

Investigating the Relationship Between Service Quality and Brand Trust for Theme Park Reopening: The Mediation of Perceived Uniqueness

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Abstract: Service quality and brand trust are important characteristics of companies hoping to succeed in the theme park market. The present study explores the understanding of the linking role of service quality and brand trust. The purpose of this study is to investigate visitors' brand trust of the theme park industry. That trust is the selected context for this research. Data are collected based on a combined sampling from 154 selected visitors. In order to enhance or maintain brand trust, theme parks must pay strict attention to service quality and uniqueness. This study draws on an extensive survey that took place at Chimelong Ocean Kingdom, immediately after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study firstly provides a model of THEMEQUAL as a unique service quality measurement scale for use in the Chinese theme park context. The results of this study indicate that a positive relationship exists between service quality and brand trust, which involves the mediation of perceived uniqueness.

Keywords: Service quality, Brand trust, Theme park visitors

主題公園重新開園後服務質量與品牌信任的關係研究 ——以感知獨特性為中介變量

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摘要: 服務質量和品牌信任是主題公園市場發展的重要組成部分。本研究旨在探討服務質量與品牌信任之間的聯動作用並將主題公園行業作為研究對象，為進一步提高中國主題公園的遊客品牌信任度。在新冠肺炎疫情暴發後長隆海洋王國重新開園，通過方便抽樣訪問154名遊客進行了問卷收集。為了增強或保持主題公園的品牌信任度應關注服務質量和感知獨特性因素，本研究引用專為主題公園而設的服務質量測量量表(THEMEQUAL)對我國主題公園進行首次測量。研究結果表明，服務質量與品牌信任之間存在正相關關係且感知獨特性在其關係中起中介作用。

關鍵詞: 服務質量、品牌信任、主題公園遊客

0 Introduction

According to the Thematic Entertainment Association, the development of theme parks has

brought a huge amount of revenue to the tourism industry, thus creating a driving force for economic development^[1]. In particular, the number of Chinese theme parks has grown rapidly in the past few

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decades, and with this growth in numbers, competition has become more intensive than ever. In order to survive or even succeed, theme parks all around the world have become increasingly customer-orientated. Zhu & Deng^[2] suggested the significant role played by tourists' attitudes and perceptions, especially during the epidemic. The study identifies the factors that visitors would take into consideration when choosing vacation destinations.

Chinese people have experienced a tough time in 2020, as a deadly virus called COVID-19 dramatically spread across the nation and the entire planet. Isolation and stay-at-home orders became compulsory, and control measures were immediately implemented by the Chinese government in an effort to fight the epidemic^[1]. As one of the most impactful issues of the 21st century, COVID-19 also provides a transformational opportunity for businesses and organizations in the tourism industry to improve their service delivery and increase tourist satisfaction levels^[3]. Therefore, the development of theme parks in the context of service quality requires the consideration of risk management.

Once COVID-19 began spreading across China, the Chinese government immediately began banning nonessential travel and mandating the shutdown of all nonessential business. As a result, Chimelong Ocean Kingdom (hereafter COK) was temporarily closed, from January to May 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Hong Kong Ocean Park has been closed since January and is currently suffering the threat of bankruptcy, due to the perceived social risk (since 2019) of attending theme parks. Unfortunately, the number of infection cases is still persistently increasing. Some specialists at the World Health Organization predict the influence of COVID-19 may impact all our future lives for decades to come. Couto et al.^[4] found the highest level of agreement on the issue of how tourists choose a tourist destination based significantly on trust. The sustainable development of the tourism industry urgently and necessarily requires the industry itself to draw up and implement the relevant preparations. Therefore, a positive

relationship between visitors and theme park service providers is the most important factor in the future survival and even success of Chinese theme parks.

Service quality has been proven to be one of the essential factors that influence customers' perception, value and trust of a brand^[5]. There is a general agreement in existing hospitality service literature that the relationship between service quality and trust is an important determinant of the intensity and permanence of the development of the theme park industry. Rapaccini et al.^[6] stated that the management of service quality is considered a significant factor in improving the efficiency of service operations under the background of a crisis. Fotiadis & Kozak^[7] and Li & Song^[8] investigated service quality in Chinese theme parks by using the SERVQUAL instrument. In practice, SERVQUAL is a valuable scale that is widely used to measure the levels of service quality in service-based businesses. The scale was originally developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry^[9].

In 2012, Tsang, et al.^[10] developed THEMEQUAL, a scale that is based on the original SERVQUAL instrument. The study proposed six dimensions of the model, including "tangibles," "reliability," "responsiveness and access," "assurance," "empathy," and "courtesy". These six dimensions are the influencing predictors of visitor satisfaction. This study examined visitors to Disneyland Hong Kong, but most of the respondents were locals. As is well-known, Hong Kong visitors are very different from mainland China visitors. For instance, people coming from two different regions will have different ideologies and cultures. They may also have different levels of proficiency in English. Further, Tse, Belk, & Zhou^[11] stated many factors, such as political ideology, a combination of market forces and income differentials, may determine the differences between Hong Kong and mainland China visitors. However, no one until now – let alone during the epidemic – has ever applied the THEMEQUAL model to the research of theme parks in Mainland China. Hence, applying the measurement of service quality in the theme park industry in the context of Chinese local brand

theme parks is necessary. This will become especially important in the post-epidemic period.

Previous researches define trust as a kind of feeling of security and faith; trust is also always considered to be one of the most relevant factors in maintaining steady and collaborative relationships. Kassim & Abdullah^[12] confirmed that trust is an essential element in their research of the relationship market. The study also found that the element of trust impacts satisfaction levels. Hyun^[13] identified that the factor of trust is beneficial in creating a positive relationship between visitors and theme parks. Visitors agreeing that a theme park is trustworthy will ultimately influence the relationship between customers and sellers in the context of the theme park industry. Hall, Scott & Gossling^[15] confirmed the importance of travelers' trust, noting that a second wave of infections may continue to negatively influence the hospitality industry. Wu & Lin^[14] also confirmed that the feeling of trust is significantly important in efforts to increase the loyalty of theme park visitors. In addition, Cheng et al.^[16] agreed that loyalty helps theme parks to retain visitors and gain a competitive advantage. Even though sufficient evidence exists that supports a positive correlation between service quality and trust^{[12][17]}, there is still a shortage of empirical research on this issue within the Chinese theme park industry.

In order to fill the research gap (in terms of Chinese theme park industry development), this study draws on an extensive survey that took place at COK immediately after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper also discusses the importance of service quality as a means for the theme park industry to enhance the trust of visitors. A model of THEMEQUAL is also provided as a unique service quality measurement scale in the theme park context. Furthermore, the theoretical underpinning of this study also focuses on uniqueness as one of the mediators that potentially affects visitors' trust of theme parks.

The current study proposes that uniqueness and perception of service quality affect visitors' brand trust both directly and indirectly. The purposes

of this study are therefore as follows: firstly, to establish a theoretical basis for evaluating how and to what extent service quality influences brand trust, particularly with regard to visitors' perceptions of theme park products and services. Specifically, this paper analyzes the application of a THEMEQUAL scale for use in measuring theme park service quality in mainland China. Secondly, to test this theoretical basis, an empirical case study of the COK reopening was conducted after the COVID-19 outbreak. Jones & Comfort^[18] highlighted how the COVID-19 crisis was wreaking havoc in the hospitality and retail industries. The pandemic also negatively impacts on consumer perception and behavior, product demand and operations. A specific empirical study is needed, in order to obtain the empirical results and then combine those results with the conclusions and managerial implications specifically as they relate to the issue of the COVID-19 crisis. Thirdly, the current research theoretically delineates and empirically assesses how uniqueness mediates the service quality of theme parks' impact on visitors' brand trust. Besides, it has contributions on the development of theme park industry, and fill in the literature gap of the relationship between service quality and brand trust in the context of the theme park industry. To bridge the gap, the aim of the research has identified the factors and associated mechanisms that theme park visitors' behaviour, however, the related study has received little research so far. This research also explored the unexamined pathways through which service quality and uniqueness may shape brand trust. The expected findings will provide important implications to the development of theme park industry, and also assisted theme parks with pulling through the tough time of COVID-19.

In the sections that follow, the research offers the conceptual background and develops the hypotheses. Then, the research context is introduced, and the research methodology is illustrated. Afterwards, the data results and analysis are reported. Finally, the research's implications and limitations are presented, along with possible directions for future studies.

1 Literature review

1.1 THEMEQUAL- theme park service quality

A theme park cannot be successful without valuing the importance of service quality. In the context of tourism, essential products are related to service. Parasuraman et al. ^[9] explored the dimensions of service quality and revealed the existence of 10 dimensions tangibles, namely reliability, responsiveness, communication, credibility, security, competence, courtesy, understanding/knowing the customer, and access. These tangibles serve as the basic structure of the service quality domain. These items were derived for the SERVQUAL model, which can be generated and applied to organizations, both internally and externally ^[9]. The researchers in this study selected five dimensions covering 97 items (by empirical research). These items were used to construct the first measurement of service quality in service contexts ^[9]. In order to discover the importance of service quality, many researchers and managers have focused on examining how service quality has changed the customer satisfaction level during the last few decades ^[12]. However, the model used in those studies has certain drawbacks on application, despite the model's wide adoption ^{[19][24]}. Kotler & Armstrong ^[21] confirmed the characteristics of services as being intangible, stating that consumers have to consider and suffer considerable risks when they purchase tourism products.

Therefore, Tsang et al. ^[10] constructed the THEMEQUAL model to measure the gap between perceived service quality and expected service quality from the perspective of visitors in a theme park setting. These four authors discovered the limitations of SERVQUAL. In the modified model, the original dimensions – including tangibles, reliability, assurance, responsiveness and access, and empathy – all remain. In addition, a new dimension, e.g., courtesy, is included. First, Tsang et al. ^[10] utilized Milman ^[22] to confirm that the safety and security of facilities is one of the main factors generating the success of a theme

park. Additionally, safety and security will strongly influence the health of the theme park industry from the perspective of visitors in the future. The definition of the reliability dimension implicates the ability to make sure a reliable service is being performed ^[10]. Tangibles, defined as the physical environment of a theme park, contain the park's public facilities, stores, restaurants, and landscape ^[10]. Safety and security can be understood to be linked to the public's transportation within the grounds, an essential infrastructure of a theme park. Thus, based on the unique requirement of the theme park context, the dimension of reliability, including the safety and security of facilities, is necessarily added to the proposed model. Second, compared with the SERVQUAL model, four dimensions of the THEMEQUAL model (tangibles, assurance, responsiveness and access, and empathy) remain unaltered. In the following research of Parasuraman, et al. ^[9], the factors originally identified from SERVQUAL as affecting service quality include responsiveness, access, courtesy and reliability and tangibles. However, both Tsang et al. ^[10] and Carman ^[23] agreed that the factor of courtesy should be retained as an individual dimension. Courtesy is defined as friendly and polite feedback from staff; courtesy can also create an unforgettable experience for visitors ^{[10][11][23]}. These researchers confirm the key role of service employees and the service encounters with visitors in the measurement of service quality. Furthermore, the theme park industry is a "smile" business, where employees are required to put forth a bit more effort with regard to courtesy, so they will look more pleasant in the working place. Valcic et al. ^[24] suggested that theme parks need to have their own service standards to develop the highest possible service quality. This will be needed to bring back visitors, as each customer will be happy to receive better services.

Nevertheless, research conducted by Fotiadis & Vassiliadis ^[7] confirmed that there are only a limited number of studies on theme park service quality. That study also identified the great significance of the research of Tsang et al. ^[10]. The unique service quality measurement – THEMEQUAL – has been applied in

different regions and destinations to research theme parks' service quality and the theme park industry. As has been discovered, it is a combination of indicators or factors that cause consumers to switch service providers. Additionally, a list of theme park success factors was studied by Pikkemaat & Schuckert (p.202)^[25]. Those factors include: a "multi-various range of options", "uniqueness", "innovation", "continuity/theming", "environmental integration", "capacity and queue management", "functionality and infrastructure", "weather independency", "escape/imagination", "emotions", "involvement/interactivity", "branding", "quality", "safety and security", and "design". The outcome confirms that "quality" is the most essential element affecting the success of theme parks. In addition, theme park managers are encouraged to continually measure the service quality of theme parks, in order to better understand customers' attitudes and to effectively improve their development strategy^[19].

Previous researchers have identified that hospitality service quality focuses on the effects of customer satisfaction and loyalty. For instance, Lai et al.^[26] stated that 192 articles are used to measure 'service quality', 'satisfaction' and loyalty'. A relationship between service quality and brand trust necessarily exists; Hazra & Srivastava^[27] indicated that better service quality has a positive impact on brand trust. In addition, Tsang et al.^[10] confirmed the existence of a permanent correlation between brand trust and service quality in the theme park industry. They also asserted that the assurance dimension of the THEMEQUAL scale is the key factor in each employee can give visitors to improve the brand trust and confidence of those visitors. Among various factors influence the development of the theme park industry, this study focused on the service quality for several reasons. First, service quality is one of the most important factors that improve the theme park industry and also gain the trust from visitors^{[10][12]}. Second, there are differences between Chinese culture and other nations. Li & Song^[8] proved that the evaluation of the service quality in Chinese theme parks is different compared with other countries. Besides, most Chinese theme parks are organized by the government or

privately organized^[28], only the Disneyland Shanghai is the overseas funded theme park in mainland China.

Therefore, this study investigates the service quality of theme parks by applying the unique theme park service quality measurement scale, THEMEQUAL. In addition, the relationship between service quality and the brand trust factor in the context of the theme park industry is also discovered.

1.2 The relationship between service quality and trust

Trust is defined as customers' confidence in the integrity of an organization; trust is also a commitment from the buyer that their enduring desire to continue a relationship with the supplier will be maintained^[7]. Both Crosby et al.^[29] and Jin et al.^[17] viewed the factor of trust as one of the elements or dimensions that influence relationship quality and affect customers' behavioral loyalty to a brand. Based on previous researches, brand trust factor was researched as a subtype of the factor of trust^[30]. Since mostly researches focused on the study of trust^{[27][29]}, visitors' brand trust has been regarded as the aim of the researched element in this study. On the other side, Hazra & Srivastava^[27] offered evidence that proves service quality has an impact on customers' trust. Since the tourism industry is impacted by many external factors, including the environment and political and economic instability, visitors' perceived risk will influence their destination choice and behavioral intentions^[3]. Gstaettner, Rodger & Lee^[31] stated that the majority of tourism destination managers focus on how to avoid high liability costs while neglecting the visitors' seeking demands. However, these authors pointed out the significance of visitors' attitudes and experiences in order to affect how risk managers could implement effective interventions.

Hazra & Srivastava^[27] described trust as a fundamental factor in building a sustainable market share. The study also implies how residential consumers are willing to stay in a long and stable relationship with their current service suppliers. It is widely believed that the trust factor is helpful in reducing the psychological costs when customers are dealing with a service

provider. Besides, previous research also confirms that a positive relationship exists between service quality, customer trust and loyalty^[7]. In literature related to commitment-trust relationship marketing, researchers have confirmed that trust is an important construct in transactional relationships, particularly when customers have confidence in a firm's reliability and integrity^[12].

The relationship between trust and service quality's effect on customer loyalty has been confirmed in different literatures. For instance, Caceres et al.^[32] discovered that brand trust is a key factor in maintaining a long-term relationship between customers and vendors. In the context of theme parks, Wu & Lin^[14] stated that trust affects customer attitudes and purchasing decisions; trust also has a significantly positive influence on loyalty. By establishing a measurement model, this paper proves that trust has a strong and significant effect on loyalty. Theme park tourists are more loyal to theme parks when they trust the venue and the theme park meets their expectation. Furthermore, trust has been reaffirmed as an essential effect during the COVID-19 epidemic, especially in the tourism industry. Sigala^[33] stated that trust in and brand values of tourism suppliers are impacting the development of tourism business in the response stage of COVID-19 epidemic period. For this industry, rebuilding customer trust and redesigning their value propositions and business models are the most useful actions in which they can engage during the recovery stage. Currently, safety is playing an essential role in establishing visitors' brand trust since the reopening of the COK. Visitors' trust in vendors – especially theme parks – is built on the protocol of safety; the facilities must also guarantee cleanliness and hygiene. All these researches suggest that a positive relationship exists between service quality and trust, and both service quality and trust have an impact on customer loyalty. However, there is a paucity of empirical research that investigates the linkage of the variables (such as service quality and trust) in the theme park industry, let alone during the various stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In accordance with the theory of relationship between service quality and trust, the present study

examines service quality as a precursor of trust. This concept has been empirically tested before, with positive outcomes.

1.3 Uniqueness as a mediator factor

Uniqueness is an individual element of a product or brand, an element that makes the product or brand different from other competitors. Special characteristics of theme parks are essential if they are to attract tourists. Dwivedi et al.^[34] stated that the stronger the point-of-difference a brand has, the greater will be the degree to which that brand stand out. In short, uniqueness means a brand can be more easily recognized and noticed. With regard to the theme park industry, unique or even extraordinary experiences can surprise visitors and provide them with vivid and lasting memories. Researchers emphasize that lately, uniqueness plays a more important role in visitor experiences than competitive market prices^[31]. Furthermore, uniqueness is the key determinant of hotel industry service quality standards^[32]. Investigations reveal that a similar situation exists between the service quality of hotels and the theme park industry. In addition, Tsang et al.^[10] confirmed that the factor of uniqueness is included in the list of theme park success factors. Both Hyun^[36] and Hyun^[13] agreed that a good strategy for theme park managers is to develop the unique characteristics of their theme parks. Carson^[37] stated that the Disneyland theme park's uniqueness is the secret of the park's success. Therefore, this study argues that a strong and unique experience can establish a positive perception of a brand, eventually helping to reinforce brand trust and create positive memories. Moreover, in terms of research into luxury brands, Shukla et al.^[38] and Wiedmann et al.^[39] both confirmed that uniqueness is one of the primary factors that motivate luxury brand consumers to make their purchasing decisions. Franke & Schreier^[40] proposed the concept of perceived uniqueness in the basis of commodity theory. The study claims that perceived uniqueness significantly affects customers' aesthetic and functional preferences. It is thus posited that, when customers perceive that a brand

is more unique, establishing brand trust becomes much easier.

Supporting this view, uniqueness can separate a theme park from the competition and provides added value for visitors, thereby positively affecting brand trust^[35]. Accordingly, this study contends that service quality affects the uniqueness of the brand, so uniqueness in turn can establish brand trust for a theme park. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that uniqueness (or visitors' perceived uniqueness) mediates the link between service quality and brand trust.

Therefore, the proposed framework including factors such as service quality and uniqueness effects the brand trust. All of these factors and framework have been examined the reliability and validity. Based on the previous solid researches, this study examined the relationship among the service quality, uniqueness and the brand trust in theme park industry by following conceptual framework (see Figure 1)

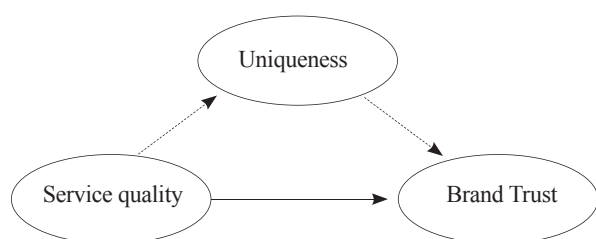


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

2 Methodology

2.1 Respondents and procedure

A convenience sampling technique was employed to collect data in COK. Visitors who had finished their visit were approached and asked to fill out a questionnaire. Alternatively, the researchers collected the relevant data through SO JUMP, a convenient professional software used for online surveys in mainland China. This approach has been widely accepted in academic circles for both validity and reliability^{[36][41]}. The data collection was conducted from late-May to mid-July, which is the peak season

for Chinese theme park destinations. The timing for issuing the questionnaires was set for the periods of 2-4pm, 5-6pm and 7-8pm during the weekends. After checking for questionnaire completeness, a was given to participants as an incentive gift and in appreciation of their cooperation. All respondents were voluntarily involved and mutually exclusive. All the selected members are adults who were picked out from the crowd. Out of 200 distributed questionnaires, there were 154 respondents, yielding a response rate of 77 percent.

2.2 Questionnaire Design and Research Setting

A questionnaire was designed to measure service quality and uniqueness, as well as to evaluate visitors' trust and quality of experience during their theme park visitation.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts, beginning with the respondents' assessment of the theme park's service quality, uniqueness and trust constructs (see Appendix). The perceived service quality construct was based on the THEMEQUAL conceptual framework^[10] as applied in the theme park industry. The questionnaire employed 26 Likert-scale items. The uniqueness dimension included four items; the trust dimension included three items, and the service quality, measured by the THEMEQUAL scale^[10], included 23 items. All items were measured using a 5-point liker-scale, ranging from ⁽¹⁾ strongly disagree to ⁽⁵⁾ strongly agree. Part two consisted of a series of respondents' demographic and socio-economic characteristics, including income, gender, age and education. Moreover, the surveys were conducted in public areas of COK, such as parking lots, at the main exit gate and at shuttle bus stations.

Located in the Hengqin new district of Zhuhai City, COK had a grand opening in 2015. The park is managed by a private enterprise known as the Chimelong Group. The Zhuhai Hengqin Chimelong International Ocean Resort is comprised of a theme park, five themed hotels and a circus attraction. The resort occupies a prime location, just across the river from Macau and only 41 nautical miles from Hong Kong. Convenient traffic

networks ensure that guests can reach the destination easily and from everywhere. As the most representative theme park in mainland China, COK has welcomed more than nine million visitors since its opening^[43]. This is perhaps the most sophisticated theme park within mainland China. In fact, COK aims to become the Disneyworld (Orlando) of China, having won the 2015 Outstanding Theme Park award, presented by Themed Entertainment Association^[44]. The researcher chose COK as the research site due to the park's features, such as the abovementioned varied experiences and unique visiting products of the park. As such, COK was considered the best choice and most representative theme park for the purposes of this study.

2.3 Data Analysis Technique

First, descriptive statistics were adopted to measure the demographics of respondents. Second, CFA were conducted to attest two-factor structure of the service quality measurement for Chinese theme park using Mplus 7.0. Third, the present study is to test the mediation model with Hayes^[42] PROCESS macro (v3.0 model 4). The present study use bootstrapping technique (N=5,000) and 95% confidence approaches in determining the mediation effects^[42]. If the mediation effect is tenable the 95% CI would be excluding zero.

3 Results

3.1 Profile of Respondents

his study analyzed a total of 154 valid responses. The demographic profile of respondents is shown in Table 1. Among the 154 respondents, over one-half were female (50.9%) and 48.1% were male. Most of the respondents were between the age 18 to 24 years (57.8%), it might because of the survey duration was between June to August, majority respondents were high school graduates and college students. Followed by 25 to 34 years (27.9%), and 35 to 54 years or above (14.2%). Most respondents were local Zhuhai residents and followed

by the other cities of Guangdong Province (35.7%). Generally, the respondents obtained university education (42.9%) and college education level (37%). With regard to monthly personal income, 30.5% of respondents were earning RMB¥8,000 or above, and 27.9% had monthly personal income RMB¥2,000 or below, 24.7% were earning between RMB¥5,000 to RMB¥7,999.

Table 1. Demographic characteristic of respondents

| | N | % |
|--|-----|------|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 74 | 48.1 |
| Female | 80 | 51.9 |
| Age | | |
| 18-24 | 89 | 57.8 |
| 25-34 | 43 | 27.9 |
| 35-54 | 21 | 13.6 |
| 55-64 | 1 | .6 |
| 65+ | 0 | 0 |
| Location of Respondents Zhuhai | 79 | 51.3 |
| Cities Outside Zhuhai (Guangdong Province) | 55 | 35.7 |
| Outside Guangdong | 20 | 13 |
| Education | | |
| Under College level | 19 | 12.2 |
| College level | 57 | 37 |
| University level | 66 | 42.9 |
| Master level | 9 | 5.8 |
| Doctoral level | 3 | 1.9 |
| Income (per month) | | |
| Less than RMB 2,000 | 43 | 27.9 |
| RMB 2,001 - 4,999 | 26 | 16.9 |
| RMB 5,000 - 7,999 | 38 | 24.7 |
| More than RMB 8,000 | 47 | 30.5 |
| Times of visitation | | |
| First time | 78 | 50.6 |
| Second time | 36 | 23.4 |
| More than three times | 40 | 26 |
| Total | 154 | 100 |

3.2 Confirmatory factor analysis

Based on the literature reviews, the nine factors and twenty-eight items created a hypothesis model. To confirm the factor structure, a confirmatory factor analysis was performed using Mplus's 7.0 robust maximum likelihood parameter estimates with standard errors (MLR). The evaluated model fit using a number of standard fit criteria, including a Comparative Fit Index (CFI) ≥ 0.90 , Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) close to 0.06, and a standardized root mean

square residual (SRMR) ≤ 0.08 ^[45]. The goodness of fit indices did marginally meet the standard with values of ($\chi^2(351) = 3115.976$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.954, TLI = 0.937, RMSEA = 0.062, SRMR = 0.037). the results of the measurement model, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values are shown in Table 2.

3.3 Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlation

Results of descriptive statistics are showed in Table 3. According to Table 4, Brand trust was positively related to service quality and uniqueness. In addition, uniqueness was positively related to service quality. Since there were bivariate collations between the variables, test the mediation effect of uniqueness to verify the proposed model.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics (N = 154)

| | M | SD |
|-----------------|------|-----|
| Service Quality | 3.82 | .80 |
| Uniqueness | 3.88 | .91 |
| Brand Trust | 4.01 | .96 |

Table 4. Bivariate collations between variables (N=154)

| | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|--------------------|--------|--------|---|
| 1. Service Quality | - | | |
| 2. Uniqueness | .585** | - | |
| 3. Brand Trust | .810** | .696** | - |

** $p < .01$

3.4 Mediation Effect of Uniqueness

A mediation analysis was to test the mediation effect of uniqueness and the results are presented in Table 5. The model explained 35.24 variance of uniqueness in the first step. After controlling for several demographic variables, service quality was positively related to uniqueness ($B = .656$, $SE = .078$, $p < 0.001$). The model accounted for 74.65% variance of Brand trust in the second step. The relation between service quality and brand trust was significant ($B = .775$, $SE = .064$, $p < 0.001$). Importantly, it suggested that the mediation effect was significant. Because uniqueness was positively related to brand trust ($B = .377$, $SE = .056$, $p < 0.001$). Moreover, the 95% CI of the mediation index did not include zero (.013,.659).

Table 5. Summary of the mediated model (N=154)

| | B | SE | p |
|--|-------|------|------|
| Step 1: Uniqueness as outcome ($R^2 = 35.24\%$) | | | |
| Gender | -.084 | .079 | .308 |
| Age | -.015 | .084 | .861 |
| Education level | .015 | .048 | .760 |
| Income | .034 | .036 | .384 |
| Times of visitation | .013 | .075 | .863 |
| Service quality | .656 | .078 | .000 |
| Step 2: Brand trust as outcome ($R^2 = 74.65\%$) | | | |
| Gender | .093 | .053 | .084 |
| Age | -.040 | .057 | .479 |
| Education level | -.040 | .033 | .225 |
| Income | -.010 | .026 | .710 |
| Times of visitation | -.114 | .050 | .025 |
| Service quality | .775 | .064 | .000 |
| Uniqueness | .377 | .056 | .000 |

Table 1. Demographic characteristic of respondents

| Construct | Mean | Std. deviation | Std. factor loading | Composite reliabilities | Cronbach's alpha | AVE |
|---|------|-------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|------|
| Low THEMEQUAL | | | | .973 | .969 | .629 |
| Tangible | | | | | .802 | |
| The facilities within the COK have a modern outlook. | 3.88 | .819 | .523 | | | |
| The staffs of COK have neat appearances | 4.16 | .715 | .597 | | | |
| The facilities within the COK are visually appealing | 3.90 | .978 | .728 | | | |
| The interpretation materials within COK, such as leaflets, signpost, and map are visually appealing | 3.79 | 1.147 | .714 | | | |
| Reliability | | | | | .893 | |
| When you have a problem, staff of COK will help you to solve it | 4.07 | .915 | .826 | | | |
| The shows/performances have begun on schedule | 4.10 | .879 | .832 | | | |
| The facilities in COK are safe to use | 4.08 | .967 | .775 | | | |
| Responsiveness and access | | | | | .931 | |
| Staffs are never too busy to respond my requests | 3.88 | .986 | .756 | | | |
| Staff responses you exactly when the service/performance will be performed | 4.12 | .827 | .821 | | | |
| Staffs offering on time responses to visitors | 3.99 | 1.100 | .865 | | | |
| Staffs are willing to help me always | 4.08 | .863 | .897 | | | |
| I can obtain information from staff easily | 4.06 | .995 | .890 | | | |
| I can access to the staff in COK easily | 3.94 | 1.256 | .831 | | | |
| Assurance | | | | | .936 | |
| The behavior of staff is giving me confidence to visit | 4.03 | 1.044 | .896 | | | |
| I felt safe during my transaction | 4.10 | .998 | .879 | | | |
| Staff have sufficient knowledge to answer visitors' questions | 4.08 | .996 | .867 | | | |
| Empathy | | | | | .942 | |
| The operating hours of COK is convenient for visitors | 3.94 | 1.145 | .838 | | | |
| COK has enough staff members to give each visitor personal attention | 3.80 | 1.179 | .798 | | | |
| COK has put the interest of visitors in the first place | 3.83 | 1.148 | .798 | | | |
| Staff of COK can understand the specific needs of visitors | 3.81 | 1.136 | .768 | | | |
| Courtesy | | | | | .793 | |
| I have a pleasant experience of visiting COK | 4.00 | 1.126 | .751 | | | |
| Staff of COK are consistently polite | 3.98 | 1.202 | .671 | | | |
| Brand trust | | | | .896 | .875 | .741 |
| COK is a reliable brand even after the coronavirus closure | 4.06 | 1.005 | .908 | | | |
| COK always meets my expectation for a theme park | 4.00 | 1.103 | .845 | | | |
| This theme park always demonstrates integrity | 3.97 | 1.105 | .823 | | | |
| Uniqueness | | | | .764 | .859 | .618 |
| The content of shows is fresh | 3.86 | 1.073 | .779 | | | |
| Some unexpected situations happened | 3.90 | .923 | .793 | | | |

4 Discussion

The findings show that service quality and uniqueness have an impact on visitors' trust in theme parks. To date, studies have only occasionally examined the service quality and uniqueness in the Chinese theme park industry by applying the SERVQUAL model. However, the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL model cannot fully explain or explore the theme park setting. Previous research has confirmed that THEMEQUAL is able to help theme park operators seek out the important factors from the visitors' perspective, as well as how service quality can be significantly improved^[10]. In this study, THEMEQUAL is firstly proposed as a means to measure the service quality in the theme parks of mainland China. Supporting the assumptions of this study, the findings show that low service quality partly explains why visitors have low trust in theme parks. In addition, uniqueness has been reported to be a component that influences service quality and trust^[32]. Using a sample of theme park visitors, the analysis finds support for all the hypotheses in this study.

Furthermore, developing and sustaining trust in a tourism service setting is difficult to achieve. This study conceptualizes the construct of the relationship between service quality and brand trust by providing a theoretical foundation that constitutes the core of the present research. This is achieved by demonstrating the effect of relationship quality, including those determinants that affect theme park visitors' loyalty. As a unique measurement tool for assessing theme park service quality, this study confirms the availability of THEMEQUAL in mainland China. This research highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of service quality, including in the theme park industry. The results of this study suggest that service quality can be viewed as one of the antecedents that affect visitor trust. Perception of service quality, including tangibles, reliability, responsiveness and access, assurance, empathy and courtesy, are identified in this study as having a direct effect on trust. This empirical research also provides – and bases its conclusions – on a sample of Chinese theme park visitors. The

study also confirms the uniqueness and importance of THEMEQUAL for researching service quality in the Chinese theme park industry.

Thirdly, uniqueness is proposed to affect the relationship between service quality and trust in Chinese theme parks, especially as a mediator. This study partly explains the effect of uniqueness as a mediating factor and also improves the understanding of the mechanism. However, uniqueness only partly accounts for the relationship between service quality and trust.

Overall, the present study is the first to attempt to provide empirical evidence of the interdependence of involved variables and, at a higher level, the importance of THEMEQUAL in the research of visitors' brand trust.

5 Implications and Conclusions

This study examines and identifies the service quality dimensions of theme parks (THEMEQUAL) and how those dimensions affect visitor brand trust. More importantly, the hypothesis of the relationship between service quality and brand trust is clarified and confirmed. After comprehensive data analysis, the results support the various factors that influence the perception of service quality. This finding also confirms, in line with previous studies^{[7][32]}, the effect of service quality on theme park brand trust. Furthermore, this study is the first to attempt to provide empirical evidence of the role of THEMEQUAL items as the independent variables that affect brand trust. The finding indicates that the components of uniqueness have a significant effect on trust^[32].

The importance of this finding also generates insights for theme park managers. The development of the tourism industry has become more difficult than ever, due to the impact of COVID-19. Theme park service providers should focus most of their attention on measuring the service quality of their theme parks. In order to attract more visitors, theme parks should appeal to prospective tourists with particular strengths, namely by offering a better service and creating brand trust. Theme park management should also modify their service standards. For instance, the ability and motivation of employees in theme parks should be fully

understood by the management. This is particularly true when the employees are serving visitors or otherwise meeting their requirements. Thus, staff training plays an essential role as an enforcement measure to construct the concept of service quality for each employee. Consequently, it will not be enough for managers to only focus on the development of facilities; they also need to pay closer attention to the development of soft power, such as service quality. Theme parks can therefore directly increase visitor trust and loyalty by improving the level of service quality. This study suggests that visitors from different social environments might react differently to certain elements of brand trust. Thus, theme park managers should establish their marketing strategies to fit each marketing environment, because the needs of visitors might have changed by the onset of COVID-19.

Several limitations are noted in this study. With regard to the demographic profile, due to the restrictions on the movement of people worldwide, the majority of respondents are Chinese residents. This may not match the normal, actual marketing mix of the COK. Hence, there is a possibility that the current data is not fully representative. In addition, due to limitations in terms of both time and resources, the sample size used to reach the study's conclusion is comparatively small. This small size may affect the representativeness of the research findings. Furthermore, this study conducted the convenience sampling and data collection in one of

the most popular theme parks in mainland China. The results of this study therefore might not be representative of similar issues in other theme parks. Future research may consider collecting the data in other popular theme parks, such as the Guangzhou Chimelong resort or Shanghai Disneyland, in order to truly and accurately reflect the circumstances in the Chinese theme park industry. Moreover, the results of this study are largely based on the author's theoretical expectations. However, further research is needed to extend the present exploration. In particular, despite the importance of visitors' trust, the influence of visitors' loyalty and the measurement instruments of other constructs (such as switching intention) have not received adequate attention in existing theme park literature.

Nevertheless, this study is among the first to research how service quality and uniqueness have influenced visitors' trust since the spread of COVID-19. In addition, the findings have a number of theoretical and practical implications, as previously mentioned.

The present study reveals that service quality and uniqueness both have an influence on visitors' trust and hence on the development of the theme park industry. Particularly, the THEMEQUAL model is established as a means to measure the service quality of theme parks. The results of this research have important implications for increasing the number of mainland China theme parks, especially under the background of the COVID-19 crisis

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