The Influence of Atmospheric Experience on Theme Park Tourist's Satisfaction and Loyalty in Malaysia

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Understanding atmospheric experiences is crucial in identifying the most satisfying factors that generate visitor loyalty. The main objective of this study is to describe and explain the atmospheric construct (ambience, interaction, and design); the construct of satisfaction and the construct of visitor loyalty. This study will be focusing on selected theme parks which are from southern, central, and northern Malaysia. This study focuses on what types of atmospheric experiences emotionally touch visitors at theme parks, especially the difference between Malaysian and Non-Malaysian visitors. The research data is based on the visitor visiting the prospective theme park. The outcome of this study will be a source of information for theme park management to enhance their understanding of the main contributors of visitor loyalty and to allow them to increase the quality of their services by creating a positive image of the theme park.

Key words: *Tourist, Loyalty, Atmospheric Experience, Satisfaction, Theme Park, Malaysia.*

Introduction

Theme parks in Malaysia have been selected among residents and tourists as one of the most popular sites for the purposes of leisure, recreation and entertainment. Theme Parks often symbolize a family trip vacation, as theme parks comprise activities and games that can cater for various age. Additionally, tourists' reasons for travelling to Malaysia are varied, but they include: beautiful nature such as the Manukan island in Sabah, a vast mix of traditional cuisine or music, historical places such as the famous Malacca, adventure tourism like in Perak which is popular for their water rafting at the Kampar river, and also leisure or theme

parks as an entertainment option for all ages and types, depending on the tourists' preferences (Abdullah et al., 2018).

Atmosphere can be classified as the ambience of the surrounding which at the same time seeks to create positive intentions, persuade the customer and attract them to purchase the products or services (Kotler, 1973; Abdulrasheed, 2017). It is regarded that well planned management, excellent ambience, well-organized and maintained equipment and facilities, and customer service are all part of atmosphere creation that leads to satisfied customers which are necessary in order to be competitive and sustain their business in the future. Gupta and Kumar (2009) also state that "customer satisfaction has become an important tool in developing customer satisfaction measures and establishing business processes that link quality with customer satisfaction".

Thus, tourists' satisfaction and loyalty must be taken seriously by theme park management in order to maximize their profit, but at the same time retain existing tourists' and also attract new target tourists. By knowing the level of tourists' satisfaction to atmospheric experiences provided, there would be a win-win situation to the tourists' benefit, which fulfills their needs and wants, and at the same time the theme park can improve their level of service and management to further satisfy tourists. It is important to satisfy tourists' needs and wants so their loyalty can be retained, this is necessary to remain competitive. At the same time the theme park can improve their level of service and management which allows for effective future planning in order to cope with changing needs and wants of tourists.

Problem Statement

Theme parks in Malaysia have been improving and in the state itself is looking at theme parks as serious matters to produce as they are being trusted to create positive contributions towards the economic growth for Malaysia. In January 2019, CEO of Integrated Theme Parks and Attractions and Chief Commercial Officer of TAR&H, Philip Whittaker, urged that as theme parks have to be nimble and adaptable with changing markets and trends, so as to attract strong visitation from both domestic and international visitors. In May 2018, the i-City management has highlighted a total investment of RM 100 million in the various rides and attractions by 2018 so as to ensure excellent experiences for tourists. This was a continuation from 2014, where the Group's Leisure business centers invested RM 70 million for enhancing the variety and various rides and attraction (Makhsun et al., 2018a).

Main tourist satisfaction measures, typically tied to service quality, have recently received much criticism by senior tourism academics (Ryan, 1995; Kozak, 2001; Pearce, 2005; Abdulsallam et al, 2016). The lack of importance placed on visitors' needs and wants, besides low service quality or lack of variety of fun thrills activities or facilities provided, creates a

major influence on the level of visitors' satisfaction and reduced the tendency of revisits. Hyoungeun et al., (2017) highlighted that customer satisfaction has been widely discussed and showed it to be one of the most critical factors that must be taken seriously in tourism academia.

Thus, there is a clear need to study what types of atmospheric experiences positively affect visitor satisfaction and generate visitor loyalty to the theme park. Overall happiness is said to depend much on satisfaction in different life domains (Glatzer, 2000; Makhsun et al., 2018b)). It is important for the theme park management to makes sure their tourists' are satisfied with the products and services that they offered.

Scope of Study

The scope of this study is the tourists of Sunway Lagoon, i-City, Legoland and Lost World of Tambun. This study assessed the level of tourists' satisfaction with their atmospheric experiences in Malaysian theme parks. Their experiences were recorded with regard to factors such as ambience, interaction provided by customer service personnel and the design of Sunway Lagoon, i-City, Legoland and Lost World of Tambun (Saudi et al., 2019). It involves tourists from different age levels, genders, nationalities, occupations and educations.

Sunway Lagoon is known as the one-stop place for fun, and caters for ages 8 to 80 and it provide over 90 attractions spread across 88 acres which are contained in six adventure zones including Water Park, Amusement Park, Wildlife Park, Extreme Park, Scream Park and Nickelodeon Lost Lagoon Asia.

I-City is popular for their digital lights and is located in Shah Alam. It also provides other attractions such as water world, snowalk, trick art museum, red carpet (wax museum), horror house and city walk (Sinaga et al., 2019). The customer expectations towards I-City attractions provide that the LED lights are how the I-City Shah Alam has come to be well known.

Legoland is situated in Nusajaya, Johor. Legoland consists of theme and water parks. Miniland is also part of the attraction, the miniature build based on well-known landmarks such as Petronas Twin Towers, the Merlion Statue, Wat Arun and Taj Mahal.

The Lost World of Tambun is situated in Ipoh, Perak. The water theme park is one of the biggest parks in Malaysia situated upon 40 acres. It is located at the end of Tambun Caves, which contain 5,000-year-old Neolithic cave paintings. The Lost World of Tambun consists of a water park, amusement park, adventure, petting zoo and hot springs. The Theme park is very popular among the Perak community itself especially for the hot springs, which is

beloved by Chinese people who subscribe for the annual fee membership at the park (Wnuk, 2017).

Research Questions

- What is the relationship between atmospheric experience and tourist satisfaction?
- What is the relationship between tourist satisfaction and tourist loyalty?

Research Objective

- To examine the relationship between atmospheric experience and tourist satisfaction
- To examine the relationship between tourist satisfaction and tourist loyalty

Research Hypothesis

This study embarks on the following hypothesis:

- H1: There is a relationship between atmospheric experience and tourist satisfaction
- H2: There is a relationship between tourist satisfaction and tourist loyalty

Literature Review

According Ryu & Han (2009) investing in the physical environment by creating ambience (such as lighting, music, color and aroma) and layout (such as the seating environment) especially at restaurants will enhance the dining experience as part of marketing tools which indirectly increases the level of customer satisfaction. Ayadi and Cao (2016) assert that an understanding of interaction is an important factor so that theme park management can properly observe the responses of children towards their facilities so they can broaden the variety of such. This will lead to to more fulfilment of children's' need and wants. Furthermore, Mehrabian and Russell (1974) determine that certain environments are able to elicit customers' feelings of pleasure. This is supported by the fact that excellent design of an environment may influence the tourist to remain or leave which will subsequently impact upon customer satisfaction and tendency of loyalty (Sypniewska, 2014).

F.Bigdeli (2014) found ambience, interaction and design contribute to the positive effect on the customer experience, and this positive result is a satisfied customer. Examples of this include the tremendous and happening music at the Sunway lagoon during the activities

which makes increased customer happiness during the activity and enhances their satisfaction level with the theme park. Ali, F., et al. (2016) identified the importance of having good staff at theme parks so as to deliver high levels of hospitality, which impact upon customer satisfaction during activities. Torres, et al., (2017) found that design elements, as well as interactions have positive relationships to feelings of joy (Saudi et al., 2019).

Jin, Lee, & Lee (2013) found that experience quality such as the uniquness of design has direct and indirect relationships towards performance quality, overall satisfaction and enhance the intention of revisit among the theme park visitors. Aziz et al., (2012) states the importance of understanding visitor satisfaction by utilizing information to fill their needs and wants, and identifies that this will enhance the satisfaction levels thru the atmopheric experience and create an increased the tendency to revisit.

Faizan et al., (2016) says interaction with the staff is the strongest contributor towards customer satisfaction, satisfied visitors will have a tendency to repeat visit and stay loyal. Dong & Siu (2012) found in their study on visitor feedback of Tokyo Disneyland, which claim that the park is unique in terms of their mix of cultural Japanese in food service, music and performance across the entire theme park, which contributes towards positive experiences especially with foreigners (Meyer and Meyer, 2016; Meyer and Meyer, 2017).

Research Methodology

This study will used SmartPLS version 3.2.7 software program for data analysis. The data will be operated and loaded through SPSS in order to perform the essential data statistical analysis to study the relationships between atmospheric experience and tourist loyalty, and answer the research questions. The collection of primary data was accomplished using a survey method instrument as to answer the study's research questions. The unit of analysis for this study involves visitors that have been to four selected theme park in Malaysia. For the questionnaire data, the researcher will keep data private and confidential and restricted to research purposes. Apart from the primary data collection, researchers had also been looking into secondary data collection which comes from published journals, articles from websites, press releases and books that related to the study. Below is the theoretical framework for this study (Sinaga et al., 2019).
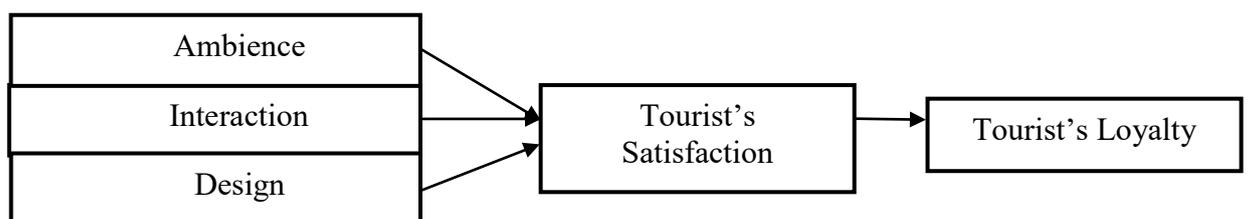
Theoretical framework is derived mainly from previous study by Slatten et al. (2009)

Findings

The first hypothesis includes direct relation of Independent variable to Mediating variables. It explains the assessment of relationship between atmospheric experience (Ambience, interaction and design) and satisfaction. Value of path coefficient for direct relation of ambience to loyalty (A-S) is 0.029, interaction to satisfaction (I-S) is 0.417 and design to satisfaction (D-S) is 0.352. This show the path coefficient for ambience to satisfaction (A-S) as small, interaction to satisfaction (I-S) and design to satisfaction (D-S) as large according to Cohen (1988) magnitude identification. Which according to Cohen (1988) suggested that path coefficient values of 0.02, 0.15 and 0.35 indicates as low, medium and high impact.

The result shows that ambience (A) is insignificant and negatively related to satisfaction (S), as result from (t-value: 0.669, p-value: 0.504). Interaction (I) is significant and positively related to loyalty (S) as a result from (t-value: 7.296, p-value: 0.000) and same goes to design. (D) is significant and positively related to loyalty (S), as a result of (t-value: 8.836, p-value: 0.000), this is considered significant as per standard criteria of Hair et al., (2016).

Therefore, assuming a 5% significance level, the researcher finds that the Interaction (I) and design (D) in the structural model are significant and supported, except for ambience (A) which is insignificant and not supported.

The second hypothesis includes direct relation of Mediating variable (MV) and Dependent variable (DV). It explains the assessment of relationship between satisfaction and loyalty. Value of path coefficient for direct relation of satisfaction to loyalty (S-L) is 0.730. The path coefficient for satisfaction to loyalty (S-L) is large and high impact according to Cohen (1988) magnitude identification. The result shows that for Hypothesis 2 (H2), satisfaction (S) is significant and positively related to loyalty (S), as a result of (t-value: 24.188, p-value: 0.000), this is considered significant as per standard criteria of Hair et al., (2016).

Therefore, assuming a 5% significance level, the researcher finds that the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty are significant and supported.

Conclusion

Understanding tourist satisfaction factors leads to creating long term relationships with customers and contributes positively to business growth. By making tourists' satisfied with most contributor factors identified in the atmospheric experience through their services or products offered, the potential of receiving repeat tourists' is high.

Furthermore, this present study makes a contribution to the service literature that calls for research on the relationship between the atmosphere of the service setting and its linkage to visitor emotional response in experiencing tourism and theme park attraction, Ali et al., (2018), Jamal et al., (2017), Chen et al., (2016), Dong & Siu (2013), Slatten et al., (2009), and Bigne et al., (2005). This study contributes to the literature by investigating the determinants of visitor loyalty within the context of theme park attraction in tourism industries in Malaysia.

The findings of this study contribute to the empirical knowledge on increasing visitor loyalty through use of preferred theme park attractions.

The findings of this study contribute to the empirical knowledge on increasing visitor loyalty through use of the theme park service industry. The study also validates the importance of satisfaction and atmospheric experience contributing towards the loyalty of the theme park visitor. The research also contributes to empirical knowledge by providing support for the argument that satisfaction partially mediates between the three variables and visitor loyalty.

In addition the data collected can be a source of information for the particular theme park to: keep track of their business strategies when identifying possible new tourism attractions, increase their tendency of having repeat tourists, and to attract potential tourists toward their theme park.

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