

## **BATMAN RIDES AGAIN! THE INFLUENCE OF A SUPERHERO BRANDED ATTRACTION ON VISITATION TO A CASINO-INTEGRATED RESORT IN MACAO**

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The global popularity and rise of superhero movies from companies such as Marvel, DC Comics, and Dream Works has led to these superhero icons being increasingly integrated into the event and entertainment industry, through brand alliances at movie theme parks and integrated resort complexes, or individual attractions such as the Batman Dark Flight (BDF) ride studied in this research. Given the significant costs to license, stage, and maintain superhero branded entertainment zones and rides at integrated resorts (IR), this preliminary study importantly examined the rationale behind visiting the ride and ultimately the ride's overall influence in IR visitation. Respondents were questioned while queuing for the BDF ride collecting 304 valid responses specifically asked on their level of interest in Batman including the motives for choosing the ride. Notably the study revealed that the BDF was essentially a peripheral attraction. In the absence of the ride, most respondents would still have visited the IR. Although a preliminary analysis, the findings suggest greater assessment is required on the net economic and competitive worth of event and entertainment hosting at Macao's IRs and in particular to Chinese audiences who make up most of Macao's visitation and this study sample.

**Key words: Superhero; Themed attraction; Chinese visitation; Casino marketing; Integrated resort**

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### Introduction: Background to Macao's Tourism and Integrated Resort Industry

Integrated resorts (IRs), described also as “destination resorts” due to their geographical footprint and ability to shape the surrounding economic and social environment, represent some of the largest hotel resort structures globally. The Venetian

IR resorts in Macao and Las Vegas have 13,000 and 7,092 hotel rooms and suites, respectively, while Genting Highlands in Malaysia has 9,444. Typically, IR hotels will total over a few thousand hotel rooms within their inventory of nongaming (McCartney, 2017). These IRs work with strategic brand alliances and partnership across a wide range of gaming and nongaming brands in retail,

hotel, restaurants, theaters, arenas, and with multiple events and entertainment incentives geared to stimulate IR visitation, overnight stay, and spending within the property (McCartney, 2017). Several global movie companies have engaged with IRs throughout Asia, with theme parks, themed events, and thematic attractions such as the Batman Dark Flight (BDF), which is investigated in this article. The choices and development of nongaming facilities and attractions are particularly moot for Macao. Although there has been previous reference to Macao as potentially a “Las Vegas in Asia,” especially after casino liberalization in early 2000 (Loi & Kim, 2010), Macao has not replicated the event and entertainment developments of Las Vegas. In contrary, Macao has become increasingly reliant on the casino industry and its significant revenues in the past two decades. In 2016, Macao’s gross gaming revenues totaled US\$28.0 billion (Macao Gaming Inspection & Coordination Bureau, 2017), although nongaming revenues such as those generated from events and entertainment make up less than 10% of total revenues generated by Macao’s casino resorts (GGRAsia, 2016a). Thirty-one million people visited Macao in 2016, with 20.5 million (66%) from Mainland China, 6.5 million (21%) from Hong Kong, and 1.1 million (3.5%) from Taiwan (Macao Statistics & Census Service, 2017). Research on Chinese visitation to Macao has confirmed that almost half of those traveling to the gambling city have done so on multiple occasions (Wong & Rosenbaum, 2012). With the Las Vegas Strip generating US\$17.1 billion in total revenues in 2016, gaming produced US\$5.9 billion (34.2%) while nongaming such as accommodation, food and beverage, retail, events, and entertainment represented 65.8% (US\$11.2 billion) of Las Vegas Strip resort revenues (University of Nevada, Las Vegas [UNLV], 2018).

Macao’s casino tourism environment sets the premise for this research on the BDF to explore the impact of a superhero-branded attraction on understanding the rationale for visiting the ride at Studio City, Macao, and the respondent’s level of interest in Batman. Although the respondents were questioned on their attachment and fan appeal to the Batman theme, the research specifically questioned whether the respondent would have visited Studio City had the BDF been there or not. From

the sample, a key finding suggests the BDF was not a key determinant to visit the IR by the majority of the respondents even though they had a high level of interest in Batman. With events and entertainment principal marketing tactics for all the integrate resorts along the increasingly competitive Cotai Strip, this research shows that event and entertainment choices particularly related to themed attractions would need assessment on their longer-term net worth particularly in generating visitation. Previously, Macao’s IRs have closed event and entertainment offerings such as *Zaia* from *Cirque du Soleil*, the *Tryst* nightclub at Wynn, and the *Taboo* cabaret show at *City of Dreams* (GGRAsia, 2016b). Although previously announcing that the Venetian had been willing to accept the losses to host *Zaia*, the theater show was closed in 2008 after 3.5 years into the 10-year contract. The *Zaia* production cost was estimated at US\$150 million (Amsel, 2012). The cost of hosting events and entertainment versus overall benefit to the IR, particularly in creating additional revenues to the casino and nongaming such as accommodation, retail, and restaurant sales, would be a managerial implication. To illustrate IR event hosting costs and challenges, the “*House of Magic*” theater show at *Studio City*, built at a cost of US\$40 million, closed in late 2017 citing a lack of success at the venue (Moura, 2017). The “*House of Magic*” show had formed part of the questions in this study on the respondent’s purpose to visit *Studio City*. When presented with possible financial loss through hosting the attraction, this could be offset by the IR based on overall benefits to the IR such as property visitation, casino patronage, and brand image and reputation building. Although being a peripheral attraction with limited financial returns, the event and entertainment offering could still have benefits. This research importantly investigates the issue of IR visitation as a result of hosting the BDF ride but acknowledges that further analysis would be needed on the amounts spent on gaming and nongaming by the respondents during their time at *Studio City*. The sentiment of Macao’s casino industry carrying the cost to host event and entertainment was affirmed by Mr. Lawrence Ho, the CEO and Chairman of *Melco*, a company with a majority shareholding in *Studio City* and full owner of *City of Dreams* another major IR investment on *The Cotai Strip* who stated that:

The cold hard truth is, nongaming doesn't make any money and it will never make any money. . . . Nongaming is there as an added attraction to draw gaming business in Asia. . . . Unless Macao wants to pick itself up and move to Las Vegas, it's never going to change. (Macao Business, 2015)

Rather than being important revenue sources as in Las Vegas, events and entertainment at Macao's IRs to date are primarily supporting attraction attributes used as part of the promotional mix and competitive positioning to draw and retain mostly those who gamble at the properties. With Macao's limited international visitor appeal, entertainment must attract and be relevant almost exclusively to Chinese visitors. Paradoxically, retrenching on IR events and entertainment may create less program and reason for Chinese to visit Macao longer. For 2016, visitor length of stay averaged 1.2 days with only 51% of the 30 million visitors staying overnight in Macao (Macao Statistics & Census Service, 2017). The high portion of day trippers and relatively short length of stay in Macao in turn limits the possibility of revenues from entertainment businesses (Loi & Kim, 2010).

In the midst of the economic and marketing debate on IR event and entertainment use is the reaction in recent years of the Chinese Central Government's sentiment towards Macao's tourism trajectory and the extraordinary casino revenues that are primarily generated by Chinese visitors. The vulnerability of Macao's gaming industry and the ability for the Chinese authorities to dampen casino revenue growth was shown between 2014 and 2016 when gaming revenues declined by 2.5%, 34.1%, and 3.3%, respectively. The gaming revenue drop in 2015 was particularly dramatic as the Mainland China's anticorruption campaign gathered momentum discouraging Chinese rollers from the casinos (Sheng & Gu, 2018). The Chinese Government has insisted and given directive to the Macao Government and Macao's casino industry to diversify beyond the significant gaming revenues specifically wishing to see greater advancement in nongaming growth such as events and conventions. Therefore, the Macao IR industry will continue to reach out and make strategic event choices, one being the possible alignment with the popularity of superhero-themed entertainment, especially with Chinese audiences.

### *Asia and the Rise of Movie and Superhero-Themed Entertainment*

The ability to be Batman was humorously explained in the *Big Bang Theory* television series, that "given enough startup capital and an adequate research facility I could be Batman" (Big Bang Theory, 2017). Superheroes created in a science laboratory, mystical or extraterrestrial, are now a common feature of the event and entertainment world catching the imagination of a global audience. Mickey Mouse, Hello Kitty, Kung Fu Panda, Shrek, Batman, Ironman, and Superman are now household names among an increasing number that dominate the event and entertainment world in movies, television series, theme parks, theaters, hotel and entertainment resorts, as well as retail and merchandising. Superhero-themed events are commonly developed using this increasing list and global growth in popularity of these characters. DreamWorks Animation, which launched Kung Fu Panda and numerous other characters portraying heroism, have integrated popular movies such as *Kung Fu Panda*, *Shrek*, and *Madagascar* into live daily events such as musical theater performances, theme park fit-outs, tours, and used in event hosting as visitors shop and eat within hotel resorts (DreamWorks Animation, 2017).

The superhero and movie icon vary in appearance and beginning, including human (Batman), animal (Kung Fu Panda), mythical (Thor), or product personification (Lego) (Callcott & Lee, 1994). The movie superhero appeal has generated a multi-billion dollar worldwide business, becoming global icons promoted by studios such as Fox, Universal, and Marvel owned by Disney. Acquired by Walt Disney Company in 2009, by mid-2017 the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) had grossed almost US\$11 billion through a combination of superhero films, television series, and comic books (Nasdaq, 2017). However, given the superhero's close affiliation to event hosting and costs to use this brand, little is known on the impact of appeal of the movie icon brand within events and entertainment aimed at attracting participants to visit a location or hospitality venue.

Studio City opened in 2015 on The Cotai Strip at a cost of US\$3.2 billion with the DC Comic character Batman a major part of the indoor

event space (GGRAsia, 2015). As with Macao's other IRs, Studio City's key market segment is China. Hollywood has increasingly tailored its movie industry to appeal to emerging and highly lucrative Chinese audiences. Interwoven with the appeal of domestically made movies in China has been the rising interest from Chinese audiences on Hollywood productions, which increasingly have Chinese elements and plots embedded, using Chinese cast members and film backdrops in Mainland China and Hong Kong. Heroes and acts of heroism within the movies have particular appeal to Chinese audiences. *Transformers: Age of Extinction* partly set in Hong Kong made US\$320 million more in China than in North America. The Chinese space agency became a key part of the plot in *The Martian*, while *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* had two Chinese actors. Major Chinese companies such as Wanda Group, Alibaba, and Tencent are also investing in Hollywood (Time, 2017). Such collaborations and acquisitions by Chinese entertainment companies not only means more movies will be produced in China but that content will continue to imbed Chinese elements. In the context of the entertainment and event industry, there is increasing need to understand which elements of Western productions will have greatest financial returns and appeal towards Chinese audiences.

Acknowledging the importance of the Chinese visitor as the leading inbound travel market to Australia, Fredline and Jin (2017) found that events were largely a marginal reason for Mainland Chinese to visit Australia due to reasons such as a lack of interest or understanding of the event. The study by Fredline and Jin (2017) found that visits to theme parks were popular as an activity but was not considered for further analysis as the research looked at specific sporting or cultural events. Yet, the theme park presents a program of entertainment and events. On assessing the gaps in event management research in over 300 event research articles, Kim and Kaewnuch (2018) revealed the significant emphasis on specific professional and amateur event categories such as festivals, sports, culture, and business events. However, daily themed event and entertainment participation studies are largely overlooked in the event literature. Although a preliminary study of the influence of a themed attraction to influence visitation, this

research importantly also looks to provide some insight into this gap in the literature.

#### *The Increasing Presence of Superheroes Within the Event and Entertainment Industry*

Leading entertainment corporations have been producing movies with iconic heroes for decades. IGN Entertainment ranked the top heroes from the comic industry, an industry producing superheroes from the 1930s and from which many have been integrated into the movie, event, and entertainment industries. The hero rating was based on criteria such as the hero's character development over time, social relevance, how cool the hero was perceived as being, and overall storyline (IGN, 2011). Table 1 shows the top 40 superheroes. Many have featured in several movies and TV series such as Marvel's *The Hulk*, *Spiderman*, *Wolverine*, *Captain America*, and *Thor*. DC Comic's *Superman*, *Batman*, and *Wonder Woman* also rank high. The hero character typology could be categorized into four main areas: Pure human (Ironman and Batman); from outside of Earth (Thor and Wonder Woman); those born with mutant characteristics (Professor X and Jean Grey); and humans that are transformed later into mutants due to a scientific experiment (Spiderman and Captain America). Most of the comic book heroes are either pure human or have been transformed into mutants. This transformation of some humans into superheroes reflects the expectations of movie patrons to see filmmakers creating entertaining heroes, as well as villains, out of perhaps a duller and murkier reality (Ribstein, 2012).

Table 1 reflects the growing list of supernatural and pure human heroes, many of which have made the transition from comic book to movie screens and the event and entertainment industry. As well as Marvel and DC Comics, animation production companies such as DreamWorks Animation have increased their investment in new movies with a regular production of superhero or heroic themed movies. Dreamworks Animation has produced movie animation series with heroes and heroic elements such as *Kung Fu Panda*, *Shrek*, *How to Train Your Dragon*, and *Madagascar*. The global popularity of the characters within these movies and subsequent movie sequels have acted as a catalyst for the studios to leverage greater financial returns,

Table 1  
Top 40 Heroes (IGN, 2017)

Rank#	Characters	Publisher	TV Series	Movie	Nature of the Character
1	Superman	DC Comics	Yes	Yes	Outside of Earth
2	Batman	DC Comics	Yes	Yes	Pure Human
3	Spider-Man	Marvel	No	Yes	Mutant (Transformed)
4	Wolverine	Marvel	No	Yes	Mutant (Transformed)
5	Wonder Woman	DC Comics	Yes	No	Outside of Earth
6	Captain America	Marvel	No	Yes	Mutant (Transformed)
7	Green Lantern	DC Comics	No	Yes	Pure Human
8	The Flash	DC Comics	Yes	No	Mutant (Natural)
9	The Hulk	Marvel	Yes	Yes	Mutant (Transformed)
10	Daredevil	Marvel	Yes	Yes	Mutant (Transformed)
11	Dick Grayson/Robin	DC Comics	No	Yes	Pure Human
12	Iron Man	Marvel	Yes	Yes	Pure Human
13	Jean Grey	Marvel	No	Yes	Mutant (Natural)
14	Thor	Marvel	No	Yes	Outside of Earth
15	Dream of the Endless	DC Comics	No	No	Mutant (Natural)
16	Rorschach	DC Comics	No	Yes	Pure Human
17	Barbara Gordon (Batgirl/Oracle)	DC Comics	No	No	Pure Human
18	The Thing	Marvel	No	Yes	Mutant (Transformed)
19	James Gordon	DC Comics	No	No	Pure Human
20	Cat Woman	DC Comics	No	Yes	Pure Human
21	The Spirit	DC Comics	No	Yes	Mutant (Transformed)
22	Professor X	Marvel	No	No	Mutant (Natural)
23	Raphael	Mirage Studios	Yes	Yes	Mutant (Natural)
24	Yorick Brown	Vertigo	No	No	Pure Human
25	Hellboy	Dark Horse Comics	No	Yes	Outside of Earth
26	Rick Grimes	–	Yes	No	Pure Human
27	Punisher	Marvel	No	Yes	Pure Human
28	Swamp Thing	DC Comics	Yes	No	Mutant (Transformed)
29	John Constantine	DC Comics	Yes	Yes	Pure Human
30	Green Arrow	DC Comics	Yes	No	Pure Human
31	Deadpool	Marvel	No	Yes	Mutant (Transformed)
32	Tim Drake (Robin)	DC Comics	No	No	Pure Human
33	Nick Fury	Marvel	Yes	No	Pure Human
34	Jesse Custer	DC Comics	No	No	Pure Human
35	Judge Dredd	Rebellion Development	No	Yes	Pure Human
36	Spawn	Image	No	Yes	Outside of Earth
37	The Crow	Caliber Comics	Yes	Yes	Outside of Earth
38	Dr. Strange	Marvel	No	Yes	Pure Human
39	Cyclops	Marvel	No	Yes	Mutant (Natural)
40	Reed Richards (Mister Fantastic)	Marvel	Yes	Yes	Mutant (Natural)

and as a result has seen the heroes embedded within the global events and entertainment industry. This is particularly prominent in theme parks, where these hero myths are further manipulated and brought into the real world creating a greater sense of belonging by fan groups and enhancing the excitement around those who believe the myth (Clavé, 2007). The Universal Studios theme park at Resorts World Singapore has seven zones. Each zone in the IR represents a bestselling movie series theme offering entertainment facilities such as amusement rides, restaurants, merchandizing, as

well as regularly staged music and dance events. These include movie characters such as The Minions, Transformers, Puss in Boots, Shrek, Kung Fu Panda, as well as various popular animals represented in the Madagascar movie (Resorts World Sentosa, 2018). Dreamplay at the City of Dreams IR in Manila uses DreamWorks animation characters to create an interactive and digital play venue for adults and children to “play, create, and learn” (City of Dreams Manila, 2018). With those operating major theme parks globally being closely aligned to the movie industry, this has kept the

attractions, rides, and heroes current as movie plots and characters are released and updated. This is seen in the Batman franchise, which has undergone multiple makeovers, plots, gadgets, vehicles, and costume updates in the past few decades from Adam West's initial role in Batman in 1966. Several actors have starred as Batman including Val Kilmer (1995), George Clooney (1997), Christian Bale (2005, 2008, 2012), and recently Ben Affleck (2016), who spars off against Superman played by Henry Cavill (IMDb, 2018).

In recreating the hero movie franchise and through extending into the event and entertainment industry greater brand loyalty can be secured. It is a loyalty built through experiences (Barnouw & Kirkland, 1992). Fans share a deep devotion, bond, or admiration to the individual celebrity, and although fans don't believe the celebrity has special powers, the events created around the celebrity fulfill important social needs (O'Guinn, 1991). The fan will identify himself or herself in some way with the fictional character (Bosshart & Macconi, 1998). Several reasons are given on this fan appeal towards superheroes. The superhero can act as a role model due to heroic acts and the fan can easily relate to the stories, energizing the fan's imagination to become more daring. For the most part though the audience remains in the real world seeing the possibility that things could be made better (IGN, 2017). This escape into the fantasy may be for only the duration of the movie, themed party, or amusement ride.

The movie industry has played a key role in the growth of hero character devotion, loyalty, and mass consumption. As well as having a certain typology (Table 1), the heroes vary in appearance including human (Batman), animal (Kung Fu Panda), mythical (Thor), or product personification (Lego) (Callcott & Lee, 1994), with many of these heroes becoming iconic features within events and entertainment. The events enable fans to get together to talk and share their emotions, creating a bond and rigid loyalty to the products and services (Holt, 2004). Leveraging of this fan commitment, bond, and devotion to certain heroes and symbols, the tourism and hospitality sectors have used event and entertainment industry to reproduce these themes to quickly leverage of this interest in superheroes. However, it can be a costly investment due to production and licensing

commitments and therefore requires a careful analysis of potential benefits.

### Methodology

Studio City management granted permission to conduct the survey for 1 day during a weekend in November 2016 at the BDF ride. Those who had a ticket and were queuing to experience the ride became the sampling frame resulting in 304 valid questionnaires being collected. As the queue moved quickly a select number of questions were asked specifically to answering the role of Batman in attracting them to Studio City. The research acknowledges that the sample may not have been representative of visitors to Studio City as the focus of the study was on those visiting the BDF. The respondent was asked on some demographic information and two Studio City travel behavior questions, questioning how long the respondent stayed at Studio City and whether this was the first time or a repeat visit to the property. Previous research has shown visitation from Mainland China and Hong Kong to Macao to be highly repetitive (Zeng, Prentice, & King, 2014). Therefore, packaging events and entertainment in Macao's IRs need to consider the level to which they remain appealing to the majority who have visited the IRs previously. The IR is designed with multiple gaming and nongaming facilities to induce a longer length of stay in the hope of securing greater spending by visitors (McCartney, 2008). The respondents were also asked on their main motives to visit the BDF, which included visiting with friends, family, and colleagues, to personally enjoy the ride, that it was a must-see attraction, and they had been given complimentary tickets. Studio City has several other gaming and nongaming attractions such as the Golden Reel, House of Magic, as well as a casino, hotel facilities, and several restaurants. The respondents were also questioned on their use of these facilities as well as the BDF. Using a Likert-type scale of 1 = *no interest* to 5 = *very interested*, respondents were then asked to rate the level of interest in Batman. The questionnaire was prepared in English and traditional Chinese, with the Chinese translated from the English version. The Chinese version was reversed translated to ensure it assembled the English version as close as possible.

A pilot questionnaire was given a few weeks prior to the survey to Studio City management for review and comments but no amendments were given.

### Findings

As outlined in Table 2, a total of 304 responses were gathered, of which most were from Mainland China (41.5%) followed by Hong Kong residents (37.8%). There were very few local visitors (6.6%). Only 2.3% of those visiting the BDF were from other places of residence. Most of the respondents were either 19–29 (49.3%) or 30–39 years old (34.9%). For 78.3% of the sample, this was the first time to visit Studio City with many staying for a full day at the resort (45.7%). Only 4% of the respondent sample had been to Studio City for four or more times. Previous research on Macao's tourists confirms a high repetitive visitation rate. Depending on the management objective of the IR entertainment zone on whether it is to attract a first-time or repeat visitor, an important future issue to investigate would be attractiveness attrition rate and cost of staging BDF when considering those who have visited Macao and Studio City on multiple times previously.

Table 2  
BDF Visitor Profile ( $n = 304$ )

Demographics	<i>n</i> (%)
<b>Age range</b>	
Below 18	19 (6.3%)
19–29	150 (49.3)
30–39	106 (34.9)
40–49	24 (7.9)
50–59	5 (1.6)
60 or above	
<b>Place of residency</b>	
Macao	20 (6.6%)
Hong Kong	115 (37.8)
Mainland China	126 (41.5)
Taiwan	36 (11.8)
Others	7 (2.3)
<b>Stay duration at Studio City Macau</b>	
1–3 hr	88 (29.0%)
Half day	77 (25.3)
Full day	139 (45.7)
<b>Visit times at Studio City Macau</b>	
First time	238 (78.3%)
2–3 times	54 (17.7)
4 times or more	12 (4.0)

Experiencing the BDF is a social occasion (Table 3), one to share with family and friends (33.2% of respondents), and something the respondent personally enjoys (31.6% of respondents). Some of the respondents considered the BDF as a must-visit attraction (17.1%) while some visited the BDF as they were given a free ticket (11.5%). The BDF experience is one to be enjoyed and shared with others. Less than one fifth of those experiencing the BDF considered it as a must-see attraction. The presence of the BDF experience was not the compelling reason to visit the amusement ride for over four fifths of the respondents.

This initial questioning showed the appeal of the BDF was primarily for a younger audience and to tourists who were visiting the IR mostly for the first time. It is an activity to be mainly enjoyed with others. An objective of IRs is to create longer visitation on the property, which can hopefully convert to greater amounts spent on the attractions and facilities such as gaming, accommodation, retail, and restaurants. Although not examined in this study, the issue of amounts spent by visitors on gaming and nongaming facilities could be explored to assess the importance of the BDF in attracting visitors with specific spending capabilities.

As an IR, Studio City has multiple attractions in addition to the BDF to entice visitors to stay longer and spend more. Respondents were questioned on other activities they had or would take part in during their time at Studio City, aside from the BDF. Multiple responses were permitted on activities conducted while at Studio City (Table 4); 25.3% of the 641 responses related to experiencing the Golden Reel, a figure eight Ferris wheel centered at the top of the hotel. The casino, restaurants, and House of Magic, a theater venue with daily performances, and entertainers all had similar use of between 16–17% of the responses. Twenty-nine respondents visited the Batman ride only when at Studio City.

Table 3  
Main Reason for Visiting BDF

I come along with friends/families/colleagues	101 (33.2%)
I personally enjoy the Batman Dark Flight	96 (31.6%)
I consider it as a must-visit attraction	52 (17.1)
I have free tickets and do not want to waste it	35 (11.5)
Other reasons	20 (6.6)

Table 4  
Respondent Attraction Visitation Within  
Studio City in Addition to BDF ( $n = 641$ )

	Responses ( $n = 641$ )
Golden Reel	162 (25.3%)
Casino	108 (16.9)
Restaurants	105 (16.4)
House of Magic	103 (16.1)
Hotel	70 (10.9)
None	29 (4.5)

The BDF is not the sole reason of visitation for a majority of respondents. It is a mixture of entertainment and leisure pursuits, to shop, gamble, eat, as well as visit other attractions and events. The next highest visited attraction after the BDF, the Golden Reel, secured 162 visits just over half of the BDF respondent sample. Only 70 respondents stayed at a hotel at Studio City (Table 4). The majority of the sample ( $n = 234$ , 77%) stayed elsewhere.

When the hotel respondents ( $n = 70$ ) were additionally questioned whether they were staying the full day at Studio City, 53 (76%) of the respondents replied that they would be. The amenities and facilities within Studio City had an impact on keeping most of the in-house respondents staying at the resort. With the possibility that some of those who visited BDF and other attractions at Studio City had stayed at competing casino resorts, a future strategic marketing implication for Studio City management is to further link a visit to the property with accommodation purchase. Future research could be taken across all of the property's facilities to

determine the attraction mix that creates greatest hotel purchase as well as visitation and spending in other gaming and nongaming facilities.

Respondents were asked 10 questions based on their level of interest in Batman (Table 5), using the scale where 1 = *totally disagree* and 5 = *totally agree*. A total of 10 statements on level of interest by fans towards brands were asked based on recurring themes in the literature (Holt, 2004; Clavé, 2007) and adapted to superhero brands. These looked at issues such as ritual behavior ("I always discuss about Batman related topics in my daily life"), social identity ("I consider myself as a fan of Batman"), important bonds ("I try my best to follow the news and stories about Batman from different channels") and emotions ("I am very involved when reading Batman news/stories or watching Batman movies"). The Cronbach alpha was high at 0.97, showing reliability within the constructs. "I consider myself as a fan of Batman" was ranked the highest at 4.06 with a standard deviation of 1.698, followed by reading Batman stories and watching Batman movies (3.99,  $SD = 1.682$ ), being excited to talk on Batman related topics (3.84,  $SD = 1.694$ ), and following the news and stories about Batman on various media channels (3.83,  $SD = 1.698$ ). The least ranked statement at 3.19 and a  $SD$  of 1.762 confirmed the level to which the respondent was a member of a Batman club or association. All the statements had positive levels of interest in Batman being more than the average (2.5), showing the respondent to be active in their appreciation and discussion of Batman issues.

Table 5  
Level of Interest by Respondents Towards Batman ( $n = 304$ )

	Level of Agreement (1 to 5)	$SD$
I consider myself a fan of Batman	4.06	1.698
I am very involved when reading Batman news/stories or watching Batman movies	3.99	1.682
I am usually excited when I talked about Batman related topics	3.84	1.694
I try my best to follow the news and stories about Batman from different channels (Newspaper, Magazines, Facebook, Twitter, Website, WeChat, Weibo, etc.)	3.83	1.698
I am very emotional when I see Batman figures/products and Batman in costume	3.69	1.711
My friends and families always ask my opinions about Batman related topics	3.56	1.674
I tend to make friends with fans of Batman	3.49	1.685
I am always keen to attend Batman related events and activities	3.45	1.658
I always discuss about Batman related topics in my daily live	3.45	1.680
I am a member of one of the Batman related fan clubs or associations	3.19	1.762



Although there was an overall positive sentiment towards Batman and involvement in Batman related activities by the respondent, these feelings did not produce a major sole reason to visit Studio City. When asked whether the respondent would still have visited Studio City in the absence of the BDF (Table 6),  $n = 245$  (80.6%) said they would while  $n = 59$  (19.4%) would not. In terms of the BDF return on investment, further economic background on the respondent such as amounts spent in the resort would be required to quantify the value of the visitor who would or would not visit Studio City should the BDF not be there. Being a fan of Batman and the presence of a BDF directly influences only a fifth of respondent's decision to visit Studio City.

The range and mix of gaming and nongaming amenities is an important consideration. Batman plays a role within this but is not the single key factor in attracting visitation to Studio City. Almost half of the respondents stayed a full day at the property with around three quarters of the respondents being first time. Older audiences are less attracted to visit the BDF. Other gaming and nongaming attractions were also given as a combination of reasons to stay (Table 4). The BDF was only a must-see for 17.1% of the sample while 19.4% said the attraction was the key reason to visit Studio City. A future consideration is that once experienced the BDF could become less appealing to the younger audiences who predominantly visit the attraction. Given the high level of repeat visitation to Macao essentially by Chinese travelers, the IR is tasked to ensure that entertainment and fixed attractions such as BDF remain appealing to this tourist segment in particular. Depending on Studio City's target visitor profile such as visitor net worth, further study would be needed to determine if other facilities and entertainment beyond BDF attract older audiences and those visiting Macao multiple times.

Table 6  
Desire to Visit Studio City in the Absence of a BDF

	Yes	No
If BDF was not located at Studio City would you still have visited Studio City?	245 (80.6%)	59 (19.4%)

## Discussion

In the hope of benefiting from the popularity of a growing number of superhero movies and sequels, the event and entertainment industry have increasingly hosted superhero-themed activities in collaboration with the major entertainment companies such as DC Comics, Marvel, and DreamWorks. Under strict license agreements the iconic figures are replicated and produced in backdrops similar to the movie with amusement rides and zones, merchandising, restaurants, and photo opportunities with characters in costume. In collaboration between DC Comics and Studio City, Macao, a Batman Dark Flight simulation ride was produced and used as one of the major event entertainment attractions within the property. Approaching a sample of visitors queuing to ride the BDF this research importantly examined the appeal of the ride to attract visitors to the property as well as investigating their fan interest in Batman. Although a first step in exploring the influence of superhero themed entertainment on visitation, this research also notably provides initial insight into a topic largely overlooked in the event literature to date. Most of the visitors were Chinese, thereby also permitting the investigation of the level of interest of a Western iconic superhero to a Chinese audience.

Although an initial investigation on the issue within integrated resort settings, the research showed that the presence of a Batman-themed attraction could appeal to a particular visitor segment. Visitors to the BDF were mostly under 39 years old and visiting Studio City for the first time. With the majority staying most of the day at the IR, other attractions and facilities were being used during their stay such as the "Golden Reel" and casino. As an integrated resort, there are multiple gaming and nongaming attractions and entertainment programs within Studio City all aimed at providing a reason to visit, stay, and spend money. Although this study found that all the respondents were fans of the superhero, other gaming and nongaming attractions were also visited during the visitor's time at Studio City. Even though being considered a fan of Batman was the highest level of agreement, the absence of a BDF would not have deterred around 80% of the respondents from visiting Studio City. The brand licensing, production, and daily running

costs of the BDF will be financial considerations in assessing the amusement ride's return on investment as well as the level to which the attraction presents a competitive edge to stimulate a certain number of visitors who spend more and stay longer at the resort.

This research is important given that many of the West's comic and Hollywood movie production studios have established or wish to increase their involvement in Asia, particularly in China given the possible significant lucrative returns. This studio presence has been mostly within Asia's theme parks and integrated resorts where various related themed attractions, events, and entertainment are incorporated into regular programming. Given the growing number of superheroes, movie sequels, and plots, this study suggests that research is needed to determine the attractiveness and future ongoing appeal of particular superhero fabrication at the resort. Gaming revenues dominant Macao's hospitality landscape where events and entertainment have minimal economic impact, being primarily used as tactics to attract visitors into the resort with gambling an important outcome. Although not an important revenue source for Macao's IRs, nongaming plays a key role in attracting gamblers to the resorts. Events and entertainment provide a program of activity to take part in within the IR, with new events a purpose for a Chinese gambler to return. Casino marketing is also strictly prohibited in China and therefore IR event and entertainment are marketing imagery and messaging that can be legally used in the country.

The study found that the respondents visited other attractions when at Studio City. A strategic management consideration would be the need to further isolate the entertainment and event offering mix that provides greatest distinction compared to the competition and a mix that could maximize visitation and revenue to the IR. The engagement of using superhero themes across Macao's Cotai Strip is now common event and entertainment practice and therefore the implications of this research will resonate with others following a similar marketing strategy. As the world's largest and highest spending outbound travel segment, the issue of engaging movie companies and creating events and entertainment that attracts Mainland Chinese to global destinations, and the lessons

learned in locations such as Macao, will be important references.

### Managerial Implications

Although a preliminary investigation, the findings show that for most of the respondents the BDF was not a key reason to visit the IR. Given the investment required from concept to staging, Macao's IR management will need to determine the overall worth of the event and entertainment portfolio in terms of stimulating visitation, IR branding, loyalty and retention, and spending across other amenities such as the casino, retail, and accommodation. The study highlights the growing number of superheroes in the entertainment industry and therefore increasing choices of themed attraction possibilities. The local lessons learned from Macao's engagement to Chinese audiences with the event and entertainment industry should be considerations for those global locations and sites wishing to attract this visitor segment. With a year on year increase of 6% to 135 million Chinese outbound travelers in 2016, this travel segment spent US\$261 billion, 21% of the world's total tourism spending. In 2012 China became the world's top outbound traveler spender (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2018). As the fastest and highest spending travel source market, the Chinese outbound traveler represents immense potential for the global events and entertainment industry to engage with and attract visitation and spending. This research showed the possibility of the attraction becoming less appealing after an initial visit.

The life cycle appeal and of superhero brands to Chinese audiences may be contingent on several factors such as movie release and sequels, attractiveness of the plot and storyline, and popularity of actors. These factors could be integrated into future research on assessing the use of themed superheroes into entertainment particularly with investment into longer-term fixed attractions and zones in Macao and for those destinations wishing to attract Chinese visitors. The attractions at Asia's IRs and theme parks are also important marketing and promotion channels for the movie studios. This cycle of populism towards the thematic attraction can in turn generate future movie patronage as well as cultivate a larger fan base and increase purchases in

merchandising. Therefore, the movie industry has an important stake to help ensure themed superhero entertainment remains a success.

#### Future Research

The marriage of the movie industry and the hospitality industry continues through the hosting of theme events, amusement zones, and fixed attractions, allowing for participant involvement as well as souvenir purchasing. The hospitality industry needs to justify the return on investment on this superhero collaboration. As well as financial returns, the movie industry similarly needs to be assured this partnership can grow brand awareness and appeal of the various superheroes. As new superhero movies and sequels are launched, the hospitality industry is challenged to ensure the investments in the attractions are justified and remain appealing for as long as possible. The type of superhero theme could be relevant. The appeal of the story line of Batman was not explored such as his human history and background and being a symbol of justice. There are some commonalities between superheroes but also some specific attributes and personality failings that could appeal. The introduction of the antihero with movie characters such as DC Comic's *Suicide Squad* and Marvel's *Deadpool* have been popular with global audiences, showing the increasing challenge of choosing a superhero of greatest appeal and financial return from target audiences.

A greater definition of a "fan" and fan commitment is needed. Although all the respondents expressed great interest in Batman, for many the BDF was not the sole reason for visiting the resort, although for some fans the BDF was the key feature that attracted them to the resort. The research also showed the possibility of the attraction losing appeal after a few visits. The constant rejuvenation of entertainment and attractions to stay relevant and appealing to visitation can be a costly one with any additional investment required being a part of a broader financial and competitor analysis.

This study showed that the BDF is a peripheral attraction, and therefore future research on justifying IR events and entertainment-theme decisions and costs should investigate the net worth in generating additional gaming and nongaming revenues, repeat and new customer visitation, loyalty

and retention, and the competitive position of the IR. The theme may have an appeal attrition rate indicating that the net worth could dimension over time, an additional factor to consider tracking.

#### Limitations

The study was conducted at only one attraction inside one IR and could be extended to multiple attractions within the IR and across The Cotai Strip to determine a more comprehensive understanding of the appeal of themed entertainment and events. The design of the IR could impact and influence visitation, with some resorts having fun zones while other resorts have individual character attractions such as the BDF at Studio City. In order to provide greater strategic insight, the research acknowledges that more information is needed on the visitor profile, particularly on amounts spent on specific gaming and nongaming activities as well as further understanding on the attraction's ability to attract new visitors while retaining others. An external analysis could also assess the role the BDF has in the competitive positioning of Studio City.

The survey was only conducted over 1 day due to limited resources and management permission. The respondent sample may not have been representative of those visiting the IR or the BDF ride. As suggested in the research, a more detailed BDF user profile would be useful in determining the return on investment of the BDF.

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