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CREATING MEMORABLE TOURISM EXPERIENCES THROUGH SERVICESCAPE DESIGN: A PROPOSED MODEL FOR ZOO NEGARA MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how different dimensions that form the overall servicescape of Zoo Negara Malaysia impact visitors' memorable tourism experiences (MTE). The servicescape concept, which describes the overall physical environment within a service setting that can be controlled by the organization, is adopted for the study. In other words, it is suggested that physical cues such as animal conditions, zoo layout, design and facilities may be used by zoo operators to create memorable tourism experiences. Aspects of MTE consist of knowledge, hedonism, meaningfulness, refreshment, local culture, novelty and involvement. A conceptual framework is proposed to investigate the relationship between zoo servicescapes and memorable tourism experience. It is expected that this study contributes towards existing academic research related to zoo tourism and provides insight into how zoo operators could design and manage their zoological facilities to increase visitor numbers.

Keywords: Memorable tourism experience, Servicescapes, Zoo tourism, Zoo Negara.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, zoos were developed to provide amusement for visitors by showcasing animals in cages and enclosures (Hazudin, 2023; Huang et al., 2019; Smit & Wood, 2015; Tribe, 2004; Xu, 2020). Many zoos and animal-based attractions are actually captive-setting facilities, whereby animals are confined to inadequate or inappropriately small enclosures. However, the public has come to expect zoos to place more of a premium on animal welfare. They want to see infrastructure put in place to guarantee animals have adequate room to move around, opportunities to engage in natural behaviours, nutritional support, and a safe environment in which to reproduce. As Malaysia's largest zoo, Zoo Negara encompasses 110 acres of land. In the year 2022, it welcomed almost 600,000 visitors exceeding the original goal of 450,000 visitors (Malaysia Now, 2022). Zoo Negara received RM9.86 million in aid from the government between 2018 and 2022, in which RM8.5 million was for operating costs while RM1.36 million was to cover animal food, husbandry management and medicines (The Star, 2023b). Visitor numbers have been rising at the end of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic and it is paramount that Zoo Negara maintains such encouraging statistics. One of the ways to increase visitor numbers is to ensure that they have a memorable experience and this is where the servicescape plays an important role.

Bitner's (1992) servicescape framework will serve as the theoretical basis for this investigation into the current state of zoo design. It is proposed that various servicescape dimensions have an effect on MTEs since physical, tangible elements can be purposely manipulated to influence employee and customer actions (Bitner, 1992). In other words, employees' and customers' actions, opinions, and perspectives can be shaped by the servicescapes they encounter (Ezeh & Harris, 2007). As service providers, zoos have an obligation to understand the significance of servicescape in creating MTEs. According to MTE studies by Kim et al. (2012), individuals look back fondly on their travels when they can recall many different facets of their experiences. Their findings demonstrated that a tourism experience that is memorable usually features aspects such as involvement, local culture, knowledge, hedonism, meaningfulness, refreshment, and novelty. As their study focused on developing a measurement scale specifically for MTE in a resort hotel setting, the constructs that make up the MTE dimensions may not be the same as other service settings.

As for zoos and other tourist attractions that feature animals, it is important to strike a balance between providing visitors with an experience that is a purely enjoyable (hedonic) and providing them with purely informative (knowledgeable) and edifying experiences (novelty). Memorable animal encounters and interactions during visits to the zoo play a role in increasing visitor satisfaction, which may influence their intention to revisit as well as to recommend to family and friends (Rashid Radha et al., 2021). It is also important that opinions of zoo visitors are taken aboard because their views could assist in ensuring continuous enhancement of the zoo experience. Consultation with zoo visitors need to be carried out to know if having animals in an enclosed setting is actually beneficial or even acceptable to them. Guo and Fennel (2024), Hazudi et al. (2023), Luck and Gross (2016), Woods (2015) and Xu (2020) reported that visitors enjoyed zoo experiences that involve direct interaction with the animals, learning about them and viewing the many types and species of wildlife. Negative experiences involved poor management of zoo facilities and services, as well as mistreatment of animals. In this paper, the main objective is to explore how various dimensions of the servicescape influence memorable tourism experience of zoo visitors. A conceptual framework is proposed to highlight the research variables that form zoo servicescape dimensions as well as MTE dimensions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE)

Memorable tourism experiences are experiences which may be generated and recalled after a trip has ended (Zhang et al., 2018). The term MTE is also often used as an abbreviation for memorable tourism, which refers to experiences being recalled after the event in question has taken place (Coudounaris & Staphit, 2017). A measurement scale that was tailored exclusively for MTEs was devised by Kim et al. (2012). Their findings showed that respondents who believe that they have had a memorable tourism experience are likely to recall numerous aspects of the encounter, including knowledge, hedonism, meaningfulness, refreshment, involvement, novelty and local culture (Kim et al., 2012). These seven dimensions are regarded as the MTEs most commonly adopted in previous research.

In a study conducted by Thoo et al. (2019) on Zoo Negara Malaysia, the previously mentioned seven MTE dimensions were utilised to investigate the factors that led to the occurrence of memorable zoo experience. These include (i) knowledge (information, facts or experiences known by an individual), (ii) hedonism (pleasurable feelings), (iii) meaningfulness (doing something important and valuable), (iv) refreshment (the state of being refreshed), (v) local culture (a good impression about local people), (vi) novelty (a feeling of newness resulting from having a new experience), and (vii) involvement (the degree to which an individual is involved in the tourist experience). Previous research demonstrated that different components of the same wildlife encounter have distinct effects on the visitor experience. In the context of zoos, providing the animals with an environment which is similar to their natural habitat is very important. Additionally, visitors should also be able to get a good look at them. This will increase the likelihood that guests will have a positive experience at the zoo (Leubke et al., 2016). The presence of animals that appear sick, lethargic, and are deprived of their natural surroundings would contribute to a less positive impression (Musa et al., 2015).

Understanding Servicescape Dimensions

The term servicescape was originally coined by Bitner in 1992. The term servicescape is used to describe man-made, physical surroundings as opposed to the natural or social environment. Therefore, the term servicescape is frequently used to refer to the actual physical environment, which includes a variety of components such as the general layout, design, signage, and décor. More specifically, Bitner (1992) argued that the dimensions of the servicescape are the following: (i) ambient circumstances, (ii) spatial arrangement and functionality, and (iii) signs, symbols, and artefacts. The first servicescape dimension, which is ambient circumstances, includes the vast majority of the intangible elements that are nonetheless recorded in our subconscious such as playing music in a cafe to put customers in a more relaxed mood. Secondly, for spatial arrangement, there are visual cues provided by the interplay of space and function. In the context of restaurant's table configuration, for instance, is designed to give diners some personal space. Thirdly, details about signs, symbols, and artefacts that refer to or point toward a specific location are provided. Bitner (1992) laid down the foundational conceptualization of the servicescape in a theoretical manner, which was not based on empirical evidence or any contextual settings. Previous studies which used Bitner's (1992) servicescape framework mostly adopted a quantitative approach (Selem et al., 2023; Turley & Milliman, 2000; Hooper et al., 2013; Lockwood & Pyun, 2019; Chui et al., 2010).

Servicescapes are essential because they have a significant impact on the behaviour, perceptions, and attitudes of customers (Bitner, 1992). For example, better levels of client satisfaction with the service provider would result from maintaining a clean and sanitary atmosphere for providing the service. Thus, it is of the utmost importance for service providers to take into consideration and understand how servicescapes play a role in influencing the perspective and satisfaction of customers. Depending on different service settings and contexts, the servicescape dimensions have different effects on customer's evaluation of their experience. In the context of beach resorts, it is the interior and exterior design of the resort that creates an impressive and memorable image in the minds of the guests as it represents the resort's identity and style (Selem et al., 2023). On the other hand, in a retail shop setting, customers base their evaluation on the social aspects and ambience of the retail store (Turley & Milliman, 2000). In another research focusing on retail shops, the dimensions of servicescapes that influenced overall service quality and behavioral intention were employee service quality, ambience, space, hygiene, design and equipment (Hooper et al., 2013).

In a study carried out within the context of city hotels, the servicescape dimension that fostered a memorable guest experience were aesthetic factors (Lockwood & Pyun, 2019). Findings showed that these aesthetic factors such as interesting interior design ideas (e.g. furniture style, fabrics used, pictures/photos, ornament, flowers, flooring) and impressive architectural features (e.g. exterior), can be used to impress the guests during their stay. Other dimensions of the hotel servicescape were atmosphere, functionality, spaciousness and physiological conditions. A servicescape study within a national park setting was carried out by Chui et al., (2010). The study was conducted to examine how servicescapes affected visitor's behaviours. The respondents rated the importance of the following servicescape factors; (i) Friendliness of the local people (ii) Quality of the natural scenery, landscape and environment (iii) Convenience and access to local transport and (iv) Cleanliness and hygiene at the park. This suggests that providing the right servicescape to visitors would improve visitor experience at the national park.

Arnould et al., (1998) argued that servicescapes are purposely designed places which aim to produce commercially significant actions. Their seminal paper on the staging of wilderness servicescapes showed that in the context of animal-based attractions, substantive staging takes place by physical creation of contrived environments. In other words, bird cages and safari parks are presented and staged for the public to enjoy. Communicative staging also takes place in which there is a transmission of servicescape meanings from service provider to customer. Examples include training zookeepers to offer interpretation or explanation of animal behaviours. A more recent study relating to servicescapes within the context wildlife parks was carried out by Dybsand and Fredman (2021). Their study highlighted that when watching wildlife, five key factors made up the servicescape – focal species encounter, other wildlife settings, other participants, local souvenirs and surrounding and lastly, guiding and interpretation. However, since their research was carried out in a non-captive safari setting, the servicescape dimensions may not be the same as zoos. A well-designed zoo servicescape attracts many visitors. Xu (2020) reported that it is expected by the visitors that zoological facilities be designed so that services and facilities are appropriate for themselves and the animals. In Minkiewicz et al's (2009) study of an Australian zoo, they conceptualized the servicescape concept into three dimensions which are (i) facility aesthetics, (ii) layout accessibility and (iii) cleanliness. As for the present research, Bitner's servicescape dimensions are adapted and extended into five dimensions namely (i) layout, design and signage, (ii) exterior environment, (iii) cleanliness, (iv) employee characteristics and (v) animal welfare.

Zoo Tourism

Zoo tourism is defined as all displays of animals in captivity with the aim of promoting tourism (Nekolny & Fialova, 2018). According to the Southeast Asian Zoos Association (SEAZA,) zoos encompass a wide segment which includes zoological gardens, safari parks, bio-parks, public aquariums, bird parks, terrariums, insectariums and other collections of animals intended for public viewing for the purpose of education, scientific and conservation functions (Catibog-Sinha, 2008). In order to be categorised as a zoo, animal-based attractions must meet the basic definition and fulfil additional criteria such as a permanent place and long-term character, which excludes travelling animal shows and circuses (Worldwide Zoo Database, 2018). Animals that are kept in zoos must also be available for public viewing. Game preserves, for example, are not considered as zoos as wild animals live in a secure environment but the game preserve is not open to the public.

Zoology means the study of animals and is originally a Greek term (Smit & wood, 2015). Historically, modern zoos that were opened to all visitors started operating during the 18th and 19th centuries (Tribe, 2004). Most zoos operating after the 19th century were opened in big cities such as London and New York (Nekolny & Fialova, 2018). Nowadays, zoos can also be found in rural areas such as the countryside. Zoos are also considered a form of museum whereby the exhibits are alive (Mason, 2000). Just like museums, zoos, have a purpose to educate, have professional staff and are frequently non-profit-making. The existence of zoos, aquariums and wildlife centres offer the public a chance for them to view, get a closer look as well as interact directly with animals (Huang et al., 2019, Luck & Gross, 2016). Modern zoos are considered an attractive tourism destination as visitors may interact more closely with the animals (Xu, 2020). Besides being a tourist attraction, zoos also play a role in promoting pro-environmental messages to the public through their ability to connect people with wildlife (Ollerenshaw, 2020). In this research, zoos are defined as public parks which display animals, primarily for the purposes of recreation or education (Fennell, 2013).

Early zoos used cages to display wild animals and grouped them to emphasize species identification and classifications (Woods, 1998). In 1826, Sir Stamford Raffles established the first zoological garden in the world (Turley, 1999). Exotic species brought back by the British were from Malaya and were placed in the zoological garden for the scientific study of animals. However, as funding became scarce, this scientific role of zoos was no longer prioritized as much. This led to the concept of charging entrance fees to support the zoo's collection, research and education activities (Ballantyne et al., 2007). Zoos are now major sites for recreation and leisure activities which account for much of their popularity. Many zoos all over the world have undergone extensive renovations and service upgrades to better address animal welfare concerns and promote biodiversity conservation (Catibog-Sinha, 2008). This has opened up learning opportunities for visitors to find out more about animal behaviours, natural habitats and characteristics. If zoos are to be successful and sustainable, their operations must take into account a number of critical factors. The greatest difficulty comes from providing for the animals' needs and rights while also giving visitors an unforgettable experience. A happier, more satisfied visitor is more likely to return and tell their friends and family about their experience, and these outcomes may be influenced by memorable encounters with wildlife.

Dybsand and Fredman (2021), Guo and Fennell (2024) and Hazudin et al.'s (2023) research suggest that zoos can increase their popularity by recreating natural habitats as accurately as possible. For this reason, zoos have a responsibility to their visitors and the animals they house to provide exceptional care and to promote natural behaviours in natural settings. Encounters with animals that will stay in a person's memory contribute to their overall level of pleasure as a tourist, which may subsequently encourage them to return

or to suggest the attraction to their family and friends. The perspectives and ideas of members of the general public who visit the zoo are significant because they point the way towards the ongoing enhancement of the visitor experience. To determine whether the general public derives the full benefits of keeping the animals in captivity, it is necessary to engage with the public. Findings from Christou and Nikiforou's (2021) study indicated that although there is concern among tourists regarding the animal's welfare and that the animals look unwell and "unhappy", they still visit zoos for leisure and educational purposes.

Besides captive settings, animal-based attractions are also commonly categorized into semi-captive conditions such as wildlife parks, and totally in the wild such as safaris and national parks (Shani & Pizam, 2008). Previous studies conducted by Tsaur et al. (2006), Woods (2015) and Hazudin (2023) showed that the greatest zoo experiences for visitors typically entail interacting with various animals, gaining knowledge, and observing a broad variety of animals. The inadequate management of confined animals, the poor administration of the facility, and the threatening behaviour of animals were the primary factors contributing to the negative experiences. For the present research, the main aim is to identify how zoo servicescapes help towards providing tourism experience that they will remember for a long time.

The Context: Zoo Negara Malaysia

One of the natural attractions offered to domestic and international visitors to Malaysia is Zoo Negara, which is located just five kilometres outside of Kuala Lumpur. It is a popular attraction due to its strategic location and the variety of animals from all over the world (Musa, 2015). The zoo is managed by the Malaysian Zoological Society and was officially opened on 14th November 1963. This non-governmental organization (NGO) initiated and helped develop Malaysia's first local zoo. Zoo Negara is famous for the variety of animal species from around the world. Currently, Zoo Negara accommodates more than 5137 animals from 476 species of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish (The Star, 2023a). Past research on Zoo Negara have focused on visitor experience in general (Musa et al. (2015), financial benchmarking (Shanmugaretnam (2018), tourist satisfaction (Izzah et al., 2020), performance of services and facilities (Bahari & Lin, 2016) and giant panda conservation (Thoo et al., 2019). Their findings point towards the need for Zoo Negara to sustain its operations by increasing its visitor numbers. Suggestions include better marketing initiatives and technology adoption (Shanmugaretnam et al., 2018), improvements in facilities and services being offered (Bahari & Ling, 2015; Zailani et al., 2020) and encouraging visitors to spend more time and money at the zoo (Musa et al., 2015)

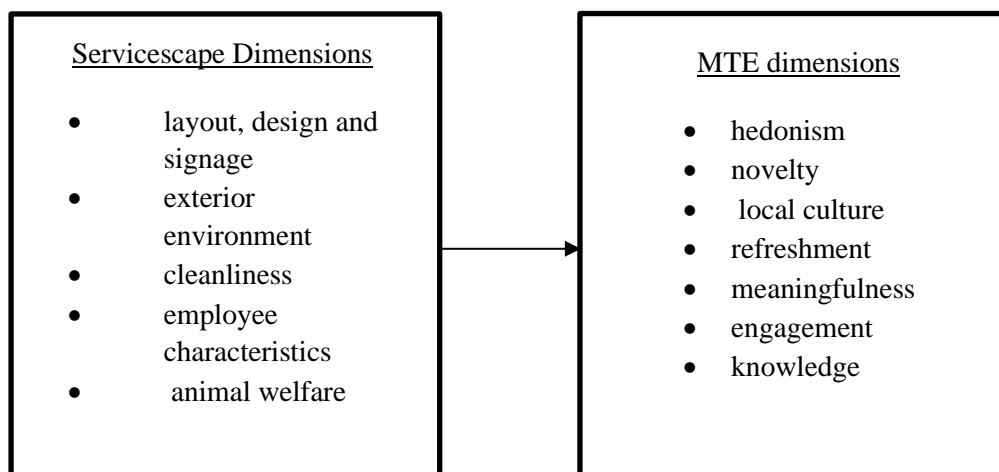
Zoo Negara needs to ensure that visitors are satisfied with their zoo experience as poor visitor numbers may lead to Zoo Negara not being able to sustain itself from ticket sales. The zoo may need to rely heavily on public and private funding. Operating a zoo costs millions and it is often difficult to generate revenue solely through admissions tickets to cover the costs of housing, maintaining and staffing the zoo. During the Covid-10 pandemic, Zoo Negara needed public and private funding to cover costs amounting RM1 million a month to cover its operating expenses (Hazudin et al., 2023). From a sustainable tourism perspective, it is important for all tourist attractions to support their existence through generating funds from visitor spending. A self-sustaining zoo should be financially independent while offering the best experience to its visitors (Musa et al., 2015). Zoo Negara needs to attract new visitors as well as encourage repeat visits by ensuring that visitors have an informative, entertaining and educational experience during their visit. Therefore, this research is timely as findings could indicate how physical cues can be used to create competitive advantage for Zoo Negara. Additionally, the study may provide insight into how Zoo Negara can continue operating as a self-sustaining tourism attraction.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In order to examine the relationship between servicescapes and memorable tourism experience (MTE), an initial conceptual framework was developed. A number of studies have showed that there is a relationship between servicescapes and MTE. The independent variables, which are categorized under servicescape dimensions include (i) layout, design and signage (ii) exterior environment (iii) cleanliness (iv) employee characteristics and lastly (v) animal welfare. The dependent variables, which reflect MTE are listed as (i) hedonism (ii) novelty (iii) local culture (iv) refreshment (v) meaningfulness (vi) engagement and (vii) knowledge. Once data is collected, this initial framework may change as potentially more dimensions may be added. This is due to the fact that previous research have not examined the relationship between servicescapes and MTE in the context of animal-based attractions such as zoos.

Figure 1

Proposed Conceptual Framework



METHODOLOGY

For this study, a netnographic approach is proposed. Netnography is a research tool for collecting and analysing user-generated content, which is based on online information (Heinomen & Medberg, 2018). It is an advantageous qualitative, interpretive research methodology that allows the generation of more spontaneous, richer and deeper sharing of experiences (Tavakoli & Mura, 2018). According to Whalen (2018), netnography is often applied in hospitality and tourism research because of the experiential and service-centred nature of these industries. Data will be collected through TripAdvisor reviews as it is one of the most popular and largest travel websites for tourists all over the world (Xu, 2020). Tripadvisor offers the researcher valuable data as visitor comments might point towards servicescapes that are memorable to the visitors.

Visitors' online reviews may also provide insight into how zoo experiences can be further improved leading to the achievement of competitive advantage. In terms of authenticity, integrity and reliability, Xu (2020) demonstrated that TripAdvisor has a valid checking system that ensures the comments and experiences being shared are genuine. The Tripadvisor reviews chosen for this study will focus on keywords that indicate Zoo Negara visitors expressing their enjoyment at the zoo. Using content analysis,

the coding and categorisation of data will be carried out to identify recurring themes and patterns. In other words, keywords such as ‘memorable’, ‘unforgettable’, ‘wonderful’ and ‘amazing’ are considered interpretive codes that emphasize favourable comments indicating MTEs. For each MTE dimension, coding will also be carried out to analyse which aspects of the servicescape relating to the MTE is being mentioned in the TripAdvisor comments.

CONCLUSION

Zoos are one of the most visited tourist attractions worldwide. Zoos are places where animals are kept and displayed for educational purposes, as well as act as centres for biodiversity research and conservation efforts. This paper is a work-in-progress in which further research will be carried out to test the proposed conceptual framework by collecting empirical data from individuals who have visited Zoo Negara Malaysia. In terms of managerial implications, this research could assist Zoo Negara Malaysia in understanding how to draw in new visitors and keep the ones they already have coming back. Zoo Negara needs to provide visitors with an engaging and educational experience. This study is timely because it sheds light on how visitors experience zoo servicescapes and how each dimension of the servicescape affects visitors' tourism experience.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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