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## Tourist's Delight: How Theme Parks Can Improve Tourism Experience

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# TOURIST'S DELIGHT:

How theme parks can improve tourism experience

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*Understanding what drives customers to write delighted or outraged reviews on platforms such as TripAdvisor following their visits to theme parks would be highly valuable information for park developers and managers. Researchers Dr. Edwin Torres and Dr. Ady Milman from Rosen College of Hospitality Management use data extracted from the review platform to dissect tourism experience, delight and outrage in the previously overlooked theme park sector.*

Increasingly, tourists are understood as consumers of 'experience'. How a tourist feels about and remembers an experience will inform their decision to return or recommend a place or activity to others. For scholars, understanding the critical factors behind good and bad tourist experiences is a hot topic; the ability to predict how a tourist will experience a place or activity is the key to improving that experience. On a basic level, when you take a short city-break, your experience will be affected by your mode of travel, your accommodation choice, the facilities available, the food you eat. Beyond that, other factors including tourist motivation, tourist typologies, authenticity, commodification, image and perception can all change a visitor's experience. The researchers from Rosen College used the concepts of 'delight' and 'outrage' to better understand tourists' experiences at theme parks.

## DELIGHT AND OUTRAGE

To gain a deeper understanding of the emotional aspects of tourism experience, the concepts of 'delight' and 'outrage' have, over the last two decades, been increasingly applied by academics. More intense than the traditional measures of 'satisfaction' and 'dissatisfaction', quantifying a tourist's delight and outrage could lead to better knowledge of tourist behavior and trends overall. A satisfied customer might tell their friends they've had a 'lovely time', but a delighted visitor could be impelled to write a stunning online review that thousands will see. And equally, if we understand what really outrages consumers about an experience, that confrontation, bad write-up and reimbursement could be avoided.

## THEME PARK TOURISM

The concept of tourism experience can be looked at in any tourist consumer context,

including holidays, backpacking, cultural and heritage tourism, urban tourism, immersive or passive activities and food services. There is a dearth of literature on the topic of tourist experience in the context of theme parks, however, especially in relation to delight and outrage. While there have been studies conducted into consumer delight in settings such as retail, hotels, performing arts and festivals, there has been very little research into consumer outrage at all, and almost nothing of either in the theme park setting. This is surprising given how relevant these approaches are to theme parks.

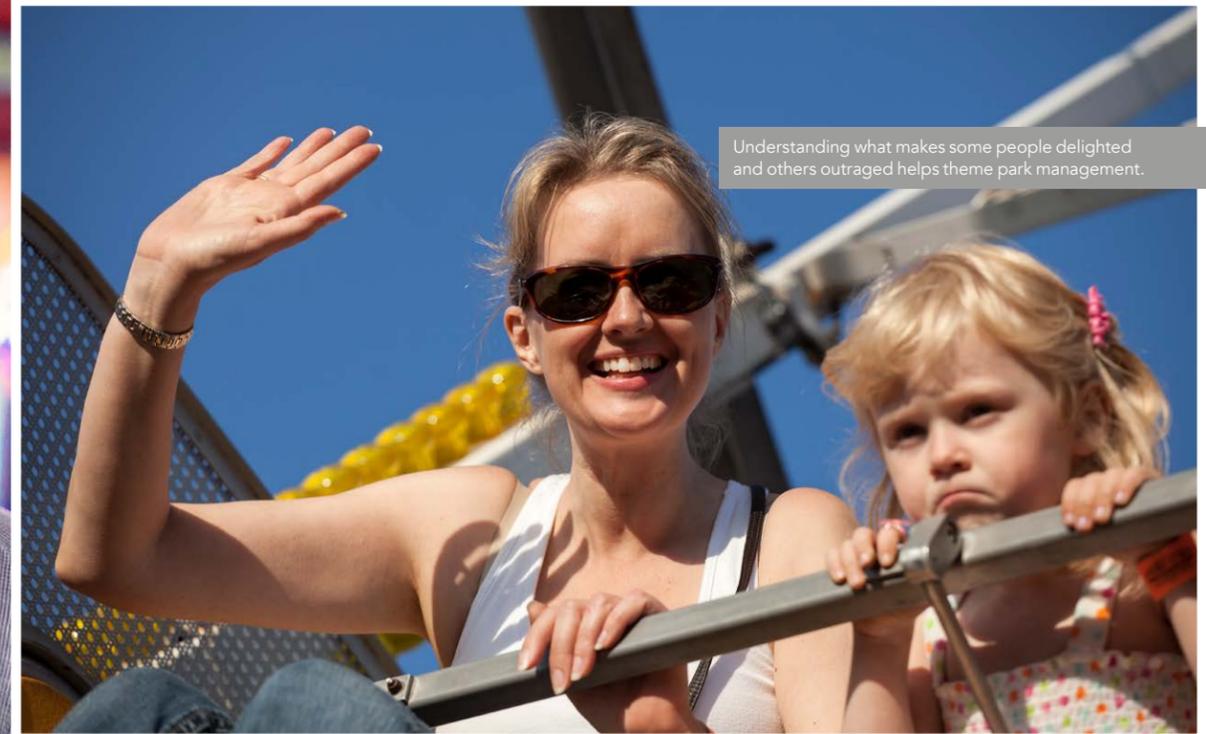
Theme parks can be described as places of entertainment, fantasy settings or social artwork. The parks and the rides themselves often aim to recreate the imagined surroundings of stories, myths, books, television and film. As well as being ultimately

...RESEARCH INTO TOURIST EXPERIENCE AND THE DRIVERS OF DELIGHT AND OUTRAGE IN THEME PARKS SHOULD BE OF INTEREST TO MANY.

experiential they have also become an incredibly important element of the hospitality industry. They can serve as 'economic engines' for the communities in which they are situated: driving the need for accommodation, facilities and food and drink services; providing employment; and incentivizing investment.

Growth in both the number of theme parks and the size and sophistication of existing theme parks is particularly significant in the United States, although the trend is notable worldwide. As popularity grows and tourists become more 'demanding', theme park creators and managers are looking for ever more inventive and creative ways to distinguish themselves in the increasing pool of competition. They must take into consideration not just the rides themselves but the visitor experience as a whole; waiting in line, entertainment, food, drink, facilities and merchandise, all of which have become crucial to delivering the 'wow factor' for tourists. Imagine Disney World without the actors dressed as characters, Mickey ears

Understanding what makes some people delighted and others outraged helps theme park management.



TripAdvisor is the largest travel word-of-mouth site in the world, with over 435 million reviews on 6.8 million attractions, places to stay and restaurants. On average, 390 million individual visits are made to the site monthly, and human moderators and automated tools help root out questionable reviews. While the site has been utilized in studies looking into tourism experience at hotels, restaurants and museums and heritage sites, as well as review credibility, until now it has not been employed as a tool in the study of tourist delight and outrage at theme parks.

#### THUMBS UP?

In the first study of its kind to focus on theme park visitors, Rosen College researchers Torres and Milman have used a qualitative approach to TripAdvisor data to determine patterns in delight and outrage and their resultant behaviors. The researchers built two datasets for analysis based on the top 20 theme parks in North America (by annual visitor numbers). The first dataset was constructed using keywords from TripAdvisor reviews related to delight and outrage. The second dataset was constructed using the number of 'stars' given in customer reviews on the site; five-star and one-star comments were collected. Analysis could then be done within each dataset and comparisons made between them.

Previous studies have reflected that key drivers for customer delight in other service industries are customer needs such as security, justice and self-esteem; customer emotions such as joy, thrill, exhilaration and exceeded expectations; and customer service such as friendliness, professionalism, staff attitudes and behaviors, skill and cleanliness.

This new research from Torres and Milman highlights that for theme park visitors fun, enjoyment, thrill, love, amazement, and delight are the critical drivers of customer delight. This contrasts with the most critical drivers in other tourism sectors such as hotels, where service, professionalism and cleanliness were most important to customer delight. In addition, the traveling party of the reviewer appears to play a part in customer delight, with words such as 'family' and 'kid' rising to prominence with other terms of delight.

With regards to outrage, the key drivers were identified as failing, outdated



Queuing was found by the researchers to be one of the most likely triggers for feelings of outrage.

...GOOD PARK ENTERTAINMENT CAN RESULT IN DELIGHTED CUSTOMERS, WHILST OUTDATED ATTRACTIONS CAN LEAD TO OUTRAGE.

or underwhelming attractions, and waiting, queues and crowds. The time of year that the visit took place played a part in this, as most outraged reviews occurred at peak season for the theme park in question (when crowds are largest). Value perception also drove outrage, and whilst service and staff were not noticeable as drivers of delight, they were important keywords amongst outraged reviews.

Finally, the research team noted that interestingly review posts by outraged customers were on average longer than those comments made by delighted customers, but that overall, there were more delighted theme park reviews that outraged ones. It appears that whilst outraged customers are more likely to go into detail about their experience, delighted customers are more likely to comment in the first place.

#### LESSONS TO LEARN

So, what can theme park managers learn from this pioneering data analysis? First, good quality entertainment is key for delighted customers, while outdated attractions can lead to outrage. Continuous innovation and renewal of theme park rides and activities is therefore needed. As the traveling party emerged as a source of delight in many reviews, theme

park attractions should improve accessibility for families and larger groups and exploit opportunities for interaction within groups.

The two main drivers for outrage were waiting times and what was perceived as high pricing. This introduces a paradox for theme park managers: increasing the price of tickets reduces crowds but leads to outrage in some customers, and vice versa. Theme park management teams have already come up with some novel ways to reduce queueing and waiting times such as virtual queues and further innovation in this area would be beneficial. The Rosen College research team suggested future studies into the demographic and visit characteristics of those outraged by admission prices might shed light on how best to deal with this. Finally, now that staff behavior and service have been identified as significant drivers of outrage, this could be tackled by better training at parks.

This study by Rosen College researchers Torres and Milman has pushed delight and outrage in the theme park setting into the spotlight. As a section of the tourism market which continues to grow but has not been thoroughly examined in the past, they highlight that delight and outrage in the theme park setting is a topic deserving further attention.

## RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Torres and Milman use the concepts of delight and outrage to better understand visitor experiences of theme parks.

### REFERENCES

Torres, E., Milman A., Park, S. (2018). Delighted or outraged? Uncovering key drivers of exceedingly positive and negative theme park guest experiences. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights*, 1 (1), 65-85.

### CO-AUTHOR

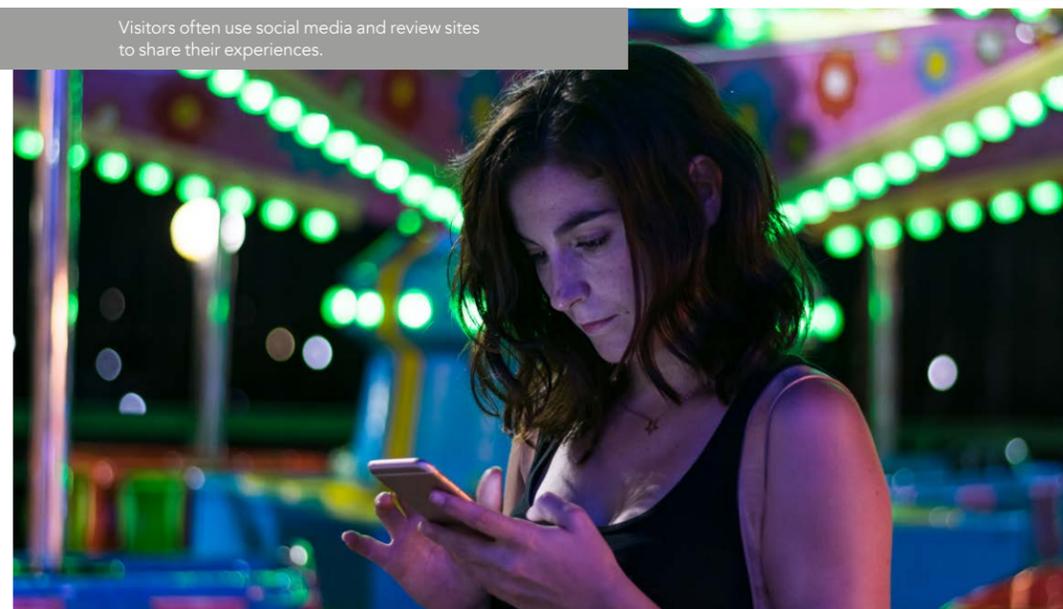
Soona Park, Purdue University

### PERSONAL RESPONSE

**This research is the first of its kind into delight and outrage in theme park visitors. What are your future research plans in this area?**

There are many areas of potential research in this field. The researchers are interested in studying delight and outrage in other subsectors of the attractions industry such as water parks. Additionally, the research team would like to use experience sampling methodology, whereby customers are provided with electronic devices and asked about their emotions throughout the day, in order to more accurately determine how customers' feelings change throughout the day and to ascertain the triggering events which might lead to delight and outrage. Focus groups can also be utilized to identify the characteristics of theme park visitors who are more likely to post online feedback. Finally, the managerial practices of various theme parks regarding monitoring, analyzing, responding, and taking action concerning electronic word-of-mouth can be studied through both surveys and interviews with industry managers.

Visitors often use social media and review sites to share their experiences.



### Dr. Edwin Torres



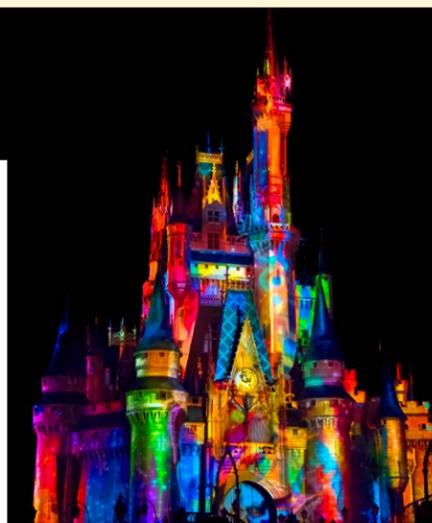
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Up-to-date and modern attractions are key for stimulating delight in visitors.