

**Equity Research** 

6 November 2019

### Investment Sciences

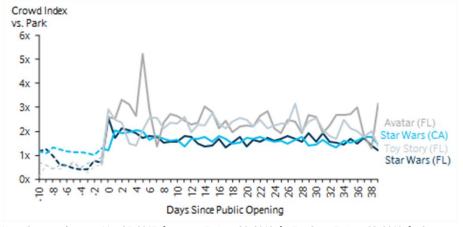
## Star Wars Galaxy's Edge Meets Resistance

Early press reports<sup>1</sup> on Disneyland's Star Wars Galaxy's Edge attraction (Star Wars) suggested the launch went poorly: This was followed by Disney reporting net traffic declines y/y in its fiscal Q3 2019 (see the note from our fundamental analyst, Kannan Venkateshwar: DIS: Messy quarter, 8/6/2019). Although Star Wars is too small a part of the parks to reasonably be blamed for overall traffic decline, the timing has raised attention on whether the new attractions have drawn disappointing traffic. Using geolocation data, we look at relative traffic and crowdedness for the Star Wars versus other recent attraction launches (Figure 1): Our data suggest that Star Wars has drawn sparser crowds compared to either the Pandora: The World of Avatar or Toy Story Land.

The comparison is imperfect because the largest ride in the new area - Rise of the Resistance - has yet to open in either Florida (expected early December 2019) or California (expected January 2020). If the ride attracts traffic similar to Guardians of the Galaxy (in California), it will probably still be less of a crowd draw than other recent additions; but, if it instead draws an additional Pandora: The World of Avatar's worth of traffic, it would be the most successful of the recent launches. As a result, we believe that a fuller assessment needs to wait for those rides to come online.

#### FIGURE 1

We Observe Star Wars Attractions Having Initial Crowd Densities That Have Been Somewhat Lower Than Avatar or Toy Story in Florida



Note: Opening dates are May 27, 2017, for Avatar FL, June 30, 2018, for Toy Story FL, June 23, 2019, for Star Wars CA (the date of the public opening for all park guests), and August 29, 2019, for Star Wars FL. Source: Complementics, Barclays Research

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> "Is Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge Already a Flop?" *Theme Park Tourist, July 27, 2019* 

### Star Wars Galaxy's Edge; Slow Opening, Little Improvement

Disney opened its Star Wars Galaxy's Edge attraction in Disneyland (Star Wars CA) for previews in May 2019, and general access in June. The Florida version (Star Wars FL) opened in the Disney World resort complex (Disney Hollywood Studios park) in August. Early press reports suggested that the opening was disappointing<sup>2</sup>, and the company followed up by missing on sales and earnings, while reporting traffic declines at domestic theme parks (see Kannan Venkateshwar's note: *DIS: Messy quarter*, 8/6/2019). Although even a high profile launch like this one is much too small to be able to account for an overall traffic miss, the timing has certainly added attention to questions about how well Star Wars is performing at Disney's parks.

#### **News Reports Suggested Small Absolute Crowd Sizes**

The stakes are high in Florida. Despite nearly every prediction, crowds were light after Galaxy's Edge opened at Disneyland on May 31. It was a disturbance in the Force that few saw coming.

"We couldn't have been more wrong in our crowds prediction for Disneyland," said Tom Bricker of the Disney Tourist Blog. "We were shocked by just how quiet the parks were. In fact, Disneyland was busier the days leading up to the debut than it has been in the weeks after."

"Disney Star Wars land opening: What we learned from California," Tampa Bay Times, 8/3/2019

Barclays Investment Sciences and Data Science teams have begun using geolocation data, and evaluating these kind of attractions is a clear use case, since there are clear comparisons both within the same park and across other parks in similar locations. Geolocation data uses location pings from individual cell phones to estimate traffic in places of interest; see our October 16, 2019 report *Data Science Methods: Making Geolocation Data Work* for details.

For cases like a single attraction within a larger group, it's tough to disambiguate the absolute effects of an attraction opening from other factors we know varied around the launch. For example, things we know could have influenced total demand include weather, price changes (Disney raised prices this year), restrictions on season pass holders that were in place during some periods of the initial launch in California, promotions and new attractions at competitors, expected crowds, and more. Additionally, we believe our confidence intervals for absolute traffic growth estimates are wider than the low-single digit swings that are likely to separate success and failure in this case.

For those reasons, we think it is best to use estimates of relative traffic between places at the same time to assess the success of the new attraction.

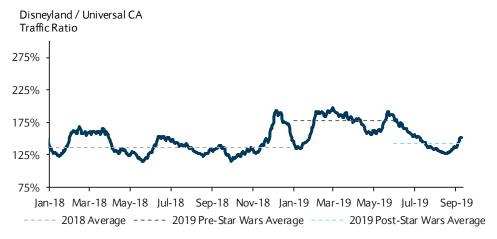
We see at least one datapoint that supports the narrative of thin crowds at launch. Looking at the ratio of traffic at Disneyland to Universal Studios California, we see that Disney did experience a relative drop-off after the Star Wars exhibition opened (Figure 2). This doesn't provide an absolute insight (both parks could have seen total traffic rise or fall), but certainly suggests underperformance relative to the benchmark of Universal.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> "Is Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge Already a Flop?" *Theme Park Tourist, July 27, 2019* 

FIGURE 2

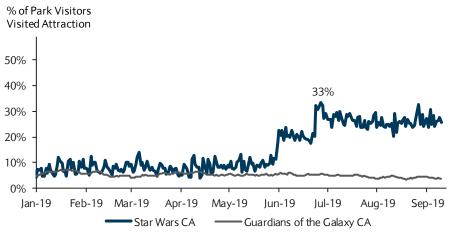
Traffic We Identified at Disneyland Rose Relative to Universal Studios CA in the Early Part of 2019, but Fell in the Period After Star Wars Opened



Source: Complementics, Barclays Research

On the other hand, we can see that many of the people who go to Disneyland have visited Star Wars – in our data, about a third of Disneyland visitors went to Star Wars since it was opened to all park guests in the second half of June (Figure 3). By way of a benchmark, we observe fewer than 10% of park visitors in the Guardians of the Galaxy attraction, which was the most recent major opening in Disneyland prior to Star Wars.

FIGURE 3
Since Late June, About 1/3 of the Visitors We Observed in Disneyland in a Given Day Visited Star Wars



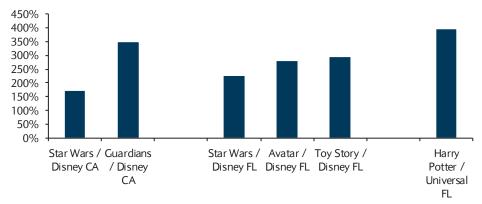
Source: Complementics, Barclays Research

Likely a better comparison here is to explore how much of a relative draw each feature has been, normalized for the area it covers. This is basically a summary of "hot spots" of which attractions draw the most traffic to the park. The overall score for each park is exactly 1, so the hot spot summary lets us know how much each attraction is beating (or lagging) the replacement level attraction within the park. What we see in Figure 4 is that although the Star Wars attractions are better than the overall average of the parks, used by a reasonable number of park attendees, they are underperforming the other recent attractions. They are also underperforming the drawing power of Harry Potter to Universal Florida.

FIGURE 4

In Terms of Attracting Visitors, Star Wars Is Outperforming the Parks Overall, but Underperforming Recently Launched Disney Attractions (and Harry Potter)

% of Visitors Used Attraction / % of Ground Area Covered by Attraction



Note: Traffic observed from September 7, 2019 to October 7, 2019. Source: Complementics, Barclays Research

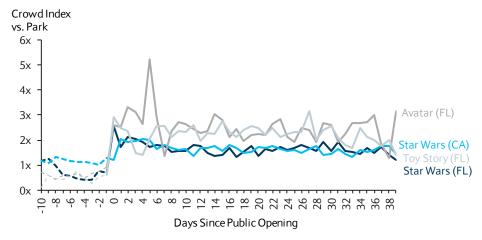
We can also use adjusted measures to evaluate how much of a crowd each area is drawing. To do so, we think the following is the best approach:

- Focus on immersive experiences. The ones for which we have that data are the two Galaxy's Edge attractions (in California and Florida), Pandora: The World of Avatar in Florida, and Toy Story Land in Florida.
- Use a way to evaluate relative traffic that accounts for footprint of the attraction. In
  order to keep the comparison most relevant, we think the best way to look at it is crowd
  density for the attraction, relative to crowd density for the park as a whole a measure
  we'll call Crowd Index.
- To best capture the initial performance period, we look at the crowd density index around the public openings for the different attractions.

Figure 5 shows that both Star Wars attractions attracted crowds about 2x denser than average for respective parks. But by comparison, both Avatar and Toy Story opened to densities closer to 3x their reference levels.

FIGURE 5

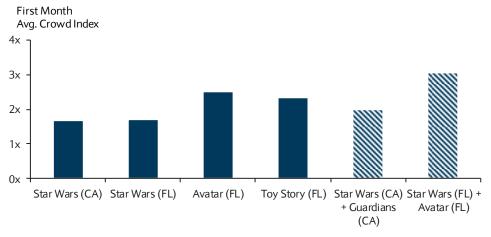
## We Observe Star Wars Attractions Having Lower Initial Crowd Densities Than Avatar or Toy Story in Florida



Note: Opening dates are May 27, 2017, for Avatar FL, June 30, 2018, for Toy Story FL, June 23, 2019, for Star Wars CA (the date of the public opening for all park guests), and August 29, 2019, for Star Wars FL. Source: Complementics, Barclays Research

That said, this comparison may be unfairly penalizing Galaxy's Edge for the fact that the attraction area opened prior to the completion of all the planned rides. A Rise of the Resistance ride is expected to be a major traffic draw in both Florida (where it is expected to open in early December), and in California (where it is expected to open in January 2020). Given that difference, it may be Star Wars is performing well given its limited line-up. We are able to establish some benchmarks for the additional traffic to frame how much it would have to draw to reverse the underwhelming narrative.

FIGURE 6
If Incremental Traffic to Rise of the Resistance Is Large Enough, There Is Room for the Galaxy's Edge Attraction to Outperform Other Recent Launches



Note: Crowd Index for first 30 days after opening. Source: Complementics, Barclays Research

As Figure 6 shows, adding a Guardians of the Galaxy's worth of additional traffic likely still leaves Galaxy's Edge lagging the other major attractions in traffic index. However, if the incremental crowd drawn by Rise of the Resistance is closer to the total for Pandora: The World of Avatar, that should bring Galaxy's Edge ahead of the other recent launches.

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Walt Disney Co. (DIS, 04-Nov-2019, USD 132.92), Overweight/Neutral, CD/CE/J/K/N

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USD 132.92 (04-Nov-2019)

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