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# Exploring visitors' experience using strategic experiential modules (SEMs): the case of Zoo Negara, Kuala Lumpur

Ghazali Musa, Izzah Mohammad, Thinaranjeney Thirumoorthi, Sedigheh Moghavvemi and Azilah Kasim

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#### **Abstract**

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to explore the experiences of visitors using the strategic experiential modules (SEMs).

Design/methodology/approach - In this study, the authors analysed a total of 37 essays written by University of Malaya students who visited the attraction on 23 November 2013. The aim is to explore what constitutes the elements within the SEMs, pertaining to the students' visit. The results are potentially useful for future Zoo Negara marketing communication initiatives, as well as for the management to remedy the shortfalls which have hindered Zoo Negara from operating as a self-sustaining attraction.

Findings - The results confirmed the applicability of all five dimensions of the modules, which include both positive and negative elements. Of the five dimensions, THINK and SENSE were the most frequently

Originality/value - Though this study offers no theoretical contribution, it does demonstrate the applicability of the Schmitt theory on SEMs and the usefulness of such an application from the managerial perspective.

Keywords Malaysia, Perception, Experience, Essay method, Strategic experiential modules, Zoo, Tourist attractions

Paper type Research paper

#### 1. Introduction

In 2012, Malaysia ranked as the tenth most popular tourism destination in the world, hosting 25 million inbound tourists (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2013). Efforts to increase the tourist numbers continue, with a set target of 36 million by 2020, contributing RM 168 billion to the country's economy (Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations, 2014). However, the average length of the tourists' stay was only seven nights (Tourism Satellite Account, 2013). Inducing tourists to stay longer in the country and encouraging repeat visitations are the two main challenges facing the Malaysian tourism industry. Longer stays and repeat tourists ensure bigger revenue, with lower marketing expenditure (Legoherel and Wong, 2014; Wang et al., 2006). Dealing with these challenges requires effort to improve the tangible and intangible qualities of Malaysian tourism products and services.

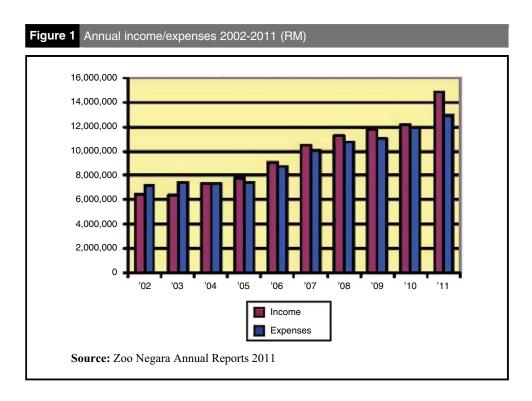
Kuala Lumpur (KL) is one of Malaysia's popular destinations. It serves as the main gateway for international tourists entering the country. In 2013, 13.3 million inbound tourists visited KL, placing the city in the top six in terms of destination arrivals in the world (Euromonitor, 2014). Among the attractions available in KL are shopping complexes, old and modern architecture,

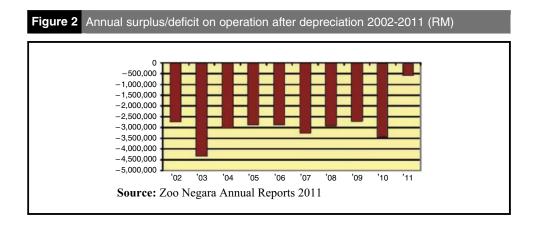
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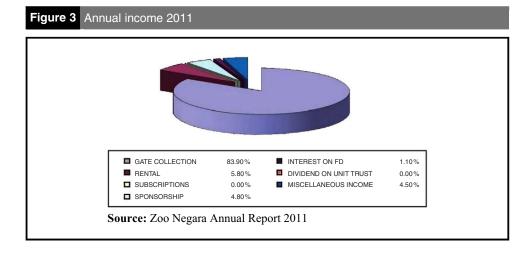
conference venues, and myriads of gastronomic and cultural attractions representing the Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnics.

KL also offers semi-natural attractions. One attraction that has been enjoyed by domestic and international visitors for many decades now is Zoo Negara, Malaysia's National Zoo. Zoo Negara was the first Malaysian Zoo, situated just 5 km outside KL's boundary (Zoo Negara, 2014). It became famous as a tourist attraction partly for its strategic location, and partly because it offers a wide array of animals representing various species from all over the world. The National Zoo receives about 5,000 visitors daily during weekends and public holidays (*The Star*, 2014). Despite the visitor numbers, the Zoo is barely able to sustain itself (refer Figures 1-3), and relies heavily on public and private funding and sponsorships (Zoo Negara, 2011).

From the sustainable tourism perspective, every tourist attraction should aim to sustain itself (Jones and Gripaios, 2000). In this regard, Zoo Negara should be able to generate enough funds to support its existence. To do so, it needs to encourage repeat visits by ensuring that visitors







have an informative, pleasant and entertaining experience during each visit. This requires the understanding of how visitors perceive their recent experience at the Zoo, and working towards overcoming all the weaknesses in its products and services. However, to date, research of the on-site-specific tourist experience is limited, and such research in the context of Zoo Negara is non-existence. This research therefore is timely in its exploration of the Zoo Negara experience among visitors, hoping to unveil issues that could be remedied to improve its operation as a self-sustaining tourism attraction.

Experience is defined as the subjective mental state felt by participants (Otto and Ritchie, 1996, p. 166), or the "mental, spiritual and physiological outcomes" resulting from on-site recreational engagements (Schänzel and McIntosh, 2000, p. 37). This includes a steady flow of multiple fantasies, feelings and fun which may be called the "experiential view" (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982, p. 132). There are several theories from various perspectives available to measure tourist experience. Researchers (Hammit, 1980; Craig-Smith and French, 1994; Aho, 2001; Musa et al., 2010) commonly measure it by categorization according to the phases of the tourists experience. Beeho and Prentice (1995) developed ASEB - activities, settings, experiences, benefits-grid analysis by combining the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis and the sequential hierarchy of demand (ASEB). Another theory measuring experience is by categorization according to dimensions. Pine and Gilmore (1998) proposed four experience dimensions which are entertainment, educational, aesthetic and escapist. Later, Oh et al. (2007) adapted the Pine and Gilmore's four experiential realms to study the experience of tourists in bed and breakfast. From the Pine and Gilmore (1998)'s study, Schmitt (1999a) proposed the experiential marketing theory, which is referred to as strategic experiential modules (SEMs). In discussing experiential marketing, Schmitt (1999a, p. 57) defined experience as a result of "encountering, undergoing or living through things". These experiences provide "sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and relational values that replace functional values". This is also our operational definition for this study.

This paper explores the experiential aspects of a visit to Zoo Negara. The analysis outcome could provide a significant understanding on the managerial and marketing implications of each visitor's experience to the destination. From a marketing perspective, SEMs provides businesses and service providers with a framework to integrate the experiential aspect of the consumption of any product or market plan. By understanding the experience, service providers could gain more meaningful connection with their customers because experiential marketing enables customers not just to be exposed to something, but to "feel" it as well. In other words, it engages with customers and brings them closer to the service providers. At a business level, the need to better understand the consumption experiential aspect is becoming more essential. Many businesses are investing to ensure that their customers have memorable experiences consuming their products and services (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 2000; Stuart and Tax, 2004).

In this study, we analysed a total of 37 essays written by University of Malaya students who visited the attraction on 23 November 2013. Our aim is to explore the negative and positive experiential elements within the SEMs, pertaining to the students' visit. The results are potentially useful for future Zoo Negara marketing communication initiatives, and the management to remedy the shortfalls which have hindered the attraction from operating as a self-sustaining attraction.

Following this introductory section is a literature review pertaining to the tourist experience, experiential marketing and the SEMs and wildlife tourism experience. This is followed by the methodology section which briefly includes the description of the case study (the National Zoo of Malaysia). Results and discussion will be presented before drawing out the final conclusion.

#### Literature review

#### 2.1 The tourist experience

As stated earlier, Schänzel and McIntosh (2000, p. 37) defined experience as "mental, spiritual and physiological outcomes" resulting from on-site recreational engagements. This includes a steady flow of multiple fantasies, feelings and fun, which may be termed as the "experiential view" (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982, p. 132). Oh et al. (2007) defined tourist experience as everything that tourists go through at a destination and this could be behavioural or perceptual, cognitive or emotional, or expressed or implied (p. 120). On the other hand, Stamboulis and Skayannis (2003) argued that the tourist experience is created through the process of visiting, seeing, learning, enjoying and living in different life modes. Experiences involve the entire living being and often result from direct observation and/or participation in events that are real, dreamlike or virtual (Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999a). For the stakeholders of tourism such as tourists, destination marketers, local residents and policy makers, the nature and scope of the experience offered by a destination determine the value of the destination (Oh et al., 2007). Therefore, researchers have examined the tourist experience which was created as a result of visiting a destination. Among tourism experience studies were a tourist service experience (Otto and Ritchie, 1996), a heritage village visitor experience (Beeho and Prentice, 1997), a backpacking experience (Uriely et al., 2002), a tourist food experience (Quan and Wang, 2004), a hiking experience (Chhetri et al., 2004), the psychological aspects of tourist experience (Larsen, 2007), a sacred site experience (Andriotis, 2009), a brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009), a wetlands park tourist experience (Wang et al., 2012) and a heritage assets experience (Laing et al., 2014).

In consolidating the concept of tourist experience, several theories from various perspectives have been proposed. One of the ways to measure tourist experience is by categorizing it according to the phases that the tourists go through. Hammit (1980) categorized tourist experience into five phases which are travel anticipation, travel to, on-site experience, travel back and recollection. Later, the model was simplified by Craig-Smith and French (1994) into three phases: the anticipatory phase (the experience tourists undergo during their preparation before travelling), the experiential phase (the experience they get during the journey to the destination, at the destination as well as during the return journey from the destination) and the reflective phase (recollection of the travel when the tourist arrived at home). Aho (2001) expanded the traditional three stages of tourism experience (before, during, after) into seven stages: orientation (awakening interest), attachment (strengthening interest), visiting (actual visit), evaluation (comparisons), storing (photos, souvenirs, memories), reflection (repeated presentations) and enrichment (continued contacts with memorabilia and networks, new practices developed during the trip). Of these seven stages the first two are pre-trip and the last four are post-trip.

The visitor experiences could be facilitated by the activities and settings (Prentice, 1993; Manning, 1986) and the benefits (Bruns et al., 1994) of visiting the destination. To understand visitor experience, Beeho and Prentice (1995) developed an ASEB grid analysis to examine the experiences and benefits that the tourists gained from visiting the tourist attractions. This grid analysis is a joint derivative of SWOT analysis and the sequential hierarchy of demand (ASEB). Conceptually, it is a matrix formed by combining the SWOT analysis in the rows and the levels of the sequential hierarchy of demand in the columns. Beeho and Prentice (1997) later adapted the model to ASEB demi-grid analysis which omitted the opportunities and threats from the grid analysis for the study of the heritage tourists' experience.

In another study, Pine and Gilmore (1998) proposed four experience dimensions which are entertainment, educational, aesthetic and escapist. These dimensions are distinguished by the level and form of customer involvement in business offerings; the "customer participation" axis and the "absorption-immersion" axis. Along the customer participation axis, the educational and escapist dimensions reflect active participation whereas passive participation is characterized by the entertainment and aesthetic dimensions. The tourist who actively participates in destination activities will influence the performance of the activity which becomes part of his or her experience whereas vice versa for the passive participation. Along the absorption-immersion axis, the tourist typically "absorbs" entertainment and educational offerings of a destination and "immerses" in the destination environment resulting in aesthetic or escapist experiences. Absorption in this context is defined as "occupying a person's attention by bringing the experience into the mind" and immersion as "becoming physically (or virtually) a part of the experience itself" (Pine and Gilmore, 1999, p. 31).

Oh et al. (2007) used Pine and Gilmore's four experiential realms to study the experience of tourists in bed and breakfast. The findings supported the study of Pine and Gilmore (1998) and gave a practical framework in measuring the tourist experience. Using the experience economy concept (Pine and Gilmore, 1998), Schmitt (1999a) derived the experiential marketing theory known as SEMs. The following section examines the literature on experiential marketing and SEMs.

#### 2.2 Experiential marketing and SEMs

Experiential marketing is an emerging marketing management philosophy, derived from the concept of experience economy. Using a long-term perspective, Pine and Gilmore (1998) differentiated four stages in the economic value progression which are commodities, goods, services and experiences. The business offerings and the key attributes progress from "fungible to natural (commodities)" to "tangible and standardized (goods)", "intangible and customized (services)" and "memorable and personal (experiences)" (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). They also claimed that the seller-buyer relation evolves from trader-market (commodities) to manufacturer-user (goods), to provider-client (services) and finally stager-guest (experiences). Along with this progression, firms actively offer their customers memorable experiences by means of using goods as props and services to help them at each stage (Pine and Gilmore, 1998).

In the experiential marketing theory, Schmitt (1999a) proposed that traditional marketing views consumers as rational decision makers who care about functional features and benefits, whereas experiential marketers view consumers as irrational and emotional human beings who are concerned with achieving pleasurable experiences. There are four key characteristics of experiential marketing: a focus on consumer experiences, treating consumption as a holistic experience, customers are rational and emotional animals and use of eclectic methods and tools. Schmitt (1999a) also claimed that companies have shifted from traditional marketing which focused on features and benefits to providing experiences for their customers. This shift is the result of three simultaneous developments in the broader business environment; the omnipresence of information technology, the supremacy of the brand and the ubiquity of communications and entertainment.

Schmitt (1999a, b) suggested five different types of experiences referred to as SEMs that marketers can create for customers. These are sensory experiences (SENSE), affective experiences (FEEL), creative cognitive experiences (THINK), physical experiences, behaviours and lifestyles (ACT) and social-identity experiences that result from relating to a reference group or culture (RELATE).

SENSE marketing appeals to the senses with the objective of creating sensory experiences, through sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. SENSE marketing may be used to differentiate companies and products, to motivate customers and to add value to products (e.g. through aesthetics or excitement). One of the key principles of SENSE is "cognitive consistency/sensory variety", i.e., the ideal SENSE approach provides an underlying concept that is clearly detectable but appears always fresh and new.

FEEL marketing appeals to customers' inner feelings and emotions, with the objective of creating affective experiences that range from mildly positive moods linked to a brand to strong emotions of joy and pride. What is needed for FEEL marketing to work is a close understanding of what

stimuli can trigger certain emotions, and the willingness of the consumer to engage in perspective taking and empathy. Schmitt argued that the standard emotional advertising lacks emotioninducing stimuli and the willingness to empathize as it is not targeting feelings during consumption.

THINK marketing appeals to the intellect with the objective of creating cognitive, problem-solving experiences that engage customers creatively. THINK appeals to target customers' convergent and divergent thinking through surprise, intrigue and provocation (Schmitt, 1999a, b). The objective of THINK is to engage customers' creative thinking. This requires an understanding of the customer's knowledge structure and their attention and concentration resources.

ACT marketing enriches customers' lives by targeting their physical experiences, showing them alternative ways of doing things (e.g. in business-to-business and industrial markets), alternative lifestyles and interactions. Rational approaches to behaviour change (i.e., theories of reasoned actions) are only one of many behavioural change options. Changes in lifestyles and behaviours are often more motivational, inspirational and emotional in nature and motivated by role models (such as movie stars or athletes).

RELATE marketing contains aspects of SENSE, FEEL, THINK and ACT. It expands beyond the individual's personal, private feelings, thus relating the individual to something outside his/her private state. RELATE campaigns appeal to the individual's desire for self-improvement (e.g. a future ideal self that he or she wants to relate to). It appeals to those who need to be perceived positively by individual others (e.g. one's peers, girlfriend, boyfriend or spouse; family and colleagues), and relates them to a broader social system (a subculture, a country, etc.).

#### 2.3 Wildlife tourism experience

Part of the experience a Zoo offers is an encounter with a variety of often exotic, animal species in captivity. This is may be referred to as wildlife tourism. Higginbottom (2004) defined wildlife tourism as "tourism based on encounters with non-domesticated (non-human) animals that can occur in either the animals' natural environment or in captivity" (p. 2). Wildlife tourism has become more popular in recent years because of the experiences offered to the participants to reconnect with nature in a potentially life-changing way (Ballantyne et al., 2011a, b), which also provide opportunities to view and interact with animals that may be endangered or rare (Cousins, 2007; Orams, 2002; Woods and Moscardo, 2003). There is an increasing demand for wildlife interaction and this has caused the emergence of many wildlife tourism activities (Semeniuk et al., 2010; Weaver, 2005). Reynolds and Braithwaite (2001) categorized wildlife tourism products into seven types, namely: nature-based tourism with a wildlife component, locations with good wildlife opportunities, artificial attractions based on wildlife, specialist animal watching, habitat-specific tours, thrill-offering tours and hunting/fishing tours. Among the examples of activities offered by wildlife tourism are bird watching, whale and dolphin watching, zoos, aguariums and wildlife parks (Ballantyne et al., 2011b).

Schänzel and McIntosh (2000) examined the beneficial experiences gained from wildlife tourism activities with an examination of visitors to penguin viewing sites in the Otago Peninsula. They discovered that visitors experienced enhanced environmental awareness and mood benefits as a consequence of wildlife tourism experiences. Reynolds and Braithwaite (2001) developed a conceptual framework for wildlife tourism and proposed six quality factors of the wildlife tourism experience. These are authenticity, intensity, uniqueness, duration, species popularity and species status. The quality factors are intrinsic to the situation, capturing the essence of quality and richness in a wildlife tourism experience. Orams (2002) studied the tourists' motivation experiencing wildlife, and discovered the decreasing opportunity to interact with nature is one of the most important reasons. Higham and Carr (2003) explored insights into tourist experiences by gathering the visitors' views on the sustainability of wildlife experiences at twelve ecotourism operations in New Zealand. The study revealed two important dimensions that are central to the visitor experience, which are social and ecological dimensions of sustainable wildlife tourism.

Ballantyne et al. (2009) examined the perceptions, preferences and conservation awareness among tourists visiting Mon Repos Conservation Park in Queensland, Australia and discovered that the visitors strongly support the conservation aspects of the experience and place primary importance on the minimal impact concerns. The findings also indicate that the wildlife tourism management should regard tourists as their conservation partner, to convey the reasons behind any constraints imposed and present a consistent message regarding interactions with wildlife, as it is believed to meet successfully the needs of both tourists and wildlife. Tsaur *et al.* (2007) examined whether experiences of experiential marketing have positive effects on the consequent visitors' behaviours in Taipei Zoo. The results proved that the experiences of experiential marketing have positive effects on visitors' emotions. Also, visitors' emotions have a positive effect on their behavioural intention through the mechanism of satisfaction.

#### 3. Research method

### 3.1 Case study: Zoo Negara Malaysia

Zoo Negara was officially opened on 14 November 1963 and has become a well-known zoo worldwide. The Zoo covers 110 acres, housing over 5,137 specimens from 476 species of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish. Currently, the Zoo is managed by the Malaysian Zoological Society, a non-governmental organization established to create the first local zoo for Malaysians. Over the years, it has transformed itself to an open zoo concept with over 90 per cent of its animals being kept in spacious areas with landscape resembling their native habitat (Zoo Negara, 2014).

According to Zoo Negara's official web site, the management has based itself on five pillars, which are education, conservation, research, recreation and training. It is believed that education in the Zoo is a key to creating wildlife conservation awareness. The Zoo therefore serves as an open classroom for visitors to learn and nurture their interest in wildlife. Second, Zoo Negara is home to highly endangered animals, which are nurtured to breed in captivity, and later they are released into the wild. Third, the Zoo provides knowledge to researchers from various fields such as zoology, biology and veterinary. Zoo Negara is not only a place for education but also functions as a recreational site which visitors can enjoy while learning about animals. Lastly, for training, the Zoo provides assistance to other zoos in Malaysia in wildlife management and is actively involved in the national and international zoological community.

#### 3.2 Research method

To explore the visitors' experience at Zoo Negara, we employed a qualitative research approach. As stated earlier, this research is based on content analysis of the university students' essays on their zoo experience. The qualitative approach was chosen because the study did not aim to get a representative sample of all the Zoo visitors. Rather, it attempted to examine the phenomenon of KL Zoo experience among young adults. The decision to use university students can be justified in several ways. University students are known to be the future decision makers (Meek, 2004) not only for their respective families but also at their workplace. The use of college/university students is an accepted practice in disciplines of marketing, consumer research and social psychology (Ro and Kubickova, 2013). Furthermore, students represent an unattended segment who increasingly engage in vacation breaks, and therefore, a potentially lucrative market segment for pleasure travel (Gallarza and Saura, 2006).

The students visited Zoo Negara on 23 November 2013 as a fieldwork for their Tourism Management subject. This research was approved by the ethical committee of the University of Malaya. Before the departure, they were briefed to take notes and record their observations and experiences during the trip. Upon returning from the Zoo, they were given two weeks to write an essay in English based on their experience at the attraction. To increase the participation rate, a monetary incentive was offered to the best three essay writers. Out of 78 students who went on the trip, a total of 37 wrote and submitted the essays to the researchers. Thus the response rate was 47.4 per cent. This number is sufficient for a qualitative study which aims to explore the meaning of and obtain rich and deep information pertaining to a particular phenomenon. Generalizability is not the concern, instead the sample size for qualitative research should focus on sample homogeneity, degree of association between variables and the number of groups involved in the analysis of the data (Guest et al., 2006).

The final aim of a qualitative approach is to get "data saturation" or "theoretical saturation" which Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 65) defined as no additional data being found as the researcher

"looks for similar instances over and over again until the researcher becomes empirically confident that a category is saturated, and when one category is saturated, nothing remains but to go on to new groups for data on other categories, and attempt to saturate these categories also". In other words, saturated data is a point where the same scheme answers are achieved. For this study, data saturation was achieved after the 30th essay. However the remaining seven were analysed to ensure all possible information was accounted for.

The essay method was chosen because according to Cho and Trent (2006), "emphasis of the personal essay purpose is on personal encounter with experience and encounters with individuals" constructions of personal experiences' (p. 331). We equate the essay method to the diary method, as it requires participants to recall a detailed account of an experience specific to an event within a specified time frame. The difference is that, while the diary method requires participants to record their experiences every day, this study was confined to the experience in the recollection of students specific to the three-hour visit they made to the Zoo. Research diaries are especially effective when used to study phenomena that would not otherwise be accessible to researchers because the phenomena are internal, situationally inaccessible, infrequent and/or rare, or because the physical presence of the researcher would significantly impact the phenomenon of interest (Bolger et al., 2003). Diary methods are more likely to capture ordinary events and observations that might be neglected by single-recording methods because participants view them as insignificant, take them for granted, or forget them (Elliott, 1997).

Diary methods also have potential for research related to temporal dynamics and time-based phenomena (Bolger et al., 2003). In diary method information about events is captured at or close to the time of occurrence (Wheeler and Reis, 1991). Diaries have fewer retrospection, recall and reframing errors compared to other methods that capture events a significant period of time after their occurrence. Diary studies have the potential to constitute a relatively unobtrusive form of data collection - provided participant burden is minimized. The main advantages of diary methods are that they allow events to be recorded in their natural setting and, in theory, minimize the delay between the event and the time it is recorded (Lavrakas, 2008). Online diaries, including blogs (weblogs) and other self-representational works have evolved from simple text documents in the mid-1990s to composite works in many media and continue to gain in popularity (Serfaty, 2004).

Precursors to the traditional diary include logs and accounts of observations and events kept by explorers, travellers and other chroniclers. These precursor texts are generally less focused on the self and more oriented towards a public audience than the typical diary (Sheble and Wildemuth, 2009). Social scientists have infrequently used diaries for research (Toms and Duff, 2002). In the early twentieth century, references to the use of research diaries began to appear in social science literature (Sheble and Wildemuth, 2009) such as tourism. Markwell and Basche (1998) argued that diaries assist in monitoring processes and changes which might occur over the duration of a tour, and also allow an understanding of human emotions outside a staged research setting, increasing ecological validity. Other than Markwell and Basche (1998)'s research in Australia, Musa et al. (2010) also used the diary method to examine the experiential aspects of home-stay holidays among domestic students in Kampung Lonek Malaysia.

The unstructured essay prompts the participants to write what matters most to them during the zoo visit. Table I shows the abbreviation used to describe the participants by age, gender and race. Content analysis was carried out using NVIVO qualitative research software, to explore the patterns in experience and group them within the dimensions. The coding was carried out under guidance by the SEMs (Schmitt, 1999a, b).

The main themes of the model were identified in the form of tree nodes. Within the tree nodes, coding of the nodes representing each theme was carried out using the principle of content analysis. The related statements within a specific theme which described the model were recalled by searching the related themes or nodes. In this study two of the researchers carried out the coding separately, and compared the results before the final themes were agreed. The use of different researchers and cross-check codes developed independently enhances the reliability of findings (Gibbs, 2007; Miles and Huberman, 1994). The next section will present the research findings.

Table I Essay writing participants by age, gender and race					
Abbreviations	Age	Gender	Race		
Participant 1	22	F	Chinese		
Participant 2	20	F	Javanese		
Participant 3	23	F	Iranian		
Participant 4	21	F	Chinese		
Participant 5	22	М	Chinese		
Participant 6	29	F	Malay		
Participant 7	22	F	Chinese		
Participant 8	21	F	Malay		
Participant 9	22	F	Chinese		
Participant 10	22	F	Chinese		
Participant 11	22	М	Chinese		
Participant 12	21	F	Malay		
Participant 13	22	М	Malay		
Participant 14	23	F	Chinese		
Participant 15	22	М	Malay		
Participant 16	20	М	Javanese		
Participant 17	22	F	Chinese		
Participant 18	23	М	Malay		
Participant 19	23	F	Chinese		
Participant 20	20	F	Malay		
Participant 21	22	F	Chinese		
Participant 22	23	F	Malay		
Participant 23	21	F	Malay		
Participant 24	22	F	Malay		
Participant 25	21	F	Chinese		
Participant 26	22	М	Chinese		
Participant 27	22	М	Chinese		
Participant 28	23	F	Malay		
Participant 29	22	M	Chinese		
Participant 30	22	F	Malay		
Participant 31	23	F	Malay		
Participant 32	22	F	Chinese		
Participant 33	19	M	Pakistani		
Participant 34	19	F	Burmese		
Participant 35	21	F	Malay		
Participant 36	22	F	Chinese		
Participant 37	21	F	Malay		
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### 4 Results

#### 4.1 Participants profile

Referring to Table II, the majority of essay respondents were female (73.0 per cent) while males constituted 27.0 per cent. Those who were 22 years old form 46.0 per cent, while 21 and 23 years old participants made up 18.9 per cent, respectively. In terms of race, 45.9 per cent were Chinese and 40.5 per cent were Malay. We discuss the rest of the study results in the following section based on the dimensions of SEMs, as stated in the method.

#### 4.2 SEMs

As stated earlier, content analysis was carried out guided by the five dimensions of SEMs (Schmitt, 1999a, b): SENSE, FEEL, THINK, ACT and RELATE. Table III presents the dimensions of SEMs of the students' experience of the National Zoo, in terms of frequency and percentage. Participants mentioned all of SEMs' five dimensions. These were SENSE (31.3 per cent), FEEL (12.9 per cent), THINK (50.0 per cent), ACT (4.1 per cent) and RELATE (1.6 per cent). The illustrations of the five dimensions of SEMs recorded in this study are presented in the following sections.

Table II Demographic profile of participants					
Demographic profile	Frequency	%			
Age					
19	2	5.4			
20	3	8.1			
21	7	18.9			
22	17	46.0			
23	7	18.9			
29	1	2.7			
Race					
Chinese	17	45.9			
Malay	15	40.5			
Others	5	13.6			
Gender					
Female	27	73.0			
Male	10	27.0			
	•				

	Dimensions of strategic experiential modules in students' experience to too	the national
Dimensions	Frequency	%
Think Sense	681 425	50 31.3
Feel	176 50	12.9
Act Relate	56 22	4.1 1.6
Total	1,360	100

4.2.1 SENSE. In this module, there are five sensory experiences created through sight, sound, touch, taste and smell, as stated by Schmitt (1999a). The "sight" elements were the most frequently expressed in the essays. From the participants' sight, there were three categories recorded, i.e. animals, environment and people. Animals were the most frequently described in the "sight" category. Many of the participants observed the abundance of animals in the zoo and their behaviour. Among the animals mentioned by participants were big mice, fawns, tortoises, flamingos, crocodiles, giraffes, zebra, miniature horses, camel, a white tiger, monkeys, baboons, gorillas and chimpanzees:

Walking around the Zoo Negara, we saw many animals such as lions, tigers, reptiles, fish, bears, elephants, zebra, guanaco, rhinoceros, striped hyaenas, orang utans and many more (Participant 7).

We even got to see and observe chimpanzees and orang utans shaking hands and bickering with each other. The most awesome and sensational part was when they spotted our cameras and posed for the photos (Participant 15).

Zoo environment and settings were the second most frequently described sighting by the participants in their essays. They observed the Zoo layout and the facilities provided. Participant 22 described the Zoo as having a simple circular layout, which facilitates visitors moving around from one site to another. She also noticed several exhibits at Zoo Negara, which include the elephant show, bird house, tigers and lions' corners, mammal kingdom, Ape Centre, Insect Zoo and many more. Participant 34 described the environment of the Zoo as:

I see tall sturdy trees with thick green leaves, closely standing side by side. It gives me such unexplained serenity that placed me in a complete relaxed state of mind. I see colourful pastel forest flowers all around. Their delicate petals that magnify innocence and fragility soothe the innermost of

me. Looking above, I see a clear, blue sky, a great landscape with few cotton-like clouds, silently inviting anyone to fabricate sweet and memorable moments.

Zoo Negara provides facilities such as toilets, tram rides, a prayer room and food and souvenir kiosks as described by Participant 31. Participant 23 noticed that the signage such as maps of the zoo and animal information boards were not clear and could easily be missed by visitors. The participants also noticed that some animals were being sponsored by certain institutions from the information boards:

In front of the camel area, there is an information board that shows the logo of the sponsor. The idea of sponsorship is very good as it helps the Zoo to fund the animal costs and at the same time improves the image of the sponsoring company (Participant 5).

The "people" was the third most frequently recorded category. Many of the participants wrote about the crowds that they saw during the visit, who were made up of school groups, local and foreign families and also groups of teenagers. The participants also observed the visitors' behaviour during the visit:

Most of the visitors we met were family with their kids. The kids were very excited to see the animals. They read the information board of each of the animal sites, perhaps to learn their names. Some of them roared at the animals, when they saw tiger and lion (Participant 14).

Participants recorded the helpfulness of staff and volunteer workers at the Zoo. Participant 18 described the staff as friendly, kind and always ready to help visitors:

There were many volunteers on duty on that day. Since it was on the weekend and the beginning of the school holidays, many volunteers were there to handle the big crowd of visitors. The volunteers helped us put on the entrance tags before we entered the Zoo (Participant 30).

The participants recorded unpleasant smells during their visit to the Zoo. Among the areas mentioned as smelly were the lion, tiger and monkey cages:

The environment there is not fresh and clean enough. Some places are very smelly and dirty (Participant 17).

The atmosphere was filled with the smell of grass, animals' dung, and some of the food prepared for animals. It gave us a strong unpleasant smell when we first entered the Zoo, but as time passed the smell became less strong (Participant 1).

The sounds of nature, with tigers roaring and birds chirping, was most frequently expressed by the participants. Participant 25 mentioned that she could hear the roar of a tiger even before she could see the tiger itself. The sound of birds chirping pleased the visitors as recorded by Participant 18:

The birds chirping, twittering and whistling to the visitors bring delight to us. This is the voice of nature, which never fails to please us.

However, visitors were also surprised at the sound of loud music and noise from an event organized at the Zoo. Participant 6 explained:

During the trip, there was a company carrying out an event in close proximity to the tigers and lions. The event created a lot of noise from the loud music played.

The element of "touch" in the SENSE dimension was the second least expressed in the essays. Only a few of the participants recorded their experience patting the ponies in the children's world:

We saw there was a children's corner for people to touch the ponies. There were two types of ponies; a black pony and a brown-colored pony. The ponies were so cute that I could not resist touching them (Participant 21).

The element of "taste" in the SENSE dimension was the least mentioned in the essays. The participants only stated their experience of tasting honey in the bee farm:

At the bee farm, there were people selling drinks made of honey and other bee related food products. There, they showed us the various types of bees. They even let the visitors try out the taste of fresh honey and we enjoyed that a lot (Participant 4).

4.2.2 FEEL. Both positive and negative "feel" experiences were represented at high frequencies within the dimension. For good feeling, the participants expressed their likes, enjoyment and excitement of interacting with animals, riding the tram and having quality time with friends, Most participants described their excitement when seeing the animals in close encounters. Participant 4 recalled that she was excited to see the world's largest rat, capybara and giant fishes that she had never seen before - all in close encounters. Another example of animal viewing excitement was expressed by Participant 27:

As I have always loved monkeys to be my pets since young, which is prohibited under the law, they were the first animals I visited. I felt like a happy kid, running from cages to cages, waving, making funny monkey noises, and snapping pictures of their acrobatic moves. Also, not forgetting that I snapped the pictures of myself with them! It was a great time!

Participant 1 explained that she really enjoyed patting the pigmy horse in the children's world. Apart from the excitement, some participants expressed their concern about the caged animals and their well-being:

I am concerned to see the space for the penguins in the Zoo. I'm afraid the temperature is not cold enough for the penguins as we know that they live in cold parts of the world (Participant 30).

As an animal lover, I was furning with anger; isn't the Zoo supposed to be a replaced habitat for captured animals from all over the world? How these animals could be made to bear such loud noises created from the event that was going on that day. Even the visitors themselves were pretty disturbed by it (Participant 27).

Some participants reported their bad feelings such as dislike, sadness, surprise and disappointment. They recalled not enjoying the amphibian and invertebrate sections. Participant 15 described the areas as creepy and scary because most animals exhibited were dangerous. Although most participants were excited and enjoyed watching the animals in close proximity some expressed their disappointment with the animals in the Zoo:

Also with slight disappointment, some of the animals which I expect to be aggressive behaved the other way round (Participant 27).

As we walked through the aquarium, there was not much marine life that could really impressed us. I expected to find sharks but there were no sharks in the aguarium. I passed by the aguarium quickly and left with disappointment (Participant 21).

Most participants were surprised and disappointed with the price of tickets, maps and food and beverages at the Zoo. Participant 13 recalled that he would rather be hungry than pay RM 5 for a burger:

Realizing the fact that I needed a map to explore the Zoo, I started looking for one. It was available at the entrance, but not for free. Though it was only RM 2, it was indeed disappointing knowing that what is usually free in most other zoos is not in this one (Participant 33).

The first surprise for me was the ticket price. It was RM30 for adults with MyKad (Malaysian Identity Card) and RM50 for adults without MyKad. I thought it would be much cheaper than that (Participant 30).

4.2.3 THINK. THINK module was the most frequently expressed dimension by the participants. In this module, the dimension was categorized into settings, recommendations, products and services, animals, information, imagination and web site. The phrases recorded were related to how the participants thought and interpreted their experiences. The participants expressed their thoughts about the environment and settings inside the zoo and what they had encountered during the visit. These were vividly expressed by the following participants:

The cage looked all cramped and the animals seemed very sad and unhappy. Most of them were caged so you did not get to chance to interact with the animals (Participant 8).

I could see rubbish in the river and around the trees. This brings a bad image to the Zoo (Participant 22).

The participants also made recommendations for the Zoo's improvement based on their experience. Participant 19 suggested that the Zoo should provide audio-visual facilities to enhance visitors' educational experience during the visit. She also added:

Management may want to provide greater opportunities for the visitors to interact with animals, for example, the visitors may purchase food provided in the Zoo, to feed the rabbit, turtles, deer and so on. Visitors may be allowed to feed the animals in the Zoo, which could enhance their experience.

Examples of other recommendations made by the participants were as follows:

The use of Malay language at the animal show is a disadvantage for international visitors, who are unlikely to understand. I propose that the show use English as the medium language at the animal show (Participant 7).

It will be great if the Zoo provides tour guides, who can explain better and give more information about the animals beyond the knowledge of their names and country of origin (Participant 15).

Discount price tickets should be promoted during the school holidays or festival seasons. For instance, the discount can be given to the family. If visitors come with their family, maybe children can get the ticket at discounted price. This promotion not only encourages the visitation of the target market but also strengthens the relationship among family members (Participant 25).

From the experience with products and services in the Zoo, participants pointed out that having services and facilities such as a prayer room, tram rides and food kiosks are necessary:

As Zoo Negara is a huge place, the facilities like tram rides are most necessary for those who cannot walk very far, such as the elderly people, small children and persons with a disability. Having prayer rooms inside the Zoo makes it conducive for Muslim visitors to perform their daily prayers. Walking at the Zoo for a long time can be tiring and make the visitors hungry. The visitors can take a rest and eat for a while at the nearest drinks and food kiosks that are provided in the Zoo (Participant 31).

Most participants complained that the entrance fee was too costly. "I think the entrance fee cost is too expensive for the attraction (Participant 8)". However, there were some participants who thought that the entrance fee was reasonable (e.g. Participant 28) to support the animals' food and the maintenance of the Zoo.

The visit made the participants think about the animals. The following phrases highlighted the thoughts of participants about the animals:

I was very excited to see the wisdom of the sea lion, the birds and the bear. I was thinking about how the trainer trained the animals. It made me think that nothing is impossible in this world (Participant 6).

Because of the hot weather in Malaysia, they hardly moved and preferred to stay in the same place. There was a leopard in front of the tiger area, but this leopard seemed to be very lonely and not active. I think maybe because this is not its habitat, it lives in the jungle, where it can run freely, but the situation is different in the cage, which makes it lazy to move (Participant 5).

The participants also gained information and knowledge from the visit. Participant 21 quoted that she saw an animal which looked like a kangaroo, but on the description board it was written as Pademelon. Participant 5 said that he had learned a lot from the bee hives. "I learned a lot about the bee hives, like how they make the honey and the roles of the each bee in producing the honey".

Another element in the THINK module was the effect on their imagination that the participants had after their trip to the Zoo. Participant 15 described that he had imagined walking in Africa, on the Savannah walk because the atmosphere in the Zoo resembled the landscape in Africa. One of the participants also dreamed of having the world's largest rat as her pet at home:

The largest rat made me think of having one as a pet for my kids in the future at home. They can play with the rat, I think it would be fun to have this kind of pet kept in the house (Participant 17).

The participants also expressed their thoughts about the web site in the essay:

The zoo's website is good as it provides a lot of information. The arrangement of link buttons is also viewer friendly. It is really convenient as all information is available online, especially the ticket price, operating hours, and activities going on at the Zoo. The layout is quite interesting and the background music made me really excited about visiting the attraction. When I first visited the website. I could already imagine how it would feel to be there (Participant 20).

4.2.4 ACT. In this module, the dimension was categorized into interaction with animals, revisiting intention, experience sharing and photo taking. From the visit, the most recorded phrases in the ACT dimension were photo taking with animals and in front of the Zoo's main gate. Participant 24 stated that the "must do" activity was taking a photograph in front of the

main entrance to Zoo Negara. Participants also captured their encounters with animals through photo taking:

One of the best experiences at the Zoo was to see a group of giraffes and zebras. I quickly took pictures of myself with them against the beautiful scenery in the Zoo (Participant 21).

The world largest rat was in front of me. I have never seen this animal before in my entire life! Its name is Capybara (Hydrochoerushydrochaeris), and my Canon DSLR kept snapping pictures of this super cute animal, from different angles (Participant 4).

Participant 12 described her enjoyment of the visit and her intention to bring her family along to the Zoo for the next visit. Participant 27 also expressed the intention to revisit the Zoo:

All in all, it was a place worth visiting during the weekend with my friends! I will probably visit the Zoo again in the near future when the giant pandas have safely settled in the Zoo.

Another interesting element in the ACT dimension was the participant interaction with the animals. Participant 15 explained that he greeted "hello" to the world's largest tortoises that were basking under the hot sun. Participant 35 described the monkey sound which she and her other friends tried to imitate:

They were noisy and making their own sound just like they were competing with each other to see who could make a louder sound. We had fun making similar sound to the monkeys.

Even though the visit to the Zoo was frequently described as a memorable experience, only some of them expressed their intention to share the experience with others:

Visiting this Zoo is memorable, enriching and exciting. I will never forget this experience in my life as it is so awesome and I am sure that one day I will tell the story of going to this Zoo to my children (Participant 3).

4.2.5 RELATE. RELATE module was the least frequently expressed dimension by the participants during Zoo visit. The participants related their experience to animal conservation, social life and souvenirs. Participant 21 stated that "I came to the conclusion that the price was reasonable and there were many choices of souvenirs for visitors to choose from, and all the souvenirs were related to the context of animals or Malaysia". RELATE which concerns about animal conservation was expressed by Participant 34:

On our way to the animal show, we could see countless numbers of banners with panda pictures displayed by World Wildlife Fund organization. It made me wonder whether the Zoo in Malaysia is suitable for the animal, and what will be the future challenges. Even the world famous panda-breeding program has been very costly and unsuccessful. But I do believe supporters of the Zoo have valid reasons that it will be a successful action (Participant 34).

The participants also related the experience to social life:

In amazement, I looked at the magnificent honey production process without blinking my eyes. Small little creatures were working persistently to produce honey together. Their perfect teamwork and diligence are the lesson that we can absorb into our daily lives. It was really a wonderful and gleeful experience (Participant 15).

We found out that the monkeys were trying to get our attention. They jumped here and there and pursed their lips. And I thought [...] yeah! these are the faces of girls these days, doing selfie on their Facebook, Tweeter and Instagram. I could see their mouths exactly same as these monkeys'. When I thought about this, I smiled alone, because one of my friends always does monkey smile in the picture (Participant 6).

#### Discussions and conclusion

This study explores the experiential aspect of young adults/students' visit to the National Zoo in Malaysia based on the experiential marketing framework developed by Schmitt (1999a). It demonstrates what constitutes the visitors' experience at the Zoo, among University of Malaya students. The majority of the essays were contributed by female students. Higher participation among females was also observed in other diary studies (Markwell and Basche, 1998; Musa et al., 2010).

The results revealed that all the five dimensions, namely, THINK, SENSE, FEEL, ACT and RELATE emerged from the analysis. We discuss the findings from both positive and negative aspects. The positive aspects are the strengths which are useful in designing future marketing communication to lure visitors to the Zoo. While the negative aspects are the opportunities for improvement in facilities, products and services provisions, which could be considered by the Zoo authority and management.

The most frequently expressed dimension of SEMs was THINK (50 per cent of the essay content). This reflects the intellectual capacity among the participants, of which the three most important comments were settings, recommendations for Zoo improvement and products and services. Participants also commented on the animals, information, imagination and the Zoo web site. The web site was regarded as good and user friendly, providing all the necessary information required for the Zoo visit. Even though most students complained about the entrance fee being too expensive, some regarded its price as reasonable, considering the expenses required to feed the animals and to maintain the establishment. Having entered the Zoo, some participants thought the Zoo's landscape resembled Africa, equipped with special background music, which further enhanced the experience. They gained knowledge from the information boards provided in the Zoo, which facilitated their curiosity to learn the background of specific animals.

On a negative note, some participants thought certain animals were lonely and inactive, having been deprived of their natural environment. Some cages were cramped with animals. Some participants thought that the Zoo was not properly looked after, rubbish could be seen littering some places and the river. Based on the cognitive experience, some respondents provided suggestions to improve the experience, which could be implemented by the Zoo authority. These include providing audio-visual facilities, creating animal feeding activity for visitors, using English as the medium language at the animal show, and offering tour guide services and discounted price tickets to selected target markets. The information discovered here provides an opportunity for THINK marketing, which appeals to the intellect with the objective of creating cognitive, problem-solving experiences that engage customers creatively (Schmitt, 1999a, b).

Within the SENSE dimension, participants mentioned all five sensory dimensions. Expectedly, sight was the most frequently expressed. The participants saw animals of various species in abundance at the Zoo. The well-designed layout enabled them to move around comfortably without feeling lost. The environment was perceived as relaxing, with many recreational opportunities with friends and family members. Related services were provided, including the services delivered by volunteers at the Zoo, to facilitate visitors' movement. Participants enjoyed the sound of nature, the calm ambience and some interactive activities such as touching the ponies and tasting honey. The positive SENSE experience here is useful in the design of marketing communication, where Schmitt (1999a, b) proposed the need to highlight the creation of sensory experiences, through sight, sound, touch, taste and smell.

On the negative side of the SENSE experience, participants expressed disappointment with regard to improper signage that hindered their cognitive learning experience of the animals' names and backgrounds. Participants recommended the Zoo authority and management improve signage that direct visitors to various crucial facilities such as the animal displayed areas, restrooms, prayer rooms, food stalls, etc. Interactive signs could also be introduced to encourage the visitors' engagement with the exhibits. Many participants were disturbed by the presence of loud music from an event organized at the Zoo during the visit. They complained of its inappropriateness as the event was in close proximity to some iconic animals such as tigers and lions. If the event could not be avoided, the management should ensure the volume of the music was at a tolerable level to both visitors and more importantly animals. Some participants complained about an excessively unpleasant smell mainly from animal excretion. This unpleasant sensorial experience could be reduced by regular cleaning of the affected areas. All the negative SENSE experienced by the participants listed here are opportunities for managerial and operational improvements for the Zoo.

Within the FEEL dimension, the participants expressed feelings of excitement and joy, but also aspects of disappointment and sadness. The participants mentioned that they were excited to see the animals in close proximity and enjoyed riding the tram and interacting with animals.

This was evidence of the participants' connection with both animals and activities available at the Zoo. The affective experience among the participants created the attachment which led to the perception of empathy towards animals (Schmitt, 1999a, b).

On the negative side of the FEEL experience however, some participants were annoyed with the perceived expensive entrance fee. They commented on the exorbitant entrance fee; at the very least, the Zoo's map could be provided free of charge. They also suggested that certain market segments could be given a discounted price especially to students and families. Similarly even the food and drinks were considerably more expensive than outside the Zoo. Management could perhaps indicate to the visitors the reasons for expensive prices within the Zoo, to alleviate the dissatisfaction, especially among those who had little knowledge of how expensive it is to run a Zoo.

Within the THINK and FEEL dimensions, many participants were concerned about the animals' welfare at the Zoo. Some expressed sadness for the animals, being taken away from their natural habitats. Animals looked bored and unhappy. Some cages were not clean and crammed with many animals. One participant empathized with the small space and warm temperature in which the penguins lived. These concerns over the animals' welfare coincide with Schänzel and McIntosh (2000)'s study, which found visitors' experiences enhanced environmental awareness as a consequence of wildlife tourism experiences. In addition, Higham and Carr (2003) discovered the element of conservation advocacy from the visitors interviewed at 12 ecotourism operations in New Zealand.

Within the ACT dimension, the elements of photo taking, the intention to revisit, interacting with animals and sharing experiences were expressed by the students. The animals in the Zoo were the main attractions and the participants took photos to capture their memories of encounters with them. They also interacted with the animals by imitating the animal sound. Some expressed their intention to share their experience with others and the intent to visit the Zoo again in the near future with the family and friends. As stated by Schmitt (1999a), ACT marketing enriches customers' lives by targeting their physical experiences, showing them alternative ways of doing things, alternative lifestyles and interactions. The Zoo authority could further enhance the ACT experience by, among several examples, including animal interaction (e.g. feeding, riding and touching), interactive animal information displays and animal photography competitions.

The RELATE dimension was the least frequently mentioned in the essay with only elements of animal conservation, social interaction and souvenirs mentioned by the participants. RELATE requires a greater maturity in life experience, for which the participants might be still rather young to appreciate. Among examples of attempts to relate their experiences in the Zoo were panda placement, honey bees and souvenirs. The participants reflected on the future challenges of hosting pandas at the Zoo of whether it would be a success or failure. The industry of the bees in producing honey, with every bee playing its own function for the production, triggered the thought that anything is possible in future endeavours if everyone in the group is willing to work hard together. Participants also commented on the appropriateness of souvenirs available at the Zoo, which represented either the animals or Malaysia itself.

#### 5.1 Research implications

This study demonstrates the applicability of Schmitt theory on SEMs and the usefulness of such application from the managerial perspective. Specifically, it shows how understanding the Zoo visitors' experience can be tightly guided by the five dimensions of SENSE, FEEL, THINK, ACT and RELATE in SEMs (Schmitt, 1999a, b). It also demonstrates the use of the essay/diary method to understand visitor experience. The findings have managerial implications. For example, better understanding of visitors could provide the Zoo authority and management the opportunity to integrate visitors' consumption of experiential aspects into their marketing plans, and products and services development. The positive aspects of the experience are valuable marketing messages, while negative aspects allow the Zoo authority to institute remedial actions to improve the appeal of the attraction. Provisions of products and services that are guided by the elements in experiential marketing modules, may eventually stimulate further and longer visitations that will enhance the Zoo's profitability thereby enabling it to operate sustainably. A self-sustaining Zoo

will benefit society by being financially independent while offering the best quality experience to potential visitors.

#### 5.2 Research limitations and suggestions for future research

The weakness of this study relates to its being qualitative research, from which it is impossible to generalize. Since the participants were university students, the results might not reflect the views of the general public. Hence, they cannot be generalized as representing all the visitors' experience at the Zoo. In addition, since the primary goal was exploration rather than synthesis, the study admittedly lacks an in-depth analysis of the data to synthesize for instance, how are the modules or categories related to each other. This limitation should be overcome by future researchers who are interested in a similar issue. They should take more time to relate the findings to the literature and try to find if there are any other themes that could be taken into consideration. Future researchers could also expand this study by the measuring aspects of experience using the experiential marketing modules from the positivistic perspective of quantitative research. For example, future study could employ quantitative survey to explore the satisfaction aspect of the Zoo experience. A particularly useful research framework for the benefit of Zoo management is the influence of experience, using dimensions of experiential marketing modules on the satisfaction with the Zoo Negara.

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