

How are tourism businesses adapting to COVID-19?

Perspectives from the fright tourism sector

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously impacted the global tourism industry, effecting the livelihoods of millions of tourism workers and disrupting host communities. Current research in tourism management has focused on understanding the economic, social and political impacts of the pandemic. This professional perspective aims to examine operational adaptations that businesses in the fright tourism industry have adopted under the COVID-19 pandemic circumstances. The study collated industry association press releases, undertaking content analysis to examine the changes businesses employed to adapt during the pandemic. Findings suggest that businesses made a variety of operational changes, such as changing queueing, diversification of props and changes to make-up hygiene, allowing these businesses to survive pandemic imperatives.

1 Introduction

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on the global tourism industry, impacting the livelihoods of millions of tourism workers with flow-on effects for host communities (Gössling, et al., 2021). Current research in tourism management has focused on understanding the economic, social and political impacts of the pandemic (Hall, et al. 2020) and there are already numerous studies addressing post-pandemic tourism (Brouder, 2020). However less is known about how small and medium sized tourism businesses are adapting to the pandemic (Kristiana et al, 2020). Adaptation, based on Adaptation Level Theory (Helson, 1948), is a key process by which people manage perceived risks and projected changes (Füssel, 2007). In a dynamic tourism environment, it is assumed that businesses employ adaptation strategies (Putra, 2010; Kristiana et al, 2021), or patterns of behaviour to resolve problems faced by the business.

The paper examines operational adaptations that small and medium sized fright tourism businesses have adopted in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Fright

tourism is a form of dark tourism that combines macabre-themed fantasy elements, Gothic narratives, and industry-created props to create interactive and engaging tourist experiences (McEvoy, 2016). Prior to the pandemic, fright tourism was a \$7 billion US dollar a year tourism sector (Kirchner, 2020), but as the COVID-19 pandemic gripped the world from early 2020, the fright tourism industry experienced a dramatic economic loss with no clear adaptation strategies apparent. Many independent fright tourism attractions in the United States have closed permanently (Kirchner, 2020), while others are trying to adapt to a new pandemic environment.

1.1 Understanding fright tourism

Fright tourism is often considered a subset of dark tourism (Bristow & Newman, 2004) which encompasses visiting sites (real or fabricated) of death, disaster, and the macabre (Stone, 2006). In fright tourism, tourists are often attracted by the thrills of simulation, rather than the reality of visiting the sites (Bristow & Newman, 2004). A level of fantasy (staged experiences that include elements of the supernatural), and a Gothic aesthetic (McEvoy, 2016) are typical features of fright tourism attractions. Research focusing on this form of tourism includes examinations of ghost tourism experiences (Dancausa et al., 2020; Gentry, 2007); Dracula tourism (Reijnders, 2011; Light, 2017); marketing of fright tourism attractions (Brown et al. 2012; Weidmann, 2016); and the liminal experiences in simulated settings (Bristow, 2020). Tourists typically visit fright tourism attractions to experience the thrill of fear in an environment that is safe and simulated (DeVisser-Amundson, De Korte & Williams, (2016); Kerr, 2015). The attraction to fear challenges the dominant conceptions of fear as a negative emotion (Goyal and Verma, 2021). Fright tourism businesses employ mechanisms designed to create enjoyable experiences that induce feelings of shock, horror and thrills in tourists. Animatronics, odours, music and other effects are commonly used to elicit these scary experiences.

Due to the interactive nature of the fright tourism industry (high adrenaline experiences of tourists running and encountering psychological and physical challenges), risk management techniques have long been employed by the fright tourism sector (Stark, 2015). These techniques include activities such as placement and handling of illumination and electrical appliances for fire prevention (Moore, 2021), eliminating the use of extension cords to reduce instances of tripping hazards (HAA, 2021), and regular maintenance of air compressors to reduce potential water spills resulting in slip hazards, to mitigate potential accidents and medical emergencies

(Stark, 2015). However, beyond risk management, the new pandemic imperatives (especially social distancing and enhanced hygiene protocols) are forcing the fright tourism sector to adapt across multiple operational and financial aspects of their businesses.

1.2 COVID-19 and business adaptation

Since March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic took hold of most of the world, many tourism businesses were forced to operate in a limited capacity in order to control the spread of the virus (Kock et al. 2020; Zenker & Kock, 2020; Li et al. 2021). Research has examined the economic impacts of COVID-19 (Verma & Gustafson, 2020), changes in tourist behaviours related to contact between tourists and service providers (Kock et al. 2020), and the role of organisational resilience in the ability of tourism businesses to recover from the pandemic (Bhaskara and Filimonau, 2021) but the wider adaptive measures of tourism businesses have yet to be fully addressed. Richards & Morrill (2021) studied the youth travel sector and indicated the biggest adjustment was in the modification of cancellation policies, after the pandemic emerged. Alonso et al. (2021), in investigating coping strategies of small and medium sized enterprises, found that many businesses reduced employment hours and rotated staff, while others discontinued some of their services. Other businesses applied for governmental relief funds and discontinued operations all together (Alonso et al. 2021; Rogerson, 2021). Rogerson (2021) examined operational changes made in South African tourism businesses to maintain operations during the pandemic, concluding that some of the most significant business changes included product diversification, reduction of prices, reduced staffing, changed marketing, and greater inter-enterprise cooperation. A review of the literature however did not reveal any studies addressing the operational adjustments taken by small and medium sized tourism businesses in fright tourism or related sectors. In order to address this gap, we undertook a content analysis of secondary data to determine how businesses in this sector employed adaptive measures as a result of the pandemic.

2 Methodology

Primary data collection was not feasible due to the restrictions on movement and lack of access to electronic e-mail databases, so data collection utilizing secondary sources was necessary. Our study, which was exploratory in nature, was conducted in April 2021 in the United States (US).

An online search of press release documents of two major industry associations was conducted, in order to obtain information provided by fright tourism attractions to their associations, with the information disseminated to other association members to share best practices. Search phrases: *COVID-19 and business adaptation; responses to COVID-19*, and similar words and phrases, were entered in search engines of the websites of the two major fright tourism related associations. The two associations are the Haunted Attraction Association (HAA) – a US-based industry association of fright tourism businesses, and the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA) - the largest global amusement park association. The IAAPA contains information for large scale amusement parks, many of which have Halloween-themed fright attractions during the months of September and October and has over 6,300 members (2019). These parks include, for example, *Halloween Horror Nights* at Universal Studios Orlando, *Scare-o-winds* at Carowinds in Charlotte, North Carolina, and *Knott's Scary Farm* at Knott's Berry Farm in California. The HAA is the only official global association for the haunted attraction industry, and member organisations represent the fright tourism industry, including haunted attraction owners and operators, designers, vendors, artists and other suppliers. The association offers the Certified Haunted Operator Seminar (CHAOS) safety program, public relations, legal consultation, annual tradeshow and conferences, and industry education for members. Membership numbers for the association were not available at the time of research.

The online search resulted in thirteen press releases in total. The press release documents, typically pdf or Word files of up to 500 words in length, documented the views of business owners and/or general managers. These views were based on informal, anonymous, surveys conducted by the two associations with business owners. Content analysis, defined by Holsti (1961) as "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages" (p. 14) was then applied to review the press release documents. This method of analysis was chosen in order to classify the themes and determine their meanings by three researchers. Emergent coding was utilised, broadly following processes outlined in Haney et al (1998) and used in other tourism studies (Halpern & Regimi, 2013; Wilson & Latkova, 2016; Kim & Madhuri, 2019). First, the three researchers individually examined each press release and determined some general patterns (broad themes that related to the study aim). The researchers then compared the notes and reconciled any differences in the general patterns. Following this step, the press release documents were again independently and

more closely read, this time generating additional, more specific, themes. A final set of operational adaptations (representing each theme) was then generated following a group discussion. Approximately 95% agreement was reached on the final set of the themes, following this iterative process.

In addition to business-to-business industry press releases, a search of Nexis Uni (an academic search engine specializing in news, business and legal sources) for the period of September and October of 2021 was conducted to see if any Covid-19 related business protocols for fright tourism business were communicated via press to the general public. The scope of search was limited to the entries for the state of North Carolina in the US as we desired a state with a moderate number of well-distributed fright tourism businesses. As such, we felt the state is representative of the fright tourism industry in the US. The Nexis Uni search included such phrases as: *Covid-19*, *Haunted Attractions*, and *Halloween* in order to be as inclusive as possible. The search revealed 86 results with the combinations of search phrases. Of these articles, only one referred to Covid-19 protocols, in which the article stated face coverings were recommended at an attraction. Other results were on such topics as what places to visit during Halloween, which date is best to celebrate Halloween, and Halloween events in various cities.

3 Results and Discussion

Four specific business adaptation strategies were identified in the data obtained from the press releases, with the fourth strategy involving eight elements. These are detailed in the following section. The one Nexis Uni article referenced a specific haunted attraction, and that information was also included in the attraction's website, so is included with the fourteen Covid-19 website statements discovered.

1. Relocating tourists to safe zones

The findings from the documents demonstrate innovative ways of adapting to new social distancing requirements. Haunted attractions, often called haunted houses, are purpose-built attractions in fright tourism that follow a storyline and require revealing spaces in a certain order to tourists (Clasen et al. 2019). The structure of these haunted house attractions often requires patrons to travel through in a particular order in tight spaces, which is a challenge for social distancing. Although changing the design of the house would be costly, the findings show that

changing the flow and locations of patrons is possible. This would involve relocating visitors to so-called safe zone areas where groups of patrons can be separated from one another. Moving operations outdoors to the extent possible may assist with this challenge due to the flow of air and ability to create moveable mazes. It was revealed some fright tourism attractions could also modify their experiences to offer a drive-through service, which keeps patrons separated from actors as well as one another, avoiding direct contact. Examples of this include a haunted car wash, the Tunnel of Terror Haunted Car Wash in Belmont, North Carolina, United States (Dreier, 2020), and a drive through haunted trail, the Haunted Hills Terror Drive in Pittsboro, also in North Carolina (Mace, 2020).

2. Changing queuing processes

Queuing for entry into a haunted attraction is an important part of the fright tourism experience, as patrons build camaraderie with other guests, and anticipate what the experience will offer (Bristow and Keenan, 2018). The press release documents show that changes in direction for queuing for entry is one way to tackle social distancing requirements. Often, queues wrap in a back-and-forth fashion, and to avoid direct face to face interactions with other customers, queues would need to be adjusted. The findings show they can become one directional, take up more space so there can be greater distances between customer groups, and offer a timed ticket approach (i.e., offer visitors a specific time to enter the haunted house). These adaptation strategies would reduce the number of people waiting in line at any given time.

3. Re-aligning promotional activities

The third strategy revealed in the data was modified promotion. Given the very real fears people were experiencing during the global pandemic, businesses needed to re-think how they marketed the message of 'fear as fun' in haunted fright tourism attractions. Fright tourism attractions use different themes each year in order to promote the experience as new and to encourage repeat visitation. However, considering the health crisis, and given the fears people were experiencing, the findings reveal that businesses were focusing on fantasy elements to manage customer expectations and to reinforce the idea of fear as fun. The results show that depictions of medical themes in promotional materials of fright tourism businesses have become inappropriate, considering the global medical emergency that the pandemic has generated. Subsequently images at websites and in business brochures were being re-designed with new non-medical elements.

4. Changing experience design elements at attractions

Lastly, in order to provide a safe and memorable fright tourism experience, and to ensure that experiences continue to incorporate appropriate and relevant design, the documents show that businesses have adopted changes to tangible elements at their attractions. These included:

- Incorporation of plexiglass partitions in areas that offer high traffic and/or close contact. Businesses should be thoughtful about how they use plexiglass and find a way to blend it in with the attraction's storyline.
- Adoption of mirrors in attractions to make scare actors appear closer to patrons than they actually are in order to maintain social distancing.
- Updating sound technology in order to make actor voices seem louder.
- Reducing the level of props and gear on set that customers typically come into contact with, such as having to push a door open to move from one area of the attraction to another.
- Offering fewer touch points and/or confined spaces.
- Introducing games to outdoor waiting spaces to offer the opportunity to keep patrons socially distant while waiting to enter the haunted house.
- Incorporating personal protective equipment (PPE) into costume design for scare actors. This provides an opportunity to re-think the design of character costumes, and how they can be created in a way that includes comfortable, storyline-appropriate, face masks and gloves.
- Investing in animatronics. This strategy further reduces the points of contact between customers and staff and allows scare actors to be responsible for operating an animatronic character to interact with the guests from a safe distance.

4 Conclusion

Overall, the study and its findings extend the literature on business adaptation in tourism management (Kristiana et al, 2021) and provides fresh perspectives from the fright tourism sector in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. At a practical level, the paper identifies a set of new strategies that may be useful to small and medium enterprises. Due to the interactive experience of fright tourism attractions, which is created by storytelling through set design, props, and

oftentimes confined spaces, the adaptations taken by this industry in order to ensure a safe and fun experience may be unique and necessary for such attractions to survive and thrive during and following the pandemic. However, some of the adaptations are more generic in character (e.g., changing queuing processes) so they may be useful to industry sectors well beyond fright tourism. In contrast to the study undertaken by Rogerson (2021) which highlighted management issues in relation to the pandemic, such as changes to staff management, the current study reveals physical operational changes (e.g., changing queueing, diversification of props, make-up hygiene, etc.), and is the first study to do so. There are however limitations in the reported research project. The study was exploratory and based on secondary data, using online information; in depth research with fright tourism operator-participants may shed further light on the effectiveness and longevity of these adaptations. The study was based in the United States, and it would be beneficial to examine fright tourism operational adaptations in other regions of the world where Covid-19 may have manifested differently, in terms of its medical impact and also regulatory responses. Many fright tourism businesses entirely changed the manner in which they operated during 2020, and there is a likelihood that the adaptations employed may be more permanent- the success of these adaptation measures could be explored through longitudinal studies. Finally, research on customers' perceptions of these strategies may prove to be a useful avenue for future research.

5 References

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