

Creating New Immersive Worlds at Summer Camp

Abstract: Researchers evaluated the effect of creating new immersive worlds by using an unfolding narrative and tangible props on the quality of subjective experiences (i.e., delight and perceived value) of campers and their likelihood to promote the camp to friends and family. Campers ($n = 231$) in three separate sessions of a residential summer camp participated in the study. One camp session created a completely new immersive world (i.e., unfolding narrative and tangible props), a second camp session created a partially new immersive world (i.e., unfolding narrative with no tangible props), and the third camp session acted as a control. Quality of immediate experience measures ($n=1,847$) were taken following each of eight camp activity sessions (e.g., climbing, fishing, swimming). The quality of campers' overall experience at camp was measured on the last day of the camp session. Experience-level data were analyzed using linear mixed modeling. Results revealed significant interaction (new immersive world-by-activity). A hypothesized causal sequence linking new immersive worlds to likelihood to promote was also supported through path analysis of data averaged to the camper unit of analysis. This research is consistent with Merhige's (2014) recommendations to use themes in youth camp settings as they may enhance the quality of camp activities and youths' overall camp experience.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The quality of camp experiences is imperative to the success of camps, particularly in the increasingly competitive (McCormack 2016) camp industry. Campers who enjoy meaningful experiences will return and may also promote the camp to others. Competition for campers can be intense and camp managers are challenged to provide quality experiences that are enthusiastically shared after camp has concluded. Camps may promote quality experiences by recruiting talented and enthusiastic staff, as well as ensuring camper safety and voice are in place (e.g., Ditter 2016). Strategies for promoting quality experiences in tourist attractions, restaurants, and interpretation contexts have also been identified (e.g., Pine and Gilmore 2011; Tilden 1959). Examples include creating new immersive worlds (e.g., theming), personalizing encounters, and using provocation in interpretation programs. Most camps actively use such techniques, but little is known about the efficacy of specific strategies. This paper thus describes a field experiment conducted to evaluate one popular strategy, creating new immersive worlds (NIW), on the quality of experience of youth at a summer camp. Specifically, we addressed two questions: (1) What effect does creating NIW have on the quality of immediate experiences of youth campers; and (2) Through what causal linkages might creating NIW affect intention to engage in promotion?

2. BACKGROUND

Research on quality of experience dates back at least to a seminal paper by Holbrook and Hirschman

(1982). An expansive body of interdisciplinary literature has followed, with important contributions from marketing, consumer behavior, positive psychology, and leisure studies. In a recent contribution from leisure studies, Ellis, Freeman, Jamal, and Jiang (2017) developed a theory of structured experiences. The theory defines structured experiences as intentionally designed experiences with a distinct beginning and end. The theory also advances propositions for facilitating distinct types of experience: immersion (action and reaction), absorption (sensory stimulation), and engagement (engagement with a story). High levels of immersion, engagement, and absorption act as a determinant of a resulting state of deep structured experience. Deep structured experience is a binary phenomenon defined as "A state of effortless concentration during which individuals lose (a) their sense of time, (b) their thoughts about themselves, and (c) awareness of their problems. Participants have a genuine interest in the activity in which they are involved and a strong desire to continue doing that activity" (Ellis et al. 2017, 9).

3. CREATING IMMERSIVE WORLDS THROUGH THEME

Creating NIW through theming is a key strategy for success in the experience economy. In their seminal book, *The Experience Economy*, Pine and Gilmore (2011) discuss theme as crucial to quality experiences and that it "must drive all the design elements. . . of the experience toward a unified storyline that wholly captivates the customer." Ellis and Rossman (2008) added to Pine and Gilmore's work by offering further insights and suggestions into how to intentionally

design experiences using technical and artistic performance. Technical performance corresponds to basic service quality, while artistic performance refers to use of the experience industry techniques identified by Pine and Gilmore, i.e. theme, unanticipated value added takeaway, multisensory appeal, absence of negative cues, and personalization.

Freeman Tilden (1959) emphasized the importance of theming interpretive experiences in *Interpreting Our Heritage*, a timeless source of information among heritage and natural resource interpreters. Although Tilden did not refer to theme by that term, he emphasized that "interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part" (9), devoting an entire chapter to that topic. The chapter "The Story's the Thing" describes the importance of a coherent narrative in effective interpretation.

Many camps immerse visitors in NIW in an effort to improve quality, but empirical research on the effect of creating NIW (i.e., theming) in camps and other settings is limited (Hayes and MacLeod 2007; Pikkemaat, Peters, Boksberger, and Secco 2009; Stricklin and Ellis forthcoming). Despite the limited empirical evidence, the power of NIW and theme is evident in a variety of practical settings. Developers make substantial investments in theming tourist attractions. Camps, though, are extraordinary places in themselves. Nature-based camps expose campers to unique natural and built features that afford opportunities for diverse forms of recreation. Camps strive to fill campers' days with exciting activities that present exhilarating challenges and build skills. Perhaps creating NIW at a camp is of little consequence in such stimulus-rich settings. In an effort to empirically examine NIW in a structured summer camp setting, the following general hypotheses were tested:

H₁: NIW activities yield higher quality of immediate structured experiences than non-NIW activities.

H₂: Repeated exposure to high quality immediate structured experience yields high overall evaluations of camp experiences.

H₃: High overall evaluations of camp experiences yield a likelihood among campers to promote the camp to others.

4. METHOD

This study was conducted at a nature-based summer camp in the southern United States. The camp holds three "county-camp" sessions each summer. Campers and their parents self-select which dates they will plan to attend. Each camp session included eight core activities: archery, riflery, kayaking, fishing, crafts, challenge course, swimming, and dance. All three camp sessions were the same length of time, included the same activities, and the same counselors. There were no notable differences between the age or sex of campers between the three groups. The sample included 1,847 experience observations from 231 campers. Participants' ages ranged from 8 to 17 years old and 61.5% were female. On the first day of camp, campers were briefed on the research study and research instruments, then informed that they may chose not to participate in the study at any time. Researchers obtained Texas A&M IRB approval and maintained all IRB standards regarding human subjects during this study.

4.1 Measurement

The first set of instruments measured the quality of campers' immediate experiences (Xe). These were administered following each of the eight core

Figure 1. Path model depicting the relationship between averaged individual activities, overall camp experience, and likelihood to promote.

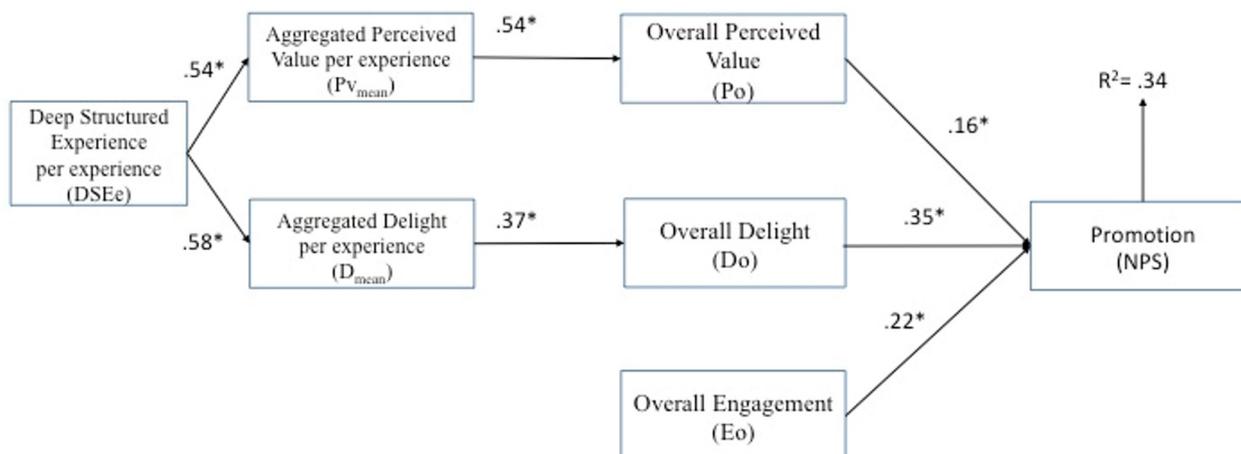


Table 1: Descriptive statistics for experience and camp level variables

	N	M	SD	SK	K	# of items	DSEe	De	Pve		
Experience level variables											
DSE (DSEe)	1,783	65.4	22.31	-0.68	-0.06	5	0.82	-	-		
Delight (De)	1,794	4.34	0.92	-1.45	1.79	1	0.58*	-	-		
Perceived Value (Pve)	1,717	4.3	0.97	-1.5	1.73	3	0.54*	0.69*	0.80		
Camp level variables							NPS	Pvo	Do	Eo	
Net promoter score (NPS)	212	8.99	1.77	-2.43	6.65	1	-	-	-	-	
Perceived value (PVo)	209	4.68	0.63	-2.62	8.41	4	.46*	0.83	-	-	
Delight (Do)	214	4.72	0.56	-2.58	9.66	1	.52*	.66*	-	-	
Engagement (Eo)	213	0.74	0.2	-0.75	0.05	4	.37*	.29*	.31*	0.67	

Note: Coefficients in principle diagonal are alpha coefficients * $p < .01$; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; SK = skewness; K = kurtosis

activities. Variables measured included prevalence of deep structured experience (DSEe), delight (De), and perceived value (PVe). The second set of instruments measured the quality of campers' overall camp experience (Yo). These measures were taken on one occasion -- the last day of camp -- and included perceived value (PVo), delight (Do), engagement (Eo) and net promoter scale (NPS; Reichheld 2003).

DSEe was a six-item scale. The response format for each item was a line in which participants would mark an X to indicate how they felt during the activity ranging from "none of the time" to "all of the time." An example of one of the items in the scale is "I was totally focused on this activity." Scores were calculated by measuring in millimeters from the beginning of the line until the mark made by participants and calculated into a percentage of the whole. The alpha reliability estimate was .82.

Delight (De) is an extreme form of satisfaction, ranging from "disgust" on one end to "delight" on the other (Schneider and Bowen 1999; Torres and Kline 2013). The single-item scale asked participants to "circle the face that best shows how much you liked or disliked the activity" with a spectrum of five smiley faces ranging from delighted to disgusted. Perceived value (PVe) was a three-item scale. The response format was a five-item Likert-scale ranging from true to false. An example of one of the items was "this activity was an excellent use of my time." The alpha reliability estimate was .80.

Engagement (Eo) was a four-item scale. The response format for this measure is identical to DSEe. One item stated, "I felt excited about things we were doing." In a sample of youth, the alpha reliability was acceptable ($\alpha = .71$; Ellis, Taggart, et al. 2016). The alpha reliability estimate for the scale during this study was acceptable ($\alpha = .67$).

The likelihood among campers to engage in promotion for the camp was measured using the "Net Promoter" score method (NPS; Reichheld, 2003). A single-item measure asked, "On a scale of 0-10, how likely are you to recommend Camp Brownwood to a friend?"

Measurement questionnaires took the form of a booklet that included measures for each of the eight activities and a set of measures for the overall camp experience. Camp counselors distributed each campers' booklet at the end of each activity and allowed them time to complete the appropriate set of questions. Similarly, at the end of the camp experience, counselors distributed the booklets to gather data concerning campers' overall experience.

4.2 Procedure

Creating NIW was operationalized by constructing a cohesive, imaginary context through 1) an unfolding narrative and 2) tangible props for each of the eight core activities. Before the summer began, the researchers chose the three county camps as their sample and randomly assigned one of three treatment conditions to each camp. Camp staff were asked to help determine a theme and a "Texas/Western" theme was decided upon. Researchers trained staff on how to use narrative storyboarding to design and implement the NIW during the camp sessions. Camp I was a control (i.e., no immersive world), Camp II created a partially NIW (i.e., unfolding narrative without props), and Camp III created a completely NIW (unfolding narrative and props). During the climbing experience in the completely NIW, for example, an unfolding narrative and accompanying props were used. Campers "became" gold miners who had successfully mined a large pot of gold, but bandits were in hot pursuit. They had to climb a bluff

(cargo net) and slide down the side of the bluff (zip-line) to escape.

4.3 Analysis

We hypothesized that the presence of a NIW enhances the quality of experience during each of the eight activities and the overall camp experience. Some activities may lend themselves to NIWs better than others. Thus, we examined the interaction between NIW and activity. Next, we averaged the experience-level data to produce *average* delight and perceived value scores across all eight activities for each camper (PV_{mean} and D_{mean}). We noted that campers whose *average* quality of individual immediate experience (i.e., PV_{mean} and D_{mean}) was high should also report higher values on the corresponding overall camp measures (PVo and Do). Finally, to complete the causal model, we regressed NPS on the three overall evaluations of camp (i.e., PVo , Do , and EO). Ordinary least squares regression (path analysis) was used to test the coefficients in the causal model. To facilitate interpretation, we transformed all variables to z-scores. Coefficients in Figure 1, then, are standardized regression coefficients (*beta*).

Table 2:

NIW-by-Activity Interaction Effects on DSEe, PVe, and De

	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>
Deep structured experience (DSEe)		
NIW	1.75	226.46
Activity	8.53*	1543.57
NIW × Activity	2.22*	1543.61
Perceived value of Time Investment (PVe)		
NIW	0.81	219.05
Activity	15.11*	1477.68
NIW × Activity	3.08*	1477.87
Delight (De)		
NIW	0.2	224.22
Activity	10.87*	1545.11
NIW × Activity	2.11*	1545.37

* $p < .01$

5. RESULTS

Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1. The mixed models analysis of the individual experience data showed a significant NIW-by-activity interaction effect on all three measures of immediate experience (Table 2). The interaction effects were plotted to facilitate interpretation (Figure 2). NIW activities

provided greater deep structured experience prevalence for all activity types, but the magnitude of the effect differed by activity. The largest effect was swimming and the smallest was riflery. Perceived value and delight were higher following non-NIW dance and fishing experiences. Path analysis results are summarized in Figure 1. All hypotheses were supported. Coefficients ranged in magnitude from .16 (NPS and PVo) to .54 (PV_{mean} and PVo). The R^2 in predicting likelihood to promote was .34.

6. DISCUSSION

This study addressed two questions: (1) What effect does a NIW have on the subjective quality of immediate experiences of youth campers; and (2) through what causal linkages might a NIW affect likelihood to engage in promotion? NIW was found to have a significantly positive effect on the quality of immediate experiences of youth campers, but the significant interaction effect indicates that some activities may be better suited to a NIW than others. Very generally, NIW affects the quality of immediate experiences and, as the quality of individual immediate experiences increases, the perception of quality of the overall camp experience also increases. Ultimately, campers tend to become promoters of the camp.

The interaction effects require additional investigation. NIW activities, as opposed to non-NIW activities were consistently related to an increase of prevalence of deep structured experience (Figure 3). Perceived value was largely in line with the findings of deep structured experience. All the activities had higher perceived value when NIW was implemented except dance and fishing. Similarly, delight was higher in the NIW conditions except dance, fishing, and rifle shooting. Our direct on-site observations yielded no evidence for why these certain activities were higher valued during the non-NIW conditions. Further research is needed to determine which camp activities are better suited for NIW and which are better non-NIW.

7. LIMITATIONS

Several limitations are noteworthy. Due to the quasi-experimental design of the study, the external validity of these findings is not as strong as it would be had a true randomized control design been used. Future research on the operationalization and measurement of NIWs is needed. We operationalized NIWs as an unfolding narrative with associated props, but there are a variety of unmeasured variables that may play a salient role in creating NIWs, such as setting, music, lighting, food, voice, dialogue, and

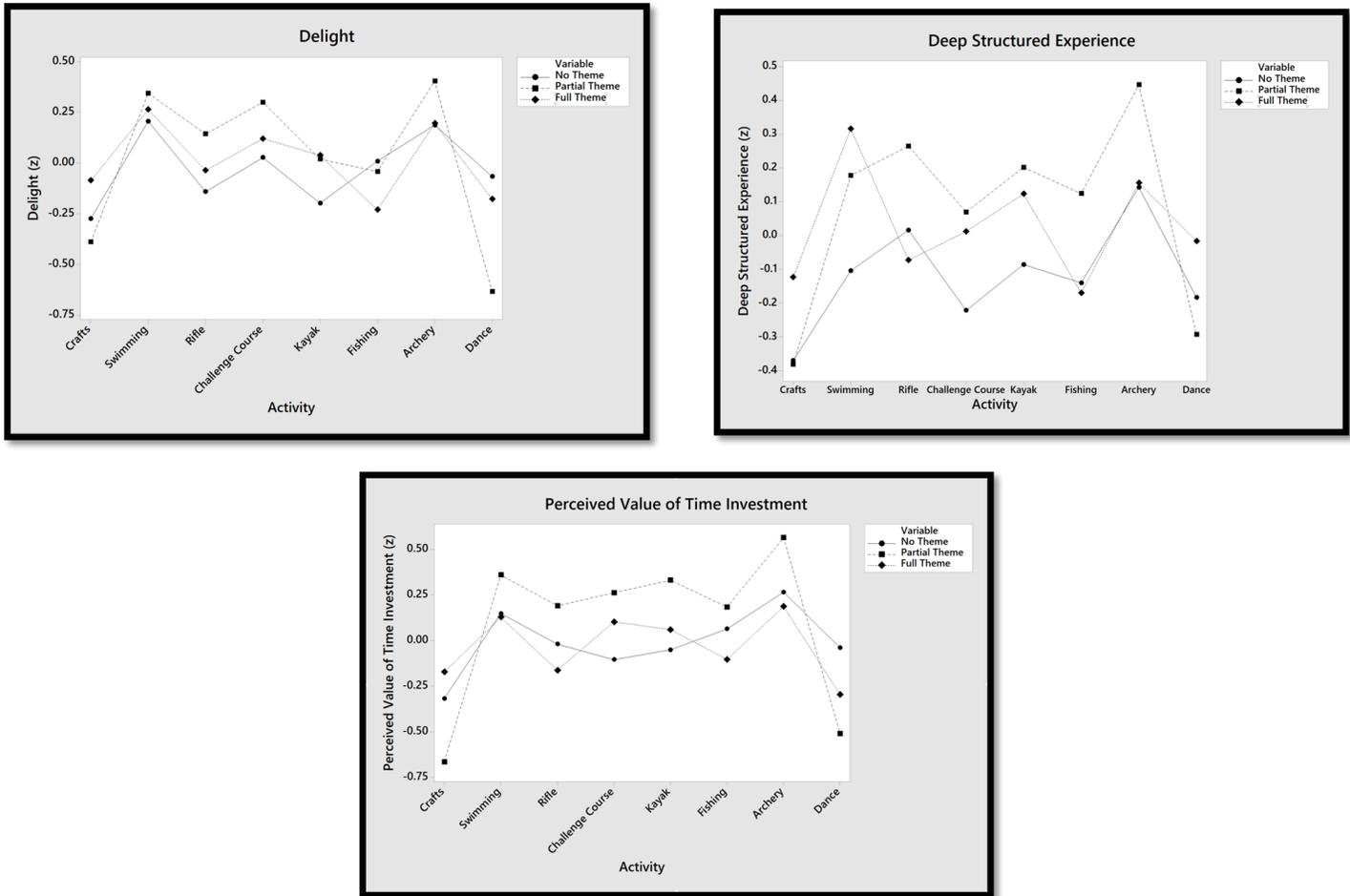


Figure 2: Interaction Effect of Theme by Activity on Deep Structured Experience, Perceived Value, and Delight; **Figure 2a:** Deep Structured Experience; and **Figure 2b:** Perceived Value of Time Investment (clockwise).

acting. Additionally, the results of this study provide evidence that certain activities may lend themselves to NIWs better than others. Future research might explore which *types* of activities may be more or less appropriate for NIW type settings.

8. IMPLICATIONS

Camps use a variety of strategies to promote quality experiences. The idea of creating a NIW at camp is not new. Many camps provide themed experiences, but this phenomenon has not previously been empirically tested and is often not pervasive or cohesive. The results are noteworthy for camp directors and staff from a return on investment, growth, and quality perspective. First, the cost to create a NIW at camp can be very modest. It may only cost a few dollars and a handful of hours in training to decide a NIW, create a narrative storyboard for each activity, and purchase the necessary props. In contrast, equipment needed for a new camp activity (e.g., a giant blob at the lake or new bicycles) can cost several thousand dollars to purchase and additional funds for installation and consistent maintenance.

Second, in an increasingly competitive market where high quality camp experiences are essential, campers who are likely to promote will be crucial to the success of a camp. With this in mind, the net promoter results from this study are particularly notable. High net promoter scores indicate satisfaction, quality, loyalty, retention, and the ability to grow as an organization. Thus, campers who have quality experiences will likely return year after year, as well as help promote and attract new campers.

From a research standpoint, this study provides initial evidence of the effect of NIWs on the quality of immediate structured experiences at a youth summer camp. This finding solidifies Pine and Gilmore's (2011) argument for the enhancing capabilities of theme and NIWs in experience industries. This research is consistent with Merhige's (2014) recommendations to use themes such as the Wild West, Survivor, or Star Wars in youth camp settings as they may enhance the quality of camp activities and youths' overall camp experience.

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