

# U.S. Theme Park Promotion of Technological Enthusiasm

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by

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## **U.S. Theme Park Promotion of Technological Enthusiasm**

U.S. theme parks have played an important role in nationwide societal entertainment since the agricultural fairs from the mid-18th century (Wilmeth, 1982). Considering several major participants, such as companies who benefit from the industry's consumer platform, advocates for the modernization movement, and organizations who promote traditional theme parks, theme parks are continually sparking enthusiasm for park guests. With customer preferences constantly changing, theme parks are embracing and integrating the newfound technological enthusiasm into solutions to remain competitive in the attractions industry.

Historically, there has been consistent positive theme park attendance. In 2005, North America's top 50 amusement and theme parks posted a 4.2% increase for a total of 176 million visitors (Zoltak, 2006). 335 million park guests enjoyed more than 1.5 billion rides and generated approximately \$11.2 billion in revenue. In 2018, all major global markets saw roughly a 4% increase in theme park attendance, where 252 million people visited the world's top 25 theme parks, which improved the increase from 2017 by 0.7% and exceeded half a billion visits (Sands, 2019). Magic Kingdom at Walt Disney World in Lake Buena Vista, Florida, one of the most popular parks in the world and an advocate for technological entrepreneurship, welcomed 20.9 million visitors in 2018, a 2% increase in attendance from 2017 (Hunter, 2019). However, theme parks must develop new strategies to attract more visitors in a changing American society.

Theme parks want to build a new customer experience by transitioning into venues that will encourage guest-to-park interactivity and one-of-a-kind immersive experiences. By evaluating several innovative solutions that will help establish their key goals, the industry is

promoting technological enthusiasm by redefining the essence of theme park magic and the ride and attractions experience.

### **Review of Research**

One of the major critical issues that the theme park industry faces is attendance predictability. Theme parks generate profit and revenue from parking, food, gifts, and other service fees; therefore, it is imperative to innovatively design, market, and deliver experiences that create value. Failing to do so will cause pressure on both demand and pricing (Geissler & Rucks, 2011).

Several existing research conclude that the guest experience plays a significant role in the industry's future. Because theme parks have become essential in the American vacation experience, many visitors will expect more than just the traditional theme park experience (Milman, 2001). Poulsson and Kale (2004) and Lukas (2014) address how experiences tend to be more worthwhile for customers (and lucrative for theme parks) when they are personally relevant and include elements of novelty, surprise, learning, and engagement. The experience should also reflect the psychological, corporeal, cultural, and existential tendencies of the park. Milman's (2009) evaluation of guest experiences concluded that tourists value the intangible aspects of the total theme park experience, emphasizing an environment providing fantasy and escapism. The local residents valued the tangible aspects, emphasizing the park services and ride queues. These studies agree with Gilmore and Pine II's (2002) conclusion of businesses encompassing an experience venue that layers and stages new experiences for their customers, atop their existing services.

Similar to how any industry must adapt due to rapid changes in business, theme parks must respond to changes in multiple environmental factors, such as economic conditions, technology, competition, politics, social and demographic changes, and internal problems (Milman, 2001). Further research from Milman (2001) and PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP (2006) emphasize that key factors affecting revenue and attendance are an improved global economy and ongoing theme park modernization. Theme parks are transitioning to a digitized infrastructure and economy with opportunities for potential innovation to support theme park attendance. Durrant et al. (2011) list several potential innovations, such as re-conceptualizing the materiality of souvenirs to incorporate digital media, co-creating souvenirs to capture park experiences, capturing people's digital trail of activity, and creating a centralized infrastructure with discrete agency for intervening in visitor activities.

Previous research highlighted the significance for transitioning from a consumer to interactive-base theme park environment and modernization. Building upon them, the focus of this research will be on how theme parks will utilize technological solutions to establish a unique and lasting theme park experience. Furthermore, my research will analyze the impacts of modernization by identifying key affected participants and social groups.

### **More Than Just the Traditional Theme Park Experience**

Although the industry has enjoyed steady attendance growth in the past decade, theme parks must develop new strategies to attract more visitors who are expecting more than just the traditional theme park experience (Milman, 2001). If theme parks fail to reciprocate, they will fall into the “Commoditization Trap,” where rival entities become more alike than different in the underlying concepts that dominate their physical design and operational procedures.

However, managing these entities as experience venues helps defeat the commoditization trap, and the key in establishing these experiences lie in layering impressionable experiences with existing services (Gilmore & Pine II, 2002).

Consumers are no longer satisfied with merely consuming products or services (Gilmore & Pine II, 1998). They seek unique and memorable experiences to supplement or substitute for common theme park commodities (Milman, 2008). The National Carousel Association (NCA), which works to keep America's remaining carousels in operation (NCA, 2020), was established from the idea of lasting impressions, emphasizing "the emotional impact that riding a carousel tend to have on young children" and "the more emphatic, but less reasoned, emotional heart trip of how it feels to experience a carousel" (Summit, 1993). Suzanne Jones, the vice president of The Hershey Experience, and Eric Merz, the creative producer at Universal Orlando Resort, believe that establishing lasting impressions are built through relationships and interactivity. Jones states that "interactives are very powerful in building a really strong response and connection to the brand," and hopes that her guests will have the opportunity to "engage with the brand in a deeper fashion." Merz builds on this statement, "Interactivity allows people to have very personalized human moments where they feel like they have some agency in their experiences" (Terwiesch & Siggelkow, 2018). Focusing on memory-making to strengthen the relationship with consumers, Jones wants her guests to take stories with them," while also "shaping their view of the Hershey brand as part of their family's special moments" (William, 2017). Similarly, Merz aims for his guests to "go on stage for a moment of time and feel like they're a part of that story" (Terwiesch & Siggelkow, 2018).

Consumers want to escape reality with a mind-boggling experience. To uphold their reputation in fantasia and escapism, theme parks and attractions have undergone intensive

changes. The Hershey and Crayola Experiences had both completed renovations for this reason. In 2013, the Crayola Experience approached intellectual property (IP) differently by undergoing a major renovation where, from the moment a guest steps into the attraction, the product comes alive with several interactive screens and hands-on experiences (William, 2017). In 2016, Hershey renovated the facility's dark tour ride to parallelize the modern machinery used to make Hershey's products and guest expectations for entertainment experiences, using projection mappings, animatronics, and social media components (William, 2017). Both attractions demonstrated how audiovisual technology can foster intricate theme park character and stories. Even at smaller parks, the clever placement of digital screens, projectors and acoustics can create a valuable sense of "being somewhere special." People have more in control of their time and can fully experience a newly modernized fantasia (Wills, 2019).

Authenticity is alive in the minds of tourists and is based on their perception the genuineness of their experiences (Pikkemaat & Schuckert, 2007). Theme park technology is now essential to spawn the "theme park magic." Thus, the industry will be challenged to deliver interactive experiences blended with non-realistic themes at value prices from customer demand (Milman, 2001).

### **Steps Towards the Theme Park Modernization Movement**

The collaboration of the park's physical essence with a more digitized backbone enabled by high-end technology will contribute to accomplishing an enhanced visitor experience (Milman et al., 2012). Nick Franklin, the former executive vice president at Walt Disney Parks and Resorts, believes that technological integration is necessary for our technology enthusiast society. "Folks who are still stepping into these fantasy worlds are bringing more of their

everyday real world with them in the form of their devices” (Terwiesch & Siggelkow, 2018).

They use them to organize, take photos, and communicate. Their devices enhance the experience of what’s going on around them. He claims that “if you force people to step away from that, you actually increase their stress level and make it harder for them to enjoy the theme park experience” (Terwiesch & Siggelkow, 2018).

Both Nick Franklin and Eric Merz agree that there has been a challenge in providing guest service, and hope that these technological solutions will “allow us to know more about the guests as they approach, as they engage in our attractions, as they engage with the team members directly” (Terwiesch & Siggelkow, 2018). Greg Kahn, the CEO and founder of the Internet of Things Consortium (IoTC), aligns saying that “there is so much more we could be doing with technology to connect people” (Kahn, 2020). The Walt Disney Company and Universal Orlando Resorts had both unveiled products that innovatively leveraged IoT and Big Data to improve the guest experience: Disney’s MagicBands, and Universal’s Volcano Bay TapuTapu wearables. Guests are given a wristband equipped with RFID technology and a long-range radio that communicates with thousands of sensors and streams real-time data to hundreds of systems that simulates the venue as a giant computer. This allows for the one-to-one relationships previously expressed by Suzanne Jones and Eric Merz (Marr, 2017). These wearables were conveyed to “root out all the friction within the Disney World experience (Marr, 2017),” “make it easier than ever to enjoy time with the people who you care about the most (“*MyMagic+*,” n.d.),” and to “personalize their day to the attractions that they want to go see.” Guests can express their preferences for the system to enable a hassle-free park experience (Terwiesch & Siggelkow, 2018).

Theme parks are further experimenting with entrepreneurial technologies. The theme park ride is becoming a high-tech multimedia experience. Global firms travel to showcase new ride technology and connect with industry experts at the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA) annual Expo, the largest trade show for the attractions industry (“*IAAPA Expo*,” 2020). Audiovisual technology, a popular showcased integrated technology, helps theme parks build more personal and satisfying experiences. Well-positioned audiovisual technology amplifies park themes, advertises products, and enhances intimacy, adrenaline, and entertainment (Wills, 2019). The IAAPA Expo accomplishes the association’s mission to “inspire, grow, and protect the global attractions industry through member connections” and “to deliver safe and memorable experiences to guests” (IAAPA, 2020). Similar to the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) sponsored by the Consumer Technology Association (CTA), the IAAPA Expo serves as the proving ground for innovators and breakthrough technologies, taking the global stage where next-generation innovations are introduced to the marketplace.

There are so many applications of these new technologies. Theme parks are taking advantage of this broad spectrum of technologies and are shaping the applications into solutions to improve and modernize.

### **Theme Park Technological Consumerism and Brand Support Platform**

Barriers to new products include concept unfamiliarity and consumer distrust. By collaborating, parks attract visitors and tech companies earn brand support. Companies had used World’s Fairs and various tech conferences and trade shows to pursue brand loyalty. With Tony Bennett proposed “Exhibitionary Complex,” which integrates spectacle and surveillance



(Bennett, 2019), companies use theme parks as such complexes to promote technological consumption and user trust.

Companies, such as Dynamic Attractions and ID&C, use theme parks as a platform to strategically market and earn brand support. Dynamic Attractions is an engineering company that envisions to “make the best rides in the world,” and regularizes theme park consumption by securing their company’s reputation as a branch of Dynamic Structures. They claim that they “applied that valuable experience to over 50 state-of-the-art theme park rides,” and are building the “greatest attractions in the world for the greatest clients in the world” (Dynamic Attractions, 2020). ID&C, a company that specializes in event security, has undergone projects that boost their reputation in trending RFID wristband technology, working across all event and entertainment industries (ID&C, 2020). They use Disney’s MagicBands and Universal’s TapuTapu wearables as examples to demonstrate product reliability to prove their integrity and encourage consumerism in their market (“*10 Lessons*,” 2020).

There are companies who want to expand and diversify their market. Electrosonic embraces its presence in the market with their audiovisual solutions to provide a heightened sense of immersion and entertainment, contributing to the concept of “theme park magic” (Wills, 2019). They claim that they “have remained at the forefront of the global AV industry because we are always one step ahead of our clients and their visions,” and are “able to bring them to life using the very latest in AV design, integration, installation and support technology” (Electrosonic, 2020). Likewise, Mike Clayville, the vice president of Worldwide Commercial Sales at AWS, claims that “leading enterprises across a wide range of industries turn to AWS for its unmatched breadth of functionality, compute capacity, highly scalable infrastructure, and proven operational expertise” (“*The Walt Disney Company Selects AWS*,” 2017). Amazon Web

Services (AWS), considered the leading cloud provider, has maintained its relationship with Disney, a high-profile customer in the market, by demonstrating its service capabilities through production workload migrations to the cloud (Ferguson, 2017). This is confirmed by Charles Weiner, the senior vice president for Enterprise Infrastructure Services for The Walt Disney Company, who says “we have had success modernizing our IT operations and transforming the digital presence of our brands using AWS (Ferguson, 2017),” confirming AWS’ service compatibility with the theme park industry.

Theme parks are also building their own brand. The memorable moments are essential to shaping guests’ perspective as consumers. The “brand experience” emerged from attractions such as the Hershey and Crayola Experiences, and platforms such as Disney’s MyMagic+ program. Dan Alyward, the corporate director of operations at Crayola Experience, and Suzanne Jones insist that attractions need activity to engage with the brand to realize its full potential. “Both by demonstrating the products in the attraction and by presenting them in the store, we show a scope and breadth of the brand that you don’t really have otherwise,” Alyward and Jones agree that hands-on engagement is essential for brand experiences (William, 2017). Similarly, Disney uses its MagicBand technology with its MyMagic+ program for all guests to engage with their attractions. The platform allows visitors to plan, manage, and share the details of their vacation experience, providing an “all-in-one” service throughout the Disney resorts. Services include the FastPass+, PhotoPass Memory Maker, waterproof ticketing system, hotel door key, digital form of payment, and a customizable fashion accessory (Sandlin & Garlen, 2016). This allows for a fully immersive experience within the Disney brand, parallelizing the Hershey and Crayola brand experiences.

Today, U.S. theme parks are platforms for companies to showcase their products. Theme parks are branded: rides are adorned with logos and brands associated with consumerism. Brands communicate versions of the desirable life through consumption, and help theme parks by linking them to esteemed brands (Lukas, 2014).

### **Reminiscence of the Historical Theme Park**

Social groups who aspire to preserve the historical significance of theme parks have formed as a result of the modernization movement. Traditional theme parks hold sentimental value to original park enthusiasts. The meaning of mechanical rides or attractions will eventually be replaced by post-modern interactive experiences (Milman, 2009). Suzanne Jones states, “As the brand evolves, the experience must too” (William, 2017).

Theme park enthusiasts want to encapsulate the historical theme park essence. The National Amusement Park Historical Association (NAPHA) is dedicated to the “preservation, documentation, and enjoyment of the amusement and theme park industry - past, present, and future,” and has been involved in several initiatives to promote the preservation of industry history. NAPHA has acted as a repository for historical industry information, with a wide array of information including books, photos, videos and blueprints (Futrell, 2006). Similarly, the American Coaster Enthusiasts (ACE), who believe that wooden roller coasters are an integral part of the “fabric that is Americana,” is amassing a collective historical perspective that is claimed to be “unmatched by any other group, anywhere” (ACE, n.d.). Both organizations are building an industry archive that can be used as a key information source.

There are enthusiasts who want to physically preserve retired rides and attractions, such as the American Amusement Park Museum (AAPM) and NAPHA. AAPM is a family project

that has ongoing goals to “keep each piece in a restored state,” and are continuing to save new pieces and bring them to the collection by working with many parks. Their collection includes ride vehicles and iconic decorations from Hershey Park, Six Flag Great Adventure, Kings Dominion, and many more (AAPM, 2015). NAPHA is also preserving historic rides and finding new homes for classic amusement rides, trying to preserve key components of its history. Their access to vintage blueprints has led to the modern construction of popular retired rides (NAPHA, 2020).

Furthermore, there are enthusiasts who hold sentimental attachment to certain theme park elements. The National Carousel Association (NCA) works to keep America’s remaining carousels in operation because of the “emotional impact that riding a carousel tends to have on young children,” and wants to ensure that these carousels will be around for future generations to experience (NCA, 2020). Similarly, in 2016, die-hard Disney and *Twilight Zone* fans disapproved of Disneyland’s Tower of Terror modern rebrand to *Guardians of the Galaxy*. “I don’t like the Guardians ride taking over Tower of Terror for one simple reason: that ride introduced millions of kids to *Twilight Zone*,” quoted by Eric Vespe (“*Disneyland Closing Iconic Tower of Terror*,” 2016), illustrating the value the attraction held on those who had grown up with *Twilight Zone*. The petition to prevent the construction of the new *Guardians of the Galaxy* attraction claimed that the action was “un-Disney-like” and was something Universal Studios Hollywood would do (Streicher, 2016). The petition demanded, “This isn't like you, Disney. Listen to your guests. Put the ‘Guardians’ somewhere else” (Streicher, 2016).

While modernizing their park design, theme parks should consider how their parks have impacted their park guests; how these changes will affect them. The formation of these social

groups originated from the desire to preserve the historical essence for future generations to enjoy what they once did.

## **Conclusion**

Theme parks must develop new strategies to attract more visitors in a changing American society, and are considering innovative technological solutions to establish a new kind of customer experience. Modernization is the industry's response to changing customer preferences, however, they must consider the social impacts. The process has transformed theme parks into a platform for technological consumerism. Furthermore, the industry's fetishization for innovation may have neglected social groups who prefer the traditional theme park experience. It is important to recognize these factors that arise from technological innovation and modernization movements. There exist consequences if the social impacts remain unidentified. Identifying these factors allow theme parks to accommodate the impacted parties during modernization while maintaining its competitive side in the industry.

Despite the technological enthusiasm that persists in today's society, various parties are socially impacted, varying from companies, consumers, frequent park guests, park staff and employees, and more. Companies that specialize in new technologies, such as audiovisual technology, may have an advantage over companies that specialize in mechanical attractions; frequent park guests may disapprove of radical park design changes; park staff will have to act to contribute to the overall park theme and guest experience. Furthermore, it was uncovered that establishing unique guest experiences require one-to-one relationships between the park and its guests. The industry needs to classify which technologies can help foster these relationships to allow for a better park experience. Significance for other phenomena include the concepts of

technological consumerism, the brand experience, and social and user trust in technological innovation. Companies want to expand their market and pursue brand loyalty and are strategizing new ways to demonstrate their product integrity, like how they used theme parks as such a platform. Another phenomenon includes the concepts of fetishization of innovation and the socio technological spectrum. Despite the need to modernize, the industry must consider the appropriateness of their innovative decisions and when “enough is enough.”

Future research can be put into the specific technologies that can be used to help foster the relationship between the park and its guests, such as IoT, Big Data Analytics, Cloud Computing, and RFID technology. Specifically, ongoing research can analyze how conceptual models and applications of smart cities and smart and connected communities (SCC) be integrated into theme park infrastructure. It would also be interesting to determine how the industry defines the lines between their goal of improving customer experiences and mass data collection, and their plan for data security.

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