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Milazzo, Liselle, "Engaging Tourists Through Brand Community: An Analysis of Walt Disney Theme Park During the 2020 Global Pandemic" (2021). *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 30.

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Engaging Tourists Through Brand Community: An Analysis of Walt Disney Theme Park During the 2020 Global Pandemic

Introduction

The extant research on the coronavirus pandemic constitutes a new body of literature regarding sociocultural, economic, and policy changes surrounding the global virus mitigation and tourism attraction re-opening procedures which is beginning to bring greater understanding and clarity to the “unprecedented” times we now live in. However, despite the growing literature regarding the various challenges and opportunities arising as a result of COVID-19, missing from the tourism studies literature is the discussion of mass tourism industry lynchpins, theme parks. This research critically addresses the ways members of Walt Disney World's online brand communities have leveraged their collective group membership to negotiate the travel restrictions and the attraction shut down during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite travel restrictions, social distancing policies and unprecedented disruption of the tourism industry, people around the world continue to derive meaning from engaging with theme parks through brand communities. Brand community is defined as a “specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Past research has focused on both in-person and online brand communities (Kozinets, 1997; Schau, Muniz, and Arnould, 2009; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), this work focuses on online brand communities due to ongoing social distancing policies. Theme parks have long been understood to be a powerful economic and cultural tool creating and sustaining communities¹, but the impact on communities denied access to sites of connection is missing from the field. The COVID-19 crisis presents a unique opportunity to study the relationship between online brand community and the tourism industry when in-person travel is disrupted for an extended period of time.

Literature Review

The extant research on the coronavirus pandemic is beginning to bring greater understanding and clarity to the “unprecedented” times we now live in and are facilitating a new body of literature regarding sociocultural, economic, and policy changes surrounding the global virus mitigation and re-opening procedures. Research has been written about the challenges surrounding the global coronavirus pandemic such as the social costs of tourism (Qiu, R, Park, Li, & Song, 2020), the perception of risk in international tourism during the pandemic (Karabulut, Bilgin, Demir, & Doker, 2020), the impact of shelter-in-place orders on the hospitality industry for corporations like AirBNB (Dolnicar and Zare, 2020), as well as nostalgia-based leisure activities during social distancing (Gammon and Ramshaw, 2020). However, despite the growing literature regarding the various challenges and opportunities arising as a result of COVID-19, critically missing from the tourism studies literature is the discussion of mass tourism industry lynchpins, theme parks. Considering the American theme park as an instrument for the construction of ritualized leisure time, the closure and severe curtailing of their operations call for a nuanced investigation of mass mediated dialogues before focusing on smaller, more specialized sites. The goal of this work is to help researchers better

¹ (both in the physical and virtual worlds, through job creation and opportunities and for socialization; for domestic and international audiences)

understand the way modern “social values and attitudes are created, expressed and maintained” (Kozinets, 1997, p. 470).

Theoretical Framework

Adopting Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, which states that “understanding an individual’s environment is essential to understanding an individual’s choices and behavior” (Woodside et. al., 2007, p. 16), the current study uses ecological systems theory to anchor research on how members of a brand community for Walt Disney World, utilized their brand community for a variety of purposes during a global tourism catastrophe. This study puts forward the notion that Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory can be used to understand the relations between ecosystems that are broader and work to understand the socio-ecological environment society is operating within. The five ecosystems are 1) the microsystem, 2) the mesosystem, 3) the exosystem, 4) macrosystem, and 5) the chronosystem. For Bronfenbrenner’s who is studying child development, the microsystem (made up of their immediate surroundings like school and family) and is the most influential level. Yet when applying this research to adults it's opens up the possibility to better understand other ecosystem levels. The exosystem defined as “formal and informal social structures” (like the mass/social media and workplaces) take on new significance for adults. Additionally, the chronosystem, which consists of all of the “environmental changes that occur over the lifetime”, include historical events (e.g. a global pandemic or polarizing election).

The global coronavirus pandemic has changed the way Americans experience their world. Our ability to connect with our families, extended families, and communities in-person have been severely reduced due to government restrictions and shut downs. This has impacted every level of Bronfenbrenner’s model and has upended the importance of the ecosystems. Currently, our increased consumption of media (to connect with family and friends as well as for news and entertainment); personal and societal economic instability; and the changing governmental policies on religious gatherings, health care, social services, and education means that the exosystem is flexing its muscles in “unprecedented” ways. This research uses Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory to anchor research on developing and sustaining (online) brand community during a global tourism catastrophe.

Brand Community

As early as the 1970s, researchers from the consumer culture and marketing fields were focusing on brand communities, also called consumer communities or subcultures of consumption (McCracken, 1986; Kozinets, 1997). At the end of the twentieth century, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) use social practice theory to systematically categorize value-creation practices within subcultures of consumption. Their research focuses on identifying the consumer practices shape the value creation process for Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners in order to identify a common set of value-creating practices amongst a subculture community. Their work begins to address the way in which American consumer culture has been adapted by consumers and brands as a value-creating process.

Around the same time, Kozinets (1997) uses netnography, an ethnographic approach to collecting data online, to better understand contemporary consumer behavior revolving around intangible mass media content. This anthropologically grounded research looks at the *X-Files* fan culture to glean insights into contemporary consumer behaviors. This research importantly shows how modern communities are “created and maintained, particularly using... the Internet” (p. 470). This work

allowed Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) to set forth defining what the theoretical qualities of "brand community" are and continue to expand the research on members who belong to brand communities.

This form of community is not only unique for its ageographic nature, but additionally is marked by "shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility" (2001, p. 412). Those researching fanship note that these shared rituals and traditions are increasingly being translated and manifested in the online world (Fuschillo, 2018). Since then, other work has explored different facets of personal and collective identity, community peer pressure, transcendent customer experiences; consumer-brand relationships; branded events; and nostalgic, retro re-branding (Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann, 2005; Black and Veloutsou, 2017; Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry, 2003; Lee, Lee, Taylor and Lee, 2011; O'Sullivan, 2016; Schouten, McAlexander, and Koenig, 2007).

This research answers the call of previous scholars who hope for researchers to "collect new data to unpack the operation of a broader set of practices as they appear in a wider array of brand communities" (Schau, Muniz, and Arnould, 2009, p. 42). It begins to address Irwin's (1973) four life cycles of consumer cultures (articulation, expansion, corruption and decline) and provides empirical evidence of the expansion stage. This project is important in the context of modern consumer culture and begins to discuss a symbiosis between consumer subcultures and the tourism industry (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Understanding human behaviors is a significant topic of inquiry particularly as the society is progressing through pandemic-necessitating social distance when, humanity has access to affordable, instantaneous, digital technologies and communications.

Methodology

One approach to exploring articulations as they unfold is to engage with the contemporary mass mediated dialogue. With this in mind, the current study examines the media coverage and social media content an American mega-theme parks located in Orlando, FL: Walt Disney World (WDW). This site was selected due to its industry dominance as a tourism attraction, theme park and international brand. During this time, data was also collected on WDW's rival Universal for comparison.

Facebook posts were collected from March 2020 - September 2020. Only Facebook posts that pertained to the theme parks and the coronavirus pandemic were included. Specific hashtags were used to help filter content like #DisneyMagicMoments. This hashtag was created in March 2020 by WDW to engage with consumers who were in lock down and unable to travel. Facebook posts with content that focused on upcoming movie releases (i.e. Mulan in August 2020), celebratory days (i.e. International Dog Day or Earth Day), other affiliated theme parks re-opening (i.e. Disney World Shanghai) were excluded. The data collected was qualitative in nature and included images, videos, photographs and words.

A total of 53 Facebook posts, published by WDW between March and September 2020, were collected. Posts were coded with the following question in mind: How are consumers and brands utilizing online brand community during the COVID-19 lock down? The posts were selected based on their brand-consumer engagement, consumer's virtual-engagement with the attraction, coping practices, or relevance to the Orlando community. The data was analyzed chronologically as the pandemic was on-going.

All data was analyzed twice. The first cycle used an adapted list of codes inspired from Schau, Muñiz & Arnould's (2009) meta-analysis of brand community value-creation. Brand community practices

were identified (example: empathizing, documenting, and customizing) and categorized (example: social networking, community engagement, and brand use). This coding process allowed to discern applicable trends for the brand and among the brand community throughout the pandemic. The second round of coding was inductive coding, allowing the data to speak for itself rather than imposing preconceived notions upon the data.

Due to the constraints of researching in a global crisis, the author has kept a journal throughout the data collection and analysis process. This provided space to understand and acknowledge their positionality as both an individual experiencing a shared catastrophe and researcher. These journal entries were used to describe areas of confusion, tension and ask questions of the data. This reflexivity continued throughout data collection and analysis.

Results

The data collected reflects the ways, since the initial outbreak, WDW has engaged with their online brand community and local community; as well as, offers the guests' perspective on the closures, virtual theme park options, re-openings, and policy changes and implementations as the pandemic has progressed. The initial data analysis shows that WDW did not heavily focus on their online brand communities in the earliest weeks of the pandemic. This allowed users to take charge of the narrative and how they are engaging with the attraction at home. As the pandemic related shut-down and state travel-bans' lengthen, WDW begin to engage with their online community in more targeted ways. WDW curated theme park experiences, recipes, music, and activities that could be enjoyed by tourists at home.

Data collected on Universal's theme parks reveal an initial differing response to online brand communities. Transferability of the principal findings extend to other subcultures of consumption and brand communities.

Conclusion and Discussion

Brand community is helpful as we explore the current tourism trend where individuals' movements are geographically restricted however, their interaction with tourism attractions remains consistent (regardless of physical, in-person attendance). The present analysis of the articulations of brand community and the intersection with theme parks reveals an important facet of our modern understanding of community. This speaks towards a general shift to the democratization of tourism and the increase in geographically-dispersed communities, and highlights the situated nature of brands. Brand communities are evidence of the persistence of community in our culture even when in-person communities have been shut down due to the pandemic.

The study of brand communities during the COVID-19 pandemic addresses emerging literature that is expanding the concept of what constitutes a 'community' and addresses the theme park's visitors who are active online but are geographically-dispersed. Such an analysis of brand community and mass tourism is imperative if we are to answer the call to build a new future for the tourism industry. This directs our scholarship towards what the future of tourism engagement might look like regarding mass tourism attractions, particularly as the world reconns with an increasingly unstable future due to the impacts of climate change, social unrest, and pandemics.

In doing so, the current project advances the prevailing question and concern of tourism studies academics: what will the future of the tourism industry look like? It advances the literature that understands media is a powerful tool for exploring and understanding the role of tourism in

sustaining communities, providing ritualized leisure opportunities, and redeveloping brand engagement. Moreover, it provides insight to other mass tourism attractions around the globe facing similar challenges, as well as highlights the importance of on-going investigation in COVID-19's impacts on the tourism industry, particularly as the pandemic experience is protracted.

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