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**EXPLORING HOW ZOO SERVICESCAPES IMPACT
MEMORABLE TOURISM EXPERIENCE:
A CRITICAL INCIDENT TECHNIQUE (CIT) APPROACH**

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Abstract:

This conceptual paper aims to investigate the impact of servicescapes on visitors' experience of Malaysian zoos in order to show that the zoo's physical environment plays an important role in determining a memorable tourism experience (MTE). In order to investigate the extent to which zoo-related servicescapes create memorable tourism experiences, the critical incident technique (CIT) is being proposed. Semi-structured interviews are to be conducted to ask visitors which aspects of their visit to the zoo were the most memorable in terms of hedonism, refreshment, local culture, novelty, meaningfulness, involvement, and knowledge. This study is expected to extend the servicescape framework to include new dimensions within the context of zoos. In terms of managerial implications, this study could assist zoo operators in understanding how visitors evaluate their trip to the zoo. Findings from this research could therefore provide insight into how zoological facilities, services, and attractions could be better managed to increase visitor numbers.

DOI: 10.35631/JTHEM.623006.This work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)**Keywords:**

Zoo Tourism, Servicescape, Memorable Tourism Experience, Critical Incident Technique

Introduction

Watching wildlife in captive settings is a popular leisure activity all over the world. The external surroundings of animal-based tourist attractions play an important role in creating a memorable visitor experience. Animal-based attractions, such as zoos, are typically associated with entertainment and recreational functions. Additionally, zoos also help educate the public about biodiversity conservation and environmental education. The operation of zoos should take into consideration several important factors in order for it to be successful and sustainable. The main challenge lies in fulfilling animal rights and needs, whilst at the same time creating a memorable experience for the visitors.

Memorable wildlife encounters contribute towards increased visitor satisfaction which could then lead to revisit intention and recommendations to family and friends. Views and opinions of the visiting public are important because they provide direction for continued improvement of the zoo experience. The public needs to be consulted to find out whether or not they fully benefit from having the animals in captivity. Previous research by Woods (2015) reported that best visitor experiences of zoos commonly involve interaction with wildlife, learning, and viewing large varieties of wildlife. Worst experiences were dominated by poor management of captive animals, poor management of the facility and threatening behaviour of animals. In this paper, research focusing on how zoo servicescapes contribute towards visitors' memorable tourism experience is carried out. Specifically, this research aims to indicate which servicescape dimensions require attention so as to attract more visitors, as well as maximise revisit intentions.

Literature Review***The Zoo as a Tourist Attraction***

Zoos are one of the most visited tourist destinations in the world (Nekolny & Fialova, 2018). As early as the nineteenth century, zoos were introduced with the purpose of maintaining a collection of wild animals for study, conservation or display to the public (Smit & Wood, 2015). Zoo tourism provides the public with the opportunity to nurture their interest in wildlife and learn about biodiversity conservation (Shani & Pizam, 2008). As a tourist destination, zoos are designed for public exhibition, education and scientific purposes (Catibog-Siha, 2008). Research by Sickler and Fraser (2009) showed that visitors enjoy going to the zoo to feel a connection between themselves and the animals, as well as the chance for parents to spend time with their children. Spending time at the zoo allows visitors to experience family togetherness, novelty seeking, education and relaxation (Catibog-Siha, 2008).

In the past, zoos were mainly built for the purpose of entertaining visitors (Bahari & Ling, 2016) whereby captive animals are being displayed for the viewing pleasure of the visitors. Therefore, most animal-based attractions operate as captive-setting sites where animals are being held in specific enclosures that unfortunately, may be unsuitable or too small for them. The public now expects more emphasize on animal welfare when visiting zoos. They want to see that facilities being provided ensure animals are getting the right kind of space, behavioural enrichment, opportunities and food to keep them healthy and breeding (Smit & Wood, 2014).

Besides captive settings like zoos, animal-based attractions are also commonly categorised into semi-captive conditions such as wildlife parks, and totally in the wild such as safaris and national parks (Shani & Pizam, 2008). According to Ryan and Saward (2004), visitors actually want to observe animals in as natural setting as possible. Their study showed that “for zoos to become more attractive as a tourist destination, they must become more like replicas of natural areas” (p. 264). Unfortunately, for most zoos, animals are actually out of their natural environment which may be detrimental to their wellbeing. To improve animal welfare, zoos have a duty to provide high-quality care for all captive animals and promote natural behaviours in natural environments.

Extension of Bitner’s (1992) Servicescape Dimensions

Originally, the term servicescape was defined by Bitner (1992, p.58) as “the man-made, physical surroundings as opposed to the natural or social environment”. Servicescape was therefore often used to refer to the physical environment encompassing different elements such as the overall layout, design, signage and décor. Specifically, Bitner (1992) proposed that the dimensions of the servicescape are (i) ambient conditions, (ii) spatial layout and functionality and (iii) signs, symbols and artefacts.

Servicescapes are important as they influence consumer behaviour, perceptions and attitude (Bitner, 1992; Ezeh & Harris, 2007; Daunt & Harris, 2012; Hooper et al., 2013). A clean and hygienic service environment, for instance, would lead to higher customer satisfaction with the service provider. Another example is the design aspect of the servicescape, such as space and layout. Appropriate positioning of objects and furnishings facilitates the free flow of movement throughout the service environment, contributing to a more pleasant customer experience. It is therefore paramount for service providers to consider the influence of the servicescape in shaping customer perception and satisfaction.

Previous research has highlighted that, depending on the service context, customer’s evaluation of their experience is influenced by different servicescape dimensions. For instance, retail shoppers base their quality inferences on the ambient and social elements of the store environment (Turley & Milliman, 2000) whereas in a restaurant setting, customers expect the restaurant atmosphere to match the type of food sold (Lin & Mattila, 2010). This suggests that the design of the servicescape should take in to account the different range of service contexts.

In terms of the design of zoos, previous research has shown that visitors expect zoo operators to provide adequate services and facilities for both themselves, as well as the animals at the zoo (Xu, 2020). There is a strong concern for animals and animal rights therefore, zoo operators need to examine current animal exhibits and programmes to ensure they are creating enjoyable experiences (Sickler & Fraser, 2009). Zoos need to be comfortable for visitors as well as animals on exhibit. In Minkiewicz et al’s (2009) study that looks at a zoological garden in Australia, they conceptualised the servicescape concept into three dimensions which are facility aesthetics, layout accessibility and cleanliness. As for the present study, it is proposed that the servicescape dimensions be adapted and extended based on Bitner’s (1992) servicescape model. The zoo servicescape is therefore divided into five dimensions, namely (i) layout, design and signage, (ii) exterior environment, (iii) cleanliness, (iv) employee characteristics and (iv) animal welfare.

Dimensions of Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE)

According to Zhang et al. (2018), MTEs are experiences that are “selectively constructed from tourist experiences and can be remembered and recalled after a trip” (p. 2). Memorable tourism MTE is also defined as a tourism experience that is remembered and recalled after the event has occurred (Coudounaris & Staphit, 2017). Individuals who perceive a tourism experience as memorable would often recall several experiential dimensions such as hedonism, novelty, local culture, refreshment, meaningfulness, involvement and knowledge (Kim et al., 2012;). In the context of zoo tourism, research shows that various aspects of wildlife encounters impact visitor experience differently (Ballantyne et al., 2007; Shani & Pizam, 2010; Ryan & Saward, 2004; Smit & Wood, 2015). Visitors are more likely to enjoy their trip to the zoo if animals are in as natural a setting as possible and if they have the opportunity to have a good view of these animals (Leubke et al., 2016). On the other hand, animals who were inactive, unhealthy and looked like they were deprived of their natural environment contributed towards a negative experience (Musa et al. 2015).

Kim et al (2012) developed a measurement scale specifically for MTEs and these dimensions are considered to be the MTEs that individuals recall most frequently. In Thoo et al.’s (2019) study of Zoo Negara Malaysia, Kim et. al’s (2012) MTE dimensions were adopted when examining the antecedents of MTEs. The dimensions include (i) hedonism (pleasurable feelings), (ii) novelty (feeling of newness resulting from having a new experience), (iii) local culture (good impression about local people), (iv) refreshment (the state of being refreshed), (v) meaningfulness (doing something important and valuable), (vi) involvement (the degree to which individual is involved in tourist experience, (vii) knowledge (information, facts or experiences known by an individual).

Proposed Research Method

For this study, an exploratory approach will be adopted with the purpose of obtaining initial insights into how different dimensions of the zoo servicescape influences the visitors’ experience at the zoo. In contrast to explanatory and descriptive research, an exploratory study is generally conducted when there has been “little research in the area or where the researcher is exploring a new angle or perspective on the research topic” (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p.222). Specifically, the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), in the form of semi-structured interviews, will be conducted to obtain an understanding of the research area from the perspective of the zoo visitors. The technique has now been used widely in the services marketing literature and has been a key method for recording service failures and successes, providing relevant data for improving management practices Grove & Fisk, 1997; Zhang, Beatty & Mothersbaugh, 2010).

This method is considered appropriate due to the deficiency in research focusing on servicescape dimensions within the context of zoo tourism. Furthermore, findings from the interviews will be used to clarify and validate servicescape dimensions that have been discussed in the literature review. The flexibility of interviews as one of the qualitative research methods also permits the exploration of research issues that arise as the research progresses.

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) involves asking respondents to narrate positive incidents that had an impact on their overall zoo experience. According to Flanagan (1954, p.327), “The CIT outlines procedures for collecting observed incidents having special significance and meeting systematically defined criteria. By an incident, is meant any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences

and prediction to be made about the person performing the act. To be critical, an incident must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects.”

Questions related to the demographic profiles will be asked at the beginning of the interview session to gather the overall background of the respondent and to establish good rapport. This will be followed by a statement asking the respondents to state a specific situation/incident where they felt that their visit to the zoo was a positive and memorable experience. Respondents will be asked the following question:

We are interested in finding out what visitors enjoy about their experiences at the zoo. Based on your own personal feelings, think of a time when you had a particularly positive and memorable experience when you visited the zoo today. Could you describe the situation and tell me what happened?

Following the respondent’s recall of the incident, probing questions will then be asked to find out more about the details of the incident, such as what actually happened, where it happened and what did they see or experience that made the experience memorable.

To recruit participants for this study, purposive judgement sampling will be used. Participants who have visited zoo(s) in Malaysia within the last year will be invited to share their experiences with the researcher. Zoos operating in Malaysia include Zoo Negara, Zoo Melaka, Zoo Johor and Zoo Taiping. Using the researcher’s personal contacts as well as social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram and TripAdvisor, participants will be asked if they are interested to take part in the interview. Online interviews will be conducted through Zoom and Webex meetings. It is expected that the interviews will last between 20-30 minutes. All interviews will be recorded and transcribed for analysis.

In terms of data analysis, procedures suggested by the CIT method (Flanagan, 1954) will be adopted whereby respondents’ narratives will be examined using content analysis to uncover common themes and potential categories. A deductive approach to qualitative data analysis was adopted, in which a coding schema derived from the literature will be developed (Altinay & Paraskevas, 2008).

Conclusion

Zoo tourism provides increased opportunities for the public to nurture their interest in wildlife and learn about biodiversity conservation. However, visits to the zoo may be regarded as a negative experience if visitors perceive that animal welfare is not being taken care of. On the other hand, a more positive experience might come from interactions with the employees as well as seeing the animals in a clean and natural environment. By focusing on improving services and facilities that make up the dimensions of the servicescape, zoo operators will be able to directly influence visitors’ memorable tourism experience. Based on this research, the servicescape framework will be extended to include dimensions that have not been previously identified, especially within the context of zoo tourism. The findings could indicate how physical cues, such as layout, design and signage, exterior environment, cleanliness, employee characteristics and animal welfare could be manipulated to create competitive advantage for animal-based attractions. Suggestions could be presented to zoo operators for them to take appropriate action in order to improve the facilities and services being offered to the public.

This study contributes to the literature on zoo tourism by providing initial insight into how zoos can manipulate their servicescapes to ensure visitors leave with a positive experience. It is therefore recommended that future research should gather empirical evidence that demonstrates how memorable tourism experience is shaped by visitors' evaluation of the different zoo servicescape dimensions.

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