The Preferred Theme Park

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Abstracts Since early 1900s, theme park has gradually evolved into a major type of tourist attraction. For certain location, it is the main reason for visitations. Design and construction of such successful theme park requires outstanding creativity, and professional knowledge of logistics and operational requirements. These, however, can easily drive the development of new parks into product oriented rather than market oriented establishments. While it is difficult and premature to draw any conclusion on whether it is appropriate or preferred, there seems to be crucial to understand more about the desires, requirements and preferences of the guests. After all, it is the satisfaction level of the guest that determines their visit and re-visit propensity. It is also important to take note that once the park is built, alternations will be difficult and costly. Another consideration given to the study is that while the existing literature on theme park is rather scant, knowledge about the oriental markets are even less available. On top of this, the market is undergoing a process of changes. One of which would be the aging of the population which indicated the necessity to approach an elder group of visitors and to satisfy the needs and wants of this adult non-family group. For this conference, an exploratory study is used to identify the key attributes for a theme park to be successful and experience that is preferred. It would adopt a qualitative approach and employ in-depth interview as the major mode for data collection.

Keywords Theme park design, Theme park attraction, Customer satisfaction

1. Introduction

Since early 1900s, theme park has gradually evolved to become one of the major types of tourist attractions. For certain location, theme parks have successfully developed as a destination by itself. It partially rectified the deficiency of attractions of many localities and provided critical reasons for visitation. Nowadays, theme parks become a new leisure spots and trends for entertainment all over the world, as discussed by Liu [8] and Milman [11]. It is more than a type of attraction but a travel motivation and a form of travel. Design and construction of theme parks requires a critical level of creativity and professional knowledge of logistics and operational requirements. These, however, can easily drive the development of new parks into product oriented rather than market oriented. It has been argued that the success of a theme park is to create escapist experience by cues, which support the theme, according to Pine and Gilmore [14]. The cues must be able to lead the visitors to escape from the reality and enjoy oneself in the fantasy that the park created, be it thrill or immersion into fairy tales. When designing a theme park, it is essential to understand what themes are well received and preferred by the potential visitors. The themes should be unique and different from

competitions. Also, it is necessary to enhance the perceived values and decrease the perceived costs. For the perceived costs, it could be monetary or non-monetary. Time and energy consumption will be classified as non-monetary perceived costs, found by Cheng, Du and Ma [3]. Queuing time, weather and travel hazards, and crowdedness, therefore, affect the exspectation of the guests and their level of satisfaction.

Although theme park is a big business with extremely high level of initial capital investment, literature on the expectation and behaviours of park patrons are relatively scant. Knowledge specifically related to Asian guests are even less. According to UNWTO, the tourism growth engine from now till 2030 will be Asia Pacific. Among which, the growing Mainland China market is perhaps the most important target markets for many establishments. For successful business strategies, therefore, it is necessary to understand their preference, motivations, decision criteria, expectations and behaviours such as those in related to information gathering, travel patterns and selection of destinations. These are the main objectives of the subject research. The study will be divided into major parts.

First, an exploratory study was executed to identify the key attributes for a theme park to be successful and an experience that will be preferred. It would adopt a qualitative approach and employ in-depth interview as the major mode for data collection. Target group include the more traditional family group who travel to and visit theme park with children aged 16 or below; young adults between 26 and 45 with no

kids; and adolescence between 18 and 25. Target family respondents include parents of kids (6 to 9 years of age) and elder kids (10 to 16 years of age). More importantly, the study approaches adult groups between 18 to 45 years of age, of both gender and under different income group and education background. Prior theme park experience is a key attribute but not a screening factor. For the non-visitors, the key area of investigate is the barriers that prevent them from visiting.

Second part of the study is a quantitative investigation making use of structure questionnaire to measure their degree of preference on different dimensions. By differentiating the different groups of respondents, the researchers hope that a model would developed for the understanding of the needs and preference of different potential guests, predict their behaviours and to facilitate both the design of parks and their communication strategies.

Given the fact that the target is set at Chinese in Hong Kong and the Mainland, findings cannot be generalize to predict the behaviours of the non-Chinese. Yet, it will serve as a critical piece of the jigsaw puzzle to this untapped huge market. It also served to reveal the key parameters for the development of future parks and attractions.

For this conference paper, content will concentrate on the first part of the study and to solicit inputs, views and expert comments during the conference. The findings, conclusions and inputs will constitute an important part of the next phase of the study.

2. Literature Review

Theme Park Product

According to Kotler [7], there are three product layers in the "theme park product". The core product, the most important product, is the excitement and/ or atmosphere of the theme park that creates for the visitors. The tangible product contains the safety, range of rides, attractions, shows, brand name, quality of service, sharing the park with other people. The last layer is the augmented product. It is encompasses other ancillary service including car park facilities, complaint handling, personalized service provision, dining and shopping. Birenboim, Anton-Clavé, Russo and Shoval [2] argued that park attractions are classified into five main types: rides, shows, restaurants, shops and games. They found that the most of the visitors go the the rides first when after entering the park. Shows are relatively less attractive than the rides. They tend to go back to their favorite rides again and go shopping before leaving the park. Accordingly to an industry key informant, however, theatre shows and spectaculars are always rated as very important attributes for their satisfaction. The priority being given to rides, especially thrill rides or signature rides, is possibly due to the perceived crowdedness of such.

The visiting behaviours of the first-timers are different from the repeat visitors. The first-timers are more likely to enter the park earlier, which was discovered by McKercher, Shoval, Ng, and Birenboim [10]. This, however, is believed to be related to what the industry would label as "maxing out" factor. Guests other than annual pass holders are tends to optimize their value of money by attending to as many rides and attractions as possible. The perception that queues will be shorter in the morning is yet another possible reason for entering the park earlier. For the repeaters, however, their choices of rides and attractions will be more selective. Their average length of stay can be shorter and thus they may not see the need to enter park as early.

The demand of the different activities changes along the time. The rides are more popular in the morning, while restaurants are busy in the late morning and early afternoon. Shops are usually getting crowded in the late afternoon and evening. It is also a question whether the design of the physical park can alter these patterns and to optimize the utilization of spaces.

Psychological Satisfaction

According to McClung [9], many visitors come to the park because of the desire of the children. The parents are willing to please the children by going to the theme park, as discussed at Johns and Gyimothy [5]; Johns and Gyimothy [6]; Bakir and Baxter [1]. They enjoyed watching the children having fun. For the children, the preference of different age group is different. For example, from the Pearce [13], the children aged 13-16 are interested in thrills than the others. Even though children's desire is the main consideration, adults' interest elements should not be ignored. It could make the park more fun by increasing the adults' involvement. Some adults come to the park because of the nostalgia, referring to Johns and Gyimothy [5]; Johns and Gyimothy [6]; Bakir and Baxter [1]. While visiting the theme park, they could recall the good memory or experience from the past. For example, nostalgia and pilgrimage were major factors for adults since most of them had visited Legoland Billund as a child themselves, and it is also seen by some to be truly Danish and a must see attraction because of the history of Lego, from Bakir and Baxter [1]. To enhance the experience, some theme parks would show some history of the park, surrounding area or even the community.

Many visitors seldom re-visit the theme park very often because they are willing to try something new. Frequent visitors have high satisfaction to the park and purchase the annual pass. The annual pass allow them to re-visit anytime within a period of time. This group of visit are relative less intention to switch to another brand or theme park. From the Cheng, et al. [3], the variety-seeking of products by visitors means the visitors need different product categories or different brands of the same category to meet their different needs. Many visitors are variety-seeking and conscious the perceived value of the theme park. The visitors tend to stick with the brand of theme park that always have something

new and exciting.

Environment and Facilities

McClung [9] pointed that the one of the most important factors influencing park attendance is climate. In the theme park, many thrill rides are in outdoor areas. The weather and climate are the key issues. Many thrill rides have to stop service in the rainy day and many people are squeezed in indoor area. On hot and sunny day, many parents are also reluctant to bring their children to the park because of the threat of sunstroke. In fact, the weather and climate are uncontrollable. To make the park safe and enjoyable to visit all year round, the designing and planning about the logistic and construction of the theme park are crucial.

Moutinho [12] found that apart from the theme park entertainment and pleasant environment, enjoyable facilities are the crucial factors of the visitors for selecting the park. Many visitors are the family group with kids. Spacious, equipped and sufficient nursery room as well as child care service is always welcome by the visitors.

Service Quality

In the theme park, apart from the environment and facilities, service quality is also a key element to make the visitors happy. Tsang, Lee, Wong and Chong [15] found that the attitude and performance of staff in the theme park were the key drivers in generating high satisfaction level. When the visitors have problems, they always expect the staff could be reached easily and responsive. The sense of human touch is predominant because the staff actively involves in the entire service delivery process in the theme park. The staff attitude and performance are influential to the image of the theme park, according to Haahti and Yavas [4].

Cost

Ticket price and consumption inside the park is concerned by the visitors. It may also be a barrier of the non-visitors. From the findings of McClung [3], cost is an important element to influence the park attendance. The household income of the non-visitors is relatively lower than the visitor. Cost is a factor for choosing the theme park. However, low cost or discount may not be a good tactic to increase the participant. Apart from pleasing the children, the parents also want to show off to others. They are willing to bring the children to the theme park and want to be seen by others. Referring to Bakir and Baxter [1], it is also a way to show the prestigious status by taking the children to the expensive place.

Perception of Non-visitors

McClung [3] underscored that age, children in household and income are the key factors for people not to come. He found that the park visitors tend to be younger, with children under 18 living at home, and earning more than non-visitors.

Apart from the constraint of lodging and crowded environment McClung [3]; Johns and Gyimothy [5]; Johns and Gyimothy [6] found that the park catered well for children's needs, but left adults with a feeling that they were "babysitting". It is also a reason from the non-visitors.

Re-visit Propensity

The success of a business is not only attracting the new visitors, but also retaining the visited guests. Cheng, et al. [3] identified that brand loyalty development could strengthen the visitor loyalty and increase the re-visit propensity. A corporate branding enables theme parks to create a good image, increase security, trust and recognition to attract visitors more efficiently. The theme park should formulate relevant promotion measures to align the image. Bakir and Baxter [1] reported that repeat visitation usually occurs when the visitors have both enjoyed the experience or when something new and exciting is offered, such as annual pass discount and special events.

Findings

According to the various groups of respondents, the major motivation for visiting theme parks include the followings. First and foremost, it is a good option to get thrill, excited and entertained. It is important to note that the three aforesaid motivations have critical difference. To get thrill as a motivation seems to appeal more to the younger adults and teens. Roller coasters, wet rides and other motion-based rides are the key types of attractions that they will queue up for. Their more matured counterparts and family group demonstrated a very different point of view. Although they also indicated positive value of thrill rides to a theme park, they have a high tendency to avoid participating. It is important to note that the environment rather than the ride can deliver the satisfaction of thrill to guests as well. This might be confused and correlated with another attribute, immersion.

It has been argued that bonding with family members and friends is another key attributes for park attendance. Especially among the local respondents, theme park attending is one of the good way to do some activities with their family, especially the kids. The availability of activities that the parents and do with their children, adults with their friends is important.

Majority of the family agreed that visiting which theme park is decided by the children and this is in line with the major body of the literature, for example, Johns and Gyimothy [5]; Johns and Gyimothy [6]; Bakir and Baxter [1]. Therefore, it could desirable to point towards children as the main target when designing the marketing strategies. When probing deeper into the respondents'' decision process, however, there are a major observation that deserve more attentions. First, those family with younger kids ages 3 to 6 are key sources of business to many theme parks. These younger kids' influence and participation to the purchase decision could be pseudo. It is very often that the parents are extending their influences and information to arouse the interest and preference of the kids. It is also worth attention that parents tend to make use of theme park holidays as incentive to motivate kids or rewards for their good works. According to a group of Mainland Chinese respondents, park attending can be regarded as a mode to 'showing off' to friends and relatives. Taking all these into consideration, the

influence of parents and their part to play in the decision concerned should not be under estimated.

It has been revealed that most of the current theme parks rarely being designed and built for a balanced satisfaction of children and their parents. Although it has been argued that the main purpose for family visitation is to satisfy the children, parents somehow demonstrated their latent needs of being "entertained" as well.

Given the field work take place in Hong Kong and Guangdong province, weather is a more concern that respondents mentioned. The "open sky" outdoor approach of theme park became an obstacle to visitation. According to them, summer in Southern China is too hot, too humid to be outdoor. With the frequent thunder storm and typhoon hitting the territory, visitation will definitely be affected.

The availability of franchises is yet another important motives for visitation. Respondents in general agreed that likability of franchises (characters) is part of their consideration. For this reason, theme parks such as Disneyland and Universal studio are inherited with strengthen in both communication and satisfaction of visitation.

Animal and nature encounter is another perceived satisfaction of theme parks. Zoological park, however, are argued to be less preferred. The safari type would be a more desirable engagement. Yet, it is no longer an element that would create extra mileage to move the needle.

Brand building is very important in the theme park. According to the Cheng, et al. [3], the brand has become the main factor affecting visitors' selection of the theme parks in China. The well-known theme park brands are more attractive to the visitors than new creation. Partially, it is contributed by the quality assurance. It also has something to do with the perceived risk of visitation. According to the respondents, risk is associated with both "value of money" and "safety".

Travel distance to the park from home is not too much a concern to the group of respondents. They contended that they will normal include that as one of the element on their travel itinerary. As long as there is ample transit service avail, it is not too serious a concern. If the location of the park is far from the city area, they would consider to stay on premises for an overnight. Room rate will then be a concern. They also expressed their concern of lacking of night time activities and catering facilitates.

Regarding the augmented products of theme parks, respondents generally have an impression that prices are over-charged but quality of sub-standard. They can accept this as a common phenomenon but bearing an impact on their length of stay.

With regard to their purchase behaviours, various groups indicated a multiple channel model which included traditional travel agents, marquee and on-line portal. They do not have a strong attachment on any particular mode of distribution. Price and promotion are more important elements for draw their attention and influence their choices.

In terms of sources of information, respondents rely most on word-of-mouth and past experience. They also make reference to travel literatures both on-line and travel book. Among the younger respondents, there seems to be a tendency of heavier usage and reliance on social media reference. Travel blogs, guest generated messages and critics are given more attentions and are more influential.

Across different background, the propensity to share experience, tips and photos are gaining prominence. The younger respondents tend to do it online with no special group of audients. The more mature group tends to do it within their private network. Most of them asserted that they are more likely to share compliant than positive exclamations.

There are also other minor observations which have not been included in their paper. Some of the observations such as those related to the "stamp collecting" behaviours and component of merchandises in overall satisfaction seem to be interesting and important. The existing batch of result, however, has been able to provide sufficient breadth and depth to reveal the situation. The researchers, therefore, decided to investigate further before moving onto the second phase of the study. This phase of the study only served as the starting point of a full fletch study and the existing findings will be used as input to the conceptual design and methodological setting for the subsequent quantitative study. In the upcoming phase, a questionnaire survey will be designed and conducted in Hong Kong, Guangdong and selected non-Guangdong region.

Given the fact that the target is set at Chinese in Hong Kong and the Mainland, findings cannot be generalize to predict the behaviours of the non-Chinese. Owing to the limitation of budget and time, the geographic definition for data collecting in China is delimited to tier 1 cities in southern China, viz., Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Yet, findings of the study shall serve as a critical piece of the jigsaw puzzle to this untapped huge market. It also served to reveal the key parameters for the development of future parks and attractions.

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