Monsters, Ghosts and Coasters; Noise, Toys, and Sea Creatures: Comparing Six Major Theme Park Halloween-Themed Events

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Comparing Six Major Theme Park Halloween-Themed Events

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Abstract

In times past, Halloween was recognized as a fairly innocent children’s holiday involving trick-or-treating in suburban neighborhoods. Today, Halloween is more commonly recognized as an opportunity for teenagers and adults to attend parties, dress in provocative costumes, and participate in increasingly terrifying scare zones at Halloween-themed events. This case study research analyzes social media communications of six major themed amusement parks in regard to Halloween. Three research questions are addressed and answered. The study identifies key similarities and differences between the parks’ communication outreach. Findings support earlier research suggesting Halloween-themed events contribute to negative social and cultural outcomes. The work ends with a list of ten ‘best practices’ suggestions for more comprehensive, inclusive social media communication by theme parks.
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Introduction

Halloween is big business in America. The holiday used to be characterized innocently as primarily an opportunity for young children to run door-to-door in suburban neighborhoods and collect candy from friends and neighbors. In recent years, however, Halloween has emerged in popular culture as more of an opportunity for adults to let their hair down through dress-up and at Halloween-themed private and public events. American consumers spend billions of dollars to celebrate Halloween, and the holiday is firmly entrenched in media and pop culture as a ‘must participate’ experience.

Nowhere is this more visible than in America’s themed entertainment parks. Disneyland, the Universal Studios parks, and the Six Flags parks are among those that celebrate Halloween in a big way, and generate enormous profits as a result.

Mass communication scholars have given somewhat limited attention to the commodification and promotion of Halloween by popular theme parks. Most existing studies focus on the cultural impact of Halloween more so than the parks’ communication about Halloween events. Therefore, this case study research serves as an initial attempt to examine event-related communication in greater depth.

This research effort examines the Halloween-themed events staged by six major Southern California theme parks in 2014. Each park’s event history, attractions, apparent target audience, social media use, and competitive strengths and weaknesses are examined to identify similarities and differences. The research identifies elements of the media promotion of these specific Halloween-themed events that may contribute to the negative social impacts of Halloween on American
culture as identified by Levinson, Mack, Reinhardt, Suarez & Yeh (1992). Finally, a best practices assessment will be offered of the social media utilized by the six parks in 2014.

A Constantly Evolving Celebration

Halloween’s origin can be traced to the Celts who lived 2,000 years ago in Ireland. The Celts recognized the first day of the long winter on November 1. There was an associated belief that the world of the living crossed paths with the world of the dead at that time. Therefore, the night of October 31 became known as Samhain, the eve on which the spirits of the dead returned to roam the Earth (Bannatyne, 1990).

“The Celts made offerings to the spirit world in hopes that the spirits of their loved ones would make a brief visit home to enjoy a warm fire at the hearth” (Bannatyne, 1990, p. 4). So that unwanted spirits wouldn’t be part of the visiting crowd, the Celts dressed themselves in disguises (Henderson, 2006).

During the 8th and 9th centuries, the Catholic Church recognized November 1 as All Saints Day, and included the recognition on the church calendar. The church decreed that the day and vigil “be generally observed to honor numerous martyrs and, eventually, saints on a common day” (Levinson, Mack, Reinhardt, Suarez & Yeh, 1992, para. 7).

American colonists were familiar with the concept of Halloween, but the holiday wasn’t celebrated in the United States until after 1840 (Belk, 1990). During the late 1800s, the American public’s recognition of the day increased as large numbers of Irish immigrants came to America to escape the potato famine. The
creation of Jack-O-Lanterns made from hollowed-out vegetables is just one of the Irish celebratory traditions associated with the holiday (Belk, 1990).

By the early 20th century, Americans had begun to dress up in costumes and go house to house asking for food or money. Parades and community parties kept the holiday exciting in the 1920s and 1930s; however, there were increasing problems with vandalism by revelers. Gradually, an understanding became established that families could prevent tricks from being played on their homes if residents provided treats for the youngest children in the neighborhood (Radford, 2014).

Throughout Halloween’s history, the event has not been “a holiday that has been celebrated the same way over the centuries, nor one whose meaning is fixed” (Rogers, 2002, p. 10). Halloween has constantly reinvented itself, while still remaining “securely anchored in national narratives” (p. 10). This evolution continues in the 21st century, as Halloween has in many ways become recognized more as a celebration for adults than one for children. A whole new pop culture industry has developed around Halloween.

This evolution parallels the emergence of Dark Tourism, a phenomenon in which consumers embrace and celebrate concepts of death and disaster – along with the locations where tragedies happened (Lennon & Foley, 2000). Frightening movies and television shows such as The Rocky Horror Picture Show and The X Files have achieved cult status with audiences (Abbot, 1995; Austin, 1981). Even the skull and crossbones, once a deathly symbol common at Halloween, has crossed over into popular culture as a year-round fashion statement (Callahan, 1995).
Theme parks such as the ones subject to study in this report have embraced Dark Tourism in their own way, and annually engage in widespread commercialization of Halloween with a destination orientation. With special events and attractions staged for a month or longer in duration, Halloween has become – for these theme parks and others – a season more so than a celebration.

Halloween and Consumer Culture

In 1992, Rutgers University researchers Stacey Levinson, Stacey Mack, Dan Reinhart, Helen Suarez, and Grace Yeh published their work, *Halloween as a Consumption Experience*. The research examined the merchandise and sales strategies at a small number of Halloween-themed retail stores. The work also looked at the celebration of the holiday through a small number of localized events that included a costume contest, pumpkin carving contest, and parade.

The work concluded that Halloween is greatly commercialized and feeds off some of society's worst stereotypes:

- Halloween offers merchandisers an unparalleled opportunity to produce and sell consumer products that are quickly used and then discarded; the focus is always on ‘bigger and better’ decorative items than the competition;
- Halloween supports existing gender-specific roles and expectations – such as warrior and Ninja Turtle costumes for boys, with Minnie Mouse and princess costumes recognized as ‘for girls;’
- Halloween reinforces peer pressure and conformity even among the youngest children;
• Halloween is built around immediate gratification and materialism.

By 2012, it was estimated that 170 million Americans took part in some sort of Halloween celebration, and spend $8 billion on candy, decorations and costumes (Sanburn, 2012).

A 2014 estimate showed that the typical American adult consumer would spend $29 on costumes and $23 on candy (Expected average... 2014). Expenditures on costumes alone were expected to reach $11 billion (Gillespie, 2014). Adult-themed sexually suggestive costume parties allow exhibitionist outlets for the “hot cop,” the “naughty nurse” and others (Norimine, 2011).

Fright themed events for young adults are now a key element of the Halloween experience. The Haunted Attraction Association, “the official association of the haunted house industry,” claims to represent a worldwide network of haunted houses, theme parks, and vendors. The HAA hosts the TransWorld Haunt Convention and presents awards in a variety of categories. The HAA claims that in 2013, 36% of Americans visited a haunted house, holiday attraction, or theme park and that these attractions generated $300 million in revenue (Haunted Attraction Association, 2014).

Nowhere is Halloween a bigger commercial venture than in Southern California, where more than a dozen area theme parks rush to embrace Halloween and the tourism dollars it brings. Tourism spending in California in 2012 exceeded $103 billion, and more than one-third of that spending occurred in Los Angeles and Orange Counties (Economic impact of travel..., 2014). The economic recovery in 2013 allowed the industry to make increasingly bright projections about future
tourism spending. Although theme park representatives do not publicly discuss attendance and finances, Disneyland’s Halloween event is frequently sold out, meaning the park reaches its attendance capacity and the entry gates are closed. It has been reported that Knott’s Berry Farm’s event is so popular that it generates half of the park’s annual income (Knott’s Berry Farm, 2014).

Methodology

An examination of the six major Southern California theme parks that offer Halloween-themed events allows for a unique perspective on celebration of the holiday in American culture. All six parks are located within a 100-mile radius. All target the same general consumer group and all reach out through the same local and regional media channels. All have at their disposal the same social media tools.

The parks and events include: Disneyland’s “Mickey’s Halloween Party,” Knott’s Berry Farm’s “Scary Farm,” Legoland’s “Brick-Or-Treat Party Nights,” The Queen Mary’s “Dark Harbor,” Six Flags Magic Mountain’s “Fright Fest,” and Universal Studios Hollywood’s “Halloween Horror Nights.”

The project was organized in a case study format to expedite data collection and analysis during a one-month span of time from October 1 to November 1, 2014. The research effort was coordinated with the assistance of 40 undergraduate communications students enrolled in two identical sections of a public relations writing course taught by the principal investigator.

At the outset of the project, the principal investigator explained the concept and introduced the students to appropriate media content analysis methodology
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and procedures. Students were introduced to theme park social media and given recommendations for media content collection and analysis.

This cast study project was as much a teaching endeavor as it was a research project. College-aged students are a key target audience for most Halloween-themed events, including four of the six studied in this project. The students were excited to develop this work because the students perceived it to have great personal relevance.

Each team was assigned two park Halloween-themed events to compare and contrast, and each team had latitude to determine for itself what social media to follow over the one-month study period. Each team completed a review of relevant literature before developing research strategy, collecting data, and reporting results. The principal investigator reviewed all results and collapsed the findings into this descriptive report. The narrative to follow reflects the teams’ different choices of social media.

The project was guided by three research questions, as shown below:

RQ1: How were six major Southern California theme park Halloween-themed events in 2014 similar and different?

RQ2: Might the media promotion of Halloween-themed events like those studied here contribute to negative social and cultural impacts?

RQ3: Based on results of the content analysis of the six theme parks’ social media communication, what best practices suggestions could be offered?
Results

The following section will briefly profile each park's Halloween-themed event in terms of its history, attractions, apparent target audience, social media use, and competitive strengths and weaknesses. Then, each research question will be addressed individually.

Disneyland's “Mickey's Halloween Party”

The City of Anaheim has staged an annual Halloween parade since 1924, and by the 1950s, the event was supposedly the nation's biggest civic Halloween celebration (Anaheim Halloween Parade, 2014). After Disneyland opened in 1957, the park had entries in the parade. In 1995, the park decided to develop its own Halloween-themed event revolving around its familiar characters.

“Mickey's Halloween Party” is decidedly non-scary, in keeping with Disney's gentle themes and imagery. There are no monsters chasing guests throughout the park; instead, Disney characters dressed in Halloween attire mingle with guests. Mickey Mouse is dressed as the sorcerer from Fantasia; Minnie Mouse is dressed as a non-threatening witch. Jafar, Captain Hook, Maleficent, and other Disney villains not usually seen in costume make friendly appearances.

Disney's media communication for the month-long event suggests that families with children between the ages of 4 and 12 are targeted. The event offers trick-or-treat stations around the park, dance parties, craft and activity stations for children of all ages, photo opportunities with Disney characters, and an early evening fireworks show. Special park entry tickets are required. Park guests are invited to dress in costume, although a strict dress code is enforced.
Disneyland makes extensive interactive promotional use of social media. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were monitored to gather data for this report. In September 2014, when the Facebook banner was changed to reflect Halloween, the change generated more than 35,000 liked from followers. During the month-long tracking of social media, more than 3,000 photos were posted on Instagram.

**Knott’s Berry Farm’s “Scary Farm”**

By far the most established of the Southern California events, Knott’s “Scary Farm” began in 1973 with a single Knott’s employee dressed in a gorilla suit scaring passengers on the Calico Mine Train ride. “Scary Farm” has since expanded to a month-long event encompassing the entire 160-acre park. It claims to be the largest Halloween-themed event staged anywhere. The 2014, there were four “scare zones,” eleven fright mazes and more than 1,000 costumed monsters and zombies roaming the park. “Scary Farm” is not for the faint of heart. It is dark, ghoulish, grotesque and violently bloody. Although Knott’s does not publicize its earnings, a park executive speaking off the record with the principal investigator said most of the park’s annual earnings occur during the 30 days of “Scary Farm.”

Knott’s communication clearly targets teenagers and young adults. Several ticketing options are available, including a pass that allows unlimited access to all 24 nights of the event and a package ticket that allows special access for groups of 6 or
more. In 2014, the event included Special Ops, a maze that was said to be the first guest-directed interactive gaming activity in a North American amusement park (Special Ops: Infected, 2014).

The Knott’s Berry Farm social media sites monitored for this report included Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Of these, only Facebook has a distinct social media presence for “Scary Farm;” the other social media are generic to the park itself. The students who collected content analysis data for this report noted the “rude and sarcastic tone” utilized by Knott’s social media – clearly in an effort to connect with the target market. Knott’s also utilizes a YouTube page and had more than 7,700 videos of ten videos on a “Scary Farm” playlist. In the past, Knott’s has quickly taken advantage of opportunities to connect with fans in a personal way via YouTube (Carpenter, 2010).

Legoland’s “Brick-Or-Treat Party Nights”

Legoland is one of a string of theme parks owned and operated by a British company. The Southern California location is in Carlsbad, a suburb of San Diego, where it opened in 1999. The park underwent a major expansion in 2005, at which time it claimed 1.4 million visitors per year (Jacoby, 2005). No published history of Legoland’s Halloween-themed event could be located. Legoland was by far the least aggressive of the six parks in terms of the scope of its Halloween events and promotions. It is the least aggressive on a regular basis; the park is regularly closed on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and closes each afternoon at 5 p.m.
In 2014, “Brick-Or-Treat Party Nights” involved just six evenings in September and October, during which only about half of the park remains open to guests. Events included a ghost cruise, scavenger hunt, children’s costume contest, and arts and crafts activities. Every “Brick-Or-Treat” evening ends with a fireworks performance. Legoland clearly targets families with children aged 12 and younger. Guests are encouraged to attend in costume, and a dress code is enforced.

Legoland’s Facebook and Twitter sites were monitored for this report. There is a Legoland Halloween website that is available year-round. In the days leading up to the first “Brick-Or-Treat” evening, the park posted photos and graphics in social media. However, the social media sites do not allow guests to make their own posts. Guests can only like, comment on, or share posts made by the park’s social media moderator. Very little fan interaction was observed.

The Queen Mary’s “Dark Harbor”

The Queen Mary was built in the early 1930s as a luxury trans-Atlantic ocean liner. The ship has been permanently moored in Long Beach since 1967, and serves as a tourist attraction and hotel. The Queen Mary was put into military service to carry troops during World War II, and during that time hundreds of military personnel died in and around the ship. The Travel Channel’s Ghost Adventures television program claims the Queen Mary “is considered one of the most haunted places on Earth” (2015, parta. 1). In keeping with this perception, the Queen Mary’s “Dark Harbor” Halloween event is, thematically, all about death, destruction and mystery on the high seas.
The Queen Mary’s website is replete with photos and stories of the ship’s history but does not offer history of the “Dark Harbor” event itself. In 2014, “Dark Harbor” was open 17 days between October 2 and November 1. It included four specific attractions, a variety of mazes, and monsters and zombies wandering throughout the ship. A small number of characters are featured throughout the promotional communication. These characters include Half-Hatch Henry, Scary Mary, and a ship’s captain named “Captain of the Grey Ghost” who has a starfish and barnacles stuck to his face.

“Dark Harbor” clearly targets adult consumers. The website specifically discourages children from attending (FAQ: Know before you go, 2014). Because the ship includes restaurants and overnight lodging, “Dark Harbor” is frequently promoted as a weekend getaway for couples who wish to enjoy the Halloween experience, consume alcohol, and then eat and sleep onboard the ship. Packages include general admission tickets, “front of the line passes” and multi-day overnight stay packages. The Queen Mary was the only one of the six Halloween-themed events to specifically target LGBT couples. In 2014, the ship featured two “LGBT Nights” that included a costume contest and drag show. Otherwise, there is an extensive dress code posted on the website; costumes are only allowed on specific dates and must be approved before guest entry.

Queen Mary media monitored for this report included the ship’s website, which is active year-round – though there were only a handful of posts made between outside the months that the 2014 event took place. Regular posts promoting the 2014 event began in June. There was extensive major corporate
sponsorship on the website. The Facebook page reflected numerous photos and videos taken onboard the ship and posted by staff, along with a moderate level of interaction between staff and guests.

_Six Flags Magic Mountain's “Fright Fest”_

Six Flags has thirteen parks in the United States. Six Flags Magic Mountain opened in 1971 and has hosted a Halloween-themed event since 1992. The Six Flags “Fright Fest” is co-branded with Snickers brand candy bars; communication tools all identify it as “presented by Snickers.” The event includes haunted houses, live action shows such as “Monstertainment,” and scary characters wandering through the park. Many of the scare zones and mazes had western themes, including Chupacabra, which featured “a host of terrified Mexican villagers . . . running scared from a werewolf-like beast” (MacDonald, 2014, para. 15). In 2014, “Fright Fest” was staged on 16 evenings, weekends only. There are attractions and activities for younger children. No one older than 12 is allowed to enter the park wearing a costume.

Access to “Fright Night” was included with regular park admission; however, there were extra price events and activities such as mazes – which could cost guests up to $20 additional to enter (Gidney, 2014). Magic Mountain has 18 high-speed rollercoasters and is frequently adding new coasters to the park. Thrill-seeking teenagers and young adults are a primary target market. Six Flags Magic Mountain specifically reached out to Southern California residents with special promotions and contests.
Six Flags Magic Mountain media monitored for this report included the website, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Event updates, ticket information, and photos of guests were all present in social media communication. Twitter and Instagram were not utilized in an interactive way; the park used these sites simply to promote monsters, rollercoasters, and activities. Facebook appeared to be more heavily utilized for interaction with guests. Magic Mountain’s Facebook page garnered more than 560,000 likes and 1 million visits; individual posts had as many as 7,000 comments.

*Universal Studios Hollywood’s “Halloween Horror Nights”*

The theme park division of NBC Universal owns Universal Studios Hollywood, along with similar theme parks in Florida, Japan, and Singapore. The initial Halloween-themed event premiered in the Orlando, Florida park in 1991 and was later expanded to the other parks. In 2014, the Universal Studios Hollywood event ran for 22 nights from late September through early November.

The 2014 “More Dead Than Ever” event was a separately ticketed attraction that targeted teenagers and young adults. Multiple mazes, rides, scare zones, shows, and a terror tram were offered. In keeping with the park’s entertainment theme, many of the rides and attractions were conceptually linked to movies and television shows. Mazes included The Walking Dead (based on the current television show), Alien v. Predator, Dracula Untold, and Clowns 3D with Music By Slash. A popular scare zone in 2014 was The Purge, based on the film of the same name.
The park discouraged attendance by guests younger than 13 and prohibited guests from attending in costume. As with other parks in this study, Universal offered a variety of additional ticket options including a Front of the Line pass and a VIP Experience including valet parking, a dinner buffet in the VIP Horror Lounge, special access to a VIP-only experience, and unlimited front of the line pass for all attractions and mazes throughout the night.

“Halloween Horror Nights” has its own webpage, Twitter page, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook page, and each profiles individual events. The level of involvement by the park on these pages was found to be inconsistent, however. During the period of study, multiple new posts were made daily in Twitter and Instagram, while new Facebook and YouTube postings were made weekly or less frequently. The website takes a sarcastic tone throughout, with warnings such as this one: “If you mistreat the ‘scareactors,’ you will be sent home (of course, it may be in a body bag). You mess with the bull, you get the horns” (Know before you go, 2014, para. 1).

Research Questions

RQ1: How were six major Southern California theme park Halloween-themed events in 2014 similar and different?

The six Halloween-themed events were all similar in that they occurred in the same time frame within the same regional marketplace. Each event had had a history prior to 2014 and therefore had image credibility among consumers. Each theme park offered its event in addition to existing entertainment attractions and activities. Each theme park used traditional and social media to promote its
Halloween-themed event to consumers. Each presented a similar set of ideas about Halloween: that it is an opportunity for people to dress up, explore the mysterious, and socialize after dark with other like-minded consumers in a theme park environment.

The six Halloween-themed events were different in a number of ways. The parks targeted different consumer groups. Some parks clearly sought out families with young children. Others directed media communication toward teenagers and young adults. The Queen Mary made strong efforts to target couples, and was the only park to identify a specific event as LGBT-friendly. Likewise, each of the parks differed in the level of Halloween theme macabre presented through the media and to park guests. Disneyland and Legoland were clearly the most gentle and friendly while Knott’s Berry Farm and The Queen Mary appeared to have the most aggressive, gruesome themes. Each theme park differed in its level of interaction through social media. Some parks had almost no social media interactivity with guests. Others had extensive engagement.

Figure 1 offers a comparison of target consumers, noteworthy use of social media, key differentiating issues/ themes, and event strengths/ weaknesses for the six Halloween-themed events studied.

RQ2: Might the media promotion of Halloween-themed events like those studied here contribute to negative social and cultural impacts?

The media content analysis completed for this case study identified the presence of textual and symbolic communication consistent with the findings of
The four key findings of the 1992 research are shown below, with examples from the present study.

Focus on ‘bigger and better’

In its own way, each of the theme parks used its social media to develop the ‘bigger and better’ theme, claiming its 2014 event was bigger, better, more complex, more frightening, or more fun than its 2013 event. With the exception of Disneyland and Legoland, increased graphic violence is selling point among the parks – with each park’s social media communication claiming its Halloween-themed attraction to be the most intense. “Deadly,” “twisted,” grotesque,” horrifying,” “infected,” and “terrifying” are common descriptors.

Improvement in technology facilitates the ‘bigger and better’ upgrades. Knott’s Berry Farm can stage a “gruesome execution,” while Universal Studios can offer “a woman being eaten alive by an alien” (Martin, 2014, para. 2, 11). The technical director for entertainment at Knott’s noted that guests’ short attention spans are a factor in the park’s effort to have these scenes of violence be much more intense and “move much faster” (Martin, 2014, para. 7).

Support existing gender roles and expectations

Halloween-themed event social media content reflected reinforcement of existing gender-specific roles and expectations. In posts and photographs, boys are commonly costumed as Dracula, a pirate, or a policeman; girls are commonly costumed as Snow White, a witch, or a princess. Even the ghouls and zombies haunting the parks hold to traditional male/female roles. The Queen Mary’s Captain
is “a fierce warrior and fearless leader.” The ship’s Graceful Gale is “a mistress looking for her soul mate” (The spirits of Dark Harbor, 2014).

Reinforce peer pressure and conformity

Halloween-themed event social media supported peer pressure and conformity – especially among the teenagers and young adults targeted by most of the parks. The tone of Halloween narratives found on park websites and social media was snarky, sarcastic, rude – consistent with what Angela Ndalianis calls “an aesthetic of disgust.” This rhetorical approach integrates comfortably with the typical American teenager’s communication style. In Ndalianis’ book, The Horror Sensorium: Media and the Senses, she writes of the strong parallel between American theme park Halloween events and horror cinema. Theme park rides, in particular, engage guests in what she terms an “intensely kinetic and sensorial” experience that allows teenagers to shriek with delight at the abuses they suffer in mazes and scare zones (2012, p. 8).

“... such horror theme park attractions bring to the fore the expansion of the number of senses to include proprioception or the kinesthetic sense; equilibrioception, the sense of balance and acceleration; and nociception, the sense of pain. In the dark ride attraction, the horror is aimed more directly at the participant’s body; the senses have no choice but to react to being thrown about in various directions and to being propelled forwards and backwards at hair-raising speeds that literally make the flesh and muscles on our bodies shudder against their will. Of all entertainment media, it’s only the theme
park ride that can deliver such intense somatic and visceral effects on the body” (p. 8).

Meanwhile, outside the theme park, public officials in American municipalities deal with a variety of unpleasant social consequences brought about by Halloween celebrations. In October 2014, an unlicensed 16-year old behind the wheel of a borrowed BMW that had just left Knott’s “Scary Farm” drove off a freeway embankment at high speed at 2 a.m. The car burst into flames. The driver survived, but five friends aged between 14 and 15 were all killed. None was wearing a seat belt (Woo & Yamanoto, 2014). According to news accounts of the accident, the two of the children were not reported missing until the boys failed to show up at soccer practice the day after the accident.

Tragic Halloween traffic accidents involving teenagers are not uncommon. Also not uncommon are increases in crime, including robbery, assault, indecent exposure, urinating in public, and public intoxication. There is increasing concern about registered sex offenders interacting with children at Halloween; some communities legally forbid sex offenders from handing out trick-or-treat candy (Franklin, 2013).

Support immediate gratification and materialism

Social media content reflected that Southern California theme park ownership sees Halloween as an unequalled opportunity to build attendance and amass profits in a short span of time. This is also true elsewhere, as a Florida park executive quoted in Wynne (2014, para. 12) said Halloween has become “a significant part of our business model.” Industry-wide, Halloween theme park
events typically generate about 12% of park revenues now financially support theme parks in the way Christmas sales support retailers.

Halloween-themed events are inescapable during the month of October in America, just as Christmas-themed events are inescapable in December. Even taking to the high seas won’t allow consumers to escape the merchandising. The Disney Cruise Line includes Halloween costume dress-up events, trick-or-treating, and parties in its October shipboard itineraries (Kelleher, 2014).

RQ3: Based on results of the content analysis of the six theme parks’ social media communication, what best practices suggestions could be offered?

The student teams that conducted the content analysis of the six parks’ social media made ten recommendations of best practices. All are consistent with current expectations in the advertising and public relations profession.

• Promote Halloween-themed events early and often – but not too early

The review of social media content showed some parks did not begin promoting their Halloween-themed events until late August. The student teams believe this is too late, as targeted consumers in the young adult demographic begin making Halloween plans months in advance. At the same time, the teams felt that year-round social media promotion is unwarranted. Knott’s Berry Farm maintains its “Scary Farm” website year-round, something students felt detracted from the opportunity to build excitement for the 2014 event through social media.

• Promote the more popular attractions

Student teams were unable to locate any social media promotion for Red’s Revenge, a popular Halloween attraction at Six Flags. Student teams were unable
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to find content for Universal’s The Purge. Students recommend that the parks be more attentive to using social media to create “buzz” for the most popular attractions.

• Fan interaction on social media is essential

Social media are a consumer-driven communications, but not all theme parks studied in this project appeared to appreciate that. For example, student teams reported that Disneyland posted extensively throughout its social media, and was quick to respond to fan comments and questions. Alternatively, Legoland posted infrequently – sometimes just one post every day or two. Legoland was judged by the students to do a poor job of responding to comments and questions from guests.

• Make postings personal

In some cases, the teams reported that social media sites did not allow guests to post their own photos. Legoland’s Twitter account did not allow guests to include photos with tweets. In other cases, such as with The Queen Mary, photos had to be approved by park management before the photos would show up in social media. Young adults are a visually-driven generation. The students who analyzed social media content wanted to see more photos and videos posted on all the social media sites.

• Include more behind-the-scenes video

While student teams acknowledged that an excessive amount of behind-the-scenes video could dull the anticipation of a fright-filled night, students also
reported an insufficient amount of videos posted of what goes on after dark in the parks.

• Include the history of the attraction in online content

The student teams reported that some parks did not include any website content giving the history of the Halloween-themed event. It's conceivable that some consumers would be interested in this, especially since all the parks contended that their 2014 event was ‘bigger and better’ than similar events in previous years.

• Separate the park and the Halloween-themed event

In some cases, a park’s Halloween-themed event communication was merged into the everyday website and social media. Legoland and Six Flags did not have their own social media exclusive to their Halloween-themed events. Knott’s and other parks were found to demonstrate some inconsistency in management of their social media content. For example, students found a Knott’s “Scary Farm” photo album from 2011, but could find no photo album for the 2013 event.

• Pay attention to visual quality of websites

While students complemented the visual quality of most websites, Legoland was held out as an example of a park with a visually unattractive and unwelcoming website. The students wrote, “Legoland’s website has a busy graphic behind a huge yellow color block which is filled with text in a small, unappealing black font. It is stuffed with guidelines and information. This section should be condensed and changed to be appealing instead of an eyesore.”
• Use hashtags appropriately

Parks that choose to use Twitter as part of their social media plan need to be more strategic about the use of hashtags. The student teams that followed Twitter reported that some parks failed to offer a variety of different hashtags – making it difficult for guests to follow the communication about specific mazes and scare zones.

• Use celebrity endorsers

Extensive research has documented the intense interest in celebrity culture by American teenagers and college-aged adults. The student teams found it curious that the theme parks studied did not do more to link their events with celebrity culture – particularly since the theme parks are all located in Southern California. Universal Studios did connect its 2014 social media outreach with the Ellen Degeneres television show, as it had done previously (Villamarin, 2014). But no other park made a similar connection. One of the teams reviewing Disneyland’s event content noted that at the same time “Mickey’s Halloween Party” was being promoted in social media, Disney was using actress Anna Kendrick to promote the film Into the Woods. Students wondered why Disney didn’t take advantage of a cross-promotional opportunity and get Kendrick into the park for Halloween.

Discussion

Halloween is a significant annual occurrence in America today, and Halloween-themed events at destination theme parks are increasingly contributing to the social, cultural, and economic impact. Halloween is to theme parks what
Christmas is to retailers. Halloween is a brief period of time in which large numbers of guests can come through the gates, and huge profits can be made. Theme parks annually attempt to out-do each other, to create even bigger, more technologically advanced and interactive terrifying experiences for the teenagers and young adults that make up the core target consumer group for Halloween theme park experiences.

The findings of the media content analysis conducted for this project reflect that the six major Southern California theme parks approach Halloween in similar and yet different ways. Disneyland and Legoland have gentle, non-scary Halloween-themed events that target families with young children. Of these two parks, Disneyland is far more ambitious, recognized, and commercially successful. Disneyland has an extensive social media outreach and goes to great lengths to connect with its core consumers. Legoland has a complex but visually unattractive website, limited social media interaction – all consistent with the fact that Legoland’s Halloween-themed event is, itself, the smallest of any of the parks.

The four parks that offered terrifying Halloween-themed events also differed greatly in their approach. The Knott’s Berry Farm event is the oldest and most recognized in the region; it generates much social media attention. The Queen Mary’s restaurant and lodging options give it a unique appeal for adult couples seeking a weekend-long fright experience. Magic Mountain successfully markets itself as a thrill ride-oriented destination. Universal Studios takes advantage of its entertainment connections by weaving familiar movie and TV storylines into its event.
The celebration of Halloween through a frightening amusement park ride is especially attractive to teenagers and young adults who can “become the main character” in a scary drama. “We enter ‘real’ spaces that we can see, smell, touch, hear and even taste; the sensory experience is intense and immediate and relies less on the process of synesthetic transfer” (Ndalianis, 2012, p. 8). In short, Halloween at the theme park gives a sensory experience that cannot be found anywhere else, and teens and young adults actively seek out this sensory experience.

This research affirmed the findings of Levinson, Mack, Reinhardt, Suarez, and Yeh (1992) in that 2014 Southern California Halloween-themed events reinforced gender roles and expectations; supported peer pressure and conformity – especially among teenagers and young adults; and supported immediate consumer gratification and materialism through intense social media promotion of a holiday that is inextricably linked to spending money to participate individually and collectively a scary fantasy world.

It would be ideal if the ten best practices recommendations offered here could include recommendations to not engage in the kinds of communication that Levinson, Mack, Reinhardt, Suarez, and Yeh identified. However, it is unlikely that we will soon see a Halloween in America that is more inclusive, less associated with gender stereotypes, less materialistic, with less merchandising competitiveness.

Major consumer products retailers and the hospitality industry have all climbed aboard the Halloween bandwagon; the media are saturated with messages about Halloween long before the leaves begin turning colors (Munarriz, 2014). One would expect to see continued strong growth in the theme park industry's
marketing of Halloween-themed events to American consumers who demonstrate, year after year, an insatiable demand for the collective fantasy that Halloween allows. Whether that collective fantasy is a good thing for society is another discussion for another time.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to acknowledge the participation and contribution of his undergraduate public relations students. The students were involved at all levels of this project, from conception to completion. The students offered valuable perspectives as members of the primary target audience for Southern California Halloween-themed events. The students’ work on this project allowed them a ‘real life’ opportunity to review and critique public relations strategy and execution, while making professionally appropriate recommendations for improvement. Each student’s contribution toward the project contributed to his/her final letter grade in the course. The project was a superb learning experience for everyone involved.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Park/ Event</th>
<th>Target Consumers</th>
<th>Noteworthy Use of Social Media</th>
<th>Key Differentiating Issue or Theme</th>
<th>Overall Strengths of Event</th>
<th>Overall Weaknesses of Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disneyland’s “Mickey’s Halloween Party”</td>
<td>Parents and pre-teen children</td>
<td>Extensive and interactive content</td>
<td>A magical not scary dress-up party for the whole family</td>
<td>The Disney brand is unequalled for consumer respect and recognition</td>
<td>‘Not scary’ approach may be unappealing to teens and young adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knott’s Berry Farm’s “Scary Farm”</td>
<td>Teenagers and young adults</td>
<td>Strong effort to reach out individually (e.g., Wyatt Roman) and collectively</td>
<td>Dark, intensive; interactive and frightening scenes and mazes</td>
<td>The hugely profitable granddaddy of all Halloween theme park events</td>
<td>Public image of Knott’s as ‘lower class Disneyland’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legoland’s “Brick-Or-Treat Party Nights”</td>
<td>Parents and pre-teen children</td>
<td>Limited, generic, unappealing, not interactive</td>
<td>Children are encouraged to wear ‘fun’ costumes</td>
<td>Park has a public image of gentleness and safety</td>
<td>Park is not as invested in Halloween as its competition; few dates offered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Queen Mary’s “Dark Harbor”</td>
<td>Adults, especially couples; event specifically identified as LGBT friendly</td>
<td>Minimal Facebook but extensive web presence linked to the hotel and other amenities</td>
<td>Conceptually, links well to the history of tragedy and death associated with the Queen Mary</td>
<td>Hotel / restaurant creates a “destination weekend” opportunity</td>
<td>The nautical theme doesn’t carry through to all characters in the repertoire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six Flags Magic Mountain’s “Fright Fest”</td>
<td>Children by day, teenagers by night</td>
<td>Limited engagement with audiences</td>
<td>Roller coasters are the centerpiece of the park and of this event</td>
<td>The park’s 18 roller coasters offer guests a unique and frightening nighttime option</td>
<td>Some may perceive the park location as too remote; events staged only on weekends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal Studios Hollywood’s “Halloween Horror Nights”</td>
<td>Young adults and college students; pre-teens discouraged</td>
<td>Strong Twitter and Snapchat; perhaps too much information revealed</td>
<td>Strong conceptual links to live entertainment/shows such as Elvira, Mistress of the Dark</td>
<td>Located in the center of LA metropolitan area</td>
<td>Park targets consumers who enjoy dressing up but doesn’t allow them to attend in costume</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Monsters, Ghosts and Coasters; Noise, Toys, and Sea Creatures: Comparing Six Major Theme Park Halloween-Themed Events

http://works.bepress.com/dswanson/75/

Doug Swanson, Ed.D APR
California State University, Fullerton
• **Halloween in America**
  – A constantly evolving celebration
    • Shifting from children’s holiday to adult party time
    • Ghostly symbolism has become mainstream
    • The influence of Dark Tourism
  – A consumption experience
    • $8 Billion/ candy
    • $11 Billion/ costumes
    • $300+ million/ event revenue
  – Builds on stereotypes, conformity
    • ‘Vampires and princesses’
Undergraduate-driven group research project

- Disneyland’s “Mickey’s Halloween Party”
- Knott’s Berry Farm’s “Scary Farm”
- Legoland’s “Brick-Or-Treat Party Nights”
- The Queen Mary’s “Dark Harbor”
- Six Flags Magic Mountain’s “Fright Fest”
- Universal Studios “Halloween Horror Nights”
• Research Questions:
  – RQ1: How were six major Southern California theme park Halloween-themed events in 2014 similar and different?
  – RQ2: Might the media promotion of Halloween-themed events like those studied here contribute to negative social and cultural impacts?
  – RQ3: Based on results of the content analysis of the six theme parks’ social media communication, what best practices suggestions could be offered?
Mickey's Halloween Party

Hills and chills at the most Boo-ttime time! Details for September and October at Dine.Destinations.Disneyland.com!
Oops. These aren’t new monsters!
BRICK-OR-TREAT PARTY NIGHTS
October 4, 11, 17, 18, 24 and 25, 2014
5:00pm - 9:00pm

Presented by
Our Partner
Shutterfly

Separate event ticket required.
Spooks, dancing, rides, giant LEGO® Halloween
Queen Mary

Zak, Nick and Aaron board the iconic Queen Mary, docked in Long Beach, CA. Once the most luxurious ship at sea, the Queen Mary is now considered one of the most haunted places on earth.
Fright Fest Presented by SNICKERS®
• Social media recommendations
  – Promote early but not too early
  – Promote more popular attractions
  – Fan interaction is essential
  – Make postings personal
  – Include behind-the-scenes video
  – Use hashtags appropriately
  – Use celebrity endorsers
• Observations of instructor
  – Students excited, involved
  – Overall, inquiry went above expectations
  – Theory – *they got it!*
  – Background research/sources still a problem
  – In-class presentations were strong, Prezi/PowerPoint used well
  – Written reports averaged “B” quality with lots of problems in organization, expression, detail consistency
Monsters, Ghosts and Coasters; Noise, Toys, and Sea Creatures: Comparing Six Major Theme Park Halloween-Themed Events

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