

Visitor Experience and Emotion at Six Types of Theme Parks

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Introduction

Theme parks are increasingly popular in recent decades. It may be because people are demanding increasingly distinctive experiences, and theme parks can provide experiences that differ from daily life (Milman, 2010). Also, theme parks' hedonic visitor offers can bring visitors positive emotions (Bigné, Andreu, & Gnoth, 2005; Ma, Gao, Scott, & Ding, 2013). Those emotions create memorable experiences leading to visitors' recommendations and revisit behavior (Antón, Camarero, & Garrido, 2019). Prior studies failed to identify which dimensions of experience and which indicators are paramount in generating emotions, and no study has compared visitor experience and emotion between different types of theme parks. Therefore, this study intends to (1) identify dimensions of experience commonly provided by theme parks, (2) explore the influence of overall theme park experience, experiential dimensions, and indicators on visitor emotion, (3) unveil the differences in the experience-emotion relationship between different types of theme parks, and (4) understand the influence of COVID on theme park visitor experience and emotion.

Literature Review

Visitor Experience in theme park

Unique attributes render richer experiences. Theme parks have been neglected as a research subject (Sharpley, 2014). Yet, they represent an ideal context for studying leisure, hedonic-oriented, and long-range interactional experiences, where researchers can better comprehend spontaneous emotion and consequent behaviors (Pikkemaat & Schuckert, 2007).

Visitor Emotion

Emotion shapes the formation of memorable experiences (Ma, Scott, Gao, & Ding, 2017) and establishes criteria to evaluate experience, thereby potentially increasing revisit intention and loyalty (Bigné, Andreu, Perez, & Ruiz, 2020; Zhang, Fu, Cai, & Lu, 2014). Additionally, theme parks offer "out of the ordinary activities," so emotional reactions may be more diverse and intense when compared to other service settings (Bigné et al., 2005).

Theme Park Type

Theme parks can be classified into different categories. This study proposes a new classification of theme parks based on attraction forms, classifying theme parks into six main categories: amusement theme park, water theme park, cultural theme park, ocean theme park, movie-set theme park, and wildlife theme park.

Theoretical Model

Based on the theme park literature and attractions offered by different types of theme parks, ten dimensions of theme park experience are proposed: *special features*, *core tangible experience*, *core intangible experience*, *waiting experience*, *infrastructure*, *layout*, *atmosphere*, *people*, *price*, and *safety*. Several theoretical models were proposed to examine the effect of theme park

experience on visitor emotion, the influence of theme park type on this effect, and the influence of the perceived risk of COVID-19.

Methodology

This study was conducted in Xi'an, China, from September to November, 2020. A total of 1660 valid questionnaires were collected at six theme parks (a water theme park, cultural theme park, amusement theme park, ocean theme world, movie-set theme park, and wildlife theme park). Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) and Partial Least Squares Multigroup Analysis (PLS-MGA) were employed to examine the proposed models via SmartPLS 3.3.2.

Results

After a measurement assessment, the item *waiting experience* is removed from the scale of theme park experience. Nine dimensions of theme park experience were kept, including *special features*, *core tangible experience*, *core intangible experience*, *infrastructure*, *layout*, *atmosphere*, *people*, *price*, and *safety*.

Results indicate all nine dimensions of theme park experience significantly affect visitor emotion, and *atmosphere* contributes most to visitor emotion, followed by *core intangible experience* and *people*. Results further reveal that significant differences in these impacts exist between different types of theme parks. The performance and importance of different experience indicators are found to vary across different theme parks with an analysis of type features and individual features of theme parks. Kano's model is also adopted to explain and categorize the dimensions of theme park experience.

Results demonstrate that visitors' perceived risk of COVID-19 has a positive impact on visitor experience and emotion and a partial mediation effect on visitor emotion through visitor experience, but it does not significantly moderate the impact of theme park visitor experience on visitor emotion.

Conclusion

This study investigated the impacts of theme park experience dimensions and indicators on visitor emotion and compared these influences between different types of theme parks. It contributes to the literature in four ways. Foremost, this is the first study to examine the moderating impacts of theme park type on the relationship between theme park visitor experience and visitor emotion. Second, this study develops a creative measurement scale for theme park visitor experience that permitted measures of specific and generic visitor experiences for different types of theme parks. Third, this study reveals the relationships between various experience dimensions/indicators and visitor emotion dimensions while uncovering how these relationships change across different types of theme parks. Finally, it creates a new method that uses indicators and weights to analyze the impacts of experience on visitor emotion.

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