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When the magic closes: Examining how Disney fans coped with theme park and resort closures amid the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This essay discusses a qualitative investigation we conducted with fans of the Disney parks and resorts during the summer of 2020 regarding the company's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, 22 people responded to open-ended questions from an online survey to discuss their views of the closures and planned reopenings of the Disney parks and resorts amid the early days of the pandemic. Using social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) and the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), we discuss how fans react to and cope with the temporary loss of a favorite activity and how companies in the themed entertainment industry can work to engage customers during such times. Along with implications for practitioners working in themed entertainment, we also introduce areas of future investigation important to further understanding of fan behavior amid uncertainty.

Keywords: Disney; COVID-19; consumer behavior; fans; closures; coping strategies; park reopenings.

1. Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic caused restaurants, businesses, schools, and entertainment companies to either shut down temporarily or move remote, people around the world were impacted significantly. Health care workers served as front-line defenders of public safety, in many ways essential workers were tasked with keeping society moving forward, and many parents had to take on the dual roles of teacher and full-time employee. Typically, people deal with stress by looking for diversions from daily life as they allow for opportunities to suspend reality for a period of time by focusing on things that bring enjoyment (Inoue & Havard, 2015). However, when such diversions were suddenly taken away, people were left without something to take their attention away from the public health crisis.

One such diversionary opportunity that many around the world utilize is visiting the Disney parks and resorts, as they allow attendees to explore and get immersed in storytelling (Baker, 2018; Dalmia, 2018; Zika, 2018) by interacting with themed environments within the park setting (Baker, 2016). This paper discusses an empirical qualitative investigation into how fans and consumers of The Walt Disney Company made sense of and coped with the closures of the company's parks and resorts amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, 22 self-identified fans of the Disney theme parks and resorts left responses to open-ended questions addressing their reactions and coping mechanisms to closures and planned reopenings amid the early months of the pandemic.

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2. Background and Impact of COVID-19

As the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated in the U.S. in early March 2020, businesses and organizations began announcing shutdowns. Professional sport leagues postponed the rest or beginning of seasons, the National Collegiate Athletic Association announced spring sports in U.S. colleges and universities were canceled, and entertainment companies soon announced closures. Shanghai Disney Resort closed to the public January 25, 2020, and was soon followed by Hong Kong Disneyland, Tokyo Disneyland Resort, and Disneyland Paris Resort. Disneyland in Anaheim, California was the first U.S. resort to close, followed by Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida (Rizzo, 2020).

With much of the U.S. and international community under quarantine orders to help slow the spread of COVID-19, fans and consumers of the Disney parks and resorts found more importance placed on what they referred to as their happy place, a friendly diversion from the problems and concerns of daily life. During this period, fans engaged in a high volume of discussion about parks but also content creation including videos and images that celebrated the park experiences they could not currently partake in.

In early May, 2020, some states in the U.S. began to loosen their quarantine orders in an attempt to spur local and state economies (Ascarelli, 2020). In late May, Walt Disney World announced, and received permission, to open their resorts, entertainment and shopping district, and theme parks in June and July, 2020. Universal Studios Florida opened to the public in early June, 2020, and Walt Disney World announced a phased reopening beginning with the Disney Springs shopping district in early June, select resort hotels in late June, and their four theme parks in mid-July (Tate, 2020). Disneyland in California reopened in April, 2021 after being closed for more than a year (Barkas, 2021).

The purpose of the study is to investigate how fans and consumers chose to cope with the Disney parks and resorts being closed. Specifically, using social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) and the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), the current study seeks to better understand how the temporary removal of activities associated with the Disney parks brand impacted fan and consumer behavior and engagement. Specifically, respondents discussed how the closure of the Disney parks and resorts impacted their fandom and perspectives of the company, along with their views on the phased reopenings of the parks and resorts. It is important to note that at the time of data collection (summer 2020), the American parks and resorts making up Walt Disney World were reopening, and thus make up most respondents' observations.

3. Method

In total, 22 participants 18-year age and older responded to a survey containing open-ended questions built using Qualtrics software and distributed on Facebook and Twitter. Specifically, respondents were asked to indicate their reactions to the closure of Disney parks, societal impact of the brand and park closings, and phased reopenings by the company. The vast majority of participants were female (77.3%) and Caucasian (95.5%), and ranged in age from 24 to 70. To protect participant identity while discussing findings and implications, the names provided throughout the subsequent sections are pseudonyms. It is important to note that the current study was conducted during summer 2020 leading up to the reopening of Walt Disney World and international Disney parks. The vast majority of participants spoke almost exclusively about the American Disney parks, so the findings reflect fan views on the brand in the U.S. For this reason, discussion of responses and implications are focused on U.S. parks and themed entertainment.

4. Findings

4.1 *Fan reactions and coping mechanisms*

When asked to provide observations about the Disney parks closing in the early stages of the pandemic, most participants first reported they believed the closures were appropriate given the public health threat and applauded the company for looking out for cast members and guests. While some participants reported sadness, such as Jennifer (38F) who stated, "Sad. I understand why, and it was the right thing to do, but I missed going," others expressed pride in the company for doing the right thing and looking out for guests and cast members.

When addressing the societal impact of Disney closing their theme parks, participants again expressed both sadness and appreciation for the company leading the way in the early stages of the pandemic. Some participants discussed the negative impact on fans and society that the diversion of a Disney park was lost. For example, Minnie (66F) stated that the “closure of Disney is hard because it is a magical place and somewhere to forget problems and that has been taken away.” Other participants focused on the local economies where the U.S. parks are located. Anna (56F) wrote, “It has affected the economy of Southern California . . . It has affected the devoted annual passholders and frequent visitors by taking away their entertainment venue,” and Martha (33F) emphasized about Central Florida that “it’s detrimental financially because this is a hospitality-based company.”

Participants also highlighted how the closures drove home the severity of the pandemic and potentially helped people take COVID-19 more seriously. Bernard (70M) wrote “Quite coincidentally, we were there March 15th and flying out that night. Being there really drove home just how serious and drastic this all is.” Krystal (35F) stated, “I think when people see Disney is closed, they take things a little more seriously,” while Emmet (44F) wrote that she was “thankful and it leads others to take it seriously.” Finally, Marie (33F) indicated, “I think it helped some people realize it was serious. Disney doesn’t close for most things. The only other time they had shut down like this was for 9-11 so I think it spoke loudly about the current situation.”

Regarding coping mechanisms, some participants reported they were using the time to save money and planning for future trips. Several people disclosed that they were keeping up with the closures and reopenings on social media and watching Disney content to cope. For example, Jill (41F) wrote, “I’m watching Disney movies and following the reopening,” while Anna (56F) shared that she reads “the Disney Blog, follow(s) @DisneylandResort on Twitter,” and has used photos from past trips to pass time during the closures.

4.2 *Reopening the parks and resorts*

A majority of participants stated they believed Disney was doing a good job reopening the parks and served as a leader in industry standards. For example, Mary Ann (38F) wrote, “I think Disney management has a strong handle on procedures to try and is nimble enough to pivot if things aren’t working.” This line of thinking is consistent with fans and brand supporters choosing to highlight favorable comparisons with rival brands and out-groups (Havard, 2014; Havard et al., 2013). Fans of Disney parks are highly identified with the brand and hold it in higher regard than a rival brand such as Universal (Havard et al., 2021a; Havard et al., 2021b).

Almost all the participants also discussed their strong trust in the company to safely and effectively reopen the theme parks and resorts. For example, Adelyn (35F) stated, “I have complete trust in The Walt Disney Company to correctly set up the parks for social distancing.” Some participants highlighted their perception that Disney was a leader in the industry, and therefore would handle the situation better than competitors. Further, participants expressed confidence that Disney was doing the best they could regarding both the closing and reopening of their parks. To this point, Carolyn (43F) wrote, “I think Disney is handling it the best possible way given the strange circumstances. I don’t blame them for opening because they lost a lot of money.”

Some participants remarked on their trust of the company but expressed uncertainty related to how the public would respond to the reopening strategy. Specifically, Mary Ann (38F) wrote, “I have a high degree of trust in the company, but I have a low degree of trust in the customers.” Further, some participants identified that the company would not reopen if it would negatively impact their reputation with fans and consumers. Zip (36M) wrote, “They won’t do it if reopening will hurt their brand or damage their attendance,” and Anna (56F) stated, “I have a lot of trust in them. They know they are a target for lawsuits. They will do it right.”

5. Discussion

The current study provides important implications for practitioners and researchers; however, before proceeding, it is important to point out two potential limitations to the current study. First, the vast majority of participants were Caucasian and female. Future investigation should focus on a more diverse participant pool to further understanding of the pandemic’s impact on fans and consumers. Second, the current study asked participants to respond to open-ended questions, which was appropriate given the timing of data collection, but could have impacted the depth of responses, which can be addressed in future investigations.

5.1 Practical and research implications, and future avenues

Of the implications for practitioners and researchers, it is first significant to recognize the value of trust placed in a brand. Participants overwhelmingly expressed that they held high amounts of trust in The Walt Disney Company, and pleasure in their handling of the closures and planned reopenings. This supports social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) in that people can develop strong affiliation and identity with an in-group, and that is evident in the praise heaped on the company during summer 2020. It is also crucial to understand how the removal of a favorite activity from daily life can impact fans, and how organizations could engage with consumers during such times. For example, the Disney+ streaming service experienced great growth during the pandemic because people were looking for entertainment and the company worked to engage consumers by releasing high-profile titles either early or directly to the service (Lang, 2021). This finding supports the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) in that fans sought to engage with a favored brand in any way they could when their normal consumption habits were disrupted and constrained by the pandemic.

Researchers should conduct future studies that employ both social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) and the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) to better understand how consumers and fans seek engagement with favorite brands amid uncertain times. For instance, many participants indicated that they sought out ways to engage with the Disney brand via corporate or fan-produced content in order to find both diversion and support for the on-going pandemic. It is also essential that practitioners and researchers seek to identify a new normal and work to understand fan and consumer reactions and expectations. For example, investigating how fans and consumers have reacted to the parks being reopened will highlight important outcomes for stakeholders. As we move forward amid the pandemic and into the future, it is beneficial to better appreciate fan and consumer behavior in the themed entertainment industry, and the current findings assist in this endeavor.

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