The Effect of Unique Attraction, Word of Mouth (WOM), and Self-Interest on Tourists' Visit Intention: A Case of Sunway Lagoon, Malaysia

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Abstract

Theme park has become a famous and significant urban leisure activity worldwide. Various studies have investigated factors that influence tourists' intention to visit theme park. However, even with the increasing importance of the theme park sector and the large volume of research on the subject, there is still lack of study on unique attraction, word of mouth, and self-interest factors influencing tourists' intention to visit the theme park. Moreover, the demand for different activities and the factors influencing tourist intention could change depending on the different tourist behaviors as well as the location of the theme park. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the co-existing relationship between unique attraction, word of mouth, and self-interest as factors influencing tourists' intention to visit the theme park. Three hypotheses were developed. This study used quantitative technique by way of survey, distributed to 212 respondents. The unit of analysis is Sunway Lagoon theme park visitor. Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modeling with SmartPLS 3.0 software was used to investigate the above-mentioned relationship. The findings revealed that the unique attraction factor significantly influenced visitors' intention to visit Sunway Lagoon theme park. This result could be useful for current destination marketers, especially theme park developers that are eager to understand tourists' future behavior.

Keywords: Attraction, Self-Interest, Malaysia, Sunway Lagoon, Theme Park, Word of Mouth.

Introduction

Theme parks represent a good image of urban tourism; a synthesis of innovative tourism elements. Urbanites are now spending their leisure time in theme parks, which is a popular domestic

tourism activity. The attraction design and activity planning of the theme park vary based on the demand for tourist entertainment, with the theme parks now aiming to become a modern tourist destination. According to Hu (2013), the World Tourism Organization (WTO) has forecasted that at present and in the future, theme parks will likely be the top three trending developments in the tourism industry. This has proven true in the case of Malaysia, which has introduced world-class theme parks to the public, making it the number one theme park destination among ASEAN countries (Bernama, 2018).

By 2020, Malaysia is expected to boast 21 theme parks and water parks, including heavy hitters such as the Ubisoft video game indoor theme park and Twentieth Century Fox Studios, which will be the first theme park of its kind in the world (Bernama, 2018). Sunway Lagoon theme park, as an example has received several awards such as 2018 Traveler's Choice and the 2018 Certificate of Excellence by Trip Advisor. The theme park has also been recognized by the World Branding Awards, and as the Best Companies to Work for in Asia 2017 (Sunway Lagoon, 2018).
The Senior General Manager of Sunway Theme Parks, Calvin Ho, stated that its new indoor theme park will be modeled after existing theme parks such as The Top, Angry Birds Activity Park, Thomas Town, Sanrio Hello Kitty Town, KidZania, Petrosains, Aquaria, Entopia, and District 21, which are lifestyle-driven, internet protocol-based, edutainment-based, and include active play. Calvin also asserts that this increase in the number of theme parks in Malaysia will contribute to repeat visitors, a rise in the number of inbound tourists, and a continuous rise in domestic tourists.

There has been much debate in the literature about the factors influencing tourists' intention to visit a theme park. Most previous studies used several antecedents to factors that influence a tourist's visit intention to theme parks such as service quality (Fotiadis & Vassiliadis, 2016; Hickman & Mayer, 2003; Jin, Lee, & Lee, 2015; Tsang, Lee, Wong, & Chong, 2012), visitors' brand loyalty (Cheng, Du, & Ma, 2016; Cheng, Fang, & Chen, 2016; Fu, Kang, & Tasci, 2017), operational efficiency (Kim & Kim, 2016), satisfaction (Ryan, Shih-Shuo, & Huan, 2010; Shih-Shuo, 2008; Wu, Li, & Li, 2018), perceived value (Cheng, et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2018; Lai, Chu & Petrick, 2016), experience (Lim, 2014; Ma, Gao, Scott, & Ding, 2013; Ma, Scott, Gao, & Ding, 2017), sociodemographic factors (Milman & Tasci, 2018), and motivation (Bakir & Baxter, 2011; Shih-Shuo, 2008; Wong & Cheung, 1999).

Besides that, word of mouth (WOM) has also been investigated in various research focusing on purchase intention (Bhayani, 2016; Lee, Cheng, & Shih, 2017; Sharma, Kumar, & Bhasker, 2015), intention to visit (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016; Shafiee, Tabaeeian, & Tavakoli, 2016), service quality (Chaniotakis & Lymperopoulos, 2009; Liu & Lee, 2016), and brand loyalty (Hur, Ahn, & Kim, 2011; Munnukka, Karjaluoto, & Tikkanen, 2015). Although related to WOM and intention to visit, these studies mostly focused on other perspectives such as destination and marketing, and medical tourism (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016) and rarely focus on the impact of WOM in theme park setting. Due to the rapid growth of theme park in Malaysia as well as around the world, and the various benefits they bring to the country, this study aims to investigate the factors influencing tourists' intention to visit Malaysian theme parks. In addition, there is a need to investigate the influence of WOM, unique attraction, and self-interest on tourists' intention to visit theme park. This study investigates the above-mentioned factors with Sunway Lagoon theme park as a case study.

Literature Review

Kotler (1994) posits that theme park put out three main products. These are excitement/ atmosphere, tangible products (e.g. safety, range of rides, shows), and augmented products (e.g. ancillary services). However, Birenboim, Anton-Clave, Russo and Shoval (2013) suggested theme parks to have five main products, which are games, shops, riders, shows, and restaurants. Hu (2013) argued that the theme park could be classified according to three features. The first feature is size, project characteristics, and service radius such as large theme parks, regional theme parks, or small theme parks. The second feature revolves around the nature of the subject of theme parks such as provision of miniature landscape classes, custom classes, historical and cultural classes, plant classes, or film classes. The third feature is the location of the theme park, its main function, new and high technology, and the theme park development stage, which can be divided into four settings (e.g. natural resources, urban entertainment, simulation, miniature landscape, animation and science and technology). Many studies have investigated issues relating to the popularity of theme parks worldwide. These issues include experience (Ma et al., 2013), physical (Chang, Shu, & King, 2014; Solmaz & Turgut, 2015), satisfaction (Jin et al., 2015; Lai, Chu & Petrick, 2016), motivation (Bakir & Baxter, 2011; Prayag, Chen, & Chiappa, 2017), and theme park selection (Ali, Kim, Li & Jeon, 2018; Pan, Bahja, & Cobanoglu, 2018).

According to the theory of planned behavior by Azjen (1991), one of the factors that influence behavior is motivation. Based on Uysal and Hagan (1993) and Yoon and Uysal (2005), the definition of motivation includes forces that integrate, arouse, and direct a person's activity and behavior. Motivation could also be inferred from a person's biological or physiological needs. Dann (1981) stated that the concept of motivation in tourism research can be broken down into two forces—push and pull—that influence a person to travel. The push and pull motivations have been extensively used in previous studies on tourist behavior. However, according to Yoon and Uysal (2005), the motivation for tourists to travel should go beyond simply understanding the needs and wants of the tourists. One study used a push and pull framework and showed that behavioral intention is strongly affected by motivation (Fan & Hsu, 2014). Nevertheless, some studies did not distinguish between the push and pull factors and how they influence the intention or behavior of the tourists. Hence, the relationship between intention and motivation was investigated in a previous study (Li & Cai, 2012). The types of motivation included exciting experience, self-development, novelty and knowledge, and escape. They found that only knowledge and novelty influenced behavioral intention. Lo and Leung (2015) investigated the tourists' intention for visiting the theme park. They noted six motivations that drove them to go to the theme park. These include bonding with children, encounters with animal and nature, bonding with family members, price and promotions, excitement and entertainment, and the theme park being a good option for thrills. The diverse results on tourist motivation and behavioral intention derived from these studies prove that other variables and relationships should be studied as well. Therefore, this study focused on two pushes and pull factors, namely self-interest and unique attraction.

Next, according to Kim, Kim & Kim (2009), tourists normally depend on word of mouth communication when deciding to visit a place, as this form of communication is trusted and is easily available. Word of mouth (WOM) can be defined as communication between individuals, person-to-

person, that is informal, regarding a service, brand, organization, or product (Anderson, 1998). Sharma et al. (2015) observed that WOM has now dominated the virtual world and is now prevalent in social networking sites and social app-based communities, due to the advancements in information and communications technology (ICT). Therefore, marketing managers need to prioritize good WOM communications to influence tourists to travel to a destination repeatedly (Stylidis et al., 2015). As per Lo and Leung (2015), the medium of WOM that is highly influential in this digital age includes travel blogs, guest-generated messages, and critics. In addition, Le and Dong (2017) claim that tourists will leave positive comments regarding the destination if they feel satisfied with the experience they had obtained at the destination, which will in turn drive others to visit the place. Positive word of mouth is a powerful tool to attract new tourist to a destination (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Tourists will visit a destination that has received positive feedback and the loyalty of other tourists. In this case, the willingness of a tourist to visit a destination and then leave a WOM recommendation is also a form of behavioral intention (Wang & Hsu, 2010).

Besides, retaining guests that have already visited, and not just attracting new visitors, is also integral to the success of a business (Lo & Leung, 2015). Previous studies such as Xie and Lee (2013) and Xu, Chan, and Pratt, (2018), recommended that behavioral intention is a suitable indicator of tourists' actual behavior and loyalty. Referring to Stylidis et al. (2015), identifying the visitors' behavioral intentions is essential in evaluating the success of a tourist destination. Consequently, even with the increasing importance of the theme park sector and the large volume of research on the subject, there is still no significant study on the factors influencing tourists' intention to visit a theme park. This is because the demand for different activities and the factors influencing could change with different tourist behaviors as well as location of the theme park. Thus, current destination marketers could benefit from this research by understanding tourists' future behavior or intention to visit a destination.

The proposed hypotheses in this work are:

H1. Unique attraction has a significant influence on intention to visit Sunway Lagoon theme park.
H2. Self-interest has a significant influence on intention to visit Sunway Lagoon theme park.
H3. Tourists' word of mouth has a significant influence on intention to visit Sunway Lagoon theme park.

Methods
Quantitative technique was used in this study, where a structured self-administered questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire was distributed at the Sunway Lagoon theme park. First, the tourists visiting Sunway Lagoon theme park were given questionnaires consisting of three sections, where Section A included general questions, with five questions consisting of ordinal and nominal scales, to confirm that the respondents were qualified to answer the questionnaire; Section B laid out the factors that influence the intention of tourists to visit the theme park; and Section C outlined six (6) questions to determine the demographic information of the respondents. The questionnaire used a seven (7)-point interval scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" for all 19 questions.

The total number of tourists visiting the theme park in a year is used as the basis for the population of this study. Anand (2018) reported the number of Sunway Lagoon visitors in 2018, amounting to 1.6 million visitors. By using the guidelines from Sekaran (2003), with a 95% confidence level and a 5% standard error, the minimum sample size of this study should be 384 respondents. Convenient sampling was applied in this study due to the unidentified database of the sample population and sampling frame. The response rate from the survey was 78% (300 respondents) due to missing questionnaires, or non-response.

Data analysis was conducted using PLS-SEM software, the Smart-PLS version 3.2. PLS-SEM was used because of the small sample size in this study, and to determine the relationship between variables via a structural model.

Findings and Discussions

This study applied a modified version of the theory of planned behavior (TPB). The TPB theory uses attitude or behavior, subjective norms, and perceived control as the construct variable. In this study, WOM, unique attraction, and self-interest were used to represent behavior, subjective norms, and perceived control. The analysis of data in this research was conducted using measurement model structural modeling. Out of 300 responses received, only 212 questionnaires were found to be valid.

First, the demographic background of the respondent such as gender, age, annual income, marital status, employment status, and educational background, was analyzed. Majority of the respondents were female between 21 to 30 years old, while 41 year-old-and-above females made up the second largest group of respondents. The income of the respondents was mostly below RM2000.00 a month, which correlates with their single status and relative youth. In addition, most respondents are employees with a diploma or degree. Based on the measurement model threshold, the recommended threshold value for Composite Reliability, as per Nunnally (1978) and Hair et al. (2014), is 0.70. Table 1 shows that the Composite Reliability (CR) values in this study exceed this range, (0.89 to 0.95). Based on Fornell and Larcker (1981), the average variance extracted (AVE) should be more than 0.5. In addition, the recommended values for loading should also be more than 0.5 (Hair et al., 2014). Table 1 present the assessment of measurement model output.

Table 1: Assessment of Measurement Model

Construct	Item	Loading	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Composite Reliability (CR)
Unique Attraction	BM1	0.928	0.875	0.933
	BM4	0.943		
Word of Mouth	BW1	0.767	0.794	0.939
	BW2	0.867		
	BW3	0.913		
	BW4	0.913		
Self-Interest	BM2	0.921	0.813	0.897
	BM3	0.803		
	BM4	0.863		
Intention to visit	BI1	0.923	0.855	0.959
	BI2	0.937		
	BI3	0.945		
	BI4	0.891		

Next, Table 2 below reports the results of testing the discriminant validity of the measure scales. The criteria for assessment are that the item value should be higher than its own constructs in the model, and the average variance shared between each construct and its measurement should be greater than the variance shared between the construct and other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 2: Discriminant Validity (intercorrelations) of variable constructs

Latent Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Unique Attraction	**0.935**			
2. Intention to visit	0.781	**0.924**		
3. Self-interest	0.767	0.684	**0.902**	
4. Word of Mouth	0.571	0.562	0.655	**0.891**

Based on the above table, the discriminant validity of the scales is well above the minimum threshold. The values of the square root of AVE (matrix diagonal elements) must be greater compared to the corresponding row and column (off-diagonal elements). Figure 1 shows the path analysis output.
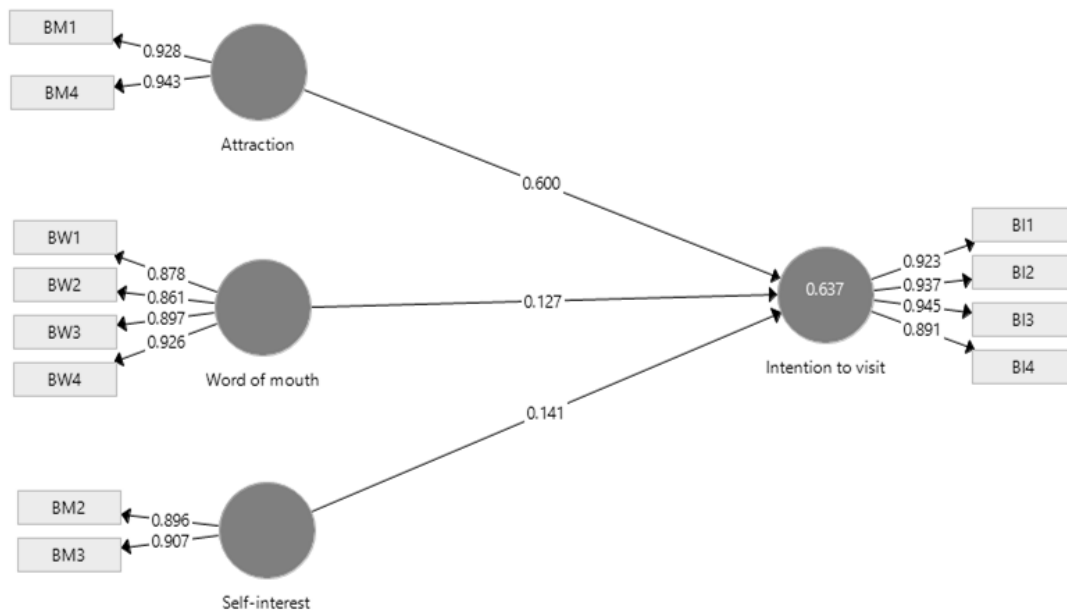
Figure 1: Structural Model Result

Path Coefficients: Significant at p<0.001

Based on the specification of the structural model in this study, the results for the path coefficient of the exogenous and endogenous construct are determined, as per Table 3. The significance of the structural model is represented by the varying values as a result of applying the bootstrapping method on the original sample.

Table 3: Result of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Beta Value	t-Value	Significant level
H1. Unique attraction -> Intention to visit	0.598	7.019	Significant
H2. Self-interest -> Intention to visit	0.162	1.217	Not Significant
H3. Word of mouth -> Intention to visit	0.110	1.152	Not Significant

Table 3 presents the summary of the hypotheses testing. Refering to the table above, the column showing sample mean shows that the highest value (0.598) is attributed to the effect of unique attraction on intention to visit. Chin (1998) explains that the t-value of the path coefficient is used to evaluate the relationship between each variable in a hypothesis, where t-value > 1.96 (significant level = 0.05).

Conclusion

The results of this study proved that variable of unique attraction had significant influences on tourists' intention to visit. However, the other two independent variables—word of mouth and self-interest—did not have any significant influence on intention to visit. It showed changes in tourists' behavior, in which the factor that exclusively affects the tourists' intention to visit Sunway Lagoon theme park is the unique attraction of the theme park itself. This finding is parallel to the finding of Lo and Leung (2015), which found that the primary motive of tourists to visit theme parks is strongly relate to the attraction of the theme parks such as for thrill rides, availability of franchises, and animal encounters. Yet, this finding also divergence with the previous study that found significant relationship on WOM and self-interest towards intention to visit as mentioned in the literature review section. Thus, the unique attraction at Sunway Lagoon theme park, bolstered by the many awards and worldwide recognitions it has received, is the main reason for tourists to visit.

Prior to that, this research contributes to the knowledge of understanding on how the changes of tourists' behavior effectively influence visit intention at a theme park. Academicians who wish to examine tourist's behavior at theme parks may find the review on unique attraction as an effective persuasion to visitation and make reality comparison of different study cases. On the practitioners' perspective, the research highlighted effective factor—unique attraction—indicates strong consideration to be emphasize by destination marketers, especially theme park developers, who are eager to understand tourist's future behavior. The finding is beneficial as a benchmark to theme park managements in understanding the preferable factor of unique attraction from the perspective of tourist that visit the theme park. Besides that, management may also invent new attractions at theme park, which will indefinitely contribute to its success.

Henceforth, these findings directly lead to the future research in relation to the forms of unique attraction that influence the tourist's intention to either visit or revisit. A comprehensive analysis seems to be necessary by using the Importance Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) to identify which form of attraction most strengthen to influence the tourist's behavior based on generation due to the varies of unique attraction that exists in current theme park as well as future theme park. In addition, future research could also compare the various kind of unique attraction at theme park in different location.

In conclusion, unique attraction in the theme park is a paramount factor that can pull visitors and tourists to visit a theme park. In addition, both the academicians and the practitioners should continuously cooperate in identifying other factors effecting tourist visitation. This is to ensure that theme park sustained as a preferred tourist attraction, which able to expand both the tourism and the hospitality industry.

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