

HFT-3540 Guest Services Management

Thursday: 10:30am–11:45am

Spring 2025

From Thumbnail to Turnstiles:

How Social Media Shapes Guest Expectations in Theme Parks

Date: Wednesday, April 9, 2025

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Introduction

Social and Digital media plays a significant role in shaping guest perceptions and expectations before they visit a theme park. Platforms like Instagram, and YouTube are filled with viral posts showcasing must-try food, attractions, and exclusive experiences. These posts not only create heightened anticipation but also serve as informal marketing tools that influence guest expectations of service quality and overall park experience. When reality doesn't align with these expectations whether due to long wait times, ride closures, or underwhelming offerings, guest satisfaction may suffer, and frontline employees are left to manage these mismatches (Pan et al., 2024).

This topic was chosen based on my firsthand experience working in the theme park industry and my growing interest in marketing strategy. I often witness guests referencing online content, particularly viral videos, when making real-time decisions about what to eat, where to go, or what to expect. As someone pursuing a marketing-focused career in entertainment, I want to analyze how parks can align their marketing with the actual experience to enhance guest satisfaction. Research shows that user-generated content significantly affects travel behavior and expectations (Kwok & Yu, 2016), making this an important area of study.

The objective of this project is to analyze the influence of social media on guest expectations and assess how well those expectations align with actual in-park experiences. This project examines social media content to identify trends in guest-facing marketing and evaluates how marketing campaigns shape or distort guest perceptions. I conducted a student-targeted survey to collect data on media influence and trust, using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

My aim is to provide data-driven recommendations that theme park operators can use to better manage expectations and deliver more consistent experiences.

Analysis and Discussion

This section explores the data collected from a mixed-method approach that included a student-targeted survey and a review of scholarly literature. The survey served as the primary source of data, and academic references were used to support interpretations and reinforce findings. Three university students with majors in Hospitality/Theme Park Management, Theatre Studies, and Entertainment Management participated in the survey. All participants reported visiting theme parks four or more times per year, making them highly engaged consumers with relevant insights into how marketing affects expectations.

The survey consisted of multiple-choice, scaled, and open-ended questions designed to measure how promotional content—such as theme park advertisements and social media videos—shapes guest excitement, trust, and satisfaction. Quantitative data was gathered through scaled questions, such as how much promotional videos influenced decision-making (1 = not at all, 5 = very much), while qualitative data was drawn from open-ended questions asking participants to share personal experiences.

Based on the responses, several key patterns emerged. First, promotional materials did influence guest excitement, though the level of influence varied from respondent to respondent. One participant gave a rating of 1, while another rated the influence as 4. Despite this variance in influence on decision-making, all participants agreed that promotional videos increased their

anticipation before visiting. This supports findings by Jamil et al. (2022), who noted that emotional engagement via social media content can strongly shape pre-visit perceptions.

Second, trust in promotional materials was not absolute. Trust ratings ranged from 2 to 4 on a 5-point scale. While none of the respondents reported that their actual visit was disappointing, the data points to a potential disconnect between marketing hype and the real-world experience. This aligns with literature by Costa et al. (2023), who emphasized that social media reviews and promotional campaigns often elevate expectations that may not be fully met in person.

Third, when asked about the most appealing types of promotional content, all participants selected ride previews and behind-the-scenes footage. Two also chose special event highlights like Halloween Horror Nights. These preferences suggest that viewers are drawn to immersive, visually informative content that provides a realistic and exciting preview of what they can expect. This finding is supported by Litvin et al. (2018), who suggest that content authenticity plays a major role in how effectively it sets expectations.

An additional theme emerged regarding the sources of theme park information. All participants identified social media platforms—TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube—as their primary sources for theme park news, followed by official websites and traditional ads. This underscores the growing importance of digital platforms in influencing consumer behavior and expectations, as noted by Kim and Hardin (2020).

A final thematic insight centered around long-term brand perception. One participant noted that Disney World advertisements shaped their childhood view of what the park experience should be, describing it as “magical.” Another participant explained that promotional materials influenced their decision to explore Disney’s water parks. These comments echo findings from

Bae et al. (2018), who highlighted how theme park marketing impacts emotional connections and long-term brand loyalty.

From a methodological standpoint, the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings. However, the mixed-method approach provided both numerical insight and personal context, allowing for a more holistic interpretation. Future research could expand the sample and introduce demographic segmentation for deeper insights.

In summary, the analysis reveals that while promotional content boosts emotional anticipation and guides guest behavior, it also creates gaps in perceived authenticity. Guests crave realistic, engaging previews that match their actual experiences. Theme parks that narrow the gap between promoted content and real-world delivery will be better equipped to manage guest satisfaction. These findings directly support the project's objective by offering actionable insights into how guest expectations are shaped—and sometimes distorted—by social media marketing.

Managerial Implications

Based on this study, theme parks should focus on creating promotional content that is not only exciting but also transparent and realistic. Parks should prioritize showcasing content types that guests find most trustworthy and engaging—such as ride previews and behind-the-scenes footage. Integrating real guest testimonials, user-generated footage, or live previews can bridge the gap between marketing and reality, enhancing guest trust (Kwok & Yu, 2016).

Service organizations should also invest in tools to monitor online sentiment in real time and adjust service strategies accordingly. If marketing consistently highlights an attraction that is closed or underperforming, guest services teams should be prepared with messaging or

incentives to manage potential disappointment. Additionally, theme park marketing teams can benefit from collaborating more closely with frontline service teams to better understand common guest pain points and adjust their messaging in ways that set accurate expectations (Costa et al., 2023).

The major findings of this project reveal that social media marketing plays a crucial role in building anticipation and excitement but often leaves room for expectation gaps. While promotional content significantly influences emotional engagement, it does not always impact decision-making to visit. Moreover, the trustworthiness of such content varies, emphasizing the need for service organizations to align their messaging with the actual guest experience. These findings directly address the project objectives by confirming the role of social media in shaping guest perceptions and pointing to areas where expectations may not match reality.

To improve guest service management, theme parks should consider developing guidelines for content creators and marketing teams to ensure realistic portrayals of the park experience. This includes avoiding over-promising and instead focusing on the emotional and sensory aspects of what is realistically available in the park. By setting appropriate expectations from the beginning, service teams will be less burdened by the task of managing disappointment and more able to provide consistent, high-quality service.

Another managerial takeaway is the opportunity for parks to introduce proactive communication strategies, such as real-time app notifications about attraction status, queue times, or downtime updates. These transparent tools could act as counterbalances to overly hyped content that may appear on social media prior to a guest's arrival.

Through this project, I learned how intertwined guest experience and marketing truly are. In a time where platforms like TikTok and Instagram dominate perception, guests come into theme parks with curated mental images of what they expect. As someone who works in attractions, this perspective has given me more empathy for both guests and service teams who work hard to meet sky-high expectations created outside their control.

A key limitation of this study is the small sample size. While the initial responses provided valuable insights, the findings would be more impactful with a larger, more diverse group.

References

Bae, Y. H., Moon, S., Jun, J. W., Kim, T., & Ju, I. (2018). The impact of consumers' attitudes toward a theme park: A focus on Disneyland in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. *Sustainability*, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su10103409>

Costa, S. M. da., Moro, S., Rita, P., & Alturas, B. (2023). Customer experience through online reviews from TripAdvisor: The case of Orlando theme parks. *International Journal of Technology Marketing*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1504/IJTMKT.2023.127352>

Jamil, K., Dunnan, L., Gul, R. F., Shehzad, M. U., Gillani, S. H. M., & Awan, F. H. (2022). Role of social media marketing activities in influencing customer intentions: A perspective of a new emerging era. *Frontiers in Psychology*, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.808525>

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Litvin, S. W., Goldsmith, R. E., & Pan, B. (2018). Electronic word-of-mouth in hospitality and tourism management. *Tourism Management*, 29(3), 458-468. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2007.05.011>

Pan, M., Blut, M., Ghiassaleh, A., & Lee, Z. W. Y. (2024). Influencer marketing effectiveness: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 53, 52–78.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-024-01052-7>

Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. What is your current academic standing?

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Graduate Student

2. What is your major or area of study? (Open-ended)

3. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = Not at all, 5 = Very much), how much do promotional videos and advertisements on platforms like YouTube influence your decision to visit a theme park?

4. Do promotional videos created by theme parks increase your excitement or anticipation for your visit?

- Yes
- No

5. What type of content in promotional videos is most appealing to you? (Select all that apply)

- Ride previews
- Behind-the-scenes footage

- Special event promotions
- Food features
- Celebrity/influencer endorsements
- Other (please specify)

6. Have you ever visited a theme park primarily because of its marketing or social media campaigns?

- Yes
- No
- Not Sure

7. In your opinion, how accurately do promotional videos reflect the actual experience at theme parks?

- Very accurately
- Somewhat accurately
- Neutral
- Somewhat inaccurately
- Very inaccurately

8. How often do you visit theme parks?

- Once a year or less
- 2–3 times a year
- 4 or more times a year

9. Where do you primarily get information about theme parks? (Select all that apply)

- Social media (YouTube, Instagram, TikTok)
- Official park websites
- Friends/family
- Television commercials
- Travel blogs/forums

10. What is your primary reason for visiting theme parks? (Open-ended)

11. Can you describe a time when a promotional video or advertisement significantly influenced your decision to visit a theme park? What stood out to you? (Open-ended)

12. On a scale of 1 to 5, how much do you trust promotional videos to accurately represent the park experience?

13. Have you ever felt that a theme park visit did not meet the expectations set by promotional materials?

- Yes

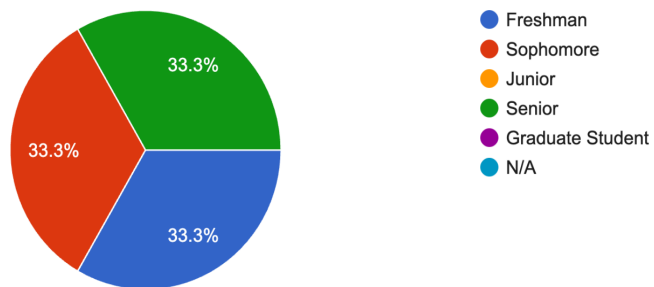
- No

14. If yes, explain: (Open-ended)

Appendix B: Survey Responses

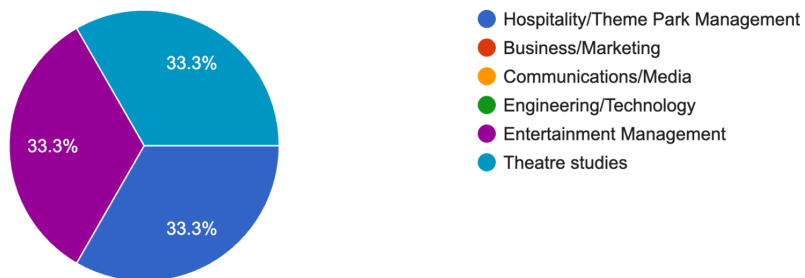
What is your current academic standing?

3 responses



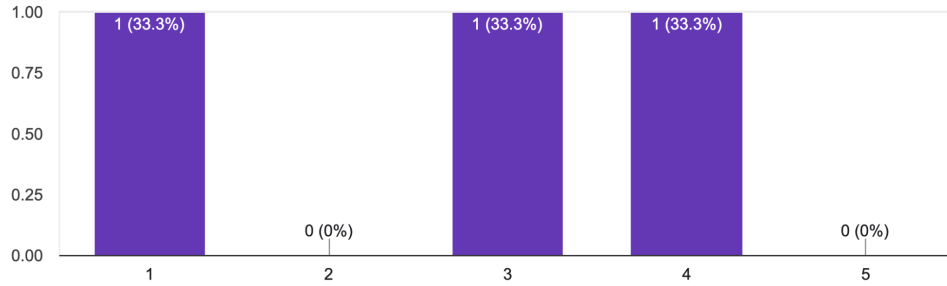
What is your major or area of study

3 responses



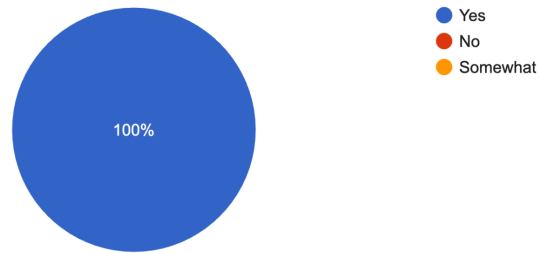
On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = Not at all, 5 = Very much), how much do promotional videos and advertisements on platforms like YouTube influence your decision to visit a theme park?

3 responses



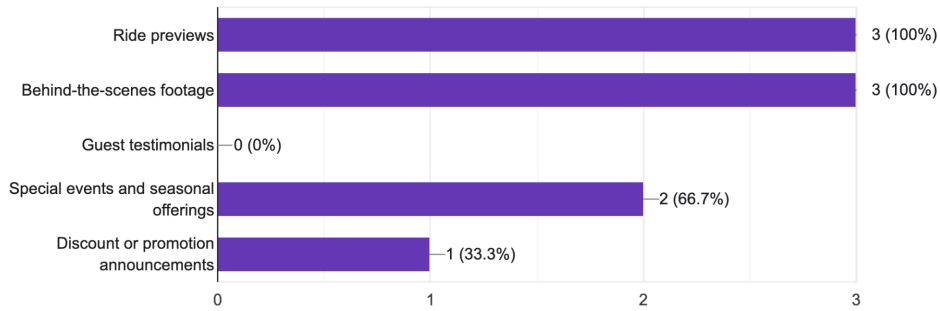
Do promotional videos created by theme parks increase your excitement or anticipation for your visit?

3 responses



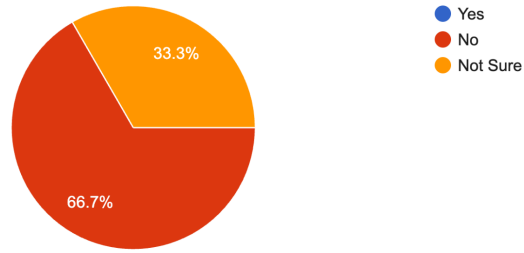
What type of content in promotional videos is most appealing to you? (Select all that apply)

3 responses



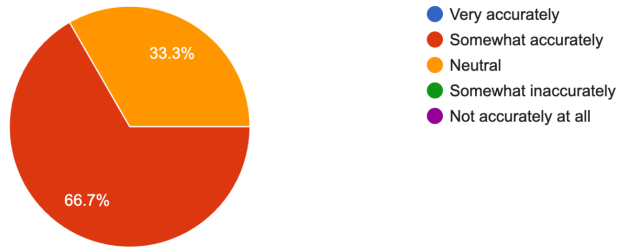
Have you ever visited a theme park primarily because of its marketing or social media campaigns?

3 responses



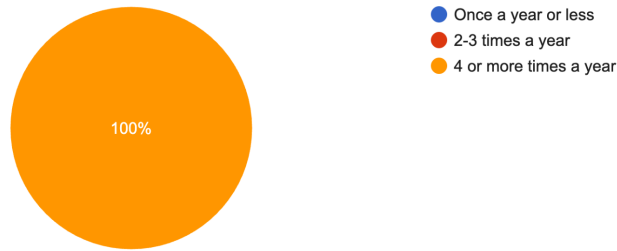
In your opinion, how accurately do promotional videos reflect the actual experience at theme parks?

3 responses



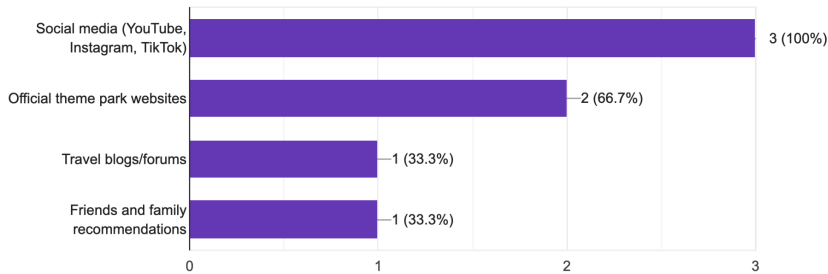
How often do you visit theme parks?

3 responses



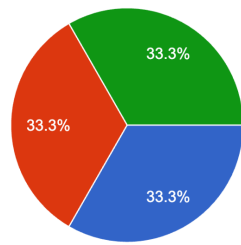
Where do you primarily get information about theme parks? (Select all that apply)

3 responses



What is your primary reason for visiting theme parks?

3 responses



- Rides and attractions
- Themed entertainment and shows
- Food and dining experiences
- Seasonal events (e.g., Halloween Horror Nights, Christmas events)
- Social outings with friends

Can you describe a time when a promotional video or advertisement significantly influenced your decision to visit a theme park? What stood out to you?

3 responses

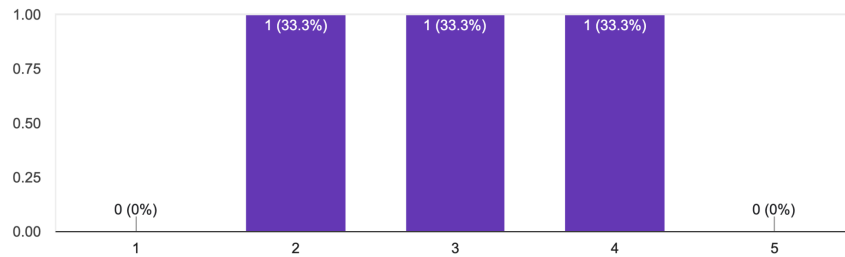
technically this counts for every hhn announcement video. stranger things being there at hhn29 made me want to go in like March and I had plenty of time to convince my parents.

Disney World ads did when I was younger because they showed all of the special offerings with the beautiful music

Disney advertising the water parks inspired me to go

On a scale of 1 to 5, how much do you trust promotional videos to accurately represent the park experience?

3 responses



Have you ever felt that a theme park visit did not meet the expectations set by promotional materials?

3 responses

