

Visitor-Centric Marketing Approach Driving Theme Park Customer Patronage: Unveiling the Post Covid-19 Pandemic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The onset of Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a drop in visitor ship and income causing many theme parks to fail in sustaining their business. In reciprocating to this pandemic, Malaysia's theme park industry, have become more innovative in adapting to this rapidly changing new norm. This research ascertained the influence of service quality, promotion and price on customer patronage of theme parks during Covid-19. Data were collected from 340 respondents. Convenience sampling technique was used to select the respondents and a close ended structured questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale was used for data collection. Findings from this study revealed that pricing and service quality has a strong influence on theme park patronage. This calls for management of theme parks to innovate and redesign their service quality dimensions and conduct consistent training in theme park service quality delivery to familiarize service delivery employees of their roles in the service delivery process. Theme parks too should inject flexibility in their ticket pricing to make them affordable. Such visitor-centric marketing approach can drive customer satisfaction, create positive word-of-mouth among visitors to increase patronage to the theme park and eventually heighten profits.

Keywords: customer patronage, price, promotion, service quality, theme park

INTRODUCTION

The entertainment industry comprises of film, music, media, sports, theme parks, water parks, zoos, museums, cultural events, performance arts, video games as well as nightclubs (Spacey, 2017). It is projected that the global Media and Entertainment market would reach a staggering US\$3,550,210 million by 2028, reflecting a remarkable compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 5.9% during the forecast period (Business Research Insight, 2023). As a sub-segment of the entertainment industry, theme parks have progressively grown into one of the most popular forms of tourist attractions (Lien, 2019). Among attractions offered by theme parks include sideshows, cultural displays, educational presentations, celebrations with firework, food and beverages. Many modern theme parks feature a strong theme and multiple sub-themes that primarily influences visitor experience (Bae et al., 2018).

Thus, the architecture, landscaping, rides, performances, food services, costumed workers, and merchandising are all structured around the adopted theme.

From the business perspective, theme parks are a significant revenue source for the Malaysian tourism industry as Malaysia has been positioned as a top South-East Asian tourist destination and theme park capital before the outbreak of Covid-19 (Fany Astari et al., 2020). A tabulation of 10 popular theme park operators in Malaysia puts the revenue of these players close to RM800 million in 2013 (Ganesan, 2014). However, the onset of Covid-19 has hampered the operations of theme parks where visitor ship and income dropped up to 80% resulting in business losses totalling RM280 millions monthly (Ganesan, 2020). According to the President of Malaysian Association of Amusement Theme Parks & Family Attractions (MAATFA) it may take one to two years for the industry to recover from the Covid-19 impact. Stemming from this, theme park operators are forced to rethink, strategize and navigate their business in a more visitor-centric direction for their sustainability (Motti, 2020).

Studies on theme parks have focused on theme park service quality and customer satisfaction, delight, loyalty, visitors' experiences and revisit intention (Xie Julin & Punnuch Chaipinchana, 2022, Iyanna, S. et al. 2022 and Monica Bayang et al., 2022). Mohd Haniff (2021) explored the role of marketing mix in delivering customer service satisfaction in the theme park industry. A study on modes of promotional marketing campaign attracting theme park visitors was undertaken by Lien (2019). Xiaohuan_Wang et al. (2020) studied theme park visitors' perception of service value and price fairness in a scenario-based experiment. Consequently, a study on tourist perceived value, place attachment and patronage intention to theme parks was established by Fang Yang (2022). The selective focus of this study on service quality, promotion and pricing was based on their emphasis in past studies on theme parks. However, past studies lack focus on linking them to customer patronage and thus this study has fill in this gap. Hence, the objective of this study is to ascertain the influence of service quality, promotion and pricing in driving theme park customer patronage (Fig.1). The novelty of this study lies in the timing when it was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic aimed to offer insights to theme park operators on potential visitor-centric marketing approaches available to drive customer patronage in rebuilding their theme park business in Malaysia's post Covid-19. Key sections of this article include an introduction, literature review, methodology, findings and discussion as well as conclusion and recommendation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Visitor-Centric Approach

Visitor-centric as postulated by Solis (2022) and McGinn (2023) begins with understanding customers or visitors and making investments in technology, processes, operations, and people to transform how they meet customers current and future expectations, as they evolve over time. The focal point of visitor-centricity is to make theme park visitors their centre-point when making innovative decisions pertaining to products, services and experiences aimed at delivering satisfaction, loyalty, and retention. As a core value, the visitor-centric approach makes theme park visitors their top priority where employees are empowered to put visitors first in their thinking and at the forefront of planning, decision making, and day-to-day operations. If enforced effectively this value will embed trust among theme park visitors that they will receive enjoyable experience upon patronizing the theme park (Sheykin, 2023). In pursuit of this trust, being truly empathetic towards visitors is important as trust emerges from the way theme park visitors are treated and grows from integrity, humanity, honesty, and competence of employees (Solis, 2022). Building on the foundation of trust can also lead to increased visitor loyalty.

However, to genuinely enforce visitor-centricity requires the transformation and integration of all theme park functions affecting visitors and the institution of a culture that rewards behaviour that is aligned with visitor satisfaction, loyalty and retention. This entails relentlessly searching for avenues to optimize visitor's experience across every touch point of their theme park journey to deliver unexpected value. Consequently, efficient, and effectively implemented visitor-centric approach can help organizations stay ahead of competition and achieve long-term success by identifying and tapping emerging trends and new opportunities (Wong, 2023).

Customer Patronage

Customer patronage is consumer's intent to buy from a firm and is influenced by factors such as service quality, advertising, pricing and alike. Customers are less likely to be swayed by promotional offers from competing businesses when their patronage towards a specific business is high (Butaney & Stockmyer, 2014). Satisfied customers are more likely to become a repeat customer and may even spread positive word-of-mouth which in turn can improve the businesses image and drive patronage. In this study customers are theme park visitors. With the increasing number of theme parks, expansion of group travel and decreased travel costs, the entertainment industry has grown more competitive, with visitors having more options of moving from one place to another to enjoy leisure services (Fotiadis & Kozak, 2017). In reciprocating to this scenario theme park management must be visitor-centric by continuously elevating the quality, safety, security and uniqueness of their service, at the right price and with consistent promotion to attract visitors to their park (Anetoh & John, 2016).

A study by Than Naing (2019) unveiled that visitor experience has a positive effect on perceived value which in turn influences visitor satisfaction and patronage intention. Shukla (2017), ascertained theme park visitor's satisfaction based on their experience at the park. In addition, Rahman et al. (2016), in their study measured customer patronage of a theme park as their first entertainment option. Lien (2019) studied the influence of promotional marketing campaign in attracting theme park visitors. Consequently, Yang (2022) examined tourist perceived value, place attachment and patronage intention to theme parks. To sum, these studies have focused on theme park patronage and patronage intention driven by visitor satisfaction, experience and value perception, all of which focused primarily on dimensions of theme park service quality. However, Lien (2019) focused on promotion as a driver of patronage while Yang (2022) focused on place attachment, value perception and patronage intention. In contrast, this study has ascertained the influence of key visitor-centric marketing approaches namely theme park service quality, promotion and pricing simultaneously on theme park patronage. Thus, improving on previous theme park studies that have examined marketing approaches independently which has led to their inability to ascertain the magnitude of influence these approaches potentially have on theme park patronage, specifically during the Covid-19 period.

Service Quality

Zeithaml et al. (2018) defined service quality as a method of assessing consumers perceive qualities such as reliability, assurance, responsiveness, empathy and tangibles. There is immense potential to develop the theme park business profitably through continuous and improved quality of service to encourage visits, repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth. According to Jamie Lo (2015), besides the environment and facilities of a theme park, service quality is an important factor in keeping visitors happy. Parasuraman et al. (1988), proposed the SERVQUAL service quality framework comprising of 22 elements, which has been adapted to service quality of theme parks. Reliability of theme park services focused on providing services as promised. The responsiveness dimension of theme park service quality emphasized on keeping customers informed about when services will be performed, providing prompt service, willing to assist customers and ever ready to respond to customers enquiries. Next, the assurance dimension measured employee's ability to instill confidence in customers, making

them feel safe throughout their transaction, consistently courteous and are knowledgeable in responding to customer's questions. Giving customers individual attention, dealing with customers in a caring manner, having the customer's best interests at heart, understanding the needs of customers and maintaining convenient business hours are all examples of empathy. Lastly, tangibility refers to modern equipment, visually appealing facilities, neat, professional appearance and visually appealing materials associated with theme park service (Kobiruzzaman, 2021).

Albattat and Romli (2017) in their study on theme park service quality adopted the SERVQUAL framework with some adaptations where assurance was measured through the availability of first aid station. Tangibles addressed how well-maintained are the theme park facilities, equipment and machinery, safety and convenience of theme park facilities, equipment and machinery for customers. Reliability, was measured by the usefulness of information on the website and as well as usefulness of the park's visitor map. Consequently, responsiveness assessed how responsive and helpful staffs were at the theme park while empathy measured staff sufficiency to manage visitors queue at the theme park. Fotiadis and Kozak (2017) discovered that responsiveness, assurance, and empathy are among the key service quality dimensions that drives theme park visitors' satisfaction. Milman (2009) uncovered crucial elements customers sought when visiting a theme park were food services, level of theming, and park design features. In short, past studies on theme park service quality had adopted the SERVQUAL framework but measures for each service quality dimension were adapted to reflect the nature and extent of service rendered by theme parks.

Promotion

Promotion is communication that informs the market of new products/services offered, price change, service availability, correcting false impressions, reducing customer fears, creating a business image, attracting consumers, convincing buyers and reminding customers of the business (Alexandrescu & Milandru, 2018). Khalid Suidan Al Badi (2018) opines that promotion is the most powerful element in the marketing mix where successful businesses thrive on to showcase their products, attract more customers and encourage purchase. Theme parks communicate the park's core values, objectives, and mission through their promotional message (Ivy, 2019). Theme parks too attract customers through advertising, brochures, press, public relations, sponsorship and the Internet (Lien, 2019). For a speedy recovery during this post pandemic period, Dubois and Dimanche (2021) advocated the pursuit of aggressive promotion to increase customers perceived value. In addition, online and offline theme park promotion too can drive theme park visitor ship. Digital marketing is a notably successful and cost-effective technique to advertise a theme park. Consequently, Manoukian (2020) advocated videos are effective and engaging to create a message. Recent studies have revealed that videos are 600% more successful than print and direct mail combined. Henceforth, theme parks must learn to reinvent their visual marketing techniques to remain relevant in the digital era at par with world-renowned theme parks to attract a whole new generation of visitors.

Consequently, Topcuoglu's study (2014) addressed the short-term and long-term effectiveness of online sales promotion tools. Sharifah et al. (2019) on the other hand, uncovered the influence of discounts offered by theme parks and promotion information in driving theme park visitors. A study by MariGowda (2019), ascertained how well display board informs customers about promotional offers by the theme park. To sum it is imperative that theme park promotion attract potential visitors and increase their patronage intention through promotional deals. Past studies have hinged on a variety of online and offline promotional tools and media to drive theme park patronage. It is evident that promotional tools are capable of informing potential visitors of a theme park offering (such as videos, display board and direct mail) while discounts drive theme park patronage.

Price

Price, is customer's willingness to forego or compromise to acquire a particular service or product (Murphy, 2021). Pricing for theme parks is challenging because the price worthiness of the entertainment has to be clear to potential visitors (Barros & Sousa, 2019). Visitors of theme parks are mainly concerned about the cost of admission, food, beverage and souvenirs within the park, making them important in determining patronage (Lewinson, 2017; Lo & Leung, 2015). This calls for optimal pricing where the expectations of consumers are met while satisfying the park's profit goals. Theme parks commonly employ a good dynamic pricing strategy due to the high seasonality of the entertainment industry (Shpanya, 2021; Foutz, 2017). Dynamic pricing is a variable pricing technique that takes into account factors such as market demand, seasonality and is efficient to extract customer excess and boost company profits (Li et al., 2018).

Past study by Idoko et al. (2019) measured pricing through reasonable entrance fee and provision of good product and services for the price charged. Jin et al. (2016), assessed if price of food sold at theme parks were reasonable. Szu-Ju Lin (2012) determined customers perception of marketing strategies and parking fees imposed on patrons of a Taiwan based theme park. A study by Hedhli et al. (2017), determined the extent to which customer spend their money without a great deal of hesitation on value received at a theme park. Than Naing (2019) on the other hand, measured price by determining if games offered at the theme park were economical. Consequently, Koksai (2020), ascertained pricing by comparing whether the price charged are cheaper than those of other theme parks. Past pricing related studies on theme parks have focused primarily on visitor's assessment of overall value received from the price paid, prices of complementors offered at the park such as food, parking etc. and competitiveness of price changed to other theme parks. These inclusions are highly appropriate as they are well aligned with visitors main concerned (cost of admission and consumption within the park) which significantly determines park patronage.

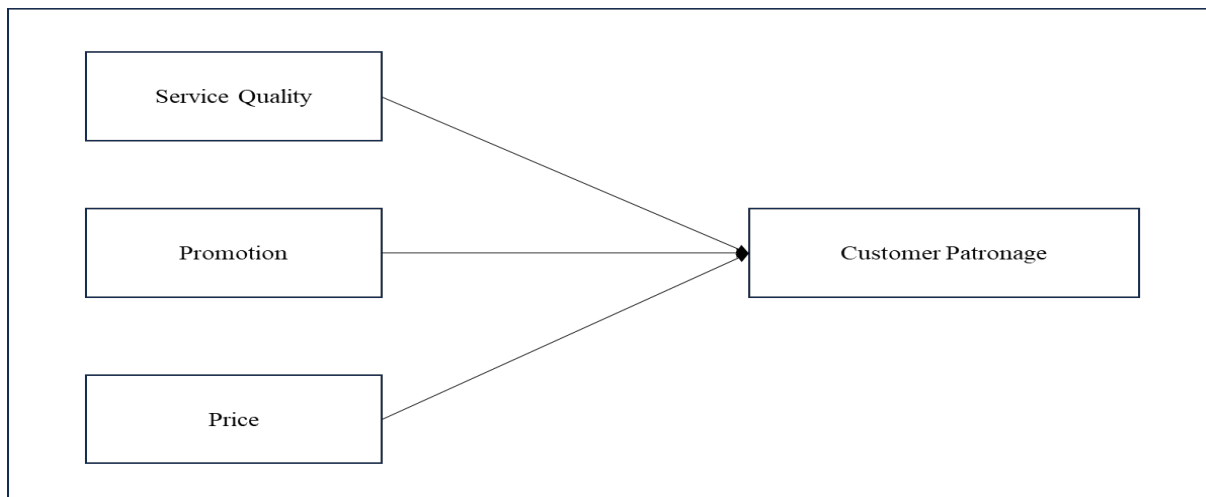


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of The Study

METHODOLOGY

To calculate the appropriate sample size needed, the Raosoft Sample Size calculator was used. With a confidence level of 95%, margin of error of 5% and population of 3000, the number of respondents needed for this study was 340. The population size was based on the average number of visitors per week during the pandemic where the theme park only operated for three days, while 95% confidence level is a generally accepted standard. The convenience sampling technique was used to select

respondents for the sample among guardians or parents of families with kids aged from two to twelve years old and have visited the theme park at least once within 2020-2021. This approach only included those who were available and reachable during the pandemic period. During the pandemic, the behavior of visitors was affected as many were concerned about safety and facilities offered at the theme park while those who are affected economically were more concerned about ticket price.

A close ended structured questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale and a neutral option was used in the survey form for data collection (Bhandari, 2020). Likert scale is widely used because it is one of the most dependable ways of evaluating views, perceptions, and behaviors. Using Likert scale too helped to increase the response rate of the survey since respondents were given a variety of choices that expresses their opinion and this saves time for them (Tripathi, 2021). The survey instrument had five sections. Section A, encompassed respondents demographics, section B focused on customer patronage (dependent variable) sections C, D and E were service quality, promotion and pricing imposed by the theme park (independent variables). Data on the independent and dependent variables were collected in the interval level of measurement. Prior to conducting the correlation and regression analysis data were transformed and summed. Result from the reliability analysis showed service quality attained the highest Cronbach's Alpha value of .889 followed by customer patronage .888 and price 0.811, indicating very good internal consistency for these variables. Promotion on the other hand, obtained a good internal consistency of .730.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Promotion attained the highest overall mean of 4.69, followed by price with an overall mean of 4.68 and 4.67 for service quality. It can be postulated that theme park visitors agreed that promotion, price and service quality does play a role in their theme park patronage decision (Table 1).

Table 1: Overall Mean and Standard Deviation for Service Quality, Promotion, Price and Customer Patronage of Theme Park

Variables	Mean	Std. Dev	Rating
Service Quality	4.67	0.52	3
Promotion	4.69	0.52	1
Price	4.68	0.58	2
Customer Patronage	4.68	0.55	

Results of the correlation analysis confirmed the presence of an association between service quality, promotion, price and theme park customer patronage at 0.000 level of significant. According to Jaadi (2019) a correlation coefficient of 0.50 to 0.70 implies a moderate positive correlation while a correlation coefficient of 0.30 to 0.50 indicates low positive correlation. Basing on this guideline it can be concluded, there was a moderate positive association of .616 and .563 between service quality, price and customer patronage of a theme park, followed by a low positive correlation between promotion and customer patronage of theme park (Table 2).

Table 2: Correlation Analysis for Service Quality, Promotion, Price and Customer Patronage of Theme Park.

		Customer Patronage	Service Quality	Promotion	Price
Customer Patronage	Pearson Correlation	1			
	Sig. (2 tailed)				
Service Quality	N	340			
	Pearson Correlation	.563**	1		
Promotion	Sig. (2 tailed)	.000			
	N	340	340		
Price	Pearson Correlation	.384**	.546**	1	
	Sig. (2 tailed)	.000	.000		
	N	340	340	340	
	Pearson Correlation	.616**	.601**	.321**	1
	Sig. (2 tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	340	340	340	340

** Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Results of the regression analysis (Table 3) showed a significant relationship of 0.05 between service quality, promotion, price and customer patronage of a theme park. The R-square was 0.447 while the adjusted R-square was 0.442, implying that 44% of the variance in theme park customer patronage was explained by service quality, promotion, and price. The significant level of these aforesaid variables are as follows: service quality (0.000), promotion (0.019) and price (0.000), while their Standardize Beta were 0.238 (service quality), 0.114 (promotion) and 0.436 (price) respectively. Thus, implying price, service quality and promotion have collectively influenced theme park patronage, with price being the strongest driver.

Price is the most important determinant for customers when deciding to visit a theme park (Lewison, 2017). Price applies to the admission fees, food, beverage, souvenir and facilities provided by the theme park. Most customers agree that entrance fees at theme parks is rather expensive, but the attractions and facilities provided are satisfying which in turn would drive future re-patronage. Nazrul (2016) asserted a good theme park is one that provides high-quality service and has a competitive advantage, resulting in a stronger visitor loyalty. These findings parallel those of Lien (2019), who uncovered service quality and price does influence theme park patronage. Consequently, a good promotion can attract more people to choose a theme park as their destination for entertainment. Amidst this post crisis period of Covid-19, theme parks should leverage on promotion to drive patronage. This concurs with Dubois and Dimanche (2021) who advocated, after a pandemic firms must begin aggressive recovery promotion to engage with their potential customers. To sum, a visitor-centric marketing approach hinging on promotion, fair pricing and excellent service quality could drive theme park patronage.

Table 3: Regression Analysis for Service Quality, Promotion and Price with Customer Patronage of a Theme Park.

Item	Standardized Beta	(t)	Significant (p)
Service Quality	.238	4.157	.000*
Promotion	.114	2.360	.019*
Price	.436	8.600	.000*
R-square			.447
Adjusted R-square			.442
F-Value			90.637
P-Value			.000

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study has concluded that pricing and service quality has a strong influence on patronage of theme parks. To compete in the theme park business after a crisis like Covid-19, requires a customer-centric

strategy to re-build patronage. Theme parks should inject flexibility in their ticket pricing and focus on affordability through special discounts for early birds during festive seasons, discount like free locker for the first few hours of visit or even free meal to drive patronage during weekdays especially for annual pass holders. Theme parks too need to innovate and redesign their service quality dimensions and conduct consistent training to familiarize service delivery employees on their roles in the service delivery process. Training can increase employee motivation and engagement, resulting in visitors having a better experience at the park. This visitor-centric approach can increase satisfaction, create positive word-of-mouth which eventually increase patronage and profit. Lastly, theme parks should invest on promotional activities to attract more visitors. User-generated content (UGC) is an approach capable of effectively promoting theme parks by engaging with followers on all social media platforms and gain their trust. Engaging social media influencers to share images of themselves pursuing activities at the theme park on their own social media too can attract their followers to the park.

A key limitation of this study centered on respondent's selection where only those who have visited the theme park at least once between 2020-2021 were chosen. This limited the study's respondents to those who are available and reachable during the pandemic period. In addition, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the behavior of visitor's was affected as many were concerned about safety and facilities offered at the theme park, thus their responses may be biased on areas of theme park service quality. Future studies could include both current and potential theme park visitors. A more comprehensive study could include other key marketing aspects such as placing, processes while service quality dimensions could be enlarged on dimensions involving people, physical evidence and service mix (basic and peripheral services).

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Nooraini, M., Raja Noor Diyana Raja Ezar, Ishamuddin and Syahira Nadia Sulaiman conceived and planned the survey instrument. Raja Noor Diyana Raja Ezar, Ishamuddin and Syahira Nadia Sulaiman carried out the survey and data preparation. Nooraini, Raja and Syahira contributed to the interpretation of the results. Nooraini, M. and Siti Zaleha took the lead in writing the manuscript. Siti Zaleha was responsible to edit and format the paper and ensure all are orderly for submission. All authors provided critical feedback and helped shape the research, analysis and manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

We certify that the article is the Authors' and Co-Authors' original work. The article has not received prior publication and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. This research/manuscript has not been submitted for publication nor has it been published in whole or in part elsewhere. We testify to the fact that all Authors have contributed significantly to the work, validity and legitimacy of the data and its interpretation for submission to Jurnal Intelek.

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