

# **Determinants of Customer Experience and its Impact on Customer Loyalty towards Theme Parks.**

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## **Abstract**

This study aims to investigate the potential customer experiences in theme parks that influence the customer loyalty. This investigation test the conceptual model with two types of customer experience i.e. affective experiential state and cognitive experiential state and its impact on different stages of customer loyalty i.e. affective loyalty, cognitive loyalty, and conative loyalty. The study analyses the results of the survey to test the hypothesis. The data was collected from the 460 respondents, who have visited the theme park at least once. The area of the study was Chennai city in Tamil Nadu state. Purposive sampling technique has been used. The data was analysed by using AMOS 20. The objectives of the study is to identify the dimensions and items for the assessment of theme park experience, to construct a relevant model depicting the relationship among the affective experiential state ,cognitive experiential state and customer loyalty. The model included seventeen exogenous variables and fifteen Endogenous variables. Out of the eighteen null hypotheses that were framed, sixteen hypotheses were supported

and three hypotheses were not supported. The findings revealed that the proposed model fit the observed data well, with acceptable model fit indices. The study confirms that affective experiential state and cognitive experiential state has positive effect on affective loyalty and cognitive loyalty. Physical environment, social environment, audience and actors were found to be a most important theme park component influencing affective experiential state. In addition to this the theme park experience is also associated with cleanliness, layout, light, safety and security. Implications for the managers were discussed in the light of increasing the customer experience and in turn elevating the customer loyalty.

**Key words:**

Affective Experiential state, Affective Loyalty, Customer Experience, Cognitive Experiential state, Cognitive Loyalty, Conative Loyalty.

**Introduction**

Theme park is an environment usually convolutedly themed to particular subjects or a group of subjects. A theme park is a group of entertainment attraction, rides and other events in a particular location for the enjoyment of large people. Theme parks have become a crucial component of the tourism industry, providing entertainment, enthusiasm and excitement for the visitors. During the last decade domestic tourism had grown at 14% on an average and currently it is estimated at 527 million. Out of this, the theme park industry alone generated 15 million footfalls in the year 2017. Presently there are around 120 theme parks in India. The success and growth potential of the theme park industry is resulting into the advent of new manufacturers of amusement parks and theme parks in India. Customer experience is of critical importance for a service-dominant theoretical approach. Anderson (2007) defined the customer experience as the moment when consumption and production meet. Customer experience also has been defined using an affective and cognitive frame work (Rose *et.al.*2012) to explain that experience occurs during a contact between a customer and service provider and

involves both affective and cognitive customer reactions. Customer experience starts with a first contact between the customer and service provider.

### **Review of Literature**

The empirical research reveals that the good physical environment includes both “soft” (Image, style, comfort, marketing, and ambience) and “hard” factors (operational efficiency, cost, safety, cleanliness and maintenance, and space allocation) (Katsigris and Thomas 2008). Social environment from the perspective of the environment psychology claims the influence of physical setting with social aspects of the setting (Bitner 1992.). Grove et al. (1998) stated that service experience is suitable for assessing services that involve face-to-face encounters between the staff (actors) and the customers within an organization controlled setting. Audience (customers) are no longer passive recipients within the service setting but become active participants to obtain a satisfying experience. Although there is an empirical research showing evidence that involves one's affective system through the generation of moods, feelings, and emotions (Gentile, Spiller & Noci 2007), in other research study it states that components of customer experience is connected with thinking or conscious mental process. (Gentile, Spiller & Noci 2007). Tian –Cole *et al.*, define quality of experience as “the psychological outcomes which visitors derive from visiting a facility. It reflects visitors’ perceived benefit to obtain the experience .The study done by Dabholkar *et al.* (2003) involves that convenience on services and the consequent improvement of customer experience. Milman.A (2009) identified attributes like rides, safety and security, cleanliness, quality of foods, layout of the parks to evaluate the guest experience at theme park. Affective loyalty is defined as favourable emotion and attitude towards a certain company or product or services. Cognitive loyalty is defined as loyalty that is based on the cost of a certain product or service and not based on the relationship with the company (Bitner, 1990). The conative loyalty is defined as intention to pursue purchasing behaviour with the same company. It involves a behavioural intent component. (Evanschitzky & Wunderlich, 2006).

## **Research Gap**

Previous research has observed that improvements in quality lead to improvements in experience which, in turn, leads to improvement in customer satisfaction (Cole & Scott, 2004). The same authors have highlighted that experience fully mediates the relationship among performance, customer satisfaction, and revisit intention. Previous studies have argued that customer experience and satisfaction are based on the level of service quality and that service quality can be considered to be antecedent of customer experience (Dick & Basu, 1994; Anderson & Fornell, 1992; Rust & Oliver, 1994). The observed relationship between quality attributes, convenience, perceived price fairness, and customer experience becomes more complicated when it is taken into account that several variables moderate the observed relationship among quality attributes, experience and customer satisfaction ( Anderson, 2007; Gountas,2003), because experience are influenced by factors that are not always controlled by the “ the experience provider”(Pullman&Gross,2004). The theory of reasoned action is often used as the basis for the Analysis of the relationship between cognitive, affective, and conative loyalty (Back, & Parks, 2003). Based on this framework, attitudinal loyalty has three stages: cognitive, affective and conative loyalty. Oliver’s (1997) theory of customer loyalty stages and consequential relationship with attitudinal and behavioural loyalty are evident, no empirical study has been undertaken in the theme park industry in India.

Based on this gap, a theoretical framework of antecedents and outcomes of customer experience in theme park establishment is proposed and tested. This framework involves different quality attributes of theme park establishments, customer experience dimensions and customer loyalty.

## **Purpose of the study**

1. To identify the dimensions and items for assessment of the theme park experience.

2. To develop a model of various antecedents of customer experience in theme park.
3. To recognise the importance of customer loyalty in theme parks.

### **Research methodology**

The population for the study were the visitors of the theme parks located in Chennai city in Tamil Nadu state. The sampling unit selected for this study consisted of visitors of the theme park like MGM, VGP, and Queens land. The survey has been conducted with 460 respondents. Purposive sampling technique has been used for the study. The questionnaire was pretested to ensure clarity and prompt response from the respondents. The data is normally distributed. The value of Skewness ranged from is 0.946 to 1.669 and value for Kurtosis ranged from .047 to 6.001. Further Mahalannobis distance was also calculated. It was found that the significant values are not high in both p1 and p2, so the data is distributed normally.

**Table 1 Questionnaire Design**

<b>VARIABLES</b>	<b>NO.OF ITEM</b>	<b>REFERENCES</b>
Affective Experiential State	6	Susskind and Chan (2000)
Social Environment	5	Bitner (1992)
Audience(Visitors)	8	Grove <i>etal</i> (1998).
Actors (Staffs)	8	Bigne et.al.,(2005)
Cognitive Experiential State	3	Susskind and Chan (2000),

Layout	5	Milman (2009)
Lighting	3	Bitner (1992).
Perceived Benefit	10	Bitner (1992).
Parking Area	3	Bitner (1992).
Convenience	6	Colwell <i>et.al.</i> ,(2008), Berry <i>et.al</i> (2002)
Quality of Experience	41	Oliver (1999).
Food Quality	4	Namkung & Jang (2007),Peri,C.(2006)
Safety and Security	4	Bitner (1992).
Physical Evidence	22	Gentile, Spiller, &Noci (2007), Rose <i>et al</i> (2012).
Brochure	4	Tian-Cole (2002).
Affective Loyalty	7	Oliver (1997)
Cognitive Loyalty	5	Sivadas & Baker-Prewitt ,(2000),
Conative Loyalty	5	Oliver (1995), Oliver (1997).

## Findings and Discussion

### Demographic and Descriptive Information

The demographic profile of the participants indicates that 57.5% are male and 43% are females with the relatively younger average age of 26-35 years. Almost 47.8% of participants reported that they visited the theme park more than twice. 28.7 % of

the participant's income ranged between 20,000 to 30,000. Water theme park rather than Amusement park is mostly preferred by the respondents.

### Structural Equation Modeling- Hypothesis Testing

Structural Equation modelling was used to analyse the main survey data to determine the pattern of relationship among the variables under examination. The proposed model was tested by Amos-20. Structure equation modeling utilises diverse mode types to explain both latent and observed relationship among the variables. In the first step of data Analysis, the proposed framework and hypotheses were tested through structural equation modelling (SEM). This techniques allow researchers to simultaneously test a set of interrelated hypotheses by estimating the relationships among multiple independent and dependent variables in structural model (Gefen, Straub, & Boudreau, 2000). For this stage of analysis the entire sample of 460 participants was used.

**Table 2 Measurement Model Fit Indicators**

Measure	Threshold	Value	Criteria Met
Chi square/df	<3	2.707	Yes
CFI	<0.97	.993	Yes
GFI	<0.96	.993	Yes
AGFI	<0.94	.906	Yes
RMSEA	<0.06	.067	Yes
P value	>0.05	.000*	No*

\*\*The absolute fit index of minimum discrepancy chi-square significant value can be ignored if the sample size obtained for the study is greater than 200. (Hair *et al.*, 1996; Joreskogand Sorbom, 1996).

### Model fit

The foundation for the structural model was the measurement model developed in 4 separate CFA analysis. Two antecedents, 15 latent constructs, 30 observed

variables were used in the model. The hypotheses relationships among the constructs were tested with the significance of model path coefficient. Similar to CFA considering that the normality assumption was met, the maximum likelihood estimates exploit to test the theoretical model in AMOS. The goodness of fit measures were used to access the overall structural model fit.(Table 2).The overall fit indices model was acceptable , with chi square to df ratio equal to 2.707, CFI equal to 0.993,GFI was 0.993, AGFI equal to 0.906 and RMSEA equal to 0.067.

### **Hypothesis Testing**

Hypothesis 1 stated that audience and actors has positive effect on affective experiential state. This hypothesis was tested based on two path coefficients. The path coefficient on audience and actors on affective experiential state was 0.673 which was statistically significance thus confirm the hypothesis H1. These results were consistent with the findings of Bigneet *al* (2005), Oliver and Mano (1993), Ashforth & Humprey (1996).Hypothesis 2 stated that social environment has positive effect on affective experiential state. The path coefficient on social environment and affective experiential state was 0.361which was statistically significance thus confirm the hypothesis H2.Previous research has argued that social environment has strong emotion and is considered as one of the most important drivers of positive customer experience (Hansen et.al, 2005; Gustafsson *et.al.*, 2006).Hypothesis 3 stated that physical environment has positive effect on affective experiential state. The path coefficient on physical environment and affective experiential state was 0.590 which was statistically significance thus confirm the hypothesis H3.This finding is consistent with previous studies that stated the quality of physical environment is of high importance in the service industry.(Bitner 1990; Millman, 2000).

Hypothesis 4 stated that affect state has positive effect on affective experiential state. The path coefficient on affect state and affective experiential state was 1.000 which was statistically significance thus confirm the hypothesis H4. This finding is

consistent with previous studies that stated the affective experiential state is of high importance. (Gentile, Spiller, &Noci, 2007, Rose *et al* 2012).Hypothesis 5 stated that physical evidence has positive effect on cognitive experiential state. The path coefficient on physical evidence and cognitive experiential state was 1.000 which was statistically significance thus confirm the hypothesis H5. This finding is consistent with previous studies that stated the physical evidence is of high importance (Gentile, Spiller &Noci 2007, Rose *et al*2012).Hypothesis 6 stated that quality of experience has positive effect on cognitive experiential state. The path coefficient on quality of experience and cognitive experiential state was 2.197 which was statistically significance thus confirm the hypothesis H6. This finding is consistent with previous studies of Tian-Cole et al.,(2002) that stated the quality of experience is of high importance in the marketing and leisure industry. Hypothesis 7 stated that convenience has positive affect on cognitive experiential state. The path coefficient on convenience and cognitive experiential state was 0 .304 which was statistically significance thus confirm the hypothesis H7. Convenience in the service setting has received significant academic attention. Previous study undertaken by (Dabholkar *et.al*; 2003; Milman.A (2009) has shown that the effect of technology on service convenience that has a consequent improvement on customer experience.

Figure 1 SEM Model

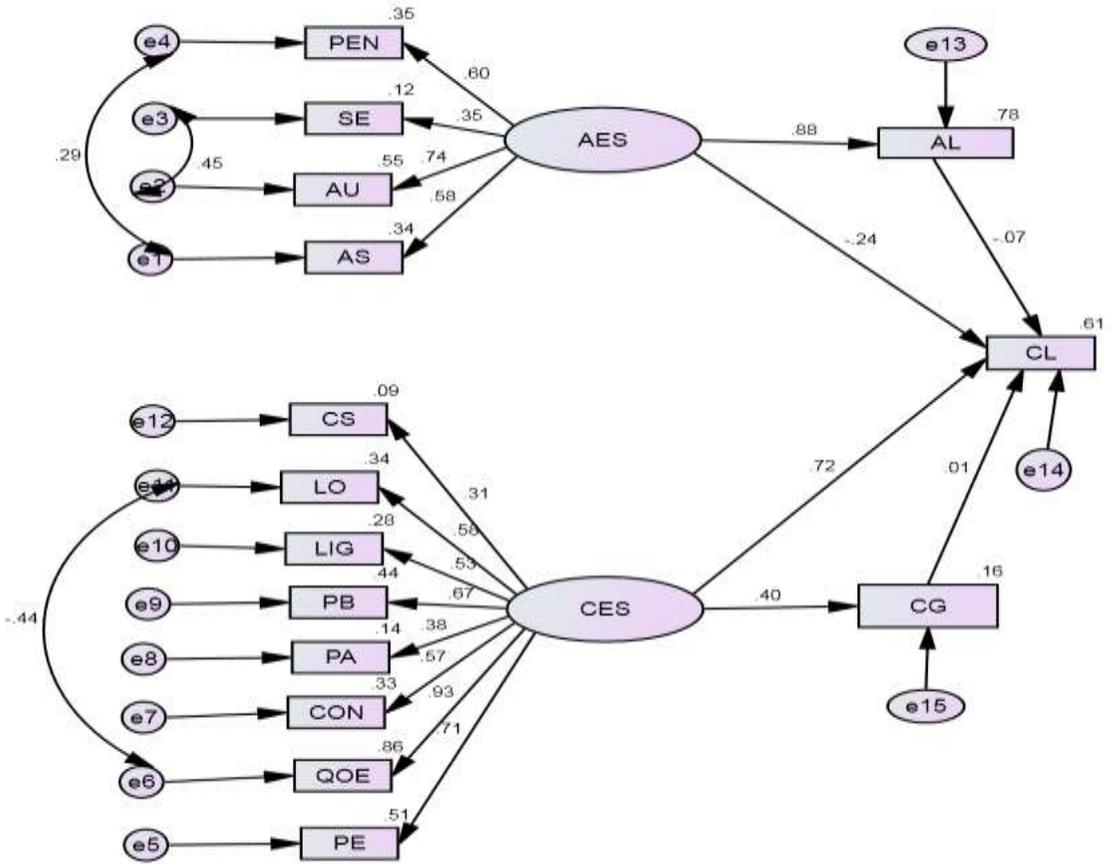


Table 3 Base Model Path Estimate

Variables	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Results
AFFECTIVELOYALTY←AES	1.431	.127	11.285	***	Supported
COGNITIVELOYALTY←CES	.276	.033	8.320	***	Supported
AESSTATE←AES	1.000				Supported
AUDIENCE←AES	.673	.059	11.463	***	Supported
SOCIALENVIRONMENT←AES	.361	.057	6.342	***	Supported
PHYSICALENVIRONMENT←AES	.590	.050	11.869	***	Supported
PHYSICALEVIDENCE←CES	1.000				Supported
QUALITYOFEXPERIENCE←CES	2.197	.120	18.265	***	Supported
CONVINIENCE←CES	.304	.026	11.847	***	Supported
PARKINGAREA←CES	.292	.037	7.812	***	Supported
PERCEIVEDBENEFIT←CES	1.094	.079	13.813	***	Supported
LIGHT←CES	.476	.044	10.919	***	Supported
LAYOUT←CES	.557	.049	11.307	***	Supported
CESSTATE←CES	.240	.038	6.354	***	Supported
CONATIVELOYALTY←COGNITIVELOYALTY	.014	.040	.347	.728	Not supported
CONATIVELOYALTY←AFFECTIVELOYALTY	-.049	.086	-.571	.568	Not supported
CONATIVELOYALTY←AES	-.291	.154	-1.895	.058	Not supported
CONATIVELOYALTY←CES	.570	.039	14.765	***	Supported

At the same time, it is expected that the convenience improves the overall evaluation of the product and service without affecting the customers' emotions (Crosby & Stephens, (1987). Hypothesis 8 stated that parking area has positive effect on cognitive experiential state. The path coefficient on parking area and cognitive experiential state was 0.292 which was statistically significant thus confirms the hypothesis H8. This finding is consistent with previous studies that stated the quality of experience affects the cognitive experiential state. (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci 2007, Rose *et al* 2012). Hypothesis 9 stated that perceived benefit has positive effect on cognitive experiential state. The path coefficient on perceived benefit and cognitive experiential state was 0.292 which was statistically significant thus confirm the hypothesis H9. Hypothesis 10 stated that light has positive effect on cognitive experiential state. The path coefficient on light and cognitive experiential state was 0.476 which was statistically significant thus confirm the hypothesis H10. Hypothesis 11 stated that layout has positive effect on cognitive experiential state. The path coefficient on layout and cognitive experiential state was 0.557 which was statistically significant thus confirm the hypothesis H11. Hypothesis 12 stated that cognitive state has positive effect on cognitive experiential state. The path coefficient on cognitive state and cognitive experiential state was 0.240 which was statistically significant thus confirm the hypothesis H12. This finding is consistent with previous studies that stated the psychological and behavioural response has been identified (Bitner 1992), (Oliver 1999). Hypothesis 13 stated that affective experiential state has positive effect on affective loyalty. This hypothesis was confirmed since the path coefficient (1.431) was statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). Such findings are also congruent with the previous studies that claim that customers experiential state positively influence affective loyalty and enjoyment (Khalifa & Liu 2007; Kim, Zaho & Yang, 2008; So, Wong & Sculli, 2005). Hypothesis 14 stated that cognitive experiential state has the positive effect on cognitive loyalty. This hypothesis was confirmed since the path coefficient (0.276) was statistically significant. The previous research has also

investigated that the relationship between customer experience and customer loyalty is always positive. (Sivadas & Baker–Prewitt, 2000). Previous studies from researchers (Khalifa & Liu, 2007; Kim, Zaho & Yang, 2008) have also confirmed the same. Hypothesis 15 stated that affective experiential state positively effect conative loyalty was not confirmed as the path coefficient (-0.291) which was not statistically significant, thus failing to confirm the hypothesis. Hypothesis 16 stated that cognitive experiential state has the positive effect on conative loyalty was confirmed. The path coefficient on cognitive experiential state to conative loyalty was 0.276 which was statistically significance thus confirm the hypothesis H16. Hypothesis 17 stated that cognitive loyalty positively effect conative loyalty. This hypothesis was not confirmed since cognitive loyalty did not have a significant effect on word of mouth and the effect on return intention. This result somewhat confirms Oliver's model (Oliver 1997) of loyalty that has been developed by sequential stages where customers first developed cognitive loyalty followed by affective loyalty and conative loyalty. Hypothesis 18 stated that affective loyalty positively affects conative loyalty was not confirmed. Since the path between them was not statistically significant. The result shows that there is no relationship between affective loyalty and conative loyalty.

**Table 4 Squared Multiple Correlations (Group number 1-Default model)**

Variables	Estimate
COGNITIVELOYALTY	0.161
AFFECTIVELOYALTY	0.775
CONATIVELOYALTY	0.609
COGNITIVE EXPERENTIAL STATE	0.094
LAYOUT	0.336
LIGHT	0.278
PERCEIVEDBENEFIT	0.444
PARKINGAREA	0.142
CONVIENIENCE	0.327
QUALITYOFEXPERIENCE	0.856
PHYSICALEVIDENCE	0.506
PHYSICALENVIRONMENT	0.354
SOCIALENVIRONMENT	0.121
AUDIENCE	0.552
AFFECTIVE EXPERENTIAL STATE	0.337

Table 4 interprets the squared multiple correlation. It is estimated that the predictors of affective loyalty explains 78% of its variance (i.e. 12% of variance is satisfied). Similarly the predictors of conative loyalty explains 6% of its variance. (i.e. 39% of variance is unexplained). But the predictors of cognitive loyalty explains 16% of its variance only.

### **Managerial Implications**

In theme park customers can develop affective loyalty, only if they have a number of positive emotional experiences. These experiences based on the results of the present study are influenced by physical environment, social environment, audience and actors. Further it has been proved from the study that cognitive

loyalty effected the information available to the customers such as quality of experience, brochures, signage and number of rides, cleanliness, lightening, and layout. The results indicated that design, architecture, and atmosphere of the theme park play a significant role in satisfying the curiosity of the respondents. As expected audience performance did have significant impact on in –park visitor’s emotions; which suggest it is essential that theme park management appropriately regulate the visitor’s behaviour to ensure customer loyalty. In addition to the above, the promptness of service provided by the visitor also plays an important role in developing a positive effect on affective experiential state.

The result shows that quality of experience has positive effect on cognitive experiential state. The excitement arising out of each rides experience, technology, safety and security measures are the main components affecting the thinking or conscious mental process of the respondents. In addition to this, quality of food and cleanliness of the rest rooms, dressing room and the grounds also affect the quality of experience. The signage and brochure forms important components of physical evidence. The respondents are looking for clear signs and symbols and a comfortable path way. The design of the brochure has also attracted the respondents towards the particular theme park. Thus the theme park management should put more effort in addressing the dominant motives of different group of visitors to enhance theme park experience. The findings also reveal that generally respondents had an affective tendency to satisfaction and their immediate conscious mental process to be the main indicator of the customer loyalty. The theme park management should carefully manage the theme park service’s especially considering every aspect of park setting and ambience, in order to elicit positive visitors’ effect.

### **Theoretical Implication**

The study has several important theoretical contribution .Different antecedents of customer experience in theme park establishment were recognised and the instrument that measures these dimensions was measured. The importance of each of the antecedents of customer experience was examined in regards to their effect on customer experience. Finally this study integrates two dimensions of customer experience i.e. affective experiential state, cognitive experiential state and customer loyalty stages into a comprehensive theoretical model that could be further applied and retested in other services industries. The findings are in line with Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory (Oliver,1980), Three Factor Model Of Quality (Rust and Oliver, 1994) and Customer Loyalty Integrated Conceptual Framework (Dick and Basu, 1994).

### **Conclusion**

In today's competitive market, providing only a good theme park services seems very unappealing. In fact the theme park management should focus on offering experiences that fulfil visitor's needs and elicit positive emotional feeling and cognitive process. Theme park operators need not only to device plans to attract the customers but should also investigate and understand the intricacies of the visitors psychological makeup. Therefore the theme park operators approach visitor's satisfaction from an experiential perception.

### **Limitations of the study and scope for further research**

No study is without boundaries and it opens way for further growth. This study also engrosses certain limitations. Human behaviour is a combination of personal attributes and various aspects of situation within which a person is placed. The study may have some respondents' bias since it is very difficult to control the respondents and make them answer all the questions in a sincere manner. Loss of sample took place because of lack of support and unfilled questionnaires. Further research may be undertaken to test the mediating and moderating effect of

variables on loyalty. In any case the findings of the study are indeed relevant to organization context.

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