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Strategic theming in theme park marketing

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ABSTRACT
KEYWORDS: theme park, theming, leisure, motivation, lifestyle

Theme parks aim to create the atmosphere of another world and it is essentially the theme which becomes the main part of a theme park experience. Thematic tourism has become increasingly popular where travel is motivated by an interest in a particular subject or area rather than by the more traditional motivations such as idyllic scenery and climate. The drawing power of theming is evident in the fact that it has, in recent years, become a catalyst for the growth of new destinations based mainly on thematic leisure.

This study attempts to identify and describe a distinct and representative set of theme types and attributes in a theme park and examines the relationship between visitors' motivation for visiting theme parks and theme preferences. Weak to mod-erately strong relationships were found between motivation for theme park visits by visitors and their demographics and lifestyle patterns. Given the fact the theme park industry is still relatively young in Asia, the findings of this study reinforce the need for Asian theme parks to focus strategically on satisfy-ing lower-level needs, such as stimulation, by developing and marketing an adventure theme comparable with Western theme parks.

INTRODUCTION

The theme park industry has witnessed a fairly rapid international expansion in recent years. In the US, the industry has reached maturity after 30 years of growth since the inception of Disneyland in the late 1950s, while in Europe, the industry has spread throughout Western Europe with a large concentration of attractions in Germany, France, the Benelux countries and the UK. Reports from the Economist Intelligence Unit indicate that the worldwide trend of the theme park industry is growing.[1] The North American theme park industry grew at a compound rate of almost 3 per cent in attendance over the past decade while Eur-ope has become an attractive venue for corporate investment in theme park development by European consortia and large US corporations.

Following Europe is Asia, which has been identified as the world's next leading inter-national theme park market. In North Asia,

like Europe, the industry has experienced a rapid growth phase spurred on by strong demand, a growth which is expected to continue over the next ten years.[2] The number of theme parks has been growing in the Asian region. Since 1991, for example, there have been major theme parks developed in Shengzhen, China, such as the China Folk Culture Villages, Splendid China and the Window of the World. In Singapore, the Haw Par Villa Dragon World and Tang Dynasty Village were opened in 1991, in addition to its existing Sentosa Island which features several theme parks. In terms of visitor attendance, Hong Kong's premier theme park, Ocean Park, attracted an annual attendance of 4.1 million in 1996, a growth rate of 22 per cent over the previous year.[3] This suggests that the industry's potential is enormous in Asia and at the same time implies that theme park developers are facing increasingly keen competition. However, despite the performance of the industry and the tourism earnings contributed by its strong growth, there is still a lack of information available on theme parks' performance, positioning and development in Asia.[4]

Theming and theme parks

A theme park is 'an amusement park that has themed attractions, be it food, costumes, entertainment, retail stores and/or rides' according to the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA). Theme parks are distinguished from other amusement parks in that there is a theme that runs through all or most of their attractions. These attractions might be marketed under one general idea or personality, or they could comprise a cluster of different themes at one central location.[5]

The theme, therefore, becomes the main part of the theme park experience. Even though theme parks were usually thought of as having a major theme, most of them in fact contain multi-themes in terms of different themed areas. Some park managers use themes to increase attendance over a period of time, say, during festivals or special events. However, even though the term 'theme'

may sometimes be unclear, by reference to the definition used by the IAAPA, the themes identified in this study may be thought of as: (i) the main theme which runs through all or most of the attractions, such as the movie theme of the Warner Brothers' Movie World; (ii) the sub-themes which are found in a park in the form of different themed areas like the Frontierland, Adventureland, Fantasyland, Discoveryland and the Main Street USA of Disney's Magic Kingdom; and (iii) the transitional themes, that is, themes that are created for special events which only last for a certain period of time to boost attendance. Some examples are the Far West Festival and Space Festival as seen in Disneyland Paris in 1994 and 1995 respectively. Theme parks are becoming increasingly attractive to the tourist who has limited vacation time, as by their very nature, they provide a condensed holiday product.[6] A good example is Disney's new 'Animal Kingdom' in Florida which replicates a safari park in East Africa. Theme parks aim to create the atmosphere of another world[7] and it is essentially the theme itself that creates such an atmosphere. A theme represents a story line or framework which highlights a particular attraction at a destination.[8] It attempts to tell a story and through this story the visitor is transported to another place and a unique experience is created. However, since theme parks are still a relatively new concept in tourist attractions,[9] there is a paucity of literature on success and failure of theme parks around the world. Past studies have focused primarily on theme park selection,[10] visitor behaviour,[11] visitor segmentation[12] etc but not on the intrinsic value of the theme park — the theme itself.

Competitive theming

Recent years have seen the emergence of many themes, only limited by imagination. For example, there have been themes that were based on the success of a product, such as Legoland in Denmark, and others that were built on the mythology of a culture like the Haw Par Villa Dragon World in Singapore. The more successful parks have been

able to use the theme to create a competitive advantage over the others.

Theming promotes the creation of a whole new atmosphere based on the unique experience that a theme park offers. For instance, in all the Disney properties, there is a fantasy element that allows guests to escape the urban setting and go to places they dream about.[13] Thematic tourism, in fact, represents tourism with a relatively narrow focus, where trips are motivated by an interest in a particular subject or area rather than the more traditional motivations such as the lure of idyllic scenery and pleasant climate. More importantly, theming in some ways is divorced from the idea of place, relegating the consideration of location to being the background for a theme, rather than being the primary motivating factor.[14]

There are a number of advantages in theming. First of all, theming is important for creating an initial perception of quality.[15] Secondly, themes are means to be used to help boost attendance. For example, 'themed' discount programmes are created to aim at certain market segments.[16] They are likely to encourage repeat visitation, as a themed environment provides a unique, memorable experience which increases the probability that guests will return. Visitors will tell friends about their visits, providing effective word-of-mouth advertising.[17] Thirdly, theming is a value-adding factor. The themed retail park 'Knott's Camp Snoopy' demonstrated that 'the mall with a themed entertainment experience will be superior to the mall without such opportunity'.[18] Fourthly, theming allows coordination of retail merchandise, which can in turn increase the guests' retail expenditure.[19] Finally, theme parks that use an easily recognisable and interesting theme will have a competitive advantage over those which do not.[20] This is especially so when there is very strong competition and the equipment is very similar — the way to differentiate is by theming.[21] In addition, as the industry matures and visitors become more experienced and discerning, theming may be needed for a more sophisticated market.

The power of theming or thematic tourism is evident in the fact that it has, in recent years, become a catalyst for the growth of new destinations based solely on thematic leisure.[22] Theme park developers have converted existing attractions into theme parks. To be more competitive and recover the loss of market share or profit, developers have to diversify their 'product offering'. For example, there has been the growth in demand for attractions with a space theme. Therefore, knowing what themes guests look for is essential to both potential and existing theme park investors. New types of theme parks are being developed around the world which shift their focus away from the conventional features of a 'Disneyland' type attraction and further differentiate themselves. This is evidenced a plan to develop a theme park at the site of the 1969 Woodstock music festival to recreate its counter-culture spirit and another based on crocodiles in Florida, named 'Jungle Crocs of the World'.[23]

Purpose of study

The purpose of the study is to examine the importance of the theme in the marketing of theme parks. Since the theme is an important factor affecting the choice of theme parks by visitors, it is important to ascertain more accurately what visitors' preferences are in terms of themes and how their demographic characteristics and lifestyle influence such preference. More specifically, this study seeks to identify and describe a distinct but representative set of theme types and attributes in a theme park; to find out the theme preference(s) of the theme park visitors; to examine the relationship between theme park visitors' motivation (purpose of visit), demographics, psychographics (lifestyle) and their preference(s) for themes; and to examine the importance of theming in the marketing of theme parks.

Motivation for visiting theme parks

Pearce and Dermott's leisure ladder provides a motivation framework to explain why people visit theme parks.[24] Five levels of need regarding theme park visitation are

identified, with the highest level of need being listed as fulfilment, followed by the need for self-esteem and development. The next level is relationship, which emphasises the need to build and extend one's personal relationships. This is followed by the need for stimulation. People in this group are concerned with the management of their arousal levels with emphasis on fun and thrill rides. The lowest level is that of relaxation or bodily needs (see Appendix).

Apart from understanding the basic motivation for theme park visitation, it is necessary to find out why one theme park is chosen over another. The theme here plays a role in differentiating the more successful parks from the less successful ones. It has a twofold significance. First, the nature of the theme chosen will have an impact on the type of customers attracted to the park. Some themes may have a broad and general appeal which caters to a wide spectrum of visitors while others may be more focused and have a narrower appeal. Secondly, theming allows the creation of an enhanced atmosphere and guest experience. These effects, in fact, create the appropriately desirable image crucial to services marketing.

Service marketing
The theme park industry is part of the service component of the tourism industry. Owing to the intangible nature of services, the creation of an identifiable image is critical for service marketing. Even though the image and the theme are not identical in nature, the theme helps project an image by the sort of theme chosen and the theming. For example, the fantasy theme of Disneyland helps project its image of delight, fun and fantasy. Further, the extensive theming of Disney gives a perception of high quality.

The decision made by a consumer to purchase a product or service is directly influenced by the image the individual has of himself/herself and the perceived image of the product or seller. This may explain the psychological process involved when a visitor chooses to go to a theme park with a particular theme, say, an adventure theme; he views himself as adventurous. It can be postulated that the psychographics of consumers help predict the sort of theme they prefer.

Moreover, the service nature of theme parks make image creation a difficult task as it is intrinsically abstract. Thus, service marketers may be able to build the image of specific reality and differentiate it from other 'realities' by the presentation of tangible evidences and experiences simulating reality. By promoting a theme, customers can then use these created physical facilities and props to judge service quality. For example, theming is often done with the careful choice of types of architecture, costumes and other settings displayed in the park.

Theme preference
In a study by McClung it was found that the type of theme is one of the factors affecting tourists' preference for theme parks.[25] Results also indicate that there is a correlation between themes and attractions so that considerable multi-segmentation strategies can be devised to cater to different market segments. For example, wet and wild themes correlate highly with family attractions. This type of theme can be used to attract younger people and families with children looking for thrills and excitement.

Moreover, research has revealed that international tourists with different cultural backgrounds exhibit distinct patterns of preference when they travel. Caucasians were found to be different from Asian visitors in terms of preference for theme park attributes concerning the nature of the attraction, activities and themes.[26] Furthermore, the importance of the cultural element in planning and designing theme parks has been emphasised by Gorder, who stressed the need to seek an appropriate philosophy of concept that reflected Eastern thought and traditions for a park located in the Orient.[27] These important differences point to the need for more theme park studies to provide data for theme park developers catering to international tourists from diverse cultural backgrounds.

METHODOLOGY
Theme types and attributes
A detailed review of tourism and theme park literature and promotion brochures was conducted to find out the theme attributes of theme parks. Words used to describe the theme or general atmosphere associated with the theme parks that appeared more than once were recorded. A list of descriptions was generated by a review of promotional literature, and was expanded by conducting interviews with five experienced theme park professionals who were asked to list all the theme types used by theme parks around the world based on their experience and knowledge. Specific theme attributes were derived and content analysis was used to sort out the adjectives used. Obvious duplication and overgeneralised descriptors were eliminated and a list of 75 attributes was compiled.

As the list contained many descriptors that were similar to each other, the latter were reduced to a smaller number and regrouped into attributes that were more likely to represent one single theme. Content analysis was to distinguish different theme types and, after regrouping, the resulting attributes were classified into seven main ones. These theme types were then shown to the five volunteers who had past experience in theme park settings to obtain further feedback for finalising the grouping of theme types. Table 1 shows the final grouping into seven theme types used in this study.

Motivation for theme park visitation
To ascertain the motivation for theme park visiting, ten statements were constructed, based on Pearce and Dermott's leisure ladder for theme park settings, each stating visitors' different reasons for visiting to theme parks.

Table 1: Theme types grouping

Type	Attribute	Type	Attribute
Adventure	Excitement and action	Fantasy	Animation
	Frightening		Cartoon characters
	Mysterious		Childhood enchantment
	Thrill rides		Children's play park
Futurism	Advances in society and technology		Fairy tale
	Discovery		Magic
	Exploration of science and technology		Make believe
	Laser		Myths and legends
	Robot	History and culture	Aboriginal
	Scientific		Authentic
	Science fiction		Cultural heritage
International	Flavours of the world		Ethnic appeals
	International village		Gold Rush
	Miniature replicas		Historic ambience
	Scenic spots	Movie	American Wild West show
	World expositions		Comedy
Nature	Animals		Motion picture
	Floral displays		Show business
	Horticultural gardens		Stunt show
	Landscaping		
	Marine life		
	Natural wonders		
	Ocean		
	Wildlife		

These were in the form of questions which represented the five levels of the leisure ladder model as shown in the Appendix.

Psychographic (lifestyle)

Twelve statements pertaining to the personality, behaviour and interests of the respondents, such as *I am a dreamer and like to fantasise; I am adventurous and look for excitement in life* etc, were developed to investigate their preferences for particular themes. These statements were developed based on past literature and comments from a group of five volunteers.

Demographic variables

Demographic variables such as gender, country of origin, age, life cycle, occupation and post, household income and education level were selected to test whether any of them had a relationship with visitors' theme preferences.

Data collection

An undisguised structured questionnaire was designed to find out information pertaining to visitors' demographics, psychographics and their preferences for themes. It consisted of five sections, with the first section consisting of questions relating to general travel behaviour, such as frequency of travel and number of theme parks visited. In the second section, respondents were asked to indicate the degree of importance of each of the seven themes, with 1 being very unimportant and 5 being very important. Following this, they were asked to rank their preferences for these themes, with 1 being the most preferred and 7 the least preferred, as an indication of their ordinal partiality. The third section of the questionnaire, which sought to reveal the respondents' lifestyle patterns (attitude, interest, behaviour) was achieved by seeking their level of agreement with a series of statements which related to these aspects on a scale which ranged from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 5 indicating strong agreement. The fourth section focused on the motivation for theme park visitation. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with ten statements which related to the five levels of Pearce and Dermott's leisure ladder model for theme park settings. The final section gathered general demographic data on respondents' gender, country of origin, age, marital status, occupation, household income and education level.

The survey questionnaire was pre-tested on a small group of ten volunteers to ascertain the validity, clarity and appropriateness of the questions asked, particularly in the sections pertaining to motivation and lifestyle patterns. Based on the comments received, some rewording was considered and the layout of the questionnaire restructured.

The sample in this study were Asians (not necessarily international tourists) in Hong Kong who had visited a theme park before and those who had not visited one but expressed an intention to visit. The survey was conducted in a popular tourist shopping area in Kowloon, Hong Kong on a weekend to obtain a good cross-section of people. Respondents were randomly intercepted and requested to complete the survey questionnaire. Interviewers were instructed to clarify to respondents the definition of a theme park where necessary and give examples.

FINDINGS
Demographic profile of respondents

The basic profile of respondents showed a mix of men (44 per cent) and women (56 per cent) across all age and income categories. The majority (52 per cent) of them were between 25 and 39 years of age and single. In terms of income group, slightly more than one-third reported middle to upper middle class incomes. This may be explained by the fact that 44 per cent of the respondents were white-collar workers and 39 per cent reported having attained a secondary education level. In terms of respondents' nationality, most of them were from Hong Kong, with the rest originating from the Philippines, China, Korea, India, Japan and Singapore.

Visitation pattern

Of the 105 respondents who provided usable data for this study, 95.2 per cent have been to a theme park before while 4.8 per cent have not. About one-third (32 per cent) of the respondents may be considered as non-frequent theme park visitors as they visited theme parks only once every two to four years. Another 30 per cent visited theme parks once a year whereas 22 per cent visited three times or more a year and once every six months. In terms of the number of theme parks they had visited, the majority of the respondents (46 per cent) had been to between one and two different theme parks while 33 per cent of them had visited between three and five theme parks. About 12 per cent had been to six to nine parks whereas only 9 per cent had been to ten or more different ones. The pattern of visitation may be attributed to the fact that there is a relatively small number of theme parks existing in Asia. Ocean Park in Hong Kong was found to be the most visited park by those respondents who had been to theme parks before (97 per cent) followed by Disney's Magic Kingdom (30 per cent). Table 2 shows the list of theme parks visited by the respondents.

Table 2: Major theme parks visited by respondents

Theme Park	%
Ocean Park	97
Disney's Magic Kingdom	30
Sung Dynasty Village	29
China Folk and Culture Village	29
Splendid China	24
Sentosa Island	17
The Window of the World	16
Haw Par Villa Dragon World	15
Warner Bros' Movie World	11
Jurong Bird Park	10
Lotte World	10
Sea World	9
Dream World	8
Universal Studios	6

(n = 100)

Theme preference of respondents

Seven theme types were examined to determine which theme was most preferred by respondents. The nature theme (66.7 per cent) was most frequently ranked among the higher ranks (ranks 1–3), followed by the fantasy theme (46.7%) and adventure theme (44.8%). Futurism (44.7%), history and culture (37.1%), and international (32.4%) themes came fourth, fifth and sixth respectively. The least preferred theme was the movie theme with only 27.7% of respondents ranking in the top three ranks (see Table 3).

To some extent the overwhelming preference for the nature theme may be explained by the limited theme park experience of some respondents. Ocean Park, an oceanarium (nature) type of park, was found to be the most visited park (97%) and almost half of these respondents have only visited one or two different parks. Thach and Axinn noted that consumers with a greater depth of experience in one park only may be more likely to use the park they are familiar with as the standard for the industry and their expectations of other parks are shaped by this limited knowledge.[28] Hence, the preference for the nature theme may very likely be a reflection of the in-depth experience obtained at Ocean Park as 70 per cent of the company's guests were in fact on a repeat visit.

On the other hand, the movie theme, a popular theme found in the West with the success of Universal Studios and Warner Brothers' Movie World, was the least preferred theme. This points to the need for the consideration of cultural influence on theme

Table 3: Theme preferences of respondents by frequency of higher ranking

Theme	%	Rank
Nature	66.7	1
Fantasy	46.7	2
Adventure	44.8	3
Futurism	44.7	4
History and culture	37.1	5
International	32.4	6
Movie	27.7	7

preferences. Another interpretation may be that as the breadth of experience in terms of the number of different parks visited was limited, the respondents in this study did not have much exposure to the movie theme. For example, only 11 per cent and 6 per cent of the respondents have been to Warner Brothers' Movie World and Universal Studios respectively.

Demographics and themes

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to test the relationship between the demographic variables and visitors' preferences for themes. The results are as follows.

— The results of the ANOVA revealed that visitors' preferences for the adventure theme was affected by their marital status, with those being single showing a higher preference for this theme (mean = 3.84) as shown in Table 4.
— The importance of the fantasy theme was also found to be affected by marital status. Those who were single preferred the theme, with a relatively high mean of 3.51 in contrast to those who were married with no children (mean = 2.30). Table 4 presents these results.
— Younger groups of respondents did not consider the history and culture theme

important (mean = 2.88) compared to those in the age group of 40–54 years (mean = 4.07). Students also reported a lower mean (mean = 2.63) towards this theme whereas the blue-collar workers and the middle-income group (HK $10,000–$30,000) regarded it as important. These results are presented in Tables 5, 6 and 7 below.
— The importance of the movie theme differed significantly by respondents' age, marital status and occupation. Those aged between 10 and 24 years (mean = 3.46), being single (mean = 3.40) and students (mean = 3.63) preferred the movie theme (Tables 4, 5 and 6).

These results are consistent with the findings in an earlier study by Pearce and Dermott pertaining to the matching of demographic groups (young children, single adults and families) with the motivations for theme park visitors. The 13–16 year olds and the solos representing the single group viewed the rides or thrills as more important than did the family groups. Given that age and marital status are somewhat related it is not surprising that respondents who are single would prefer the fantasy theme which has attributes like childhood enchantment, children's play park, cartoon characters etc. This probably also explains why other groups such as those

Table 4: Comparison of the importance of the theme to respondents by marital status

Theme importance	Group 1 (Single)	Group 2 (Married, no child)	Group 3 (Married, children at home)	Group 4 (Married, children left home)	ANOVA Main effect probability
Adventure	3.84	3.10	3.03	3.00	.0092*
Fantasy	3.51	2.30	3.26	3.20	.0213*
Futurism	3.49	3.60	3.71	2.60	.2191
History and culture	3.40	3.70	3.65	4.20	.3598
International	3.40	3.30	3.35	3.80	.7696
Movie	3.40	3.10	2.68	3.36	.0271*
Nature	3.95	3.90	3.85	4.20	.9127

Results are presented as the mean, on a 5–point scale where 1 indicated the theme was very unimportant and 5 indicated the theme was very important.
*Denotes significance at the .05 level.

Table 5: Comparison of the importance of the theme to respondents by age

Theme importance	Group 1 (10–24)	Group 2 (25–39)	Group 3 (40–54)	Group 4 (55–65+)	ANOVA Main effect probability
Adventure	3.92	3.50	2.86	3.36	.0587
Fantasy	3.58	3.25	2.93	3.36	.3889
Futurism	3.29	3.67	3.57	3.27	.4619
History and culture	2.88	3.65	4.07	3.82	.0029*
International	3.29	3.36	3.36	3.82	.4406
Movie	3.46	3.05	2.50	3.10	.0371*
Nature	3.79	3.93	4.07	4.00	.8699

Results are presented as the mean, on a 5-point scale where 1 indicated the theme was very unimportant and 5 indicated the theme was very important.
*Denotes significance at the .05 level.

Table 6: Comparison of the importance of the theme to respondents by occupation and post

Theme importance	Group 1 (Business owner/self-employed/manager/white collar)	Group 2 (Blue collar)	Group 3 (Student)	Group 4 (Housewife/retired/unemployed)	ANOVA Main effect probability
Adventure	3.52	3.56	3.69	3.13	.5597
Fantasy	3.41	2.81	3.38	3.31	.3273
Futurism	3.55	3.75	3.13	3.63	.4156
History and culture	3.59	4.00	2.63	3.88	.0009*
International	3.27	3.75	3.25	3.63	.1819
Movie	2.84	3.19	3.63	3.50	.0271*
Nature	3.89	4.19	3.88	3.81	.7355

Results are presented as the mean, on a 5-point scale where 1 indicated the theme was very unimportant and 5 indicated the theme was very important.
*Denotes significance at the .05 level.

married with children who stay with parents and married with children who do not stay with parents, with the exception of empty nesters (married with no child), tend to prefer the fantasy theme. This may be attributed to the fact that families with children may be more desirous of seeking entertainment opportunities for their children.

As for the movie theme, it was found that the preference for this theme was influenced by several related demographic variables. Younger people, who are more likely to be single and are students, preferred going to cinemas to spend their leisure time. It seemed that the more movies they saw, the higher the probability the movie theme would be attractive to them. However, it should be noted that the number of movies watched does not necessarily correlate with the importance given the movie theme (coefficient = .1246, p = .210). Likewise, the educational nature contained in the history and culture theme was less appealing to the younger group who are usually students, and tend to perceive history and culture as less stimulating.

This study also revealed that the blue-collar section showed a preference for the history and culture theme. While the basic motivation for travel may be to achieve 'a more profound appreciation of society and culture',[29] blue-collar workers who earn a

Table 7: Comparison of the importance of the theme to respondents by household income

Theme importance	Group 1 (Less than $4,000–$9,999)	Group 2 ($10,000–$29,999)	Group 3 ($30,000–$50,000) & over	Group 4 (No income/ refusal)	ANOVA Main effect probability
Adventure	3.56	3.44	3.56	3.39	.9490
Fantasy	3.78	3.15	3.21	3.28	.2685
Futurism	3.28	3.62	3.65	3.39	.6220
History and culture	3.33	4.03	3.32	3.28	.0185*
International	3.61	3.53	3.15	3.39	.2417
Movie	3.39	3.15	2.76	3.44	.0868
Nature	3.83	3.91	3.94	4.00	.9707

Results are presented as the mean, on a 5-point scale where 1 indicated the theme was very unimportant and 5 indicated the theme was very important.
*Denotes significance at the .05 level.

low to middle household income have limited travelling opportunities and, therefore, found historic theme parks appealing.

Motivation for theme park visitation and themes

Attempting to match the motivation for theme park visitation with themes is difficult as tourist motivation is itself a complex phenomenon. According to Pearce and Dermott tourist motivation is considered as multi-motive rather than a single trait or unidimensional. For example, a visitor who goes to Florida's Future World at the Epcot Centre might be seeking to entertain her six-year-old child, relax in a pleasant and safe setting, and develop her professional understanding of science and technology. While the leisure ladder model which this study has adopted does not preclude people from having more than one motive at a time,[30] the results revealed no significant relationship between motivation to visit and theme preferences. This result might suggest that visitors who go to theme parks with the needs mentioned in the model (ie bodily needs, the need for stimulation, relationship development and extension needs, self-esteem and development needs and fulfilment needs) might be seeking an overall

experience regardless of the theme, or possibly the examined theme types simply do not provide attributes catering to their needs.

The positive moderately strong relationship (coefficient = .5799) found between visitors' need to enjoy the adventure and excitement of the rides and the level of importance assigned to the adventure theme may be explained by the inherent characteristics of the theme park business. Theme parks are known to contain a large number of rides, elements of which are often an integral part or significant component of an adventure theme. Thus, the desire and thirst for adventure may be partly or wholly fulfilled by taking invigorating rides. Furthermore, since most respondents in this study were relatively inexperienced theme park visitors (as denoted by frequency of visits and number of theme parks visited), the preference for an adventure theme may suggest that they were seeking to satisfy a lower level need such as stimulation, which reinforces Pearce's postulation in his leisure ladder framework.

Visitors' lifestyle pattern and preferences for themes

The results revealed that the behaviour of visitors to theme parks may not necessarily

relate closely to their preferences for themes, as shown in Table 8 below.

This may imply that the fulfilment of their desires may be satisfied in forms of entertainment other than theme parks. For example, a person who likes visiting places with an international reputation when he travels might not like to see the replicas of internationally famous attractions featured in theme parks.

Visitors who are adventurous, who like to know more about a country's culture and history when travelling, and like to be near nature, were found to be in favour of adventure themes, history and culture themes and nature themes respectively. This is because thrill rides are almost inseparable from theme parks; and historic and cultural parks are famous in that the architecture, setting and costumes etc are all replicated to project a historic ambience. Lastly, the leisurely and relaxing setting of a theme park, especially one with a natural theme, almost ensures that visitors will be close to a natural environment.

CONCLUSION

An understanding of the consumer is at the core of successful business practice in the tourist industry. If a theme park can meet the needs of its customers, then there is a basis for a successful business. However, a person's motivation to visit theme parks is a complex phenomenon, built upon very subjective and often intrinsic factors which tend to change over time, making it very difficult to gain a complete understanding of its true nature. Moreover, people often visit theme parks with more than one motive, and the theme may be only one of the many attributes the park offers in addition to its normal amusement mix (rides, shows, games etc). It is, therefore, extremely challenging to attempt to match the motive for visitation directly with a specific theme.

This exploratory study represents a first attempt at studying some of these complex relationships. For example, the findings revealed that a visitor's desire to enjoy the excitement and adventure of the rides bore a moderately strong relationship to the preference for an adventure theme. Given the fact that the theme park industry is still relatively 'young' in Asia (introductory to growth stage), this finding reinforces the need for Asian theme parks to focus on satisfying lower-level needs, such as stimulation, by developing and marketing an adventure theme. However, as the theme park industry matures, visitors will wish to fulfil more than one level of needs in order to be satisfied. Therefore, to be competitive, park developers need to come up with innovative

Table 8: Pearson's correlation coefficient between respondent's lifestyle and theme importance

Psychographic (lifestyle) statement	Theme importance	Coefficient	p^*
I am a dreamer and like to fantasise	Fantasy	.2960	.002
I am adventurous and look for excitement in life	Adventure	.4055	.000
When I travel, I like to know more about a country's culture and history	History and culture	.4343	.000
I like to be near nature and/or in a natural environment	Nature	.4753	.000
I am environmentally conscious	Nature	.2275	.020
I am curious about astronomy and space	Futurism	.3152	.001
I would like to know what the world would be like in the future	Futurism	.2647	.007
I like visiting places with an international reputation when I travel	International	.2464	.012
I like eating international cuisine	International	.3628	.000

*All values are shown at the 5 per cent significance level.

themes. It is also suggested that parks at the stage of maturity should theme their attractions extensively, as theming creates the perception of quality.

Market segmentation based on visitors' preferences for themes creates a basis for understanding how customers select visitation to parks in terms of the theme while holding constant all other factors affecting the choice of theme park such as price, location etc. Furthermore, as the preference for themes varies from person to person, market segmentation helps to customise the product. The findings in this study showed that the nature theme was ranked most frequently in the high rank which implies that theme parks which adopt a mass market approach might consider selecting a nature theme. In contrast, theme parks which aim to target a niche segment might choose themes that have a narrower appeal such as the history and culture theme, since people aged between 40 and 54 years with a middle household income were inclined to view these themes as more important than other age groups. Thus, theme parks which aim to tap into this market might consider establishing and marketing such a theme, particularly so if its visitor population shows a trend towards progressive ageing. Furthermore, the results suggested that there might be a cultural difference existing between Asian and Western visitors in their preferences for the movie theme, making it worthwhile to target these patrons differently.

Another approach to defining market segments may be achieved by using multivariate demographic segmentation[31] and multi-segmentation based on combining different themes. In the former case, for example, a park featuring a fantasy theme may segment its market by a combination of several different demographic factors, namely, visitors' age, marital status and household income. Following this approach, the results from this study would suggest that a viable strategy may be to target visitors between the ages of 10 and 25 years who are single and earning an average household income. In the case of the multi-segmentation approach, park developers may choose to include and merge

the elements of two themes. The findings in this study, for example, would suggest that the fantasy and adventure themes (ranked second and third respectively) may be combined to provide multiple offerings to appeal to a wider range of potential visitors. Joint promotion of history and culture parks and museums would attract those seeking an educational experience. However, care should be taken in combining themes which may contain attributes that are incompatible with each other.

Suggestions for further research

It was noted in the discussion of the results that the lifestyle of visitors had a weak to moderate relationship with their preferences for themes in theme parks. This may be explained by a limitation of the study. It included only a few statements examining the lifestyle pattern of visitors in order to avoid an excessively long questionnaire. It is suggested that future researchers focus on the psychographics of visitors to get more detailed and meaningful results.

One of the reasons why the study was undertaken was the lack of research on the perceptions of Asian theme park visitors. Although the results suggest an important finding, that culture might affect visitors' theme preferences, no direct comparisons between Asian and Western visitors was conducted as it was beyond the scope of the study. Hence, it is recommended that future research be devoted to this end.

A third area of research that is suggested as an extension of this effort relates to the question of what constitutes a theme. While conducting interviews with experts in the field of theme parks, it was noted that even though the theme park industry has been in existence for more than 30 years in the US, no classification of the types of theme has yet been formulated. This suggests a fundamental research question which needs to be addressed in research on theme parks.

Finally, similar research might also be undertaken in later years as the industry grows and matures in Asia with changing lifestyles and values in today's highly dynamic envir-

onment. Without such knowledge of custo-
mers' preferences, no theme park will be able
to estimate the shifting needs and desires of
the marketplace. Besides, more themes
might be emerging that need to be taken
into account as the number of parks grows.

The theme park industry in the US has
reached a maturity stage after 30 years of
growth. While the US experience may not
be directly or totally relevant to the Asian
theme park industry, it can be reasonably
assumed that Asia will continue to experi-
ence fairly strong growth over the next ten
years.[32] Such growth will have to be sup-
ported by good and accurate market infor-
mation on visitors' theme preferences, based
on changing lifestyles and values. Moreover,
new themes will emerge as the number and
diversity of theme parks grow. In the long
term, there may be a need for longitudinal-
type studies to determine the extent of the
influence of life-cycle behavioural changes
on theme preferences in order to achieve a
more complete understanding of the visitor's
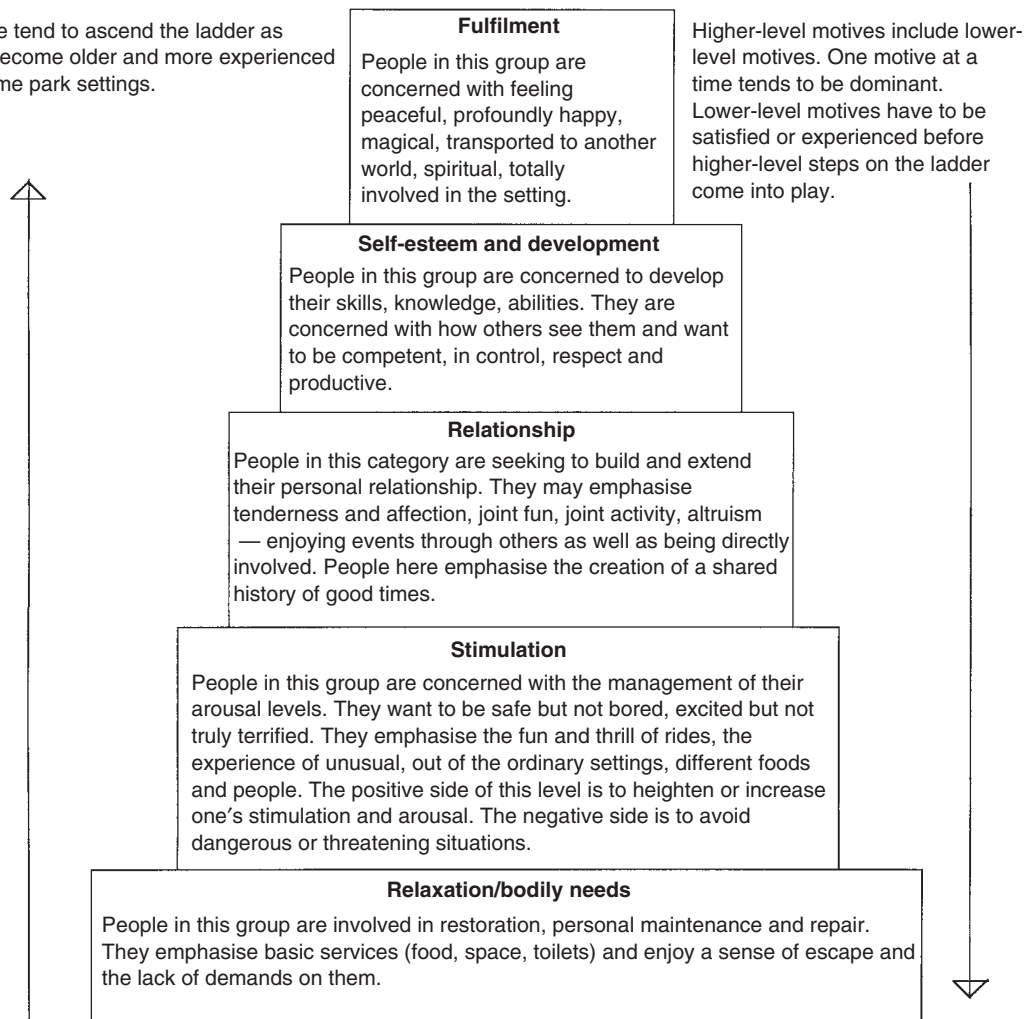motives for visiting a theme park.

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APPENDIX

People tend to ascend the ladder as they become older and more experienced in theme park settings.

Higher-level motives include lower-level motives. One motive at a time tends to be dominant. Lower-level motives have to be satisfied or experienced before higher-level steps on the ladder come into play.

Fulfilment

People in this group are concerned with feeling peaceful, profoundly happy, magical, transported to another world, spiritual, totally involved in the setting.

Self-esteem and development

People in this group are concerned to develop their skills, knowledge, abilities. They are concerned with how others see them and want to be competent, in control, respect and productive.

Relationship

People in this category are seeking to build and extend their personal relationship. They may emphasise tenderness and affection, joint fun, joint activity, altruism — enjoying events through others as well as being directly involved. People here emphasise the creation of a shared history of good times.

Stimulation

People in this group are concerned with the management of their arousal levels. They want to be safe but not bored, excited but not truly terrified. They emphasise the fun and thrill of rides, the experience of unusual, out of the ordinary settings, different foods and people. The positive side of this level is to heighten or increase one's stimulation and arousal. The negative side is to avoid dangerous or threatening situations.

Relaxation/bodily needs

People in this group are involved in restoration, personal maintenance and repair. They emphasise basic services (food, space, toilets) and enjoy a sense of escape and the lack of demands on them.

The leisure ladder for theme park settings (domestic visitors)
Source: Pearce, ref. 24