

Fast Lines at Theme Parks

G. Hernandez-Maskivker, G. Ryan, M. Blazey, and M. Pàmies

Abstract—Waiting times and queues are a daily problem for theme parks. Fast lines or priority queues appear as a solution for a specific segment of customers, that is, tourists who are willing to pay to avoid waiting. This paper analyzes the fast line system and explores the factors that affect the decision to purchase a fast line pass. A greater understanding of these factors may help companies to design appropriate products and services. This conceptual paper was based on a literature review in marketing and consumer behavior. Additional research was identified in related disciplines such as leisure studies, psychology, and sociology. A conceptual framework of the factors influencing the decision to purchase a fast line pass is presented.

Keywords—Tourist behavior, fast lines, theme park, willing to pay.

I. INTRODUCTION

FOR almost thirty years practitioners and researchers have made efforts to reduce the negative effects of waiting times. Long waits lead to lower service evaluations [1], [2] and greater customer dissatisfaction [3]-[6]. Because of this, researchers and practitioners in marketing and operations have sought ways to reduce both real and perceived waiting times [7], [1], [2], [8], [5]. Efficient waiting time management can improve customer satisfaction [9], [10], [6] and the willingness to recommend the service [11].

Fast lines, express pass, priority queues or VIP queues are some of the names of specific systems that have appeared mostly in recent years to reduce waiting times, in order to improve customer experience. Several service enterprises have implemented these systems including theme parks where fast line systems have been widely implemented [12], [13]. Theme parks continually strive to manage waiting times [14], [15], [16], [17] and so many of them have turned to fast line systems to solve his issue.

However, research on priority queues and their impact on customers at theme park is still very limited [13], [10]. Additionally, waiting times remain cause of complains and dissatisfaction among guests.

Hence, the authors suggest that an analysis of tourist behavior in relation to the purchase decision for fast lane passes is required in order to better understand consumer waiting behavior in the context of tourism. The authors focus specifically on factors that may affect the willingness to pay for a fast access or to wait in regular lines among theme park

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guests. Literature in leisure and consumer behavior helps to understand some of these factors in theme parks. A deeper understanding of the impacts of queuing and fast lines can provide interesting information for operators and managers [13] as it may contribute to develop more effective tourist services and products. Consequently, when theme parks develop and improve marketing programs they enhance their competitiveness [18], [19].

Firstly, we consider how researchers and professionals have studied waiting times over the previous three decades in order to understand the waiting phenomenon and the different strategies implemented to reduce or eliminate delays. Secondly, we present a brief overview of the fast line system and potential benefits of implementing priority queues at theme parks. Thirdly, we explore the factors that determine the purchase decision for fast line pass and we propose a conceptual framework of the factors that influence the decision-making process related to fast lines at theme parks. As [20] suggests, it is necessary to understand tourists, their culture, characteristics, social influences, values, personality, attitudes and their environment to then manage correctly and improve the tourist experience. Finally, the authors discuss the practical implications of the proposed framework.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Waiting Times in Services

Research has analyzed waiting times in a wide range of services such as banks [21]-[25], [5] stores [26], [27] and on the Internet [28]-[30]. In general, waiting is considered a problem as it may reduce customer satisfaction [3]-[6], [11], [31]. Clients who are made to wait may leave the queue [32]-[34] or they may “stick it out” but not return on future occasions [33], [35]-[37].

Waiting is often considered a waste of time [38]. Customers understand that waiting time could be used for something more useful [23]. In addition, waiting can lead to negative emotional responses like frustration, impotence, tension or irritation [39]-[44]. Therefore, researches and professionals are constantly trying to improve the management of waiting times and the speed of the service delivery [40]. Perception management and operations management of waiting times are the principal ways companies attempt to manage waiting. The first approach suggests reducing the perceived waiting time using several strategies [45], [40], [46], [42]. For example, companies may fill the wait [5], [7], [40], [42], [47] promote social interaction among waiting customers and provide a pleasant and fair waiting environment [45]. The second approach involves reducing real waiting times and making the

service faster [44]. These strategies tend to be more expensive as they may involve extending opening hours, operating at maximum capacity level, opening more checkouts or employing more sales staff [2], [48], [16], [36], [49].

In recent years, more and more tourism services such as airlines, hotels and theme parks have sought for a solution to long lines in the sale of fast lines [13]. These systems allow customers pay to avoid regular lines. Indeed, customers in tourism often look for interactive experiences that can be enjoyed in short periods of time [50] and fast lines access can facilitate the achievement of these goals. Fast lines appear as a solution that enables customers to enjoy their visit and at the same time emerge as a possible solution for companies to the inevitable problem of waiting times.

B. Fast Lines Systems at Theme Parks

Waiting times and queues are recurrent phenomenon in tourist experience [51]-[54]. Research has considered them in different tourist services contexts such as cultural sites [55], [51], [56], restaurants [57], [11], [46] and airports [40], [52], [58]-[60].

The specific context of theme parks and amusement parks have also been previously analyzed by researchers on waiting [31], [13], [52] as long queues and delays are a frequent occurrence in theme parks [61]. Theme parks as sets of rides, spectacles and leisure mechanisms are intended to entertainment and spark the imagination of customers [62], allowing people to escape their daily routine [9]. However, waiting is often a problematic issue that can influence the tourist experience and that can appear as one of the principal motives for complaining [61]. Indeed, queues and delays are often inevitable in theme parks [17], [12], [13], [54] as the demand fluctuates constantly [6] and demand patterns are often difficult to predict. For example, some researcher report significant of more than three hours waiting times during peak season, for specific attractions [53]. Theme park attendance regularly exceeds the optimal capacity and queues are unavoidable [17], [12].

In light of persistence of waiting in theme parks and the ongoing concern of companies to adapt their products and services to the inconstant demand and tourism market changes [63] fast lines systems appeared as a potential solution for reducing waiting times [61], [64], [12], [13]. Hence, fast line, express queue or VIP systems were introduced, whereby consumers could pay extra to join a priority queue separated from regular customers. Over time these systems have become very common in the tourism industry [65], [66] and particularly in theme parks. Universal Studios, Six Flags, Port Aventura, Knott's Berry Farm and Legoland are some examples of the theme parks that offer an express pass or flash pass that allow guests to bypass regular lines at several rides.

Disney began to implement a virtual reservation system called fast pass over twenty years ago [53], [67], [68]. The main differences between this system and the priority queues mentioned above are that this advance-booking system [12] is free and customers, instead of waiting in line, may arrive at an

attraction at a designated later time [68], [53] thus avoiding unnecessary delays.

Nevertheless, even with this innovation in place, research suggests eliminating delays and queues remains a complex issue [49]. Consumers continue to wait and delays are one of the main reasons for complaints in Disney parks [61]. As Disney customers may only obtain one fastpass at a time, they continue to wait in line for other attractions [31], [12]. New innovations include the VIP wristbands designed to make queuing even more efficient by charging customers for it quick access to attractions [69], [70]. In summary, Disney designed a new, technology-based system to avoid lines based on the same premise of priority passes mentioned earlier: pay extra to obtain additional benefits such as avoiding waiting times.

One of the main criticisms of priority systems has to do with the perception of injustice created by treating some customers as VIPs [71]. Fairness in queuing systems is a significant concern among waiting consumers [72], [73] and these systems undermine this principle. Reference [74] considers VIP queues as a specific multiple queue systems where money breaks the rule of "first come first serve" (FIFO). She explains that VIPs queues often leads to unfair situations as they can be considered as an institutional violation of justice [74]. The violation of FIFO rules leads to social comparisons among consumers, which in turn leads to situations of discomfort between people who wait in regular lines. One of the solutions employed to avoid this problem is to hide VIPs queues and gates for priority customers from the regular consumers [75]. Indeed, priority queues have received criticism in consumer airlines forums, such as Ryanair's forums [76]. This is, often on the difficulties involved in properly implementing this type of systems and the difficulties of separating the two types of consumers. Finally, there is the irony that the more successful these systems, the more people purchase the priority pass and the more the likelihood that premium customers will also have to wait [75]. In others words, these systems become the victims of their own success.

Nevertheless, research suggests that fast lines reduce customer dissatisfaction with lines [12]. Interestingly, this may also apply in the case of regular consumers, as priority lines also help to reduce the length regular queues, thus reducing waiting times for all [34]. Hence, fast lanes help to reduce congestion at theme parks [64] and facilitate improved queue management and customer's flows around the premises [12]. Fast lines also contribute to profitability as an important source of revenue for firms [12], [13]. Indeed, companies can adjust the price of the express pass according their needs [12] as long as it provokes a sufficient difference between the priority and the regular line and in turn this should provide benefits to cover the extra staff needed for the extra line [34]. Finally, priority services such as fast line systems facilitate segmentation of the market [77]. When companies offer the possibility of purchase a fast line they are creating two different groups of customers: high priority groups and low priority groups according to required waiting time and the

price customers are willing to pay [78], [34]. Research suggests there are customers who are highly sensitive to waiting times and are willing to pay to avoid or reduce lines and customers that are highly sensitive to price that prefer to wait rather than to pay extra money. For the second group, money is more important than time [34], [12]. Reference [78] explains that many e-commerce firms such as Amazon.com also use this market segmentation: they offer faster or slower delivery times according to the customer's willingness to pay or to wait. However, there has been little research effort aimed at identifying the factors that lead customers to purchase a fast line ticket. Hence, the next section focuses on this question in the context of theme parks.

C. Tourist Behavior and Purchase Decision Process

In order to consider the factors that affect the purchase decision for fast line passes, it is necessary to consider tourist behavior in general. Tourist possess a number of particular characteristics that make them different and unique [20], [79], [80] from other consumers. For example, the tourism purchase decision may be highly complex because of high levels of insecurity linked to the intangibility of the services and products, high level of information search, high perceived risk, high involvement in purchase decision, high consumer commitment, strongly influenced by other people, long term decision and considerable emotional significance [79], [81]. For instance, tourists usually plan and decide their trips with more time in advance than a consumer who decides to purchase a product at a supermarket. Or if a tourist buys a service, he/she will remember that experience for a longer time than a regular, non-tourism purchase [20].

Hence, a separate perspective on the customer decision-making process is required in order to evaluate tourism contexts. Indeed, tourists are consistently making decisions. For example, they must decide how to consume their leisure time [82] or which products and services to purchase [79]. They must choose among different destinations, service providers, type of travel, in which all of these situations are part of the complex tourist decision-making process [79], [83]. Pioneering models of consumer behavior, which explain decisions relating to tangible products [84], [85], have been adopted in order to explain the purchase of tourism services [79], [81], [83], [85]-[87]. However, most of the academic efforts have been oriented to analyze the travel decision process or the purchase process of packages holidays [81], while little research has examined the more specific questions of fast pass purchases.

We adapt the model of consumer decision making as proposed by reference [84] and we analyze the specific situation of purchase fast line at theme parks. Several models of consumer decision-maker in tourism contexts [85], [83], [79] consider internal and external factors that moderate the purchase decision [86]. An approximate model of the purchase decision process of fast line is suggested in Fig. 1.

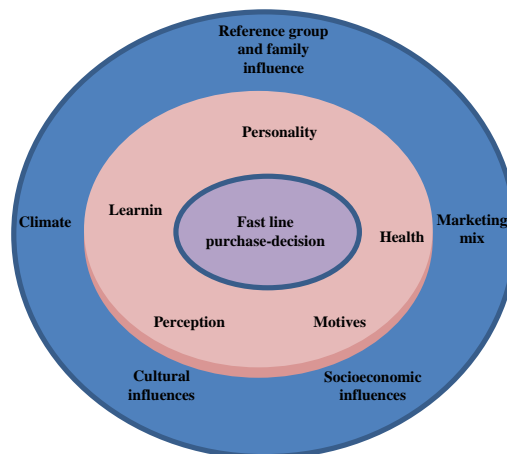


Fig. 1 Purchase decision model of fast lines systems adapted of Mayo and Jarvis (1981) [83]

D. Major Influences on the Decision to Purchase or not a Fast Line System

According to research on tourist behavior, internal and external forces influence the purchase decision [86], [79], [80], [88]. The internal factors of influence may comprise of perception, learning, personality, motives and health dimensions. Perception is considered a personal process where customers select and interpret different stimuli of the context such as advertisements, actions of others, music, etc. in order to understand the reality [89], [83]. In the specific situation of purchase fast line passes, we focus on tourist's perception of waiting times. Some customers consider time as a precious and scarce commodity and they may be disposed to pay extra to avoid lines and waiting times [74], [90], [50]. These guests are also called time-hungry [75] and they perceive their time as something much more valuable than others who prefer to wait [34].

Learning refers to prior customer's experience and knowledge that affect customer's attitudes and behaviors [86], [83]. This may include learning from prior experiences with waiting times and with fast lines systems. Familiarity with fast line systems may lead customers to purchase this service. Contrary to this, if customers had a bad experience with this service probably they may not repeat the purchase. Likewise, customers with negative experiences with delays and queues can choose to purchase the system.

Personality is the unique psychological characteristics of the individuals that include attitudes, values and habits [89]. We focus on how personality dimensions can influence customer's attitudes towards waiting. Previous research suggests that extroverted consumers are more tolerant of waiting in tourist contexts like theme parks, restaurants or events [80], [91]. Other studies analyzed customers with personality type A or B and found that type A are less tolerant of having to wait [92], [73]. We suggest analyzing this dimension but using psychographics characteristics of consumers [83], [89], [93], [94]. Psychographic factors not only include psychological traits but also comprise tourist

lifestyles, values and interests. This approach may generate a more compressive view of the tourist behavior.

Additionally, motivation, as the force behind behavior [83], will also affect tourist behavior. We suggest exploring trip motivation, and motivation to visit the theme park as possible moderators on the purchase of fast lines systems. Finally, health, as a personal condition, can also lead to purchasing the fast line system. Some customers may not be able to wait in regular lines because of a medical condition and therefore must purchase a fast access.

Regarding the external area of influence that can affect the purchase decision, this may comprise of reference group and family influences, socioeconomic influences, cultural influences, advertisements and climate. Tourists mostly act in social situations and cannot be analyzed in a vacuum [81]. From this, reference group dimensions include the influence of informal groups such as friends and family. Customers may decide to visit a theme parks with their friends, their families or alone and the leader of the party may decide to purchase or not purchase a fast line pass. Indeed, this decision may be linked to the stage in which a family finds itself in the family life cycle [83]. It is not the same if a group consists of a young couple or a family with four children.

Also, socioeconomic factors represent a wide dimension that may include the disposable income, social class, occupation, cost of the trip [83], leisure time availability [95], [19] length of the trip and length of the visit. For example, we suggest analyzing how customer's levels of incomes determine the fast lane purchase decision. Some research in waiting suggests that residents of high income areas are less tolerant of queuing than customers in low income areas [73] so they may be more likely to buy this priority service. In addition, reference [73] found that people spending large amounts of money are more prepared to stand in queues for longer periods.

In addition, culture, as a set of beliefs, traditions, values and expectations that characterizes a group of individuals [86] may influence tourist behavior. In order to analyze this dimension we suggest that the culture of tourists visiting theme parks be considered [83]. Advertisement and product promotion is another area should be considered. Marketing strategies may influence the tourist behavior promoting the sale of this service or reducing it. Finally, climate can be a moderator that affects the customer decision. For example, in bad weather, tourists may choose to purchase a fast pass. However, if the weather is favorable, tourists may not be bothered by waiting in line and decline the fast pass option.

III. CONCLUSION

The literature review reveals little research on fast lines systems and tourist behavior at theme parks. Accordingly, this paper provides an overview of this subject and in order to consider what factors influence the purchase decision for fast line passes in the context of theme parks. The authors present a first approximation on the influences that should be

considered in the situation of tourist decision purchase of fast line systems. From the identification and analysis of different factors that affect tourist behavior, professionals can define market segments and direct marketing efforts more effectively [96], [82].

The consumption of tourism and leisure products and services is growing in modern societies [62] and companies must to be able to satisfy that demand, designing, developing and improving services and products [79]. By exploring fast line systems and mapping the several forces that influence tourist behavior, managers may be better equipped to design and develop more successful products and services. It is appropriate for companies to evaluate a range of waiting management practices and to consider their impact on consumers.

Several implications for academic and professionals worlds are proposed. Managers require a deeper understanding of which consumers decide to purchase fast line access in order to adapt their products to the real needs of customers. Finally, in order to expand the sale of products like the express pass, it is necessary to assess current and potential market characteristics.

Future research may be oriented to test these models in order to advance understanding tourist behavior in waiting times. In addition, future studies can consider the design and develop of new models on tourist purchase decision, focusing on other tourist services.

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