

Conference Paper

Decrypting the Real Life Escape Room Experience

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Abstract

An escape room is a game that requires a group of players to solve a variety of tasks within a given amount of time in order to fulfill a specific goal, typically escaping a locked room. Despite gaining tremendous popularity of the game in Malaysia, there is no study being conducted in this area. Existing customer experience frameworks offer a limited explanation of this rising phenomena due to the unique inherent nature of Escape Room. Towards this end, the present paper aims to identify the key constructs of Malaysian Escape Room customer experience and determinants of the players revisit intention with respect to the Escape Room. The research is conducted on 20 players who have played at least one game in any Escape Room establishment in Malaysia. This study adopts the sequential incident technique, a qualitative approach to unearth the hidden perception of players. Thematic analysis was subsequently used to analyse the data which revealed fifteen determinants of which 9 are related to the model of goal-directed behaviour. Our research contributes to the body of knowledge in mapping customer experience in this fair nascent industry. Insights from this study are aimed at benefiting Malaysian Escape Room business operators in designing and enhancing the customer experience in their escape rooms.

Keywords: escape room, customer experience, sequential incident technique, goal-directed behaviour

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1. Introduction

The delivery of experiences has become a theme of growing importance in businesses strategy development and management (Heinonen, Campbell, & Lord Ferguson, 2019; Kandampully, Zhang, & Jaakkola, 2018). The impact of globalization and the IT revolution has significantly influenced consumption behaviour evolving it from being utility-driven to become centered on consumer experience. As such, consumers constantly crave for innovative offerings that not only fulfill their needs but also provide them with fresh experiences which are memorable and relatable to them (Collier, Barnes, Abney, & Pelletier, 2018). Given the significance of customer experience in business development,

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a wide range of conceptual frameworks in this area have been developed (Følstad & Kvale, 2018; Jain, Aagja, & Bagdare, 2017; Nasution, Sembada, Miliani, Resti, & Prawono, 2014). While studies on customer experience frameworks are in-depth, there are still substantial research gaps in the field of contemporary tourism, which require the further attention of researchers. Most of the studies are dedicated to augmenting traditional service industries namely retail, banking and traditional tourism whereas new and non-traditional attractions are neglected such as game-induced tourism (Dubois & Gibbs, 2018) and urban tourism (Novy & Colomb, 2019). One example of these neglected niches is the now burgeoning Escape Room industry.

The Escape Room game is a live-action, team-based game where players are required to conduct multiple tasks (mainly solving numerous puzzles) to escape from a locked room within in a limited amount of time (Nicholson, 2015). This form of reality game has taken the world by storm since its inception in Japan back in 2007. Originating from a video-game concept, the Escape Room became a huge hit in major cities in Asia, America and Europe. According to the listing of the world's largest Escape Room directory, there are approximately 4,000 companies currently in operation to date, spanning over 90 countries (PlayExitGames, 2019). Despite being a decade old industry, this industry has exhibited tremendous growth. It was reported that successful Escape Rooms were able to recoup their investments within the first five months of operation, in addition to enjoying 800% annual growth in sales (Sally & Shaw, 2015).

Similar to other parts of the world, Malaysia is also catching up on this trend. To date, Malaysia hosts the second largest number of Escape Rooms in Southeast Asia. Currently, there are 23 Escape Room establishments in the country, three of which are global brands. This nascent game concept landed in Malaysia back in 2013, when the Escape Room Holdings opened its first Malaysian branch in Kuala Lumpur. The industry in Malaysia has also proven to be as lucrative as their global counterparts. It is observed successful home grown Escape Room brands have established their presence globally with outstanding financial success. One of the registered proprietors of Escape Rooms in Malaysia was reported to have accumulated a net asset worth amounting to RM1.45 million with a net profit of RM1.03 million and cited this as the main reason for its acquisition by a renowned entertainment company (Zaki, 2015). The Malaysian home-grown Escape Room brand was voted as the Asian Entrepreneur of the Year after expanding its franchise into Canada, the United States, South Korea, and Myanmar (the Asian entrepreneur, 2016).

The lucrative pull of this business notwithstanding, the Escape Room game industry has its shares of challenges. The immediately apparent problem plaguing escape room

business owners is the hardship associated with making and keeping a significant customer base. Once customers have tried a particular room and completed it, there is no clear motivation for them to try the same room again even if they found the experience enjoyable simply because the novelty of the experience has worn off (Stone, 2017). It is interesting to note that the research on escape room games is scarce despite its commendable success. At the time of writing of this paper, there is only one whitepaper and one academic journal published on this topic. Based on the survey of 175 escape room operators globally, Nicholson (2015) provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of player and types of Escape room game structures, covering an assortment of puzzles, themes, and storylines. However, his study lacks insights into players' experience during gameplay, e.g., preference towards elements in the Escape Room. On the other hand, attempts to conceptualize Escape Room experience are limited to empirical studies from Western countries. Kolar (2017) attempted to conceptualize the Escape room game experience by using netnography and automated research analysis on Trip Advisor reviews provided by customers of selected Escape rooms in the USA and Europe. He found that customers exhibited strong positive emotions while playing the game and linked their experience to perceived authenticity and flow.

The absence of research on Malaysian Escape room players' experience thus calls for the need for this study. To address this gap, this paper aims to discuss the theoretical underpinnings of customer experience and subsequently identify elements that are central to the conceptualization of Escape Room game experience in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Evolution of customer experience foundations

Early literature on customer experience stems from psychological and consumer behaviour studies in the 80s, where the experience was highlighted as an important aspect of human consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Rokeach, 1964). These authors' seminal works attempt to conceptualize the nature of human consumption at an abstract level. Rokeach (1964) posits that humans are creatures with an unrestricted degree of freedom that chase after their beliefs. Similarly, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) supported this and challenged the then conventional information processing model that assumes men are rational decision-makers and proposed an alternative view on contemporary consumption, one which is based on

symbolic, hedonistic, and esthetical elements. In contrast, Mehrabian and Russell (1974) believed that human's behavioral responses, in particular, emotional responses such as pleasure, dominance and arousal are stimulated by environmental stimuli. These concepts were later applied in service design and marketing in an integrative manner, resulting in trailblazing concepts such as experiential marketing (Schmitt, 1999) and services cape (Bitner, 1992).

The subsequent discussion in the later years (the 1990s) revolved around finding the perfect form of customer experience. Towards this end, Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1991) introduced the concept of flow experience, a mental state of immersion triggered when surroundings is "right" and inducing. Being in the flow is described as a subjective experience where one loses consciousness over time and is worked at full capacity. Arnould and Price (1993) posited that interactive exchanges between the guide and customer will result in extraordinary experience to the customer, leading to higher satisfaction and positive emotional outcomes. Pine and Gilmore (1999) further suggested the need for experiences to be memorable in nature, a pre-condition for effective branding articulated by modern marketing practitioners. As opposed to the single moment experiences, Carù and Cova (2003) contested that customer experience may not need to be exclusive at each encounter, rather manifest itself in different levels of intensity depending on the context in which the interaction takes place. Their view received theoretical backing of service-dominant logic proposed by Vargo and Lusch (2008) which suggested that service and relatable experience are fundamental to determine the value of an offering.

The recent discussions revolved around ways to sustain customer experience creation. Berry, Carbone, and Haeckel (2002) suggested that businesses should look at total customer experience or customer journey in developing their business strategy. They posited that understanding the value at each stage of the customer's journey is vital in designing appropriate clues that would guide the customer's purchase experience. This notion is also supported by Verhoef et al. (2009) and Lemon and Verhoef (2016) who explained that customer experience might be affected by customers' experience which moderates the effectiveness of services delivered, hence level of satisfaction. Literature to date also suggested collaborative efforts between the company and customers to augment customer experience (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). This had resulted in various innovative solutions offered by businesses to enrich the quality of their purchase experience, from better customer engagement (Carlson, Rahman, Voola, & De Vries, 2018; Lee, Chan, Chong, & Thadani, 2019) to technology enhancement on delivery mechanisms such as self-service technology (Collier et al.,

2018; Scherer, Wunderlich, & Von Wangenheim, 2015), customer care services (Bleier, Harmeling, & Palmatier, 2019; Lee et al., 2019) and big data analytics (Grover, Chiang, Liang, & Zhang, 2018).

In summary, customer experience is a complex multi-dimensional structure with an indefinite time horizon that is subjective to the context at multiple points of interaction between the customer and business. Therefore it is imperative to understand what makes customers tick and align their expectations to the value proposition offered by the businesses. This is more pertinent to reality escape room games, of which business owners have minimal intervention in determining customer experience. In contrast with typical forms of entertainment (e.g., concert and theme parks) where consumers experience is fully staged (e.g., watching concert performance, attending cultural shows, enjoying theme park rides), the Escape Room customers are also solely responsible for their own experience.

2.2. Model of Goal-Directed Behaviour

The model of goal-directed behaviour (MGB) by Perugini and Bagozzi (2001) has been acknowledged as a useful model to explain human intentions. The MGB is an extended model based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the Theory Reasoned Action (TRA). MGB model introduced three new elements in part of the extension, namely: 1) the role of desire as in determining behavioral intention 2) role of anticipated emotions (both positive and negative) as part of the decision-making process and 3) the role of past and frequency of behaviour affecting behavioral intention. In this revised model, attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control and anticipated emotions are deemed to affect behavioral intention indirectly through desire (Meng & Choi, 2016; Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001; Shin, Kim, & Severt, 2018). Anticipated effective reactions to the performance or non-performance of a behaviour is prominent in MGB. They act as a self-regulated process where emotions implied assessment of success or failure during decision making (Chiu & Choi, 2018) particularly in times of high uncertainty (Li, Ashkanasy, & Ahlstrom, 2014; Tanovic, Pruessner, & Joormann, 2018). Past behaviour is used to proximate habits and has been empirically proven to be able to predict behaviour (Tong, 2016).

MBG model is generally adopted in studies with the objective of understanding addictive behaviors such as drug use (Ersche et al., 2016; Esumi et al., 2013) and drinking (Gabbadini, Cristini, Scacchi, & Monaci, 2017). These studies revealed a strong correlation between anticipated emotions in combination with other TPB components

in determining desire. MBG application is also expanded into management studies, particularly in determining revisit intention in the tourism industry. Based on the survey conducted on 423 visitors attending the Sancheong Herbal Festival in South Korea, attitude, subjective norm, and positive anticipated emotion influenced visitors' desire to attend the festival, and subsequently influenced their behavioral intentions (Song, You, Reisinger, Lee, & Lee, 2014). In a separate study, Park, Lee, and Peters (2017) found that residents who displayed a positive attitude towards Iowa wetlands and frequently visit to the wetlands tend to have stronger desire to revisit as compared to non-residents.

The application of MGB in analyzing Escape Room is suitable following the challenges faced. Escape room business owners struggle to retain a reliable customer base due to low barriers to market. The game structure is vulnerable to imitation and high utility erosion, as mentioned previously. While redesigning rooms seems to be the intuitive thing to do, it is very costly for business owners and prone to operational flaws if not carefully thought through. Unless Escape room business owners can decrypt what is on their customers' minds, the odds of running a successful establishment in the long term are very low. Ultimately, what matters to the business owners is to ensure players continuously revisit the room, in which MGB can provide some guidance.

3. Methodology

Customer experience investigation requires in-depth insights into the customers' thoughts and perspective. In this regard, this paper employs a sequential incident technique, a qualitative research approach used to build a holistic understanding of the subject matter based on extensive analysis of customers' reflection. This method is typically used to study customer experience (Becker, 2018) and has been applied widely in service marketing (Pöppel, Finsterwalder, & Laycock, 2018; Randhawa, Kim, & Cichy, 2017) and operations management (Wahyuni-Td & Fernando, 2016). Past literature suggests that customer experience is a culmination of distinctive episodes spanning across a period. By capturing moments which trigger customers' emotions and cognition, marketers and service designers can craft better experience which would, in turn, appreciate perceived value offering of the businesses (Abu & Alexander, 2018).

3.1. Sample Selection

This study employs a purposive sampling technique to gather the needed information while ensuring informants are well-represented (Huberman & Miles, 2002). The approach is compatible with the aim of this research, whereby researchers strive to identify and select information-rich cases given limited resources (Patton, 2015). To qualify for this study, informants are required to have attempted at least one room at any Escape Room establishment in Malaysia. For this study, the samples are selected from two Escape Room establishments in Kuala Lumpur where permission is granted by the operator. In order to gain fresh insights, informants were interviewed immediately after they had completed their game.

3.2. Data Collection

The sequential incident technique (SIT) is an interviewing technique intended to extract collective incidents from interviewees during the entire tenor of a process (Stauss & Weinlich, 1997). SIT approach is a derivation of the critical incident technique, which involves “a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behaviour in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles.”(Flanagan, 1954, p.327). Through its storytelling approach, SIT enables researchers to detail out distinctive phenomena and appreciate non-critical incidents at the same time when identifying significant themes (Decker & Meissner, 1999). Informants are free to use their own words to describe their experience and are guided through their purchase journey, which is pre-purchase purchase and post-purchase. In the context of this study, informants were asked on their impression when they first came to know about Escape Room, their experience while playing the room, and their feelings after completing the game.

Before the study, a literature review was conducted relating to customer experience in general, including synonymous terms such as service experience and consumption experience to frame the state of study in this area. Open-ended standardized interview questions were used during the interview to “allow the participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desire and it also allows the researcher to ask probing questions as a means of follow-up” (Turner III, 2010, p.765). Based on the recommendations of McNamara (2009), the questions were ensured to be worded in an open-ended manner and crafted with a neutral tone to avoid interviewer bias. The questions were given to marketing experts to assess the wording and flow of the

interview questions and pre-tested with a sample of interviewees to ensure there were understandable. Technical jargons related to customer experience was avoided as this has been reported to confuse (Patton, 2015).

At the beginning of the interview, informants were asked to briefly explain their thoughts on their experience in the Escape Room. The informants were asked to describe their experience and motives behind steps taken at each stage of purchase (i.e., pre-purchase phase, during the game and after the game) and what they were trying to achieve during the experience (i.e., to make a purchase, search for information, browse, etc.). In line with the SIT technique, informants were asked to recall distinctive episodes to the best of their abilities and detail them out in their own words. We also enquired on the informants' level of familiarity with the Escape Room gaming concept. The informants were probed for further insights into their encounters to ensure richness in context (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016).

We discovered when responses produced in group interview tend to be influenced largely by one or two dominant respondents. In the first interview we conducted, we noticed that respondents mainly conformed to answers provided by the lead discussion. Phrases like "...like what he/she said..." and "he/she know better..." were examples of this behaviour. This was immediately rectified by conducting separate individual interview sessions.

A sum of 30 narratives was extracted from 20 semi-structured interviews. The interview process was halted at 15th interview upon reaching saturation point, i.e., themes gathered are repeated post-cross-case analysis (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). However, five more interviews were conducted to ensure that no information was missed out. Time conducted for the interviews were on average, 35 minutes. The demographic profiles of the informants are presented in Table 1.

3.3. Data Analysis

First, the interview recordings were transcribed using a free audio transcribing software, OtterAi. The translated copy is emailed to interviewees for accuracy check. Once this is completed, the transcript is imported to Nvivo Software version 11 to be analyzed. An inductive approach was adopted in analyzing the informants' responses (guided by the research questions) to identify critical incidents. Critical incidents are chosen based on the comprehensiveness of description given by the respondents which comprised antecedents and outcome of the selected incidents. Ambiguous descriptions were treated as to be insignificant and are excluded from the analysis. Flanagan (1967)

TABLE 1: Summary of Informants' Demographic Profile.

No.	Gender	Age	Relationship	Frequency of play
1	Male	21	Friends	First time
2	Male	21	Friends	First time
3	Female	35	Colleague	First time
4	Female	33	Colleague	Repeated
5	Female	31	Colleague	First time
6	Male	19	Friends	First time
7	Female	22	Friends	First time
8	Male	55	Family	First time
9	Female	45	Family	First time
10	Male	14	Family	First time
11	Male	16	Family	Repeated
12	Male	12	Family	First time
13	Female	23	Colleague	First time
14	Male	25	Colleague	First time
15	Female	22	Colleague	Repeated
16	Female	23	Colleague	First time
17	Female	22	Colleague	First time
18	Male	16	Friends	First time
19	Male	17	Friends	First time
20	Female	19	Not applicable	First time

Source: Author's own work

explained that this step is critical to ensure the credibility of the data extracted, which is used to frame customer experience in the Escape Room in this study.

Next, the emerged themes were reviewed through a cross-case analysis to identify the frequency of repeated themes across informants. The wording of themes identified was refined by make comparison with past literature to check if themes are incongruent to terms used in scholarly articles. Maxwell (1992) described this step is required to achieve theoretical validity. The extracted themes were subsequently compared with assessment coded by two independent coders who were given access to voice recordings of the interviews. Their expertise in this field enhances the reliability of the analysis. After extensive deliberation, 15 themes have been identified. Details on the finalized themes and operational definition of each theme can be found in Table 2 and 3 in the Appendix.

4. Results

Fifteen themes surfaced in the thematic analysis, of which six are newly discovered elements that were not mentioned in the MGB. There are skill, challenge, flow, involvement, relational experience, and authenticity. A discussion of each of these themes is presented below.

4.1. Perceived authenticity

In general, perceived authenticity reflects the perception of the informants on the novelty of the Escape Room idea as a gaming concept. This element appears to be prominent amongst first-timers, which sparks interest for most of them to participate, as shown below:

I have never heard of this before...This is very new to me. I would have mistaken it as some sort of haunted house or arcade game. Never for the life of me would I think to escape from a prison as “fun”. Definitely a novel idea.

[Informant no.3, Female]

In contrast, customers who have played the game described perceived authenticity as the accuracy of room depicting the intended theme.

I love the props in the M&M's Big Escape. They gave out the Night in the Museum vibe...some which chills you down your bones. Some of the decorations looked legit.

[Informant no. 15, Female]

4.2. Attitude

It is observed that customers who are playing the Escape Room for the first time tend to have preconceived notions about the Escape Room game. In order to make sense of the concept, players draw attributes from relatable items to construct a preliminary image, which in turn, builds up the player's expectation. For instance:

I have a vague idea from my conversation with my boys. When I actually tried it out, it was totally not what I expected. Took me quite a while to process the mechanics behind the game. There is no comparison to what Escape Room is akin to therefore making its value proposition attractive.

[Informant no.9, Female]

I have never heard of Escape Room. This is my first time experiencing such a thing. I thought it was an arcade game or funfair of some sort. The group of people posing in front of a huge backdrop gave me that impression. At that time I were chilling out at a café opposite the Escape Room shop. Since I had nothing better to do, I drag my friend to the counter to find out more about what is was all about.

[Informant no.1, Male]

When probed further, first-time players recalled having positive emotions when they interacted with other players and marketing collateral of the Escape Room and subsequently aroused their desire to try out Escape Room.

I felt a strong urge to try it out when I saw the marketing video. I believed I would enjoy the Escape Room as much as the people do in the video.

[Informant no.13, Female]

I was very scared to try out Escape Room until I spoke to one of the players. He convinced me that I got nothing to worry about. He said I don't need to be a genius to play the game, which is comforting to a certain extent... I was very worried that I would waste my money and time playing.

[Informant no.17, Female]

Repeated players, on the other hand, have a tendency to exhibit a more goal-oriented attitude that moderated their perception of Escape Room.

I always to keep my expectations grounded to the level of difficulty. It is good to start off with the room with the least difficult one before going to the next level. I believe beating this game do not require high IQ as long as you are somewhat familiar with the way Escape Room works. Having said that, a big chunk of the game is dependent on your luck as well...As long as you persevered, you won't be too affected by the outcome.

[Informant no.11, Male]

Interesting to note is that repeated players who have strong goal orientation can maintain a positive attitude, despite playing the same room. These findings differed from Nicholson (2015), where players who repeated Escape Room game have their interest diminished.

4.3. Subjective norm and relational experience

It is no surprise for this theme to be the most cited element amongst the informants, especially new players. Due to the lack of knowledge of the Escape Room concept, new players placed heavy emphasis on their peers' recommendation in picking the game of choice as illustrated below.

I'm not sure...I played the room my friend recommended.

[Informant no.5, Female]

My friend played this room before...probably in the last two months. Heard great feedback from him.

[Informant no.18, Male]

I don't have any preference. I just follow my friend.

[Informant no.13, Female]

A few informants cited that they were being influenced by other customers in the Escape Room.

I came here alone. I chose the room that most visited by others.

[Informant no.20, Female]

The group that just came out managed to complete the game on time. I thought to myself, if they can finish it perhaps I could to. I immediately signed up for the room they went.

[Informant no.6, Male]

Relational experience elements are strongly exhibited in repeated players, where they could draw a sense of belonging to high achievers who had broken the completion time records of the rooms. This, in turn, creates a strong desire for them to go all out in achieving their goals.

This is my fifth time playing this room. I wanted to prove to myself that I can beat Campers' record.

[Informant no. 4, Female]

4.4. Perceived behavioral control

Self-efficacy appears to be the second most cited component by most informants. New players seemed to display low self-efficacy caused by the lack of comprehension on the Escape Room game. Uncertainty arising from players' low self-efficacy reduced their expectations at the purchase stage, steering them into choosing a less difficult option. For example:

I was not confident that I finish the game. After all, this is my first attempt. I played the room that has the least stars.

[Informant no.7, Female]

I think I was smart in making my choices. I picked the room with the highest success rate. This way, I am sure I could finish it.

[Informant no.3, Female]

Players with low self-efficacy tend to rely heavily others (e.g. the Game Master and team members) during gameplay. Players who are less knowledgeable tend to rely a lot on the Game Masters, who provide occasional tips in solving the puzzle. This is very apparent in groups where members are totally new to the Escape Room experience. For example:

Lucky for me, I have the support of my team members and guidance of the Game Master. If it weren't for them I would have been able to escape the room.

[Informant no.9, Female]

I can't thank the Game Master enough for helping us. If we were left alone, we definitely would not have escaped the Room, let alone solve the puzzle. He did a great job in facilitating our experience in the room as well as post game. His instructions were clear and he had a knack improvising the situation when it became too awkward.

[Informant no. 8, Male]

New players also reported adopting multiple approaches to solve a given puzzle.

To be honest, I don't really know what I am doing in there. I can't differentiate between what clues are useful and what are not. It was purely trial and error. I literally mangled the room searching for clues... I bet the Game Master was laughing behind the camera. Probably that the reason why he interrupted us in the middle of the game and I am very thankful for it.

[Informant no.2, Female]

Conversely, repeated players are generally more inclined to remain independent in their gameplay. Reasons cited are

I didn't ask any help from the Game Master. I feel like I'm cheating if I asked.
You can't very well do that if you are really trapped in real life, can you?

[Informant no.15, Female]

All informants showed some degree of involvement during the game. If the team comprised entirely of new players, the amount of effort exerted by each player seemed to be more or less equal. However, if there were repeated customers present in a team, the said player was seen to take a leading role in coordinating team members' actions. When asked about the effect on the group dynamic, new players do not feel undermined by their more experienced members as the goal of the game was a cooperative one.

4.5. Positive and negative anticipated emotions

Similar to the previous study (Kolar, 2017), positive anticipated emotions such as fun, exciting, and satisfied were the most cited emotions. Majority of first-time players drew this from marketing materials on Escape Room, in particular, the promotional video. Negative anticipated emotions such as uncertainty also played a role in hyping up the excitement, illustrated as follows:

I was experiencing this emotional roller-coaster during the briefing session by the Game Master. I do not know what to expect and that makes me want to look forward to play the game.

[Informant no.16, Female]

4.6. Flow, skill and challenge

Generally, it is observed that all informants expressed having experienced an immersion state, described as follows:

I was so focused on the game that I lose track of time.

[Informant no. 12, Male]

I felt like I was transported to the Avatar world. The dramatic soundtrack and echo of the time clock made it possible. I was so focused on the task that I forget everything else.

[Informant no. 14, Male]

The level of difficulty was just right for me. Or else I will feel bored.

[Informant no. 17, Female]

4.7. Desire and revisit intention

All informants expressed their desire to replay the room, which leads to revisiting intention. Amongst popular reasons cited were beating personal scores and dissatisfaction on the outcome of the game. At the time of the interview, some informants had already booked for the next slot and signed up for membership cards.

5. Discussion

The results detailed above highlight key perspectives of Escape Room customers in determining their revisit intention. This study provides in-depth insights that complement the broad concepts proposed by Kolar (2017). Examination of the results revealed that while the customer experience differed greatly between new and repeated players, both shared similar determinants in predicting their revisit intention, which mirrored elements of Model of Goal-Directed Behaviour.

We discovered that players' experience was largely influenced by the subjective norm. This is not surprising given the lack of knowledge possessed by players, especially for first-timers. As such, to conduct an internal benchmark, players tend to depend on their peers or family members as sources of reliable information. Our findings are aligned with previous studies where subjective norm influenced visitors' desire to visit (Chang, Kim, & Kim, 2018; Song et al., 2014). The authors found that reference groups played a pertinent role in shaping the evaluation of potential festival visitors. This perception is further enhanced using social media tools such as travel blogs, Twitter and Facebook as word-of-mouth marketing tools.

Perceived control behaviour, which postulates players' perception of his or her ability to achieve the desired goal is also prominent in this research. We inferred that the uncertainty which arises from the lack of knowledge on the process of an Escape Room game indicated a certain degree of risk to players, in particular, first-time players. They were worried that they would not be able to derive the maximum value from the paid-for experience. This concern can be related to previous studies on customer experience, in particular researches on technology use intention (Izquierdo-Yusta, Olarte-Pascual, & Reinares-Lara, 2015; Rose, Clark, Samouel, & Hair, 2012).

Our research also shows that immersion is the key to achieve the optimal level of experience, and the recipe is achieving the state of flow as well as the balancing of skill and challenge. Harmat et al. (2015) describe the flow state as a presence of mind in which users can effortlessly conduct a task given, which is reflected in players that were more skilled. Perceived authenticity is shown to differ from new player to repeated player, where the latter exhibited object authenticity rather than constructive authenticity.

6. Conclusion and Implications

In this study, we illustrated the integral elements of customer experience in the under-researched study of Escape Rooms in Malaysia. It has been widely acknowledged that customer experience is contextual, subjective, and perceptual, and is thus a challenge to be assessed and monitored. Towards this end, our study was able to capture the dynamic and diverse nature of the customer experience through insightful descriptions by employing a sequential incident technique. Such a rich understanding will enable business owners not only to identify pain points experienced by Escape Room players but will also provide clues on how to optimize their experience. This research offers business owners rich insights to improve the state of reality escape room games in Malaysia, highlighting different elements prioritized between novice and experienced players.

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Appendices

TABLE 2: Themes from Data Analysis.

No.	Themes	Code	Examples
1	Perceived authenticity	Original - True representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The room setting accurately reflects the intended theme and genre.
		Original- Unique concept	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Game masters personify their characters/roles well.

No.	Themes	Code	Examples
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Props are well crafted to the extent they look like the real thing.
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotions displayed by players in the marketing video appeared genuine.
2	Attitude	Beliefs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Escape Room game is challenging. • The Escape Room game is a good avenue to test my skills. • I will have a good time with my friends/family/peers in the Escape Room. • The Escape Room game is attractive.
		Affection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Escape Room game is interesting.
3	Subjective norm	Recommendation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My friends/family/peers told me I should try out Escape Room. • My friends/family/peers said I would enjoy the game. • My friends/family/peers invited me to play with them.
		Peer pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I felt pressure to beat my friend/family/peers score in the next game.
4	Positive Anticipated Emotions	Thrilled	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If I complete the game on time, I will feel satisfied.
		Satisfied	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If I escape the room, I will feel happy.
		Delighted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If I solve the puzzle, I will feel motivated.
		Happy	
		Motivated	
5	Negative Anticipated Emotions	Disappointed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If I cannot complete the game on time, I will feel unsatisfied.
		Demotivated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If I cannot escape the room, I will feel disappointed.
		Upset	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If I cannot solve the puzzle, I will feel demotivated.
		Sad	
6	Perceived Control Behaviour	Self-efficacy – resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have what it takes to finish the game on time.
		Self-efficacy – knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am confident I can beat the highest score for this game. • I am able to lead my team to victory.
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solving the puzzles with two people will be challenging.
7	Desire	Personal motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I hope to beat the clock the next time I visit the Escape Room
		Wishes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I wish I could do better in the next game. • I hope I can solve the puzzles quicker/complete the game in the next level.
8	Frequency of Past Behaviour	Number of rooms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have played similar to this Escape Room game recently.
		Number of establishments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is my second time playing this game.

No.	Themes	Code	Examples
9	Revisit Intention	Replaying room	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will visit this Escape Room again with my family/friends/peers.
		Frequent visit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I intend to visit another escape room from this establishment. • I intend to replay this room in my next visit. • I have booked a slot for my next visit.
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I do not mind spending time and money to play Escape Room.
10	Skill	Time management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I know how to leverage on my teammates' strength to solve the puzzle.
		Problem-solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I know which clues to use to unlock each puzzle or stage.
		"Think-out of the box"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I successfully complete the game with minimal intervention from the Game Master. • I can easily complete the task within/less than given time.
11	Challenge	Difficulty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being forced to solve multiple puzzles challenges me to perform to the best of my ability. • Escape Room game tests my ability to work with a team. • Escape Room game challenges me to think out of the box • Escape Room is a good avenue to test of my problem-solving skills.
12	Flow	Lost consciousness of surroundings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I felt like time passed very fast in the room. • I was too focused on solving the puzzle that I lost track of time. • I feel like I'm in another world when I play Escape Room.
14	Involvement	Engaged with players	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was dependant on my other teammates to figure things out.
		Information-seeking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I attempt to find out more information before visiting Escape Room.
15	Relational experience	Feel the same	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My action with other players in the team are in sync.
		Unspoken connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The winners' pictures on the scoreboard inspired me to try my best. • I shared a common goal with the rest of the players.

Source: Author's own work

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TABLE 3: Operation definition.

No	Themes	Operational Definition
1.	Perceived authenticity	Subjective evaluation on the genuineness of subject matter.
2.	Attitude	The degree to which an individual has a favourable/unfavourable evaluation of performing a specific behaviour.
3.	Subjective norm	The perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform the behaviour.
4.	Positive Anticipated Emotions	Positive affective appraisal arising from subjective evaluation of an individual on the likelihood to achieve intended outcome.
5.	Negative Anticipated Emotions	Negative affective appraisal arising from subjective evaluation of an individual on the likelihood to achieve intended outcome.
6.	Perceived Control Behaviour	Individual's perception of the ease or difficulty in achieving intended outcome.
7.	Desire	Degree of compulsion which drives a person to action.
8.	Frequency of Past Behaviour	Number of times action/behaviour has occurred within a year.
9.	Revisit Intention	Willingness to revisit destination or other similar destinations.
10.	Skill	The ability to undertake certain/task proficiently.
11.	Challenge	Level of difficulty faced in undertaking an action.
12.	Flow	State experienced by an individual where there is a loss of the sense of time and reflective self-consciousness in undertaking a task/action.
14.	Involvement	Willingness to commit and show effort in undertaking a specific action/task
15.	Relational experience	Sense of belonging of an individual to a social group.

Source: Author's own work

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