

Guests' reactions to being monitored: the balancing act of added value and privacy concerns

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Purpose

The purpose of this study is to validate theoretical propositions (Anuar & Gretzel 2011) which outline the impact implementing a tourist monitoring project has on guest's privacy concerns. By conducting a qualitative analysis on guest's reactions to a recent tourist monitoring project, the researchers improve the generalizability of and add boundary conditions to the existing propositions.

Background

Over the past year a theme park company in the Central Florida area has begun rolling out a billion dollar project that includes: updated websites and mobile apps, a reimagined ride-reservation system, and wristbands that will serve as all-in-one admission tickets, hotel-room keys and a method of payment. Three years in the making, the company's ambitious "next generation experience" project predates the more recent scandals involving national governments and invasions of privacy that have been ubiquitous in the news. While reputable news services and influential technology websites have been quick to point out the perceived connection between these new services, their tracking capabilities and governmental invasions of privacy, guests and fans have overwhelmingly stood by the company, placing value on the leisure experience over the potential privacy concerns. How has the theme park company managed to rise above the fray involving privacy? How has it managed its relationship with its guests in order to ensure that the message communicated is one of excitement surrounding expanded offerings, not fear over privacy concerns? How do brand strength and guest loyalty play a role? This study seeks to better understand the actions the theme park company has taken involving tourist monitoring, the circumstances surrounding its success, and in doing so providing practical implications for other companies.

Methodology

This study is approached through and grounded by the lenses of an increasingly collaboration driven Web 2.0 world (Goodchild 2007), an increasingly monitored world (Shoval 2007), and the complex relationship that exists between the customer and the organization. This study is supported by a qualitative analysis of public communications between the theme park company and its guests, in addition to communications between third party news sources and their readers. A content analysis of websites is conducted, gathering together communications from the theme park company in addition to news sources presenting material related to the company's actions in regard to tourist monitoring. The content of the communications as well as the responses made by website visitors in the comments section are analysed qualitatively. The thematic analysis consisted of multiple levels of coding, a process grounded in the procedures outlined by Miles and Huberman (1984) and expanded upon by Bruan and Clarke (2006). Individually the researchers first obtained a familiarity with the data, before progressing to free coding, and meaningful theme identification, before finally coming together to collectively agree to a comprehensive list of keywords and overarching themes. The results of the thematic analysis are supported by the details surrounding the implementation of the company's system, including the rollout schedule, and the statistics on

guest satisfaction. This study addresses the motivations and opinions of the guests in regard to being monitored, the interaction between the company and the guest being monitored, as well as the opportunities and challenges for other companies.

Practical Implications

The findings of the study reinforce recommendations for companies in the entertainment and theme park industries to implement tourist monitoring efforts into their respective businesses while minimizing guest privacy concerns. Potential positive outcomes include improving the guest experience, improving guest loyalty, and increasing guest engagement and enjoyment during their leisure experiences.

Value

This study represents an empirical test of the future research needs and directions related to privacy concerns outlined by Anuar & Gretzel (2011) in regard to tourism-related location-based services. By exploring the challenges and facilitating factors surrounding the strategic messaging of tourist tracking systems the researchers improve the validity of theoretical propositions related to the relationship between privacy concerns and several antecedents, including: system characteristics, the level of trust, user characteristics, and perceived enjoyment. This study supports the implementation of future empirical studies seeking to validate the qualitative findings and the factors which alleviate guest privacy concerns surrounding the implementation of tourist monitoring systems.

References

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