2 The Ethics of Tracking

What this chapter will cover:

- Rising concerns over tracking and breaches of privacy.
- Steps that should be taken in order to ensure an ethical tracking approach to research.
- The importance of considering socio-cultural attitudes towards tracking.
- The importance of abiding by legislation, platform terms and conditions, and gaining participants' consent, where possible.
- An ethical framework that should be followed by researchers who wish to engage in tourist tracking research.

Introduction

Research that tracks tourists' movement challenges our perception of ethics, privacy, and consent. The introduction of technology with the capability to track tourists in fine grained detail is viewed by some as a gross invasion of privacy, by others as a personal safety mechanism, and is treated by others with almost complete ambivalence. Importantly, in the past fifteen years we have witnessed a great change in the way in which tracking has been viewed by study participants and the general public, along with many mysterious contradictions in our acceptance or resistance to privacy – possibly fueled by media attention around this issue.

In the early 2000s, apps began emerging that conducted GPS tracking covertly in the background. For example, flash light applications (henceforth referred to as 'apps') that many of us had on our mobile phones, appeared to be a useful app. However, the business model of these apps was that they tracked users' movements in the background of the app and on-sold this data to marketing companies. Similarly, The Weather Channel app was recently exposed for on-selling tracking data that was covertly collected, resulting in a legal case against its owner, IBM. In 2017, it was estimated that 70% of apps track and share user information with third parties (Vallina-Roderigue and Sundaresan, 2017).

While there is resistance to some forms of tracking, there appears to be acceptance of other types. Strava is one such example. It is estimated that each week, 8 million activities are uploaded onto the app (Goode, 2017). Every 40 days, the app adds one million users (Craft, 2018). It is used by recreational hikers, bikers and runners, who wish to track and share their activities. It is widely known that the business model of Strava is built upon on-selling this data to cities and councils. This practice seems to be widely accepted by users.

Conversely, recent research illustrated that 23.1% of adults in the USA have enabled the Do Not Track settings on their internet browsers. This is a voluntary signal that is not required to be respected by tech companies. Google, Facebook and Twitter, for example, allegedly do not respect this request (DuckDuckGo, 2019). The Cambridge Analytica scandal in early 2018 clearly illustrated these concerns. The British political consulting firm was exposed as unlawfully using Facebook data and manipulating political messages in order to affect political campaigns. The scandal highlighted the use of apps to collate user data and resulted in great losses in credibility to the Facebook brand.

What becomes apparent in reactions to news of digital tracking is that individuals vary widely in their belief systems regarding tracking. It is therefore critical that researchers who wish to engage in tracking research must engage in ethical research practices. This it not only an ethical issue but also a legal one; many countries now have legislation pertaining to the collation, use and dissemination of personal data.