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## 'It's An Accessible World After All': Evaluation of Amusement Park Accessibility and Accommodations for Guests with Disabilities

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Running head: AMUSEMENT PARK ACCESSIBILITY

Eastern Kentucky University

‘It’s An Accessible World After All’: Evaluation of Amusement Park Accessibility and  
Accommodations for Guests with Disabilities

Honors Thesis  
Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the  
Requirements of HON 420  
Spring 2020

By  
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Mentor  
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**Abstract**

It's An Accessible World After All: Evaluation of Amusement Park Accessibility and  
Accommodations for Guests with Disabilities

Morgan Carl

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The word “disability” is defined as, “A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities” (Brennan, p. 1, 2013). In order to provide more inclusive environments for individuals with various disabilities, the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed and passed by George H. Bush in 1990 which supported their natural human rights and prevented discrimination. However, any architectural structures built before the passing of this act may be inaccessible and cause segregation due to the lack of Universal Design (UD) for people requiring special needs, which includes a handful of long-standing amusement parks. Therefore, it was hypothesized that a majority of U.S. amusement parks will be inaccessible and lack diverse accommodating services to create an inclusive environments for persons with disabilities.

The hope of this particular study is to spread awareness and further inspire future research related to the prevalence of accessibility features of public spaces and how they impact individual daily occupations and basic human functions. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with three (3) participants in order to collect personal responses and feedback regarding accessibility features of various amusement parks. The theme parks discussed during the interviews included Coney Island, Holiday

World, attractions at the Indianapolis Zoo, and Walt Disney World. After the completion of semi-structured interviews, participant responses were coded using Qualitative Description Analysis that revealed four underlying themes.

*Keywords and Phrases:* disability, accessibility, accommodation, ADA, Universal Design, occupations, & Qualitative Description Analysis

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## **Background and Need**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to evaluate the accommodations provided for guests with disabilities at various theme parks in the United States. In addition, the results obtained from this study will be utilized to determine which amusement parks are best equipped with the proper services and resources to assist and accommodate guests with a range of diverse disabilities. Individuals with disabilities are typically overlooked because many people in modern society are uneducated in disability studies. Each individual experiences different strengths and challenges with their disability that may differ from others who possess the same impairment. This absence of knowledge prevents the empathetic mindset, which recognizes and appreciates the concept that everyone experiences life differently and should have equal opportunities to embrace what life has to offer. In order to provide more inclusive environments for these individuals, the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed and passed by George H. Bush in 1990. This Act supported the natural human rights of persons with disabilities by encouraging their participation within society and attempting to diminish acts of discrimination against this population within public settings (Edie, 2016). However, any architectural structures built before the passing of this act may be inaccessible and cause segregation due to the lack of Universal Design (UD), which includes the majority of long-standing amusement parks in the United States.

Theme parks, such as Walt Disney World, provide guests of all ages with the opportunity to spend their day(s) in a land filled with magic and make-believe through numerous attractions, live entertainment, delicious food and drinks, and shopping experiences with a single ticket as an entry key. Unfortunately, since many of these

theme parks were constructed prior to ADA regulations, they are not fully compliant for guests with special needs (Lemaster, 2015). This leads into the argument, which enforces that the presence or absence of accessible features in amusement and theme parks is directly related to the overall guest experience for individuals who require special accommodations.

Occupational Therapists (OTs) not only provide therapeutic interventions for individuals with various cognitive and physiological impairments, but they also act as advocates for this population and their basic rights as human beings. In previous decades, many architects and building contractors have paid little attention towards altering “exclusionary urban design tactics,” such as lack of crosswalks and street grid layouts (Schindler, 2015). However, in the 21st century, it is becoming more common for building contractors and engineers to consult OTs to ensure that these public spaces will be not only accessible, but also inclusive for individuals living with various cognitive and physiological disabilities.

### **Problem Statement**

Since a vast amount of theme parks in the United States were constructed prior to the implementation of ADA standards throughout the architecture of public environments and buildings, these spaces are not always fully accessible depending on the need required because of the type and severity of an individual’s impairment. “Accessibility” is defined as being, “A concept describing the encounter between an individual’s or a group’s functional capacity and the design and demands of the physical environment” (Iwarsson & Stahl, p. 60, 2003). The law states that public buildings built prior to the



passing of the ADA must be accommodated to comply with the basic requirements established. Although accommodating a building after initial construction can improve the accessibility of the space, it does not promote entire inclusivity for persons with disabilities. Adapting pre-existing buildings can pose numerous limitations, especially since the majority of the original architecture cannot be completely altered to accommodate the implementation of ADA rules and regulations. Therefore, many of these public spaces are inaccessible and exclusive for individuals with disabilities that may require specific accommodations and/or utilize mobility equipment in order to navigate the space.

### **Statement of Purpose**

This study's primary purpose is to evaluate the accommodations and accessibility features provided for guests with disabilities attending theme parks in the United States. The ultimate goal is to use these results as a baseline to inspire future construction of all-inclusive amusement parks to prevent the potential risk of segregation towards this group of individuals.

### **Research Question**

Are the majority of amusement and theme parks in the United States accessible for guests visiting them while possessing a cognitive and/or physiological impairment, and which amusement parks are more inclusive for a wide variety of disabilities?

### **Thesis Statement**

Some of the most popular amusement parks in the United States will deem inaccessible for guests possessing various disabilities due to their original construction beginning prior to the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Walt Disney

World, on the other hand, is the prime example of a completely accessible amusement park through providing its guests with an all-inclusive environment through incorporating Universal Design (UD) principles into its ADA regulated architecture, providing a plethora of assistive aids, and taking active measures to prevent discrimination against individuals with disabilities.

## **Literature Review**

### **Occupation and participation**

Human beings constantly strive to achieve independence, specifically when it comes to their functional ability. If someone is unable to independently perform daily occupations due to their physical/cognitive capabilities, it may further impact their health, well-being and self-identity (Case-Smith & O'Brien, 2015). A person is characterized by the tasks they perform and these occupations become an enormous part of who they are as individuals. According to Case-Smith & O'Brien, an occupation is defined as being, "the basic everyday activities that people perform each day for self-care, to care for others, to be productive, and to enjoy life" (p. 28, 2015). Every daily task can be categorized into one of the eight occupational domains predetermined by the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). These eight domains include Activities of Daily Living (ADLs), Instrumental Activities of Daily Living (IADLs), social participation, leisure, play, work, education, and sleep & restoration (AOTA, 2014).

Humans and their lives revolve around engaging in daily occupations, whether they are pleasurable or productive tasks. However, at some point in everyone's life, some difficulties and barriers will arise that may interfere with their occupational engagement (Bagby, Dickie & Baranek, 2012). Some of these engagement barriers are determined by

functional capabilities, while others result from the lack of physical access within public spaces. For individuals living with physiological and/or psychological impairments, public environments can provide countless challenges when attempting to access occupational opportunities within these spaces (Eisenberg, Vanderbom & Vasudevan, 2016). The inability for this population to maneuver and receive full access within these environments is an act of occupational injustice, specifically occupational marginalization. This subcategory of occupational injustice typically isolates and overlooks groups within society that are perceived as being “insignificant” and “peripheral” (Fisher & Hotchkiss, 2009). Unfortunately, one of these marginalized groups usually includes persons with disabilities.

The continuous marginalization and exclusion expressed against this community completely disregards their basic human rights within society, which inspired the establishment of social models of disability to spread awareness. Built on the assumption that society actively disables these individuals through barriers present within public environments and social policies/practices, the social model of disability acts to diminish this stigma and selfish mindset against people with disabilities (Woolley, 2013). Rather than viewing disability as a personal misfortune, society needs to further encourage occupational engagement by making these social spaces more suitable and accessible for this population. Participating in occupations is a critical “quality-of-life” measurement that is directly related to classification of function, disability, health and overall well-being for both individuals with and without disabilities (Silverman & Carr-Tyszka, 2017). Being deprived of this natural human desire not only isolates the individual, but also jeopardizes their physical and mental health.

### **Importance of Environment on Occupation**

Throughout American history, disabled children and adults have been identified as being a large under-represented group of individuals who access open public and play spaces (Woolley, 2013). This lack of knowledge and understanding has resulted in a shortage of inclusive public environments and transportation within various communities in the United States. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 removed many physical barriers amongst transportation routes and public environments, however, many significant barriers are still currently present that limit the access to these public amenities (Bezyak, Sabella & Gattis, 2017). The presence of these physical and societal barriers continues to exclude individuals with disabilities from fully engaging within and accessing these environments.

Human beings establish unique relationships with their environments, especially while performing activities and utilizing environmental affordances, or opportunities, present within these spaces (Pierce, 2003). The Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) Model is primarily concerned with this dynamic relationship to uncover optimal health and participation for persons with disabilities. Case-Smith and O'Brien elaborates further regarding this model by stating that, "Across the lifespan and in different environments, the three major components-- person, environment, and occupation-- interact continually to determine occupational performance. Increased congruence, or fit, among these components represents more optimal occupational performance" (2015, p. 32). Therefore, an environment and its physical accessibility features primarily determines the functional capacity and ability of individuals possessing disabilities who utilize these public amenities.

The opportunities available through the relationship between humans and their environments is continuous and constantly evolving. The “Theory of Environmental Press” is an adaptation theory that focuses on the interaction between personal variables, such as physical and functional health, and environmental press variables, which include the person’s social environments (Lichtenberg, MacNeill & Mast, 2000). Humans and their needs are constantly adapting, therefore, their environments need to follow suit as well. Without actively incorporating proper accommodations within built environments and public transportation services, limitations arise that prevent individuals with mobility equipment and functional impairments from receiving full benefits from these amenities (Eisenberg, Vanderbom & Vasudevan, 2016).

#### **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**

According to the 2011 U.S. Census, 36.3 million Americans possess one or more types of disabilities, which is equivalent to 1 in every 8 Americans (Bezyak, Sabella & Gattis, 2017). In modern society, this population has dramatically increased in number since the definition of disability has been expanded and U.S. health care has experienced enormous technological advances to extend the life expectancy of these individuals. The Americans with Disabilities Act is a comprehensive civil rights law that actively prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities for employment opportunities, public services, public accommodations, telecommunications and miscellaneous services that include retaliation and attorney fees (Brennan, 2013). For this specific study, there will be a primary focus on public services and accommodations under the ADA, since this includes amusement parks and the transportation provided through these establishments.

The ADA states that, “Title II applies to State and local government entities, and, in subtitle A, protects qualified individuals with disabilities from discrimination on the basis of disability in services, programs, and activities provided by State and local government entities” (“Americans with Disabilities Act: Title II Regulations”, 2010). This includes numerous public services that involve the legal right to use service animals in public spaces, providing interpreters during public events and meetings, using large fonts for informative public signs, and implementing accessible walkways leading up to various transportation outlets. Access to transportation is a requirement to achieve full participation in the surrounding community, and individuals with disabilities account for approximately 40% of Americans who struggle to receive adequate transportation services (Bezyak, Sabella & Gattis, 2017). This population faces more challenges while accessing public transportation than able bodied humans, which directly impacts their social participation within their community.

Public services, specifically transportation, are required to be fully accessible and have the proper services readily available to accommodate for individuals with disabilities. For public transportation, the Access Board is required to “issue minimum guidelines and requirements for accessible design to ensure that buildings, facilities, rail passenger cars, and vehicles are accessible, in the term of architecture and design, transportation, and communication, to individuals with disabilities” (“Americans with Disabilities Act: Title II Regulations”, 2010). This also includes transportation services provided through amusement park franchises, such as buses, trams, monorails, shuttles and trains. These services are required to have railings for mobility support, ramps and handicap seating areas for individuals with wheelchairs, wide enough doorways and

walkways for individuals to fit through while utilizing various mobility equipment (M/E), and many other accessibility requirements that allow individuals with disabilities to access these amenities.

Title III: Public Accommodation continues to prevent discrimination on the basis of, “...failure to make reasonable modifications in policies, practices, or procedures, when such modifications are necessary to afford such goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, or accommodations to individuals with disabilities” (Wagstaff, p. 348 2013). This ensures that all public businesses and establishments meet the basic ADA requirements and have accommodating services readily available to create an accessible environment for persons with disabilities. One of the most important policies that this specific title enforces is requiring that all places of public accommodations, including amusement parks, permit individuals to operate wheelchairs and other manually powered mobility equipment in public areas where pedestrians are allowed (Moorer, 2018).

This policy is crucial for guests with disabilities who attend amusement parks, especially since many impairments require the use of diverse mobility equipment to simply navigate from one space to another. Some amusement parks, such as Walt Disney World, even offer rental services for wheelchairs and other Electric Conveyance Vehicles (ECV's) for guests traveling long distances who were unable to bring their personal mobility devices (“WDW Guest services”, 2020). In addition to accommodating for physical impairments, Disney World and Disneyland also offer “Disney Show Translators” for guests with hearing impairments to receive the same experience and entertainment during performances as everyone else in the audience.

Theme and amusement parks are quite literally built around their unique rides and attractions to capture the attention of individuals of all ages. More amusement parks are expressing these accessibility concerns by incorporating more rides that have been purchased, designed, and installed to allow individuals using wheelchairs to easily transfer or accommodate the entire wheelchair on the ride itself (“Americans with Disabilities Act: Title III regulations”, 2017). Amusement parks not only possess attractions and thrilling rides, but also provide restaurants, merchandise stores, public restrooms, amphitheaters for live music performances, and many other amenities for guests to enjoy. Therefore, it is crucial that these amusement park environments are physically accessible and their employees are prepared to accommodate guests with a variety of special needs. These aspects will not only improve the accessibility of the environment, but will also provide persons with disabilities with the opportunity to take full advantage of all the services these franchises have to offer (“Mental and Physical Disability Law Reporter”, 2011).

### **Universal Design (UD)**

The article “Universal Design for a lifetime” defines Universal design as, “The design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design” (Mace as cited by Young et. al, p. 3, 2014). UD incorporates ADA guidelines into their principles and takes accessibility of public structures and buildings to the next level. These seven principles include equitable use, flexibility of use, simple and intuitive, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, and size and space for approach and use (Preiser



& Smith, 2011). Together, these principles create an all-inclusive environment for a wide spectrum of users.

These seven design concepts not only accommodate for accessibility, but they also prevent segregation of persons with disabilities through their design rendering these structures as “virtually invisible” (Young et. al, 2014). Until recently, architects and contractors have neglected to incorporate UD concepts into modern buildings because they can be more expensive and time consuming to construct rather than just abiding by minimum ADA standards. While complying with ADA regulations is a federal requirement, applying UD to modern architecture would prove to create the most accessible and inclusive environment for both persons without and with disabilities. Universal design not only impacts functional ability, but also possesses the ability to “lift human spirits when environments are designed to truly meet the needs of people who use them” (Nasar & Evans-Crowley, p.27, 2007). Therefore, UD encourages everyone to utilize all aspects of their environment and the affordances within these spaces.

Universal design includes, but is not limited to, inclusive and non-discriminatory design of various products, cars, architecture, urban environments, and even telecommunication platforms (Nasar & Evans-Crowley, 2007). Since a growing emphasis has been placed on UD over the past few decades, the services these elements can accommodate have expanded as well. For amusement parks specifically, more manufacturers are incorporating UD principles into the design of amusement ride vehicles. One patent in particular created amusement ride vehicles for an attraction at Universal Studios that included a unique seat design to accommodate riders in a diverse variety of wheelchairs (Volz, Brose, Chadwick & Manlove, 2000). This unique seat

design can retract and fold down, which creates a large space with wheelchair tie downs available that allow guests to remain seated in their wheelchair for the duration of the ride. Since this design is incorporated into *all* of the ride vehicles for this attraction, this perfectly represents universal design. There is no need to have a separate “handicap” ride vehicles to enable individuals with disabilities to ride the attraction. More amusement parks are progressively incorporating these inclusive vehicles into their attractions to appeal to a larger audience of guests.

Occupational therapists understand how structures available within the built environment can either support or inhibit performance and participation of all individuals, especially those with disabilities (Young et. al, 2014). Universal design is the most suitable way to ensure that consumer services and public environments are entirely inclusive. While the importance of these design elements continues to gain awareness, many amusement parks still neglect to incorporate these principles into new architecture, attractions, and other public amenities these franchises offer. Whether it is due to lack of financial means or inability to modify older architecture, the reluctance of amusement parks to provide services with UD elements only continues to exclude individuals with disabilities from participating within these environments.

### **Discrimination against Guests with Disabilities**

While some amusement parks are dedicated to create the most inclusive environment possible for its guests, this commitment is not upheld by other amusement parks such as Universal Studios, Six Flags, and Darien Lake Theme Park. Beard (2015), a practicing attorney who focuses on cases surrounding amusement and tourism, exposed four lawsuits involving these establishments because their employees lacked quality

disability training and discriminated against guests with special needs. Recreational design, which is most commonly expressed in theme parks, is a continuous challenge for these franchises because of the severe ADA liability risks they impose. Although recreational franchises must still comply with traditional ADA regulations, they fail to consider the “uneasy intersection between safety and access that arises with offering recreational experiences to guests” (Beard, p. 19, 2015). For example, in the case featuring Darien Lake Theme Park, a former U.S. Sergeant and double leg amputee was permitted to ride the “Ride of Steel roller coaster,” which reached a maximum height of 208 feet. Although he was granted access to ride the coaster, the operating employees were not properly trained and failed to inform him of the potential dangers that could be inflicted upon him. He was ejected from the car after the coaster was racing down the third hill and died instantly upon impact. These employees should have been trained to be equally concerned about his personal safety as well as avoiding discrimination against persons with disabilities.

The Universal Studios and two Six Flags cases dealt specifically with the segregation of persons with disabilities based on preconceived stereotypes. These guests were restricted from boarding roller coasters that they had previously ridden because the workers believed that allowing them on the attraction posed a “direct threat” to the safety of others. The ADA emphasizes, “...public accommodations may impose legitimate safety requirements that are necessary for safe operation. Safety requirements must be based on actual risks and not on mere speculation, stereotypes, or generalizations about individuals with disabilities” (as cited by Beard, p. 20, 2015). In all three lawsuits, park employees excluded guests with physical impairments from riding due to following the

blind recommendations established by the manufacturers. When these three manufacturers were questioned regarding details behind the restrictions the theme park employees enforced, they neglected to provide factual evidence to support the supposed “safety concern” behind the exclusion of select individuals from riding. Therefore, placing these new requirements on the attractions were stereotypical and selfish towards individuals with certain physical impairments. Modern amusement parks need to ensure that their employees are properly trained regarding how to interact with and accommodate guests with disabilities. Disability awareness training programs would prevent future discrimination and lawsuits from occurring.

### **The Evolution of Modern Amusement Parks**

Although individuals with disabilities and their rights are legally protected under various civil right laws, this population still struggles to achieve full integration into society (Hall, 2008). The main obstacle that separates these individuals from completely integrating is the built environments present in their communities. As previously mentioned, many of these environments still possess physical barriers that isolate people with disabilities. However, contractors of new amusement and theme parks in the United States have consciously shifted their architectural guidelines to establish more inclusive spaces. In 2018, Sesame Place was constructed in Langhorn, PA and was the first theme park to be designated as a Certified Autism Center. This establishment provides autism awareness and training programs to ensure its employees possess the proper knowledge, skills, temperament and expertise required to interact with families and children with special needs (“Sesame Place”, 2018). Families with loved ones who have special needs often have limited travel options when visiting amusement parks, which was recognized

by the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards (IBCCES). The IBCCES has been the industry leader in autism training for licensed healthcare professionals and educators around the world, and have partnered with franchises, such as Sesame Place, to create training and certification programs for the hospitality and travel industry (“Sesame Place”, 2018). Their main priority is to educate individuals who will be working individually with guests with disabilities to guarantee their safety and knowledge when assisting these individuals.

Other amusement parks, such as Walt Disney World, also encourage the involvement and participation of guests with special needs through providing a plethora of accommodations and assistive aids. Disney World Imagineers have labored endless hours to establish as many UD qualities as possible into the architectural design that spans the 30,000 acres of land that composes the Walt Disney World (WDW) Resort. Schinner (2018), who is chair of the Autism Speaks Cincinnati market and committee member for “diversity of all abilities in the workforce” through the Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce, outlines some of these structures on Disney property as the presence of at least one zero entry pool at every resort and water park, each parking lot having multiple shuttles that transport guests to the park entrances, motion activated front doors at every resort, and all resort buses and monorails being spacious enough for someone in a wheelchair and a mom with a double stroller to easily fit. These are just a handful of design features that Disney provides its guests to feel completely satisfied during their magical vacation.

Schinner (2018) highlights a wide variety of additional assistive devices available for guests visiting the WDW resort who may need to utilize these services throughout the

duration of their stay. After reading the entirety of her novel, it is apparent that the Walt Disney Company strives to go above and beyond to ensure that each and every guest feels included during their vacation. Social and physical environments are critical factors that can directly impact an individual's overall experience in public spaces. According to environmental experts Gitlin and Corcoran:

“The environment may evoke varying degrees of influence on daily performance depending on factors such as a person's level of cognitive and physical competency, the person's appraisals of role and environmental demands, and the characteristics of ongoing interactions or transactions that transpire within the environment” (as cited by Taylor, p. 156, 2018).

Disney Cast Members understand the pressing effect environments can inflict upon a person's occupations, otherwise known as the everyday tasks that people participate in, especially in overcrowded public areas.

Enormous crowds and long lines are inevitable when visiting these theme parks, which is why Disney World incorporated numerous “sensory spots” in all four parks (Schinner, 2018). These spaces are for everyone to enjoy, but also provide guests with cognitive impairments a more secluded area to escape to if they need a less stimulating environment to relax and recharge. Magic Kingdom has one of the best sensory spots, which is an isolated island lying between Liberty Square and Adventureland called “Tom Sawyer Island.” It is an easy attraction to miss because it appears to simply be a plot of land filled with greenery and is only accessible by boat. However, the trees act as a curtain surrounding a hidden world filled with playgrounds and small hiking trails

accompanied with some peace and quiet. The WDW Resort is also completely ADA compliant, has wheelchairs and electric conveyance vehicles (ECV) for rent at each park and resort, allows approved service animals on property and even permits them on certain rides, distributes Disability Access Services (DAS) passes for individuals with developmental disabilities to decrease waiting in queue lines, provides access to adult changing tables available at every First Aid Center, and the official Walt Disney World website has charts available which include sensory qualities present during every attraction in all four parks and a list of rides that allow individuals to remain seated in their wheelchairs and ECV's (Schinner, 2018).

### **Methods**

A qualitative narrative approach was utilized in order to determine the level of accessibility and accommodations available in various amusement parks throughout the United States. This specific approach was chosen to collect personal feedback from the participants' regarding their experiences while assisting individuals with disabilities in navigating these public environments. Semi-structured interviews consisting of ten (10) pre-determined interview questions were conducted with each participant at the Starbucks on Eastern Kentucky University's main campus (see appendix). These questions were selected to collect in-depth personal responses from each participant to accurately determine the overall accessibility and accommodation resources available for guests with disabilities at amusement parks they previously visited. Three (3) specific individuals met all of the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate in the study. These individuals' names were replaced with the alias names of "Elsa", "Jasmine", and "Ariel" to keep their identity and personal responses confidential. Prior to conducting the three

interviews, each participant was provided with a copy of the interview consent form to have enough time to review the form and ask the researcher questions if necessary. The interviews were conducted after each participant reviewed and completed the form to ensure they were aware of and comfortable with the purpose of the study. The participants brought the completed forms to the interview and were presented to the researcher before starting the interview process.

**Instrument.** Each interview was recorded by the researcher through diligent note-taking during the interview. After the last interview was completed, the personal responses collected from the participants were then coded using Qualitative Description Analysis to discover underlying themes present in the narratives. Qualitative Description Analysis requires three steps necessary in accurately coding interview notes. These steps consist of open coding the individualized responses, identifying categories based on the open coding results, and then uncovering underlying themes based on the following identified categories.

### **Qualitative Descriptive Analysis:**

#### **Open Coding**

This first step in Qualitative Descriptive Analysis involves identifying similarities expressed within the participants' responses. The researcher goes through the interview notes and labels these reoccurring concepts to assist in defining and organizing categories based on the coding properties.

#### **Categorization**



After the open coding process was completed, categories were determined from the coded interview notes. This step involves grouping patterns into meaningful categories based on the previously coded information.

### **Themes**

Underlying themes were determined from closely analyzing the chosen categories and their content. After the themes were discovered, the researcher then went through the notes once more and identified exact participant quotes that supported each specific theme. These themes were discovered to determine the main ideas and patterns associated with the accessibility features available within the public spaces of amusement and theme parks in the United States.

### **Results**

Five major amusement parks were acknowledged during the entirety of the interviews. These amusement parks include Coney Island, Kings Island, the Indianapolis Zoo, Holiday World, and Walt Disney World. After collecting personal responses regarding the participants' experiences at these establishments, four major themes were uncovered through applying Qualitative Descriptive Analysis. These themes were recognized through analyzing the common patterns expressed within the participants' interview responses, which regarded the accommodation levels of previously visited amusement parks. These four underlying themes are inclusive, accessible, interactive and adaptive.

#### **Amusement Parks Evaluated:**

**Coney Island – Hamilton County, OH**

During Elsa's interview in particular, she expressed an abundance of positive feedback regarding a smaller amusement park, "Coney Island," located in Hamilton County, Ohio. Coney Island is her son's, "C", favorite theme park and they go multiple times every summer since it is close in proximity to their house. "C" is 17-years-old and was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) early on in his childhood. As a result of his condition, he becomes anxious and overwhelmed easily in sensory stimulating environments. Amusement parks can be a challenge for "C" because of the large crowds, loud noises and amount of simultaneous events being conducted at once. Coney Island stands apart from other amusement parks for Elsa and "C." At one point, Elsa stated that, "All the employees at Coney Island are always so welcoming and considerate towards my son. They are so understanding and sweet with him, and no employee has ever made him or myself feel uncomfortable at any point during our previous visits." She also acknowledged that since Coney Island is smaller than most amusement parks, there are typically less crowds, shorter lines, and fewer overwhelming noises. This environment allows "C" to remain calm and relaxed for longer periods of time, which promotes "C" to participate in more attractions in a shorter time frame. The physical structures available within this public space also met all ADA requirements, according to Elsa, and possessed some Universal Design elements as well. She was impressed that every attraction had a ramp leading up to the loading zones, therefore, every guest had to use the ramp regardless of their functional ability.

### **Indianapolis Zoo – Indianapolis, IN**

The Indianapolis Zoo was also evaluated during Elsa's interview. Although a zoo is not normally assimilated into the "theme" park category, this specific zoo offers multiple

amusement park rides for guests to enjoy during their visit. During their visit to the Indianapolis Zoo, Elsa recognized that every employee that was operating the rides were very supportive of “C” and his needs. She elaborated further on this observation by stating, “The zoo employees were very understanding and supportive of “C.” They constantly encouraged him to take his time while boarding the different rides so he wouldn’t feel rushed or overwhelmed. That really impressed me.” The employees also allowed Elsa and “C” to bypass the lines, so “C” would not become irritable while waiting in the long lines leading up to the attraction.

#### **Kings Island – Mason, OH**

Elsa also accompanied “C” to an amusement park named “Kings Island” located in Mason, OH. She stated that these employees were also very welcoming and accommodating to “C” and his needs. They recognized that he had Autism and asked if they were interested in renting noise-canceling headphones. These headphones would allow for “C” to block out loud, repetitive noises while they are navigating around the theme park grounds. This would allow “C” to block out loud, repetitive noises that could heighten his anxiety. The theme park employees even gave Elsa and her son free “Fast Lane Passes,” which allow them to bypass waiting in lines for every attraction. Elsa stated that “C” gets incredibly impatient and irritated waiting in long lines surrounded by a large crowd of strangers. Therefore, this pass and the headphones contributed tremendously to the positive experience her and “C” had at Kings Island.

#### **Holiday World – Santa Claus, IN**

Ariel mentioned during her interview that she accompanied her father to Holiday World a few years ago. Her father has Duchenne’s muscular dystrophy and a heart condition that

significantly restricts the amount of daily physical activity he is able to engage in.

Therefore, it is crucial that the public environments he interacts are accessible and possess various universal design elements. When discussing Holiday World, she stated that it is an outdated establishment that requires a decent amount of refurbishments.

While they were walking up to the entrance of Holiday World, there were many cracks, potholes and uneven surfaces in the cement sidewalks that made it difficult pushing her dad in his wheelchair. However, once inside the amusement park, she stated that the cement was more intact and level. When asked if the employees were helpful, she responded with, “They seemed indifferent. They didn’t really go out of their way to help, but they didn’t disrespect or seclude my dad either.”

#### **Walt Disney World – Orlando, FL**

Walt Disney World (WDW) is highly respected and received an abundance of positive feedback during each interview. All three participants had visited the Walt Disney World Resort and two of the three had accompanied a guest(s) with a disability during their visit(s). Ariel and Jasmine are annual guests at WDW and provided incredible positive feedback about the establishment and their customer service. Ariel and her family vacation at WDW almost every summer because of how accommodating the employees, otherwise known as “cast members”, are with her dad. Due to her dad’s condition, Duchenne’s muscular dystrophy, it is crucial that he has some sort of mobility device available to assist him in navigating the amusement park grounds. Ariel stated that they normally do not bring his personal motorized wheelchair into the parks because there is a wide variety of devices available to rent at the front of each of the four Disney parks. Since her dad utilizes a wheelchair for the entire duration of their visit, he experiences

some difficulty boarding rides and attractions. Ariel responded at one point during the interview and stated, “All the Cast Members were extremely welcoming and accommodating. They would slow down or stop the rides to give my dad extra time to board the ride and would assist us with transferring him from his wheelchair to the ride and vice versa. Sometimes they would even bring out special handicap accessible cars that allowed him to ride the ride while remaining seated in his wheelchair. He loved that.”

During Jasmine’s interview, it was discovered that she was previously employed as a Cast Member (CM) through the Walt Disney World Company and assisted numerous guests with hearing impairments and intellectual disabilities. Jasmine was the only CM at her work location who was fluent in American Sign Language (ASL), which proved to be beneficial in opening up many lines of communication with a diverse range of theme park guests. This skill was especially helpful with one specific guest in particular she interacted with. During one of her shifts in the park, a young boy with a hearing impairment and Autism came up to her and started asking her a question in ASL. He was excited to finally communicate with someone in his own language and told her about how he was going to ride the new “Slinky Dog” rollercoaster in Toy Story Land. About two hours later, the little boy’s caregiver came into the store asking for Jasmine. Apparently, the Slinky Dog coaster line was incredibly long and by the time they made it to the front the boy was overwhelmed, anxious, and irritable. She also mentioned that since there were no interpreters available, the boy was unable to understand the ride directions being given by the cast members. At this point, his anxiety worsened and he was unable to calm

down and wanted to get off the coaster. The caregiver asked if Jasmine would be able to ride the attraction with him since she was incredible at interacting with him earlier.

Jasmine's manager told her that it was completely fine for her to accompany the boy, and even contacted a cast member at the Slinky Dog coaster who allowed them to skip to the front of the line. She was able to interpret the verbal instructions for the boy and kept him calm enough to allow him to ride the rollercoaster.

Not only did Jasmine assist guests with disabilities as an employee, but she also accompanied her grandma who possessed a physical impairment during their recent WDW vacation. Her grandma had received an emergency Total Knee Replacement (TKR) a month prior to their vacation, therefore, they had to make last minute accommodations to their travel plans. Jasmine was primarily concerned about renting a wheelchair to ensure her grandma did not have to walk around on crutches the entire day. The wheelchair rentals typically have to be made months in advance to ensure guests have them for their visit because of the high volume of guests WDW receives every day. When they contacted the guest disability services department, they had no wheelchairs or ECV's available to rent. After Jasmine explained the situation and her grandma's recent procedure, the cast member placed her on hold to see what they could do for them. After about twenty minutes (20) of being on hold, the cast member stated that they were able to find a wheelchair for her grandma to utilize during their visit. She stated that she was "blown away by this act of customer service, especially since it was a last minute request." When they arrived at Magic Kingdom (MK), one of the four theme parks on WDW property, they went to the Guest Services desk to pick up their wheelchair rental.

Before giving Jasmine's grandma the wheelchair, they cleaned the entire chair and handles off for her and showed both of them how to work the breaks. The cast member even offered to push her grandmother up Main Street because of the presence of large crowds within this area. When they initially arrived to MK, the nighttime fireworks show was about to start. This meant that thousands of people were camping out spots on Main Street to watch the show, which makes navigating through this area extremely difficult for guests with mobility equipment. Before leaving her work station, the guest service cast member had contacted a crowd control cast member who saved Jasmine and her grandma a front row spot for the nighttime show. This allowed Jasmine's grandma to remain seated comfortably in her wheelchair during the fireworks show without having her view blocked by people standing. Jasmine responded by saying, "Disney World's customer service is top notch and provides a wide range of accommodations for guests within an entirely inclusive environment. My grandma and I were both so grateful for the cast members who helped make this trip as enjoyable and comfortable as possible for us. They make accessibility easy and effortless."

Elsa, on the other hand, visited WDW in the past but has never brought her son with her. When mentioning Disney and their customer service she stated, "They do a great job at managing the large crowds and following strict safety precautions to make sure all guests stay safe." She has not previously accompanied "C" to WDW because she is unaware of how he will react to the environment. She elaborated further by saying, "We did not know how he would handle the Florida heat, large crowds, and sensory

stimulation that is present in the Disney parks.” This is a valid concern considering Disney’s popularity attracts millions of visitors from around the world every year.

**Themes:**

**Inclusive**

This was the first theme uncovered through analyzing the documented interview responses. This theme was categorized by ten reoccurring concepts expressed within the participants’ feedback, which heavily reflect the concept of inclusivity within a physical environment (*Figure 1.1*). An ‘inclusive’ environment ensures that both persons with and without disabilities are physically and cognitively able to navigate and participate in various tasks within the public space without experiencing acts of discrimination. Certain design elements, such as universal design, are categorized as being “inclusive” structures because they actively prevent discrimination and seclusion of persons with disabilities. This concept goes beyond accessibility through encompassing acceptability by encouraging the involvement of each and every unique human being. Inclusive environments actively permit all individuals, regardless of functional ability, to receive all physical and mental benefits attainable within these public settings. Amusement and theme parks are considered public environments since anyone can purchase tickets to access these amenities. Therefore, it is crucial that amusement parks construct and express inclusive environments to ensure that every human being feels comfortable and included while engaging within these spaces.

**Accessible**

An environment being accessible means that all built structures and surrounding public spaces abide by current ADA regulations. The presence of accessibility features ensures



that public environments are ADA compliant to allow guests with disabilities to easily and safely navigate and participate in various occupations within these spaces. Accessible environments encourage and promote engagement of persons with disabilities, while simultaneously protecting their basic human rights as American citizens. These public environments are also required to undergo routine refurbishments to ensure that the space(s) possess little to no physical barriers that would prevent persons with disability from participating within these areas.

### **Interactive**

Humans establish a unique relationship with the environments they engage in. This relationship is achieved when “interaction” occurs, which means that each factor involved is “mutually or reciprocally active” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Humans influence the environment while the environment simultaneously influences their behaviors. This dynamic relationship is represented in amusement parks through the presence of helpful employees, various options for route navigation, presence of strict safety precautions, and availability of assistive devices. If the environment and features present within the space promote engagement of individuals with disabilities, then it is deemed as being interactive.

### **Adaptive**

Not to be mistaken with accessible, “adaptive” involves making alterations to a previously built structure or situation. Adaptation occurs when changes are made to enhance or encourage an individual’s overall performance and/or experience. When discussing buildings built prior to the implementation of ADA, previously built structures are required to be adapted in order to meet the new requirements. The integrity of the

structure still maintains its basic components, but now it possesses new elements that improves its function. To incorporate amusement parks into this explanation, adaptation occurs when guests are given special tickets free of charge that allow them to bypass waiting in lines. The guests still paid for their original tickets and had full intention to utilize them, but their experience was adapted when they were given the advanced tickets after entering the park. For Elsa, these free tickets altered their entire theme park experience because it preserved her son’s patience and anxiety for longer periods of time.

*Figure 1.1 Categorization of Themes*

<b>Themes:</b>	<b>Categories associated with each theme:</b>
<b>Inclusive</b>	Accommodating, compatible, welcoming, considerate, kind, understanding, enhance, universal design principles, normal, common, & variety
<b>Accessible</b>	Accessibility, navigating, compliant, services, public environments, spaces, ability
<b>Interactive</b>	Options, familiar, encouraged, training, precautions, inspected, interacted, contacted, transfers, effortless, assist & ensure
<b>Adaptive</b>	Special theme park tickets, mobility equipment, disability services, handicap accessible cars/boats, American Sign Language (ASL), subtitles, supportive handrails & implementation

*Figure 1.1*, represented above, illustrates the categories established from the interview notes and how they contributed to theme discovery. The left column lists the four themes uncovered and the right column highlights the categories determined in the second step of the Qualitative Descriptive Analysis. The categories listed in the

corresponding row to each theme were the categories that assisted the researcher in determining the underlying themes through analyzing the interview notes.

### **Discussion**

According to the participants' experiences and feedback acquired during the interview process, four out of the five U.S. amusement parks proved to be accessible and accommodating overall for guests with disabilities. Environments significantly impact the individuals interacting within these spaces, especially persons with disabilities. If public environments are not accessible and/or accommodating for this population specifically, then their physical functioning and participation can be severely inhibited. Therefore, it is extremely important for amusement parks to be as accessible and accommodating as possible. This would ensure that every guest, regardless of functional ability, is permitted to engage and participate in the wide variety of services that these establishments have to offer. However, it does appear that older and more outdated amusement parks, such as Holiday World, possess less accessible and accommodating environments for persons with disabilities.

One study, in particular, analyzed the level of impact environments have on individuals with a range of diverse disabilities. Through conducting qualitative interviews, it was discovered that everyday participation of persons with disabilities is influenced by environmental factors at the individual, community and societal levels (Hammel et. al, 2015). Environmental barriers present within these three levels dramatically limits the participation and empowerment these individuals experience while interacting within these public spaces. If an environment is not physically accessible, these individuals will be reluctant to visit these establishments because they

are unable to fully engage in and utilize the services and attractions available. However, it is extremely important to remember that accommodations do not only apply to the physical structures available within these environments.

Human interaction and societal attitudes can also impact the experiences these individuals have in public settings, which include amusement and theme parks.

Hammel and colleagues explain that,

“People with visual and cognitive impairments may be more affected by inaccessible information and technology access or inhospitable or disparaging social attitudes that disable their full participation and lead to social isolation. People with physical disabilities (eg, wheelchair users) may evoke different societal attitudes than people with hidden cognitive disabilities (eg, traumatic brain injury (TBI), stroke). Both groups identify societal attitudes and supports as important environmental factors influencing their participation, representing an environmental issue...” (Hammel et. al, pg. 586, 2015).

Holiday world, which was discussed in this current study, was identified as possessing an inaccessible physical environment for individuals who rely on wheelchairs for functional mobility. However, the Holiday World employees could have counteracted this severe limitation by actively providing accommodations, such as shuttle services and employees offering assistance, to improve the experiences for persons utilizing mobility equipment. Coney Island is another older theme park that may not have been as physically accessible as Walt Disney World, for example, but made up for the lack of accessibility with the incredible employee interactions they incorporated with Elsa’s son. The constant encouragement and acceptance they expressed towards him improved his, and his

mother's, overall experience. Therefore, societal attitudes are equally as important as the physical accessibility of these public environments.

Walt Disney World is the prime example of an entirely inclusive space, because it encompasses accessible physical environments, numerous accommodating services and the employees embody positive attitudes/interactions towards guests with disabilities. Each participant acknowledged how Walt Disney World goes above and beyond to ensure that their guests with disabilities have the same enjoyable experience as able bodied guests. Whether they personally escort an individual in a wheelchair to a reserved fireworks spot or accompany a guest with a hearing impairment on an attraction to interpret directions in ASL, WDW knows how to make their guests feel included and comfortable. Although Disney World was originally constructed in 1965, which was twenty-five (25) years prior to the passing of the ADA, this company undergoes regular refurbishments to ensure their spaces are accessible and accommodating. If more amusement park franchises modeled their services and design off of those presented by Walt Disney World, these public environments would prove to be more inclusive for guests with disabilities.

### **Recommendations**

#### *Recommendations for reducing societal barriers and attitudes*

Although a majority of the amusement parks discussed were considered accessible and accommodating, there is always room for improvement. When asked about the aspects that U.S. amusement parks can improve on, all three participants recommended implementing more intensive disability awareness training programs for the employees to complete during the hiring process. Hall (2008) performed an

investigative study to determine the effectiveness of disability training programs among amusement park employees. The researcher discovered that these disability awareness programs positively enhanced theme park employees' attitudes towards guests with disabilities. Although disability training programs have been around for a few decades now, many businesses still do not require their employees to complete this specialized training during the hiring process. These training programs would provide amusement park employees with the proper resources and information to eliminate preconceived attitudinal barriers, which are one of the biggest obstacles that prevent persons with disabilities from fully integrating in society (Hall, 2008).

*Recommendations for adapting the built environment*

Another recommendation for these franchises would be to provide more handicap accessible amusement ride vehicles for guests with mobility equipment, such as wheelchairs and ECV's. Many of the outdated ride vehicles are not designed with enough space or proper equipment to accommodate an entire wheelchair or other mobility devices. These specific vehicles possess adjustable seats and restraints that make it possible to fit a diverse range of mobility devices, which allow persons with disabilities to remain seated in their personal wheelchairs throughout the duration of the ride (Behringer, 2000). These accessible cars would be incredibly beneficial in decreasing the risk of injury associated with transferring individuals from their wheelchairs to the ride and vice versa. If not performed properly, these transfers can place individuals at a higher risk of sustaining permanent injuries as a result of being dropped. Guests possessing disabilities that severely limit their physical functioning, such as cerebral palsy and quadriplegia, have to completely rely on the assistance of others since they are physically

unable to lift themselves. Therefore, increasing the availability of accessible ride vehicles would improve the involvement and safety of individuals who possess various physical impairments.

### **Limitations**

There were a few limitations of this qualitative study. The sample size of three (3) participants was relatively small, which limited the amount of amusement parks discussed. As a result, the accessibility and accommodating services of only five (5) amusement parks were analyzed. This limitation made it difficult to generalize the results to the hundreds of other amusement parks available in the United States. Additionally, the three participants interviewed all reside in different cities in Kentucky, which decreased the diversity of amusement parks analyzed. Almost every theme park discussed is located in either Ohio or Indiana, with the exception of Walt Disney World. This limitation could have skewed my results since the amusement parks within these geographic locations are generally smaller, older, and relatively unknown. As a result, these establishments do not typically attract large populations of guests like Walt Disney World does. Therefore, it can be assumed that these Mideast amusement parks do not possess the same financial means as Walt Disney World, which can inhibit the amount of accessibility features and accommodating services available within these spaces. This could have presented Walt Disney World in a more positive light, since this world-renown amusement park was being compared to older franchises that do not have the financial means to perform regular refurbishments to improve the accessibility of the previously built environment. Finally, the researcher was basing the accessibility and accommodations of these amusement parks solely off of the participants' experiences. A

more accurate analysis of these parks could have been made if the researcher was able to physically visit these establishments, make eye-witness observations of accessibility features, and interview the employees of the amusement parks.

### **Future Research**

As mentioned in the limitations section, this study's results were solely based off of the participants' personal experiences and interview responses. This specific approach could have presented potential biases in the collected results and limited the amount of amusement parks analyzed. For future research, it would be beneficial to conduct an observational study on a more geographically diverse sample of amusement parks throughout the United States. This approach may provide a better-rounded analysis of the accessibility and accommodations available within amusement parks in the United States. In addition to incorporating an observational study, another idea for future research could be to conduct the study while focusing on how the accessibility of amusement parks impacts individuals possessing one specific disability. Individuals diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, for example, experience various physical and cognitive limitations while interacting within public environments. This particular study could provide more specific evidence-based research that would spread awareness of how accessibility, or lack thereof, is directly related to the experiences this client population has within their surrounding environments. There is a limited amount of research available regarding the accessibility of amusement parks and how accessibility features impact the participation and overall well-being of guests with special needs. Therefore, these proposed research studies may have more of an effect on increased government supervision when it comes to monitoring ADA regulations within public environments. Nonetheless, these



additional studies would continue to promote awareness of the need of inclusive environments for individuals with disabilities.

## Appendix

## Qualitative Interview Questions

1. Have you or anyone you have previously traveled with needed special accommodations at an amusement and/or theme park? If so, please explain what accommodations were necessary.
2. Which amusement/theme parks have you and/or the individual attended?
3. Were theme park employees welcoming and considerate of the needs of the individual(s) who required the accommodations?
4. Did any employee go out of their way to actively ensure that the individual(s) felt comfortable and included? If so, please explain the experience.
5. Was there any moment where an employee or bystander made the individual(s) feel secluded or uncomfortable? If so, please explain the situation and how it was addressed.
6. Did the amusement park have proper ADA and Universal Design standards such as ramps available when needed, wide doorways and waiting queues, support bars in the handicap bathroom stalls, etc.? If there were other features and/or structures readily available, please explain them and how they were helpful for the individual(s).
7. Were there any improvements that would be beneficial for the accessibility concept of the theme park(s)? How would you recommend that theme park employees and manager address these issues?
8. Were there accessibility features/accommodations that the amusement park provided that you were impressed with? If so, explain.
9. What are your thoughts on Walt Disney World and their customer service?
  - Have you and/or your relative/friend ever visited Disney World? –
  - How would you rate the overall experience at Walt Disney World? (1 being poor, 10 being excellent). Please explain the reason behind the rating provided. –
  - How would you rate the experience at other amusement parks compared to Walt Disney World? (1 being poor, 10 being excellent). Please explain. –
  - What did Disney World and their cast members excel at when it came to accessibility and accommodations? –
  - What could Disney World and their cast members improve on?
  - Would you and/or your relative/friend return to Walt Disney World? Please explain.

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