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Introduction: Theme parks and COVID-19

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Abstract

In the tourism industry, “crises” have been conceptualized as local and temporary phenomena, interval states that may require imminent action, but that can eventually be overcome, with business simply resuming. At the moment of writing, however, it is not at all clear when or if the theme park sector can simply return to a pre-pandemic state of affairs. Even if tourism may once again attain pre-COVID *numbers*, it may well be through entirely new and different *forms*. The essays collected here provide scholarly and professional snapshots of the current (winter 2021/2022) state of the theme park industry, with special attention being paid to economic strategies, operational issues, the impact of the pandemic on the destination level, and temporary coping strategies.

Keywords: COVID-19; theme parks; tourism crisis; recovery.

In early November 2021, the final editorial meeting for this article was supposed to take place during a conference in Tarragona, Catalonia. Somewhat ironically, the rising number of COVID cases prevented the German member of the editorial team from travelling to Spain, and the editors had to find an alternative way to meet up. While the meeting could be easily moved from analogue to digital, however, the same does not apply to the topic of this essay collection: offering location-based entertainment and leisure, theme parks are built on the idea that patrons travel to and gather on their premises in large numbers. Physically experiencing the park’s themed landscapes and interacting with people – performers, employees, and other visitors – is the very point of a theme park visit. Due to official travelling and contact restrictions as well as accompanying health and safety concerns on the parts of tourists, the current pandemic has thus constituted the most serious challenge in the development of tourism in general and theme parks in particular – if not a historical caesura.

Based on the figures alone – according to the *TEA/AECOM 2020 Theme Index and Museum Index* (TEA/AECOM, 2021, p.6), a downfall in global attraction attendance “from 50% to 90% in 2020 depending on the extent of the pandemic and the type of parks in various regions” – one could “merely” speak of a severe crisis of the theme park sector. In fact, as most people perceive COVID-19 as a potential life risk, the pandemic, together with travel restrictions and constraints, has altered travelling lifestyles around the world, leading to the emergence of new patterns of behavior, and has drastically reduced the attendance to theme parks in particular and location-based entertainment in general. Five issues have been identified as major disruptive factors both from the demand side and the supply side of the theme park industry: (1) travel restrictions; (2) temporary facility closures; (3) capacity constraints; (4) social conduct regulations, including social distancing mandates; and (5) new operational procedures related to the cleaning and sanitization of facilities. Additionally, social perceptions might have changed, inducing new mental distance between the “ordinary” and the “extraordinary” (Anton Clavé et al., 2022).

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Nevertheless, we hesitate to use the term “crisis.” In “Crisis Management,” Melanie Smith, Nicola MacLeod, and Margaret Hart Robertson generally define crises in tourism as either natural or man-made “sudden disasters or catastrophes” (Smith, MacLeod, & Robertson, 2010, p.25). Specifically in the case of health crises, they seem to mainly conceive of crises as local and temporary phenomena, citing “the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in the UK in 2001, the spread of SARS in 2002/2003, bird flu in Asia in 2005, swine flu in Mexico in 2009” as examples (p.27). For Smith, MacLeod, and Robertson, then, (health) crises are primarily interval states that may require “careful planning and management” (p.26), but that can eventually be overcome, with business simply resuming. And indeed, the “Five-Phase Approach to COVID-19” offered by the Pacific Asia Travel Association, for example, identifies the fifth and final phase as a “recovery” – that is, a return to normal, with “resumption of international travel”; “reopening of entertainment and additional cultural venues and service retail industry”; and “restart of international travel” (PATA, 2021).

However, as highlighted by Lee and Chen (2020), it is clear that the devastating effects of COVID-19 on the leisure, entertainment, and tourism industry cannot be compared to previous health crises. Indeed, with the pandemic entering its second winter, it is not at all clear when or if the theme park sector can simply return to a pre-pandemic state of affairs. Global and regional theme park companies have had to manage the financial effects of the unprecedented abrupt reduction of their activity (and closing of the venues during some months in 2020) in the short-term, while they can scarcely predict medium- and long-term impacts related to, among others, demand attraction, facilities operation, and experience design. Moreover, interpretations and results are always context-dependent and potential adaptation strategies can evolve in unpredictable and unplanned ways that require constant and swift changes and reformulations.

Therefore, with respect to the COVID-19 pandemic, Babou and Callot (2021) prefer to speak of “regeneration” and “rejuvenation,” arguing that even if tourism may once again attain pre-COVID *numbers*, it may well be through entirely new and different *forms*. What these new and different forms could look like in the case of the global theme park industry and how businesses could transition towards them, is entirely unclear. Indeed, reflections on the future of leisure, entertainment, and tourism practices as we know them should be undertaken carefully and critically (Gibson, 2021; Hall, Scott, & Gössling, 2020). Moreover, as Cheer et al. (2021) reflect, COVID-19 may turn out to be a precursor of further environmental crises that will be more intense, longer, and more onerous for global communities to contend with.

Hence, all we can offer at the moment are critical snapshots of the parks themselves, their producers, and their consumers (the visitors). The following essays provide scholarly and professional insights into the current (winter 2021/2022) state of the theme park industry, with special attention being paid to economic strategies (see the papers by Cornelis; and Williams and Toth), operational issues (see the papers by Freitag; and Kokai and Robson), the impact of the pandemic on a destination level (see the papers by Anton Clavé; and Dubois and Dimanche), and temporary coping strategies (see the papers by Lukas; and Havard, Baker, Wann, and Grieve). As the temporary threatens to become permanent, these snapshots may turn out to be prophetic, or perhaps – as we hope – merely notes from an extraordinary time that will have been, in retrospect, a mere crisis, after all.

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