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Simrit Gill

An analysis of Disney Theme Parks' relational approaches to developing consumer engagement and advocacy

Disney is at the heart of storytelling and imagination. Now hosting 12 theme parks across the globe, from Florida to Shanghai, the "Vacation Kingdom" had over 140,403,000 visitors in 2016 (Newell 2012; Themed Entertainment Association 2016). Disney has adapted several relational approaches such including the use of co-creation on rides such as Test Track to help increase consumer engagement.

A conceptual framework has been constructed to explain how Disney generates engagement and word-of-mouth communication. It proposes that shared values, lead to enthused participation, involvement and in turn to engagement. Once engaged, outcomes are affective commitment, trust, word-of-mouth. A brand community acts as a dynamic loop between the outcomes and antecedents (Brodie et al. 2011). The implications of the study will be outlined, including recommending the use of new technology but keeping this within the art of storytelling and imagination.

Keywords: Engagement, Advocacy, Participation, Shared Values, Involvement, WOM

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INTRODUCTION

Opened by Walt Disney in 1955, Disneyland California became the heart of the art of storytelling and entertainment, where families travelled to make "memories that last a

lifetime" (Walt Disney Parks and Resorts 2017). Now hosting 12 theme parks across the globe, from Florida to Shanghai, the 'Vacation Kingdom' had over 140,403,000 visitors in 2016 (Themed Entertainment Association 2016). Disney has adopted several relational approaches to drive engagement, including the co-creation of rides and innovation of new technology such as the Magic Band. These approaches have allowed Disney to stay current in competition with large competitors, such as Six Flags and Universal by generating word-of-mouth, building affective commitment and trust from consumers, as well as the development of a brand community. The antecedents that drive this engagement will be further explored.

Engagement

Being a relatively new concept (Vivek et al. 2012), engagement is a construct that has not been fully developed and there are still uncertainties surrounding the role it plays in relationship marketing. Previously, engagement was manifest in many other disciplines, including psychology (Hallberg and Schaufeli 2006; Avery et al. 2007; Bakker et al. 2007) and education (Lutz et al. 2006). The research in the realm of psychology holds importance when being applied in the field of marketing, as customer engagement can be defined as a multi-dimensional concept, including interaction and emotions to create a total brand experience (Gambetti et al. 2012). Bowden (2009) agrees with this concept, characterising engagement as a string of psychological procedures, initiated by either the customer or the organisation (Vivek et al. 2012). Wagner and Majchrzak (2007) acknowledge that both participation with the organisation and with other customers is going to intensify the consumer engagement process through collaboration and exchange and driving customers' behavioural manifestations so that they have a brand focus beyond purchase (van Doorn et al. 2010). Relevant to this paper due to the nature of theme parks being an experience, Vivek et al. (2012, p.127) define engagement as: "The connection that individuals form with organisations, based on their experiences with the offerings and activities of the organisation".

Advocacy

Advocacy has been identified as one of the consequences of satisfaction in a consumption experience (Swan and Oliver 1989; Anderson 1998; Brown et al. 2007). However, Morgan and Hunt (1994) acknowledge that there is more to a marketing relationship than satisfaction, with antecedents including commitment and trust. Anderson (1998), Fullerton (2003) and White and Schneider (2000) recognise advocacy as when consumers enthusiastically provide recommendations on a brand's products or services, to other consumers (Harrison-Walker 2001; Hill et al. 2006), known as positive word-of-mouth (Fullerton 2003). Although Mazzarol et al. (2007) state that advocacy is a greater indicator than repeat purchases of loyalty, Dick and Basu (1994) argue that it can be difficult to measure its effects, due the relationship it has with brand retention.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

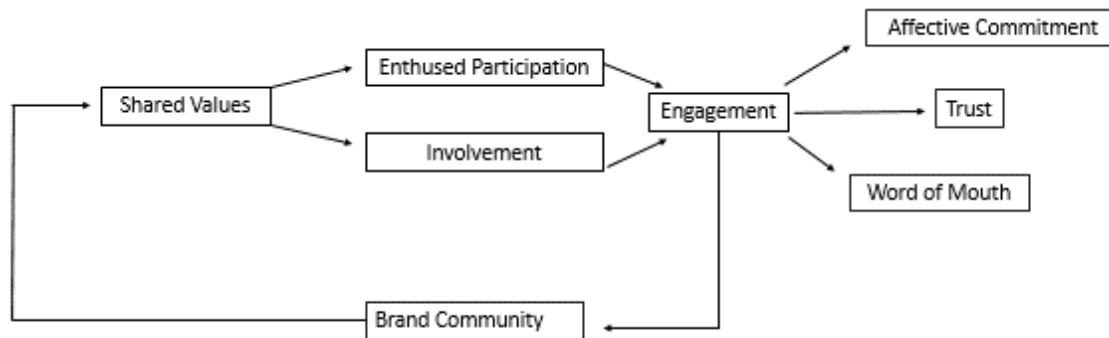


Figure 1: Author's adapted conceptual framework outlining how Disney uses relational approaches to develop consumer engagement and advocacy

The conceptual framework has been constructed drawing from the work of Vivek et al. (2012, 2014). This paper argues that a consumer must have somewhat shared values with an organisation to want to participate and be involved with the organisation, thus becoming engaged (Gronroos 2004; Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006; Brodie et al. 2011; Vivek et al. 2014). Vivek et al. (2012) note that brand community is an outcome of engagement, and whilst this paper agrees, it also shows brand community as a dynamic process that acts as an influence on the antecedents of engagement (Brodie et al. 2013). This paper argues that affective commitment, trust and word-of-mouth are outcomes of engagement supporting Vivek et al.'s (2012) framework.

ANTECEDENTS

Shared Values

Morgan and Hunt (1994) define shared values as the extent to which relational partners share common feelings. Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) suggest that shared values are the foundation that drive the extent to which a consumer will participate with an organisation, and the drive to maintain these relationships with the firm (Gronroos 2004); whilst Zaichowsky (1985) notes that shared values can determine how involved a consumer may be. This combined leads to the argument that shared values are an antecedent of engagement and drive enthused participation and involvement as presented in the adapted framework.

Although customers of Disney may have shared values, the example in this paper will focus on the Disney employees, as the parks are renowned for their cast and crew members. Maxham and Netemeyer (2003) outline the importance of hiring employees who have the same values as the organisation. At Disney, the cast and crew members encompass the Disney persona to deliver the best experience for every customer, in an aim to encourage them to maintain this customer service, which is then passed onto the consumer. Sirdeshmukh et al. (2002) outline that employees who have operational competence, benevolence and are problem-solving in nature, can increase the trust that consumers have in the organisation, a proposed outcome in this framework.

Enthusied Participation

Vivek et al. (2012) describes the concept of enthused participation as zealous or passionate reactions and feelings of someone when interacting with the focus of engagement. Additionally, Dabholkar (1990) describes participation to be the extent to which the customer is involved with producing the product or service. Vivek et al. (2014) sees enthused participation as part of engagement. Vivek et al. (2012) propose that an individual's level of participation has a positive effect on the intensity of their level of engagement. This concept is strengthened by Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) acknowledging that participation and interaction from the customer can produce high levels of enthusiasm and greater engagement with the organisation, thus becoming an antecedent of engagement. One-way participation can be increased is by using co-creation (Nambisan and Baron 2009) with many attractions. Test Track, at Epcot allows users to design their own car whilst waiting to experience the ride. Riders can adapt the speed, style and characteristics of the car and then 'race' with the rest of their party, adding to the storytelling and journey of the ride. The Test Track at Epcot (Walt Disney Parks and Resorts 2017) involves co-creation and guest participation adding to the experience of the ride.

Test Track
Presented by Chevrolet®

Epcot
Future World

Guests Must Be
40in (102cm) or taller

Age Interest
Kids, Tweens, Teens, Adults

FastPass+ Offered

Thrill Level
Thrill Ride, Small Drops

[Accessibility and Other Information](#)

Design a virtual concept vehicle and then go for a high-octane spin at this attraction that's thrilling and creative.

Hours
Sunday
November 19, 2017 📅
9:00 am to 9:00 pm

Map

One Fun Ride
Buckle up in a 6-passenger "simulation car" and put a virtual vehicle that you created to the test. [Read More](#)

A Second Spin
Afterward, participate in even more interactive experiences with your vehicle design. [Read More](#)

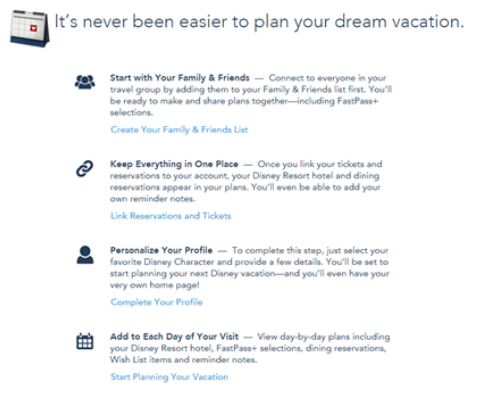
Even More Fun for Adults
Discover other great Walt Disney World experiences that adults love—like exhilarating attractions, delectable culinary events and more. ➔

SHARE

Figure 2: Test Track information as described on Disney Experience

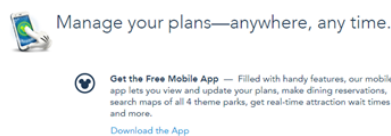
Involvement

Zaichkowsky (1985) states that involvement is the perceived value of the product taking into account the customer's needs, values and interests. Vivek et al. (2012) argue that the higher the level of interest and caring from the customer's perspective, the higher the level of engagement, due to involvement being a cognitive, motivational construct in relation to the customer's state of mind (Smith and Godbey 1991). The introduction of new technology such as the 'Magic Band' in 2013, combined with the 'My Experience app' generates a universal tool that allows guests to enter their rooms, pay for food and is used for admission to the park, as well as a PhotoPass and Fastpass+ (Walt Disney Parks and Resorts 2017), adding to the perceived value of the product (Zaichkowsky 1985). The bands are a great vehicle for data capture for Disney to view consumer habits, but also to allow the guests to tailor their experience by booking fast passes. Indeed, Fastpass+ bookings have increased by 50% within the first quarter of implementation (Fast Company 2014). The bands have resulted in reducing wait times for lines by 25%, they permit guests to reserve dinner tables, and even allow guests to have a virtual map showing character locations around the park. This co-producing and involvement in the design process can lead to higher levels of engagement as a greater perception of value is received (Lawrence et al. 2009).



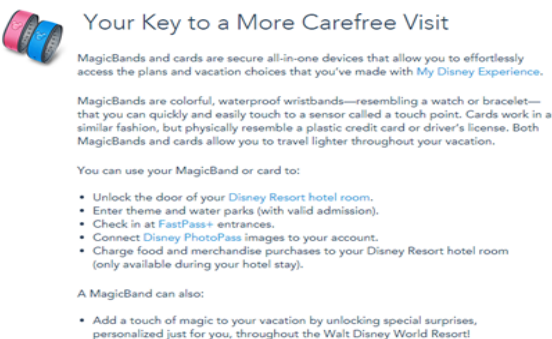
It's never been easier to plan your dream vacation.

- Start with Your Family & Friends** — Connect to everyone in your travel group by adding them to your Family & Friends list first. You'll be ready to make and share plans together—including FastPass+ selections. [Create Your Family & Friends List](#)
- Keep Everything in One Place** — Once you link your tickets and reservations to your account, your Disney Resort hotel and dining reservations appear in your plans. You'll even be able to add your own reminder notes. [Link Reservations and Tickets](#)
- Personalize Your Profile** — To complete this step, just select your favorite Disney Character and provide a few details. You'll be set to start planning your next Disney vacation—and you'll even have your very own home page! [Complete Your Profile](#)
- Add to Each Day of Your Visit** — View day-by-day plans including your Disney Resort hotel, FastPass+ selections, dining reservations, Wish List items and reminder notes. [Start Planning Your Vacation](#)



Manage your plans—anywhere, any time.

- Get the Free Mobile App** — Filled with handy features, our mobile app lets you view and update your plans, make dining reservations, search maps of all 4 theme parks, get real-time attraction wait times and more. [Download the App](#)



Your Key to a More Carefree Visit

MagicBands and cards are secure all-in-one devices that allow you to effortlessly access the plans and vacation choices that you've made with My Disney Experience.

MagicBands are colorful, waterproof wristbands—resembling a watch or bracelet—that you can quickly and easily touch to a sensor called a touch point. Cards work in a similar fashion, but physically resemble a plastic credit card or driver's license. Both MagicBands and cards allow you to travel lighter throughout your vacation.

You can use your MagicBand or card to:

- Unlock the door of your Disney Resort hotel room.
- Enter theme and water parks (with valid admission).
- Check in at FastPass+ entrances.
- Connect Disney PhotoPass images to your account.
- Charge food and merchandise purchases to your Disney Resort hotel room (only available during your hotel stay).

A MagicBand can also:

- Add a touch of magic to your vacation by unlocking special surprises, personalized just for you, throughout the Walt Disney World Resort!

Figure 3: The Magic Band and My Experience App, part of the launch of the MyMagic+ Scheme introduced in 2013 (Walt Disney Parks and Resorts 2017)

OUTCOMES

Brand Community

A brand community can be defined as an international society (de Valck et al. 2009), with both engaged customers and non-customers coming together in an empowered virtual community (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000; Vivek et al. 2012). Participation and involvement with a brand, lead to the community being engaged (Brodie et al. 2013) through interaction (Vivek et al. 2014) and having shared values (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), thus suggesting that consumer engagement can lead to the development of a brand community (Vivek et al. 2012). Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) value the importance of a brand community due to the persuasion consumers can have on others’ purchasing behaviours. Although engagement may be an antecedent to brand community, this paper argues that being a part of a brand community will lead to higher levels of participation, involvement and connection (Vivek et al. 2012) and thus a dynamic loop emerges between the concepts (Brodie et al. 2013). Brand communities can be enhanced by customer-initiated offerings (Vivek at al. 2012) such as the Walt Disney World Mum’s Panel, an online forum of ‘expert’ panellists sharing their top tricks and hints to tackle the holiday. These self-claimed Disney fanatics share their experiences, from basic activities such as registering the Magic Band, to how to use the app to plan the best route around the park, this online brand community acts as a tangible example of how advocates of the brand are acting on their own accord to enhance other consumers’ experiences.



Donyell

Specialty: Walt Disney World

Hello from North Carolina! I am a mom of twin girls, wife, and university professor who has been inspired by the creativity of Disney for a lifetime. Since my first Disney visit when I was 12-years-old, I have been drawn to the adventures crafted by Disney Imagineers. Planning Disney vacations helps connect me to families who will find in Disney the kind of joy my family has experienced over the years. Allow me to help you map your own Disney journey so that you, too can create the memories of a lifetime!



Linda

Specialty: Disneyland Resort

Hi there! I'm Linda from Colorado. The Disneyland Resort has always held a special place in my heart and now I enjoy Disney Parks vacations with my own family at least once a year. I am married to my high school sweetheart and we have a wonderfully silly daughter together. I love sharing my Disney Parks knowledge with anyone and everyone and I'm so excited to help you plan your next Disneyland Resort adventure!

Figure 4: Two examples of active users on the Panel, outlining their want to share knowledge and help others in the virtual community.

Word-of-mouth

Word-of-mouth can be defined as informal, spontaneous, communication, relaying a pleasant experience and often recommending it to others (Anderson 1998; Harrison-Walker 2001). Word-of-mouth has a major influence on what people think and feel towards a brand (Buttle 1998). Vivek et al. (2012) suggested that there is a positive relationship between engaged customers and word-of-mouth, where highly engaged customers become advocates of the brand (Keller 2007; de Matos and Rossi 2008). Within the brand community, word-of-mouth is more likely to be generated (Brown et al. 2007) as members are more enthused, due to having participated with the brand, and engaging (Vivek et al. 2014). An example of word-of-mouth is the rise of vloggers and Disney vlogging. These guests film their trip to Disney, highlight their best bits and share them with viewers. This allows viewers to have an up-to-date knowledge of what the parks have to offer and are mainly offered voluntarily from the producer. Ellie Steadman, known for her Disney Vlogs has reached audiences of over 302,188 viewers.

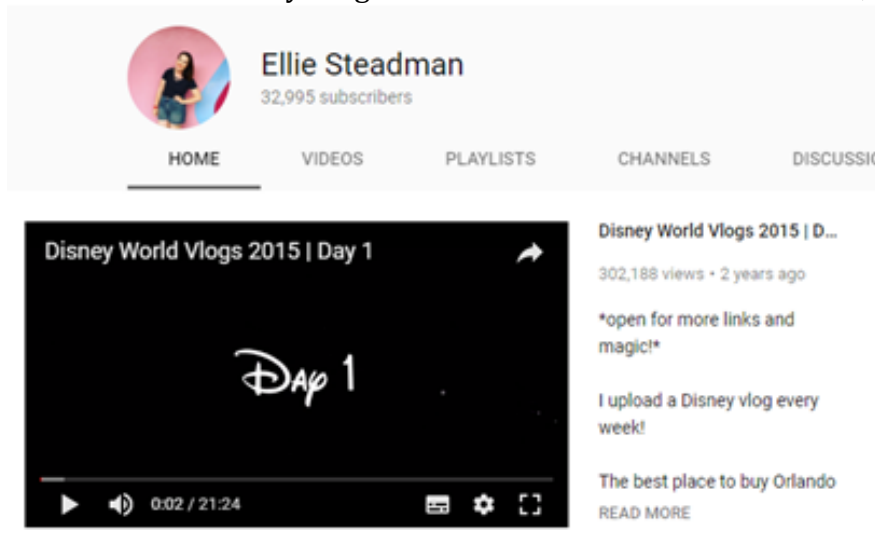


Figure 5: Ellie Steadman Youtube Channel

Affective Commitment

Allen and Meyer (1990) define affective commitment as an affective or emotional attachment that a consumer can identify with, be involved in and enjoy being part of the organisation so wanting to maintain the relationship (Verhoef et al. 2002). Fullerton (2011) explains that if a consumer is affectively committed to an organisation, they will want the organisation to succeed, developing a long-term relationship (Sharma et al. 2006). Therefore, this paper agrees with Vivek et al. (2014) and suggests that consumer engagement has a positive relationship with affective commitment, due to the sense of belonging (Bansal et al. 2004) through desire-based attachment shared with the brand community. Although Vivek et al. (2012) argue that affective commitment and loyalty are separate outcomes, loyalty has been omitted from the framework due to its complexity and interaction it has with affective commitment (Bowden 2009).

Trust

Grossman (1998) defines trust as being gained through experiences, where if the customer has a positive experience with an organisation, they are more likely to trust them in the future. Berry (1996) argues that trust is the most powerful tool for an organisation and its marketing activities. Vivek et al. (2012) outline the positive relationship between trust and consumer engagement. Trust underpins reciprocity and non-opportunistic behaviour (Morgan and Hunt 1994), and allows the consumer to believe that Disney have their best interests at heart and truly care for the consumer from before the consumer enters the park, right through to after they leave. This is encouraged by the interactions with staff, experience enhancers like the Magic Band that add value to a trip, and delivers on what is promised to the customer.

IMPLICATIONS

1. The use of new technology and innovation involving co-creation is imperative for Disney keeping that competitive edge over other theme parks. With other key players such as Universal and Six Flags, it is important for Disney to maintain that competitive edge. This could be achieved through integration with popular social media apps such as Snapchat and an interactive and virtual map around the parks offering different filters.
2. Disney has a long-lasting reputation that resonates in the hearts of many consumers, the art of storytelling and imagination sets it apart from its competition. Retaining the core values that the organisation has and shares with its consumers and employees is a key recommendation for Disney.

LIMITATIONS

This model has taken a basic approach, omitting possible outcomes suggested by Vivek et al. (2012) based on the author's assumptions of the relevant concepts of engagement in terms of Disney. The framework is primarily focused on academic findings that have no association with Disney as a case study, although focused on published literature that has insight in other fields. Primary research could be conducted with consumers, to test the model empirically.

CONCLUSION

Although there are limitations to the framework, this paper argues that the first point of engagement is shared values; these drive consumer participation and involvement. From there and agreeing with Vivek et al. (2012) the outcomes of engagement are argued to be affective commitment, trust, word-of-mouth and a brand community. It is this brand community that keeps the engagement in a dynamic loop and thus the engagement continues.

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