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Let's 'Meetup' at the Theme Park

Edwin N. Torres
University of Central Florida, edwin.torres@ucf.edu

Marissa Orlowski
University of Central Florida, marissa.orlowski@ucf.edu

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Original Citation

Torres, E. N., & Orlowski, M. (2016). Let's 'Meetup' at the theme park. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, doi: 10.1177/1356766716634152

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Let's 'Meetup' at the theme park

Abstract

Many people enjoy theme park and other leisure experiences with their families; however, today a great number of single, geographically mobile individuals desire to partake in such experiences. 'Meetup' is the world's largest social network of local groups, and thus allows for both online and offline (in-person) interactions. Using an ethnographic approach, this study examines how individuals can enjoy activities centered on common activities, interests and opinions (AIO) via immersion in a 'Meetup' group over the course of a year. Notably, members visited with greater frequency, had less tolerance for long lines, and were more likely to attend special events, eat at specialty restaurants, and consume alcohol. Group members also exchanged travel advice and both contributed and detracted from the enjoyment of the theme park experience. Membership in this 'Meetup' group increased the frequency of visits and deeper exploration of the theme park resort, thus improving behavioral loyalty among annual pass holders. Managers can learn from these online communities to foster interactions among their guests and better target this new market.

Introduction

In recent years, the Internet has provided the space for the creation and expansion of various online groups, organizations, and voluntary associations. These groups, or online communities, are Internet-driven collectives of people who interact over time around a shared purpose or interest and thus can provide information, camaraderie, social support and entertainment to their members (Preece, 2000; Ren et al., 2007). Wang et al. (2002) posited that online communities fulfill member's functional needs, social needs, and psychological needs. Furthermore, they suggested that these communities offer potential for businesses to build their brand, customer relationships, increase revenues, and disseminate information in a cost-efficient way. Some online communities exist exclusively in the virtual realm. Nevertheless, organizations like 'Meetup' bridge the gap between virtual and face-to-face interactions. 'Meetup', the world's largest social network of local groups, is an online international community of groups that supports offline (in-person) interactions and allows members to find and join groups developed around a common interest (Meetup, 2015). Communities that are formed online and interact predominantly offline are referred to by some scholars as "electronic to face – E2F communities" (Williams et al., 2004). At the present time, 'Meetup' has 23 million members, over 216,000 groups, and over 580,000 monthly events, which members typically refer to as 'meetups' (Meetup, 2015). 'Meetup' groups are changing the way that individuals interact with and meet new friends and acquaintances.

'Meetup' and other online communities can furnish the opportunity for people with similar Activities, Interests, and Opinions (AIO) to form groups with the purpose of enjoying travel, hotel, restaurant, theme park, and other leisure experiences. Although much attention has been given to social media utilization over the past few years, 'Meetup' has received much less attention. Sessions (2010) is among a small group of researchers that studied the offline interactions of online

communities. In her research, she highlighted the potential for both strong and weak ties to emerge from such events. Furthermore, she demonstrated that individuals who attended offline events were more active contributors in the virtual group, were less likely to stop contributing, and favored interaction with those people they have met in-person (Sessions, 2010). Shen and Cage (2015) posited that 'Meetup' groups can bring about the benefit of enhancing bonding social capital; however, such bonding can make it more difficult for new members to be accepted in the community. Aside from a few studies that examine 'Meetup' groups from a communication perspective, both scholars and managers have overlooked the potential of such communities for marketing purposes.

While the presence of others can serve to engage and enhance the hospitality experience, such interactions may also detract from its enjoyment. Pleasant guests with similar desires could enhance the theme park visit whereas obnoxious guests with different interests can easily ruin a well-planned event. Several researchers have studied the impact of customer-to-customer interactions (Martin and Pranter, 1989; Wikstrom, 1996; Wu, 2007; Huang and Hsu, 2010). This study expands upon that knowledge by examining such interactions within the context of a theme park 'Meetup' group. Furthermore, this research suggests that it is possible for positive customer-to-customer interactions to generate loyalty attitudes and behaviors for business organizations.

Theme parks present a unique experience where guests interact with one another as they enjoy a variety of rides, shows, restaurants, and other amenities. Milman (2009) conducted interviews and subsequent surveys with both local residents and tourists about what they value in their theme park experience. He found that ride safety, cleanliness, quality of rides and attractions, and friendliness of staff were some of the most valued attributes to all visitors. Also noteworthy was that, as compared to tourists, local residents placed greater value on the wait times and value

for the price (Milman, 2009). In a similar vein, Geissler and Rucks (2011) analyzed the factors that accounted for guest satisfaction in a theme park setting within a period of ten years and found that guests placed emphasis on three service categories: overall park experience / value, park food quality / variety, and park cleanliness / atmosphere.

Customer-to-customer interactions can be of great consequence for businesses, as is having a core group of loyal customers. Loyal customers can provide a steady stream of cash flow that, all things being equal, can make a business profitable. Despite the fact that most businesses desire to create long-term relationships with their customers, this can often be a challenge in today's competitive marketplace. This study seeks to expand upon the existing knowledge of customer loyalty by studying annual pass holders at a popular theme park resort. Their choice of activities, spending patterns, and attitudes towards the organization are explored in further detail throughout this ethnography.

This research studied individuals who joined a 'Meetup' group related to visiting a popular theme park resort in Florida, USA in order to better understand these E2F communities and their potential for the hospitality and tourism industries. The purpose of the study was to explore the consumer behaviors, guest experience, and customer-to-customer interactions among theme park visitors. Furthermore, this research focused on single visitors with similar activities, interests, and opinions (AIO). Thus, the following research objectives were proposed:

1. To examine customer-to-customer interactions and their effects on the enjoyment of the hospitality experience
2. To assess customer preferences, spending patterns, and other consumer behaviors in a theme park setting

3. To ascertain the potential for 'Meetup' to group individuals based on Activities, Interests, and Opinions (AIO)

Literature Review

Customer-to-customer interactions

Although scholars and managers have placed great emphasis on the internal actions of an organization in pursuit of customer satisfaction, less attention has been given to customer-to-customer interactions. However, recognizing that customers can enhance or detract from the enjoyment of various hospitality products and services, academicians began to explore this area of research (Martin and Pranter, 1989; Wikstrom, 1997; Wu, 2007; Huang and Hsu, 2010). Martin and Pranter (1989) conducted one of the earliest studies on customer-to-customer interactions, positing that customers influence each other's experience through verbal exchanges, appearance, and demeanor. Consequently, they proposed the concept of 'compatibility management', defining it as:

> "a process of first attracting homogeneous customers to the service environment, then actively managing both the physical environment and customer-to-customer encounters in such a way as to enhance satisfying encounters and minimize dissatisfying encounters" (Martin and Pranter, 1989:7).

There are various factors that can determine the impact of customer-to-customer interactions, including the specific service environment and the heterogeneity of customers. Martin and Pranter (1989) proposed that such interactions are more critical when customers are in close physical proximity to each other, when verbal interaction is more likely, and when customers are engaged in numerous and varied activities. Interactions are also critical when the service environment attracts a heterogeneous customer mix, the core service requires compatibility, and

customers must occasionally wait for the service. In support of this notion, Johnson and Grier (2013) suggested that elements of cultural compatibility, inter-group anxiety, and cross-group contact can affect a customer satisfaction within a service encounter.

Customer-to-customer interaction can also impact guest satisfaction. Homogeneity among customers has been found to have a positive impact on the evaluation of fellow travelers regarding their own satisfaction (Wu, 2007). Additionally, Wu (2007) proposed that travel companies can actively manage their customer-to-customer interactions by appropriately grouping customers with similar characteristics (homogeneity), communicating the code of behavior prior to the start of the trip, and actively preventing dysfunctional customer behavior from multiplying. A related stream of research suggests that customers can be co-producers of products and services (Wikstrom, 1996). Wikstrom (1996) also posited that if customers have a great deal of interaction with the producer, their feedback could influence the design, production, and marketing of a product or service.

Customer-to-customer interaction can be of even greater importance in settings that offer many opportunities for interpersonal connections. Kasavana et al. (2010) conducted research on social media and discovered that hotels have used social networking to help guests interact with one another before a stay and create contacts to socialize with during their visit. Levy and Hassay (2005) proposed that tourism destinations can learn from companies with tangible products, which have successfully established brand communities. Torres (2015) studied the customer-to-customer interactions of young travelers in the context of a European tour and noted that members had the potential to both enhance and diminish the service experience. Furthermore, he posited that the young travel segment is not as homogeneous as previously conceived and that significant differences in Activities, Interests, and Opinions (AIO) existed within members. Galloway (2002)

segmented theme park visitors based on psychographics and introduced three attitude dimensions: enjoyment of nature, escape stress, and sensation seeking. Consequently, it is possible for people with an interest in one attraction to have different interests and derive different benefits from a visit.

This study seeks to gain a better understanding of the customer-to customer interactions in the setting of a 'Meetup' group with emphasis on theme parks. During the observation period, members spent a significant amount of time together. As part of their experience, members shared the service space and participated in various group activities. Considering prior research, such a setting is likely to make the customer-to-customer interaction critical to the overall enjoyment.

The theme park experience

For many travelers, a theme park is synonymous with a great vacation. Numerous interactions with employees, technologies and other guests comprise the overall guest experience. Seeking to identify the most relevant attributes to theme park visitors, Milman (2009) conducted interviews and subsequent surveys with both local residents and tourists. His research revealed that ride safety, cleanliness, quality of rides and attractions, and friendliness of staff were some of the most valued attributes to all visitors. Based on the findings, factors were clustered and some of the main categories included: a) entertainment variety and quality, b) courtesy, cleanliness, safety, and security, c) food variety and value for money, and d) quality of theming and design. In a similar vein, Geissler and Rucks (2011) analyzed the factors that accounted for guest satisfaction in a theme park setting within a period of ten years. Results revealed that guests placed emphasis on three service categories: a) overall park experience / value, b) park food quality / variety, and c) park cleanliness / atmosphere. In exploring the attributes that impact the theme park experience in China, Milman et al. (2012) discovered that some of the key features included: staff knowledge,

safety of roller coasters, security of the park, ticket price, creativity, merchandise pricing, and level of theming. Pikkemaat and Schuckert (2007) studied the factors that account for success and failure of theme parks. Their research stressed the importance of quality, safety and security, range of options, customer emotions, functionality and infrastructure, and branding as positive elements in the theme park experience. In contrast some of the factors of a failing theme park included not meeting customer expectations, missing authenticity, lack of repeat visits, and inappropriate location of the park.

Johns and Gyimóthy (2002) studied the subjective experiences of families within a theme park. Their research revealed that for many adults, revisiting the theme park was a "must do", as it offered souvenirs, nostalgia and memories of when they were younger. Conversely, another group of adults were "putting up" with the park for the sake of their children, even though they didn't have a strong desire to be in the theme park in the first place. Nevertheless, Johns and Gymothy (2002) posited that parents view the theme park as a "safe" place to take their children. McClung (1991) explored some of the differences between visitors and non-visitors of theme parks via a national telephone survey in the United States. His research revealed that park visitors were younger, tended to have children under 18, and were more affluent than non-visitors. Seeking to uncover consumer's selection of theme park vacations, Kemperman et al. (2000) revealed that theme park choice is driven by both variety-seeking behaviors and seasonality. In support of the need for novelty, Cornelis (2010) tested the impact of new attractions on theme park attendance. His research concluded that the creation of an attraction helped drive theme park attendance for two years past its inception.

Tsang et al. (2012) presented the case of Hong Kong Disneyland, which experienced difficulty when opening their third theme park. The authors sought to provide a solution by

focusing on quality and developing a service quality measurement instrument for theme parks. For these purposes, Tsang et al. (2012) adapted the SERVQUAL model, thus creating THEMEQUAL. Findings demonstrated that customers were surprised by the physical outlook the physical / product-based features of the park. However, negative gaps were found in the dimensions "responsiveness and access" and "empathy", thus revealing that the performance of staff was below the expectations of visitors. The multiple regression analysis showed that "responsiveness and access" was the best predictor of visitor satisfaction followed by "empathy" and "assurance". In contrast, "tangibles", "reliability", and "courtesy" didn't have a significant influence on visitors' satisfaction. Therefore, the attitude and performance of the theme park staff were the key drivers in generating high levels of satisfaction. Consequently Tsang et al. (2012) concluded that visitors desire staff members who react quickly and are accessible, and that provide caring service and individual attention to visitors.

The theme park experience has the potential to elicit various emotions in guests. Conscious of this reality, Bigné et al. (2005) tested two models of guests' emotions within the theme park setting. The first model posited that positive arousal led to positive disconfirmation; in other words, that affect came before cognition. The second model had positive disconfirmation as an antecedent of positive arousal; in other words, that cognition about the theme park led to guest affect. The authors concluded that the second model better predicted consumer behavior in theme parks. Furthermore, it was revealed that pleasure and satisfaction influenced guest loyalty (Bigné et al., 2005). Additional study of customer emotions within a theme park setting was also undertaken by Ma et al. (2013). The authors examined how the emotion of delight was elicited using the cognitive appraisal theory (CAT). Accordingly,

"Based on CAT, delight is elicited when tourists evaluate an experience as appetitive and goal congruent on the dimension of goal congruence; caused by an object or circumstance rather than oneself or others in the dimension of agency; as certain on the dimension of certainty; as unexpected in the dimension of novelty, and as goal relevant" (Ma et al., 2013: 367).

Methodology

Research design

The purpose of the present research was to explore consumer behavior and customer-to-customer interactions within a social group assembled through the 'Meetup' website as it related to the theme park experience. Although various research methods might serve such purpose, an ethnographic approach was found to be especially suited given the ability to freely observe customer-to-customer interactions and group dynamics. Furthermore, given the exploratory nature of research with 'Meetup' groups, a qualitative approach was deemed particularly appropriate. The process of conducting ethnographic research allowed the authors to obtain rich data by taking into account the perspective of the theme park visitors engaged in the 'Meetup' group. Bowen (2008:1515) argued that "participant observation is a technique that, in certain circumstances, can lead to a fuller understanding of thoughts, actions, and feelings than some more conventional research techniques." Although the purpose of ethnography is not to provide statistical generalization, this approach does allow researchers to conduct analytical generalization (Bowen, 2008). While statistical generalization refers to the process of drawing inferences from the data to the population of interest, analytical generalization refers to the process of evaluating the findings

from a qualitative study against theory and determining the extent to which theory may be extended or refined (Eisenhart, 2009; Yin, 2010).

Dewalt and Dewalt (2002:1) define participant observation as "a method in which the researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as a means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture." Spradley (1979) categorized ethnographic research in a grid containing two axes: the insider's language (i.e. informant) and the outsider's language (i.e. researcher). Accordingly, an ethnography that uses primarily the insider's language can be categorized as an "ethnographic novel". At the other extreme, an ethnography consisting predominantly of the outsider's language was themed an "ethnocentric description". This research falls in the middle, and thus the findings are presented as a "standard ethnography" (Spradley, 1979).

Research setting

Access to the group was obtained by creating an account with the 'Meetup' website, and requesting to join a group with interests in theme parks. Like many of the members, the first author owned an annual pass to the theme park resort. This group will be referred to as 'theme park meet' (TPM) from this point forward. The group was located in Florida, USA. While most members resided in the same city as the theme park, a few members lived in other cities within the state of Florida and visited the theme park resort on weekends while staying at one of the city's hotels and resorts. All the individual names mentioned throughout this paper are pseudonyms in order to protect the anonymity of group members.

Ethical considerations

This ethnography was conducted in a covert fashion. Lugosi (2006) suggested that the choice of covert versus overt data collection should take into account the fieldwork context, the

relationships between the researcher and the subjects, and the nature of the study. Furthermore, conducting research in a covert fashion may also grant access to information that would otherwise be denied to the researcher (Lugosi, 2006). Another key advantage of covert data collection is the potential for more candid responses and interactions. In discussing the ethics of covert participant observation of tour groups, Lugosi and Bray (2008:471) stated: "the public nature of the walking tours, and the practice of tour guiding meant that the study was less vulnerable to criticisms of invasion of privacy". In a similar fashion, events that took place as part of TPM were typically held in a theme park, restaurant setting or other public location. Additionally, at the close of the observation period, TPM members were debriefed as to the existence and nature of the research study.

Data collection strategies

The first author observed this group for a period of one year. During this time, the primary researcher attended 27 official events and 10 unofficial events. Events ranged in attendance, with some events having as few as four members and others as many as 30 attendees. Unofficial events took place for a subsection of the group via personal invitation.

Since covert participant observation was deemed the most appropriate strategy to collect data, the first author operated as a complete participant within in the group, meaning that he concealed his role as a researcher and fully engaged in the group and group events (Creswell, 2009). During this time, he maintained a notebook to capture field notes after each event as outlined by Bowen (2002). Photographs of the events were also collected and reviewed to aid the first author's recollection of specific events. Finally, the 'Meetup' site was reviewed after events to confirm event details and participants.

Data analysis procedures

Throughout the data collection period, the field notes were typed and organized chronologically. Since data collection and data analysis are simultaneous processes in qualitative research, the field notes were reviewed and coded periodically throughout the observation period. At the close of the observation period, the field notes, photographs, and codes were used to form clusters and meaning units (Moustakis, 1994). More specifically, the researchers adopted various forms of analysis including domain analysis and taxonomic analysis, following Spradley's (1979) guide for ethnographic inquiry. Theme analysis was also conducted and followed guidelines proposed by Dewalt and Dewalt (2002) for analyzing data from participant observation.

Data quality and verification

In order to ensure the quality of observations, the researchers took various safeguards. These additional steps are consistent with the framework proposed Guba and Lincoln (1981). Accordingly, it was proposed that quality observations in qualitative research have the following characteristics: confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability. With regards to ensuring the confirmability of the study, the researchers employed a variety of methods to take field notes and aid with the recollection process. First, the primary author took brief notes via smartphone. Second, more extensive field notes were later documented using word processing software. Third, the primary author reviewed still photographs and posts through the 'Meetup' site in order to help with recollection of people and events. Fourth, the primary author re-read the notes several times and reflected upon the data. Finally, the primary author shared the field notes with the second author in order to provide additional perspective and verify that the conclusions drawn from the data were warranted. With regards to credibility, the first author spent a prolonged amount of time following the 'Meetup' group. As previously stated, 37 events (27 official, and 10

unofficial) were observed, each averaging approximately 5 hours, for a total of 185 hours of direct observation throughout the year. Consequently, the first author was able to observe similar behaviors repeated in various occasions. The first author also employed source triangulation by inquiring about the opinions of various members. Peer debriefing took place between the first and second author after the observations were taken. Both authors examined the field notes together, challenge any assumptions, and come to final conclusions.

Dependability was ensured by overlapping methods and time triangulation. Observations were made in conjunction with informal interviews in order to obtain similar information. Data was also gathered at different points. The transferability of this research is enhanced by giving a 'thick description', in other words ensuring detailed accounts of the information, especially in the results section. Finally, the researchers have presented the viewpoints of various members as they interacted with one another. In addition to the traditional elements sought in a quality qualitative research, the authors took extra precautions not to present a biased account of events. Throughout the course of the data collection and analysis, the authors asked themselves whether any of their own personal characteristics, including culture, religion, age, travel experience, and education, were creating a biased perspective.

Findings

Frequent visitors and guest experience

Most of the members of the TPM group held annual passes to the theme park resort. Activities took place almost every week. While all members did not attend every event, the core group participated on a regular basis. Consequently, most used their annual passes every other week. Given that the members visited the park on a frequent basis, were likely to renew their annual passes once they expired, and made several expenditures inside the theme park resort, it could be stated that members were behaviorally loyal. A key question that might emerge is whether

members became loyal because of the group or whether the group perpetuated the loyalty behaviors? The authors argue that although most members were loyal owing to their annual pass purchase, the interactions they held with others promoted more repeat visits, exchange of information, and positive memories which could perpetuate their loyalty behaviors and attitudes.

In exchange for their loyalty, the theme park resort offered a few perks such as merchandise, restaurant, and hotel discounts, as well as previews of new attractions before they were made available to the general public. It is noteworthy to state that many such benefits had a several restrictions (i.e. a restaurant discount might be available for lunch, but not for dinner). While the theme park resort management might consider such benefits sufficient, TPM members were often dissatisfied with the discounts they received and recalled how the discounts used to be more generous in previous years. In one occasion Laura brought up the subject of pass holder perks during conversation and found ample agreement among members that perks should be more generous. The level of disposable income varied among group members, and based on their occupations, ownership of property, education, and other characteristics, the researchers would categorize most members between middle and middle upper class. Some members spent money more freely in food, beverage, and merchandise while others would bring beverages from home in an effort to minimize expenditures. Purchases in the theme park resort often required customers to pay a premium (as compared to similar items outside), which some members were willing to pay.

Members enjoyed visiting the park, liked the themes, typically only held annual passes to this specific theme park resort, and held this theme park resort in higher regard than its competitors. Consequently, it can be stated that most members were attitudinally loyal. Furthermore, annual pass holders thrived on variety, often exploring the places that the average tourist overlooked. Therefore, membership in TPM helped avoid the sensation of satiation with the theme park and its

attractions. It was not uncommon to visit a theme park for a few hours to catch a few rides, go to a restaurant, and watch the evening fireworks. This contrasted with the average tourist (non-annual pass holder), who would arrive to the parks in the early morning, ride every attraction and leave exhausted when the park closed for the day. TPM members often had less tolerance for long lines and tried to strike a balance between going to the most popular rides (which had the longest wait times) and least popular rides (which had the shortest wait times) in order to maximize both time utilization and enjoyment.

Many tourists visiting the theme park resort would spend part of the day in one park and the remainder in another park. This practice, called "park hopping", allows guests to experience a greater number of parks in a lesser amount of time. However, park hopping can be a less than optimal strategy, as guests sacrifice valuable time traveling from one park to another and often visit popular rides at peak times, thereby increasing wait times. In contrast, TPM members seldom visited more than one park in a day. It was also noted that pass holders visited the park predominantly on weekends. Consequently, this research posits that the value proposition of annual pass holders is different than that of regular visitors. Many in the group felt that if they visited the park at least seven days in a year, they would make up the total cost of the ticket. Since most members exceeded seven visits, they often felt that they obtained a return on their investment. TPM members also enjoyed consuming alcoholic beverages in the parks and resorts, possibly more than the average guest. This was evidenced by the choice of venues and events for some of the group's activities.

TPM members exchanged ideas and tips about how to maximize the resort experience. They often prided themselves in knowing the best times to go on a ride, the best place to watch the fireworks, or the best restaurant to eat. One of the group members, Zach, always wanted to try the

various restaurants available throughout the theme park resort. He would make reservations months in advance and coordinate with the group to ensure attendance. These dining events were enjoyed by most members, but some eventually voiced budgetary concerns given the frequency and cost of such experiences. Furthermore, Zach's preference for steakhouses was not always the first choice of two other regular members who were vegetarians.

Special events were key in attracting annual pass holders to the theme park resort. When there was a special event taking place, or a new attraction opening up, an event would be created through the 'Meetup' site. Such events often attracted a larger number of members. Additional out-of-town members, who came for the weekend specifically for the theme park resort's special events, joined the core members. When the theme park resort did not have a special event, group leaders would create their own events, such as a bar crawl through the various hotels in the theme park resort or a scavenger hunt at one of the parks. In light of this, it can be argued that the element of novelty can cause repeat patronage and avoid customer satiation, even while visiting the same location or business. On one occasion, Brett mentioned that some of his friends asked him whether he got tired of the theme park resort. However, he argued that given the variety of attractions, restaurants, bars, hotels, and events, it was difficult to get bored.

In light of the differences noted in consumer behaviors between annual pass holders and tourists to the theme park, it could be argued that these two groups display substantially different behaviors, have different objectives, and display differing spending patterns. Some of the behaviors exhibited by pass holders are contrasted to those of the average tourist in Table 1:

>>>Insert Table 1 Here<<<

Customer-to-customer interactions

The interactions among theme park meet members served to both enhance and detract from the enjoyment of the experience. Most members were single and thus the group provided the opportunity to enjoy one of their favorite activities – visiting the theme park resort – in the company of others. Many members admitted having visited the theme park by themselves in the past. However, they found the experience of visiting the park with others more pleasant. People exchanged information about various aspects of the experience including attractions, dining, and special events. Furthermore, the group allowed them to meet other people who shared similar activities, interests, and opinions (AIO). The existence of 'meetups' attracted members to the theme park resort even on occasions when they would consider an alternate activity. In creating this group, Charles, the group organizer, said:

> "TPM is a great place for fans to meet up both online and at the parks. I started this group when I first moved to the area and bought an annual pass to the parks. I soon realized that most of my friends were either unable to get into the parks, or just uninterested. I grew tired of visiting the parks alone, so I decided to create a social network where people just like me could find other fans to visit the parks with. TPM is not only for (park name deleted) fans, but also fans of other area parks. We hold regular meetups at the theme parks, and often at local restaurants or bars"

Many 'meetup' groups have stated descriptions and rules. One of the stated rules of the TPM website required members of this particular group to be between the ages of 25-48; however most members were in their 30s. On a few occasions, the first author observed some members breaking this rule by bringing people outside of that age range to an event. On two occasions Brett bought a friend who clearly surpassed the upper age range. Although no one made a comment

directly to him, several group members complained amongst themselves about this incident. Similar situations took place when a group member would bring their children with them. The group considered this uncivil, as it changed the dynamics of their experience. In one instance Zoe commented that when people bring their children, members would have to monitor their conversations to make sure they were child-appropriate. Although Zoe had children herself, she considered the act of bringing children without first asking permission from the group organizer an uncivil action.

The group did not have a stated attendance policy; however, confirming one's attendance and not showing up was frowned upon. If this took place repeatedly, members risked being deleted from the group by the organizer. If a personal invitation was made to an unofficial event, such a celebrating a member's birthday, attendance was almost mandatory. Most members of the group were single and thus opportunities emerged for dating. When this took place, established group members would take note and hold conversations. If a new member arrived whom established members considered desirable, they would encourage each other to date. It was also observed that female members of the group were very protective of the male members. If a male member dated a female newcomer, the established women in the group would investigate the new female and make she was appropriate for the established member.

Members also committed small acts of customer deviance. For example, many annual pass holders knew that parking at certain resort hotels would minimize the time associated with entering the parks. Therefore, some members lied at the hotels' security gates, stating that they were having dinner at a restaurant in order to gain access to the parking lot. In a similar manner, one park within the resort sold refillable soft drink mugs. Members quickly realized that they could have one group mug, which they would then use to refill their own personal cups, thus saving money spent on soft

drinks. Generally, members felt no remorse about such actions, as they felt they already spent a significant amount of money in the parks, having purchased an annual pass and spending significant sums of money in food and beverage throughout the year.

Domain analysis

In order to uncover deeper meanings within the data, the researchers conducted domain analysis. Spradley (1979) described domain analysis as a type of preliminary analysis that focuses on uncovering the names for things and the relationships within each of the terms. There are different kinds of semantic domain analyses including: strict inclusion, spatial, cause-effect, rationale, location for action, function, means-end, sequence, and attribution (Spradley, 1979). Domain analysis allows researchers to study words, phrases, and objects using the informant's language. Additionally, domain analysis can be seen as an initial step to developing a taxonomy and other kinds of analyses of ethnographic data. The authors include a detailed list of their domain analysis in Appendix 1.

Taxonomic analysis

According to Spradley (1979:137), taxonomy is "a set of categories organized on the basis of a single semantic relationship." A taxonomic analysis can take a variety of formats including box diagrams, lines and nodes, and outlines. For this study, lines and nodes were used to demonstrate the relationship of key terms and themes. Figure 1 demonstrates the relationships among the categories of this study in a graphical format.

>>>Insert Figure 1 Here<<<

Theme analysis

One of the most popular approaches to analyzing qualitative data is to code the data for themes. Although the aim of this paper was not to conduct qualitative content analysis, themes did

emerge over the course of the study and throughout the analysis of field notes. Dewalt and Dewalt (2002:173) describe the process of coding for themes with participant observation as follows:

> "The analyst reads and rereads the notes and interview transcripts, on the lookout for recurring ideas, patterns, and concepts. Gradually (or quickly), the analyst begins to abstract a number of ideas and words contained in the text into a single concept, or a small set of related concepts."

A number of themes emerged throughout the course of this ethnography. One of the major themes was that of customer loyalty. Most members held an annual pass to the theme park resort. However, due to TPM, members visited the theme park resort more frequently in order to spend time with their new friends and explore new events and activities. Members exchanged information and encouraged deep exploration of the theme parks, the resorts associated with the theme parks, specialty restaurants, and other facilities. A second major theme emerging from this research is that of the consumer behaviors exhibited by frequent visitors (i.e. annual pass holders) versus those of the average tourists. It was noted that frequent visitors visit more often, but do so for shorter periods of time. Annual pass holders who were part of TPM had less tolerance for long lines, a greater propensity to consume alcohol in the theme park, and were similarly more likely to explore new restaurants, festivals, and special events. Finally, a third major theme surrounds the idea of reasons to join 'Meetup' in general and the TPM group in particular. Members joined seeking to make new friends and explore common interests. The need to belong was further motivated by moving to a new city or a recent life event, such as divorce, that created a gap in the social circle. Similarly, flexible work arrangements, leisure time, disposable income and similar demographics facilitated the creation of a social group made up of new acquaintances with a common interest in theme parks.

Discussion

The theme park experience is often enjoyed in the company of family. Today, given the large size of the single travel market, many are enjoying this experience with friends. E2F communities like 'Meetup' help to facilitate this process. In this study, 'Meetup' allowed group organizer Charles to connect with other people who shared his interest in theme parks. While Charles and other 'Meetup' members have taken advantage of the E2F environment, traditional marketing efforts have not. Furthermore, few organizations have viewed 'Meetup' groups and potential targets of their marketing efforts. The authors argue that 'Meetup' has the potential not only to attract members towards certain activities, but to foster a long-term relationship with the firm and other customers.

Many firms have paid attention to online review sites such as Trip Advisor and social networking sites such as Facebook. However, many firms have overlooked the opportunity presented by E2F communities. In contrast to review sites, 'Meetup' allows for the creation of groups according to member's activities, interests, and options (AIO). This could present a tool for marketers to find new niches and effectively cater to them offering customized products, packages, and special events. During this study, it was observed that a few small businesses outside of the theme park, such as local pubs and bars, catered to such groups by offering special events, discounts, and other perks. However, many organizations have yet to take advantage of this trend, thus missing an opportunity to reach new markets in a customized manner.

Consistent with the construct of compatibility management proposed by Martin and Pranter (1989), businesses should endeavor to bring together people of similar interests to ensure a maximum enjoyment of the service experience. However, managing compatibility can sometimes

overwhelm service providers. 'Meetup' offers a unique opportunity for businesses, in that it shifts the onus of compatibility away from the firm and onto the 'Meetup' organizations, thereby presenting businesses with already-compatible groups to target.

Theme park operators and others should ensure that the perks of loyalty are relevant and desired by their core customers. During the observation period, it was noted that members desired to have larger merchandise and food and beverage discounts. While such perks might present costs for the organization, they could potentially make core customers spend more frequently in such products and services. Discounts such as these could be utilized during low seasons or special events to drive traffic and increase frequency of purchase. Theme parks and other entertainment venues can offer special events for their annual pass holders. Furthermore, they could experiment with creating their own social media platforms in order to facilitate socialization prior to and during the vacation or leisure experience.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are similar to those inherent to qualitative research as a method of inquiry (Creswell, 2007). While the year-long observation period allowed the first author to interact with several members of TPM, this study focused on one specific 'Meetup' group with the singular interest of visiting theme parks. Thus, the findings may not be broadly generalizable to all 'Meetup groups' or to all non-tourist theme park visitors. Additionally, observations and field notes were only captured for the events that the first author was able to attend. Although this averaged three events per month, there were other TPM events scheduled during the year of observation. Observations from these other events could have added to the richness of the data offered additional insights into the nature of TPM, theme park visitors, and 'Meetup' as an organization. Finally, the covert approach to participant observation also presents a limitation. In

order to maintain an active, yet covert, role within the TPM group, the first author was unable to debrief group members after each event. Instead, debriefing took place at the end of the observation period, which limited the ability to capture immediate reactions to events that occurred early in the observation period.

Future Research

The findings of this study revealed that loyalty emerged as a theme. Using the findings about the basic consumer behaviors of the single, non-tourist theme park visitor as a starting point, future research should more deeply explore loyalty behaviors and attitudes of this customer group and the implications for theme park operators. Moreover, the authors posit that theme park operators can benefit from engaging with 'Meetup' groups and considering the unique needs of the 'Meetup' customer. Since the opinions of theme park operators were not captured in the present study, future research could also explore theme park-oriented 'Meetup' groups from the operator perspective in order to derive a deeper understanding of the potential for synergy between the theme parks and this market segment. Finally, research into 'Meetup' as a gateway for other hospitality organizations to attract and target a niche market would be beneficial.

Conclusion

The consumer behaviors of TPM members differed from those of the larger tourist base of the theme park resort. Members were more likely to have an annual pass, to visit more often, to spend money in specialty restaurants, and to consume more alcohol. It was also noted that individuals shared travel tips and encouraged each other to try different experiences within the theme park resort. Consequently, members fostered continued loyalty behaviors amongst themselves. Behavioral loyalty was observed in that members renewed their annual passes, visited often, and made purchases inside the theme park resort. Attitudinal loyalty was observed in that

individuals liked the park, thought it was unique, and held it in higher regard than other theme parks. By increasing members' knowledge base and providing companionship during the visit, TPM created excitement among its members. Furthermore, members thrived on variety and having a group that encouraged exploration of new activities within the theme park resort and created their own themed events helped to enhance the experience, encourage more frequent visits, and avoid satiation. It should also be noted that some interactions can lead to conflict, and thus managing conflicts within such groups can be of critical importance. In conclusion, today's geographically mobile, single individuals create a great opportunity for marketers of hospitality and leisure experiences. By examining the consumer behaviors of members who partake in 'meetups', the researchers propose that E2F communities can be better utilized by organizations to target customers and ensure guest compatibility on the basis of similar Activities, Interests, and Opinions.

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