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Research Paper

Exploring the experiential and sociodemographic drivers of satisfaction and loyalty in the theme park context

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to identify the drivers of satisfaction and loyalty in the context of theme parks. Drivers examined included Schmitt's (1999, 2003) experiential consumption dimensions of SENSE, FEEL, THINK, RELATE, and ACT, sociodemographic characteristics, and past visit behavior. Data were gathered from an online survey of 371 US residents who had visited at least one theme park in the previous 12 months. Results show that overnight visitors who experienced the FEEL dimension of experiential consumption and perceived their visit as a good value for money were more likely to be satisfied with their visit than those who felt otherwise. In addition, visitors' overnight stay at the theme park's destination, their number of past visits, and their FEEL experience were the primary drivers of their likelihood to return (loyalty). Theoretical, managerial and methodological implications regarding visitor experience in theme parks are discussed.

1. Introduction

Theme parks are dominant landscapes of American popular culture and provide 'a realm of objects, images, and ideas' (King, 2002, p. 1). Browne and Browne (2000, p. 387–389) viewed the theme park as 'a social artwork designed as a four-dimensional symbolic landscape, evoking impressions of places and times, real and imaginary'. These contemporary entertaining attractions attempt to create a fantasy atmosphere of another place and time (Milman, 2009), and are regarded as symbolic landscapes of cultural narratives that feature follow-ups on stories, books, plays, and films, in which the guests can immerse themselves (King, 2002).

In the past several decades, the theme park industry has grown considerably, both in North America and other regions of the world (Rubin, 2016). In North America, despite the maturity of the market, the top 20 theme parks reported an attendance increase of 22% during the 2006–2015 period (Rubin, 2016), while revenue grew from $16.6 billion in 2014 to 18.3 billion in 2015, an increase of 10.4% (Rubin, 2016).

Nowadays, well-known theme park brands have become destinations in themselves. For example, Walt Disney Parks worldwide, drawing almost 138 million visitors annually (Rubin, 2016), enhance their immediate communities to become well-known destinations as well. In fact, some destinations (such as Orlando, Florida, or Anaheim, California) have been branded by their theme parks' elements. Furthermore, as theme parks continue to increase in popularity, many parks are facing competition with other entertainment businesses, and therefore integrate their experience offerings with complementary leisure and hospitality sectors to increase their market share and generate auxiliary economic impacts (Clavé, 2007; Milman, Li, Wang, & Yu, 2012). The new integrated business model reinforces the theme parks to become destinations by encouraging visitors to remain in the operator's territory and experience hotels, restaurants, retail outlets, and other facilities linked to the theme park's brand (Rubin, 2016). The global theme park industry is predicted to sustain growth. Over the past 10 years, the global top attraction operators saw a 7% annual growth, as the industry exhibited steady improvement in business volume, the introduction of innovative technologies, and continued internationalization (Rubin, 2016). Projections suggest that the market will rise in the 2016–2020 significantly due to growth in the urban population, an increase in GDP per capita, growth in the middle-class population, and increases in international tourism expenditure. According to Technavio (2016), the industry is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of over 8% during the forecast period 2017–2021, from $53.12 billion in 2017 to $72.78 billion by 2021. Yet, the market faces some challenges such as foreign exchange rate fluctuation, regulatory changes, the threat of terror attacks, and the seasonal nature of the industry (Daedal Research, 2017). Increasing consumer expectations, as in any industry, are also among the theme park industry's challenges. In the experience economy, where the value of consuming a product or service is measured not only by tangible aspects but also by emotional dimensions of experience, it is imperative to understand the

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diverse drivers of satisfaction and loyalty for a theme park in order to stay competitive in the marketplace.

Although researchers have acknowledged the important role of the theme park visitor experience, most studies did not specifically define what a 'theme park experience' is, or empirically measure its components. Furthermore, while recent studies have attempted to measure the impact of a variety of variables on visitors' satisfaction and intention to revisit theme parks (Fotiadis, 2016; Jensen, 2007; Manthiou, Kang, Chiang, & Tang, 2016; Ryan, Shih Shuo, & Huan, 2010), very few studies have isolated the construct of visitor experience from other predicting variables and measured its exclusive impact on visitor satisfaction and intention to revisit or loyalty. Hence, the goal of this study is to identify the experiential consumption drivers of visitor satisfaction and intention to visit in a theme park context. More specifically, the study will attempt to identify the relative influence of each driver on visitors' overall satisfaction and intention to revisit or loyalty for a theme park.

2. Literature review

2.1. The experiential components of consumer experience

Providing visitors with satisfactory tourism experience is crucial in achieving success in the highly competitive marketplace. The concept of tourism experiences has been addressed in the literature for several decades, mainly in the context of authenticity (Cohen, 1979; MacCannell, 1976). Recent contributions have discussed a variety of characteristics and conditions that impact tourism experiences, such as cultural differences (Bricker & Kerstetter, 2006; Lee, 2001), motivations, activities, interests, and attitudes (Otto & Ritchie, 1996; Quan & Wang, 2004; Uriely et al., 2002; Volo, 2009), the psychological nature of experiences (Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987), and experience environments (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009). Experience typologies have been suggested with regard to different consumer groups, such as holidaymakers (Wickens, 2002), urban tourists (Page, 2002), food service patrons (Quan & Wang, 2004), sports tourists (Bouchet, Lebrun, & Auvergne, 2004), backpackers (Noy, 2004; Uriely, Yonay, & Simchai, 2002), cultural tourists (Prentice, 2001) and heritage tourists (Beeho & Prentice, 1997). However, the components or dimensions of experiences were not identified in detail until the recent discussions about experiential consumption. Schmitt (1999, 2003) and Pine and Gilmore (2011) developed widely cited conceptual theories for understanding the consumer experience. They suggested that experience is a complicated phenomenon that should be investigated from multiple perspectives using a holistic approach.

Schmitt (1999) suggested that experiences may be divided into different types, each with its own inherent structure and processes. Managers view these types of experiences as strategic experiential modules (SEMs) and include SENSE, FEEL, THINK, RELATE, and ACT (Schmitt, 1999). SENSE experiences are gained through sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. FEEL experiences appeal to customers' internal feelings and emotions and their impact takes place during the consumption process. THINK experiences appeal to the intellect aiming to create cognitive, problem-solving experiences that engage consumers imaginatively. ACT experiences aim to affect bodily experiences, lifestyles, and interactions. RELATE experiences include aspects of SENSE, FEEL, THINK, and ACT and expand beyond the individual's personal feelings, adding experiences that relate to the individual, to his or her idyllic self, and to other people, institutions, or cultures.

These five SEMs have been addressed in the literature at different contexts and were employed as drivers to predict attitudes, satisfaction, behaviors, and purchasing intentions. For example, Farshad, Kwek Choon, and Amir (2012) explored the relationships between experiential marketing and experiential value in the smartphone industry, while Tao (2014) studied the influence of boot camp on military propensity. In the tourism and hospitality industry, Nadiri and Gunay (2013) measured experiences in trendy coffee shops, Ghazali et al., (2015) addressed visitor experience in a zoological park, and Song, Ahn, and Lee (2015) investigated the relationships among the five SEMs, emotions, and satisfaction at the 2012 Expo in Korea. However, Schmitt's (1999) SEMs have rarely been employed empirically (Song et al., 2015), especially in the theme park industry. Due to the inherent relevance of experiential consumption in the theme park context, the five SEMs may be influential drivers of satisfaction and loyalty towards a theme park.

Other studies measured consumer experience in tourism and hospitality context from different conceptual approaches. Kim (2010) and Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick (2012) measured memorable tourism experiences with seven experiential factors: hedonism, meaningfulness, novelty, knowledge, involvement, local culture, and refreshment. In another study, Kim (2014) suggested that memorable tourism experience composed of 'local culture, the variety of activities, hospitality, infrastructure, environment management, accessibility, the quality of service, physiography, place attachment and superstructure' (p. 41). Hosany and Gilbert (2010) measured tourists' emotional experiences toward hedonic holiday destinations and identified three factors including, joy, love, and positive surprise. Lee and Smith (2015) developed a scale to measure tourists' experiences while visiting historic sites and museums with five dimensions: entertainment, culture identity-seeking, education, relationship development, and escapism. Chang and Horng (2010) defined experience quality as the 'customers' emotional judgment about the entire experience', composed of five dimensions including physical surroundings, service providers, other customers, customers' companions, and customer themselves (p. 2415). Finally, Ali et al. (2014) measured the well-cited Pine and Gilmore's (1999) four realms of customer experiences, namely entertainment, education, aesthetic, and escapism in resort hotels.

Most of these studies have focused on the measurement of experience in one specific setting and their generality may be questionable. While the constructs and variables cited were valid, the scales were not comprehensive enough to measure overall consumer experience. Consequently, the authors of this research chose to adopt Schmitt's (1999, 2003) SEMs model that includes five dimensions of consumer experience representing cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of consumers' overall experience. Despite the growing prominence of the theme park industry, there are limited empirical studies that address specifically the all-inclusive measurement of the theme park consumption experience.

2.2. Consumer satisfaction and loyalty in the context of travel and tourism

Consumer satisfaction is an important strategic metric on which success of a tourist destination or an attraction is dependent. Satisfaction is a consumer's judgment of the difference between his or her expectations prior to a consumption experience and the performance of the received product or service (Oliver, 1999). The importance of satisfaction in creating desirable consumer outcomes has been well-documented in the literature, and customer satisfaction has been linked to customer repurchase intentions and loyalty (Zboja, Laird, & Bouchet, 2016). Numerous travel and tourism studies have also suggested that satisfaction can affect visitors' likelihood to return to a destination or an attraction (Fotiadis, 2016; Jensen, 2007; Jarvis & Liu, 2016).

Studies to assess or predict visitor satisfaction were conducted in different settings and scenarios such as wellness tourism (Lim, Kim, & Lee, 2016), nature-based tourism or natural attractions (Jarvis, Stoeckl, & Liu, 2016; Moore, Rodger, & Taplin, 2015; Pietilä & Fagerholm, 2016), or festival and events (Hall, Oriade, & Robinson, 2016; Lee & Kyle, 2014; Özdemır & Oosman, 2009) Other studies have addressed visitor satisfaction in museums, botanical gardens, and zoological parks (Budruk, Schneider, Andreck, & Virden, 2002; Jensen, 2007; Nowacki, 2009), and heritage