accommodations, food services, recreation, shopping and other tourist services, as well as recreational and entertainment activities.

In Malaysia's intensely competitive marketplace, it is often assumed that the key to gaining an advantage lies in creating high-quality hedonic experiences that will lead to satisfied and loyal customers (Ali, Ryu, & Hussain, 2015). Traditionally, the literature has pinpointed customer satisfaction as an important antecedent to loyalty (Slatten, Krogh, & Connolly, 2011). More recently, however, scholars and practitioners have shifted their focus towards the concept of customer delight as a new strategy for shaping customer loyalty (Finn, 2005; Loureiro, Miranda, & Breazeale, 2014; Slatten et al., 2011). In so doing, scholars are challenging the supremacy of customer satisfaction in developing loyalty. Researchers consider emotions to be important outcomes

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of hedonic consumption experiences in the tourism industry, where many tourists are motivated to travel in the expectation they will receive pleasure and delight (Kao, Huang, & Wu, 2008; Ma, Gao, Scott, & Ding, 2013). Positive emotions relate to tourist satisfaction and intention to revisit in various sectors of the tourism industry, including theme parks, because of their continuous interaction with the physical and social environment during the consumption experience (Ali et al., 2015; Bigné, Andreu, & Gnoth, 2005). In this context, Loureiro et al. (2014) has postulated that customers' emotions, such as delight, are natural constituents of their experience. Indeed, 'Perhaps more than any other service industry, tourism holds the potential to elicit strong emotional and experiential reactions by consumer' (Loureiro et al., 2014, p. 168). The literature highlights customer experiences that emotionally influence people and ensure they regard their experience as 'delightful'. Customers store these experiences in their memories, so a close link between them and their delight exists (Johnston & Clark, 2001). Customers regard these delightful experiences as the core product offering because they can take away the memories they developed during consumption (Slatten et al., 2011). Hence, delightful experiences can be considered to be a vital determinant of customer loyalty.

The existing body of services research that focuses on the relationship between satisfaction, loyalty and intention to revisit have focused on the role of general emotions, framed broadly as positive and negative emotions (Hume & Mort, 2010; Koeing-Lewis & Palmer, 2014; Lin & Liang, 2011; Svari, Slatten, Svensson, & Edvardsson, 2011), ignoring the role of specific emotions, such as delight, along with its antecedents and consequences (Loureiro et al., 2014; Ma et al., 2013). Customer delight is defined as a customer's reaction to experiencing a product or service that provides an unanticipated level of value or satisfaction (Chandler, 1989). Based on this conceptualization, customer delight is related to, but distinct from, customer satisfaction, particularly in respect of its effect on customer loyalty (Hicks, Page, Behe, Dennis, & Fernandez, 2005; Kim & Mattila, 2013; Kim, Vogt, & Knutson, 2013; Loureiro, 2010; Oliver, 1997). Scholars such as Ma et al. (2013) and Crotts and Magnini (2011) have stated that customer delight is new to the literature, arguing that this necessitates further research into its relationship with other concepts such as satisfaction and loyalty. Knowledge of how customers' responses elicit delight would be useful in designing experiences to meet specified tourist needs (Ma et al., 2013). A recent study by Kim et al. (2013) also called for more research on satisfaction and delight as predictors of customer loyalty in the tourism context. They also recommended developing a framework that includes various factors that may influence customers' satisfaction, delight and loyalty. This study is a response to such calls, as it examines the relationships among customer experiences, delight, satisfaction and loyalty. As such, this study aims to examine the effect of customer experiences (both physical and social) on their delight, satisfaction with and loyalty to Malaysian theme parks.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The following section discusses the theoretical background and concepts that are central to the study. The next focuses on the conceptual model and discusses the relationships among the model elements, along with the research methodology and data collection. The final section consists of the findings, implications and suggestions for future research directions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Customer experience

The term 'experience' is often used to refer to product offerings

in service settings that involve hedonic consumption, for example in travel, restaurants, hotels and the arts (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). The term 'customer service experience', meanwhile, has gained a great deal of attention since Pine and Gilmore (1999) introduced it in their conceptualization of the 'experience economy'. Other researchers have conceptualized consumer experience as a psychological construct: a holistic and subjective response resulting from customer contact with the service provider that might involve a customer's cognition and affect (Altunel & Erkut, 2015; Li, Kim, & Wong, 2016; Palmer, 2010). Within this milieu, scholars believe experience to have some experiential aspects, as Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) theorized. In later research, Berry, Carbone, and Haeckel (2002) suggested that for service providers to compete, their services must satisfy and create positive customer experiences. Service providers do this by detecting clues that customers will leave during the buying process. Because of recent recognition in theory and practice of the customer experience, there is growing consensus that the concept requires a universally accepted definition that integrates different perspectives (Klaus & Maklan, 2012). Meyer and Schwager (2007) presented a related definition of customer experience: 'Customer experience is the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company. Direct contact generally occurs in the course of purchase, use, and service and is usually initiated by the customer. Indirect contact most often involves unplanned encounters with representatives of a company's products, service or brands and takes the form of word-of-mouth recommendations or criticisms, advertising, news reports, reviews and so forth' (p. 118). As the theme park industry becomes more service-oriented, offering more interactive experiences (Milman et al., 2012), understanding the concept of the customer's experience becomes more important (Dong & Siu, 2012). This study recognizes Meyer and Schwager's argument and adopts the definition of customer experience as the internal response to any direct or indirect contact with the theme park and its resources.

A review of the literature suggests various components of customer experience. Bitner (1992) introduced the term, 'servicescape' to denote the physical environment where a service process takes place. Similarly, Gupta and Vajic (1999) used the term 'interaction' to describe the elements that influence customer experience. Recently, Mossberg (2007) coined the term 'experience room' to describe the customer experience. In another conceptualization, Grove, Fisk, and Dorsch (1998) proposed the 'services theatre model', which portrays theme park services as theatre performances (Fisk, Rogers, Charness, Czaja, & Sharit, 2004), where actors (i.e. staff) are the people who deliver services to the audience (i.e. customers) in a setting (physical environment). The interplay between the actors, audience and setting shape the overall experience of customers. Walls, Okumus, Wang, and Kwun (2011) also discussed these three constituents of customer experience in their exploratory study on customer experiences in luxury hotels. This study also considers customer experience as a multi-dimensional and diverse construct, developed by various elements including: (i) the physical environment, (ii) interactions with staff, and (iii) interactions with other customers within the theme park.

2.1.1. Physical environment

Service providers in the hospitality industry have depended on the physical environment and atmosphere to create a great customer experience (Mossberg, 2007). Different authors have described the physical environment differently: Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) described it as something that outlines the tangible attributes of an intangible service or the service encounter. Bitner (1992), in coining the term 'servicescape' to connote the tangible aspects of the service encounter, identified

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