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# Corporate image in the leisure services sector

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper seeks to empirically examine the relationship between corporate image and customer satisfaction in the leisure services sector. It also aims to examine the mediating impact of employees and servicescape on this relationship.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Data were collected from a sample of 195 individuals who had visited an Australian zoological garden over a specified time period. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to test the validity of the measures, whilst structural equation modelling and multiple regression were used in hypothesis testing.

**Findings** – Findings reveal that corporate image has a significant positive relationship with customer satisfaction. Although the results indicate that the relationship between corporate image and customer satisfaction is not mediated by either servicescape or employees, they imply that corporate image and employees directly influence customer satisfaction.

**Research limitations/implications** – A single-case study design was implemented, limiting the generalisability of the findings. This provides an opportunity for replication of the model in other leisure services environments and services contexts outside the leisure services industry.

**Practical implications** – The findings reinforce the need for leisure services operators to prioritise the development of a strong, clear corporate image. The extended analysis illustrates that the disaggregated dimensions of corporate image are valuable to consider in terms of directing managerial strategy. Employees and servicescape are key aspects of the service offer on which management needs to focus to ensure that their desired corporate image is communicated and reinforced.

**Originality/value** – This study addresses an identified need to further examine the relationship between corporate image and customer satisfaction. It also contributes

to corporate branding research by broadening the conceptualisation of the corporate image construct. Moreover, this study contributes to the corporate image literature by examining the mediating factors of employees and servicescape.

**Keyword(s):** Corporate image; Customer satisfaction; Customer loyalty; Leisure facilities; Employees.

**An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article.**

### ***Introduction***

Corporate attention to branding has steadily increased over the past decade. This is in recognition of the shareholder and asset value that branding can create (Hatch and Schultz, 2001), as well as the documented link between branding and the financial performance of the firm (Madden *et al.*, 2006). Einwiller and Will (2002) define corporate branding as:

... a systematically planned and implemented process of creating and maintaining favourable images and consequently a favourable reputation of the company as a whole by sending signals to stakeholders by managing behaviour, communication and symbolism (p. 101).

A corporate brand captures the additional values that are inherent in or associated with the corporation and its products/services (Da Silva and Alwi, 2006). Consequently, corporate brands serve as a powerful navigational tool for a variety of stakeholders ranging from investors and employees to consumers (Balmer and Gray, 2003). Whilst models of product branding are abundant, there is less empirical work on services brands in general and particularly leisure services brands (de Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2001). The leisure services industry, which incorporates restaurants, bars, sporting stadiums and activities, museums, galleries and visitor attractions is becoming increasingly competitive (Goulding, 2000). As early as 1996, Scheff and Kotler (1996) identified a global trend towards changing lifestyles resulting in a decline in people's leisure time. This is particularly evident in today's increasingly hectic lifestyles characterised by a larger proportion of women participating in the workforce and lengthened working hours creating a time-poor population (Esch *et al.*, 2006). Thus, it is evident that leisure services must identify and foster clear bases of competitive advantage in their battle for a share of consumer's leisure time. We suggest that a strong corporate brand and, more specifically corporate image, may serve as such a basis.

Corporate image, as a critical component of the corporate brand, has an external focus and considers how external stakeholders view the organisation. Although links between corporate image and customer satisfaction have been suggested (Chun and Davies, 2006), few empirical studies and inherent limitations in these studies mean that this relationship is still unclear. We address this research gap and empirically verify the relationship between corporate image and customer satisfaction. It has been proposed that satisfaction with a service encounter can be affected by a range of factors such as previous experience, word-of-mouth and external communication (Anderson, 1996; Bitner, 1992; Nandan, 2005; O'Cass and Grace, 2004; Wakefield and Blodgett, 1996). However, today's consumer is becoming more connected, informed and active (Pralhalad and Ramaswamy,

2004a). In an emerging experience economy, the customer is seeking to participate and be engaged in memorable service experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). Therefore, taking the perspective of service-dominant logic, which focuses on creating value with the customer, we argue that experiential elements of the service offer are most likely to contribute to customer satisfaction. Consequently, this study empirically investigates two key elements of the service offer: employees and servicescape. Moreover, we argue that servicescape and employees, as vehicles through which corporate image is translated, can provide a key explanation for the relationship between corporate image and customer satisfaction.

The purpose of the present research is threefold:

1. To empirically establish a relationship between corporate image and customer satisfaction.
2. To empirically investigate servicescape and employees as mediating variables in the corporate image-customer satisfaction relationship.
3. To contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how corporate image is translated into satisfaction in a leisure services setting.

We begin with a presentation of the theoretical framework. A discussion of the key constructs follows, with proposed relationships and hypotheses articulated. The research method is then described and the findings of the study are presented and discussed. Finally, conclusions are drawn as to the theoretical and managerial implications of the study and future areas of research are proposed.

### ***Theoretical framework***

This research investigates the relationship between corporate image and customer satisfaction and the mediating roles of servicescape and employees. This research extends previous studies by examining the relationship between corporate image and customer satisfaction in a leisure services setting. Hawabhay *et al.* (2009) contend that an organisation's corporate communications and other factors such as CSR programs and event sponsorships can strongly direct images formed in customers minds. In today's society driven by multi-media communication and the availability of information at ones fingertips, it stands to reason that we develop an image of a service organisation (our perceptions of it and attitudes towards it) without necessarily having personally experienced the service. Therefore, although it could be argued that employee interaction and servicescape are drivers of a customer's image of an organisation, our contention is that an image is likely to exist even before a patron comes into contact with a service provider. Our focus, therefore, is not on the drivers of the corporate image that customers hold. Rather, our spotlight is on the association between corporate image and the service experience. Berry (2000) argues that the company's true value emerges in the customer's actual experience with the service. It is logical to argue, therefore, that the key elements of the service experience (employees and servicescape) play a fundamental role in not only reinforcing the existing corporate image, but are also critical to how the visitor experiences the service. We therefore contend that both employees and servicescape play an important role in explaining the relationship between corporate image and customer satisfaction. The proposed relationships are illustrated in Figure 1.

## Customer satisfaction

Most research investigating satisfaction has studied short-term customer experiences (Anderson, 1996; Bitner, 1992; Bitner *et al.*, 1994; Churchill and Surprenant, 1982). In these brief encounters, the customer is viewed as a “recipient”, having had value created for them through a service offering, and on completion of the service transaction they are either satisfied or not satisfied with the outcome. However, this view of the customer and the service encounter is limited, as it does not account for the importance of relationship marketing and the creation of a closer bond with the target market through building ongoing relationships. Price *et al.* (1995), in a mixed method study of hedonic experiences, create a distinction between satisfaction being measured as a result of a brief transaction and that resulting from a temporally extended service encounter. Their findings indicate that a service encounter of an extended duration, in their case the leisure pursuit of white water rafting, promoted the development of boundary open relationships where the customer and service provider develop a relationship based on continual interaction and a mutual understanding. This relationship promoted a positive effect amongst customers resulting in increased satisfaction with the service provided.

In the Price *et al.* (1995) context, the customer can be classified as a participant in the service experience. This notion is furthered with the concept of co-creation, a central tenet of the service-dominant logic of marketing (Lusch and Vargo, 2006; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Co-creation can be seen as engaging customers as active participants in the organisation's work, thereby forming the basis for value creation (Lengnick-Hall *et al.*, 2000; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a). Pine and Gilmore (1998) see participation as a dimension of the customer experience, with passive and active participation on opposite ends of the continuum. The other dimension suggested by Pine and Gilmore (1998) is the extent of the customer's connection with the experience, with absorption on one end of the continuum, suggesting observation and standing back from the experience. Immersion represents the other end of the spectrum and denotes a high level of involvement with the experience. Leisure pursuits (i.e. attending museums, zoos, parks, and entertainment centres) can be considered an extended service encounter, with consumption occurring within the facilities of the service provider and entailing numerous points in time where customers and the leisure provider are likely to interact during the service experience (Dube and Menon, 2000). Using Pine and Gilmore's (1998) realms of an experience, customers in this context are highly immersed and involved in their experience, but are not as active or formative in the creation of the final experience, with much of the final outcome resting with the leisure services operator. However, considering the increasingly limited amount of leisure time we have today, it can be expected that customers of leisure establishments will still want the opportunity to co-create their encounter, seeking a personalised and meaningful experience to maximise the utility of their precious time:

Oliver (1997) defines satisfaction as:

The consumer's fulfilment response. It is a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption related fulfilment (p. 13).

This definition emphasises that satisfaction comprises cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural aspects. The cognitive and attitudinal elements capture one's need to evaluate the situation and consider the outcome in relation to expectations. The behavioural aspect denotes an evaluation of the behaviour undertaken as part of the consumption situation and whether this would be undertaken again on the basis of received outcomes. Thus, in the context of leisure services, we define customer satisfaction as a fulfilment response to an engaging extended consumption experience.

### **Corporate image**

Corporate image is defined by Balmer (1998) as “associations and meanings connected with an organisation” (p. 966). Grunig (2003) asserts that “corporate image has been used as a synonym for concepts such as message, reputation, perception, cognition, attitude, credibility, belief, communication and relationship” (p. 245). In line with this, Aaker (1996) views image as “the net result of all the experiences, impressions, beliefs, feelings and knowledge that people have about a company” (p. 113). Nandan (2005) and Brown *et al.* (2006) provide further support for this view, construing image as consumer perceptions of the brand and what individuals know or believe about an organisation. Corporate image, or, how stakeholders distinguish an organisation, is referred to by Davies *et al.* (2004) as corporate character. Where the majority of literature considers image as a single dimension, Chun and Davies (2006) conceptualise image as a multi-dimensional construct consisting of five dimensions: competence, agreeableness, enterprise, chic and ruthlessness. Agreeableness reflects trust and social responsibility, whereas competence denotes dependability and efficiency (Davies *et al.*, 2004). The dimension of enterprise is a signal of innovation and excitement, whilst being “chic” equates to sophistication (Davies *et al.*, 2004). Ruthlessness was the only negative element of image reflecting organisational autocracy (Davies *et al.*, 2004).

Corporate image in this study is considered as multi-dimensional and is defined as stakeholders' beliefs, perceptions, feelings and attitudes towards an organisation. In line with the contention of Bosch *et al.* (2006) this study also considers that these perceptions, feelings and attitudes may have been formed through customer response to an organisation's strategic intent, or in other words, mission and vision. Of the five image dimensions suggested by Chun and Davies (2006), only competence, agreeableness and enterprise are seen as relevant to organisations in the leisure sector. Responding to competitive pressures and a greater push for corporate social responsibility, operators in this sector are likely to value being socially responsible and trustworthy (agreeableness), innovative and exciting (enterprise) as well as efficient (competence). In the same light, they are likely to make their strategic direction, particularly if heading down a socially responsible path, a key part of their image, supporting the inclusion of mission/vision as an additional corporate image dimension. However, leisure services providers are unlikely to see being sophisticated (chic) as a critical success factor in the sector, nor would they want to be seen as ruthless and inflexible (ruthlessness) by their target market.

Balmer (1998) highlights the importance of corporate image, asserting that an a priori link exists between an individual's image of the organisation and that person's behaviour towards it. In line with this, Chun and Davies (2006), in their quantitative

study in a retail context, found positive image to be related to customer satisfaction. Furthermore, the disconfirmation paradigm suggests that satisfaction will occur when individual expectations are confirmed (Churchill and Surprenant, 1982). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that a positive image and expectation of a leisure experience prior to consumption, if met or exceeded, would result in customer satisfaction. There is also, however, the possibility that a positive corporate image may negatively influence satisfaction. This may be the case where the image has created unrealistic expectations for customers. Where these expectations are not met, customers are likely to be very dissatisfied. Despite a possibility of the opposite, literature predominantly suggests a positive relationship between corporate image and satisfaction:

*H1.* Corporate image has a significant positive relationship with customer satisfaction.

### **Employees**

Hardaker and Fill (2005) note that the importance and recognition of employees as part of the corporate branding process appears to be increasing. Likewise, Hawabhay *et al.* (2009) contend that staff behaviour is integral to the corporate branding process due to its crucially important role in transmitting the brand's values and creating an emotional bond with customers. This is particularly so in leisure services organisations where a key part of the visitor experience is delivered through interaction with employees. Surprenant and Solomon (1987), in an experimental simulation of a banking environment, considered employees in terms of their personal characteristics. Their results indicate that employee traits are best represented by three dimensions: competence, helpfulness and sociability. This conceptualisation of employees is particularly relevant to the context of leisure services, where visitors are likely to have an expectation of competent, helpful and friendly (sociable) staff that will enhance their leisure experience.

Interaction with service employees can strongly reinforce an organisation's corporate image. In many cases, visitors to a leisure destination only really know the quality and value of the service and experience provided in terms of their interactions with service staff during a specific visit (McDonald *et al.*, 2001; Shostack, 1977). In such a scenario, the staff "are" the corporate brand in the consumer's eyes (Grönroos, 1994) and represent the moment of truth (Gummesson, 1993) where everything that the brand stands for to the consumer is at stake. Considering that an experience with a service-based brand often involves multiple interfaces where consumers interact with staff across various parts of an organisation (Bitner *et al.*, 1994), employees are a fundamental component in communicating a consistent corporate image. Viewing the employee as a brand ambassador (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001), it can therefore be argued that their role would be critical in supporting a leisure organisation's existing corporate image and communicating it to the target market. Consequently, as the image of the organisation increases in strength, the role of employees in communicating and supporting this image will become increasingly important. Specifically, it can be argued that employees would be more competent, helpful and friendly in support of a stronger corporate image. The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

*H2a.* Corporate image has a significant positive relationship with the role of employees in the service encounter.

How customers experience a service is crucial to their perception of value (Sandstrom *et al.*, 2008). Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a) argue that the interaction between the organisation and customer is the locus for co-creation of value. In leisure organisations, where the service encounter is critical to how the customer experiences the service, the service employee has the potential to influence the value-creating experience and thus, ultimately, visitor satisfaction. Thus, it is argued that the role that service employees play in terms of adapting to individual customer requirements and enabling the co-creation of a personalised leisure experience (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) can have an effect on customer satisfaction. Hence, we advance the following hypotheses:

*H2b.* The role of employees has a significant positive relationship with customer satisfaction

*H2c.* Employees mediate the relationship between corporate image and customer satisfaction.

### **Servicescape**

Researchers (Bitner, 1992; O'Cass and Grace, 2004; Turley and Fugate, 1992; Wakefield and Blodgett, 1996) have found support for the effect of servicescape, often referred to as the organisation's physical environment, on customer responses to the service environment. Parasuraman and Zeithaml (1988) in considering servicescape in their conceptualisation of service quality viewed it as uni-dimensional, represented by the visual appeal of the physical facilities. In investigating the importance of servicescape dimensions across a typology of service organisations, Bitner (1992) elaborated on this by adding spatial layout and functional dimensions of the servicescape to its conceptualisation. Wakefield and Blodgett (1996), in testing Bitner's model and propositions across three different leisure service settings, conceptualised servicescape as multidimensional, comprised of facility aesthetics, layout accessibility and cleanliness. Considering the direct relevance of the context of Wakefield and Blodgett's (1996) study and the fact that it synthesises the dominant conceptualisations of the servicescape construct, their conceptualisation of servicescape will be adhered to in the current research.

In a mixed method study of services customers, O'Cass and Grace (2004) found service facilities to be one of the most frequently mentioned dimensions of services brands. This suggests that service facilities perform a key role in the support of corporate image. Leisure services require customers to spend an extended period of time in the physical surroundings of the service provider. As such, it is reasonable to assume that the perceived quality of the servicescape in terms of its visual appeal, cleanliness and ease of orientation play an important role in communicating an image of the service organisation to the customer. Consequently, it is possible to suggest that a strong corporate image is likely to be reinforced by aesthetically pleasing, accessible and clean physical surroundings. Therefore, we suggest the following hypothesis:

*H3a.* Corporate image has a significant positive relationship with the servicescape.

In a service environment, the servicescape forms a key part of the value proposition made to the customer. In a leisure services setting, this is even more so the case, as the physical environment is the setting for the visitor “experience” and a locus for the co-creation of value (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a). Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a) argue that access to desirable (personalised and co-created) experiences is increasingly the goal of consumers. In a leisure services setting, such access to a co-created and personalised experience can be achieved through servicescape. It is logical that clear directions and an organised layout make the facility more experience-centric, reflecting consumers' personal needs and desires, thereby likely to result in heightened visitor satisfaction. Based on arguments supporting customer satisfaction through co-creation of value, it can be hypothesised that:

*H3b.* The servicescape has a significant positive relationship with customer satisfaction.

*H3c.* The servicescape mediates the relationship between corporate image and customer satisfaction.

### ***Research design***

#### **Sample and data collection**

The approach used to examine the potential relationships is an empirically grounded case study. A case study ensures that developments emerging in a specific service setting, in this case a zoological garden, are captured (Laing *et al.*, 2002). This exemplar case is appropriate for the leisure services industry, considering the lack of corporate branding research in this sector. The sample for this study consisted of randomly selected visitors of a zoological garden operating in Australia. The sampling frame was all visitors who had attended the zoological garden in a one-week period, with visitors being intercepted during their experience or upon exit.

Researcher administered surveys were used to collect data from respondents through a formal structured questionnaire. A total of 195 questionnaires were completed in a seven-day period. In terms of the types of visitors represented in the sample, 69 per cent were female and 31 per cent male. In respect of the age of the sample, the majority (38 per cent) was between 35-50 years of age, whilst 26 per cent were 18-25 years of age, 16 per cent were in the age group of 50+, 11 per cent were 30-34 years of age and 25-29 year olds (8 per cent) represented the smallest proportion of the sample attending the zoological garden. The majority of respondents (59 per cent) visited the Zoological garden as a family, with 19 per cent visiting as couples and 14 per cent as part of a group. Persons attending the zoological garden as singles (4 per cent) formed the smallest proportion of the sample.

#### **Measures**

The majority of scales pertaining to the four aforementioned constructs: corporate image, employees, servicescape and customer satisfaction were based on existing

literature (the Appendix provides scale items for each construct). All scales used were seven point scales, anchored by 1 – strongly disagree and 7 – strongly agree. The satisfaction scale developed by Oliver (1980) was used to measure customer satisfaction, as it captures cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural elements of satisfaction very well. Having identified a leisure services experience and specifically attendance at a zoological garden as an extended service encounter, items from the scale developed by Price *et al.* (1995) were used to capture this aspect. Respondents were provided with a set of statements relating to their overall satisfaction with their experience at the zoological garden on that day. A modification of the Davies *et al.* (2004) corporate character scale was used to measure corporate image of the zoological garden. Respondents were asked to rate, on a seven point scale, to what extent they agreed that the listed traits described the zoological garden's personality. Items pertaining to mission, values and positioning, in line with the zoological organisation's branding strategy, were also included in the measure of corporate image. To measure these aspects, respondents were asked to what extent they agreed that the statements provided reflected the values, mission or vision of the zoological garden. Servicescape was measured using a combination of established scales including aesthetics, accessibility and cleanliness. Facility aesthetics and layout accessibility were measured using scales established by Wakefield and Blodgett (1996) and Parasuraman and Zeithaml (1988). The items pertaining to facility aesthetics captured the visual appeal and attractiveness of the facility, whilst layout accessibility captured ease of orientation around the venue. Cleanliness of the physical environment was measured using a scale established by Wakefield and Blodgett (1996). The construct of employees was measured using an existing scale developed by Surprenant and Solomon (1987). Surprenant and Solomon (1987) evaluated employees on three dimensions: competence, helpfulness and sociability. These dimensions were utilised in the current study, being highly relevant in the context of a zoological garden.

### **Measure validation**

As there were some amendments made to a number of the scales used (e.g. corporate image, satisfaction, employees), an exploratory factor analysis was used to confirm the underlying structure of the factors. The exploratory factor analysis confirmed that corporate image consisted of five dimensions and servicescape of three. Employees and satisfaction were found to be uni-dimensional. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to establish the validity of the resulting measurement scales. In line with previous empirical research around corporate image (Chun and Davies, 2006; Da Silva and Alwi, 2006; Davies and Chun, 2002; Davies *et al.*, 2004), it was modelled in this study as a second order reflective construct manifested by five reflective first order dimensions. In line with previous research (Wakefield and Blodgett, 1996), servicescape was also modelled as a second order reflective construct, manifested by three first order dimensions. Employees and satisfaction were both modelled as first order reflective constructs in the measurement model. A summary of the results from the measurement model is provided in Table I. The fit indices reported in Table I indicate that the measurement model fits the data reasonably well. All the t-values for the standardised factor loadings for the theoretical constructs are significant, suggesting convergent validity (Atuahene-Gima, 2005).

The final constructs, their final measures ( $\alpha$ ) and the composite reliability for each construct are detailed in Table II. All measures used performed well, with all instruments showing satisfactory internal consistency (all Cronbach  $\alpha$ 's >0.7) and composite reliability (all >0.8). As a test for discriminant validity, we used the method suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981) which involves comparing the average variance extracted (AVE) for each latent factor and the correlations among the latent factors. In all cases, the square root of AVE was much larger than the correlations. The square roots of AVE values for each major construct are depicted on the diagonal in Table II.

### ***Results and discussion***

The structural equation model tested in this study is shown in Figure 2. Corporate image, customer satisfaction, servicescape and employees are all modelled as reflective constructs in the structural equation model. Moreover, as corporate image and servicescape are modelled as second order reflective constructs, investigating them at the aggregate level was considered most appropriate. Results in Table III indicate that corporate image is directly related to customer satisfaction ( $t=7.926$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), providing support for *H1*. These results indicate that a strong corporate image enhances customer satisfaction with the service experience. Our results support those of Chun and Davies (2006) who found a positive relationship between image and customer satisfaction in a retail setting.

With regard to the relationship between corporate image, employees and servicescape, the results in Table III demonstrate a direct relationship between corporate image and employees ( $t=7.703$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), providing support for *H2a*. These results suggest that image is a major determinant of the role of employees in the service encounter. Our findings of a significant direct relationship between corporate image and employees follow the contentions of Harris and de Chernatony (2001), Balmer and Wilkinson (1991) and Berry (2000), who contend that the moment of employee interaction is a defining one in service management and a key stage in supporting and reinforcing corporate image. This is logical if we consider the intangibility and variability of the service offering. Employees are a crucial point of interaction since they are the face of the organisation and, therefore, the service organisation's image is best reinforced to visitors through this interface. Whilst a zoological garden may espouse certain values, visitors today are more cynical, educated and demanding (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2004a), needing to see these values being put into action through their interaction with employees before they are persuaded about the authenticity of the claims.

The results in Table III also indicate a significant direct relationship between corporate image and servicescape ( $t=3.160$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Thus, *H3a* is supported. In highlighting that corporate image is a key driver of servicescape, these results support Bitner's (1992) contention that the physical environment has the ability to communicate and support an image. These findings make sense when seen in the context of a zoological garden. Being primarily an outdoor leisure activity, it seems logical that the corporate image of a zoological garden would be reinforced by the physical environment. Today's increasingly educated and marketing savvy customers are unlikely to simply believe the zoological organisation's message of who they are and what they stand for. They want organisations to "walk the talk" and

will use aspects of the physical environment such as adequate size and quality of the animal enclosures as key indicators. Therefore, zoological garden visitors will use cues in the physical environment to assess the extent to which the organisation lives up to the image that the organisation portrays.

Interestingly, although servicescape has been found to play a significant role in reinforcing a leisure organisation's corporate image, our results indicate that it has no direct relationship with customer satisfaction ( $t=0.615$ ,  $p>0.1$ ), refuting *H3b*. This result can be explained if we consider today's consumer and their expectations. In an increasingly competitive service sector where organisations are continually reinventing and improving their service offer, customers of a zoological garden would expect it to be clean, aesthetically pleasing and organised in a logical fashion to facilitate ease of orientation. However, these elements of the servicescape are today considered as standard business practice. To be satisfied, consumers demand a unique service experience tailored to their needs (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b). Aspects of the servicescape such as cleanliness, aesthetics and layout are less likely to contribute to personalisation of the experience, and therefore customer satisfaction, than other elements of the service offer, such as employees.

Considering the relationship between employees and customer satisfaction, our findings reveal a significant direct relationship, demonstrating support for *H2b*. These findings suggest that customers will judge their service experience, thereby directly affecting their level of satisfaction, based on their experience with the staff. This is consistent with the findings of Chun and Davies (2006) who establish that customers would judge a retail store from their experiences with the personnel. The findings make intuitive sense in the context of a leisure service such as a zoological garden, where, although the consumption of the service is self-paced, staff such as animal keepers can add to the experience and make it really come to life through the animal information talks and interaction with visitors about the animals. Moreover, in their interaction with zoo employees, customers can discuss their specific needs and desires relating to their zoo experience, with the staff member able to assist in suggesting aspects of the zoo experience that are most likely to help customers achieve a unique experience.

It is also proposed that the relationship between corporate image and customer satisfaction is mediated by employees and servicescape. To establish mediation (Baron and Kenny, 1986; Mathieu *et al.*, 2008; Wood *et al.*, 2008) requires the demonstration of significant indirect effects between corporate image and customer satisfaction. As an alternative analysis, a chi-square difference test between the full model and a model without the direct effects could also be conducted, with a significant chi-square indicating the presence of mediation (Wood *et al.*, 2008). Both the indirect effects and the chi-square difference analyses were conducted, the results showing consistency. The non-significant indirect effect in Table III ( $t=1.00$ ,  $p>0.1$ ) refutes *H2c* and *H3c*, indicating that the relationship between corporate image and customer satisfaction is not mediated by either servicescape or employees. Although we had hypothesised that corporate image would be translated into customer satisfaction through both employees and servicescape, our findings imply that corporate image and employees directly influence customer satisfaction.

## **Extended analysis**

Although we have conceptualised corporate image as a second order reflective construct, considering the strong direct effect that corporate image has on customer satisfaction, we felt it would be interesting to investigate whether the various dimensions of corporate image would each also exhibit significant relationships with customer satisfaction. These relationships are assessed using multiple regression, with the results being reported in Table IV.

In terms of the individual dimensions of corporate image, the  $R^2$  value indicates that the individual dimensions of corporate image together explain 44 per cent of the variance in customer satisfaction. Moreover, through disaggregation of the corporate image construct analysis indicates that only certain elements of corporate image influence customer satisfaction. More specifically, assessing the relative importance of each of the image dimensions in terms of beta values, customer satisfaction is best predicted by adventure ( $p < 0.001$ ) and mission/vision ( $p < 0.05$ ). These results may be explained by the context of this study and perhaps some macro-environmental trends. Customers to a leisure destination want a personalised and meaningful experience. In the context of a zoological garden, it seems logical that adventure, which embodies excitement, imagination and nature, be influential in creating an experience that is both meaningful and unique. In view of today's global trends towards environmental awareness and corporate social responsibility, a company's strategic direction in line with these issues could be assumed to affect customer satisfaction. This may explain why the mission and vision of the zoological garden, which focuses on wildlife conservation, preservation of natural habitats and environmental awareness strongly affects visitor satisfaction. While the results are consistent with the structural model and provide additional support for *H1*, the disaggregated analysis provides a more comprehensive understanding of the elements of corporate image that drive customer satisfaction.

## **Conclusions and implications**

The findings of this study enrich the literature on corporate image, and more broadly, corporate branding. This study sought to examine the relationship between corporate image and customer satisfaction. Whilst supporting the conceptualisation of corporate image as multi-dimensional, our results also support the inclusion of mission/vision as a dimension of corporate image. This contributes to academic literature by broadening the conceptualisation of the corporate image construct. The study also demonstrates that corporate image and employees have a significant relationship with, and are in fact antecedents to, customer satisfaction. Moreover, the significant direct relationships between corporate image, employees and servicescape reveal that these two elements of the leisure organisation's service offer work together to create an atmosphere that supports the organisation's corporate image and reinforces it in the minds of the target market.

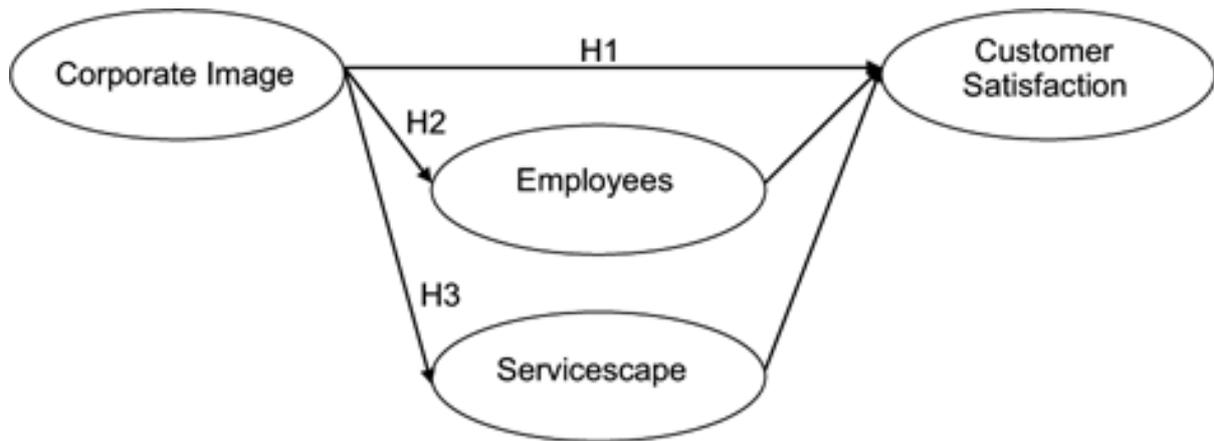
From a managerial perspective, our results of a direct relationship between corporate image and customer satisfaction reinforce the need for leisure services operators to prioritise the development of a clear, strong corporate image in customers' minds. For leisure service operators, many of whom are small to medium sized enterprises, corporate image building is a very costly exercise that is typically

considered to have primarily long-term strategic benefits. At times, in the midst of much competition for internal resources, initiatives that achieve more immediate goals are often prioritised. However, our result implies that a strong, well-defined corporate image drives customer satisfaction, one of the ultimate goals of any service organisation. The extended analysis illustrates that the disaggregated dimensions of corporate image are also valuable to consider in terms of the specificity that they provide, which may direct managerial strategy. Following disaggregation, adventure and mission/vision were found to be the key drivers of customer satisfaction in the case of a zoological garden. This implies that these are the elements of image that similar leisure services providers should focus on to enhance customer satisfaction.

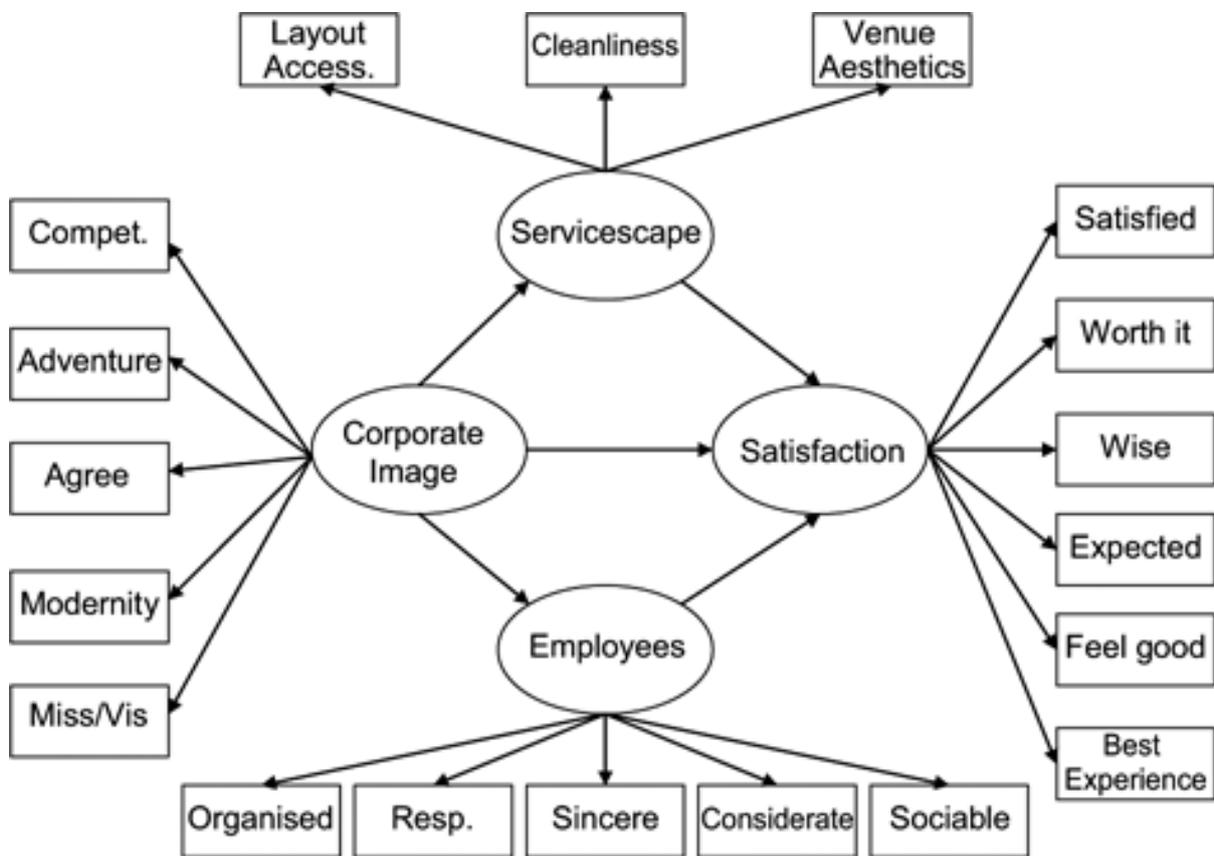
Our results also highlight to leisure service organisation managers that their front-line employees and the servicescape are key elements of their service offer, in terms of being highly influential in supporting the organisation's corporate image. Having committed valuable and scarce resources to the development of their corporate image, it is important for management of leisure service organisations to maximise their return on investment, by ensuring that the image is communicated and reinforced with maximum efficiency. Our results indicate that employees and servicescape are key aspects of the service offer that management needs to focus on to ensure that their desired image is being communicated and reinforced. Moreover, the direct relationship between employees and customer satisfaction implies that employees are also a driver of a customer's satisfaction with their leisure experience. For managers, this implies that utmost care should be taken with the selection, training and rewarding of front-line staff. Not only are friendly, knowledgeable and helpful staff critical to supporting a strong corporate image, they also enhance customer satisfaction with the leisure experience.

### ***Limitations and suggestions for further research***

It is recognised that a number of issues must be considered when interpreting the findings of this study, although some of these provide opportunities for further research. As a single-case study design, an important limitation concerns the generalisability of the findings (Yin, 2003). Although analytic generalisation can be achieved, the findings are difficult to generalise to service environments not considered here. This provides an opportunity for replication of the model in other leisure service environments as well as services contexts outside the leisure services industry. Although it is recognised that single case studies should ideally have a longitudinal design, time and resource constraints posed a limitation in this case. Therefore the data was collected at one point in time only. Further examination of the model using a longitudinal design would also be beneficial. Finally, although corporate image was modelled as a second order reflective construct, the extended analysis reveals that it could potentially be modelled as a formative measure (Coltman *et al.*, 2008; Diamantopoulos *et al.*, 2008). Consequently, opportunities exist for future researchers to operationalise and examine corporate image as a formative measure.



*Figure 1* Conceptual framework



*Figure 2* Hypothesised structural equation model

**Table I** Summary of measurement model

Construct	SFL	t-value
<i>Corporate image (CImage)</i>		
Mission/vision	0.762	7.731***
Modernity	0.560	7.731***
Agreeableness	0.724	10.272***
Adventure	0.841	12.204***
Competence	0.889	12.980***
<i>Servicescape (SScape)</i>		
Venue aesthetics	0.842	9.170***
Layout accessibility	0.641	8.758***
Cleanliness	0.781	8.758***
<i>Employees (Emp)</i>		
Staff at the zoo were organised	0.835	15.561***
Staff at the zoo were responsible	0.876	17.083***
Staff at the zoo were sincere	0.892	17.736***
Staff at the zoo were considerate	0.883	17.730***
Staff at the zoo were sociable	0.749	12.839***
<i>Satisfaction (Satisf)</i>		
Satisfied with my decision to visit the zoo	0.857	17.327***
Experience at the zoo today was worth the price I paid for it	0.766	13.836***
Choice to visit the zoo today was a wise one	0.910	17.327***
Experience at the zoo today was as good as I expected	0.701	11.922***
Feel good about my decision to visit the zoo today	0.892	18.981***
Experience at the zoo today stands out as one of my best experiences	0.637	10.292***

Notes:  $C_{min} = 268.458$ ,  $df = 146$ ,  $C_{min}/df = 1.839$  at  $p < 0.000$ ,  $GFI = 0.874$ ,  $AGFI = 0.836$ ,  $NFI = 0.903$ ,  $TLI = 0.942$ ,  $CFI = 0.953$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.066$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

**Table I** Summary of measurement model

**Table II** Summary statistics: correlations, reliability, internal consistency and square roots of average variance extracted

	1	2	3	4	$\alpha$	Composite reliability
Corporate image	<b>0.76<sup>a</sup></b>				0.84	0.87
Employees	0.506 **	<b>0.85</b>			0.92	0.93
Servicescape	0.679 **	0.535 **	<b>0.77</b>		0.79	0.80
Satisfaction	0.634 *	0.505 **	0.574 **	<b>0.80</b>	0.88	0.91

Notes: \*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed); \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed); <sup>a</sup>Values on the diagonal (bold) are square roots of AVE; *n* = 193

**Table II** Summary statistics: correlations, reliability, internal consistency and square roots of average variance extracted

**Table III** Corporate image, servicescape, employee interaction and customer satisfaction

Variables	Direct effects	t-value	Indirect effects	t-value	Total effects	t-value
<i>Corporate image is associated with:</i>						
Servicescape	0.851	3.160 ***				
Employees	0.597	7.703 ***				
Satisfaction	0.523	7.926 ***	0.170	1.00(NS)	0.693	10.5 ***
<i>Servicescape is associated with:</i>						
Satisfaction	0.095	0.615				
<i>Employees is associated with:</i>						
Satisfaction	0.149	1.961 **				

Notes: Cmin = 275.45, df = 147, Cmin/df = 1.874 at *p* < 0.000, GFI = 0.871, AGFI = 0.833, NFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.942, CFI = 0.950, RMSEA = 0.067; \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01; \*\*\**p* < 0.001

**Table III** Corporate image, servicescape, employee interaction and customer satisfaction

**Table IV** Dimensions of corporate image and customer satisfaction

Corporate image dimensions	Customer satisfaction	
	Standardised beta value	t-value
Competence	0.099	0.986
Adventure	0.337 ***	3.813
Agreeableness	0.119	1.567
Modernity	0.069	1.028
Mission/vision	0.164 *	2.072
$R^2$	0.439	
Adjusted $R^2$	0.424	
F-ratio	29.258 ***	

Notes: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

*Table IV* Dimensions of corporate image and customer satisfaction

**Table AI Corporate image**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Loading (SFL)</b>
<b><i>Competence</i></b>	
Achievement-oriented	0.66
Socially responsible	0.78
Committed to conservation	0.79
A leader in its field	0.68
Hardworking	0.74
<b><i>Adventure</i></b>	
Natural	0.67
Innovative	0.90
Up to date	0.81
Exciting	0.82
Imaginative	0.80
<b><i>Agreeableness</i></b>	
Sincere	0.93
Honest	0.89
Trustworthy	0.82
<b><i>Modernity</i></b>	
Cool	0.87
Trendy	0.97
Committed to wildlife conservation	0.88
Strives to provide an educational experience	0.74
Strives to provide an entertaining experience	0.55
Strives to be environmentally aware	0.85
Committed to the preservation of natural animal habitats	0.76

**Table AICorporate image**

**Table All Employees**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Loading (SFL)</b>
<b>Staff at the zoo were well organised</b>	<b>0.84</b>
<b>Staff at the zoo were responsible</b>	<b>0.88</b>
<b>Staff at the zoo were sincere</b>	<b>0.89</b>
<b>Staff at the zoo were considerate</b>	<b>0.88</b>
<b>Staff at the zoo were sociable</b>	<b>0.75</b>

*Table AllEmployees*

**Table AIII Servicescape**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Loading (SFL)</b>
<i>Venue aesthetics</i>	
Physical facilities are visually appealing	0.76
Exhibits are visually appealing	0.65
Picnic facilities are visually appealing	0.64
The appearance of the physical facilities is in keeping with the types of services provided	0.78
The zoo is an attractive facility	0.87
<i>Cleanliness</i>	
The zoo maintains clean restrooms/parent facilities	0.68
The zoo maintains clean exhibits	0.74
The zoo maintains clean seating and shelter facilities	0.71
Overall, the zoo is kept clean	0.84
<i>Layout accessibility</i>	
Layout makes it easy to find the restrooms/parent facilities	0.82
Layout makes it easy to find picnic facilities	0.90
Layout makes it easy to find the seating and shelter facilities	0.90
Layout makes it easy to find the food service areas	0.86
Layout makes it easy to get to where you want to go	0.84

*Table AIIIServicescape*

**Table AIV Satisfaction**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Loading (SFL)</b>
<b>I am satisfied with my decision to visit the zoo today</b>	<b>0.86</b>
<b>My experience at the zoo today was worth the price I paid for it</b>	<b>0.77</b>
<b>My choice to visit the zoo today was a wise one</b>	<b>0.91</b>
<b>Experience at the zoo today was as good as I expected</b>	<b>0.70</b>
<b>I feel good about my decision to visit the zoo today</b>	<b>0.89</b>
<b>My experience at the zoo today stands out as one of my best experiences</b>	<b>0.64</b>

**Table AIVSatisfaction**

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### **Further Reading**

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## **Appendix. Questionnaire items**

### ***Corporate image***

If the Melbourne Zoo was a person, to what extent would you agree that each of the following words describes the Zoo's personality? Note: the scale ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7) (see Table AI).

### ***Employees***

Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements about the staff at the zoo. Note: the scale ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7) (see Table AII).

### ***Servicescape***

The following statements relate to your experience with the physical facilities at the zoo. Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements. Note: The scale ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7) (see Table AIII).

### ***Satisfaction***

The following section relates to your experience at the zoo today. Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements. Note: the scale ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7) (see Table AIV).

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