



Understanding Patronage Behavior Among Tourists in Shopping Malls in Malaysia Using the Experience Economy Framework

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Abstract. The experience economy stands out as a mega trend because of its world-wide impact and researchers have studied this idea across diverse industries such as retail and tourism. When more and more people are concerned about experiential consumption, traditional business approaches that focus heavily on the product itself rather than on customer needs or experiences, and their accompanying strategies have become less effective. Therefore, companies including retail stores and malls must create their own unique transformational experiences to keep the customers happy. Due to advancement of technology and changing consumer preference, new related variables should be examined so that their impact on patronage behavior can be known. This paper proposed the use of the extended Pine and Gilmore's experience economy framework to investigate patronage behavior among Tourists in shopping malls in Malaysia.

Keywords: Patronage Behavior, Experience Economy, Shopping.

1 Introduction

Shopping is considered to be one of the most important tourists' activities by previous researchers [1]. A common outcome of the shopping experience analyzed in previous research is customer satisfaction. Both the initial and subsequent evaluation of shopping experience create satisfaction [2]. Satisfied customers usually have great experiences during their visits to the shopping malls. On the other hand, if consumers' initial expectations are not met during their shopping trip, they are likely to feel dissatisfied.

Due to rapid economic growth, with an increase in household income and middle-class consumers in China, more and more Chinese consumers are traveling abroad for shopping and tourism. Tourists often prioritize shopping as their main objective in popular shopping destinations like Macau, Hong Kong and Paris [3,4, 5]. They often allocate a portion of their budget specifically for shopping either to buy souvenirs or unique local products. Besides international tourists, shopping malls also target local tourists for more visitors and revenue. Gilboa and Vilnai-Yavetz [6] argued that the shopping mall is a social arena for many. Window-shopping was found to be one of the leisure activities engaged by Malaysian young adults [7]. The Malaysia Shopping Mall Association president Tan Sri Teo Chiang Kok said:

“Shopping is indeed part of the Malaysian lifestyle, with at least 25% of our urban population in malls during weekends... With many events and activities happening throughout the year, any visit to a shopping mall always results in memorable and even exhilarating times.” [8]

The domestic tourism sector in Malaysia experienced a decrease in visitor arrivals and tourism spending because of COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions on interstate travel. In 2021, there were 66.0 million visitors, showing a decrease of 49.9% compared to the previous year's 44.9% decline in 2020. The amount of tourism trips decreased by 50.7% in 2021, dropping from 147.0 million trips in 2020 to 72.4 million trips. In 2021, the amount of money spent on domestic tourism decreased by 54.5 percent, reaching only RM18.4 billion compared to RM40.4 billion in 2020 (see Fig. 1). This was the smallest number recorded since Department of Statistics Malaysia began collecting data for the Domestic Tourism Survey in 2008.



Fig.1 Malaysia's Domestic Tourism Expenditure (2012-2021)

Data shows continuous growth in international travel and spending in the region, backing the growing focus on shopping tourism. Metropolitan areas such as Kuala Lumpur, known for their high levels of tourists and shopping expenditures, highlighting the importance of shopping tourism in boosting local economies. With new shopping malls like Lalaport and TRX highlight a strong growth in the Malaysia retail industry with support from domestic tourism.

Previous researchers like Frishammar et al. [9] have also commented that popular retailers can attract more customers to the shopping mall, benefiting other retailers within the mall, or vice versa. The motivation behind why customers choose to patronize shopping malls continues to be an interest of researchers and practitioners. For retailers, understanding and adapting to the shoppers' preferences can influence their business success. It is even more important when that is a strong signal indicated that physical retailers might not be able to survive in the new landscape [10].

Conventional approach to entice customers with focus on broad assortments, price reduction, and extended store hours are no longer attractive for the customers. Ambience and social factors of luxury popup stores in the shopping mall were found to affect

Chinese tourists' emotion positively and their patronage intention [5]. Limited edition products offered by experiential stores with novelty factors will generate positive word of mouth [11]. Retailers need to focus on the entertainment or recreational aspect of retailing in order to attract more customers [12, 13, 14]. Findings by Abdul Karim et al. [12] also highlighted the importance of including stores with futuristic elements and advanced technologies to appeal to younger customers, while older customers are attracted to a diverse tenant mix and engaging entertainment experiences.

With the evolution of technology and changing consumer expectations, studying patronage behaviour becomes even more critical. Many customers chose online shopping because it is convenient. However, physical stores will still be a choice of customers because their presence facilitates sensory engagement and provides rich multisensory experiences with an aesthetic impact [15]. The Adyen Malaysia Retail Report in 2023 also highlights the preference of Malaysian consumers for switching between in-store and online shopping experiences [16]. Therefore, companies are striving to ensure consistency in customer experiences across various channels in response to the rapidly evolving patterns of customers [17]. Various touchpoints are integrated across organizational operations using technologies for managing inventory and delivering better customer service, both online and offline. For example, new shipping models like buy-online-pickup-in-store (BOPIS) and buy-online-return-in-store (BORIS) are introduced.

In the past ten years, the retail industry particularly shopping malls has encountered significant challenges, partly resulted from Covid-19 pandemic. However, even before the pandemic, many have already moved to online shopping due to the emergence of e-commerce platforms including Amazon, Alibaba, TaoBao and Tian Mao. As for Malaysian, they visit online shopping platforms such as Lazada and Shopee. The recovery path can be difficult, as Helm et al. [10] highlighted that the brick-and-mortar retail landscape has experienced a downturn. Malls that have low performance are identified as "dead malls" or "declining malls" [18].

Previous research used Pine and Gilmore's experience framework to study the customer experiences. This framework provides a structured and comprehensive way to understand experience economy and these experiences are classified into four distinct quadrants: entertainment, educational, escapist, and esthetics. Each quadrant highlights the importance of customers' active participation and their connection to the experience in seeking out unique and memorable experiences. Previous studies show that scant literature examined the role of the four realms of experiences (4Es) in the retail environment. Most studies are conducted on tourism targeting tourist hotspots, theme parks and ethnic cuisine [19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25] and only a few studies such as Jung et al. [26]; Sadachar and Fiore [13]; Turkson et al. [27] are done in the retail environment.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the importance of expanding Gilmore's experience framework with four new dimensions to explain their positive impact on mall outcome. These new dimensions are related to the evolution of mall environment

such as mall digitization and personalization. The paper is organized as follows: The next section outlines the literature on the experience economy and customer satisfaction. We then develop the theoretical argument for extending our understanding of patronage behavior to include serendipity, localness, seamless experience and personalization. Finally, we present the conceptual framework with hypothesis to illustrate this new extended Pine and Gilmore's [28] experience economy framework.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Experience Economy

According to Pine and Gilmore [28], experiences can either be the product itself or more than just the product itself. It is a whole package including what the customers see and feel. As such, experience in the context of the experience economy is an intangible offering that emerges from consumers' active engagement within sensory and emotional contexts [29].

When Pine and Gilmore [28] described the four realms of an experience, they used a two-dimensional diagram to illustrate it (see Fig. 2). Customer participation is divided into two ends whether the customer participate actively or passively. A person's connection level with the experience shows how much the person connects with the event or performance [28]. Absorption is to capture the consumer's mental attention and engagement whereas during immersion stage, the consumer integrates with the event or performance either physically or virtually.

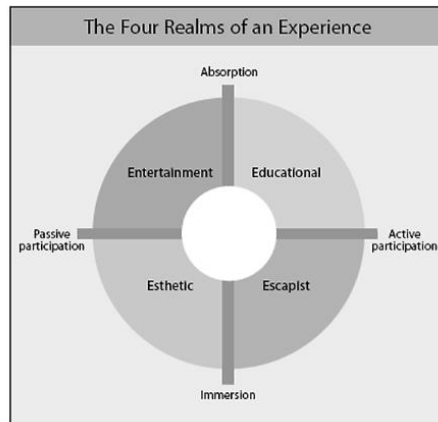


Fig. 2. Original Four Realms of Experience [28, p.102]

2.2 Experience Economy in Retail Environment

Entertainment Experience. Pine & Gilmore [30] claimed that the entertainment is known as the oldest forms of experience. There has been an increased interest in entertainment research to understand hedonic experiences [31]. Oliver et al. [32] stated that the content within entertainment media has the power to connect with and capture viewers by offering inspiring messages and experiences. Different forms of media are said to have the power to evoke emotions like hope, gratitude, empathy, and determination [32].

When shoppers perceive the value, they receive from the shopping experience more than their initial expectations, they feel satisfied, and such evaluation extends to the level of entertainment and pleasure they experience in the store [33]. These entertainment elements in shopping malls such as food courts, movie theaters, children's play zones, and relaxation areas are seamlessly integrated into every shopping mall to enhance the overall customer experience [34]. Similarly, Terblanché [34] stated that modern shopping centers provide visitors with more than just retail options where they aim to create an environment that offers recreational, aesthetic, entertainment, and social experiences to make each visit an enjoyable outing.

Today retail businesses can use entertainment to not only create enjoyable shopping experiences but also engage customers on a deeper level. Retailing has therefore evolved far beyond normal buying and selling transactions; it now revolves around creating memorable experiences and the environment stimulates shoppers to visit shopping malls [35]. Based on the survey results from a shopping mall in Bangladesh, Mahmud et al. [35] found that shopping mall's entertainment experiences bring positive consumer experience to shoppers. Leisure related factors impact shopping well-being, which can lead to mall loyalty and positive word of mouth [37]. Therefore, this paper proposes that:

Hypothesis 1: Entertainment experience positively affects tourist's mall outcomes.

Educational Experience. In the realm of educational experiences, consumers actively participate in events, absorbing knowledge and insights through their engagement [30]. The landscape of consumer buying habits is evolving, with individuals seeking more experiential shopping [36]. The curiosity or desire for knowledge is satisfied in the mall, which is related to educational experiences. Educational experience was found to have a significant relationship with the experiential value provided by merchandise retailers [13]. Turkson et al. [27] added that education experiences encompass knowledge shoppers gain from their activities, including discovering new products, fashion trends, music, exposure to diverse cultures, and engaging in product demonstrations.

Previous researchers have examined the frequency of visit and time spent in the shopping mall [7]. During a visit to shopping malls, visitors may shop, window-shop or spend time on other activities. It is the experiences being in the malls that motivate them to revisit. For example, Sadachar and Fiore [13] suggested that a store selling scarves can teach consumers 25 ways to wear a scarf, providing an educational experience rather than simply selling the product (scarf) off the shelf. Such activity enhances experiential value for consumers and encourages patronage behaviour. Therefore, this paper proposes that:

Hypothesis 2: Educational experience positively affects tourist's mall outcomes.

Escapist Experience. In contrast to the entertainment experience, the escapist experience is its complete opposite, involving total immersion and active involvement in events [30]. Within the retail management literature, creating an escapist experience for customers is found to have significant impact on shopping behavior. Turkson et al. [27] claimed that escapism usually involves a conscious effort by an individual, including shoppers, to redirect their focus away from their typical daily routines and activities. For example, retailers that sell outdoor recreational equipment have also begun incorporating activities like target ranges or climbing walls within their stores [13].

According to Hagtvedt and Chandukala [15], the shopping mall culture is primarily derived from Western cultures. Sadachar and Fiore [13] argued that when young Indian consumers visit shopping malls, it becomes an escapist experience because they seek to achieve higher social value. In their study, they found significant relationship between escapist experience for merchandise retailers in the mall but did not find significant relationship for service retailers in the mall. The merchandise retailers carry branded and international products, which are associated with an escapist experience, as Indian consumers feel modern, just like Western consumers. Van Kerrebroeck et al. [37] found that providing an immersive experience of VR in a shopping mall environment gives a sensation of escapism. By engaging users in this VR environment, customers can mentally distance themselves from their physical surroundings, reducing the discomfort or stress caused by feeling crowded. Therefore, this paper proposes that:

Hypothesis 3: Escapist experience positively affects tourist's mall outcomes.

Esthetic Experience. From the perspective of retail management, esthetic experiences involve customers' passive engagement as they immerse themselves in the retail environment [30]. As stated by Sadachar and Fiore [13], the customers only immerse themselves in such sensory-rich setting but do not alter the nature of the setting (e.g. retail store and mall interior design). A well-designed esthetic element in the mall adds experiential value to the Indian consumers. These include the architectural style of a building, layout and landscape design, window displays of retail stores, and lighting [13].

Empirical research has extensively explored the impact of hedonic shopping experiences on various aspects of consumer behavior, closely aligning with the four realms of the experiences [13, 15]. An example of esthetic experience within the context of the experience economy can be found in the Immersive Christmas digital art exhibition at Sunway Carnival Mall (Immersive Christmas, 2023). The carton boxes collected from the mall's tenants were upcycled for decoration. These beautiful carton box star ornaments create and capture special moments for shoppers during festival celebrations in the mall. Such approach transcends mere service or entertainment provision; it crafts an esthetic experience that builds stronger connections between customers and the shopping mall. Therefore, this paper proposes that:

Hypothesis 4: Esthetic experience positively affects tourist's mall outcomes.

Serendipity. According to Huang et al. [39], serendipity refers to a person's ability to make unexpected discoveries and find surprises that adds positive experiences, such as interesting or valuable things, without pre-planning, including self-discovery. Tung and Ritchie [40] added that serendipity embraces the concept of unexpected and positive surprises. Surprising situations can generate positive emotions and sometimes make a tourist forget that they are a tourist [41]. In the Airbnb context, Mody et al. [42] stated that the extra effort by the host (placing baked goods and fresh fruits with handwritten notes) evokes a feeling of serendipity in the customers.

The concept of serendipity is apt to be added to the shopping mall environment for tourists. When tourists visit a new city and decide to explore without any goals, their casual visit turns into a memorable adventure as they wander through the mall and are drawn to the vibrant, lively performances of the event, which they might not have planned or included in their itinerary. A good shopping deal can be very attractive. For example, Shop & Be Rewarded Campaign and Miss SHOPhia Go Travel 2022 exhibition organized by Tourism Malaysia in selected shopping malls [43]. Therefore, this paper proposes that:

Hypothesis 5: Serendipity positively affects tourist's mall outcomes.

Localness. Localness is defined as the "result of accumulating life experiences in a local environment, representing the relationship between people and cities, and indicating potential local knowledge of people" Zhang [44]. Localness is related to the accumulation of life experiences in a local environment. Previous studies have reported that localness is a common dimension for examining food experiences, as seen in the works of Tsai [45]; Badu-Baiden et al. [46]; Şahin and Kılıçlar [47]. These studies are done with samples from Taiwan, New Zealand and Turkey respectively.

The concept of localness can be incorporated into the shopping mall environment. Since shopping malls are dynamic spaces where a variety of experiences come together under one roof, it makes them ideal for showcasing local culture to shoppers including

tourists. Tourists are often driven to shop by the desire to acquire souvenirs and physical reminders of a pleasant vacation [48]. Most memorable shopping experiences involve a meaningful integration into the local culture. For example, handmade items that are unique to the country such as batik, pewter, pottery, and ceramics as well as snacks. Therefore, this paper proposes that:

Hypothesis 6: Localness positively affects tourist's mall outcomes.

Seamless Experience. Customer experience is an important aspect of marketing research which shapes a company's competitive advantage if it is well-managed. In today's retail landscape, customers engage in these experiences through various channels, including physical stores, digital platforms (websites, social media, apps) giving rise to the term "phygital". Phygital is defined as "the transformation of physical stores in the digital era: concepts are completely redesigned to offer a new customer experience and use digital tools as sales support" [49, p. 134]. The integration of physical and digital elements to create unique customer experiences. This includes the use of smart screens, digital mirrors, and other interactive technologies in retail environments to enhance customer interaction with products [50]. This gives the customers the greatest convenience to simultaneously engage in online and offline shopping within the same location, resulting in a new shopping experience [51].

Shopping malls that embrace digital strategies see digital technologies as really important and they use these technologies to create new and improved digital services [9]. Pal and Srivastava [52] tested that the receptivity of artificial intelligent (AI) such as chatbots, face recognition, virtual fitting room, smart parking and cashier-free station in Indian retail stores. They found that the retail chatbot was rated the highest compared to the other four attributes. Chatbots have become a focus for many researchers in the areas of marketing and retail management environments. These tools can be useful conversational assistants in managing customer interactions through queries with specific details [53, 54]. Kull et al. [55] found that such interaction increased brand awareness and customer service. Chatbots also enhance customer satisfaction by offering accurate guidance and timely information. The use of Virtual Fitting Room (VFR) technologies in the high-end brands such as Burberry and Louis Vuitton shape new consumer experiences by allowing customers to virtually try on different apparel [56]. The implementation of Smart Parking Systems (SPS) in shopping centers can reduce the time drivers spend searching for parking particularly in congested retail environments [57]. By optimizing these touchpoints, it creates seamless experiences for the visitors of the shopping malls. Therefore, this paper proposes that:

Hypothesis 7: Seamless experience positively affects tourist's mall outcomes

Personalization. Many studies found personalization is key to online shopping experience, as the more personalized it is, the greater the levels of customization and favourable responses from consumers [58, 59]. Personalization also plays an important

role in physical shopping experience. Combination of strong personalization and interactivity within the stores can result in consumers' favourable reactions as noted by Batra [58] and Song and Zinkhan [59].

Frishammar et al. [9] pointed out that managing shopping malls traditionally in the past involves maintenance of operation and physical facilities. However, technological advancements have transformed the shopping mall landscape with many retailers shifting towards digitization. Retailers are seen installing sensors so that they can better track the consumer's behaviour. On the other hand, consumers are empowered with new digital tools when visiting a shopping mall. They expect more simulated and engaging experience [60]. Therefore, this paper proposes that:

Hypothesis 8: Personalization positively affects tourist's mall outcomes

This section details the dimensions of experience economy and discusses the proposed hypotheses, which establish logical connections between these dimensions and shopping mall outcomes.

3 Proposed Conceptual Framework

Based on the above discussion, the customers' shopping mall experience can be seen as economic offerings like products or services enhancing the consumers' engagement with a brand or a store within a shopping mall. The paper is a preliminary work to extend Pine and Gilmore's experience economy framework. The 4E constructs of this experience economy: (1) entertainment, (2) educational, (3) esthetic, and (4) escapist [28] will be added with four new dimensions (highlighted in red): serendipity, localness, seamless experience and personalization (see Fig. 3) and its related hypothesis is shown in Fig. 4.

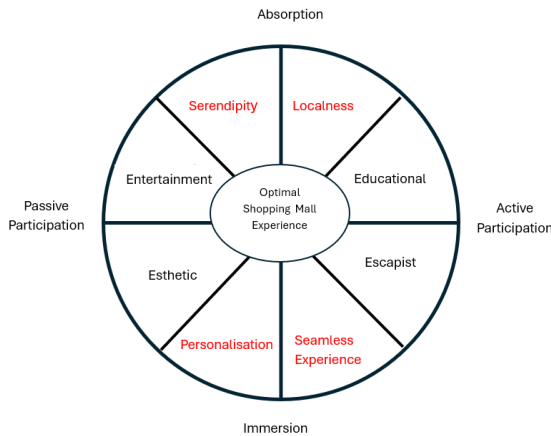


Fig. 3. Extended Pine and Gilmore's Experience Economy Framework

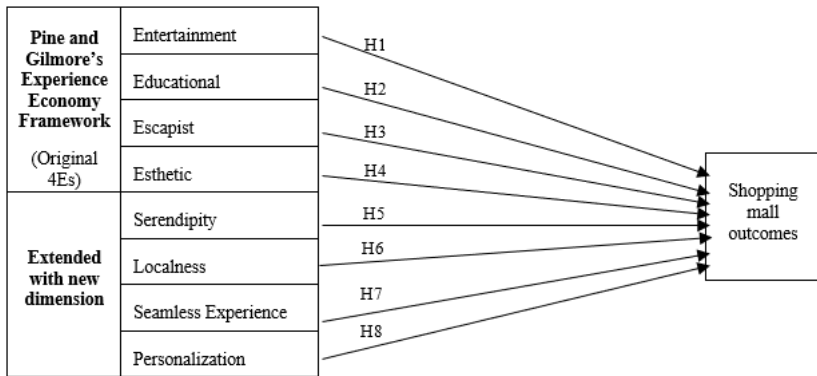


Fig. 4. Proposed Conceptual Framework

4 Concluding Remark

As the experience economy grows, the need to develop distinctive and memorable experiences for tourists becomes more crucial. This will help to predict tourist's patronage behaviours and improve mall performance. In addition, it helps shopping mall managers and retailers understand how shoppers engage with and connect to their experiences at shopping malls. Knowing their preferences motivates them to bring in fresh ideas and activities to attract a larger crowd.

The proposed conceptual framework is part of the ongoing doctoral work of the first author. The study follows positivist's beliefs, emphasizing the importance of gathering empirical data, conducting thorough analysis, and testing hypotheses to comprehend phenomena where experiential elements play an important role in affecting tourists' patronage behavior. A questionnaire will be carefully designed based on previous studies [13, 28, 42, 52].

To collect the data, a time-based systematic sampling will be adopted. The targeted respondents will be international and local tourists. The researcher will approach the mall visitor every 15 minutes. If the visitor declines or is not eligible (e.g., not a tourist according to the definition set forth in the proposed study), the researcher will wait for the next person at the identified area near the main entrance of the selected malls. The four selected malls are: Sunway Pyramid, Mid Valley Mega Mall, Pavilion and TRX. The sample size is estimated based on the population which is last year's total number of tourists visiting Malaysia (233.8 million) [61, 62]. Therefore, the suggested targeted sample size is 384 according to Krejcie and Morgan [63]. Pilot tests will be carried out

before the final data collection. Later, we will employ Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using Smart PLS software to test and confirm the relationship between the experiential dimensions on the shopping mall outcomes. The novelty of this research, with its newly added dimensions, is expected to shed light on understanding tourist's patronage behavior in Malaysian shopping mall.

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