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Examining visitors’ experience with Batu Cave, using the four realm experiential theory

Ghazali Musa, Shahrul Najmin, Thinaranjeney Thirumoorthi and Azni Zarina Taha

Abstract
Purpose – City has a continuous need to diversify its products and services to ensure longer tourists’ stays and a profitable tourism industry. Kuala Lumpur is one of the most popular cities in the world, and within its vicinity, Batu Caves are not only an important Hindu religious site, but also a popular tourist attraction. Guided by the four realms of experience dimensions (Pine and Gilmore, 1998), the purpose of this paper is to analyze 54 essays written by university students, to examine the experience of their visit to Batu Caves. The findings confirmed the application of all the four realm dimensions – entertainment, educational, aesthetic and escapist – revealing both positive and negative aspects of the experience. Batu Caves may capitalize on the positive experiences as pointers to create an effective marketing communication, while negative experiences are opportunities to devise appropriate corrective measures, and perhaps further develop tourism products and services that would appeal to the visitors’ experience.

Design/methodology/approach – This study employed a qualitative research strategy to examine visitors’ experiences at Batu Caves using the four realms of experience theory as coined by Pine and Gilmore (1998). A total of 54 undergrads were asked to describe their visit to Batu Caves (Lucia-Palacios et al., 2016) providing a complete insight of their opinions, feelings and perceptions (Jüttner et al., 2013) using the essay writing method.

Findings – The authors discovered firm evidence of the theory’s application, revealing the expected four experiential dimensions in explaining experience at a cultural religious site, extending the description to include its positive and negative aspects, all of which are useful for destination management. The study points out a lot of aspects that must be managed by the site, such as the poor esthetic experience (e.g. smell, rubbish, graffiti, etc.), controlling the animal aggression (i.e. monkeys) and perhaps develop new products and services which could enhance some experiences (e.g. cultural escapism through cultural performances in which visitors could participate).

Research limitations/implications – The main weakness of the research is perhaps the qualitative research work in which data were collected from essays written by the university students. Data of this nature prevent us from being able to generalize the findings and reflect on the experience to the general public.

Practical implications – Tourist stays in Kuala Lumpur could be enhanced by providing meaningful, deep and memorable experiences. Tourist attractions such as Batu Caves should continuously examine the experience that they provide to the visitors. Batu Caves’ management could continuously measure its tourists’ experience provisions, as tourists’ needs evolve over time. From the results they could revamp their products and services offering to ensure the sustainability of Batu Caves’ natural and cultural appeal among visitors and tourists alike.

Originality/value – The outcome provides a better understanding of the current tourism product and services at the destination that have an impact on a visitor’s experience. The findings will assist the Batu Caves’ management to revise and develop the products and service offerings to the tourists.

Keywords Tourist experience, City, Essay method, Batu Caves, The four realm of experience

1. Introduction
The tourism industry in Malaysia contributed RM161 billion in revenue and ranked sixth in the annual GDP contributions (The Sun Daily News, 2015). On average Malaysia had recorded an impressive 9.7 percent growth yearly in tourist arrivals from 2004 to 2014 (Tourism Malaysia, 2016). The tourist arrivals dropped drastically by 6.3 percent from...
27.4 million in 2014 to 25.7 million in 2015. The drop could be attributed to the negative image plaguing the country, following the triple airline tragedies in 2013 and 2014. However, even among those who came to Malaysia, their stays reduced from 6.8 nights in 2013 to 5.5 nights in 2015 (Tourism Malaysia, 2016). Previous studies reflect that various factors affect the length of stay such as destination image (Machado, 2010) and standards of service and hospitality (Barros et al., 2010). Length of stay is essential for the destination planners whose tasks are to create and develop attractive tourism products and services to cater for tourists’ needs (Kozak, 2003). Scholtz et al. (2015) expressed that the destination management should emphasize “specific attributes” to attract visitors to stay longer and spend more.

Cities such as London and New York are constantly growing and in a constant state of change to provide their visitors the experiences and products they expect and these products and experiences are also constantly changing, adapting to an increasing demand (UNWTO, 2012, p. 10). All these trigger a constant investment in infrastructure, promotion and conservation ultimately benefiting tourists and local residents. Failing to assess the products and understand the target market will result in dissatisfaction, when the perceived performance is lower than the expectations formed by the tourists. Cities with diverse cultural and religious compositions provide tourists with more unique experience (Adapa, 2008). Cultural heritage sites within Kuala Lumpur include China Town, Batu Caves, National Mosque and Thean Hou temple (Wonderful Malaysia, 2016). One of the key issues in heritage tourism is the promotion of the attraction that will enhance tourist intention to visit and re-visit the attractions (Adapa, 2008). The cultural heritage attractions are different compared to other tourist attractions that require a balance between the traditional role to promote spiritual healing and piety and to generate income for the local communities through tourism activities (Kasim, 2011). These attractions provide unique experience to the tourists, which is based on different religious practices of the devotees, giving tourists the chance to experience seldom-exposed authentic religious activities (Kasim, 2011). Tourism destinations and attractions must be managed effectively to fulfill tourists’ expectations, which in the future will contribute to positive word of mouth and repeat visitations. In Kuala Lumpur, one such attraction that requires examination is Batu Caves.

Recently, the Kuala Lumpur Mayor launched KL PASS™ which is under the Kuala Lumpur Tourism Master Plan 2015-2025. The ultimate objective of KL PASS™ is to enhance the tourist experience, including extending the tourists’ length of stay in Kuala Lumpur. KL PASS™ comes together with a guidebook that provides information pertaining to the attractions in the city. The KL PASS™ holders do not have to pay entry fees and they are also entitled to discounts in various shopping and dining outlets. Despite various efforts to motivate tourists to spend more time in the city by the authorities, an attraction itself also should play its parts in creating and enhancing the tourists’ experience.

To date, there is no consensus for the definition of experience in tourism studies. Authors have proposed various dimensions and theories related to tourism experience. Some of the measures highlighted were realms of experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1998), “steady flow of fantasies, feelings and fun” or known as the “experiential view” (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1980, p. 132), a behavioral or perceptual concept (Oh et al., 2007), cognitive or emotional (Oh et al., 2007), expressed or implied (Oh et al., 2007), benefit to the tourist (Prentice et al., 1998) and mode of experience (Cohen, 1979). Schmitt (1999) promoted the experiential marketing concept which was derived from the experience economy philosophy. To Schmitt, there are five dimensions, namely sensory (sensing), emotional (feeling), thinking (thought), operational (action) and related (belonging). This study posits that the framework developed by Pine and Gilmore (1998) provides an excellent alternative to uncovering the richness of the customer experience on a tourist attraction. This framework categorizes experiences using four dimensions termed as entertainment, educational, escapist and esthetic. Each dimension determines customer involvement either active or passive, and personal connection in terms of absorption or immersion when engaged in the event. The framework focuses toward how customers are co-creating value and explains how the customers would go to great lengths to experience something new. Pine and Gilmore (1998) explained the importance of memory and how it plays an important role in the interpretation of the experience. It provides explanation on the memorability of the experience as well as the creation of value by the customers through their interaction with the destination. The aim of this study is to extend the understanding on how tourists co-create their own experiences in each of the four dimensions in the experience realm.
The overall tourists’ experience is a fundamental mechanism for sustainability. Intangibles add a sense of exclusiveness making a significant difference (Tourism Intelligence International, 2013). As such, higher spenders hold higher and more sophisticated expectations, taking infrastructure and many services and facilities for granted rather than considering them as added values. This expectation may be influenced by their prior experience with the attractions. The reduction in tourists’ length of stay has prompted the destination marketer to re-examine the current tourism product and services. In line with Kuala Lumpur Tourism Master Plan 2015-2025, this study aims to investigate the visitors’ experience at Batu Caves using the four experiential realms theory (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). The study will provide a better understanding of the current tourism experience at Batu Caves. It could assist the Batu Caves’ management to revise and develop the product and service offerings to the visitors.

2. Literature review

2.1 The visitors’ experiences

Despite the deepening interest in the tourists’ experience, researchers have not come to a consensus for a well-excepted definition (e.g. Holbrook and Hirschman, 1980; Oh et al., 2007). Stamboulis and Skayannis (2003) argued that the conservative tourist experience’s definition only referred to visiting, seeing and living in a different mode of life, which led to recent researchers to define it as events that individuals engage in a personal way that is enjoyable, engaging and memorable (Oh et al., 2007; Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Tung and Ritchie (2011, p. 1369) provided a more in-depth definition of tourism experience as “an individual’s subjective evaluation and undergoing (i.e. affective, cognitive, and behavioral) of events related to his/her tourist activities which begins before (i.e. planning and preparation), during (i.e. at the destination), and after the trip (i.e. recollection).” Yet, a few researchers argued that emotion is an important attribute in creating experiences, because it is incorporated into the customer memory (Slåtten et al., 2011; Kim and Fesenmaier, 2014). Emotions such as excitement, thrill, fun and fear develop the flow of experience (Beeho and Prentice, 1997).

In contrast, Alcántara et al. (2014) argued that the experiences are formed through the creation of perception that will benefit the customers. Valuable experience will affect the customer quality of life, interest in living and knowledge gained from the event. Therefore, researchers point out that it is essential to gain an understanding of what the experience is and how it is developed from the outcome of visiting different tourist destinations based on stakeholder perspectives (Oh et al., 2007). Following the argument, recent studies have emerged, offering new perspectives from the analysis such as spiritual and cultural tourism experience (Jauhari, 2010), wine tourism experience (Quadri-Felitti and Fiore, 2012), tourist experience in a wetland park (Wang et al, 2012), heritage experience (Chen and Chen, 2013), a factory tour experience (Lee, 2015), tourists’ shopping experiences (Correia and Kozak, 2016) and visitors’ experience at a zoo (Musa et al., 2015).

There are several types of models that explore and analyze customer experience. Prentice et al. (1998) used the benefit determinant concept that divides the experience into five different models: hierarchical, flow, planned behavior, typological and insider-outsider. Meanwhile, Uriely et al. (2002) suggested type-related concept to measure experience based on Cohen (1979) theory of five “modes of tourist experiences” that classify it into recreational mode, diversionary mode, experiential mode, experimental mode and existential mode. However, the classification has been criticized for its inability to obtain the entire element of experience that is necessary in measuring performance and value of destination (Oh et al., 2007).

Other studies analyzed the five phases of experience as suggested by Hammitt (1980): travel anticipation, travel to, onsite experience, travel back and recollection. Beeho and Prentice (1995) introduced the ASEB (activities, settings, experiences, benefits) grid analysis. This new analysis model is an improvement to the traditional SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunity and threat) management tool. The ASEB is a sequential hierarchy of demand that enables the analysis to be focused and customer oriented. Beeho and Prentice (1997) introduced a demi-grid that employed just strength and weakness as dimensions to explore tourists’ experiences rather than the full grid SWOT.
In contrast, Pine and Gilmore (1998) proposed the context of evaluating the experiences generated by the customer using four dimensions: entertainment, education, escapism and esthetic. Each dimension influences the richness of experience in business offerings through customer level of participation (active or passive) as well as forms of connection (immersion or absorption) in the event. Progressing from the experience economy, Schmitt (1999) introduced the experience marketing concept using the strategic experiential modules (SEM), which categorizes experience into five dimensions: sensory experiences (SENSE), affective experiences (FEEL), creative cognitive experiences (THINK) and physical experiences, behaviors and lifestyles (ACT). The sensory and emotional experiences reflect the customer experience based on senses and emotions. While thoughts result from customer experience, and from the creativity and cognitively from the event, operational experience is developed from the physical or participation in the activities and related experiences, generated from active involvement in certain cultural or social groups.

Even though the study on visitor’s experience has been widely acknowledged among researchers, Tung and Ritchie (2011) argued that there is a need to conduct further investigation to identify specific elements that are described as special, spectacular and memorable among customers. In line with the argument, Alcántara et al. (2014) suggested appropriate steps to be taken by identifying experience and assessing the value from the customer position as necessary factors in the process of designing memorable experiences. A study in bed and breakfast tourist experience conducted by Oh et al. (2007) claimed that the Pine and Gilmore’s (1998) findings is significant for evaluating customers’ experience. Moreover, research conducted by Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2012) on wine tourism validates the conclusion that four experiential realms are a viable framework in understanding the consumer behavior as well as a means to improve the wine industry business model. The four experiential realms theory will be further explained in the following literature review section.

2.2 Four realms of experience theory

Customer experience is a new approach in marketing research philosophy, which is derived from the “experience economy” model. Pine and Gilmore (1998) suggested a new kind of economy that engaged in experience, which is extracted from the service-based model. It was triggered by the rise of new technology and market rivals that in the end leads to high consumer expectations as well as affecting cost. It is a shift in paradigm, which generates value-added service and differentiation to the businesses in the uncertain market. Using the “progression of economics value” principle, there are four stages of evolution in economy, each stage of which has developed a distinct offering to customers. These stages are “commodities (fungible), goods (tangible), services (intangible) and experiences (memorable)” (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). Among these progression stages, Pine and Gilmore (1998) claimed that the experience stage is made up more of personal characteristics which will develop in the memory of a person who has been involved in the events that they can connect to at an emotional, physical, intellectual or spiritual level. Furthermore, an experience potentially becomes an economic good by means of the services and scenarios offered in the environment that the customer has consumed and become memorable to them (Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Oh et al., 2007).

Using the four realms of experience theory (Figure 1), there are four dimensions suggested by Pine and Gilmore (1998) that can be used by marketers to design a memorable experience for customers. These dimensions are entertainment, educational, esthetic and escapist. Across the horizontal spectrum, there are two types of involvement by the participants that relate to either the passive (not affecting performance) or the active (yielding the experience). Meanwhile, on the horizontal spectrum lies another two types of connection to the event or activity which are absorption and immersion. Entertainment relates to the form of personal experience when the customers are only “passively” involved in the event (Oh et al., 2007). Educational relates to personal involvement when customers will increase their knowledge by absorbing as well as actively participating in the event (Oh et al., 2007). Escapist involves greater individual immersion and participation as compared to other dimensions. Escapism can either be in a form of a real or virtual environment (Oh et al., 2007). Esthetic on the other hand, limits the customer’s participation in the event. Despite being immersed in the occasion, there is “little or no effect” on the activity or environment that they joined (Oh et al., 2007).
2.3 Heritage religious tourism experience

Cultural heritage tourist attractions represent material or objects (monument, building and archaeological site) in the past (historical), which are considered as special value or significance as “treasure” or “legacy” (Peleggi, 1996; King and Parnwell, 2011; Levi and Kocher, 2012). Meanwhile, religious tourism is referred to as visiting religious sites particularly involving the faith of the followers or traditionally known as pilgrims and usually occurred during certain special events (Kartal et al., 2015), in which the motivation is to be closer to divinity, seek forgiveness for wrong doing, worship ancestors and nature gods, or petition deity for blessings (Nyaupane et al., 2015). In addition, Kartal et al. (2015) described that “it mostly covers tourist trips to perform the religious beliefs and/or to see the centers of faith attraction in the evaluation of the tourism phenomenon” (p. 216).

However, some studies find that there are many non-religious people who visit sacred sites for various reasons other than spiritual motivation (Hughes et al., 2013; Nyaupane et al., 2015; Kartal et al., 2015). Hughes et al. (2013, p. 211) described among other motives that encourage people to visit religious sites that are: “spur of the moment decision” (accounting for the majority of visits), family connections with site (e.g. visiting gravestones of ancestors), famous people who were connected with the site and personal interest in architecture or historic art works. Meanwhile, Nyaupane et al. (2015) explained that among the intention for non-religious tourists’ visits the sacred sites belonging to others’ faith is to experience the sense of wonderment and cultural inspiration, or to satisfy curiosity.

Many religious sites, which have long-established reputations as places that offer a spiritual experience such as worship, ceremonies and rituals to the visitors, are lately visited by non-religious tourists (Hughes et al., 2013). Often, these tourists may participate in the religious practices during a tour at the religious sites (Levi and Kocher, 2012). Bremer (2006) suggested that these religious sites (e.g., Vatican City) are considered hybrid places, where the religious and secular activities take place in the same space due to the presence of a significant number of tourists in the religious destination. For instance, most large heritage religious sites also offer tourists a tour in a small museums and treasuries, beautiful historic buildings and landscapes (Hughes et al., 2013) as well as stores for souvenirs and other tourist items (Levi and Kocher, 2012). Hughes et al. (2013) further highlighted tourists who visit religious heritage sites to gain an aesthetic experience, and also engage themselves with the sites at emotional, physical, intellectual or spiritual levels. The next section provides a brief description of the case study site.
2.4 Case study: Batu Caves, Malaysia

Malaysia offers both natural and cultural attractions, and Batu Caves are both (Wonderful Malaysia, 2016). It is a hill comprising interior limestone formations formed over 400 million years ago, located at the northern part of Kuala Lumpur city. Historically, the site was a worship place for an Indian trader, K. Thamboosamy Pillai in the 1890s. The caves house Hindu temples and shrines. Among the main caves’ attractions is the large Lord Murugan’s statue located at the entrance, the 272 stairs leading up to the main temple, the animal species such as monkeys and a popular rock climbing site (Tourism Malaysia, 2015). Batu Caves are visited by many worshippers and tourists alike (Kuala Lumpur Attraction, 2016), and received 3,000-5,000 visitors daily (Murugan.org, 2016). These numbers peak especially during the annual Thaipusam celebration which offers “informative, pleasant and entertaining” experience to any visitors (Musa et al., 2015; Wonderful Malaysia, 2016). Batu Caves are not only a religious sacred site, but also a tourism attraction, offering experiences of culture, nature and adventure.

Several researchers have documented various research aspects of Batu Caves (Kasim, 2011; Maciejowski, 2015; Price, 2016; Sarkar, 2016). Sarkar (2016) examined the urban ecotourism potential of Kuala Lumpur which includes the caves, and stressed the importance of social media like Facebook and Twitter in promoting ecotourism attractions in Kuala Lumpur. Price (2016) documented geological and historical aspects of Batu Caves, covering archeology, historical discoveries and quarrying activities in the area. Kasim (2011) and Maciejowski (2015) discussed the natural and cultural perspectives of Batu Caves in relation to tourism. Maciejowski (2015) examined the double roles played by Batu Caves as an important Hindu pilgrimage center and the increasingly popular tourist destination for both natural and cultural attractions. Kasim (2011) who surveyed the university students’ Hindu parents examined the balance of tourism and religious experience. The author argued that understanding the significance of a religious event among its followers will preserve the real purpose of religious travel and tourism and provide insights of a balanced management approach of a religious tourism destination. So far there have been no studies examining visitors themselves of what they have experienced at Batu Caves.

3. Research methodology

This study employed a qualitative research strategy to examine visitors’ experiences at Batu Caves. The research is similar to Musa et al. (2015), aiming to gain an understanding of the “experience phenomenon” from the young adults’ perspective. While Musa et al. (2015) examined the young adults’ experience at the National Zoo in Kuala Lumpur using Schmitt’s (1999) SEM, this study investigates the experience at Batu Caves using the four realms of experience theory as coined by Pine and Gilmore (1998), from a relatively similar demographic composition. The university students were selected as the sample for several reasons. They are known to be future decision makers for both families and at workplace. Literature on the usage of college students has been widely documented in the marketing, consumer research and social psychology research context (Kubickova and Ro, 2011). Additionally, students represent an unattended segment that is engaging in an increasing number of vacation breaks, providing a potentially lucrative market segment for pleasure travel (Gallarza and Saura, 2006). They also have more time to go on vacation and more participative in tourism activities (Thrane, 2016), along with inheriting an idealized vision of their experiences that leads to a higher tendency to widen their experiences as they travel (Forsey and Low, 2014).

Participants were asked to describe their visit to Batu Caves (Lucia-Palacios et al., 2016) providing a complete insight of their opinions, feelings and perceptions (Jüttner et al., 2013) using the essay writing method. On October 10, 2015, a total of 54 students from University Malaya visited Batu Caves as a part of their Tourism Management course’s assignment. Prior to departure, the students were briefed to take notes and record their observations and experiences during the visit. Upon returning from the trip, they were given two weeks to prepare and submit an essay writing based on their field trip. Students were instructed to be honest and expressive in their writing with regard to whatever experience they had encountered, be it negative or positive. They were prior-informed and had agreed that their essays will also be analyzed for
a research purpose. To ensure the quality of the write up, financial incentive was offered for the best three essays of the visit to Batu Caves.

The essay method enables researchers to “explore the meaning” and to gain “rich and deep” data (Musa et al., 2015). The method has much similarity with the diary method as it “requires participants to recall a detailed account of an experience specific to an event within a specified time frame” (Musa et al., 2015, p. 241). If the former confines the recollection of experience in a specific time frame within a day, the latter requires recording events and experience on a daily basis (Musa et al., 2015). The diary method provides rich insights (Poria, 2006) and a contextualized narrative (Markwell and Basche, 1998). It enables the participants to record the event in the natural setting, thus minimizing the delay between the event and the time it is recorded (Lavrakas, 2008). Similarly, for the purpose of this study the students were asked to record their experiences and observations at the attraction which lasted for four hours. This minimizes the recall and reframing errors as the participants capture the events as they occur (Wheeler and Reis, 1991). The diary method is widely documented in social science studies (Sheble and Wildemuth, 2009; Markwell and Basche, 1998; Musa et al., 2010, 2015). Markwell and Basche (1998) pointed out that diaries allow an understanding of human emotions outside a staged research setting, increasing ecological validity.

The unstructured essay prompts the students to write what matters most to them during the Caves’ visit. The authors carried out content analysis using NVIVO qualitative research software, to explore the patterns in experience and group them within the dimensions. The coding was carried out guided by the four realms of experience theory (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). The main themes were classified as the tree nodes using the principle of content analysis. The main themes were classified into the four dimensions of the four realms of experience theory. For each dimension, the researchers create sub-themes to present the variation expressed in the experience of students’ visit to Batu Caves. Two researchers coded the themes separately and achieved 90 percent consistency. The inter-coding developed independently enhances the reliability of findings (Gibbs, 2007; Miles and Huberman, 1994). All of the 54 students who went on the trip to the caves submitted their essay write up, as it was a part of the requirements for the tourism course. Table I indicates the demographic profile of the participants by age, gender and race. More than half of the participants were female, aged 21 years old and of Chinese ethnicity.

4. Results

The analysis employed the four realms experience theory coined by Pine and Gilmore (1999), where the dimensions consists of entertainment, education, escapism and esthetic. Referring to Table II, most experiential dimensions recorded were escapism (27.8 percent) and education (27.1 percent), followed by esthetic (24.5 percent) and entertainment (20.6 percent). The statements of experience were almost evenly distributed. Figure 2 demonstrates the students’ four realms of experience in percentages within each dimension.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic profile</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.7</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>72.2</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24.1</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>53.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>46.3</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>83.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.1 Entertainment

Entertainment elements were either positive (48.8 percent) and negative (51.2 percent), both of which were almost equally represented. For negative entertainment, participants were alarmed by the huge presence of monkeys, which caused an inconvenience to their visit and overall experience. "The monkeys were trying to snatch our food, drinks and also bags [...] they were really scary" (Participant R10). "I was petrified to see so many monkeys [...] I felt very restless when they were chasing each other. I had to be very alert when they were around me" (Participant R23). "We were scared that mischievous monkeys would attack us and snatch our belongings [...] luckily they were not aggressive towards us" (Participant R47).

Nevertheless, some participants regarded the presence of monkeys and pigeons as positive entertainment. They observed how the monkeys behaved when they were fed by the visitors.
“The monkeys were entertaining especially when the tourists fed them” (Participant R26). “We witnessed a couple of funny incidents […] a bunch of monkeys were trying to snatch the plastic bags carried by tourists. They also attacked those with food and drink” (Participant R47). Participants enjoyed watching groups of pigeons, which were calm and not as wild as the monkeys. Most pigeons flocked to the concrete pavement in front of the Lord Murugan’s statue, waiting eagerly but cautiously for visitors to feed them (Participant R7, R15, R50). “It felt really nice when I was surrounded by hundreds of pigeons especially when they flew around me” (Participant R15). “We were amused with the presence of pigeons […] we fed them with grains, breads, corns and chips” (Participant R7).

4.2 Education

The education dimension consists of six elements, namely pre-travel knowledge (31.4 percent), onsite information (25.2 percent), cultural and religious practice (24.5 percent), animal species (14.5 percent) and pre-cautiousness (4.4 percent). The pre-travel knowledge was the most frequently mentioned by the participants. For most participants, it was their first visit to Batu Caves, and therefore, they carried out a prior information search pertaining to the destination’s history, location, culture, religion and online reviews. “I Googled about the history of Batu Caves before the visit to get some ideas on the attraction” (Participant R11). “The search on Google resulted in abundance of information pertaining to Batu Caves […] there were so many narratives and pictures […] it gave a feeling of travelling to the destination on a computer screen” (Participant R36). The participants also learned about the attraction from the information board, audio/visuals or explanations from the local people. It enhanced their knowledge of the sacred site, enabling them to relate with their onsite experience (R26, R29, R39).

A participant mentioned the audio aid provided by the management to assist visitors in their whereabouts, and information on history and dressing code. The visitors learned that they needed to wear appropriate attire when they are at the holy site, to respect the culture and religion (R16, R34, R43, R45). “The visitors were prohibited from wearing shorts as a sign of respect and they were also encouraged to wear sport shoes for the steps is not only narrow, but might also be slippery when raining” (Participant R16). “Those who wore shorts were given sarongs before they entered the shrines. In addition, the visitors were not allowed to smoke in the vicinity” (Participant R45).

Besides the displayed information, the employees explained about religious and cultural practices at the shrines to visitors. It enhanced the participants’ overall experience (Participants R27, R45). “The staff told me that the main religious event for the Hindus is the Thaipusam festival which held on an annual basis” (Participant R27). “According to the management staff, the Thaipusam festival is celebrated at the end of every January to reminisce Subramaniam whose is a Hindu god” (Participant R45). Apart from the displayed information, the participants also learned from their observations. They observed the worshiping rituals and the attire clad by the devotees (Participant R27/R30/R52). “I saw many devotees visiting the temple […] the staff told me that they were having special prayers” (Participant R27). “It was interesting to observe how the Hindus pray during the rituals […] I would not get to experience it by reading books or watching documentaries” (Participant R30). “The devotees were barefooted when praying at a shrine […] I watched closely the rituals and ceremonies and thought that Hinduism is a beautiful religion” (Participant R52).

The participants learned about different species of animals that inhabit the area during the trip. “I saw bats and trapdoor spiders in the caves” (Participant R14). “There were unique species such as Liphistiidae spiders, Eonycteris and fruit bats in the cave” (Participant R18). “You could get more information about the bats from the exhibition […] you could also hear the bats flying in the cave and got a glimpse of it when you were walking” (Participant R26).

The participants had been warned about monkeys and they took precautions to avoid unwanted incidences. Some of them decided not to visit Cave Villa due to the negative online reviews they read prior to the trip. “We did not visit Cave Villa since the comments posted online were negative.
[...] some stated that the place is in a ‘deplorable state’ and not as beautiful as advertised” (Participant R18). “Our main aim was to visit the caves which is on the top and since the reviews on Cave Villa were not impressive [...] we gave it a miss” (Participant R33).

4.3 Esthetic

The third dimension consists of four aspects termed as physical esthetic (38.9 percent), cultural esthetic (37.5 percent), unpleasant esthetic (16.7 percent) and fauna (6.9 percent). The participants mentioned the physical esthetic element particularly the stalactites and stalagmites in the caves. They described their feeling once they reach the main cave (Participant R10, R29, R15). “The top of the cave was incredible [...] it was an awesome place” (Participant R10), “I felt like I am in another world [...] the cave was beautiful. It’s hard to explain with words [...] one should see and experience it him/herself” (Participant R29). “The second cave has a remarkable view with the opening in the ceiling reflects the sun shine in the dark cave” (Participant R15).

Participants mentioned the majestic statue of Lord Murugan, the temples and the paintings, all of which depicted the cultural esthetic. “I couldn’t take my eyes from the huge statue of Lord Murugan which painted in gold [...] it was marvelous and I just couldn’t stop taking selfie. It felt so small standing next to the 140 feet statue” (Participant R18). “The Lord Murugan statue was gigantic and it was shining under the sunlight [...] it was a spectacular sight. I was just admiring the statue” (Participant R33). Meanwhile some participants mentioned the cultural arts in Batu Caves (Participant R5, R35 and R52). “The interior design of the Venkateswarar temple which is located between the Ramayana Cave and Valluvar Kottam was marvelous” (Participant R35). “The statues and wall paintings depicting Hindu deities and mythology were beautiful” (Participant R52).

Unfortunately, the participants also reported an unpleasant smell and foul odors in the caves, triggering uncomfortable feelings. They stated that the air smelt like bad paint fumes (Participant R32, R4, R24). “I smelt a weird odor but I was uncertain what that was [...] It could be the cave’s natural odor” (Participant R32). “I was holding my breath for a while as I really could not stand the foul odor [...] I just wanted to leave the place as soon as possible” (Participant R4). “The unpleasant smell along the staircase made me nauseated” (Participant R24). Some participants expressed their disappointment pertaining to the cleanliness and vandalism as it ruins the image of the holy place. “The nature has been destroyed by irresponsible people [...] they wrote bad words and drew pictures on the walls. It is a disrespectful behaviour because the cave is a sacred place” (Participant R41). “I am really disappointed with the management of Batu Caves Complex because the area was so smelly [...] the monkey and bird poops were all over the place. They need to clean the place as the devotees normally walk in barefooted [...] I am quite ashamed with the cleanliness of Batu Caves as it is one of the top tourist attractions in Kuala Lumpur” (Participant R50).

The participants described the beautiful animals they found at Batu Caves. The least frequently mentioned in the participant essays was the fauna (6.9 percent). Participant R50 mentioned beautiful koi fish near the Art and Gallery museum. Other animals that were mostly pointed out by the participants were the peacocks. “I saw two peacocks [...] they were really beautiful especially when they spread their feathers” (Participant R28). “The peacocks have iridescent blue and green plumages. Their feathers are marked with eyespots and they are very beautiful when displaying their colorful feathers” (Participant R34).

4.4 Escapism

The escapism consists of four elements, namely physical escapism (60.1 percent), cultural escapism (22.7 percent), reminiscing about the past (9.8 percent) and psychological escapism (7.8 percent). Physical escapism is related to the participant’s active involvement in the step climbing and cave exploration (Participant R16, R19, R34). “It took us around 20 minutes to reach the top and I was quite exhausted climbing the stairs [...] but it was worth it. I felt on top of the world once I reached the cave” (Participant R16). “I was curious and excited to reach the peak of Batu Caves [...] the climbing to the top was exhausting [...] I almost given up half-way of climbing the 272 staircase” (Participant R19). Furthermore, many of the participants were also involved in
the cave exploration. The following quotes demonstrate the participants’ experience: “Meandering from cave to cave, blue hazy mist hovered above the glow of candles and a waft of incense that surrounds the shrines seeped through each cave” (Participant R37). “We continued walking around the cave and took pictures. The caves were magnificent with stalactites and stalagmites […] forming wonderful art-like formation that only nature could conjure” (Participant R45).

The cultural escapism refers to the exploration of temples, caves, an art museum, statues, and paintings of the Hindu religion. “I went to both Art Gallery Cave and Museum Cave […] they were full of Hindu statues and paintings” (Participant R10). “The visit to Ramayana Cave and Lord Hanuman temple worth the trip […] the Ramayana Cave depicts the Ramayana tales chronically […] very nostalgic tales of Hinduism” (Participant R26). “I saw many statues and paintings in the caves and temples […] the artworks were really attractive” (Participant 32).

Many participants recalled their previous visits to Batu Caves during this trip. “It was her first time visiting one of the famous tourist attractions of Malaysia with her family […] the memories are still vivid in the little girl’s heart and mind to this very day […] that little girl was me” (Participant R19). “Me, myself had previously visited it a very long time, I was just a little kid, around fourteen years ago. When I heard there is a field trip to Batu Caves, I am out of words because I am too excited to have another chance to visit Batu Caves again” (Participant R39). “I was not surprised because I had visited the cave previously […] my first visit was when I attended a campaign representing my university” (Participant R27).

The psychological experience of the participants revolved around the worshipping activities for religious faith and curiosity (Participant R1, R10, R48, R23). “When I was praying inside the cave […] it was very peaceful and relaxing” (Participant R1). “We did some offerings […] I just prayed sincerely hoping that all my wishes will come true” (Participant R10). “I saw many Indians were praying at the temple […] I was very curious so I just joined them to pray” (Participant R23).

5. Discussions and research implications

The study’s objective is to examine tourists’ experience using the four realms experience theory, (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) and from content analysis, the authors discovered firm evidence of the theory’s application of all the four experiential dimensions. This supports Oh et al. (2007) and Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2012) who also confirmed the applicability of all the four dimensions in the four realms experience theory in their study findings. The detail variation in the experience of each dimension was also presented through the experience’s sub-themes. The framework provides explanation on how tourists co-create with the tourism attraction to produce a memorable experience. This study found that escapism and educational dimensions were the most discussed, compared with esthetic and entertainment dimensions.

Elements of escapism dimension were physical, cultural, reminiscing and psychological experiences as reported by participants. Participants enjoyed the physical experience such as climbing and descending the stairs of the temple, and exploring the caves. The two activities were the main attractions for the visitors at Batu Caves. Despite the considerable physical effort to carry out the tasks, many of them were excited in contemplating and performing the activities. As highlighted by Pine and Gilmore (1999), customers may experience a journey that embarks from the normal routines of life and travel to a particular destination to take part in activities that are beneficial to their time. In addition, cultural escapism also received high records among the participants, who explored the cultural arts and paintings within the caves, temples and museums to understand the sacred stories of Hinduism. They felt like they were on a journey of Hindu Gods’ tales when going through the fascinating art works and statues. However, the visitors’ experiences are still lacking in deeper immersion. The escapist experience requires a greater individual immersion and participation compared to other dimensions (Oh et al., 2007; Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Therefore, the management may wish to initiate improvement by adding cultural and arts performances, in which the tourists could participate.

Reminiscing about the past was another form of escapism described by the participants who recalled visiting the sacred site in the past. Being on the current tour allowed them to reminisce
about their past memories. They recalled their experiences from previous visits and reflected on them during the current visit and activities at the sites. The four realms experience theory emphasized escapism as the real or virtual environment that is affected by the tourist performance and recurrence (Oh et al., 2007; Pine and Gilmore, 1998). However, in this study, the authors extended the concept to include mental escapism which was filled with the fond memories that affected their visit experiences. The element least described in the escapism dimension was psychological. Only a few of the participants commented on the experience of participating in a religious ceremony during their tour. Some participants took part in the religious ceremony for spiritual motives, while others out of curiosity. Levi and Kocher (2012) stated that visitors might participate in the religious practices during a tour at the religious sites. In this study, students expressed calmness in performing the religious rituals as well as feeling connected to the sacred site. This is consistent with Bond et al.’s (2015) findings of the impact of connecting spiritually and emotionally, which is one of the benefits of visiting cultural religious sites. They claimed that cultural religious sites have attractive power that allows tourists to engage in more worship-focused experience.

Educational dimension was almost equally discussed as escapism dimension. Within the educational dimension, the participants described the elements of pre-travel knowledge, onsite information, cultural and religious practices, animal species and precautions. The majority of the participants gathered information from the websites prior to traveling to Batu Caves. Information on culture, history, religious celebration, interesting places to see, visitor activities and site reviews were the most searched by the participants. All the information is easily accessible online on various websites and social media. The participants also described onsite information that could be found at Batu Caves. There was visual information such as “do and do not” as well as descriptions of the statues, temples and arts, all of which are provided by the management. At the same time, audio facilities and management staff were also available at specific locations. Students learned more about Hindu culture and religious practices through observation and direct explanation from Hindu devotees at the temples. Batu Caves are also a home of rare animal species. Participants described an opportunity to have close encounters with unique and protected animal species. Precaution was the least mentioned by the participants in the educational experience dimension. Some participants had learned about the negative environment of Cave Villa from the remarks given by previous tourists on the websites. It influenced their intention to not visit the site during the tour. Many decided it would be a waste of time to explore the Cave Villas as there are more attractive sites that could be visited at Batu Caves. Visitors were also mindful of the monkeys’ aggressive behavior and took careful measures based on what they had been told to protect their belongings and keep safe.

Within the esthetic dimension, participants mentioned its physical, cultural, unpleasant and fauna experiences. The physical esthetic experience was mostly expressed by the participants, who were amazed by the massive natural caves’ structure as they toured inside the sacred sites. They were able to view the stalactites and stalagmites inside the caves and feel the nature as the lay out permits them to walk around comfortably. O’Dell (2005) explained the importance of space where experience is staged and consumed that has an impact on customers’ imagination. He called this experiencescapes. Some participants experienced the cultural esthetic of Batu Caves, impressed by the presence of statues and paintings within the temple and museum. They were astonished by the massive structure of Lord Murugan statue that guards the right side of the stairs leading up to the cave’s entrance. O’Dell’s (2005) proposed that tourists actively seek cultural experiencescapes to enhance their comprehension on culture. Oh et al. (2007) stated that regardless of how real the environment, it needs to be appealing to the customer’s sense in order to influence or be passively appreciated. One aspect of unappealing element is the unpleasant esthetic. Many participants felt uncomfortable with the unusual smell inside the temple or caves, which they thought came from the animals’ droppings, benzene or natural surroundings, giving the impression Batu Caves are not properly taken care of. There were complaints about vandalism on the caves’ walls, and rubbish could be seen at some places. The fauna element was less mentioned in the esthetic dimension. A few of them described the beautiful animals which exist at the temple such as peacocks, pigeons and koi fishes. They were fascinated by the peacocks’ beauty, which are well looked after in the area.
Within the entertainment dimension, the positive and negative experiences were both frequently mentioned during the visit. Negative experiences received a slightly higher record, with most participants expressing their unfavorable encounters with wild monkeys roaming around the temple. They felt discomfort, fear and shock watching and experiencing the animal aggression toward them and other visitors. Participants took extra precautions in keeping their belongings safe during the tour. Managing this, the destination may provide relevant information to visitors about the animal species for better understanding of what to do and not to do (e.g. do not carry food, do not feed monkeys, etc.). At the same time, visual warnings should be placed at potential risk spots (such as the stairs) for the visitors to be cautious of their belongings and safety.

On the other hand, the element of excitement and thrill to be in contact with wild animals may be used for marketing purposes to attract those who value such experiences. Participants recorded positive experiences when seeing the animals at the sacred site such as monkeys, pigeons and fishes. Watching their behavior entertained them, and some also enjoyed feeding the animals. They loved watching them move freely in the area and not caged. Other than the animals, most of the heritage and religious places offer cultural experiences such as the rituals, relics, monuments, buildings, history, arts and cultural performances (Levi and Kocher, 2012; Hughes et al., 2013; Nyaupane et al., 2015; Kartal et al., 2015). All aspects of these experiences are available at Batu Caves, with the exception of cultural performances, which are mainly performed by Hindu devotees during the annual Thaipusam festival.

Theoretically, this study demonstrates practical applications of the four experiential realms proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1998) in explaining experience at a cultural religious site, extending the description to include its positive and negative aspects, all of which are useful for destination management. The application of this framework to cultural religious sites further enhances the theory by identifying how the engagement with the worshipers gave the tourists a more memorable experience in terms of education and escapism. The interaction and engagement with the worshipers provide deeper understanding and appreciation of other culture. The engagement between worshipers and tourists is sign of experience co-creation as discussed by Binkhorst and Dekker (2009). Tourism service providers may design experience-centric tours that allow interaction between tourists and worshipers by taking part in some of the activities at Batu Caves (e.g. religious rituals, performances and meditation).

In terms of method, the study employs a rare data collection technique, using essays written by the university students. Marketing communication should put emphasis on the strong positive aspects of Batu Caves such as accessibility (just outside Kuala Lumpur city) and natural, cultural and adventurous experiences that are offered by the caves based on the dimensions of the four experiential realms. The study points out a lot of aspects that must be managed by the site, such as the poor esthetic experience (e.g. smell, rubbish, graffiti, etc.), controlling the animal aggression (i.e. monkeys) and perhaps developing new products and services which could enhance tourists’ engagement and experience in the form of educational escapism.

The main weakness of the research is perhaps the qualitative research work in which data were collected from essays written by the university students. Data of this nature prevent us from being able to generalize the findings and reflect on the experience to the general public. However, it allows an in-depth analysis of experience which provides sufficient richness which can rarely be achieved in quantitative studies. Future research may wish to also collect data from other market segments such as general public, international tourists and people with disabilities. Quantitative research could be followed to measure the experience’s intensity based on the four experiential realms proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1998).

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study has successfully demonstrated the applicability of the four realms of experience theory (Pine and Gilmore, 1998) in explaining visitors’ experience at Batu Caves. The main contribution of the study lies in the detailed discovery of elements (sub-themes) in the theory’s four dimensions – escapism, education, esthetic and entertainment – which provide pointers to the strengths (positive experiences) and weaknesses (negative experiences) of Batu
Caves as a tourist attraction. Positive elements in visitors’ experiences, such as educational onsite information, Hindu rituals and practices, physical and cultural escapism and physical and cultural esthetic, could be highlighted in the marketing communication to attract more tourists visiting Batu Caves. If agreeable to Hindu devotees, Batu Caves may wish to expand the Hindu culture and religious understanding among tourists by providing more immersive touristic opportunities, such as active participation in the cultural and religious ritual, activities and events. However, Batu Caves must be mindful of negative experiential aspects, such as monkeys, and unpleasant esthetic experience (e.g. smell, rubbish and vandalism), all of which require urgent attention. Batu Caves need to periodically measure its visitors’ experiences as their needs evolve over time. However, the statement of Kasim (2011) remains true that the main challenge of Batu Caves’ sustainability as a tourist attraction now and in the future is to strike the balance between the needs of Hindu devotees and the visitors who continuously visit the famous Hindu pilgrimage site.

References


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Further reading

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