

HOW TO INCORPORATE ACCESSIBILITY INTO THEME PARKS

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the “special-made” community of people with disabilities. It is with a warm heart that I give a special dedication to my angels in heaven that soar as beautiful butterflies in the sky, free from earthly barriers.

Thank you for shining your light and sharing the purest love of all.

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Abstract

This paper presents exploratory research on the topic of inclusive opportunities in theme parks for people with disabilities. The purpose of this study was to explore design and operating dissonance that exists between entertainment industry businesses, specifically theme parks, and those guests that are disabled and discuss how that dissonance manifests in the form of unequal access. A qualitative research methodology was employed in this study which provided many insights into guest experiences at four theme parks located throughout the United States. Individual interviews and observations were utilized to collect this data. The findings indicate that most guests are willing to travel substantial distances in order to experience accessible fun. However, they were often unaware of the accessible offerings provided by these theme parks. In many instances, those offerings were either found to be inadequate or park staff was merely unaware of their existence. Many procedural issues related to the interactions of park staff with disabled guests were also noted and might well be construed as discriminatory. Moreover, when it comes to theme parks, while incorporating full inclusion into the workings of theme parks may simply or not be feasible or even possible, the goal of park design and management should be the maximizing of accessibility for all, including those guests presenting disabilities. This paper also provides recommendations for consideration by theme park administrators to improve the quality of the park experience for disabled guests.

Introduction

When we think of theme parks, we may contemplate how to maximize our fun through thriller rides, heart racing attractions, and tasty carnival foods. For others, particularly the disabled, their vacations are frequently planned around the accessibility offered by a theme park (Wang, 2013). More than one in eight Americans have a disability (Mercado, 2017). That figure indicates that roughly 40 million people in the United States have a severe impairment consistent with one or more of six areas as identified and measured by the Census Bureau's American Community Survey: hearing, vision, cognition, walking or climbing stairs, difficulty with self-care, or difficulty with independent living (Mercado, 2017).

Accessibility for the disabled is about providing an opportunity to those who struggle daily with life-limiting impairments and allow them to experience, or even witness, life's precious moments with friends and family. In addition, accessibility provides an opportunity for people of different abilities and backgrounds to come together and in so doing, develop positive perceptions, break down cognitive barriers, and advance the banishing of stereotypes (Adapt the Fun for Everyone! - Physical Activity and People with Disabilities, 2009).

Considering that a disability is fundamentally a gap between what an individual is able to do, and what that individual would like to do, some might argue that it is a societal responsibility to meet the disabled where they are and provide them greater access opportunities by way of making small changes to their environment (Allen &

Wagner, 2011). In order to successfully create this change, there are seven barriers to inclusion that should be considered (Heyne, n.d.):

- Attitudinal barriers may take the form of misconceptions, stereotypes, or labeling. Society often segregates people with disabilities in their education, recreation, and work pursuits, which sets in motion a trend that perpetuates a feeling of isolation. This isolation makes it difficult for a truly integrated community to blend, where people of all abilities work and live together. As such, inclusion moves beyond merely creating an accepting environment. It advances respect for people's rights and encourages opportunities.
- Administrative barriers result from a lack of leadership from boards of directors and administrators to recognize the need for inclusive environments and encourage more accepting organizations. This barrier often stems from a misconception that creating inclusive environments is difficult, risky, and requires expensive liability arrangements. The staff and volunteers may not have received training in inclusive practices. There is often minimal effort to connect to the people who may be excluded. Also, the organization may lack funding for coordinated services and individual support.
- Architectural barriers are associated with the quality of the access provided by organizations. People with disabilities often feel excluded when architectural barriers in facilities deny them an equal opportunity to participate. Agencies can apply for grants to fund accommodations such as ramps, elevators, automatic door openers, safe curbsides, handicap parking and bathrooms, Braille signage, and communication devices to improve accessibility.

- Programmatic barriers are encountered when the rules, regulations, and practices do not accurately serve the disabled community, and therefore may exclude people with limited abilities. For example, some administration and staff members may not understand the difference between a person with a disability and a person with special needs. This is an important differentiation because the two characterizations do not fall on the same spectrum. This lack of understanding can cause unfortunate outcomes when it comes to inclusion efforts. They may also not be familiar with how to promote positive interactions among people, with or without disabilities, by making program adaptations, implementing adaptive equipment, or using strategies of individual needs assessments.

In addition to the barriers mentioned above, there are two other barriers for people with disabilities that present challenges to accessibility. These barriers are a lack of financial resources and a lack of transportation. For example, “Global data show that employment rates are lower for disabled men (53%) and disabled women (20%) than for non-disabled men (65%) and non-disabled women (30%). In OECD countries, the employment rate of people with disabilities (44%) was slightly over half that for people without disabilities (75%) (WHO | 10 facts on disability, 2017). Also, transportation is often an issue that is overlooked for those with disabilities. The disabled often depend on a parent, caregiver, or friend to transport them from one location to another (Uttinger, 2018). Thankfully, there are government mobility services, private mobility organizations, and rideshare options that can help the disabled meet their transportation needs.

It is important to note that only 10% of those with disabilities are physically affected; autism, cognitive and developmental issues, sensory challenges, and many other differences make up 90% of disabling conditions (MBF Donor Brochure.pdf, n.d.). And when it comes to the nation's theme parks, most are created with the 90% of guests who are not disabled in mind (Levin, CNN, 2017). Theme parks may not be equipped with proper signage, accessible entries and parking, proper navigation equipment, telecommunication devices, auxiliary aids, Braille, staff assistance, and visual emergency alarms, among other considerations (Grocery Stores, n.d.). While incorporating full inclusion into the workings of every theme park may not be feasible, or even possible, the goal of park design and management should be the maximizing of accessibility for all, including those guests presenting disabilities.

Purpose Statement

In reviewing the extant research literature on access for the disabled, there was no published work found that explicitly addresses disability access at theme parks. This study will explore the issue of disabled access at theme parks by investigating and evaluating many factors that allow for improved accessibility. It will provide examples of areas where theme parks succeed in improving access, as well as highlight areas of suggested improvement. Fundamentally, this study is intended to fill the information gap that exists between businesses in the entertainment industry, specifically theme parks, and the disabled guests who are affected by unequal access. As such, this is essential research for both theme park administration as well as members of the disabled community. Additionally, it seeks to foster dialog among members of the theme park

industry to commit to identifying and implementing needed changes that would create a more inclusive environment for all of their guests. In pursuing this study, these specific research questions were investigated:

Q1) How can accessibility be improved at existing theme parks, and

Q2) How adequate are required accessibility factors for the construction of new theme parks?

Methods

In pursuing this study, a qualitative research design was employed. According to Sutton & Austin (2015), qualitative research can help researchers access the thoughts and feelings of research participants, which can enable the development of an understanding of the meaning that people ascribe to their experiences. Therefore, a qualitative research study was considered appropriate and suitable for this study to gain insights into guest experiences through individual interviews and observations.

Four theme parks located around the United States were the subjects of this study and were evaluated based on their accessibility offerings to guests with special needs. In addition, forty interviews were conducted with guests visiting the four theme parks. Theme park one is located in Central Texas and is part of the largest amusement park company in the world. (Business Wire, 2018). Theme park two is one of twelve theme parks of its kind. This park is located in Southern California. Theme park three is located in Florida and is one of a chain of eight family theme parks. Theme park four is also located in Central Texas and caters primarily to disabled guests of all ages.

Upon arriving at the parks, an evaluation checklist prepared by the researcher, with advice from Texas State University Facilities Management experts as well as a Registered Accessibility Specialist (see Appendix A), was used to evaluate accessibility factors associated with theme park design. This checklist was comprised of evaluative factors that the Department of Labor and Occupational Safety and Health Administration inspectors consider when examining a location from the standpoint of ADA compliance and safety. The checklist includes, among other things, designated access routes, parking locations, wayfinding, maps of theme park grounds, proper signage, ticket booth access, safety measures while on rides, resting spaces, dining services, smoking policies, and special ticket offerings. Photos were taken during each park visit, and those photos were stored in separate Google drive albums that could only be accessed by the researcher. Photos were taken with care to avoid identification of the specific theme park and captured areas of success in serving disabled guests as well as instances where the theme park's efforts were determined to be lacking and in need of improvement.

Upon completing the checklist evaluation, forty informal interviews were conducted with guests visiting the four theme parks. These interviews are characterized as informal given that the conversations were casual in nature. The details of each discussion were captured in notes that were made contemporaneously at the conclusion of each interview. The reason for employing this approach was to allow each conversation to flow naturally and generate thoughtful responses; therefore, a tablet or notepad was not used to take notes during the conversations. In utilizing this approach, the intention was to evaluate these theme parks from the standpoint of their inclusiveness for guests with disabilities. The subjects of these interviews were the guardians, parents, and other

individuals accompanying the disabled guest or guests. Care was taken to ensure interviewees were over the age of 18. The interviewees were selected at random at each theme park. The only other demographic information captured from the interviewees was the state of residence, which provided a general idea of how far guests traveled to experience these theme parks. Before the start of the interview, interviewees were advised of their rights under informed consent and given a choice not to participate in this research. During these interviews, nine specific questions were asked of all interviewees. These specific questions were chosen to gain insight into the positive and negative experiences that the guests have had at the current park, and others, as well as the distance, traveled to visit the park (see Table 1).

Table 1

Interview Questions

Question #	Interview Question
1	Are you 18 years or older?
2	Are you from this state or are you visiting from out of state? Please share your state of residence?
3	Why did you choose to visit this theme park?
4	What do you like about this theme park?
5	Have you experienced any accessibility problems during your visit?
6	Do you have any recommendations regarding accessibility improvement for this park?
7	Would you recommend this theme park to a friend?
8	Can you identify another entertainment venue that does a great job of catering to your accessibility needs?
9	What is the distance you are willing to travel to experience accessible fun

Findings

It was important for the researcher to include the positive aspects of each park when it came to accessibility efforts to provide potential guests with more in-depth offerings and services. Regarding the first research question, “How can accessibility be improved at existing theme parks,” in Theme Park 1, guests chose to visit this park because they were season pass holders or because their family enjoys the experience. Interviewees stated that they were pleased the park had improved their food offerings. For them, this fact alone was an encouragement to visit the park weekly. However, interviewees also mentioned that the electric wheelchairs were expensive to rent, there were no senior park ticket price reductions since they are limited in their entertainment options within the park, and there were no food and beverage options for guests with dietary restrictions. Guests also described a state of invisibility and were sometimes disrespected by park staff and other guests. They also expressed dissatisfaction with not being included in park parades and activities and disappointed that the theme park does not allow assistance from other guests in their party to get ride tickets validated on their behalf.

In Theme Park 2, guests chose to visit this park because they were season pass holders, they consider the park to be fun and accessible, they love the shows, it’s military friendly, and the elderly are welcomed. It is also a teaching opportunity for parents to enrich their child’s knowledge of marine life and global responsibility. Beginning with the exhibits, there were glass windows present surrounding each animal exhibit where guests could easily roll their wheelchair up to interact with the animals or step onto the small step available for higher viewing to watch and observe the wildlife. Guests were

also able to purchase snacks to feed and interact with the animals. The same was true of the park's interactive pools. It appeared quite easy for someone with a disability to enjoy interacting with the animal's close-up, such as touching the stingrays. There were even moving and lighted escalator pathways to facilitate accessibility so that guests could enjoy seeing the animals up close with other guests. Interviewees stated that they appreciate that the park offers wheelchair rentals, natural wayfinding throughout the theme park with a non-electric wheelchair, easy accessibility of rides, friendly staff and other guests, and great parking. It also offers clean, spacious accessible bathrooms, unique shows without the use of loud music or extreme light effects, and a diversity of guests from across the world. One of the most mentioned rides was a non-motion ride, available in theater style seating, where guests could experience the same ride setup and show, but without motion. This ride was favored by small children, the elderly, people who were afraid of the regular ride, and the disabled. The park communicated six restrictions on the screen in the queue for guests to consider choosing whether the motion or the non-motion ride fit their needs. Clear markings were evident in ride queues where guests with disabilities could stand to prepare to enter the rides, ability to strap in wheelchairs along with surrounding seats for their families or service animals to join them on the ride, and elevator access for exiting the ride. The second ride guests were excited about the ride being able to shift to the side, allowing the disabled guest to board the ride without rush or stopping the ride safely.

The shows were the most prominent reason guests visited the park because anyone could enjoy them, and they did not have loud noises or lights incorporated into them. For the shows, there was both front and top row accessible seating, along with

bench seating for accompanying guests and wheelchair spaces. Also, these shows had designated wet zone accessible seating areas, so if guests wanted to get splashed during the show, they could. Guests also mentioned that they loved the cross-cultural or educational component included in each presentation. These segments informed the audience about interesting facts, statistics, the park's current projects, and actionable things the audience could do to become more globally responsible. However, the interviewees also expressed some concerns, such as the theme park should offer discounted tickets for disabled guests, given they are unable to partake in all park activities. They expressed their belief that more affordable ticket options would encourage them to bring their children, grandchildren, and other family members along with them. Interviewees also mentioned that there was inadequate signage across the park, the electric wheelchairs were expensive to rent, they occasionally felt disrespected in a wheelchair by children and families when navigating throughout the theme park, and there is no cool or rest zone present for hot, crowded days. They expressed dissatisfaction with having to navigate up to a ride only to learn that it was closed due to maintenance. They were also upset about not being informed about accessible rides and unique park offerings upon entry to the park.

In Theme Park 3, guests chose to visit this park because they face challenges finding an entertainment venue for children across the spectrum with special needs and heard favorable comments about this autism-friendly park. Also, they choose to visit this park to celebrate a birthday, enjoy a family vacation, and because their family believes it is a fun and safe place that values inclusion for all. The guests mentioned that from their initial experience at guest services, the trained employees, known as *model citizens*,

treated them with excitement and kindness and as a result, they and their family felt included, welcomed and not judged. Interviewees stated that they appreciated that the theme park website provides accessibility offerings and autism visitor tips such as locations of loud zones and dark scenes as well as ride cycle times. They expressed appreciation for the excellent implementation of the courtesy wheelchair in the parking lot. There are multiple courtesy wheelchairs placed throughout the parking area with signs informing guests that they can use this complementary chair to get to guest services and trade it out for a rental chair. This courtesy offering eliminated the guests from having to struggle from their cars to guest services. They also found the accessibility guide from guest services helpful, their experiences with the expedited access pass and designated entryways to be positive, and they enjoyed interacting with employees who are also on the spectrum. The park also provided family size accessible bathrooms with proper signage for guests as well as service dog relief centers.

In addition, they mentioned that the park offers unique rides, cooling zones, and quiet rooms to relax and take a break. The park offered three quiet rooms that were in air-conditioned spaces where parents could bring their children out of the crowded park and into an area where they could relax and settle down. These rooms are equipped with weighted blankets, light dimming variations, a hero box filled with unique toys, a sensory box, a rocking chair, hammock, bean bags, and a bed. These rooms also serve as an excellent place to change and entertain infants.

It was unique to see “create while you wait” spaces throughout the park for kids to entertain and engage themselves. These are endless outlets with physical activities in the shade that catered to the sensory needs of the guests while they are walking through

the park or waiting for their turn on the ride. Also, there are remote controlled games, a walk and roll path through the world, and video game virtual races that any guest can enjoy. The park manager informed this researcher that he creates and sends his staff in teams to support the *Autism Speaks Walk* every year and they are referred to as *model citizens* in the park. He stated, "every day cannot be a great day, but we try our best, and we are proud of that." Guests mirrored his efforts in saying that the park does an outstanding job of autism awareness with much less stellar accommodation and inclusion. Many interviewees stated that they are not used to others talking and being helpful to them in parks, especially employees. Regarding meals, the food in the park is very affordable, there is much variety, and guests can bring food and drink items into the park using a cooler.

Overall, the parents expressed satisfaction that their children can enjoy the rides like any other park guest. However, the interviewees mentioned that they wished the park had better signage and reduced crazy lights/loud sounds on two rides that triggered their child. They mentioned that it would be helpful for the park to have earplugs available to rent for children who may be triggered by loud noises and vibrant lights. Furthermore, providing clear communication about the accessibility guide and special access maps available for their families upon receiving an expedited access pass at guest services would be very beneficial.

In Theme Park 4, guests chose to visit this park because they were inspired by the vision and mission of the theme park that states, We want this park to be a place where the common element of play creates an atmosphere of inclusion for those with and without disabilities, encouraging everyone to gain a greater understanding of one another.

Their mission is “To provide a safe, clean and beautiful environment free of physical and economic barriers that all individuals – regardless of age, special need or disability – can come to and enjoy” (About Us, n.d.).

The park executes this vision by providing free admission to all guests with disabilities into the park. The interviewees each visited the park to attend a birthday party, partake in many experiential activities for youth of all ages, they were rollercoaster enthusiasts, and because their children simply love this theme park. Interviewees were impressed by the cleanliness of the theme park, the friendly staff, delicious dining, and great parking options, entertaining shows, clean bathrooms, refillable water stations, and overall experience (which some characterized as magical) provided to guests. Most employees have a disability and have found success and job security working at this park. They stated that working at the park is a wonderful experience and they expressed gratitude to be in such an accepting workplace environment.

This park offers *joy fast* passes that allow guests one skip the line pass for each ride. There is also a location tracker for parents that enables them to track the location of any member of their party through the use of a wristband, a kiosk, and downloadable phone application. Interviewees described the quiet, relaxing, and welcoming ambiance; that the rides are delightful, and the playscapes and sensory areas are amazing. Also, they mentioned that the catch and release fishing was exciting, the train is an *around the world* adventure with caring staff, there is an option to bring your food and drinks into the park, and the park is nothing like they’ve ever seen before (they described it as *good for the soul*). All rides are wheelchair accessible and sensory friendly and allow the guest to navigate up onto an accessible loading ramp and ride onto coasters, cars, or boats. Clear

signage and wheelchair entry points are leading up to the attractions and entry/exit points. This park also has fully accessible playgrounds, sand pits, swings, jungle gyms, slides, and an ultra-accessible water park. The newest addition to the park is a digital gaming and interactive section in their Sensory Village with Microsoft computers and an Xbox center. Several interviewees shared that this center is so impressive as it features the new adaptive controller with joystick and foot pedal. According to the Microsoft website, the machine is “Designed primarily to meet the needs of gamers with limited mobility. The Xbox Adaptive Controller is a unified hub for devices that helps make gaming more accessible.” The guests of this park are enthusiastic about their slogan that reads “When everybody plays, we all win.” (Xbox Adaptive Controller | Xbox, n.d.). Each of the park’s holiday events and activities has sensory friendly activities, games, and prizes. The park also provides a gym that allows special teams to practice for a variety of sports such as power soccer and basketball and welcomes players of all ages and abilities. However, the interviewees expressed concerns that unlike free access for the disabled, ticket prices are high for guests without special needs. Also, there is no significant discount in ticket pricing for those who arrive within an hour of park closure. They also were disappointed with the poor communication regarding rides that were closed for maintenance, and that the park has limited operating hours.

Regarding the second research question, “How adequate are required accessibility factors for the construction of new theme parks?” For Theme Park 1, interviewees stated that the park did not provide safety and accessibility guidelines, it is difficult to navigate around the park for new guests, and there are not enough handicap-approved parking spots available during busy hours. Interviewees also stated that it is a long walk to get to

the ride exits to receive a call number and return later for the ride; there are no accessible seating options on rides, and it is too difficult to climb into the boat ride. It was also mentioned that the lunch policies and options are not consistent at the various restaurants and that this park rents the same wheelchair as other parks but for a higher rate.

One comment received from a park guest mentioned that this park requires guests with disabilities to provide paperwork to receive special access. This interviewee stated that since she and her peer did not have paperwork on hand, they were not granted the special privileges routinely provided to disabled guests. This interviewee expressed that she believed this action violated the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act. It can be quite uncomfortable to discuss a hidden disability as, in some cases, this disability is an insecurity that they would rather hide in attempting to better fit into society. For this interviewee's peer, she possessed a visible disability, yet both were still denied access privileges intended to prevent the disabled from ride-related injuries. An additional comment regarding park actions that appeared problematic was taken from an interviewee who was stopped and questioned about their service animal by a security officer. This interviewee stated that, in the United States, disabled Americans are granted civil rights protections from discrimination and harassment under the Americans with Disabilities Act. This interviewee felt harassed, threatened, and afraid that access would be denied to her and her service animal. This guest recommended that the park implement a rule to only allow animals with proper identification (such as a dog vest, dog ID, and in training/working sign) into the park rather than interrogating all guests at the entrance of the park.

In Theme Park 2, interviewees stated that the park did not have an accessibility map to help them navigate around the park. Also, it is difficult to navigate up inclines in the park to see the shows with a non-electric wheelchair, and there is limited accessible seating on the front row for shows so they must sit on the very top level. Interviewees also mentioned that there is a limited number of wheelchairs for rent and since it is first come-first served, the park runs out of these wheelchairs in the summer. Additionally, the park uses the same electric wheelchairs that are offered at other theme parks but charges a much higher rental fee. Moreover, the electric rides are too rough, and there is no quiet or cool space available for them to rest or entertain the infants while the older children have fun.

In Theme Park 3, interviewees stated that they were not notified about the accessibility guide upon receiving their disabled accessibility pass and there is no accessible parking entry line and no organization in the security and ticketing services lines. Additionally, there are no wheelchair stations in the park other than the station located at the very front of the park which makes it difficult for small families to split up in search of a wheelchair when their disabled family member is in need. It was mentioned that the outside cooling fans for the rides are set on high and are extremely loud, which is a trigger for guests with sensory sensitivities. For one of the rides, the navigation is very difficult for children of all abilities. There are also silver posts along the railings throughout the ride queues that children often interfered with that caused an annoying and unpleasant loud sound that triggered elderly, pregnant, and disabled guests.

In Theme Park 4, interviewees stated that the park adequately serves the disabled community and shared no negative comments. It is known to be a place where anyone

can play, regardless of physical or economic barriers. Their website states that "Unfortunately, countless children and adults with special needs do not have access to facilities that enable them to enjoy outdoor recreation fully. Morgan's Wonderland (Park 4) has begun to change that." (About Us, n.d.)

Discussion

Regarding research question one, *How can accessibility be improved at existing theme parks?* It should be noted that in terms of favorable actions or activities, three of the theme parks offered guests with disabilities the ability to enter rides immediately using an express pass without requiring a wait or call back time. This is a very important offering for guests who may have difficulties waiting in line, particularly in extreme temperatures. These passes allow the assigned guest immediate boarding onto any ride along with their group. If the park is busy, then a reservation time is set for that guest to return at a later time to experience the attraction. Theme park 3 provided a designated line for guests presenting disabilities and special needs. This addition is much more practical in that guests with disabilities do not have to travel up through the crowded ride exits to get to the ride queues. Theme parks 3 and 4 also had visibly marked signage present on their attractions where wheelchairs and guests with express passes can enter the ride safely. One parent and former *National Spokesperson for Autism Speaks* said that it is a relief not having to determine where to enter using an express pass with designated lines and proper signage in place. She stated that every moment of the day was stress-free and such an amazing experience and that it was rare that she could utter those words.

Theme parks could improve accessibility by creating signage to help guests navigate around the park as well as communicate daily about rides that will be

unavailable due to maintenance repairs. In addition, parks could accommodate the needs of guests with food allergies or intolerances or allow them to bring in their own food and allow representatives of disabled guests the ability to arrange return times for those guests for rides. The parks could also improve their access by creating opportunities for guests with disabilities to take part in parades and activities. For example, they might decorate electric wheelchairs with the event theme and allow disabled guests to participate in that way, given the parade floats themselves are not accessible. Also, offering special ticket and show-only rates (for guests who are uninterested in the rides) for the elderly and disabled, and allowing guests with disabilities to enter shows five minutes earlier than other guests, so they have time to navigate and get seated would be advantageous. The parks could also hire interpreters to communicate in sign language during their shows, on train rides, and while engaging in park activities. While two of the theme parks involved in this study ensure all staff is trained in interaction with disabled guests on the spectrum, other parks should consider implementing such a program.

Also, theme parks can improve accessibility by providing their disabled guests with safety and accessibility guides upon entry into the park. These park guides are helpful because they display the specifications of each ride and assists guests in determining which rides are suitable for them. These ride specifications include cognitive triggers such as flashing lights, 3D effects, cycle times, sharp turns, will you get wet, dark scenes, type of restraint, and more. The disability guide also includes general ride restrictions, cast restrictions, first aid, oxygen tanks, evacuations, service animals, dietary restrictions, special access passes, and ECV's/Wheelchairs. It is advisable for parks to offer maps in different languages to cater to the needs of the diversity of visiting guests.

In addition, if parks could include symbols on the map that shows the ride specifications mentioned above, like loud sounds or crazy lights, that would certainly be helpful. These symbols should be accompanied by a key on the side of the map that includes the descriptions of each ride and attraction guideline and services offered at the park. This information should also be included on the various park websites for guests to plan out their visit before arrival.

All four parks offered wheelchair rentals; however, there were issues with wheelchair rental offerings and options. Guests travel from all over the world to experience these entertainment venues, and in most cases, they depend on the park to have wheelchairs available for their use during the visit. However, if the parks have a limited supply of wheelchairs and offer the guests to return at a later time or date to experience the park when they run out of rentals, that is a poor outcome. The parks could improve in this area by reducing the wheelchair rental fee, purchasing additional wheelchairs to improve availability and consider expanding the benefits for disabled season pass holders allowing them to earn and receive free wheelchair rentals. The placement of courtesy wheelchairs in the parks and parking lots could also be improved. They might also consider changing the guest services department name to *special accommodations* so guests would know where to find inclusive offerings. The parks could also improve their access by creating cool zones and rest zones for guests and implementing free water bottle refill stations.

Regarding research question two, *How adequate are required accessibility factors for the construction of new theme parks?* In general, these parks met the minimum requirements for ADA compliance standards including accessible parking, entrances,

ticket booths, spacious bathrooms, wide pathways, and ride entry, except for theme park 1 that failed to provide satisfactory access. In general, these parks provided informative websites, accessible seating and viewing options, and accessible ride offerings that should be considered in the design and operation of all new theme parks. New parks should consider the construction of an indoor facility for a sensory space, video game entertainment, and other fun learning activities for guests who cannot remain outdoors for long periods.

The installation of accessibility buttons in the doors of each park for wheelchair and stroller access is highly recommended. Implementing visual emergency alarms and the same primary path for exiting the premises in case of an emergency is crucial. These additions, along with installing a Braille and tactile map for blind guests whose biggest challenge is obtaining a concept of their surroundings should be considered. The San Francisco LightHouse for the blind recognizes how rare if not non-existent Braille maps can be, so they created hard copy maps for the blind. This inclusive map consists of raised lines and four-color printing for high contrast. Labels appear in Braille and large print. Each map is paired with a key explaining the symbols used. The addition of this inclusive innovation to theme parks can help guests obtain useful information that can allow them to better experience the parks.

Parks 2 and 4 had wonderful spaces set aside for guests with cognitive disabilities or those that needed an indoor space to play. Park 2 had multiple quiet rooms that were specially equipped with squishy toys, noise-canceling headphones, weighted blankets, and other complementary resources available to guests who are on the autism spectrum and their families to take a break. Park 4 had a Sensory Village that encourages creative

play through make-believe activities such as a grocery store, news station, car repair shop, and animated screens that respond based on that individual's shadow's movements. Another services business that has caught onto this idea is Miami International Airport. They are opening a brand new Multi-Sensory Room for kids with autism that will include a dimly lit space with wall puzzles, cushioned seats, a light projector, and an aquatic bubble tub. "The room is designed to be a quiet area for young passengers with cognitive or developmental disabilities such as autism that provides a relaxing environment during the travel experience" (CBS Miami, 2019). For the construction of new parks and businesses, considering the implementation of sensory rooms will be an excellent addition for guests with a special needs family member.

Also, parks should consider offering both indoor and outdoor service dog relief areas. This is an excellent implementation for guests visiting the parks with a service animal who needs a designated and convenient location to use the bathroom. Other venues such as Houston airport do a great job of providing an indoor service dog relief center. This space described on the *dogs on planes* website says, "Inside, you'll need to keep an eye out for the dog icon and sign indicating the doorway to the pet relief station. Once inside, you'll have an unadorned but functional relief area with synthetic grass, fire hydrant, waste disposal, and wash station." (Service Dogs & Disability Rights | ADA | FHA | ACAA | Rehab Act | American Disability Rights, n.d.).

Theme park 3 offered a virtual reality ride that enabled guests to enter the ride through an accessible ride elevator using their wheelchair or strapped in a seat with a seatbelt. This accessible elevator brings them right up to where they can board the ride and provides a safe lift down once the ride concludes. It is an adequate and beneficial

addition that was installed when the park was built. This lift can easily be installed in other parks to aid in the entry and exit of rides for guests presenting disabilities. It is advisable for any ride that requires guests to climb stairs or high inclines to get to the level of the ride to implement a lift for guests with disabilities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, research of extant literature indicated that the origins of these environmental and social barriers are essential to understanding the fundamental purpose of access. The present study contends that inclusive environments and activities are critical for the social and developmental quality of life for persons with disabilities. Given that statement, it comes as no surprise that "People with disabilities are among the most marginalized groups in the world; Disability is now understood to be a human rights issue. People are disabled by society, not just by their bodies (WHO | 10 facts on disability, 2017). The findings presented in earlier studies is consistent with the interventions that have been created to overcome the difficulties faced by people with disabilities visiting theme parks. Surprisingly, many people are still limited to an information gap and are segregated when it comes to accessible options for recreation and leisure. The Therapeutic recreation directory found this to be true. "With supports available to them, children and adults with severe developmental disabilities can choose to participate in a full range of community recreation and leisure activities based upon their personal interests and desires" (Walker, 1999). The findings of the present study are still in line with previous research on the barriers of inclusion. It would be advisable for parks or builders of theme parks to implement the following solutions to barriers of inclusion (Heyne, n.d.):

- Attitudinal solutions begin with one person. When one staff member or manager has inclusive attitudes and behaviors, other employees and guests will follow. It starts with proper training on appropriate ways to interact with people with varying abilities, so that you can embody that for another person. Another way to demonstrate inclusive attitudes is by advocating for “person first” language (e.g. “people with disabilities” rather than “disabled people”) when someone uses derogatory or stereotypical language. Attitudinal change and inclusive behaviors come naturally to individuals who participate in early interactions and inclusive recreation programs from a young age.
- Administrative solutions can occur by employing people with disabilities into staff and administrative roles. Another important step toward removing administrative barriers to inclusion is educating the board of directors, administrators, and staff on the significance, meaning, and practice of inclusion. An advisory council can be created to uphold the expectation of inclusion in the workplace and recreation agencies can promote recreation programs to the community as well as learn about funding opportunities and support services.
- Architectural solutions should be a part of the universal access design for facilities that are utilized by people of all ages and abilities. Persons with disabilities should be involved in the initial design or structural modifications to structures to ensure that accommodations are functional. There are grants available for agencies to submit proposals to fund accommodations such as lifts, ramps, elevator, and paved pathways that bring an old building up to code.

- Programmatic solutions include hiring a certified park and recreation professional or a certified therapeutic recreation specialist on staff to facilitate inclusion as a trained recreation professional. This solution will help remove programmatic barriers by training staff about disabilities and inclusion techniques, conducting personalized assessments, and offering individual instruction and accommodations for participants. It is vital to receive suggestions from parents of children with disabilities or participants with disabilities who can provide information on communication, behavior, positioning, and similar concerns.

Study Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

In the area of limitations, visits to theme parks that catered to the disabled community were originally planned. However, those specific parks are closed for maintenance during the winter season. Therefore, the four parks selected for this research were chosen based on their seasonal operating hours potentially and unintentionally skewing the results of this study. Another limitation of this research was how information was captured through interviews. The comments shared during the informal interviews were recorded contemporaneously and written as factually as possible at the end of each conversation. It was difficult having to recall information for memory. Also, the author intended to speak only to caregivers or those accompanying individuals with a disability. In some cases, this was not practical for those disabled patrons who were unaccompanied in the park. Lastly, it may be problematic to generalize a whole industry based on my limited study. It may not be appropriate to assume that all theme parks share the same struggles when it comes to providing guests with support and access. I learned from one of the park staff that it is difficult for parks to find balance in providing inclusive fun in

rides and attractions while adhering to the needs of a thrill seeker. At its core, this is a battle between ride manufactures who create rides that exclude disabled guests based on participation restrictions and parks that are interested in creating more inclusive opportunities for fun.

In terms of future research, it would be useful to expand this study and pursue a larger sample size. Many operations are in need of inclusive options that can be investigated. In terms of theme parks, any researcher who intends to pursue further research in the area of theme parks should include more parks, schedule conversations with park administration, and broaden the study by discovering ways to adapt the fun for everyone. Additionally, researchers should be aware of the ADA compliance requirements for the parks under study as there are different standards in each state when it comes to access based on the laws put in place by legislators. Researchers should begin by reading the *39 Theme Parks With Special Needs Access Passes* to gain a better understanding of the places that are already implementing changes to becoming more accessible. Next, prepare yourself mentally by envisioning yourself with an impairment and imagine how you would fulfill the daily activities in your life, learn to look, and observe what you have learned. Then I encourage you to visit those places to assess the parks and how they are serving the special needs and disabled community. Mainly, find theme parks and other venues that say they are accessible and visit them to see if they actually are. Then offer suggestions to management on your findings. Ask them, Have you thought about implementing this? Why haven't you done this? Here are some areas of improvement for the special needs and disabled community that's growing in numbers.

The present study used a qualitative research approach to generate authentic experiences of both equitable and inequitable access. Perhaps there may have been a difference in findings if the disclosure were through guest surveys or other types of disclosure methods. Much work remains to be done to create an inclusive society for all, but these suggestions on improving access in theme parks may be a helpful starting point. Businesses want to make changes so that everyone can participate, but it is up to members of society to identify those gaps and advocate for the needs of others who also deserve to live an enjoyable life.

The current research appears to be one of the first steps at creating inclusive opportunities for persons with special needs and disabilities at the nations theme parks. Prior to this work, there does not appear to be research literature specific to this topic. People with disabilities are frequently marginalized and stereotyped, which can make it difficult for them to find inclusive opportunities for fun. If the findings in the present research were used in the creation of new parks or considered in the changing of existing parks, improved access would not just be the exception, it would become the reality. This would allow people of all abilities and backgrounds to come together and better understand one another. These inclusive environments would serve people and the corporate world in two ways: businesses would gain attendance and revenue, and individuals with disabilities would have improved access to fun, employment, and social interaction.

Appendix A

ADA Checklist

Assessment of Accessibility Guidelines and Standards	Present	Not Present	Up to par	Suggestions for improvement
1. Designated access route a. Parking locations; b. Route from parking;				
2. Wayfinding: (spatial problem solving, when/how) a. Visual b. Audio – crosswalk height, audio guide c. Tactile				
3. Maps of Theme Park grounds showing accessible rides and routes; a. Visual b. Audio c. Tactile				
4. Proper Signage a. Ride Entry b. Elevator access/ Lifts				
5. Ticket booth access; Height a. Waiting lines with adequate turn-around space				
6. Safety measures which accommodate wheel chairs, etc. <u>while on a ride</u> ; a. Usable doors b. Ride entrances c. Transfer space from chair to ride; d. Companion seating				
7. Resting space a. Cool zone b. Space to rest while nauseated c. Refreshment access d. Bathroom adult size changing stations				
8. Dining services a. Vending machines				
9. Smoking allowed?				
10. Special ticket offerings a. Attendant accommodations; Priority ride access b. Service animals welcome?				

Appendix B

Informed Consent



Study Title: How to Incorporate Accessibility into Theme Parks

**Principal Investigator: Leanna Mouton Co-Investigator/Faculty Advisor: Dr. Floyd Quinn
Sponsor:**

My name is Leanna Mouton and I am an undergraduate student at Texas State University. I am currently studying four randomly selected theme parks in the United States. I am doing this study to learn how accessibility for guests with special needs can be improved at these theme parks. I am asking you to take part in the study because you are a guest of this theme park. I'm going to tell you a little bit about the study so you can decide if you want to participate or not. Please know that even if you choose to participate, you can stop at any time.

Upon arriving at the parks, I have examined the park facility using an ADA approved evaluation checklist. I will ask randomly select guardians, parents, and other individuals accompanying disabled individual(s) interview questions about their experiences at the park and suggestions for improvement. You must be over the age of 18 to participate in this study. I am not interviewing disabled guests, only those accompanying those guests. The interviews will take no longer than five minutes to complete. At the end of my visit to the park, I will comprise a list of suggestions for improvement and present those suggested improvements to the upper management of the parks.

This is voluntary and you do not need to answer any questions and you have the right to skip questions that make you uncomfortable. The benefit of this study is to assist in providing a more holistic view of issues surrounding accessibility for the disabled that will inform recommendations on improvements to park management. There are no risks outside your daily activity to you or the disabled guest your in this interview.

Your name or other individual personal information will be collected. You will also not receive any payment for your time in this study.

Question about this study can be directed to Leanna Mouton at lkm78@txstate.edu or her Faculty Advisor Floyd Quinn fq10@txstate.edu.

This project was approved by the Texas State IRB on December 17, 2018. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-716-2652 – (dgobert@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - (meg201@txstate.edu).

Do you have any questions for me at this time? If not, please feel free to ask any questions you may have during the course of the interview.

Do you understand the purpose of this study and your role in it as a possible participant in this interview?
Do you want to participate in the study and allow me to interview you?

IRB approved application # 6194 Page 1 of



Appendix C

IRB Approval



In future correspondence, please refer to 6194

December 17, 2018

Floyd Quinn, Ph.D.
Texas State University
601 University Drive.
San Marcos, TX 78666

Dear Dr. Quinn:

Your IRB application titled "How to Incorporate Accessibility into Theme Parks." was reviewed and approved by the Texas State University IRB. It has been determined that risks to subjects are: (1) minimized and reasonable; and that (2) research procedures are consistent with sound research design and do not expose the subjects to unnecessary risk. Reviewers determined that: (1) benefits to subjects are considered along with the importance of the topic and that outcomes are reasonable; (2) selection of subjects is equitable; and (3) the purposes of the research and the research setting is amenable to subjects' welfare and producing desired outcomes; that indications of coercion or prejudice are absent, and that participation is clearly voluntary.

1. In addition, the IRB found that you need to orient participants as follows: (1) signed informed consent is not required as participation implies consent; (2) Provision is made for collecting, using and storing data in a manner that protects the safety and privacy of the subjects and the confidentiality of the data; (3) Appropriate safeguards are included to protect the rights and welfare of the subjects. (4) Compensation will not be provided for participation.

This project is therefore approved at the Exempt Review Level

2. Please note that the institution is not responsible for any actions regarding this protocol before approval. If you expand the project at a later date to use other instruments, please re-apply. Copies of your request for human subjects review, your application, and this approval, are maintained in the Office of Research Integrity and Compliance.

Report any changes to this approved protocol to this office. All unanticipated events and adverse events are to be reported to the IRB within 3 days.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Monica Gonzales".

Monica Gonzales
IRB Regulatory Manager
Office of Research Integrity and Compliance

CC: Leanna Mouton

Dr. Daniel Guerrero

OFFICE OF THE ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT FOR RESEARCH
601 University Drive | JCK #489 | San Marcos, Texas 78666-4616
Phone: 512.245.2314 | fax: 512.245.3847 | WWW.TXSTATE.EDU

This letter is an electronic communication from Texas State University-San Marcos, a member of The Texas State University

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