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Crisis Communication and Public Relations: How Fairs Communicated Cancellations During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS: HOW FAIRS
COMMUNICATED CANCELLATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science, Agriculture

By

Olivia McKenna Robinson

May 2023

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CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS: HOW FAIRS COMMUNICATED CANCELLATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Agriculture

Missouri State University, May 2023

Master of Science

Olivia McKenna Robinson

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic halted aspects of a traditional fair including the agriculture, home economics, entertainment, and carnival exhibits that were missed by the diverse stakeholders who enjoy the traditions of this industry. This study examined how fairgoers reacted to the news of cancellation and investigated fair managers' communication decisions. An explanatory sequential (QUANT → QUAL) mixed methods design was used. A survey was conducted asking fairgoers to recall communication strategies and feelings after the communication. A more in-depth focus group with fair managers was hosted to understand how crisis communication was utilized, and if active information seekers versus passive information processors influenced communication decisions. Fairgoers in this sample did not have a communication strategy preference and did not have strong feelings toward a specific strategy. Managers utilized training from the industry and modeled other fair's cancelations to learn how to implement crisis communication tactics. Fairs found that stakeholders have expectations for fairs, and it is the job of a communicator to uphold these expectations when communicating during a crisis. Despite limitations, the future of this topic can be studied to better crisis communication in the fair industry.

KEYWORDS: situational theory, crisis communication, agriculture, fairs, fairgoers, passive information processors, active information seekers, IAFE, communication strategies

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May 2023

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A task as large as this project does not simply happen due to one person. There are many thanks to give, and I want to take a moment to acknowledge those that have supported me every step of the way. First, I want to thank our Lord and Savior for giving me the ability and strength to tackle this assignment. To Him be the glory in all that I do.

Secondly, I would like to thank my thesis committee for the time and effort spent supporting me in this process. To my thesis committee chair and advisor, Dr. Kelsi Opat, thank you! Being your first graduate advisee has been a journey and one I am so thankful to have been a part of. To Dr. Christine Sudbrock and Dr. Arbindra Rimal thank you for your support throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies. All your insight and experience has taught me far beyond what I expected to learn when enrolling in the program.

I would also like to take a minute to thank my family for their support and dedication to my education. Mom, thank you for always seeing my potential and being a phone call away. Dad, thank you for always stressing the importance of agricultural literacy and pushing me to always work hard. My life's success is a direct reflection of my parents' hard work to support myself and my three sisters. Thank you, Macy, Kailey, and Paige, for always cheering me on and encouraging me to keep going. I also want to thank my fiancé, Christopher. Thank you for being one of my biggest supporters and seeing the potential in myself that I did not always see. To my grandparents, future-in-laws, and many family friends who were always a phone call away when needing motivation, thank you for always valuing my education and the time I dedicated towards this degree.

To the seven ladies who taught me why fairs make a difference in this world, I would not love the fair industry as much as I do if it weren't for you. Jennifer, Amanda, Tammy, Cheryl, Emily, Kathy, and Brittany—thank you for the best five summers and for always supporting my academic achievements and welcoming me home with open arms every summer. I will always cherish lessons learned with you all and this thesis is a direct reflection of those inspiring moments.

The Darr College of Agriculture family and my biggest support system is one of the biggest reasons I found motivation near the end of this project. Thank you, Katelyn, Sarah, Taylor, Emily, and Claire. The endless phone calls and words of motivation helped see this project to completion. All of you are pioneers as women in agriculture and inspire me daily.

As I acknowledge the years' worth of work that went into the completion of this project, the gratitude that fills my heart reminds me of the passions behind my love of agriculture, the fair industry, and crisis communication. May all who read this feel the love that was put into this research project.

I dedicate this thesis to the Washington Town & Country Fair.

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INTRODUCTION

The warm smell of funnel cakes, the happy yells as rides whirl teenagers around, the smiles of young exhibitors earning a blue ribbon with their beloved show animal perfectly groomed right beside them—all these emotions and more can easily be seen in small towns at county fairs or at the largest of fairs like the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo™.

In late February of 2020, fairgoers, volunteers, and staff of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo™ were expecting their 20 days of livestock shows, rodeos, concerts, and carnival rides to happen just like any other year; however, eight days into their fair, the city of Houston and the local health department closed the fair. In a Facebook post on March 11, 2020, the RODEOHOUSTON wrote:

In the interest of public health, the City of Houston and the Houston Health Department have ordered the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo™ to close. The grounds will close at 4 p.m. The Rodeo will respectfully and dutifully comply with the City's order.

As exhibitors, vendors, season pass holders, and fairgoers alike tried to figure out what this meant for them, marketing managers and communication staff scrambled to find the best way to communicate with their stakeholders their event was cancelled due to the 2019 novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19)—a novel disease that would later shut down fairs, events, schools, and businesses across the world (Seraphin, 2021). While the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo™ was one of the first fairs in the industry to close and cancel its event in 2020, it was not the last (International Association of Fairs and Expositions, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in early March of 2020, affected many aspects of life in the twenty-first century (Heydari et al., 2021). While businesses closed, teachers taught virtually, and workplaces moved to inside employees' homes, communication changed to keep people up-to-date without being face-to-face. This communication was vital in the entertainment world, specifically the fair industry. This study will examine crisis communication through Grunig and Hunt's (1984) situational theory, specifically the symmetry model and focus on crisis communication in the fair industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aims to be a resource in closing the literature gap between crisis communication and the fair industry.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed crisis communication strategies for fairs — the entire fair industry had to find a way to best communicate what was occurring to their various key publics (International Association of Fairs and Expositions, 2022). This study will examine fairgoers feelings after receiving communication announcing the cancelation and how fair managers prepared to use crisis communication strategies for their stakeholders' benefit. Little research has been conducted regarding fair industry communication strategies or the importance of crisis communication for the industry. This lack of research makes understanding crisis communication strategies vital for not only the marketing managers within the industry, but for the longevity of the fair industry as well. Previous research has been conducted in crisis communication, Grunig and Hunt's situational theory, active information seekers, and passive information processors. This research will be reviewed to understand whether these theories can be applied to the fair industry. A review of literature on this topic will be conducted in order to further research crisis communication in the fair industry.

KEY TERMS

The Fair Industry

As defined by the International Association of Fairs and Expositions (IAFE), a modern fair includes, “an annual celebration from the community to come together, to share, and to learn” (International Association of Fairs and Expositions [IAFE], 2022a, para. 1). The IAFE is a not-for-profit organization that serves agricultural fairs on the local, county, and state level. Membership totals over 1,100 fairs inside and out of the United States (IAFE, 2022a). The modern fair of the 21st century has evolved from an industry rooted in agriculture.

Originally county fairs were established in the 1800s as agricultural societies created to highlight advances in agricultural exhibits and competitions (IAFE, 2022b). These agricultural societies have advanced into an industry that includes the entertainment and tourism industries, as well as the agricultural aspect that started the industry. The IAFE notes the difference between fairs, festivals, and carnivals is the inclusion of agriculture. “But the key difference between a fair and a festival or carnival is the fact that a fair has several contests involving farm animals or produce; you will always see various animals or the best-grown vegetables at a fair” (IAFE, 2022b).

Due to the intersectionality of these various industries, it is imperative to note the importance each has for one another. Van Niekerk and Mathis (2017) explain how fairs are a combination of both competitive exhibits and tourist attractions that are beneficial to local economies and communities. “They promote tourism development of the area and drive economic development and, through planning, develop and make use of local traditions, customs, and the life of the community as a whole.” (Van Niekerk & Mathis, p. 467). For this

study, the definition of a fair includes a culmination of agricultural competitive exhibits focused on bringing entertainment and tourism to communities resulting in an economic impact that allows the tradition to carry on annually.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The SARS-CoV-2 virus, which first infected residents of China in late December of 2019, spread rapidly across the globe for more three years and was commonly referred to as the COVID-19 pandemic, originally called the 2019 novel coronavirus (Sheposh, 2023). In early 2020, COVID-19 spread throughout the world. By March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) had declared a pandemic (Sheposh, 2023). To fight this pandemic, health officials recommended preventative steps to help stop the spread of the virus. Sheposh (2023) explains,

“among them were travel restrictions, including closing borders and quarantines for travelers or repatriated citizens; social distancing policies; cancellation of large gatherings; and temporary closures of schools, universities, and businesses that they deemed nonessential” (para. 47).

Local, state, and national authorities within the United States mandated these regulations thus halting many citizens from leaving their homes, including for non-essential work.

After April 2020, officials began lifting the mandatory restrictions and reopened places of business with restrictions including masking and quarantines if exposed to COVID-19 (Sheposh, 2023). For three years the infection rates, restrictions, and mandates continued to fluctuate, allowing both times of lax and strict restrictions. In September of 2022, United States President Biden suggested the pandemic was over, and in early 2023 many testing sites

and other pandemic solutions were closed (Sheposh, 2023). At the time of this study, “the United States reported over 103.5 million cases and more than 1.12 million deaths” (Sheposh, 2023, para. 17) over the course of the pandemic.

Communication played an integral role during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to restrictions and regulations, communicating via distance became vital to the success of keeping safe while also communicating the fast-paced changes that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media was widely accepted and used as a form of relaying information to the public by many organizations.

“Of all the available social media, Twitter has played a particularly important role in communicating information concerning COVID-19. This social medium has been widely used by health agencies and stakeholders for their crisis and risk communication during the pandemic with the purpose of communicating prevention measures and other related content,” (Poch-Butler et al., 2023, p. 378).

It is important to note the change of communication strategies due to the pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within the fair industry, marketing managers are typically responsible for public relations, social media content, and working to communicate specific messages to the internal and external publics that are involved within the industry. To study the best ways to communicate during a crisis, the first step is to understand what type of communicators these managers are communicating with and what information is typically communicated.

Theoretical Framework

Situational Theory. Public relations can be explained as the building and maintaining of a positive organization image from its stakeholders' perspective (Wienclaw, 2021). Research in the importance of public relations and the application of practices has become increasingly more relevant with the uptake in mass media and crisis management (Hamilton, 1992). Public relations specialists aim to use strategies and tactics to promote positive images for an organization through the use crisis communication.

Grunig and Hunt's (1984) situational theory explain how public relations can strategically gear messaging with the specific audiences in mind for the most effective results. Situational theory contains three independent variables: problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement, which predicts two dependent variables or communication audiences, information processors and information seekers (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Problem recognition is described as those who are aware of the problem and recognize an act must be done about the problem (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Constraint recognition is the realization there are limitations and constraints with the problem at hand (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Level of

involvement measures how the audience receiving this information feels it best affects them as a stakeholder (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Grunig & Hunt (1984) explained that these three independent variables then divide the audience into two separate communication seeking behaviors- active or passive. Based on the degree to which these publics value the three independent variables is what predicts what kind of active or passive communicator they will be (Table 1). Those who actively seek information and use that information to their benefit are known as information seekers. Those who involve “a low level of information activity” predict information processors (Hamilton, 1992).

Table 1. An Example of Information Seekers vs. Information Processors.

| Dependent Variable | Level of Involvement | Example |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Information Seekers | Active- high level of recognition for problems and constraints. Willingness to be actively involved in solving a problem or seeking information. | Sarah actively seeks out reviews of the best restaurants in New York City a week before her trip. She finds the highest rated pizza place and visits the organization's social media. She finds photos of their specialty pizza and reviews from previous customers. Sarah is able to visit the restaurant and be satisfied knowing she ate the best pizza in New York City. |
| Information Processors | Passive- low level of recognition for problems and constraints. Low willingness to be actively involved in solving a problem or seeking information. | Macy knows she is traveling to New York in a few days. Rather than research which restaurant to go to for her free evening in the city, she decides to settle on whatever is available and close to the hotel that she will book once she arrives in New York. Macy is happy with her flexibility to see where the night will take her. |

Grunig and Hunt's (1984) theory helps break up the different kinds of publics into two separate groups: information seekers or information processors. Grunig and Hunt (1984) relate information seekers to active communicators. This type of public will try to seek information and stay up-to-date on communication and information. Once information is received, this public will then attempt to "plan their behavior. The messages they receive usually are more effective" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 149). This type of public can process the information received and easily retain the information. Messaging for information seekers can be used as a persuasive tactic.

Information processors are passive communicators or members who do not seek the information but are able to process this information with no effort (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). These communicators are those who retain information over time and recall the information and use it for their own advantage without having to seek out additional resources.

The level of involvement in seeking information actively or passively is important in the field of public relations because it allows public relations and marketing managers to understand with whom they are communicating (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1996). Grunig and Hunt's (1984) situational theory argues that publics who actively seek out the information can recall and utilize this information more than those that passively retain information over time. It is more valuable to target active information seekers because of their ability to use and remember information than the information processors.

Grunig and Hunt (1984) explain how the two separate groups can create overlap and interchangeability overtime. For those outside of the active public category, there is room for active seeking traits, however, Grunig and Hunt suggest there is not complete crossover into the active category. "Publics whose members process information often remain latent publics. Sometimes, they become aware publics, but seldom will they become active publics" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 151).

Importance of Public Relations & Knowing the Audience. While Grunig & Hunt's (1984) situational theory found a difference between how publics actively or passively seek information, further public relations and communications studies show Grunig and Hunt's findings can help organizations be successful through public relation applications, like understanding the level of involvement stakeholders' desire.

Springston et al. (1992) expanded off Grunig and Hunt's (1984) theory to note the goal of these public relations management strategies, like understanding active versus passive communicators, was to provide effective management practices while maintaining interdependence within the organization. Thus, bringing the notion of having communication goals for an organization to match the desires of the stakeholders and audience receiving the information. This notion aims to provide a successful practice for both the organization and the parties it communicates with requires organizations to learn who they are communicating with to allow this theory to be put into practice successfully (Grunig et al., 1995).

Researcher suggested a contingency view of management, meaning each public relations approach is dependent with whom one is communicating (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). "No one approach is appropriate all of the time and for all conditions. What is the best approach depending upon the nature of the organization and the nature of the environment" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, pg. 43).

By knowing the type of information seeker or information processor an organization is communicating with, professionals would be able to apply other communication strategies towards public relations and crisis communication efforts. Grunig and Hunt (1984) suggest these two types of communicators will take different information into account via communication strategies that require involvement. Active information seekers will use different communication strategies than passive information processors (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Active information seekers seek out communication strategies used. Today these could be explained as a information seekers actively following an organization on social media.

Crisis Communication

Understanding different types of active or passive publics within a community or organization can help decide what kinds of communication and public relation events to host for a public to be active and responsive but also assists in the planning on how to communicate with a public during times of crisis. Crisis communication and management is the way an organization overcomes damage and crises through tactics and factors designed to combat these disasters (Coombs, 2015).

While crisis can be a broad term and have different meanings for different organizations, in general, a crisis can be defined as something that creates stress and demands a response from an organization (Coombs, 2015). Coombs (2015) differentiates crises into two separate categories: disasters and organizational crises.

Quarantelli (2005) expands on Coomb's crisis categories by explaining a disaster as "events that are sudden, seriously disrupt routines of systems, require a new course of action to cope with the disruption, and pose a danger to values and social goals" (p. 3).

An organizational crisis can be defined as the following:

The perception of an unpredictable event that threatens the important expectancies or stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes (Coombs, 2015, p. 3).

The COVID-19 pandemic was a disaster that led to many organizational crises. It is important to study how to communicate information as it changes during crises —especially during times of rapid change, like a pandemic (Coombs, 2020).

Crisis Management. Another aspect of crisis communication includes crisis management (Coombs, 2015). This breaks down how to manage a crisis into three separate phases: prevention, preparation, and response (Coombs, 2015). Prevention is the process of

preventing a crisis before it happens (Coombs, 2015). Preparation is preparing for a crisis to happen and includes the creation of a crisis management plan (CMP) (Coombs, 2015). During this more in-depth process, organizations organize and prepare to execute certain processes once a crisis arises (Coombs, 2015). A response is the specific action after a crisis occurs — this is usually outlined in the CMP, which is created during the preparation phase (Coombs, 2015).

Before researching how crisis communication and situational theory were utilized throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to understand how these have been studied before. While crisis communication and public relations are two separate specialties, the overlap within the industries brings the two of them together not only in the role that communication experts play, but also in previous research Muntean et al. (2013) argue public relations and communication have become a social responsibility, especially in the world of agriculture. Muntean et al. (2013) studied how members of the agriculture industry perceive their role in public relations and “public relations professionals should be deeply involved in helping management define an organization’s social role” (p. 7). This requires public relations to play more of a role in an entire organization rather than as an afterthought, thus proving the importance of this in an organization’s operations. The researcher also found that by including public relations goals and strategies within all aspects of the organization, the entire operation was required to be more socially responsible, thus helping to prevent future crises (Muntean et al., 2013).

This previous research can be applied today to understand how situational theory and crisis communication were utilized when canceling events within the fair industry. Two variables need to be further investigated before explaining how this conceptual framework can be applicable in this study of communication in the fair industry during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Communication Strategies. Communication strategies are a broad term for ways in which professional communicators use different tactics to communicate information with their stakeholders (Færch & Kasper, 1984). This may include social media, mailings, electronic communication, and other specifics targeted toward their publics. For the purpose of this study, the following will be considered the most common communication strategies used by fairs: phone call, email, social media post, outside party (e.g., word of mouth, a newspaper, a source already informed). For the purpose of this study, these communication strategies were outlined by industry experts who agreed that these strategies are the ones most used in the fair industry.

There are different ways in which organizations may choose to communicate with their publics, however, there is usually a specific plan for how these organizations choose to do so. Within crisis communication, certain strategies are outlined before the crisis arises to help organizations decide the most effective way to communicate to its publics. Most communication strategies have been studied by finding how successful it was post-crisis (Cheng, 2018).

While crisis communication has not been studied in depth within the fair world, the IAFE (2022) encourages members to have plans in place for what to do if a crisis occurs. One study conducted by Crayton (2017) for the Wisconsin State Fair found the need for crisis management plans is especially high. “County fairs, like many other tourist events have an inherit risk for crisis. It is important for county fairs to be prepared to manage the many crisis situations that can happen at their events” (Crayton, 2017, p. 7). While it has been established there is a need for crisis communication plans in the fair industry, the implementation of those plans and the response of the fairgoers after communication is received is needed to understand how to better prepare and execute crisis communication strategies.

Fairgoers. Fairgoers is a broad term for one of the publics for the fair industry. Fairgoers are those who attend and financially support the fair industry (IAFE, 2022). Fairgoers are especially important when deciding how to communicate because there is no one person who attends a fair; identifying specifics can be very broad and difficult for the industry when deciding how to communicate, specifically during a crisis. There are both information seekers and information processors within the industry. Livestock exhibitors would be an example of an information seekers. These exhibitors must actively seek out information like, the date of weigh-in, what time they are allowed to load in animals and tack, or the specific rules for each livestock show. Little information will need to be processed for those fairgoers who bought a ticket at the gate and chose to visit what is on the grounds with convenience to them.

Communication Within the Fair Industry. Both information processors and information seekers attend fairs, thus requiring communication professionals in the industry to use strategic communication skills to appeal to all audiences. As stated, and recommended in situational theory (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), the fair industry has a need for clear communication with its key publics to remain transparent and keep all publics involved and educated about what is going within the industry, usually specific to what is happening for that specific fair.

It is important to understand and distinguish how both communication strategies and fairgoers (the audience) play a role within the industry and communication. Previous research within fair industry communication is limited. One study, conducted at the Nebraska State Fair, researched how adult fairgoers understand and retain information and communication received while actively participating in the fair and on the grounds (Loizzo et al., 2019). This study argued that while fairs are within the entertainment industry, they also serve an important role in the education realm:

“While state fairs are often described as a time for fun, socializing, and 4-H exhibitions, a growing need and opportunity exist to reframe thinking about the potential of these large-scale annual events through the lens of informal, free-choice science education and learning” (Loizzo et al., 2019, p. 2).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, fairs had to find a way to be transparent while also adapting to quickly changing information from state and local officials, health departments, vendors, and many other governing bodies that influence these fairs. While there is limited research on communication in the fair industry during the COVID-19 pandemic, previous research of situational theory, crisis communication, and communication during the COVID-19 pandemic help explain the importance of this research in the fair industry.

Fairs play an important role in many different industries including tourism, agriculture, business, non-profits, and community sponsors. With many different roles and identities, it is important to understand what role fairs play for their publics. Seraphin’s 2021 study about the event industry found people who attend events are meeting a fundamental human need. Seraphin (2021) argues humans will always need to meet in person through live events that bring them together. Some fairs had to cancel up to two years of events due to the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020-2022. For some fairs, this was a potentially fatal cancellation, as ticket sales and concession profits allow for the continuation of the annual event. Seraphin (2021) argued that not only did the COVID-19 pandemic cancel events, but it also cancelled rites and rituals among human beings.

Public relations is an important aspect to the world of agriculture (Muntean et al., 2013). A 2022 study simply defined public relations as, “building trust in the minds of the stakeholders by enhancing reputation to establish a favorable opinion” (Bhargava & Arakkal, 2022, p. 5). This includes the agriculture industry. The fair industry is a large part of the educational aspect of agriculture (Loizzo et al., 2019). Public relations strategies play an important role because they

allow for relationships to grow through communication of an organization's goals and missions (Muntean et al., 2013). Research of the importance of public relations in the agriculture industry by Muntean et al. (2013) found public relations is more than something that aims to keep customers happy and more of preventing an issue down the road. "Agribusinesses should be very concerned with responsibility to stakeholders, as many ethical issues facing agriculture could have a negative effect on human health and safety" (Murphy-Lawless, 2004, p. 390).

Like the importance of public relations in agriculture, so is the importance of crisis communication plans within the fair industry. A 2019 study by Pappas in crisis communication within the tourism industry found crisis communication and management is needed to stop an evolving crisis from becoming worse. Just like the agribusiness industry, the tourism and fair industries both commonly endure crises (Pappas, 2019).

While understanding that both public relations and crisis communication are needed within the fair industry, when a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic occurs, it sometimes reminds stakeholders of the importance of having these things in place. Coombs (2020) stated, "COVID-19 has created some specific communication demands for public sector crisis managers that have implications for future crisis communication" (p. 992). Coombs (2015) breaks this down into "six major communicative demands (1) anxiety, (2) empathy, (3) efficacy, and (4) fatigue, (5) reach and (6) threat" (p. 992). All six of these are the implications of future research needed in crisis communication within the entertainment and fair industry. While Coombs (2015) continues to break down the best way to analyze and work through these six demands, it is important to first understand how marketing managers and communication specialists within the industry communicated during the COVID-19 pandemic. While there are tactics to best communicate,

without understanding or researching what crisis communication and public relation tactics were implemented during 2020, there is an information gap for this specific industry.

Using this review of literature as a guide, this study asks the following research questions

(RQ) and research objective (RO):

RQ1 (Quantitative): How did the communication strategies used affect fairgoers' responses to the fair industry?

RQ2 (Qualitative): How was crisis communication utilized within the fair industry during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RO1 (Mixed): To explain the reactions of active information seekers vs. information processors in the fair industry.

METHODS

A bias for this study may exist and the researcher aims to identify it in order to understand and recognize what potential biases may be present in the methodology and findings of this study. The primary researcher in this study has had five years of experience in the fair industry. They worked for a fair during the COVID-19 pandemic and played a role in announcing a fair's cancellations in 2020. Other researchers on this project use the state fair as a primary form of recruitment during the summer. All parties involved have interacted with a fair on some level and want to note the potential bias this may create.

There are many stakeholders involved in the fair industry including employees, volunteers, vendors, public safety, and other organizations that make it possible for fairs to operate. When the COVID-19 pandemic led to the cancellation of events organized by these fairs, marketing managers had to decide the best way to communicate these cancellations to all stakeholders.

To understand how communication strategies were decided and implemented, a mixed methods study was conducted (Figure 1). An explanatory sequential (QUAN → qual) mixed methodology was used to mix the data. An explanatory sequential design is a two-step process, using quantitative data to guide the qualitative research process and explanation of the first step (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Researchers formed qualitative focus group questions to expand answers given by the survey participants to help explain the gap of fairgoers response to fair managers experience.

Previous mixed method research in agriculture uses an explanatory sequential design to help explain quantitative findings through qualitative research (Flannery, et al. 2020). "It is

characterized by the collection and analysis of quantitative data in a first phase of research followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data in a second phase that builds on the results of the initial quantitative results,” (Creswell & Clark, 2017. P. 194). The following methodology section will explain participants, measures, and procedures as well as the quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods analyses.

Before any methods were implemented, researchers obtained IRB approval. IRB#-FY2023-139 was approved from the university on November 9, 2022 (Appendix A). Participants for the survey and focus group consented and reviewed risks and benefits before any data were collected.

Each method is explained in three separate sections to better explain each process based on the relative method.

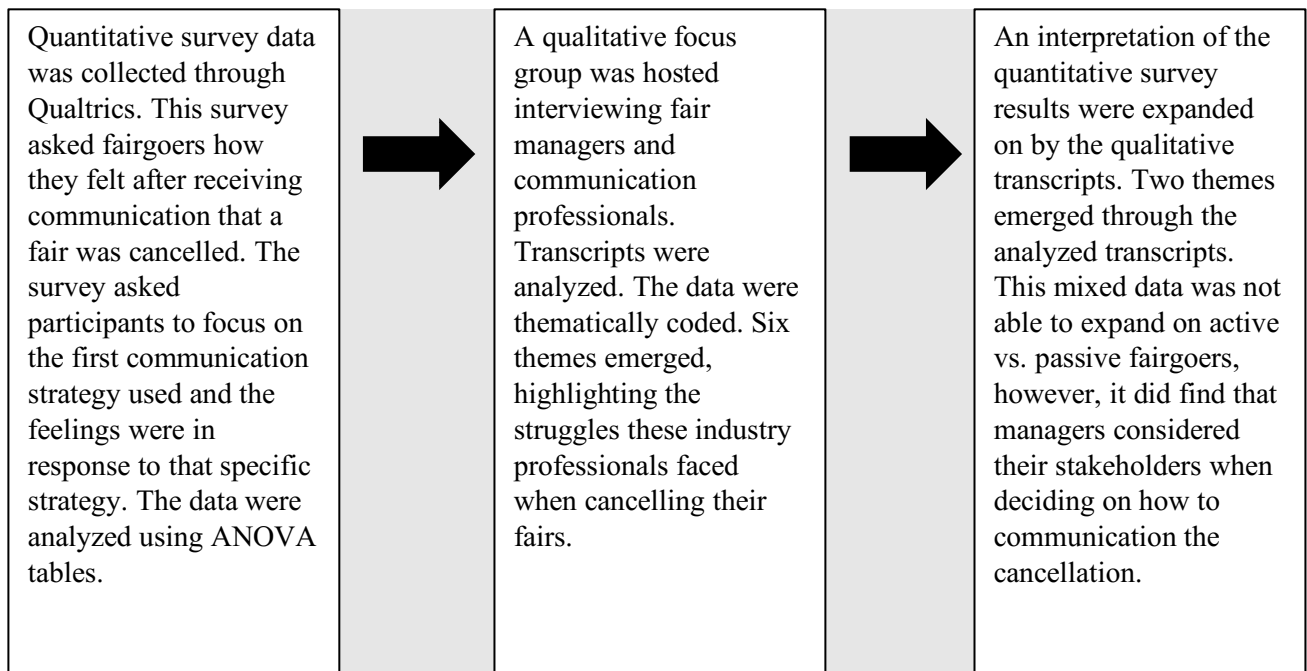


Figure 1. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (QUAN → qual) was utilized for this study.

Quantitative Phase

The first phase of this study aimed to collect quantitative data that represented how fairgoers felt in response to communication strategies used by fairs. Weight is typically given to the quantitative data in an explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Clark, 2017). For this study, weight was given to the fairgoers survey responses due to the influence they have on the industry. Many fairs, like the State Fair of Texas, credit their vast stakeholders for the success of each fair. As written in a blog post from the State Fair of Texas in 2015 by Khuu:

“The success of this year’s Fair would not be possible without the continuous support of fairgoers. Visitors include lifelong fans and first-time guests, coming from both near and far to experience the 129-year tradition” (para. #8).

This example of the influence a fairgoer has on the industry is what shaped the design of this study. The fairgoers and their experiences are what drive fairs to continue to be innovative, therefore, to understand how fairs responded during the COVID-19 pandemic, researcher studied the phenomenon with an emphasis on the fairgoers.

Procedures. Participants were recruited using a two-part email system. First, an email was sent from the IAFE to its members, specifically fairs within the United States of America. This email asked fairs to send the survey to their own fairgoers. The original email was geared towards marketing managers and other communication professionals who had access to email subscribers. The email that was sent to the participants was first tested for validity using a pilot survey and reviewed by communication professionals to compare language used to language that was consistent with the industry, therefore face validity was reached. Those fairs that willingly participated then emailed the anonymous online survey using Qualtrics to their audiences. Other marketing materials were attached into the original email, allowing fairs to share on social media if they desired (Appendix B). Because the email was sent to a range of fairs, there was no record

of which specific fairs emailed the survey. The survey was open for two months allowing participants to answer and complete the survey at their convenience. Before starting the survey, participants were asked to consent to participate using an online consent form attached to Qualtrics. All risks and benefits were outlined in the form. A total of 45 responses were analyzed using the following statistical procedures. A response rate compared to the number of surveys emailed was not able to be collected due to the limitations of the procedures.

Participants. A survey was sent to fairgoers who received communication from a fair during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022). This was accomplished by reaching fairgoers who had previously attended a fair. Many fairs use online tickets that allow for purchasers' information to be collected and stored by the fair. These ticketholders can also opt in or out of receiving future information from the fair. There is no public database that includes the contacts for all fairs and expositions within the United States, therefore, using a membership organization that collects these contacts allowed the researcher to send emails to staff who then contacted all members.

According to an article published by Business View Magazine (2022), the IAFE has a large membership with over 1,000 agriculture fairs and an additional 800 businesses vested in the industry. The primary researcher contacted the IAFE staff to use their membership email list to contact fairs throughout the United States. The IAFE staff and researcher worked together to create a call for participants. The call was emailed to IAFE member fairs within the United States, Appendix C. Fairs were not required to email the survey directly to fairgoers; their participation was completely voluntary. There was no way to track which specific fairs participated. The sample consisted of 79 previous fairgoer participants ($N = 79$) This sample was reduced to 47 participants because 32 participants answered they had not received any

communication that announced a fair cancellation, thus disqualifying them from participating. No participants were removed for being younger than 18 years old. These 47 participants, 59.6% identified as female ($n = 28$) and 40.4% identified as male ($n = 19$). The average participants' age was 52 years old ($M = 52, SD = 13.78$), ranging from 21-73 years old (Table 2).

Table 2. Survey Participants Demographic Information

| Demographic | <i>n</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|--------------------|-----------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Gender | - | - | - |
| Male | 19 | - | - |
| Female | 28 | - | - |
| Age | - | 52 | 13.78 |

Variables.

Communication Strategies. The two variables originally studied were as follows: communication strategies and fairgoers feelings. Participants were asked to indicate the initial communication they received from the fair announcing that it was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All follow-up questions regarding communication strategies asked fairgoers to reflect on that initial communication, Appendix D. Communication strategies included a phone call, email, social media post, and outside party (e.g., word of mouth, newspaper, a source already informed of cancellation). The decision to list these specific strategies was reviewed by the researcher and industry professionals, all of whom agreed these four strategies covered the basis of communication strategies used in the fair industry.

Fairgoers' Feelings. Fairgoers' feelings represented different attitudes and behaviors that were felt towards the fair's cancellation announcement. Fairgoers were asked to rate the following feelings after they received communication from the fair regarding the cancellation: informed, frustrated towards the fair, at peace with the cancellation, educated, confused, disappointed, or excited. The specific communication strategies were chosen because they covered a broad basis of different communication strategies that could have been used. These strategies were confirmed by industry experts as the most common type of communication strategies used. Similarly, the fairgoers feeling variables were outlined because each term highlighted a different emotion a fairgoer could have potentially felt. The researcher chose a range to account for a potential array of emotions, allowing different feelings to be tested.

The reliability of this survey was calculated using Cronbach's Alpha. Cronbach's alpha reliability test is most used in social sciences, including communication fields (Cronbach, 1951). A respectable reliability was achieved at $\alpha = .750$ (Wrench et. Al., 2018).

The researcher divided the dependent variable into two separate parts. First, the feelings "at peace with the cancellation" and "educated" were combined into a new thematic variable or summary score titled "satisfied understanding." The remaining five feelings – frustrated, confused, disappointed, and excited – were left as individual dependent variables due to the themes of the feelings being too broad and unable to group into a new variable. The new variable, "satisfied understanding," was viewed as a more positive feeling towards the fair, explaining why the two variables, "at peace with cancellation" and "educated," were combined. While the other five were viewed as separate, more dissatisfied feelings, thus explaining why more were not able to be combined into this new variable.

Reliability was not tested for the five individualized dependent variables because they did not measure the same theme and were viewed as their own individual measure. Cronbach's alpha is used to measure the reliability of multiple variables, thus eliminating the need for a score for the individual variables, frustrated, confused, disappointed, and excited (Introduction to SAS, 2023). This resulted in a total of six dependent variables. Face validity was achieved using a pilot survey and confirming that the survey was legitimate, cohesive, and subjective (Wrench et. Al., 2018).

The Independent variable, communication strategies (phone call, email, social media post, outside party (e.g., word of mouth, a newspaper, a source already informed), were selected because of the range of strategies it covered. Of the 47 respondents, 93.61% ($n = 45$) selected the following communication strategies: phone call, email, or social media post. Only 4.25% of participants ($n = 2$) received cancellation information from an outside party as the first strategy announcing the cancellation. Due to the need for participants to answer based on the first communication strategy they received, and the low number of respondents receiving an outside party communication first, the researcher removed the respondents who initially heard of the event's cancellation from outside parties, reducing respondents to 45 ($N = 45$).

After identifying which communication strategies were received, the remainder of the questions focused on the dependent variable, fairgoers feelings. Fairgoers' feelings were then compared to see how they differed by the three remaining communication strategies: phone call, email, and social media post. Participants were asked to answer questions regarding their feelings on a Likert-type scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5) for each feeling, Appendix D. A Likert scale is a commonly used scale which measures attitudes and opinions of

respondents (Mohn, 2023). It allows researcher to use numbers to represent potential feelings (Mohn, 2023).

Analysis. Five one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted. These tests examined the independent variable, communication strategies (phone call, social media post, and email), to the dependent variable, fairgoers' feelings (satisfied understanding, frustration, confusion, disappointed, excited). Each feeling was considered its own dependent variable; therefore, the ANOVA tables compared each separate feeling including the combined satisfied understanding variable to the three independent variables, phone call, social media post, and email. Before analyzing the ANOVA tests, researcher screened data for accuracy, missing data, outliers, and assumptions. To measure accuracy, the researcher reverse coded the dependent variable "excited." While the word choice "excited" reads as if it could be considered a positive feeling toward the fair, "Strongly Agreeing" that one was excited that the fair announced the cancellation would indicate the fairgoer had negative feelings toward the fair being held of attending during a pandemic.

To ensure that reliability for the dependent variables was consistent, the researcher reverse-coded the answers for "excited". If participants indicated they did not receive communication announcing a fair's cancellation, they were sent to the end of the survey, therefore, data were not recorded for the remaining questions. The researcher removed these respondents to ensure no missing data was included. The researcher also noted that in comparison to all the fairs that exist and cancelled in 2020, this sample was only a fraction of those fairgoers, therefore missing data could be considered a form of non-response bias (Sedgwick, 2014). The researcher assessed outliers by studying the standardized z-scores for each variable, using a ± 3 . One outlier was found. The researcher analyzed the Test of

Between-Subject Effects including and excluding the outlier. Overall, there was no significant difference by including the outlier ($p = 0.737$) and excluding the outlier ($p = 0.845$), therefore the researcher kept the outlier. Normality was assessed using Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances and this assumption was met ($p > .001$). After data screening, the researcher analyzed descriptive statistics using a count of feelings and five ANOVA tables to answer RQ1.

Overview. The quantitative phase of this research method used a survey sent to fairgoers across the United States to analyze how those who received communication canceling a fair due to the COVID-19 pandemic felt after receiving that news. A total of 45 responses were analyzed from the 79 respondents, leading researcher to be able to use ANOVA tables and descriptive statistics to understand how fairgoers felt after receiving fair cancellation information, which is explained in the results and discussion section below.

Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase of the explanatory sequential design was influenced by the results of the survey responses. Researchers analyzed the data of the survey responses then selected participants and formed questions to help better explain crisis communication in the industry via qualitative focus groups. As stated by Kruger and Casey (2015), "a focus group is a special type of group in terms of purpose, size, composition, and procedures" (p. 2). Fair managers and industry professionals were asked a series of questions to allow the researcher to better understand the experiences and thoughts of the fair managers. Focus groups are often used for research in social sciences (Kruger & Casey, 2015). In this study, the focus group aimed to answer RQ2.

Fair managers play an integral part in decision-making processes. The fair industry is structured in unique ways depending on the organization. Fair managers work with the volunteer boards, paid employees, and non-profit foundations; therefore, the roles of a manager can vary, rendering communication vital for aspects of each relationship with stakeholders inside the organization. The qualitative phase examined how these fair managers use crisis communications, specifically during COVID-19. Two focus groups were hosted during early February of 2023. The following method section breaks down how the focus groups were designed, who participated, and the analysis of the results.

Participants. Data were obtained from two separate focus groups. These interviews were conducted to investigate how fair managers used crisis communication in the fair industry during COVID-19. A total of seven ($N = 7$) fair managers participated in the two focus groups. Of the seven participants, 28.57% ($N = 2$) were male, while 71.43% ($N = 5$) were females in the industry. Table 3 outlines more descriptive data about the fair managers who participated, also showing which IAFE Zone (Figure 2) each fair manager represented. These participants show a range of geographic locations across the United States.

Procedures. After the survey closed, the researcher started recruiting participants for the focus groups using a nomination strategy called organizational recruiting (Kruger & Casey, 2015). First, the researcher identified specific qualifications needed to participate. Kruger and Casey (2015) outline ways to use nomination strategies to recruit focus group participants. “Perhaps the most effective strategy in community studies is to ask neutral parties for name(s)” (p. 83). An email was sent to the IAFE office asking for nominations of fair and/or marketing managers who fit the qualifications outlined by researcher. These qualifications included: fairs that were cancelled or modified during 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, marketing and/or

fair managers, persons who had experience in crisis communication, and those actively involved in the fair industry who would like to participate in research.

After an initial email was sent from the IAFE office via the same mailing list that received the call for survey participants, researcher met with an IAFE representative to discuss obtaining at least five recommended participants for a focus group. The goal was to reach as many fairs as possible, so recruiting through a generic email and a personalized one that targeted qualified individuals allowed for specific recruitment to take place. The IAFE representative sent personal emails to fair managers who met the qualifications listed above. A Google survey was attached at the end of the email. The researcher had access to the results of this survey. The fair managers who were interested in participating and completed the survey were then contacted by the researcher to schedule and assign a focus group time. A total of 12 fair managers replied to the original email, and seven ($N = 7$) in total participated due the availability of all respondents. While seven participants is a small sample size in comparison to the fairs that were due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this sample size represented different fairs that cancelled at different times of the year in different IAFE Zones (Figure 2). Saturation, when no new or addition data is found, was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, indicating enough data were collected for analysis.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) explain how validity and credibility are different in qualitative research compared to quantitative research methods. McLeod-Morin et al. (2020) explain, “qualitative studies are not meant to be generalizable and only speak for the population being studied, however they should be transferable in a way that allows the researcher to apply theoretical concepts found in the study to other contexts” (p. 6). Saturation specific to the sample size was achieved. “In a qualitative study, transferability is most similar to the external validity

of a quantitative study and refers to the generalizability of a study” (McLeod-Morin et al., 2020). While the data do not represent all fairs’ perspectives, it gives an accurate representation of these participant’s feelings and experiences post COVID-19 cancellations due to saturation and transferability.

Before focus groups were hosted, the Institutional Review Board, Appendix A, approval was obtained. Participants received the consent form via email 24-hours before the focus group and were asked to review the terms. Before the focus group began, researcher verbally reviewed the risks and benefits to the groups, and all participants verbally agreed to their consent. The focus groups were divided into two separate days and groups based on the availability of the participants. Both focus groups were hosted via Zoom due to the distance between participants and the researcher and lasted around 45 minutes per focus group. Studies like Ruth et. Al. (2021) have used Zoom to allow focus groups and interviews to connect participants who were not able to be in the same place as the main researcher. This is one example of how Zoom has been used in qualitative research for the benefit of both the researcher and participant. Data were transcribed using Otter, an online transcription tool. Data totaled one hour and 50 minutes. Transcriptions were re-analyzed by the researcher by listening to the recorded audio and double-checking the transcriptions. The researcher omitted common phrases like “umm,” “okay,” and other common transition phases that did not add to the content of the data. There were 15 total pages of data to code.

Analysis. The researcher analyzed the 15 pages of data using thematic analysis. A thematic analysis allows researchers find and create themes based on patterns and repetitions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher identified, analyzed, and reported patterns from data as recommended by Scharp and Sanders (2019). Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend six steps to

use thematic analysis when coding qualitative data. The following six steps were used by the researcher, all in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations:

1. Becoming familiar with the data
2. Generating coding categories
3. Generating themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Locating exemplars

Using thematic analysis allowed the researcher to find similarities between the two focus groups and the primary experiences and feelings of the participants in relation to crisis communication in the industry, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher identified six themes that explained crisis communication in the industry, crisis preparation, past experiences being applied, fair preparation to announce a cancellation, differences of the COVID-19 situation, and crisis communication in the future. The themes were described by the researcher in a codebook and examples of the themes were added (Table 5). While these themes are broad, they give an overview of the feelings and thoughts experienced by each of the fairs or fair managers in their unique experiences. These six themes will be explained in the results and discussion sections below.

Overview. Two focus groups were hosted in order to have fair managers and industry professionals expand on the quantitative data collected in the survey. The researcher used thematic coding to outline saturated thoughts and feelings towards crisis communication practices used during cancellations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Six themes were identified, described, and outlined by researcher, which are explained in further words in the results section.

Table 3. Participating Fair Representatives and the Geographic Location of those Fairs

| Pseudonym | Job Title | IAFE Zone | Fair Status in 2020 |
|-----------|----------------------------|-----------|---------------------|
| Greg | Chief Executive Officer | Zone 5 | Modified |
| Isabelle | Fair Manager | Zone 5 | Cancelled |
| Jenny | Chief Executive Officer | Zone 1 | Cancelled |
| Ashley | Chief Operating Officer | Zone 6 | Cancelled |
| Tina | Public Relations Manager | Zone 4 | Cancelled |
| Anna | VP of Operations/Marketing | Zone 3 | Cancelled |
| Jacob | Fair Manager | Zone 5 | Cancelled |

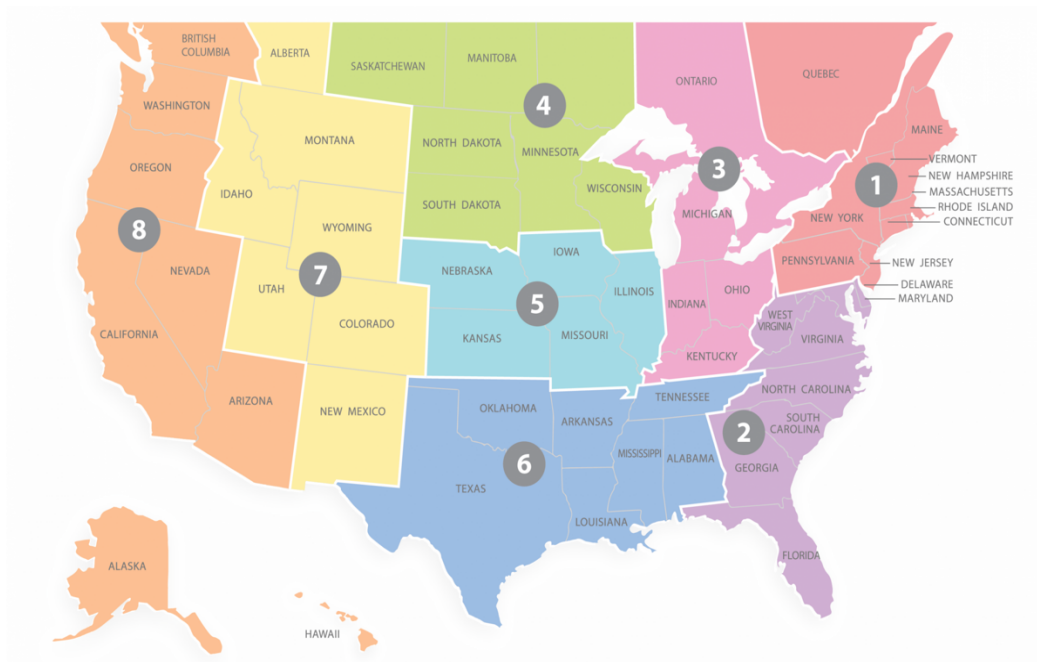


Figure 2. This map is the IAFE Zone districts located on their website.

Mixed Phase

The researcher mixed the data by informing the focus group questions with results from the survey. Mixed methods are often used in communication studies in the agricultural field (Dunn et al., 2013). Using mixed methods allows for methodology to be intentional, including the creation of questions to connect both methods. The researcher asked two specific questions in both focus groups to see how fairgoers' feelings impacted communication strategies used by fairs which addresses RO1.

Procedures. Survey data were analyzed before the focus group questions were written. After analyzing the survey data, the researcher created two questions asking fair managers how information seekers and information processors reacted to the cancellation announcements. The questions were as follows:

1. What ways, if any did your communication and announcement decisions involve the consideration of the fairgoers?
2. Did fairgoers respond to your communication and announcement with any strong feelings like confusion, anger, or happiness?

Analysis. After asking the specific questions in both focus groups, the researcher coded those answers by conducting another thematic analysis. Two themes resulted from these two questions (Table 5). These two themes drew connections to mix the data.

RESULTS

RQ1 (Quantitative): How did the Communication Strategies used Affect Fairgoers’

Responses to the Fair Industry?

The results of this analysis aim to answer RQ1, and to understand if fairs should use a specific communication strategy to announce a cancellation to evoke a specific feeling amongst fairgoers. This was answered by evaluating how fairgoers felt after receiving communication from specific communication mediums. The following section uses this analysis to answer RQ1 and give applicable results.

This research question wanted to determine if communication strategies, (phone call, social media post, or email) resulted in a change in fairgoers’ feeling towards the fair and cancellation (satisfied understanding, frustration, confusion, excitement, or disappointment). A total of five one-way ANOVA analyses were conducted.

The independent variables: phone call, social media post, and email were compared to the dependent variables: satisfied understanding; frustrated, confused, excited, and disappointed. The strength of fairgoers’ feelings did not significantly differ between communication strategies ($p > .05$). In other words, fairgoers’ feelings were not affected by how they first heard of the cancellation (email, phone call, or social media). In addition, a Turkey HSD post hoc was conducted, and resulted in no significance. Appendix E and Table 4 examine the exact differences for each variable, including the descriptive statistics.

Due to limited number of respondents, the data below is not generalizable to the fair industry. The data below is a direct reflection of the sample who participated.

Table 4. ANOVA Results for Difference in Fairgoers' Feelings for Each Communication Strategy

| Dependent Variable | <i>df</i> | <i>F</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>η</i> ² |
|--------------------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------------------|
| Satisfied | 2,40 | 0.17 | .845 | .01 |
| Understanding | | | | |
| Frustration | 2,41 | 1.13 | .333 | .05 |
| Confused | 2,41 | .03 | .967 | .002 |
| Disappointed | 2,41 | 1.32 | .278 | .06 |
| Excited | 2,41 | .14 | .867 | .01 |

RQ2 (Qualitative): How was Crisis Communication Utilized within the Fair Industry during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

A thematic analysis of the focus group data was performed and found the six following themes, Table 5

The researcher found that during 2020, crisis communication played an integral part in the announcement of a cancellation or modification for a fair. There were existing factors that allowed fairs to use crisis communication during 2020 when the pandemic began. As the COVID-19 pandemic affected events further into the early 20s, fairs were able to use the communication tactics created in 2020 as a sounding board for how to continue using crisis communication.

The following results section will explain each theme and how it was applicable to the fairs. Themes are broken down from a communication standpoint, starting with how fairs prepared before the 2020 pandemic began, how crisis communication has impacted the industry for many years, the steps fairs took to plan the announcement of their cancellation or modification, how time was on their side, what tough choices were made in 2020, and how the first year of a pandemic influenced their fairs for years after.

Crisis Communication & On-the-Job Training. Fair representatives were asked to explain how crisis communication played a role in their respective jobs and what kind of learning and/or experience they have in managing and communicating a crisis. All participants agreed crisis communication plays an integral role in their job. Tina explained:

“with almost any industry, especially one that sees hundreds of thousands of people, [crisis communication] must go hand-in-hand. Things unfortunately do happen, whether it’s something small, like a show getting rained out, and that is considered a crisis, or it’s something larger, [crisis communication and the fair industry] really go together.”

Isabelle explained how communication in general plays an integral part in the industry: “Communication is a huge part of what we do. Whether it’s communicating about the events from a marketing standpoint, or communicating to the exhibitors, or as it relates to COVID, trying to keep people informed as we navigated the whole process, [crisis communication] is always on your mind.”

Isabelle also explained the importance of crisis communication for industry. “I think in any relationship, whether it’s one-on-one or to the thousands, [crisis communication] is key to credibility, and therefore success. I think it takes credibility with you audience to get your message conveyed.”

Participants explained how having hands-on experience in crisis communication has helped them see the importance of having plans and allows for practice for more severe crises. Greg explained his background and how it has allowed for On-the-Job Training in the industry.

“I was not really trained, but I was put in a position where you had to deal with those situations and communicate with the families, investigators, and the public. You have to learn what you should and should not say.”

Greg further explained the potential crises he previously experienced with this on-the-job training experiment that is crisis communication.

“Crisis communication has been around. We opened our fair two days after the ride accident in Ohio in 2018. There were 14 TV and radio station people standing outside when I walked out. They wanted to talk about the ride safety.”

Table 5. Application of Thematic Codes

| Theme | Description | Example |
|--|---|--|
| Crisis Communication & On-the-Job Training | Fairs have used crisis communication through on the job training and experiences in the past. | Tina- “Things unfortunately do happen, whether it’s something small, like a show getting rained out, and that is considered a crisis, or it’s something larger, [crisis communication and the fair industry] really go together.” |
| Industry Preparedness | IAFE classes and conferences have hosted crisis communication preparedness opportunities which aided fairs in knowing how to communicate. | Greg- “I took Institute of Fair Management before I got my CFP (Certified Fair Executive). And there’s parts of that that were helpful. A lot of what we were taught and IAFE training for E. coli, really is a very similar to what we followed that protocol for COVID.” |
| Planning to Announce | Managers outlined the physical steps it took to announce the cancellation. | Jacob- “I remember recording the video a week before our board ever met [to officially] cancel the fair.” |
| The Factor of Time | Fairs had time to prepare the communication strategies used. | Jacob- “These checklists were created strictly out of time to do so.” |
| Tough Choices in 2020 | Each fair had its own unique communication experience during 2020, resulting in many perspectives of how communication occurred. | Isabelle- “Communication at that point became critical to basically put the brakes on all the plans that that were in place.” |
| Post-2020 Challenges and Outcomes | Fairs struggled to communicate for years after the first cancellation but now had plans in place. | Jacob- “COVID made it unique, and people weren’t as easy to upset in 2020, 2021 was a different story.” |

Crisis communication and on-the-job training experiences that occur in the fair industry have allowed marketing managers to see the need of creating such preparation and resources for crisis communication.

Industry Preparedness. As an industry, fairs utilize IAFE resources and training to help prepare for crisis situations that could occur. All the fair representatives who participated in the focus groups are members of the IAFE; have equal access to assistance; and have attended at least one IAFE training, meeting, or conference that gave instructions on how to use crisis communication to the benefit of the fair. Greg spoke about how the IAFE taught a course on crisis communication as part of their Institute of Fair Management, which allows fair and industry professionals to obtain their Certified Fair Executive certificate (CFP). The class is geared towards E-coli training. “A lot of what we were taught for IAFE training was for E Coli and was the same protocol we followed for COVID-19. There’s a doctor who comes in and talks about outbreaks.” With E Coli being present in all humans and livestock animals combined with agriculture playing a role in all fairs, the IAFE tries to help fairs prevent the spread of this disease, especially with livestock and animals on grounds. “We have used signage, wash stations, and hand sanitizer. These are protocols we had even before COVID.” Because of this training, Greg and his fair were able to implement and adapt an E Coli plan to a COVID-19 plan, which he credits as a reason they were able to still operate during 2020 when many other fairs cancelled.

Isabelle credits attending an IAFE conference for giving her access to resources for crisis communication tactics. “I can remember attending a management conference through the IAFE one year, and they spent the entire time on how to handle the media, especially when you’re trying to communicate during a crisis. That was a very helpful class.” Jenny explained how fair

managers can take what is learned at these conferences and trainings and rely on each other for help. “We learn from each other. We ask, ‘Hey, how did you handle this? Or we watch somebody’s else’s statements or releases.”

Jacob explained further that during 2020, fairs relied on other fairs within the organization who cancelled early in 2020 as an example of how to accomplish a successful cancellation announcement.

“I know 90% of our COVID communication plans were modeled after what we saw our neighbors doing. We were just lucky enough to be later in the year, so we were after them [the first cancellations]. We took a lot of [tactics] directly from them or watching what everybody else did.”

All participants agreed having used the conference and industry resources helped form their COVID-19 and 2020 cancellation plans.

Planning to Announce. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 was a unique circumstance because it allowed fairs the ability to create plans specific to the crisis at hand. The six participants who cancelled their fairs in 2020 recalled the exact steps when crisis communication was utilized, including the specific strategies and decisions used to best announce the cancellation. The following will explain how each fair recalled making the announcement, showing the similarities in the planning process as most were modeled in very similar formats. All agreed that thought went into the development of these plans.

Isabelle:

On June 3 I got a call that the Public Health Board would be meeting later that night. We got asked to meet with them and they put the skids on everything that night. They did not have the authority to shut us down but made it very clear that they would be launching campaigns against us to say that they were opposed to us and made it very clear that we would be publicly chastised. We had to turn around and spin on our heels and put the message out without basically bad talking to the people who shut us down. In a very small town, you can’t turn on your neighbor. You might crap on someone today, but you’re going to need them tomorrow. I had to make this [Facebook] video and try to communicate that canceling was what we were going to do. The video was tough to make.

Jacob:

When we publicly made the announcement, there was a press release that included a full statement by me. There was a video with some comments from me that talked about no fair. In the accompanying, you know, social media post to go with that. We knew what the decision would be. The board meeting was kind of more for formality. I remember recording that video a week before our board ever met [to officially cancel the fair]. We swore our video team and our PR team to complete secrecy. All of that was written because we knew once the board met it would officially be cancelled. We're a private organization, so we don't have to have media at our board meetings. We knew that the board would not keep it quiet, nor should they be expected to, they are volunteers. We scheduled a board meeting for 10 a.m. and an all staff meeting at 10:15 am. Because we knew the Board meeting would be very quick. I mean they had one item. The board met at 10. I told the staff at 10:15. This is funny how you remember this. Like it was somebody died. We dismissed the staff at 10:25, and at 10:30, everything [prepared statements] went out. We had even already pre-worded, like our commercial exhibits. People had already had emails ready to go out to our vendors, telling them the fair was cancelled, the competitive people, I mean all that stuff had been prewritten. Everybody went back to their office and hit send on those prepared emails. I think we were all probably similar on that, because I think my office stole a lot of that from fairs that already cancelled.

Jenny:

The Board had made the decision, I think, on a Wednesday or a Thursday. We alerted the media Thursday morning, told our staff at 9 o'clock. They all went back and were each tasked with telling the people that they worked the closest with. So, they hear it from us, not on the news. Then the press conference was at 10:00, so it gave our staff about an hour to alert our closest stakeholders, the people that we work the closest with. There were only a handful that got a got a phone call, and I mean less than 10. One of those is silly, but it was my parents. I called my parents and said, 'You're going to see this on the news because you asked me every day if we're having a fair. Just so, you know we're going to cancel,' and I literally hung up the phone and walked out and had the press conference. Then for our staff, we already had a decisive list of who is contacting, who and if there was anybody else within their department that they felt they needed to contact, they had the absolute opportunity and free rein to do that. By the time it hit the media it was more telling the general public, because by that point hopefully, most of our constituents already know. Stakeholders like our ticket holders that might have an email attached, our livestock exhibitors or people that worked in the ticket department, or something like that, but not the general public. The general public was told through social media or through that press conference. And then, obviously, a lot of media picked it up from there. The those who got a phone call, it was not a lengthy conversation. It was, hey? Just so, you know you're going to see this on the news in a few minutes. We'll talk more later. But I wanted you to hear it for me first.

Ashley:

Our cancellation was all similar. The only people that we probably added were a couple of our sponsors or at a significant level and they received a personal phone call.

Anna:

When they made the decision, I think it was maybe four or five people that were still here [physically in the office]. It's kind of like a divide and conquer, and it was like, you know, who your important people are. Let's just keep communicating with those people, and then we'll hit the general public later. Those that stayed on staff during COVID have so much experience and know who you don't want to hear or see the announcement on a Facebook post only.

Tina:

We basically broke down every single person that was a stakeholder [at our fair] whether that was a parking partner, whether that was a vendor, whether that was a sponsor, and then we correlated it to who would be doing that communication with them. So, was that our director of sponsorship or was that our director of finances? Then we decided who was reaching out to them and the timeline of exactly when they could reach out. We are a State-owned agency. Some of those State entities must know first. We created a timeline of when that could happen, and everyone [staff] received the full timeline so they could see. Okay, these people have been notified by 9 o'clock. These people have been notified by 10 o'clock, and then, you know, at noon these are all the people that can know. Following the public is going to know. [Our staff] could see that entire timeline. They knew they weren't stepping on someone's toes.

These fair representatives were able to easily recall exactly what happened leading up to the announcement of the cancellation. All noted that after three years the exact steps that were taken to announce the cancellation were imbedded in their minds. Jacob described it as, "something I will never be able to forget the thought process that went into this."

The Factor of Time. Although these fairs were able to share the exact plans that were made to announce the cancellation, fair professionals agreed time played a large factor in being able to use crisis communication to their benefit.

"What made COVID a little different than other crises are the fact that we all saw it coming. Once Houston cancelled, we all knew. There really was time to create a lot of this stuff. Creating these checklists were strictly out of having the time to do so, which is awesome." - Jacob

Jenny explained how many of her fair stakeholders expected the cancellation solely out of the time that had passed since the very first cancellation in the industry. "We were at the end

of fair season in our area. I think people knew as soon as cancellations started to happen.” She explained further:

“We had time for this. I think if you were talking about a ride accident or a shooting, or something else, we have those canned responses already. But with this, we had time to think through every aspect of our communication and response.”

Ashley explained how so much time had passed since some stakeholders and vendors were able to operate, thus influencing their cancellation decision. “So many organizations had scaled down their operations that we were fearful if we were to go forward. Because of the cancellations and the scaling down, it was almost essential by the time it came to our fair.”

Time also influenced being able to create crisis communication plans for the future, while also being appreciative of what happened in the past. Jacob explained, “now, if there is a crisis that suddenly you don’t have two months to prepare or a month to prepare, now we’ve got some of these plans in place because of COVID.”

Tough Choices in 2020. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, each fair faced its own set of unique challenges that existed due to fair location within the United States, time of the year of the event, community support, health mandates, and the decisions of governing boards. Fair managers and the top-level staff of these fairs were tasked with making decisions regarding a cancellation or modification due to the pandemic. Throughout the focus groups, all participants felt the need to explain and justify what exactly happened in 2020. Participants felt the need to explain, thus creating this theme of tough choices for these fairs. Tina, a public relations manager explained how her fair cancelled their historic event.

“We did cancel in 2020. We ended up doing a ‘Fair Necessities Program,’ which included a fair food drive. We did four weeks of a fair food drive with different vendors each week. We did different things with agriculture online because we were not able to do shows. We showcased all this online to showcase those aging out [of showing age for the fair].”

The remaining participants explained how their fairs also tried their best to host something, despite a cancellation. Isabelle, a fair manager, explained how they thought the fair was going to happen and how difficult it was when an outside board made that decision for them.

“We thought that we were going to get [to have] close to a real fair. We had full intentions of doing so, that’s what we were communicating all along. Then our county board of health came in, who did not have the authority to shut us down, and they created some real problems. Communication at that point became critical to basically put the brakes on all the plans that were in place.”

One of the participants was able to host a modified fair. This event differed from the other fairs that participated in the focus groups, because it ran the same number of days and most of the aspects of their traditional fair with safety precautions and modifications included. Greg, the CEO of this fair, explained how even though they were able to host the fair, there were many tough choices that still existed. “Our fair was one of the few [that ran in 2020]. We wrote a plan to go through with it. We brought in the Health Department, the city manager, and our leaser.” As a privately-owned operation, Greg’s fair had to operate due to the lease agreement. Greg explained that even with all separate boards in agreement to support a fair, it was still a very difficult time for him and the fair. “It was a tough two-week run. I got threats during the fair from people who didn’t want us to be having it. They hoped my kids died for the fact that I had it. It was very unpleasant.”

Even for the fairs that were cancelled, the cancellation process was difficult and emotional. Jenny, a fair CEO talked about the emotional struggles of canceling.

“It’s kind of like a death. After we went through that fact, how you unpack and deal with that, you know on an individual, a team level, and an industry level. Even though we had communication plans in place, that didn’t mean it helped make the decision easier on whether to cancel.”

Jacob echoed similar thoughts and feelings to those of Jenny. “It’s funny how you remember every detail [of canceling]. It was like someone had died.” Isabelle explained how

even making the video to announce the cancellation was emotionally tolling. “We chose to go out with a video message on Facebook. I’ll be honest it was probably one of the hardest messages I’ve done. I was so vested and also angry.”

For these fairs, those that were able to modify, and those that cancelled, it was an emotional experience. Many felt the need to share what exactly happened in 2020 without being prompted. As one of the few fairs that modified in 2020, Greg experienced challenges and feelings that were more common for other fairs post-2020, leading to the next theme of post-2020 challenges and outcomes.

Post-2020 Challenges and Outcomes. The hostility that Greg faced via threats and negativity was a common theme that many fairs felt after 2020. RQ2 asked how crisis communication was utilized during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the focus group participants found their experience in 2020 helped the fairs for two years after the original cancellation or modification. Jacob explained how 2021 was different than 2020. The differences went beyond communication preparations. “COVID-19 made it unique, and people weren’t as easy to upset in 2020, but 2021 was a different story.” Jenny continued to explain the uncertainty of 2021.

“We thought 2021 would be easier, and in hindsight for me 2021 was much harder, because there was so much up in the air. In 2020 so much cancelled that it’s like ‘yeah, we’re probably going to cancel’ end of story.”

Greg explained how outside support also decreased post-2020.

“The 2020 fair wasn’t as painful as the 2021 fair. The health department and everybody was with us to keep moving forward, especially with the kids’ projects. In 2021 from a communication and crisis management standpoint, the news media made it way more difficult in 2021. There were less sentiments of everyone being united, and everyone was more divided.”

Despite the challenges from outside parties in 2021, from a communication standpoint the outcomes post-2020 were more positive. Tina explained how the checklist was created to announce the 2020 fair cancellation was utilized in other cancellations post-2020.

“If we must make major decisions, these are the key players that we need to communicate to. Out of COVID came this decision checklist that we moved forward with. This is something that we carried forward when we had to cancel our Harvest Fair and a few other major decisions. We’ve broken out that checklist again to ask, ‘who are these stakeholders that we really need to be communicating with?’”

Jacob explained how now they have plans in place for crisis management that never existed before 2020. “I think we probably had plans in place before but not to the scale of cancelling the whole event. I think we all had plans in place for portions of the fair, but not to cancel the whole thing.” Jacob also explained when trying to figure out how to cancel, he went back to board minutes from the 1940s when World War II cancelled their fair, finding nothing. He hopes 2020 will be able to bring something to look back on for the benefit of the future. “Hopefully in the future people can go back to 2020, because we now have a plan and have lots of notes.”

This theme found that through the struggles of post-2020 and COVID-19 cancellations, there were positive and negative outcomes for the fairgoers, as well as the communication and crisis management plans.

Overview. These six themes explain crisis communication in the industry, how crisis communication resources have been utilized, the steps taken to make the cancellation, and the outcomes of implementing the crisis communication plans all to answer RQ2.

RO1 (Mixed): To Explain the Reactions of Active Information Seekers vs. Information Processors in the Fair Industry.

As explained in the literature review, communicators can be classified into two separate categories, active information seekers or passive information processors (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). To further explain Grunig and Hunt’s situational theory (1984) and the application of this theory

in the fair industry, the researcher examined active information seekers and information processors separately to explain their feelings towards the fair industry post cancellation announcement. The researcher asked questions in the focus group targeted toward mixing the data. Fair managers described how the fairgoers and stakeholders played a role in their thinking of how to communicate and what strategies to use. Two themes emerged for the active information seekers, emotional expectations and relationship building. This allowed these fair professionals to understand and learn about their stakeholders who actively sought cancellation information and what kind of communication strategies were needed to best communicate cancellations to those who would be actively looking.

Table 6. Application of Mixed Thematic Codes

| Thematic Code Name | Thematic Code Description | Thematic Code Example |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Emotional Expectations | The fair industry includes more emotional expectations for the fairs to perform to the expectations of the fairgoers. | Jacob- “There's an added layer of fairs are built on this reputation as being a safe place for families to gather.” |
| Relationship Building | Fair managers were able to build relationships before canceling the event, allowing feelings to play a role in communication decisions. | Tina-“This created for many of our teams a great opportunity to relationship build throughout the entire January to April, when we cancelled.” |

Active Information Seekers

Emotional Expectations. Fair managers found fairs hold emotional weight and expectations that makes the need for communication to be thoughtful for the fairgoers. Jacob explained:

“your fairgoers treat the fair like it’s a part of their family. Then there’s an added layer of fairs are built on this reputation as being safe places for families to gather. I think these expectations are important in every industry, but especially ours.” Jacob continued to explain how this affects communication. “I think that we are able to

communicate the crisis communication plan in a comforting way that gives reassurance.”

Ashley explained how expectations from outside stakeholders are put heavily on communication.

“There’s a level of expectations on how [communication] is carried out in a professional manner. Most fairs around the country have a political aspect to them, whether the board are elected officials or run by their state. Especially with COVID there was intertwining with politicians, governments, and the health departments. I think it’s important to not overlook.”

Fairs managers agreed these expectations played a role in their decisions on how to communicate the cancellation, including the communication strategy used to communicate it.

Multi-generations are what makes these expectations an important aspect to consider when utilizing crisis communication. Jacob explained, “I think emotional ties are multi-generational and so strong because they impact multiple generations of a family.” Tina also explained the importance of thinking through these emotional expectations of the multi-generational stakeholders when using crisis communication.

“You do need to think about generational aspects when you’re approaching any communication situation. Whether it’s a text alert, or face to face, it’s important to have that communication with them. Then there’s different generations that come to our fair. We see all ages. If we put something on social media that says gates are closed, it may not be seen by everyone. We really have to be cognizant of where we are communicating, when, and how. This goes even further in a crisis.” All agreed that the communication strategies used went beyond deciding to make

announcement, it took time and deliberation on the most effective way to do so.

Relationship Building. While thinking through the different generations of stakeholders and the most effective ways to communicate, fairs found relationships were able to be created, thus allowing for communication strategies to be catered to the relationships that were formed

and elicited a positive response from stakeholders. Tina explained how the time before the cancellation allowed for these relationships to really be created.

[COVID] created for many of our teams a great opportunity to relationship build from January to April, when we cancelled. It was a very unknown time, and we were constantly in communication and very transparent that we didn't know the decision, but we were going to work with them the best we could to create something that could work for them. The whole process was very transparent. When we had to give them the bad news, they were very understanding, because we had built those relationships.” Jacob explained how he felt his fair received no big complaints after announcing a

cancellation in 2020. “No one really responded that they wished we had handled communication differently, part of this was because of the relationships.”

This mix of data shows how fair managers were able to apply time, strategies, and relationships to their cancellations during 2020. For the fairgoers who were actively seeking information about the cancellation and any other additional information, it allowed a relationship to form and certain expectations of fairs to be revealed. These findings support Grunig & Hunt's theory that the communicators that actively seek information will have a deeper connection with the information, be more knowledgeable about a topic, and will be more satisfied in the long run.

Information Processors. Information processors or passive communicators did not have a quantifiable amount of data to analyze whether these types of communicators had strong feelings towards the fair or if the fair managers were able to communicate in specific way for these types of fairgoers. Only two survey participants received communication from a third party as the first form of cancellation announcement. This data was removed from the analysis due to the lack of respondents. The researcher was hoping the independent variables, social media and outside third party would lead to more passive information processors, however, due to the lack of data, no significant themes or data can be assigned to this type of communicator. This limitation will be further explained in the discussion.

DISCUSSION

Previous research has concluded having a crisis communication plan is an integral part of communicator's job. Coombs (2020) encourages all organizations, especially those that have strong connections with the public, to have a plan ready for when and how to communicate when disaster strikes. One aspect of previous research that is limited is knowing what channel of communication should be used when communicating with stakeholders during a crisis. Should the president or CEO make a phone call to all stakeholders? Should a blanket email be addressed to all volunteers or sponsors? Should the organization update all their social media accounts with the same images and captions? What happens if a message gets spread to other key publics by stakeholders that have already been informed? How did the decision to use a specific communication strategy affect the fairgoers? What kind of emotions and feelings will be created due to this decision made by companies during a crisis response? These kinds of questions are what makes the research questions and objective of this study important and are similar questions that could be asked in an array of industries. The following discussion will help answer these questions that can be summed up as the two research questions and research objective of this research. The following section will explore the key findings, interpretations, implications, limitations, and future directions of this study.

Key Findings & Interpretations

Fairgoers Response to Communication Strategies. The researcher found fairgoers in this sample did not have a preference to one communication strategy over the other. The researcher asked fairgoers to recall what communication strategy announcing a cancellation was received first either a phone call, email, or social media post. A one-way ANOVA was run testing these

communication strategies to fairgoers feelings, satisfied understanding, frustration, confusion, disappointment, or excitement. When comparing the communication strategies to the fairgoers' feelings, participants in this sample indicated they did not feel strongly positive or negative to a fair based on which communication strategy was received first. It can be interpreted that fairgoers in this sample were less concerned with the way fairs communicated the cancellation, and more concerned with being informed of the information needed. No specific communication strategy resulted in a significant difference in positive or negative feelings for these participants.

While having indifferent fairgoers in response to communication strategies may be confusing on how to best answer the questions of how to directly communication in a crisis, these findings result in the understanding that the importance of crisis communication should be placed on the actual timeliness and effectiveness of the communication, rather than the communication strategy itself. No matter which communication strategy was used, according to this study, there was no significant feeling towards the fair, positive or negative. The range of feelings was specific to each individual fairgoer, rather than a specific communication strategy. These findings support the qualitative and mixed results of this study, discussed below. The findings of no significant feelings towards one communication strategy for fairgoers will be discussed further in the implications section.

Grunig and Hunt's situational theory (1984) does not indicate if active information seekers have a preference of the way communication is received. This study found information seekers that received information about the cancellation did not have a preference nor strong feelings, positive or negative towards the fair. The researcher suggests that active information seekers are more focused on getting the information rather than a strategic way it is communicated. These

stakeholders are more focused on the valuable knowledge during a crisis rather than the feelings these announcements create.

Crisis Communication in the Fair Industry. The common theme of the importance of crisis communication in the fair industry was evident in the focus group participants' stories of experiences within the industry. The researcher found the six themes that answered how crisis communication is used within the fair industry, crisis communication and on-the-job training; industry preparedness; planning to announce; the factor of time; tough choices in 2020; post 2020 challenges and outcomes all lead to an understanding of how fairs experienced cancellations and modifications in 2020, how they tried to combat those issues with crisis communication, and how 2020 endeavors shaped efforts post-2020. The researcher found crisis communication is an important part of the fair industry. As a nostalgic industry that involves agriculture, entertainment, vendors, and the public, many accidents and crises could potentially occur. Many of the participants learned how to navigate crisis communication with hands-on experiences after a crisis had occurred previously.

All participants in the focus groups were members of the IAFE and able to use the resources this organization provides. All agreed having those resources was very helpful in creating their crisis communication plans during 2020. Many mentioned that before getting into an industry that impacts such a vast and diverse group of stakeholders, little experience and formal education was offered in the crisis communication field for specific risks in the fair industry, despite how vital the topic and skill is for the industry. Many of the participants agreed that their membership in the IAFE and attending the conventions and meetings provided them an opportunity to learn how to be prepared for crisis communication needs which was beneficial in 2020. The researcher concluded that as a fair, being involved in this organization and being in

contact with other groups that are also supportive of crisis communications preparedness allows for fairs to be prepared for crises. For both themes, it showcases how vital having a working knowledge and experience in crisis communication is to the industry, while also having resources like the IAFE to help prepare for those who do not have hands-on experience.

The researcher also found that every fair had a specific plan for announcing their cancellation. These plans used crisis communication to decide when and how to deliver the message. Beyond just having a plan, these fair managers had the exact time and process of the cancellation ingrained in their minds, even three years after the cancellations, showcasing the importance and relevance of these plans. Planning to announce was a thought-out process, thinking through each level of stakeholder. The researcher found creating things like a checklist allowed fairs to be able to consider all angles of the fair cancellation announcement process. Time allowed for fairs to be able to process what stakeholders to include. Knowing that a potential crisis could occur soon allowed fairs to think through the potential issues that rushing through the communication process could lead to. The researcher believes that without the time that the COVID-19 pandemic allowed in 2020, fairs may not have had the success in the cancellation announcement process.

The researcher felt it was also important to note how many tough choices existed in 2020. Before the research, it was assumed that canceling was going to be difficult for fairs, this was not going to be a shock for the researcher, however, it was important for them to note how difficult this was because even though only one question was geared towards asking fairs what 2020 was like for them, each fair manager had a story to share and felt the need to tell the entire story before being able to explain what communication decisions were made when canceling or modifying their fair. The researcher believed these fair managers needed to share the entire story

to justify the thinking in communication practices, thus showing the importance of the crisis when adapting crisis communication plans for specific crises.

After these first original tough choices in 2020, fairs found challenges were still present even after 2020. Even though fairs were able to overcome their worst fears of having to cancel or modify an entire event in 2020, these fairs were still tasked with difficult decisions, despite having a communication plan in place for if they needed to cancel or modify again. These communication plans and lists were helpful for other cancellations, however, there were other factors that allowed these same stakeholders to have different feelings post-2020. The findings and interpretations will be further explained in the implication section.

How Fairgoers Influenced Communication Decisions. Fair representatives were able to explain the communication plans that were made and implemented during 2020 in the focus group. These representatives expanded this by explaining how different communicators influenced decisions. Two themes emerged from the discussion of the role of the fairgoer when thinking through crisis communication decisions. Emotional expectations and relationship building are two aspects the fairs processed when thinking through the crisis communication efforts. Emotional expectations relate to the historic role fairs for their stakeholders and communities. During this time fairs found their stakeholders had expectations of how they were going to handle the crisis. Part of this expanded on the fact that fairgoers felt the fair was supposed to be a safe place for people to gather, therefore, if these fairs were not going to be able to provide that, then it was the responsibility of the fairs to be able to communicate that with them. Fairgoers had built these expectations over time and the specifics of these expectations came to a light during 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The researcher believes that the more a fair knows and understands their stakeholders, the more positively the fair will be able to gear crisis messaging towards their stakeholders. One-way fairs were able to gear this messaging to fairgoers was by using the months leading up to the cancellation to build relationships with their stakeholders, allowing these fairs to fully understand how the fairgoers could potentially respond to a crisis. By keeping open communication, transparency and tasking certain departments within the fair office to keep in contact with their specific stakeholders, it allowed for what the fair managers credited success when then having to turn around and announce the official cancellation.

The researcher found this relationship building left positive feelings for both the fair managers and stakeholders, while also allowing for the staff to know what communication strategies to use when announcing a cancellation. These emotional expectations and relationship building findings and interpretations will be made applicable in the implication section below.

Implications

The purpose of this study expands further than to answer the three research questions were measured through quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. This study adds to literature in crisis communication, the fair industry, and the COVID-19 pandemic research—which is applicable to professionals in the industry to use for future crisis communication preparation and public relation efforts. Communicators put an emphasis on what kind of communication strategy to use. While thought goes into posting on social media, keeping in contact via email, and calling stakeholders when an announcement arises, communication channels in the agriculture industry continue to evolve due to technology and vast stakeholder's preference (Worley et al., 2022). As communication continues to evolve, fair managers and

communicators must figure out the best way to use these channels to communicate with their fairgoers.

Communicators Preference. As the quantitative data found no preference as to which channel these fairgoers preferred, the data does imply these fairgoers put more weight on the importance of the information being shared and having the full picture of what an announcement means when a fair is being cancelled. It is recommended that fair managers consider these preferences as part of their decisions on thinking through a crisis communication timeline. When picking a communication strategy to use, know with whom you are communicating. If you have active information seekers, consider using multiple communication strategies to disburse information, allowing them to continually access information and seek out communication when it is convenient for them. Consider the demographics and psychographics of your audience. Creating a new strategy of communication during a crisis would not be recommended; use what works for your audience. Managers should meet their audience in a place where they are comfortable. Instead of considering what strategy you could use to communicate, consider how you normally communicate and whether that medium works. Coombs (2015) recommends creating a plan long before any crisis happens. By taking these thoughts into consideration, it takes time away from having to decide which communication strategy to use and allows for time to focus on what is more important, that the correct message is sent out and educates viewers about the situation at hand.

Some may argue that maybe there was not a preference in communication strategy because the fairs had the time and ability to think through the best channels and strategies to use for communication due to the unique crisis that was the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020. This research shows the fair managers would also agree with that conclusion. Without the time that

the COVID-19 pandemic allowed, it may have been difficult to cancel the entire event with such strategic messaging and the timelines presented in the anecdotes given by focus group participants.

Industry Resources. Many of the fairs were able to utilize their neighboring fairs that cancelled before them, as well as IAFE resources as an example for effective and ineffective cancellation communication. The researcher recommends fairs and other organizations that qualify for IAFE membership utilize that resource. The conferences, meetings, and speakers were mentioned by the focus group participants as being valuable, and one of the participants credited being able to continue with their fair in 2020 due to the E Coli presentation and plan presented at the IAFE Institute of Fair Management course. For this fair, it was extremely helpful to not have to rewrite an entire plan of what to do and how to safely host a fair during a pandemic, which is proof that crisis communication can benefit this industry.

If fairs do not have access to join an organization like the IAFE, crisis communication is still a factor in fair managers' jobs and should be considered a priority in planning for the event of a crisis. Many of the fair managers mentioned having blanket statements ready for potential bad weather, livestock deaths, or ride malfunctions. None mentioned having a plan for the entire fair canceling for the duration of its normal run, as most fairs may have only had to close early due to weather or an unforeseen circumstance. These fair managers also mentioned that now because of the COVID-19 pandemic, they have the plans in place including notes of how to cancel in case anything this extreme happens again.

While the researcher found the industry tries its best to help fairs prepare for crises, the cancellations that occurred in 2020 are proof that time should be taken to reevaluate what crises could be applicable to fairs and how managers could best update and change crisis management

plans. As involved experts in the fair industry, these participants also credited their own past experiences in handling previous crises. For new fairs or managers, it is important to note that one does not have to endure a crisis to prepare for it. While on-the-job training is an aspect these managers credited, the researcher recommends learning more about your stakeholders and the crises your operation could face and proactively prepare, rather than waiting until a crisis occurs.

Relationships Matter. One of the biggest motivators to knowing your stakeholders before a crisis occurs is the direct benefit experienced by these fairs. The managers who were able to take time to relationship build before the official cancellation occurred experienced more positive feedback in their experience as well as when they needed to make the call, make the post, or send the email; they knew this channel of communication was one that would be successful for their audience. For an industry that relies on their stakeholders to be successful, taking the time to understand these stakeholders is vital. The researcher recommends adding relationship building into crisis communication plans. Stakeholders may have a preference to a specific communication strategy based on their demographics and psychographics; the best way to judge that is to know exactly with whom you are dealing.

One of the biggest overall themes fair managers shared was the struggles that existed in 2020. It is recommended that fairs reflect on the importance they play in the communities they bring together. When these fair managers spoke of the fairs, it was more emotional than if they solely provided a service for a community for the bottom line. Instead, these fairs talked about the people, memories, opportunities, and emotions that exist for all stakeholders of the fair industry. The fair experience of these participants ranged from three years to more than 30 years, showcasing how fairs can have an emotional impact no matter how much time is invested. It is recommended that despite the struggles of 2020, fairs should learn from their experiences

including how to take the time to write a plan, communicate during a crisis, understand one's stakeholders, and prioritize stakeholders and the relationships between them.

Limitations

While this study was able to conclude applicable results for fairs and organizations in the agriculture and entertainment industries, it is important to note the limitations that exist in this study. First, the sample of survey participants only showcased a small fraction of the fairgoers who were impacted and communicated with during 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, the survey results are not generalizable. A total of 45 fairgoers does not begin to touch the surface of how many people attend fairs yearly within the United States. More passive information seekers are needed to better understand the difference between communicating to active and passive communicators and stakeholders.

Another limitation was the method used to distribute the survey. The researcher believed it was more reliable to send the survey via a third party vested in the industry, however, the researcher was unable to follow up directly with potential fairs that could have sent the survey to their fairgoers. Without having access to the database of all fairs and their fairgoers, it was impossible for the researcher to have direct communication with them, thus limiting how many times potential participants were able to be reminded to complete the survey. However, it should be noted that the IAFE organization experienced no direct benefit by helping disperse this survey, and the researcher is grateful for their willingness to help.

As with many unfunded and non-grant studies, two serious limitations that must be mentioned is the lack of time and money to benefit both the researcher and the participants. This study was done on a low-cost budget with limited time, pushing the researcher to obtain data in

one semester in order to have time to analyze and find results. With only one year to create the concept of this study, find supporting literature, obtain permissions, and implement methods, the researchers was pushed for time thus preventing the researcher from obtaining more participants.

Finally, the biggest limitation was only being able to focus on 2020. Many of the managers had feelings and thoughts about post-2020, some of discussions which were included in the results because of the importance it played in the focus group. There are future directions and research that could be explored due to these limitations and the researcher encourages those vested in the fair industry to consider researching further on these topics.

Future Research

This study could be further researched in many directions. The researcher recommends looking at cancellations and communications post-2020. Many of the fairs spoke about how, due to the political climate that resulted from the pandemic, there were more struggles with communicating after 2020. Fairgoers had stronger opinions about the COVID-19 restrictions and rules. Researching the second wave of cancellations and crises would give a better picture of how fairs took what was learned in 2020 and then changed or remained the same in 2021. There is also room for research in regard to those fairgoers who did not receive communication about a cancellation. For those that did not receive communication, how did the feelings about fairs change if at all? Lastly, future research could include fairs that were not fortunate to either have membership in the IAFE or who had to cancel quickly like the Houston Stock Show & Rodeo, one of the first large fairs to cancel in March of 2020. All of these are topics that could be explored to give a better idea of crisis communication in the fair industry, the roles fairgoers play in this relationship, and whether the COVID-19 pandemic played a role in the increase in

communication practices for this industry. While this data is not generalizable for the entire fair industry during crises, these results and findings can be expanded upon in future research and be applied to different agricultural crises that the industry could face.

Conclusion

This purpose of this research study was to investigate ways that fairgoers responded to communication strategies used to announce cancellations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, how fair managers used crisis communication during this time, and how fairgoers affected those decisions. An explanatory sequential (QUAN → qual) mixed method study was conducted using a survey and focus group to research fairgoers and fair managers. The researcher found fairgoers in this sample had no preference over which communication strategy was used. The researcher identified six themes of how fair managers utilized crisis communication in the fair industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two thematic codes were discovered in the process of mixing the data and found fair managers in this sample considered fairgoers' feelings and the relationships that were established between both parties before canceling events. The researcher recommends fairs continue to utilize IAFE resources and crisis communication skills and set aside time to build relationships between their entity and the fairgoers who support them.

While this research is focused directly on fair managers and fairgoers, the importance of fairs involves all of us. Maybe you work in the fair industry, or you are the teenager who spends countless hours in line for the ferris wheel, or you are the tired concessions stand volunteer who pays \$70 to spend five days of your summer evenings in a hot concession stand flipping burgers, or maybe you are a 4-H advisor responsible for helping 20 eight-year-olds make sure their hogs meet the weight requirement for the show, or you are a caring sponsor wanting to keep the

historic community fair right where it belongs. No matter the role the different stakeholders play in the fair industry, all these key stakeholders deserve to be communicated with, especially during times of crisis.

There is a need for this industry to understand how communicating can affect fairgoers. Not only will this impact the longevity of the industry, but the success of the industry as well. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were times when it felt like recovery from the crisis was not possible. This research is proof that not only is recovery and redemption from having to cancel events due to the pandemic possible, but it seems that during this time, fairgoers may have been accepting and did not change their views about the industry. While times were disappointing and confusing, the overall feelings towards the fair industry likely did not change because one fair decided to communicate using social media rather than making a phone call. This is an optimistic view for the future. Although all industries, including the fair industry, hope to never implement a crisis communication plan, they will be able to use this research to learn more about who they are communicating with during crises and see the value in crisis communication skills.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Human Subjects IRB Approval

Date: 4-12-2023

IRB #: IRB-FY2023-139
Title: Crisis Communication in the Fair Industry During COVID-19
Creation Date: 9-27-2022
End Date:
Status: **Approved**
Principal Investigator: Kelsi Opat
Review Board: MSU
Sponsor:

Study History

| | | | | | |
|-----------------|---------|-------------|-----------|----------|-----------------|
| Submission Type | Initial | Review Type | Expedited | Decision | Approved |
|-----------------|---------|-------------|-----------|----------|-----------------|

Key Study Contacts

| | | | | | |
|--------|-----------------|------|---------------------------|---------|----------------------------------|
| Member | Kelsi Opat | Role | Principal Investigator | Contact | kopat@missouristate.edu |
| Member | Olivia Robinson | Role | Primary Contact | Contact | olivia636@live.missouristate.edu |
| Member | Isabelle Bauman | Role | Co-Principal Investigator | Contact | isabellebauman@missouristate.edu |



A vibrant night scene at a fair. In the foreground, a carousel with ornate, colorful decorations and lights is visible. In the background, a roller coaster with several cars is silhouetted against a clear blue sky. The overall atmosphere is festive and illuminated by the fair's lights.

**INTERESTED IN
GIVING
FEEDBACK
ABOUT THE FAIR
INDUSTRY
DURING
COVID-19?**

Follow the link to answer
survey questions

Appendix C. The Participant Call Sent via IAFE President and CEO to all Fairs

LIST: This will go only to individuals with Fairs (see attached pull which has already removed any names w/o email)

SUBJECT: Your Fair's Assistance Needed for Important Survey!

Olivia Robinson, working on her master's degree at Missouri State University and a 5-year summer employee of the Washington Town & Country Fair is undertaking an important research study for her thesis and the result will have important impact for the fair industry. Her topic is "Crisis Communication in the Fair Industry during COVID 19". There are two parts to the research. First, a survey of YOUR stakeholders to gauge their opinion of your communication during COVID. This survey should be pushed out to your guests, vendors, etc. This is a formal survey administered by Missouri State University under the supervision of Ms. Robinson's advisor. There are two images which can be used in social media to push out the survey (click on each image to get a link to it that you can use). The survey will be open until 11:59 pm CST, December 11.

Insert a small image of Survey AD 1 and Survey AD 2 and use the links below for each

<https://iafe.s3.amazonaws.com/OR+Covid+Survey+2022/Survey+AD+1.png>

<https://iafe.s3.amazonaws.com/OR+Covid+Survey+2022/Survey+Ad+2.png>

Here is the link to the survey

(https://missouristate.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_1GJmwd5Nso27ySO)

Additionally, Ms. Robinson will convene a focus group of fair personnel (staff and/or board member responsible for communications during COVID 19 crisis) in January for more in-depth interviews. If you have interest in participating in this focus group and sharing with her your communications procedures during COVID, please complete this form (<https://forms.gle/bUUrGKBgDobkcmTk9>) and we will provide your name and contact information to her.

When the thesis has been published or otherwise made public, the results will be shared with IAFE members. Your assistance in this project is critical and most appreciated.

Sincerely,

Insert my signature

NAME, CFE
President & CEO

Appendix D. The Qualtrics Survey Sent to Fairs to Send to their Fairgoers

4/12/23, 1:32 PM

Qualtrics Survey Software

received from fairs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Communicating information is vitally important, especially in a global pandemic. This study aims to learn how information was received and how it made an impact on fairgoers, as well as how communication professionals who work in the industry can be prepared for an emergency in the future.

The results of this study are confidential and only the investigators will have access to the information which will be stored on a university secure server. Your name or personal identifying information will not be used in any published reports of this research. All information gathered during this study will be destroyed after 3 years.

The following survey has no direct benefit to you and carries little risk. If you agree to participate in this survey, please fill out the date below.

Establishing Questions-Block 2

The following survey will ask questions in regards to fair cancelations from 2019-2021 due to COVID-19. A fair is defined as a state, county, and local gathering of ticket holders, exhibitors, entertainers, and more. Fairs work to unite

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communities through non-profit efforts in livestock shows, art exhibits and vendors, concessions, motorsport attractions, carnival rides, entertainment shows, and more.

Have you attended a fair at any time during 2019-2022?

- Yes
- No

Have you received communication from a fair during 2019-2022? (e.g., emails, phone calls, social media posts)

- Yes
- No

Have you received communication announcing a fair's cancelation due to COVID-19?

- Yes
- No

Which fair did you receive the cancelation announcement from?

Comm Specifics-Block 3

The following questions ask you to recall the first time you received the announcement of your fair's cancelation. Thinking back, try to remember if you received a phone call, an email, viewed a social media post, or were informed by an outside party (e.g., word of mouth, newspaper, a source already informed of decision).

The first communication you received announcing a fair's cancelation was a phone call.

- Yes
 No

The first communication you received announcing a fair's

cancelation was an email.

- Yes
- No

The first communication you received announcing a fair's cancelation was from a social media post.

- Yes
- No

The first communication you received announcing a fair's cancelation was from an outside party (e.g., word of mouth, newspaper, a source already informed of decision).

- Yes
- No

I felt informed about the fair's decision after receiving a phone call announcing the cancelation.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree

Strongly Agree

I felt informed about the fair's decision after receiving an email announcing the cancelation.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

I felt informed about the fair's decision after viewing a social media post announcing the cancelation.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

I felt informed about the fair's decision after communicating with an outside party (e.g., word of mouth, newspaper, a source already informed of decision) announcing the cancelation.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Feelings

Answer the following questions about how you felt when you received communication from the fair?

Thinking of the first time you heard the fair was canceled, you felt...

| | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree | Strongly agree |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Frustrated towards the fair | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| At peace with the cancelation | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Confused | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Educated | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Disappointed | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Excited | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Demographics

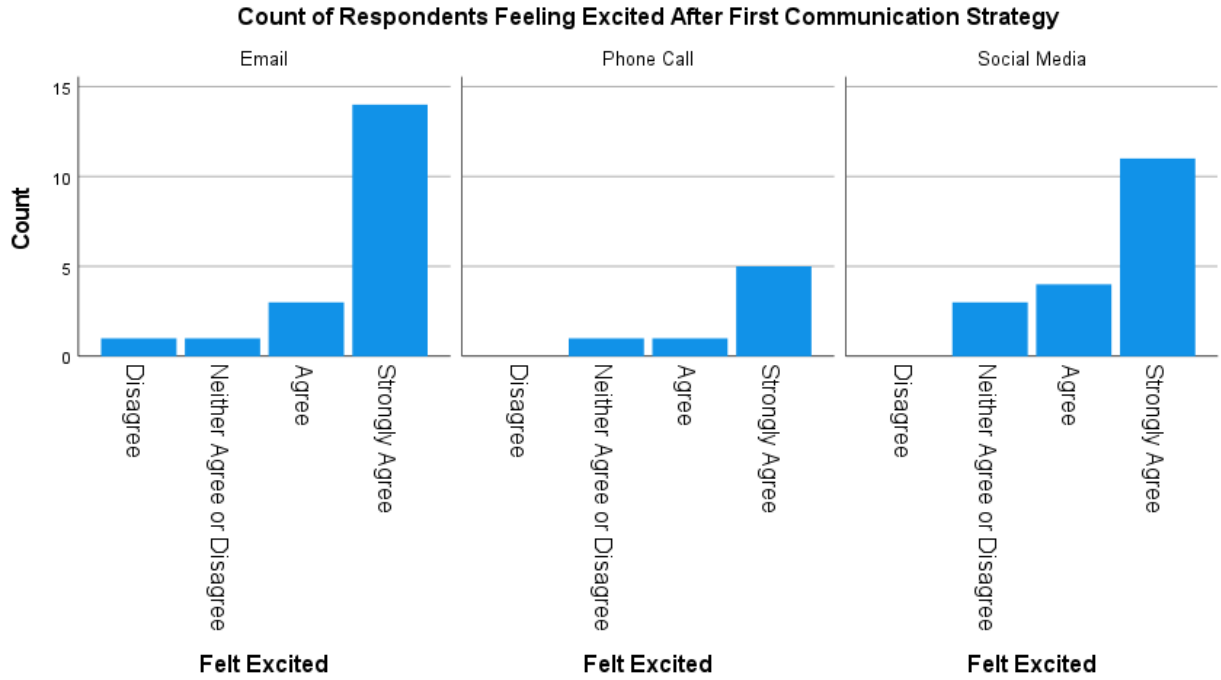
Gender- Please select the gender you identify as.

- Male
- Female
- Other

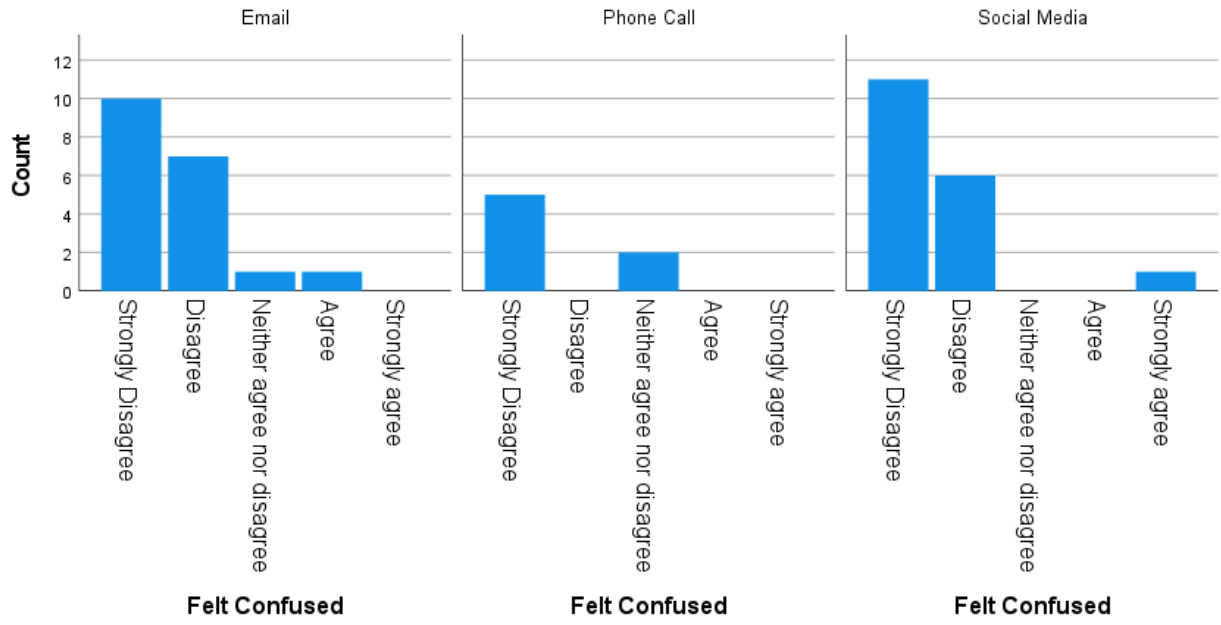
Age

Powered by Qualtrics

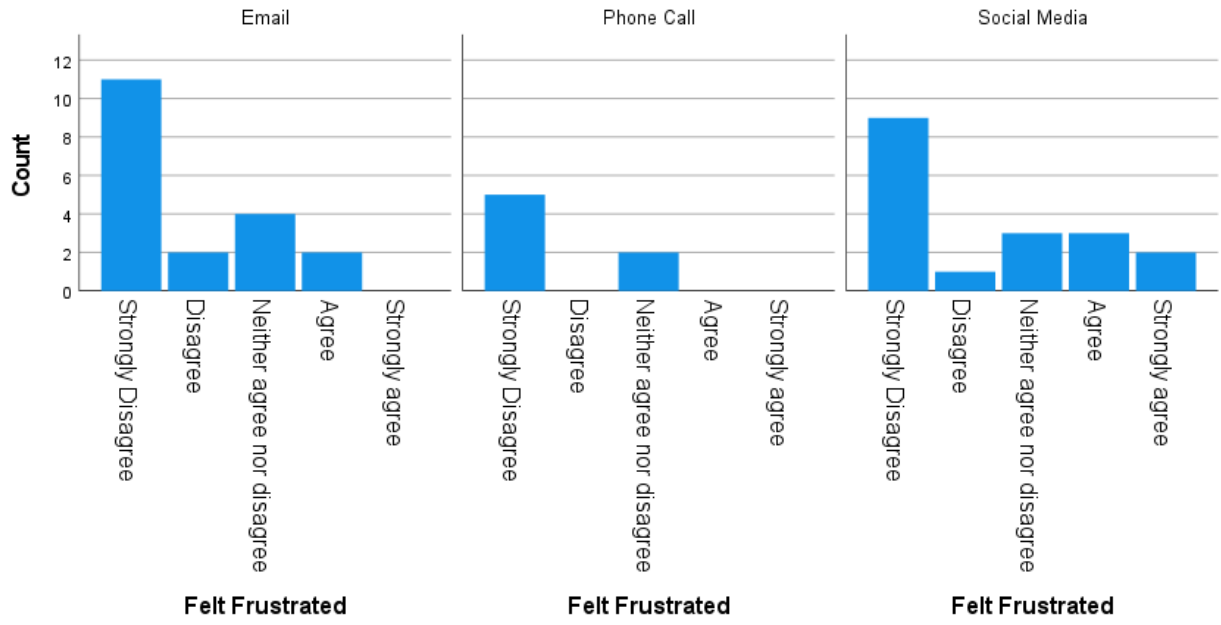
Appendix E. Count of Respondents Feeling after First Cancellation Communication Strategy



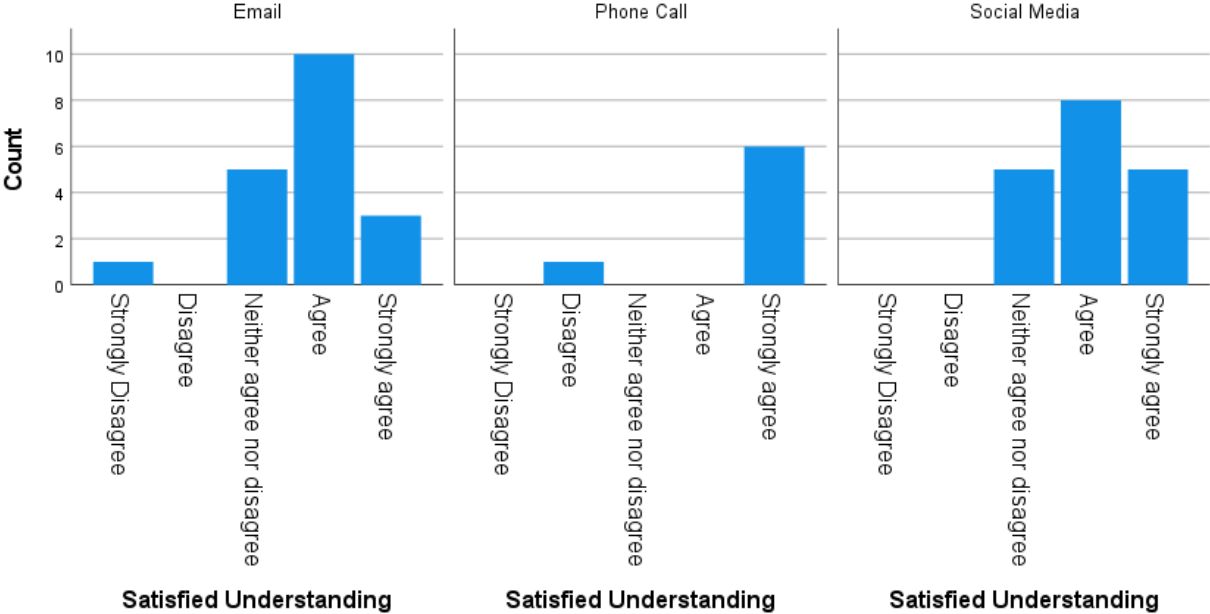
Count of Respondents Feeling Confused After First Cancellation Communication Strategy



Count of Respondents Feeling Frustrated After First Cancellation Communication Strategy



Count of Respondents Feeling Satisfied Understanding After First Cancellation Communication Strategy



Count of Respondents Feeling Disappointed After First Cancellation Communication Strategy

