

Roller Coasters, Popcorn, and Funnel Cake: Customer Service in Amusement Parks

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ABSTRACT

The prominence of amusement parks has grown over the last several decades. Amusement parks fall into the service-based industry, thus the performance of the employees is even more important as they play a direct role in a customer's satisfaction with an experience. The customer satisfaction index scale has been created many times and was adapted for amusement parks for this study. Organizational identification was another scale adapted for amusement park-goers. These scales were used in the survey to assess the connection individuals have with the park they chose and their attitudes toward their chosen park's customer service. This study surveyed participants who had attended amusement parks within the last year. It was used to answer the hypotheses and research questions.

Employees did not negatively affect the overall customer satisfaction index scores. Customers with higher organizational identification were more satisfied than those with lower organizational identification scores. Age was the demographic that did not have statistically significant difference in any test (CSI, OI, or complaints). Gender was not statistically significant in organizational identification or complaints but was significant in customer satisfaction. Distance and park chosen was statistically significant in customer satisfaction and organizational identification, but not in complaints. Parks owned by multi-park companies had participants plan to return more than those owned by companies with a single park.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Walking into Disney Parks, whether in Paris, Anaheim, Orlando, or Tokyo, customers' attitudes and personalities change. Children are instantaneously more energized, parents become childlike, and most attendees are happy to be spending time in that amusement park. During the visit, customers interact with fictional characters, ride operators, janitors, concession workers, and retail employees. Ideally, all interactions are positive, creating an overall fun experience. This mentality of serving customers with an experience, is one that is evident in amusement parks across the world (Lee, 2012).

The concept of amusement parks and rides, such as carousels and large slides, began in the early 1600s in Europe and made its way over to New York almost 100 years later. Coney Island became the first "amusement park" in America, and by 1910, there were 2,000 amusement parks operating in the United States. Disneyland opened in 1955 and spurred the innovation of rollercoasters ("Great moments," n.d.). Improvements in technology and electricity allowed the development of amusement parks to advance to what we can experience today.

Although amusement parks have improved over the years, not all customers find the experience of an amusement park a good one. TripAdvisor, a tourism-based review site, is one source tourists turn to in making vacation decisions. TripAdvisor includes information about places tourists might want to visit, from restaurants to rental properties to hotels, and of course, amusement parks. In addition to facts about these businesses (e.g., location, hours, cost, type of services offered), TripAdvisor includes customer reviews. For example, this particular review of Disney World shares a visitor's negative experience.

Much too crowded! My husband and I visited for a week at the end of October/Early November this year for our honeymoon. The crowds were simply horrendous, especially at the Halloween party. This completely ruined the experience for me outside of our dinner reservations where we had some peace and individual attention. I would HIGHLY recommend researching an alternate destination for your next vacation. I have no intention of ever going back.

(Lindsay D, 2018)

There will always be customers who are displeased with the service they receive. Even when attending the "Happiest Place on Earth," customers can still have an unhappy time. This makes it relevant to research customer service in amusement parks specifically. The following sections will introduce research on three different concepts that will provide foundation for the proposed study.

Customer Service

Customer service is the main focus of the study, as amusement parks are an experience-based industry. Customer service involves an interaction between employees and customers, with the former attempting to serve or help the latter in some way (Lee, 2012). An employee's focus should be on the customer as customer satisfaction is extremely important; not only during a customer-employee interaction, but before and after the interaction as well. The main definition I will use throughout this study is as follows:

Customer satisfaction plays a central role in marketing in many fields. Customer satisfaction is defined as the degree of pleasure an individual feels; the degree of pleasure is determined by discrepancies between a customer's perceptions of and anticipation about a product. Satisfaction is also the psychological and emotional status of an individual following an experience, and is equal to the attitudes, intentions, and needs formed by the influence of external factors such as ambience and group interactions. (Hiseh, 2018, p. 130)

Customer service employees' determination to achieve customer satisfaction will often depend on their dedication to their work, which will be discussed more in the next section.

The American Customer Satisfaction Index was created in 1996 to measure the quality of companies. Fornell, Johnson, Anderson, Cha, and Bryant (1996) proposed the ACSI to take on this challenge. Fornell et al. (1996) designed the ACSI to address businesses on every level: manufacturing, transportation, communications, retail, finance, public administration, and of course, services. The ACSI groups businesses by their type

but measures all businesses' customer satisfaction by the perceived value, quality, expectations, complaints, and loyalty. Fornell et al.'s (1996) model ended up being a satisfactory and useful concept as it is used today as a convenient tool for customers, potential and recurring, to check on where their chosen companies fall in satisfaction. The American Customer Satisfaction Index, however, has been criticized due to its reliance on customer expectations that are hard to construct (Johnson, Gustafsson, Andreassen, Lervik, & Cha, 2001). Due to this criticism, researchers have often created or adapted different customer service indices. Deng, Yeh, and Sung (2013) built a customer satisfaction index regarding international tourists and hotels (H-CSI) that takes the perceived quality, perceived value, customer loyalty, customer complaints, and customer satisfaction that is addressed in the ACSI, but does not use the customer expectations segment. This CSI is tailored more towards the tourism industry.

Organizational Identification

Organizational identification refers to the relation between an individual and a group, more specifically a group like a business, a religious group, even a club at school (Brown, 1969). This idea of belonging to a group or people believing they belong to a group revolves around an individual's self-concept. Organizational identification can assist companies in assessing where their customers, and even employees, stand regarding their connection to the company. If a person heavily identifies with an organization, their dedication to the success of the company can be crucial in the survival of said company (Brown, 1969). Cheney (1983) expanded on the research by creating a 30-item survey instrument to analyze organizational identification. The Organizational

Identification Questionnaire (OIQ) provided a solid foundation for future research and modifications. Mael and Ashforth's (1992) questionnaire started with Cheney's research, and expanded upon it to include data from previous studies that had surfaced within the previous years.

Mael and Ashforth (1992) argue that organizational identification is built off of the social identity of a person, and therefore use Social Identity Theory by Turner (1985) as the theoretical background for their own Organizational Identification Scale. Social identity theory, in conjunction with organizational identification, includes four concepts: (a) the construct of identification; (b) identification as relational and comparative; (c) individuals' identity to increase self-esteem; and, (d) identification as a scale, not an either/or. First, identification is a construct that relies heavily on the perception of the individual. Individuals must determine how they feel regarding the connection to an organization. Second, identification is often established because of previous experiences. Individuals might identify with a certain organization because the organization made them feel good or accepted compared to previous experiences. Third, identification can be a result of people wishing to be identified with a prestigious group to increase their own self-perception. Alumni, for example, can brag about their degree from a well-respected university, even if they hated the experience. The self-esteem is increased because of that identification. Fourth, a person can identify with multiple organizations. Whether it is one or 20 different organizations, the identification does not have to be deeply imbedded in a customer (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Turner's Social Identity Theory

stressed the importance of both self-concept and “social self,” (Pearce, 2013, p. 503) which are relevant to the research of organizational identification.

Imagined Communities

Imagined communities, a concept first introduced by Benedict Anderson (1983), originally referred to the idea of nationalism, and how countries use the idea of belonging to that nation as an advantage. Anderson believed that if a resident of a nation feels connected to said nation, they are more likely to be loyal and helpful to the country, rather than apathetic. Utilizing a sense of connection to a group, one that has to be fabricated to be considered true, is an effective tool and a psychologically manipulative one. Although the concept of imagined communities initially discussed nationalism, it is no longer believed to be just applicable to one’s homeland. Imagined communities are now considered applicable to the community within a company. Being a customer of a company could mean that individuals belong (even for the short time they are partaking in their services) in that “family” of sorts depending on how closely the individuals identify with the organization. Going to a specific coffee shop, investing with a particular bank, borrowing a car from one rental service, potentially places the customer within part of that community (Fine & Van den Scott, 2011). Imagined communities create a tie to a specific organization and can give a person a sense of pride or belonging regarding that community.

Rationale

As society pushes more towards globalization, immediacy, and connectivity all across our “small world after all,” amusement parks have become a staple of society. Aronstein and Finke (2013) argue that being able to spend a day in a place full of laughter and distraction from the real world is paramount because relaxation and fun are a part of living. Amusement parks are a viable way to distract customers from the real world for hours and let people recharge before entering back into reality. Customer service representatives, whether working for a large park or a small one, help facilitate that vacation from reality. Success can be achieved with the help of effective customer service employees.

The industry of amusement parks has grown exponentially since Disneyland in 1955, and amusement parks have cemented a solid place as a fun vacation (Ali, Kim, Li, & Jeon, 2016). With growth in the industry, each individual park must compete with one another to be the park that tourists wish to visit. This competition includes the best rides, the best food, the best prices, and the best experience. When a tourist decides to visit an amusement park, it is up to the employees to help manage the experiences, which includes their emotions throughout the visit. In fact, “understanding emotions is crucial for service firms because consumers’ feelings concerning products or services affect their purchase decisions. Thus, emotions are an important determinant of satisfaction formation” (Brunner-Sperdin, Petters, & Strobl, 2012, p. 23). These emotions, however, do not just belong to the customer. Customer service representatives must consider their own emotions when interacting with a customer; therefore, an employee might need to

push aside negative emotions such as anger and impatience when at work. After all, a customer's satisfaction and the effectiveness of an employee's service play a role in the park's reputation. In fact, training and education need to be emphasized for returning and new employees to better the employee-customer relationship (Hall, 2008). It is vital that parks understand how to improve the experience of the tourists, and the least-expensive way to do so is to ensure employee-customer interactions are positive and efficient. Because of previous research pointing to the impact of employee behavior on customer satisfaction, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Poor customer-employee interactions at an amusement park negatively impact overall customer satisfaction with that park.

H2: Customers with a higher organizational identity to a particular amusement park are more likely to have a high customer satisfaction index total with that park.

RQ1: What are the differences in customer satisfaction at amusement parks across demographics?

RQ2: What are the differences in organizational identification with amusement parks across demographics?

RQ3: Are customers more likely to return to a park owned by a large, multi-park company than an independently owned park?

RQ4(a): Which demographic is more likely to complain to management when an issue arises at an amusement park? (b) Which demographic is more likely to be satisfied with management's handling of an issue at an amusement park?

SUMMARY

This chapter introduces the area of study proposed by the researcher. Amusement parks are regularly visited and enjoyed by people around the world. With the research done on the ACSI, Organizational Identification, and Imagined Communities introduced, the next chapter will cover more literature to provide a solid foundation for the research. Chapter II will expand on the subjects for the study by discussing previous research and concepts gathered that were useful in creating the groundwork for this research. Chapter III explores the method with Chapter IV explaining the results. Chapter V provides a discussion of the findings, implications, and areas of future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer service is a part of businesses, successful or not. The economy of the country is now more reliant on service-based businesses than in the early 1980s (Batt, 2002). These businesses focus on experiences or intangible products rather than actual goods (“U.S. service,” 2006). Companies must have effective customer service training in order to remain competitive in a widening field. With this in mind, this chapter summarizes past research on customer service and its various components as they relate to the amusement park industry and how that, in turn, affects imagined communities. Amusement parks rely on great customer service, stemming from well-trained employees, to create an experience that results in return customers to be part of a community that defies geographical proximity.

Customer Service in Tourism

The purpose of customer service is to assist consumers of a product or experience to achieve the best possible outcome. In tourism, “fun times” is the goal, and a customer service agent must ensure a happy experience for the customer; however, when organizations note failing customer service, Yen, Huang, Wen, and Wang (2017) recommend that a customer value analysis be conducted to ensure customers are being

treated and helped. Not doing so “could result in missing the opportunity to find potential customers and even possibly to invest resources in declined customers. These are important warnings of companies getting into the decline stage” (p. 82). Yen et al. (2017) also suggest utilizing rewards programs for customers whether the company views the customer as extremely important or not because loyalty rewards programs give the pretense that a customer feels important or even “elite” when given the opportunity and status. Even though people do not constantly participate in tourism, loyalty programs use a sense of elitism to benefit customers on their occasional visit.

Although customer service representatives cannot control every aspect in a customer’s time, it is important to make the customer-employee interaction as positive as possible. The customer service experience in tourism can have a major impact on whether a company is chosen and customers return. Researchers recommend “finishing strong, get bad parts over with early on, segment the pleasure, and combine the pain” (Dixon & Walsman, 2014, p. 224). This research, based on psychology, indicates that the interaction between a customer service employee and a customer is not always pleasant, but can have its unpleasantness minimized.

Research done by Barlow and Maul (2000) indicates that when customers switch companies for service or go a different way, it is often because of the dissatisfaction they face with the service. Dixon and Walsman (2014) report that traditionally, customers proactively provide feedback after an experience to help tailor the service in the future in the event of a less than satisfactory experience but the opportunity to provide positive feedback must be present. Feedback of experience, ranging from the food on a cruise ship

to the souvenirs in the gift shop at a museum, helps improve the overall experience for the customer. Ideally, as Kukk and Leppiman (2016) explain, surveys are distributed at some point to assess the quality of the experience the customers are having. The authors add that this is a potential way to help consumers' happiness rise. With customers leaving due to unsatisfactory customer service, it becomes even more vital that customer service is analyzed and implemented correctly and effectively.

Because amusement parks fall into tourism and entertainment, identifying different factors of customer service within tourism compared to customer service in general is helpful to understand amusement parks. The established research reveals the importance of customer service as a whole, but emphasizes its importance in tourism, as the industry is completely based off of service and experience.

Amusement Parks

Disney's grip on popular culture and relevance in society has lasted for decades. Disneyland, the first of the many Disney Theme Parks, opened in Anaheim, California, on July 17, 1955. While attendance had its peaks and valleys, it has still done extremely well in comparison to smaller parks (Niles, 2013). In the last half-century, the Disney Parks in America, Japan, and France have done exceptionally well and the culture surrounding Disney has allowed it to thrive popularity wise, making it a staple of recent history. Nooshin (2004) explains "Disney's theme parks are one of the most lucrative arms of the company" (p. 239). The power the parks have has continued since their inception, allowing the Disney-themed parks to thrive in society. Although amusement

parks were not invented by Disney, the relevance of Disney-themed parks has created a powerful industry.

Amusement parks in general create experiences that result in unique expectations from consumers that must be satisfied in order to be a successful business. If a business were to disregard the importance of a customer and ignore the power a bad review can have, it would not survive in this social media and gossip-filled world. Tian-Cole and Crompton (2003) indicate that service quality correlates with “opportunities available as a destination” (p. 72), so following this logic, one could say an amusement park provides an experience to enjoy the rides, play games, and eat unhealthy food.

Service encounters can differ based on the location of the service. The service’s physical setting is included when discussing how a service should be delivered. With this in mind, the setting will also determine the costs of a service as well, which will change the expectation of the consumer. Positive and negative customer evaluation correlates with the expectations (Grove & Fisk, 1997).

The experience benefits of an amusement park typically offset the cost of the experience (Brunner-Sperdin et al., 2012, p. 23). If a customer expects to experience a friendly and personable interaction at the cash register but is instead met with a tired and bored employee who does not go to the appropriate length for the customer, the customer’s expectations are not met. The experience is truly where the value is for an amusement park. “Value in experience” considers the experience as the product a company provides. In the case of an amusement park, a visit is not a tangible product that can be easily given, rather it relies on the participation between the employees and the

customers to ensure a pleasant memory of the experience. Kukk and Leppiman (2016) suggest that the experience is meaningful, but fickle. The experience can be ruined by a favorite ride being down for maintenance or a concession stand running out of cotton candy. A decrease of perceived value, as the authors explain, can change the entire experience within minutes, but it does not completely disregard the options within the park. Concession stands, games, and a variety of rides all play into the “product” that is experience. Experience is part of how customers see the value of the amusement park, and thus, experiences at the amusement park must be pleasant from the front gate to the bathrooms.

Amusement parks are not widely researched in terms of the actual experience provided to the customers. The notable lack of academic or public research done on amusement parks and the experience itself calls for a change in future research. While amusement parks such as Disney and Universal have implemented surveys to discover how effective their experiences are in satisfying the customers, smaller parks are less likely to distribute surveys due to a lack of resources.

Customer Service in Amusement Parks

The more specific an industry is, the more specific the customer service must be to fit the audience. The value of experiences has grown significantly over the years (Kukk & Leppiman, 2016). Amusement parks must also consider the value of the experiences they provide as well as other concerns a customer may have (e.g., lodging, transportation, food, souvenirs, inclement weather). Because of the niche role amusement parks play in the economy, it is a considerably smaller field of research regarding

customer service in the industry. Yen et al. (2017) explains the deficits in receiving criticism in theme parks:

current indicators for analyzing customer value, namely recency, frequency, and monetary, only pay attention to the quantitative data. However, feedbacks [sic] from visitors, e.g. questionnaire, may use common languages, e.g. High, Low, Large, for qualitative indicators. Such neglect of qualitative indicators may pose potential risk of ignoring how customers feel about the designed climate or situation by the theme park, leaving the theme park unaware of intrinsic voice of the customers. (p. 83)

Although amusement parks are often pricier due to the cost of the operation, feedback itself needs to extend past the pricing and include employee performance as well. The service needs to be measured. Roest, Pieters, and Koelmeijer (1997) break down the three attributes of service: search, experience, and credence. Search refers to the step before decision making, experience refers to during and after actual consumption of the service, and credence is based on how the customer will expect the experiences to go in the future. These three aspects describe the consumer decision-making process while going through the motions of finding an experience and utilizing it.

Amusement parks are a part of the service-based industry because they serve customers with an experience rather than a tangible product. Service-based businesses as a whole make up 60% of the GDP of the United States and amusement parks are a large part of that service economy (“U.S. service,” 2006). Amusement parks provide a unique experience every time a customer attends the property, and that experience includes

employee interactions (Raub & Liao, 2012). The customer service must be consistently strong and helpful for every single customer, every single time to meet expectations. The customer service in amusement parks must be carefully designed not only because it is part of the entertainment and tourism industry, but also because amusement parks are meant to be pleasant experiences.

Customer Service

A customer's opinion of the service comes from multiple employee encounters through their entire service experience, from the admittance cashier to the employee picking up trash. The view of customer service quality includes the entire picture. Customer-centric service is an important concept that businesses include in feedback surveys (Kukk & Leppiman, 2016). As customers consider the employees' actions a part of their experience, it is logical to expect the services performed by the employees to be satisfactory in order to meet the goals of the business. After all, the employees are the face of the company.

Good customer service is difficult to achieve. Employees who have exceptional customer service exemplify similar characteristics: "self-starting, long-term-oriented, and forward thinking approach" (Raub & Liao, 2012, p. 651). Kukk and Leppiman (2016) agree with the above qualities and add communication skills, extroversion, polite, and problem solver as additional qualities that can create a great customer service employee. Employees in the customer service role who reflect a certain attitude and mindset may establish a thriving interaction with customers. Furthermore, as Raub and Liao (2012) elucidate, the employee's environment at work and the work culture either positively or

negatively impact the employee's performance. This is especially true for employees who are new to town or the state, or even just new to the workforce. The authors add that these characteristics are best if already ingrained in the employee, but notes that a person with dedication can learn these traits for workplace, even if it is a façade meant solely for work.

Although there are certain characteristics that employees in the customer service field should have, or at least obtain as soon as possible, Lee (2012) argues that customer service training is a process, but it can allow employees interacting with customers to provide services efficiently. Not only does training create an understanding environment focused on the customer, the employees statistically become more satisfied in their jobs. More training correlates to a larger amount of positive interactions between customers and employees, thus fostering a more productive environment (Lee, 2012). Ultimately if employees have the personality or the will to gain customer service skills, intensive training and knowledge, they can be successful and contribute to the success of the company. Training also enables employees who do not necessarily have these traits to engage as if they do. These traits are not imperative when first hired, but employees should be encouraged to gain them as time continues.

Austin, Gravina, & Rice (2009) described a case study in a bank that discovered that supervisors' praise can better the implementation of customer service training. However, their praise and supervising time can be hindered by the time and dedication to the oversight of the employees' interaction with the customers. The bank being studied was attempting to improve their customer service to compete with a new bank in town.

Customer service training was observed between a manager and the employees, and the authors noted the praise and critique evaluations:

Social praise was difficult to implement for the manager because it required him to be in the vicinity of the customer-employee interaction for the duration of the interaction to fully observe the behaviors being emitted. Even if the manager was in the vicinity of the interaction, he often had to leave for various reasons, and as a result, he missed the praise opportunity. In addition, the manager did not have the opportunity to give praise between occurrences if there were consecutive customer interactions. (Austin et al., 2009, p. 668)

In theory, supervisors can improve the employees' customer service through hands-on training and hypothetical training, but as the authors discovered, the hands-on supervision can be tricky to implement.

Based on the research by Hall (2008) the need for training and employee knowledge is evident. Training and customer service handbooks have been around for decades, yet amusement parks still receive complaints about employees' rudeness, unprofessionalism, and downright hostility. In order to bestow a better, more positive, and enjoyable environment for customers and employees, the latter must change their ways (Hall, 2008). Employees are the active participants within customer service, and it is important that the underlying personalities and attitudes are considered when analyzing the effect the group can have on a company's success. Feedback surveys regarding customer satisfaction with parks question the employees' professionalism, knowledge, service, and can ask whether or not the staff is reliable. Ali et al. (2016) conducted a

study on Malaysian theme parks and customer satisfaction and found that customer interaction with staff was often less than excellent. Due to the lack of consistency with the quality of customer service, the authors argued that employees should change their approach to customer service to include more hands-on experience and supervision early in the training process.

Employees need to be proactive and confident in their actions and abilities. Raub and Liao (2012) explain proactive customer service is the result of employees who are self-starters and focused on the long term and prevention of failures and solutions for the problems. Proactivity on every level of the hierarchy in a business, in the long run, prepares incoming employees for any customer service issue that is thrown their way. The climate created by the business helps the initiative of employees: “they have to come to recognize that personal initiative climate is highly expected, desired, and rewarded by management to achieve organizational goals of high-quality service” (Raub & Liao, 2012, p. 653). If the employee is integrated into a high initiative and high-proactivity environment, employees are more cognizant of the expectations.

Along with proactivity and self-efficacy of an employee, the information and competence balance in an employee makes a difference in their overall effectiveness. If an employee has plenty of information but no competence to execute the information or vice versa, the employee is ineffective (Kukk & Leppiman, 2016). Training must focus on a balance to best prepare the employees to know *and* act. Employees are half of a customer service encounter, the half that employers typically have some sway over. Employees need motivation in order to act, and this is true whether or not the proactivity

or self-efficaciousness is inherent (Lee, 2012). This concept is furthered by Kim and Choi (2013) as their research explains that customers and employees can disagree regarding the quality of an interaction between the two. The authors reveal that out of 362 companies surveyed, 80% of the senior executives believed they delivered a superior customer experience although 92% of the customers disagreed with the statement. Discrepancy is due to the points of view, but also of the employees' obliviousness. Employees who interact with customers on a regular basis, which would include most employees at an amusement park, should be aware and mindful of the visitors around them and how they act and interact. This is also true in the case where a customer creates a negative experience for the employee. When a customer is rude or insulting towards the employee, the employee must remain mindful of their actions and words. After the negative interaction is through, the employee must continue being aware of their actions towards the next customer and remain professional and positive.

This sentiment is echoed by Wu (2011), stating that customer participation is crucial, but that aspect is met by the necessity of employee interaction. Without socializing with the customer and allowing the employee to be friendly, an employee is not completing the task at hand. Employees' lack of awareness has, in turn, resulted in minimal effort, thus labeling employees as unwilling to work with others.

When it comes to feedback for the employees, Austin et al. (2009) research discussed the necessity of clarification when giving tasks. Productivity relies on the clear and concise understanding of what tasks must be accomplished and what deadlines must be achieved.

Customer Service Training

Training is hailed as an important facet of running a successful business. No matter the scale of a theme park, employers must place a premium on the proper training for customer service. The more training provided, the better the employees are at picking up the necessary traits to interact with customers (Lee, 2012).

Proponents of training suggest that it improves the knowledge, skills and abilities of employees, not only enabling individuals to perform better, but also facilitating the extent to which firms can implement other [human resources] practices such as participation and teamwork. Specific training may also decrease employee turnover which in turn may improve overall labor performance. (Batt, 2002, p. 595)

Chi-Ming Hsieh's 2018 article stated, "Communication through, for example, training, motivation, and evaluation, can help employees to clearly understand the mission and goals of the organization, and cultivate those with a customer-oriented awareness" (Hsieh, 2018, p. 135). Ideally, the realization of importance behind the employee's engagement in the customer's value creation process will be immediate.

Even though research suggests making training and orientation time a positive part of the employee's experience, it is unfortunately not always done that way. Assessment of the intangible products service-based companies provide, such as experience or education, is not immediate, but rather the condition that pushes a customer to be critical of the product itself, more often than not, is bad customer service (Kukk &

Leppiman, 2016). Training needs to be conducive and effective for success on the part of the employee so approval of the product remains possible.

Understanding emotions is crucial for service firms because consumers' feelings concerning products or services affect their purchase decisions. Thus, emotions are an important determinant of satisfaction formation. . . . Therefore, in service quality literature customers are asked about their satisfaction regarding service contact personnel and their expectations and perceptions of tangible aspects of the service. (Brunner-Sperdin et al., 2012, p. 23)

Customer service training should produce understanding of emotion and assist the customers, even though customers are not always happy with the outcome of the interaction. This can be due to not getting a refund because of a no-refund policy, or they think an employee wronged them and wish them to be fired on the spot. Regardless of the interaction, customer service employees need to be as empathetic and helpful as their position accounts for.

Some research has focused and researched on specific guest audiences. For example, Hall (2008) analyzed the best way to change how employees interact with guests with disabilities. The participating employees attended and participated in a workshop where the learned skills were practiced and tested in the workshop setting. Although guests who have disabilities are not the only visitors with whom employees interact, the training Hall delivered to employees is potentially a better way for customer service to be given to help employees understand the variety of circumstances for

customer service. Hall (2008) suggested hands-on, interactive training is the better way for employees to improve their half of the customer service encounter.

The above research on customer service training provides a foundation of what training should implement. The other side of the equation is the customers who are looking for their expectations to be fulfilled.

Customers

On the most basic level, a customer identifies themselves as just that: a customer. The visitor is the reason a business can thrive or not survive. Identifying themselves as such allows the customer to adapt and blend in with the other customers of the business, in this case amusement parks, and gives them a role to play (Cheng & Xue, 2014). Participation from the customer continues the business' existence and provides an experience for all parties involved.

As Yen et al. (2017) explain, a customer's experience at an amusement park is different than that of any other business. Visitors play a vital role in the amusement park experience. With the word "customer" making up half of the term "customer service," it stands to reason that research should be conducted on the customer side of the equation – on customers' experiences. Often surveys tackle ideas such as "I felt I was in good hands" (Roest et al., 1997, p. 1001). If a customer feels as if the employee handling the interaction did so confidently and effectively, then the encounter was successful. Customers' satisfaction/dissatisfaction can be due to many factors: cost, waiting time, moods of those with whom they interact, and even, subconsciously, the environment of the park itself (Roest et al., 1997). Because this research being less recent than others, the

moods of the customers today should be researched to potentially solidify the importance of awareness when interacting with a customer, whether or not the experience is pleasant. Even with unpleasant interactions, the feedback provided can lead to better service in the future (Dixon & Walsman, 2014). When a customer provides negative feedback, the feedback is still a learning opportunity, making the customer even more valuable than before.

As Brunner-Sperdin et al. (2012) found in their research, happy customers are those who feel immersed in the world of the amusement park. The research of satisfaction is typically measured after the encounter is over, at a retrospective level, and suggest targeting the customers' emotions as the interactions continue, rather than afterwards. A customer's satisfaction is the goal for businesses, and meeting visitors' needs is the way to achieve that (Hsieh, 2018). Ali et al. (2016) explained that "customer delight and satisfaction then had a significant impact on customer loyalty" (p. 8). When happiness is achieved, the reputation of the amusement park can be helped, and at the least it is not tarnished, and can lead to loyal customers. Loyal customers enjoy the environment and the community that is created at the amusement park.

Research on Imagined Communities

Benedict Anderson's (1983) book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, introduced a new idea on nationalism which had previously been treated as a "natural" concept.

Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time. But if the facts are clear, their explanation remains a matter of long-

standing dispute. Nation, nationality, nationalism – all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyse. In contrast to the immense influence that nationalism has exerted on the modern world, plausible theory about it is conspicuously meager. (p. 7)

Anderson's concept of imagined communities suggests nationalism is meant as a tool for politics and is constructed through social means. Imagined communities help build loyalties within a hierarchy and the conceptual monarchy (Anderson, 1983). Research surrounding imagined communities does not only discuss and analyze politics or government; it can be used for multiple disciplines. In fact, a major aspect of imagined communities includes that humans are cognitively aware of the identities that arise (Bergholz, 2018). Nationalism, of course, does not only rely on wartime to determine the community to which a person belongs. Powers (2011) utilized the notion of imagined communities to research people whose ancestors were forced to move to different countries for various reasons, the same countries in which they were born. The people then returned to what they believed was their country of origin. Powers' subjects were Jewish-Americans and African-Americans who returned to Israel and Ghana respectively. Tourism is a consistently powerful tool to temporarily integrate people into new communities, but the homeland tourism discussed in this research showed it to be even more powerful to integrate back into a community from where a person believed they originated.

Nationalism, however, is not always a motivator to include members into its supposed society. Since 1983, the research surrounding imagined communities,

specifically nationalism, has shifted from feeling patriotic towards a country, to feeling indifferent about the nation to which a person belongs (Bergholz, 2018). As intense as the idea of nationalities is, it has been argued that communities do not have to be permanent or serious.

Another sort of community, the “wispy community” below the level of nations, which, for much of the time, provides a group identity that exists in latent memory that can be activated when appropriate. Its grounding is a real but temporary gathering that provides connections of acquaintance, for example, those attending a leisure gathering and sharing emotions, such as Woodstock in 1969. (Tiryakian, 2011, p. 1292)

As Tiryakian argues, these “imagined communities,” while often serious, can be relaxed and more associated with memories and experiences than a sense of national identity. The author identifies examples in a more modern aspect including times of stress such as war or terrorist attacks, but also homeland tours, tourism in general, and often schools which give off the concept of belonging.

Wispy communities are built around social locations. Fine and Van den Scott (2011) discuss social locations as a means of identifying with a group. Although these locations might not have an extremely strong draw to them, they are still powerful. The authors use examples such as festivals and other types of gatherings that are temporary rather than permanent to define these imagined communities:

We focus on how individuals and groups affiliate with local cultures, examining the creation and consequences of these ties within evanescent, limited micro-

publics. We describe these micro-publics as constituting “wispy communities,” referring to worlds of actions that are temporary, limited in time and space, and have the potential of being displaced by other more insistent identities. (Fine & Van den Scott, 2011, p. 1321)

Essentially, while being part of a community can overlap with other portions of a person’s identities, each identity creates a sense of belonging to a community that would not exist otherwise.

Research surrounding the idea of “wispy communities” is lacking in reference to day-to-day situations rather than occasional or lifetime communities such as a vacation or a nationality. Viewing employees and customers in an amusement park through the lens of imagined communities can provide a new perspective and understanding behind how to best serve both groups of people.

SUMMARY

The literature on customer service, amusement parks, and imagined communities varies in abundance, however, the research in the academic world so far is consistently helpful in creating a foundational framework for the proposed research of this study. Ideally, the proposed research will identify the factors of customer service and of the park-going experience that are important to customers. The previous research on these subjects lead into the next chapter which will introduce the method of research utilized for this study and breakdown the survey used.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

Chapter III discusses the methods utilized for collecting data to address the hypotheses and research questions. It first describes the survey distribution, participants, materials and procedures. It also covers the open-ended questions and the measurements of the customer satisfaction index and organizational identification scales.

Amusement parks are often seen as a destination of fun for vacationing families, especially children. With the competition for tourist activities increasing, services and customer care needs to improve (Brunner-Sperdin et al., 2012). For example, when a customer has a miserable time at an amusement park—perhaps the food is cold, the employees are rude, and the games are not fun—that customer is less likely to return, and very likely to share a bad review with other people (Grove & Fisk, 1997). The rise of social media makes the prospect of unhappy customers even more disconcerting, as such, further research is needed to understand customer service in the amusement park setting. This study related to customer satisfaction at amusement parks was approved by West Texas A&M University's institutional review board allowing the use of social media to attract participants 18 years and older to voluntarily give their opinions and attitudes about amusement parks and customer service

Survey Distribution

Fifty-five questions make up this survey and can be viewed in Appendix A. Of the 55, 49 were quantitative; 15 aimed for the customer service index, 24 aimed for organizational identification, 7 are demographic questions, and 3 were yes or no situation questions (e.g., “Did you encounter any displeasing issue on your visit?”). The three remaining questions were open-ended for the survey-takers to add information to further explain an issue they encountered or how management handled said issue. The survey was distributed through social media websites (e.g., Facebook, Reddit, Twitter, Tumblr). The researcher had permission to share the surveys in several amusement park enthusiast groups among these social media websites and shared it multiple times to maximize exposure to potential participants.

Participants

Demographics were asked of the participants to analyze the similarities between groups of park-goers. The demographic questions were designed to obtain age ranges, gender, which park a participant would answer about, distance from respective park, and reason for attending the park.

Out of the 559 surveys started, 419 were deemed valid for the purpose of this study, while 140 participants’ results were classified as invalid due to age or not answering a significant amount of questions. Of the 419 surveys remaining, 261 participants identified as male, 148 identified as female, 1 was agender, 3 were non-binary, and 2 opted to not identify gender. The ages represented were broken into ranges. There were 167 participants who were 18-25, 103 participants 26-35, 66 between 36-44, 50 participants 45-54, 23 park goers between 55-64, and 10 people were 65 or older. The

plurality of participants was 18-25, and the majority 18-35. Participants were able to choose any amusement park they had attended within the last two years. Due to the variety of amusement parks chosen by the participants, amusement parks have been grouped together. The full list of amusement parks included in the study is available in Appendix A. The chosen amusement parks were divided into eight categories based on the owning parties: Disney, Six Flags, Sea World, Universal, Cedar Fair, Hershey Parks, Independently Owned, and “other.” The full table of amusement parks chosen can be found in Appendix B. Participants were asked to indicate the distance from their chosen park; 39 participants lived fewer than 10 miles away, 73 participants lived 10-30 miles from their park, 45 participants lived 31-50 miles away, 28 participants were 51-70 miles away, 43 were 71-100 miles from their park, and 191 participants were 101 or more miles away. The last demographic question in this study asked the participants why they came out to the park and gave them an option to fill in a custom reason. Ten participants said they came for a company party, 10 participants chose church/non-tax group, 138 attended the park for a family outing, 128 for a friends’ outing, 26 attended on a date, and 88 chose “other.”

Materials and Procedures

This study utilized a digital survey comprised of 55 questions, 3 of which were optional open-text responses. Customer satisfaction is determined through the multiple-choice questions and the three optional open-text questions, and a scale derived from the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) Model (Deng, Yeh, & Sung, 2013). There are 15 Likert-scale type questions in this survey that address the CSI and were adapted to answer the first and second hypotheses (poor customer-employee interactions negatively

impact overall customer satisfaction; customers with a higher organizational identity will also have a higher customer satisfaction index rating) as well as research question one (differences in customer satisfaction across demographics). Organizational identification (OI) was based on Mael and Ashforth's (1992) six-item scale, addressed by 24 Likert-scale type questions. The second hypothesis and second research question (differences in organizational identification across demographics) are addressed by OI. Additional questions were asked to obtain extra situational occurrences like problems encountered or various comments the participants wished to add. Both the customer satisfaction index scale and organizational identification scale were summated. Various One-Way ANOVA tests and t-tests were run and results analyzed.

Measurement of Customer satisfaction index

Anderson & Fornell's ACSI explain that customer satisfaction is an important part of economies, no matter the product being created as the customers are the reason the product is in demand. Essentially, customers are an asset to a company (2000). The adaptation of the ACSI used, based off of Deng, Yeh, and Sung is an ideal adaptation as it is used for a part of the tourism industry, of which amusement parks are an active part. The ACSI itself is still an effective form of measurement, however, the customer expectations cannot be constructed by a company, a common criticism of the ACSI (Johnson et al., 2001). Deng, Yeh, and Sung's H-CSI was adapted and expanded to create a CSI scale specific for amusement parks. After running a reliability test on the questions making up the CSI scale used for this study, the Cronbach's Alpha returned a reliability of .813, thus proving to be a reliable scale.

Measurement of Organizational Identification

The Organizational Identification Questionnaire was created by George Cheney and published in 1983, providing a starting point for research regarding how people identify with a particular group or community. Cheney's (1983) research focused on a person's connection to companies, specifically interviewing customers and employees. Cheney's 30-item questionnaire, while a good start for future research, has received understandable criticism, least of which from Mael and Ashforth (1992) who created a modified Organizational Identification Scale to update Cheney's original research. Mael and Ashforth's 1992 recreation of Organizational Identification includes a six-item scale that was ideal for this study. The reasoning behind choosing this "reconceptualization of OID" (p. 104) is that it utilizes the theoretical foundation of social identity theory to operationalize a population's connection to an organization. While previous versions of an OIQ did not provide coherent results or relationships with communication or sociological theories, thus creating a need for more attempts in a more direct manner (Reichers, 1985). The questions in the Mael and Ashforth OIQ were adapted for the research from Mael and Ashforth's study discussing a school to researching amusement parks with minimal phrase changes. The Cronbach's Alpha of the organizational identification questions in the survey is .829, also providing reliable results.

SUMMARY

Chapter III explained the methods of this study. The survey, made of five demographic questions, two scales, and three optional open-ended questions, distributed through social media sites pulled 419 valid responses available for analysis. In Chapter

IV, the results of the survey that measured the customer service and organizational identification will be further analyzed.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Chapter IV contains the results of the scales used in the survey. For H1, H2, and RQ1, the customer satisfaction index is used to analyze the results. The organizational identification scale is analyzed for H2 and RQ2. The survey questions used a scale ranging from 1 to 5, from completely disagree to completely agree. Each scale was reverse-coded where appropriate and summated. The customer satisfaction index scale was comprised of 19 items and the sums ranged from a total of 19-95. The organizational identification scale was comprised of 24 items, creating a range of 24-120. RQ3, RQ4(a), and RQ4(b) utilized specific questions within the survey to discuss the results. The results are discussed in order of proposed hypotheses and research questions.

For the purpose of creating as equal cells as possible, gender, age, and distance were split by cut points. The demographic of gender analyzes male and female identifying participants because those who selected “I identify as...” did not have a comparable amount. Age is split into participants 35 years of age and younger, and those over 35 years of age. Finally, the demographic of distance from chosen park was cut into participants who were 70 miles or less away from their chosen park, and those who lived more than 70 miles away. Because the cut points are set for these demographics,

independent t-tests were run for these demographics. The demographic of parks chosen are tested through one-way ANOVA tests

Employees

In order to perform an analysis on the employees' effect on a customer's satisfaction index score, a cut point was created. Participants of the survey were asked on a Likert-scale type question how much effect an employee had on their overall experience on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "none at all" and 5 being "a lot." The cut point split the sample into those affected a moderate amount or more into one group and those who were only affected a small amount or not at all. An independent t-test ($t = -2.62, p = .065, ES = 390$) did not return a statistically significant difference between those not affected that much ($m = 73.71, SD = 10.04$) and those affected at least a moderate amount ($m = 76.37, SD = 9.04$). This indicates that H1 is not supported.

Using the demographic questions (age, gender, park chosen, and distance from chosen park) as the independent variables, one-way ANOVA tests were run against the summated scales of the customer satisfaction index and organizational identification. These results were used to analyze the other proposed hypothesis and research questions

Organizational Identification and Customer Satisfaction

H2 proposed that a high level of organizational identification would mean a high customer satisfaction index total. CSI and OI were transformed into two variables using a cutpoint with a 2 meaning an OI of 76 (1 indicates OI of less than 76) or higher, and a CSI of 57 or higher (1 indicates CSI of less than 57). A one-way ANOVA test ($F =$

67.169, $df = 1/382$, $p = .000$) revealed a significant difference in CSI for participants who had a high OI ($M = 1.99$) and a low OI ($M = 1.77$), supporting H2

Customer satisfaction index

To answer RQ1 (CSI and demographics) independent t-tests were used with gender, age, and distance from chosen park. A one-way ANOVA test was used with park chosen.

The independent t-test for gender ($t = 3.05$, $p = .003$, $ES = 382$) revealed a difference that was statistically significant between participants who identified as male ($m = 76.70$, $SD = 8.16$) and those who identified as female ($m = 73.79$, $SD = 10.18$), indicating that male-identifying participants had higher CSI scores. Age, on the other hand, ($t = -1.68$, $p = .877$, $ES = 390$) did not return a statistically significant difference between participants 35 and younger ($m = 74.43$, $SD = 9.73$) and participants 36 and older ($m = 76.10$, $SD = 9.25$). The final independent t-test on distance ($t = 3.755$, $p = .002$, $ES = 390$) revealed a difference between the participants 71 miles and closer to their parks ($m = 77.05$, $p = 8.07$) and participants 71 miles and further ($m = 73.48$, $SD = 10.67$) that was not statistically significant.

A one-way ANOVA test was run with CSI and the amusement parks arranged by ownership ($F = 2.862$, $df = 36/389$, $p = .000$) returned a significant difference between individually owned parks ($m = 70.44$), Sea World Parks ($m = 77.71$), Cedar Fair Entertainment ($m = 78.31$), Disney Parks ($m = 76.90$), Six Flags ($m = 71.26$), Hershey Entertainment ($m = 81.09$), Universal Studios ($m = 78.05$), miscellaneous companies ($m = 77.27$). Participants' CSI means suggest that individually owned parks had the lower

average CSI rates whereas Hershey Entertainment ($m = 81.09$) and Cedar Fair Entertainment ($m = 78.31$) have the higher rates for customer service. The individually owned parks chosen were smaller than the ones owned by companies with a mean of 70.44 and could indicate that customer service is focused more on in larger parks, or it could imply that more employees of the individually owned amusement parks interact with customers, thus providing more room for a bad experience.

Organizational Identification

Similar to RQ1, in order to answer RQ2 independent t-tests were used for gender, age, and distance, and a one-way ANOVA test was used for the park chosen.

An independent samples t-test was run between the participants who identified as male and female. Because there were only a few participants who chose “I identify as,” there was not enough data to include in this test. The independent samples t-test yielded a result that was not significantly different ($t = 1.351, p = 1.77, ES = 375$) with participants identifying as male ($m = 84.33, sd = 11.13$) having a slightly higher average than female-identifying participants ($m = 82.64, sd = 82.64$). The independent t-test regarding age ($t = -1.79, p = .483, ES = 383$) did not yield a statistically significant difference between the participants 35 and younger ($m = 82.10, SD = 11.78$) and those 36 and older ($m = 84.40, SD = 12.27$). The final independent t-test tested the distance ($t = 2.99, p = .037, ES = 383$) and revealed a statistically significant difference between participants who chose a park less than 70 miles away from them ($m = 85.20, SD = 10.63$) and those further than 70 miles away ($m = 81.50, SD = 13.52$).

The one-way ANOVA test ($F = 3.551$, $df = 36/382$, $p = .000$) between the chosen park and OI also revealed a significant difference between the groups; individually owned parks ($m = 75.02$), Sea World Parks ($m = 84.80$), Cedar Fair Entertainment ($m = 88.49$), Disney Parks ($m = 89.16$), Six Flags ($m = 78.84$), Hershey Entertainment ($m = 83.18$), Universal Studios ($m = 91.00$), miscellaneous companies ($m = 82.48$). Participants' OI totals averaged highest in Universal, Disney, which was expected as Universal and Disney parks host familiar characters and entertainment such as Harry Potter and Mickey Mouse. Independently owned parks had the lowest OI average which could be due to the lack of familiar characters or world-wide advertisement.

Likelihood of Return

An one-way ANOVA test ($F = 2.873$, $df = 7/402$, $p = .006$) compared the park chosen to a customer's likelihood of returning and revealed a significant difference; individually owned parks ($m = 1.82$), Sea World Parks ($m = 1.34$), Cedar Fair Entertainment ($m = 1.19$), Disney Parks ($m = 1.35$), Six Flags ($m = 1.52$), Hershey Entertainment ($m = 1.00$), Universal Studios ($m = 1.39$), miscellaneous companies ($m = 1.44$). Participants were most likely to believe they would return to Hershey Entertainment Parks, then Cedar Fair Entertainment Parks, and Sea World Parks following. Individually owned parks were last with a mean of 1.82, potentially due to the larger sizes of company owned parks. Customers may think it is easier to get through a small, individually owned park in one day compared to a large park that may take days or more than one trip.

Customers' Likelihood to Complain

Research questions 4a and 4b discuss customers' likelihood to complain to management and their satisfaction with the result. Independent t-tests and a one-way ANOVA test were run against the demographics to assess if a specific group was more likely to complain. A 1 indicates that a participant did bring up the issue they faced to management, and a two indicates they did not.

Customers who had a concern that they brought to management were tested by their demographic and specific tests. Because age had uneven distribution throughout the ranges, a cut point was created and an independent t-test was run. Participants identifying as male or female were separated in the independent t-test ($t = .545, p = .343, ES = 68$) and those identifying as male ($m = 1.63, SD = .07$) had a slightly higher average than participants identifying as female ($m = 1.56, SD = .50$). For age, the cut point put those 35 and under in one group and those older than 35 in another. The independent t-test ($t = -1.15, p = .25, ES = 72$) with those 35 and younger ($m = 1.51, SD = .50$) and those older than 35 ($m = 1.65, SD = .484$) did not return a statistically significant difference. Another independent t-test was used regarding distance ($t = .064, p = .89, ES = 73$) with the participants split between those 70 miles or closer to their park ($m = 1.58, SD = .50$) and those 71 miles or further away ($m = 1.57, SD = .50$) with no statistically significant difference between the two. The one-way ANOVA ($F = .470, df = 7/71, p = .853$) between the parks chosen and whether a participant brought it to management also did not have a significant difference; individually owned parks ($m = 1.50$), Sea World Parks ($m = 1.75$), Cedar Fair Entertainment ($m = 1.50$), Disney Parks ($m = 1.55$), Six

Flags ($m = 1.60$), Hershey Entertainment ($m = 2.00$), Universal Studios ($m = 1.67$), miscellaneous companies ($m = 1.50$). As no demographic returned a significant difference, the results imply that the reasons for complaints had more to do with the situations experienced rather than the person who experienced it.

For participants who brought their concern to management, they were asked if they were satisfied with the resolution of their complaint. The independent t-test ($t = .855, p = .501, ES = 28$) between male identifying participants ($m = 1.63, SD = .50$) and those identifying as female ($m = 1.45, SD = .522$) yielded a difference that was not statistically significant. An independent t-test was done for age in the satisfaction part of this research question. Although the return of the t-test ($t = 1.79, p = .083, ES = 29$) came closer in significance, those 35 and younger ($m = 1.71, SD = .47$) and participants older than 35 ($m = 1.38, SD = .506$) were not statistically significant in their difference.

Distance was also broken down for a cutpoint to create as equal groups as possible; those 70 miles or fewer away from their chosen park and those 71 miles or further from their park. The test returned a difference that was not statistically significant ($t = -.769, p = .448, ES = 29$), with those 70 miles or less away from their park ($m = 1.50, SD = .516$), and those 71 miles or further away ($m = 1.64, SD = .497$). For the last demographic, the park chosen, a one-way ANOVA ($F = 2.265, df = 6/28, p = .075$) was used, also had no significant difference between the two factors; individually owned parks ($m = 1.00$), Sea World Parks ($m = 1.00$), Cedar Fair Entertainment ($m = 1.40$), Disney Parks ($m = 1.20$), Six Flags ($m = 1.80$), Hershey Entertainment ($m = 1.00$), Universal Studios ($m = 1.83$), miscellaneous companies ($m = 1.55$). This data answers RQ4(a) and RQ4(b) as no one

demographic was significantly more likely to complain or be dissatisfied by management's handling of the issue.

Unexpected Results

Having worked in the amusement park industry, some results were surprising. Starting with the demographics, age was not a significantly different group in any test that was run. This potentially could be because of the large amount of the younger age ranges that participated in the study, but it was unexpected as older age ranges seem to have more concerns in an experience than the younger ages. Another interesting finding was that there was not a significant difference between demographics for those who brought their concerns to management or a significant difference for participants who were dissatisfied with the results. Finally, the third piece of unexpected information gained is that Disney Parks were not the top group in any of the tests run. Disney Parks did score well in organizational identification but was typically second or third. This could be due to Disney's design as a children's brand, whereas Universal has movies and characters more appealing for adults—which were the participants of the study.

SUMMARY

Chapter IV discusses the results of the tests run on the data provided from the survey. The hypotheses and research questions were paired with the relevant tests, and analysis occurred to further discuss the hypotheses and answers to the research questions. Unexpected results were also examined, finding that some notions of the researcher were not true in the instance of this study. Chapter V analyzes the results introduced in this

section and expands on the limitations, future research, and implications produced through this study.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Chapter V examines the results presented in Chapter IV and the implications for the proposed hypotheses and research questions. Organizational identification is discussed regarding the different groups of amusement parks as is the customer satisfaction index. The organizational identification was on average higher for the participants taking the survey, indicating that at some level, the amusement parks provided an imagined community for the customers. Participants showed a sense of identification to the park they chose, which created a sense of connection to a group as discussed by Anderson (1983). Customers chose to attend that amusement park, voluntarily using their money to participate in the experience and placing themselves, at least temporarily, as a part of that community (Fine & Van den Scott, 2011). This is important to keep in mind while continuing through this final chapter as the participants were a part of the imagined communities being studied.

Customer Satisfaction Index

Deng, Yeh, and Sung's (2013) customer satisfaction index about international tourists and hotel experiences provided a solid foundation for an adapted CSI for amusement parks. The CSI used provides evidence for hypothesis 1, 2, and research

question 1. As mentioned in Chapter IV, the customer satisfaction index was summated into one variable ranging from 19-95, providing an easier measure for testing purposes. The questions that composed the CSI scale were Likert-style questions with values ranging 1 to 5, creating the summated value.

Customer-Employee Interactions

Hypothesis 1 argued that poor customer-employee interactions negatively impact overall customer satisfaction. In the previous chapter it explains that there was not a significant difference between the perceived effect of the employees and the participant's overall CSI score. Although more customers did believe that the employees had an effect on their experience, the significance was not demonstrated in the test. The neutral cutpoint for CSI is 57-58. Those with a high effect from customers returned an average CSI of 76.37 and those with a low effect returned an average CSI of 73.71, meaning that despite a perceived high effect from employees, the customers were not negatively affected enough to be overall displeased with the customer satisfaction index. This could be because there was not a follow up question in the survey explicitly asking whether the participant had a bad experience with an employee but solely asked if they believed employees affect their experience. Another reason for the result could be that participants could have attended the park in question months before they answered the survey, thus providing time to forget some of the experience. Whatever the reasons were that an insignificant difference was returned, hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Identity and Satisfaction

Hypothesis 2 proposed that a high organizational identity would often result in a high customer satisfaction index total, which was supported with the result of the One-Way ANOVA per the previous chapter. CSI and OI used a cutpoint for a low/high point at 19-57/58-95 and 24-72/73-120 respectively. The low half of the CSI and OI were characterized as “1” and the higher half was “2.” The test returned 321 higher half OI participants with an average of 1.99, indicating the higher the organizational identification total, the higher the customer satisfaction total, supporting hypothesis 2.

Customer Satisfaction and Demographics

As discussed in Chapter IV, there were some significant differences in customer satisfaction across demographics. Age, unexpectedly, did not return significant differences, which could be due to the larger number of younger participants in the survey. Gender did provide significant differences with male-identifying participants averaging as the most satisfied by the experience averaging 76.70 with female-identifying participants averaging 73.79, and those identifying as neither averaging 68.12 CSI rates. The CSI total ranges from 19-95, and all three options were still above the halfway cutpoint for the scale.

Distance also provided significant differences, with the parks further away being strongest in customer satisfaction index totals. All 390 valid responses averaged 75.5 CSI total, whereas the distance of 101+ miles away is the only distance range that returned an average above the total mean (77.447). This could be due to the excitement of being in a different place that the participant was not as critical as someone who travelled 10 miles.

The park chosen was also a significant difference with Hershey Parks and Disney Parks having the highest averages. Out of 375 valid responses for this particular One-Way ANOVA test, the average CSI was 75.3, where individually owned parks and Six Flags parks were the only groups of parks that were less than the average. The Six Flags parks were the most chosen out of all of the options available. This result could be due to how common the Six Flags parks are compared the few Universal Parks or couple of Disney Parks there are in the United States, making the experiences different.

Organizational Identification Scale

Mael and Ashforth's (1992) questionnaire based off of Cheney's (1983) research on organizational identification provided a solid basis on which this study could analyze OI. The scale for OI was used in conjunction with CSI for hypothesis 2 (discussed above), and for research question 2, asking about the differences in organizational identification across demographics. The OI scale was also summated with a range of 24-120.

Organizational Identity and Demographics

Similar to RQ1, the demographics and OI were tested with One-Way ANOVA tests in Chapter IV. Age and gender both returned differences that were not statistically different in organizational identification. For distance, the average of the 383 valid responses returned was 83.5, indicating a high OI. The highest average OI (86.6) was for parks fewer than 10 miles away from the participant, indicating pride for the local amusement parks for several of the participants. The next highest was the parks 101+

miles away (85.44), also indicating that the journey to the park is an identifying part of the participant.

The park chosen also showed significant differences, with 368 valid responses returning an average of 83.52 for the OI scale. The highest average for a group were the Universal Parks at an average of 91.00 with Disney second at a mean of 89.1. As discussed in the previous chapter, this could be due to the adults identifying more with Harry Potter or Sinbad than Dumbo and Cinderella. Another possibility for the significant differences could be the groups were not even in number of parks making up the groupings.

Willingness to Return and Ownership of Parks

Research question 3 asks if customers are more likely to return to wider-known park than an individually owned park, which was found to be an affirmative answer. The question was a Likert-style question, going from extremely likely to return to extremely unlikely to return (1 through 5 respectively). There were 403 valid answers were returned to create a mean of 1.44. This implies that participants are still more likely to return to a park than not return, however participants who chose Hershey parks (1.00), Cedar Fair Entertainment parks (1.19), and Sea World parks (1.34) are most likely to return. These parks specifically have more “thrill rides” than Disney or smaller parks are likely to have, which may be the attraction to them specifically.

Complaints and Demographics

The fourth research question focused on the customer complaints. The questionnaire asked if the guest brought up any issues to management, and whether the

participants were satisfied with the results. Interestingly enough, there were no significant differences in all the demographics for RQ4a or RQ4b. This was an unexpected result discussed in the previous chapter.

Implications

The first implication involves hypothesis 2 (high OI results in high CSI). This hypothesis was confirmed with a significant difference between the two groups. However, those without a high OI still had an average of 1.77 (out of 2) for their CSI score indicating that even if a person does not feel as emotionally or mentally connected to an amusement park, they still may have satisfactory experiences. This is important to note as amusement parks can focus on other aspects of their business than the characters they represent.

Metehan and Yasemin (2011) explain that “The cost of gaining a new customer is 5-8 fold more than retaining an existing customer” (p. 44), indicating that ensuring everyone, not just high OI customers, are valuable to a business like an amusement park.

The second implication is regarding how age did not play a significant difference in the scales. As mentioned by the U.S. Census Bureau (“U.S. service,” 2006), experience-centered businesses like cruises and amusement parks are a large part and a growing part of the economy, thus a much more prevalent part of society. With this in mind, when the older age ranges are attending parks, similar to the middle ranges, if they are not attending solely for themselves, they might be attending for family reasons. These participants might be much more focused on the reactions of their kids or grandkids that they experience the youthfulness of the park rather than criticizing every issue. With this

possibility, their happiness most likely relies on the happiness of the younger members of the group.

Limitations

The first limitation is the broad nature of amusement parks. Amusement parks are not as academically studied and researched as other parts of business, and certainly not from a communication perspective. This created obstacles for the researcher in limiting available research specific to the industry and leaving a need for adapted scales rather than scales already used in the amusement park industry. Second, the various amusement parks available for the participants to choose from made it necessary to group parks by ownership, resulting in uneven groupings. If this study were to be repeated, researchers are highly encouraged to go in with set parks, rather than accepting every amusement park given.

Future Research

As previously mentioned, amusement parks are not highly researched. While various parks do customer service surveys, it is not necessarily accessible by the public. Amusement parks are composed of many facets, providing numerous routes of research. With that in mind, there are a few different roads worth mentioning based off of the research of this thesis.

First, research can delve deeper into organizational identification and specific amusement parks. This could be broken down by Disney, Universal, or Sea World for families or even utilizing coaster enthusiast groups for the parks that are more rollercoaster focused. This study could discuss the connection a person has to an

amusement park's characters or rides and how the experience of attending an amusement park with that kind of draw to it can shape a person's identity.

Second, amusement park employees could be studied. While the customer's opinion on how the employees perform is important for business, it is also important that businesses listen to the employees who are the physical face of the company (Tian-Cole, & Crompton, 2003). The employees could go through a pre-test of customer service, then be retrained in customer service, and another post-test performed to gauge the change. Ideally, this could occur at one or two parks to compare the results.

Third, future research could include a customer satisfaction index solely for amusement parks, as it is a part of the largest growing industry in the world economy (Kukk & Leppiman, 2016), it would be ideal for future researchers to have access to a tested customer satisfaction index created solely for the industry being studied rather than needing to adapt one made for a similar industry.

Fourth, it could be interesting to see the differences in how people view large destination parks like Disney or Universal compared to parks that can be enjoyed in a day. Parks like Disney and Universal destination parks that customers can easily spend days at, and are pricier by comparison to parks like Sea World and Six Flags. Future research could analyze how visitors react to issues or view their overall customer satisfaction.

Fifth and finally, with the rise of social media as evident by the TripAdvisor reviews from the introduction regarding Disneyland, future researchers could analyze social media users reviews and complaints about amusement parks. Perhaps customers

are more likely to take to social media to bring attention to a concern rather than going directly to management. It could also be due to the instant gratification of complaining on social media and having friends and even strangers empathize with the situation. At the least, social media users may hope to go viral with their concern. Afterall, attention is attention whether it is good or bad. The social media aspect is a more modern way of raising attention to issues and could definitely be researched in this field of study.

SUMMARY

This chapter discussed the findings of this research. H1 was not supported, most likely due to a lack of a specific question inquiring about negative events regarding employees. H2 was supported. RQ 1, Rq2, RQ3, RQ4(a), and RQ4(b) were answered with somewhat unexpected results. Amusement parks have so many facets, and this thesis was able to scratch the surface with a good number of responses thanks to the internet and social media. Despite complaints being prominent on website like TripAdvisor, the participants of this study were, for the most part, pleased with their park of choice.

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APPENDIX A

Purpose: This survey is designed to gather information about customer service at an amusement park. The goal of the research and of the survey is to analyze the data to identify aggregate attitudes toward customer service. The study should take you no more than 10 minutes to complete.**Participation:** You must be 18 or older to participate. Your participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the study, for any reason, and without any prejudice. Although the study will not benefit you directly, it is designed to enhance the customer experience.**Risk:** The risk of taking the survey is no more than everyday conversation. If you would like to contact the researcher, Bethany Thompson, to discuss this research, please email bathompson1@buffs.wtamu.edu. If you have concerns about this research you can also contact the faculty advisor Dr. Kristina Drumheller at 806-651-2816 or kdrumheller@wtamu.edu or Dr. Angela Spaulding, the Dean of Graduate Studies of WTAMU at 806-651-2731 or aspaulding@wtamu.edu.

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge that your participation in the study is voluntary, you are 18 years of age, and that you are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation in the study at any time and for any reason.

- I am 18 years of age. I agree with the above terms. I have attended an amusement park within the last two years. (1)
- I am not 18 years of age, or I do not agree with the above terms. (2)

What is your age?

- 18-25 (1)
- 26-35 (2)
- 36-44 (3)
- 45-54 (4)
- 55-64 (5)
- 65 or older (6)

What is your gender?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- I identify as (3) _____

Think about your most recent amusement park experience for completing this survey. Which amusement park will you be using to complete this survey? (Select from drop down list)

- Adventureland (Des Moines, Iowa) (1)
- Alabama Splash Adventure (2)
- Bay Beach Amusement Park (3)
- Busch Garden (Florida) (4)
- Busch Garden (Virginia) (5)
- Castles N' Coasters (6)
- Cedar Point (7)
- Cliff's Amusement Park (8)

- Coney Island (9)
- DisneyLand (California) (10)
- DisneyWorld (Florida) (11)
- Enchanted Island (12)
- Frontier City (13)
- Funderland (Sacramento, California) (14)
- Funland (15)
- Fun Spot (Florida) (16)
- Funtasticks Family Fun Park (17)
- Glenwood Caverns Adventure Park (18)
- Great Escape (19)
- Hershey Park (20)
- Holiday World (21)
- The Island in Pigeon Forge (Tennessee) (22)
- Kings Island (23)
- Knoebels Amusement Resort (24)
- Knott's Berry Farm (25)
- Joyland Park (26)
- La Ronde (27)
- Legoland (28)

- Nickelodeon Universe (29)
- Roadrunner Amusement Park (30)
- Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk (31)
- Santa's Village (32)
- Seabreeze Amusement Park (33)
- Sea World (Texas) (34)
- Sea World (Florida) (35)
- Sea World (California) (36)
- Schnepf Farms (37)
- Silver Dollar City (38)
- Six Flags America (Maryland) (39)
- Six Flags Discovery Kingdom (Vallejo, California) (40)
- Six Flags Great Adventure (New Jersey) (41)
- Six Flags Great America (Gurnee, Illinois) (42)
- Six Flags Magic Mountain (Valencia, California) (43)
- Six Flags New England (Agawam, Massachusetts) (44)
- Six Flags Over Georgia (Austell, Georgia) (45)
- Six Flags St. Louis (Eureka, Missouri) (46)
- Six Flags Over Texas (Arlington) (47)
- Six Flags Fiesta Texas (San Antonio) (48)

- Six Flags Darien Lake (New York) (49)
- Southern Adventures (50)
- Spring Park (51)
- Story Land (52)
- Universal (California) (53)
- Universal (Florida) (54)
- Wildlife World (55)
- Wonderland Park (56)
- Other (57)

If other, which amusement park will you be using to complete this survey?

How close are you to your chosen amusement park?

- Less than 10 miles away (1)
- 10-30 miles away (2)
- 31-50 miles away (3)
- 51-70 miles away (4)
- 71-100 miles away (5)
- 101+ miles away (6)

What brought you to the amusement park? Choose all that apply.

- Company Party (1)
- Church/Non-tax group (2)
- Family outing (3)
- Friends outing (4)
- Date (5)
- Vacation (6)
- Other (7) _____

Please read the following statements and choose the descriptor that best fits your opinion.

	Completely disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Completely agree (5)
My amusement park is well priced (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My money was well spent on this amusement park (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would spend more money for the same experience (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The value of the park matched the price I spent (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please read the following statements and choose the descriptor that best fits your opinion

	Completely disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Completely agree (5)	Not applicable (6)
The employees seemed happy to be at work (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

The rides were fun for me (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The food tasted good (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fixtures, rides, buildings, and seating options as a whole appeared to be well maintained (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I was pleased with the appearance of the amusement park (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The park was overall clean (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If I had issues, management handled the problem (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please read the following statements and choose the descriptor that best fits your opinion.

	Completely disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Completely agree (5)
I will be back in the future (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

I will tell
people about
my
experience
at this
amusement
park (2)

If prices rise
in the future,
I will still
come back
to the
amusement
park (3)

I like to tell
people about
my time at
this
amusement
park (4)

The
employees
made me
feel good (5)

I know my
business is
important(6)

How likely is that you will return to this amusement park?

- Extremely likely (1)
- Somewhat likely (2)
- Neither likely nor unlikely (3)
- Somewhat unlikely (4)
- Extremely unlikely (5)

Please read the following statements and choose the descriptor that best fits your opinion.	Completely disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Completely agree (5)
When someone criticizes the amusement park, I feel embarrassed (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am very interested in what others think about my amusement park (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When someone praises your amusement park, it feels like a personal compliment (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If a story in the media criticizes the amusement park, I would feel embarrassed (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I like to talk to people about my time at this amusement park (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

I identify with the characters (i.e. mascots, story characters, etc.) of the amusement park (6)

Please read the following statements and choose the descriptor that best fits your opinion.

	Completely disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Completely agree (5)
People in my community think highly of the amusement park (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My amusement park is considered one of the best amusement parks (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My amusement park does not have a good reputation in my community (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

People are
impressed
when I tell
them I have
gone to this
amusement
park (4)

People want
to hear
about my
time at this
amusement
park (5)

Please read the following statements and choose the descriptor that best fits your opinion.

	Completely disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Completely agree (5)
There is a rivalry between amusement parks (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Each amusement park tries to set themselves as superior (through advertisement) (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Customers consistently compare amusement parks (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your chosen amusement park points out why it is superior to others (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please read the following statements and choose the descriptor that best fits your opinion.

	Completely disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Completely agree (5)
The employees at your chosen amusement park seem to try to impress customers (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The employees attempt to do their jobs well (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Employees at the amusement have pride in their work (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Employees at the amusement park have pride in their park (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How much did the actions of the employees affect your experience?

- A great deal (1)
 - A lot (2)
 - A moderate amount (3)
 - A little (4)
 - None at all (5)
-

Did you encounter any displeasing issue on your visit?

- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
-

What was the issue you encountered?

Did you bring this issue to management?

- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
-

Were you satisfied with how management handled the issue?

Yes (1)

No (2)

If not, how did you want the issue to be solved?

Please read the following statements and choose the descriptor that best fits your opinion.

	Completely disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Completely agree (5)
I like to reminisce about my youth (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am a sentimental person (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have no desire to save mementos from the past (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I like to save souvenirs or other reminders of interesting places or events (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am moved emotionally when recalling scenes from my youth (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Do you have any other comments you would like to share?

APPENDIX B

Adventureland (Des Moines, Iowa)

Bay Beach Amusement Park

Busch Garden (Florida)

Busch Garden (Virginia)

Cedar Point

Coney Island

DisneyLand (California)

DisneyWorld (Florida)

Frontier City

Funland

Fun Spot (Florida)

Great Escape

Hershey Park

Holiday World

Kings Island

Knoebels Amusement Resort

Knott's Berry Farm

Joyland Park

La Rond

Roadrunner Amusement Park

Seabreeze Amusement Park

Sea World (Texas)

Sea World (Florida)

Sea World (California)

Silver Dollar City

Six Flags America (Maryland)

Six Flags Discovery Kingdom (Vallejo, California)

Six Flags Great Adventure (New Jersey)

Six Flags Great America (Gurnee, Illinois)

Six Flags Magic Mountain (Valencia, California)

Six Flags New England (Agawam, Massachusetts)

Six Flags Over Georgia (Austell, Georgia)

Six Flags St. Louis (Eureka, Missouri)

Six Flags Over Texas (Arlington)

Six Flags Fiesta Texas (San Antonio)

Universal (California)

Universal (Florida)

Wonderland Park

Other

Blackpool

Blackpool Pleasure Beach

California's Great America
Canada's Wonderland
Canobie Lake
Carowinds
Conneaut Lake
Disneyland Paris
Dollywood
Dutch Wonderland
Efteling
Efteling
Energylandia
Europa Park
Europapark
Kennywood
King's Dominion
Kolmarden, Sweden
Lagoon Amusement Park (Utah)
Lakeside
Liseberg
Lotte world
Ocean Park
Parque de Atracciones Madrid

Phantasialand

Pleasure Beach Blackpool

PortAventura World

The Park at OWA

Thorpe Park

Valleyfair

Worlds of Fun

Worlds of fun (Kansas City)

Yomiuriland