

7-2021

Characteristics of Face-to-Face Communications in Agriculture Marketing and Customer Service

Ashlyn Ussery
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd>



Part of the [Agribusiness Commons](#), [Agricultural Education Commons](#), [Marketing Commons](#), and the [Organizational Communication Commons](#)

Citation

Ussery, A. (2021). Characteristics of Face-to-Face Communications in Agriculture Marketing and Customer Service. *Graduate Theses and Dissertations* Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/4213>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact scholar@uark.edu.

Characteristics of Face-to-Face Communications in Agriculture Marketing and Customer Service

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Agricultural and Extension Education

by

Ashlyn Ussery
Southern Arkansas University
Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Business, 2019

July 2021
University of Arkansas

This Thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council

Jefferson D. Miller, Ph.D.
Committee Chair

K. Jill Rucker, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Casandra K. Cox, M.S.
Committee Member

Abstract

As communication forms evolve, it is important for business leaders to not only follow the trends, but to be data-driven and make calculated decisions that are beneficial for their businesses. In this qualitative study, the researcher sought to describe how Arkansas Farm Bureau Federation used face-to-face and computer-mediated communication methods to communicate as an organization and the value their employees and members place on each communication method. Uses and Gratifications theory was used to guide this research and evaluate the results. This theory is unique in that it does not describe the effect media has on people, like many human communication theories, but rather it focuses on why people choose certain media outlets. Semi-structured telephone interviews were used to communicate with two groups of participants: employees and members. A thematic data analysis process was conducted using NVivo 11 software. The most-used face-to-face methods included county and state meetings, but adjustments during the COVID-19 pandemic also led to increased use of computer-mediated tactics, such as texts, emails, phone calls, and video conferencing. Though there was a strong preference and value placed on all face-to-face communication forms among both employees and members, there was a shared appreciation for computer-mediated communication forms when necessary. Both employees and members value face-to-face communications methods because they better support relationship-building. Recommendations resulting from this study were for Arkansas Farm Bureau and similar organizations to continue prioritizing face-to-face communications within budgetary limitations and to take advantage of computer-mediated methods, especially videoconferencing to foster growth and inclusion.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my advisor and committee chair, Dr. Jeff Miller who led me through this process and kept me on track. His guidance and advice carried me through all stages of the writing and research process. Being well aware of each step in this process, Dr. Miller could see the end when I could not and reassured me throughout each step. To my committee members, Dr. Jill Rucker and Mrs. Casandra Cox, thank you for not only bringing great comments and suggestions forward for this research but for becoming mentors that I could look up to and trust.

Thank you to my classmates for being great teammates. From celebrating the wins to enduring the tough times, each of you made a lasting impression on me and I can't wait to see what big things each of you will do throughout your life. Knowing I was not alone in this journey is what pushed me to keep going.

I am extremely grateful to my friends and family for their love and support during this process. Without each of you, this would not be possible.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Background.....	1
Context of the study	1
Need for the study.....	3
Statement of the Problem.....	4
Purpose Statement and Research Questions	4
Limitations	5
Definitions.....	5
Chapter 2 Review of Literature.....	7
Introduction.....	7
Conceptual Framework.....	7
Face-to-Face Communications	7
Computer-Mediated Communications.....	8
Theoretical Framework.....	9
Uses and Gratifications Theory	10
Summary of Literature	13
Chapter 3 Methodology	15
Introduction.....	15
Design of the Study.....	16
Subject Selection.....	16
Subject Recruitment.....	16
Subject Characteristics.....	17

Demographic Variables	18
Instrument	19
Pilot Testing	20
Data Collection Method	20
Data Analysis	21
Summary of Methodology	22
Reflexivity Statement.....	22
Chapter 4 Results	23
Organization of Data.....	23
Communications Forms	24
Research Question One.....	25
Face-to-Face.....	25
Computer-Mediated	26
Covid-19 Challenges.....	27
Communications Preferences and Values.....	28
Research Question Two	29
Research Question Three	31
Summary of Key Findings	33
Chapter 5 Conclusions and Recommendations.....	35
Research Question One	35
Research Question One Summary	37
Research Question Two	37
Research Question Two Summary.....	38

Research Question Three	39
Research Question Three Summary	40
Implications of Practice	40
Recommendations for Further Research.....	41
References.....	42
Appendices.....	46
Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter	46
Appendix B: Questioning Route.....	47

Chapter 1

Introduction

Background

Communication is an important contributor to organizational effectiveness (Lee, 2010). Today various communication modes are used to link customers and employees such as interpersonal communication, print communication, and electronic or online communication (Lee, 2010). Since the 1990's, daily tasks involved in business, banking, shopping, and general interactions are shifting from traditional face-to-face communication to computer-mediated communication (Flaherty, 1998). It is important to observe the effect of different communication modes through technology in the workplace (Lee, 2010).

Following the improvements, the internet has provided in the workplace such as quick access to documents and information, companies have been able to save money, time, and energy (Rhoads, 2010). Despite the increase in the use of computer-mediated communication tools, face-to-face interaction could hold great benefit for company to customer relations (Leamer & Storper, 2001). Describing the value attached to the extra money, time, and energy it takes to implement face-to-face communications could help inform agricultural companies of opportunities that could otherwise be missed.

Context of the Study

Arkansas Farm Bureau (ArFB) is a “grassroots organization that advocates for and promotes agriculture throughout Arkansas, the region and the country” (ArFB. 2020). ArFB is divided into two sections, the Federation organization and Insurance Company. The ArFB Federation is an independent organization run voluntarily by farm and ranch families with the

common goal of analyzing problems while acting to promote the well-being of farm families and the food and fiber they produce nationwide (ArFB. 2020).

These volunteers are in each county within the state and make up their county Farm Bureau boards. These teams of individuals, bring together their community through monthly meetings to discuss important issues members face and to provide updates on legislative events occurring at the state office. Within the Federation, a group of paid employees work at the state office. District Representatives are among those employees; these individuals directly oversee specific districts within the state, which contain a various number of counties. They spend their time traveling from county to county within their district connecting with farmers, learning the needs they have and relaying the information to other ArFB Federation employees and members.

The Insurance portion of ArFB was formed by a group of Federation leaders with a shared vision to bring better service to their members in the form of low insurance rates. Farm Bureau Insurance is among the leading writers of property and casual insurance in the state of Arkansas (ArFB. 2020). Within each sector, communicating with customers is the top priority and an element of business that they do not take lightly.

Due to ArFB's direct connection and dedication to the specific needs of farmers across Arkansas, this study will specifically focus on the Federation sector of ArFB. Each county in the state has a county Farm Bureau Federation branch where members meet face-to-face on a monthly basis and discuss challenges they experience at the local, state and national level. These in-person meetings are important to the organization's development and structure, as they promote stronger communication skills among members, who, during the face-to-face meetings learn to resolve disagreements and reduce conflict (Bettancourt et al., 1996). In fact, Carter (2004) identified attending and paying attention to the proceedings as the most important

competencies for Farm Bureau board members. ArFB leads county groups in developing state policy and influencing state and national legislation. In an effort to communicate face-to-face with their members, ArFB Federation takes a portion of their time to personally connect with each member through various modes of communication. With the organization being member owned and operated, everyone interested in being a part of the organization must go through the membership application process. The intake of membership applications and dues are processed face-to-face at the county office of the prospective member. ArFB Federation also sends out weekly newsletters and quarterly magazines, has monthly face-to-face meetings with members across the state, holds annual conferences in central locations, and has employees drive to farms daily to conduct interviews and capture photos of on-sight production.

While face-to-face communication is prevalent throughout the organization, computer-mediated modes of communication are used as well. Social media is regularly maintained and kept up-to-date for members as well as the website, which houses member information and other resources for programs and news. Daily emails between district representatives and members are sent out as well as connections through text messages and phone calls. Zoom and Microsoft Teams, computer-mediated communication resources, are utilized on a regular basis.

Need for the Study

As communication forms evolve, it is important to not only follow the trends, but to be data driven and make calculated moves that are convenient or easy for your business (Pryor & Reedy, 2009). Though multigenerational farmers emerge each year, the average age of a farmer in Arkansas is 57 years old (Census, 2019). With that said, 96% of individuals from 18 to 29 years old own smartphones while only 79% of individuals 50-64 years old own a smartphone (O’Dea, 2021). This study examined if the shift from face-to-face communication to computer-

mediated communication, was beneficial to a major agricultural business entity in Arkansas. The ArFB Federation was selected as a source of data collection based on their continued use of face-to-face communication through farm visits and in-person meetings across the state, despite their ability to connect with members through computer-mediated communication.

Statement of the Problem

Priority Three of the National Research Agenda of American Association for Agriculture Education states, that in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of agricultural productivity when it comes to meeting the needs of global food, fiber and energy, a supply of well-prepared agriculture professionals is needed to direct sustainability, revolutionary scientific discoveries in public, private and academic settings (Doerfert, 2011). Though face-to-face visits with clients are a comparatively expensive marketing communication tactic, it can be assumed organizations still find value in their investments of time and money (Rhoads, 2010). To prepare new and experienced professionals to communicate with the public, it is beneficial to know the methods and forms of communication that contribute toward making a connection with members. Though many organizations are using face-to-face forms of communication on a regular basis, such as business travel (Faulconbridge & Beaverstock, 2008), few take the time to determine the effects such has on their business (Rhoads, 2010).

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine how the ArFB Federation used face-to-face and computer-mediated communication forms to communicate as an organization and the value their employees and members place on each communication form.

The research questions asked to achieve the study's purpose regarding employee perceptions were:

1. What forms of face-to-face and computer-mediated communication did the organization's employees and members use?
2. What were ArFB's employees' and members' preferences among communication forms?
3. What is the perceived value among ArFB's employees and members regarding the face-to-face communication method versus the computer-mediated method?

Limitations

Limitations for this study included restrictions on the number of individuals the company was comfortable with us contacting. With reason, companies can be skeptical of studies that have to do with their customers so finding a company willing to have employees and members speak with a researcher could be a challenge. Another limitation included a lack of prior and reliable research on the topic. Going back too far to find research could present challenges with outdated information and research. While on the other hand, including research that is brand new, in the case of COVID-19, is a challenge because of the lack of prior knowledge of the topic. Establishing a diverse subject age range could be a limitation influential on the results of this study. With the average farmer being 57 years old (USDA, 2019), finding willing participants from a wide age range could be challenging.

Definitions

For the purpose of clarity, the important terms used in this study have been defined. The following terms are:

Face-to-Face Communication: a social interaction between individuals present in the same location, normally through speech and nonverbal communication (Ean, 2010).

Computer-Mediated Communication: various forms of communication through network computers, involving exchanges of text, audio, and/or video messages between individuals at the same time or at different times (Ean, 2010).

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

Multimedia and interpersonal interactions have been distinguishable modes of communication (Rhoads, 2010). In the 1990's, some individuals find computer-mediated forms of communication, like phone calls, to be most appropriate (Bouare & Bowen, 1990), while in the 1980's, others find county meetings to be the best form of communication (Martin & Omer, 1988). William and Rice (1983) stated emergent technologies with interactive capabilities are minimizing this distinction. Ean (2010) reports that it is important to recognize the choice of media use in employee communication; organizations have the choice to communicate either face-to-face or through multiple forms of computer-mediated communication. Face-to-face and computer-mediated capabilities in the workplace are concepts of communication that can be evaluated by using the Uses and Gratifications Theory. Selecting which communication tool is sufficient to use in a business, is based on the goals and strategic communication process of the business (Kalla, 2005).

Conceptual Framework

Face-to-face Communication

Face-to-face communication involves an exchange of verbal and nonverbal cues between individuals. Prior studies have been conducted regarding face-to-face communication preferences, effectiveness, and challenges. In a particular study regarding the preference of effective communication channels, Ean (2010) explains that face-to-face forms of communication enable individuals to hear and see messages being conveyed by the sender through body language and facial expressions. Although his results show computer-mediated

communication being referred to as the most frequently used communication method, face-to-face is mentioned as being the primary form of communication that is used, because of its ability to help build relationships and distribute information with ease. Likewise, Licht and Martin (2006) found that among farmers in a particular area, the majority communicated with other farmers and extension personnel through computer-mediated communication forms, although most participants referred to face-to-face communication forms as being a more reliable source. These computer-mediated communication forms include texting or emailing. Though these forms of communication can be beneficial, these have been viewed as a form of communication that takes away from the personal aspect of interactions and business. Ean (2010) states, when it comes to businesses, strong communication is important; employees must stay informed, so they are able to work together toward a common purpose of the company. Generational shifts have allowed for many new technologies to be integrated into the day-to-day life of most individuals but not all have adapted to using these resources as a primary source of communication (Tacken, et al., 2005). Rhoads (2010) states that for organizations and businesses, face-to-face communication is a more frequently used methods of communication, though computer-mediated communication will continue to be important to businesses as time goes on and technology expands.

Computer-Mediated Communication

Computer-mediated communication began more than fifty years ago for military and government use. Starting in the 80s and 90s, this communication source began to enter homes in the form of desktop computers and box televisions, evolving into everyday use for most individuals (Herring, 2010). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals are having to rely on computer-mediated communication forms to conduct business from their homes

(Brynjolfsson et al.,2020). Through experiences that individuals have had during the pandemic, it can be said that internet-based communication has increased engagement and flexibility in learning environments that must be closed (Lowenthal et al., 2020). This form of internet-based communication takes place on a worldwide collection of networks suited for data exchange. This interactive exchange allows users to engage in a two-way communication channel and is an inexpensive, efficient way of providing communication and information (Miller, 2009). Ean (2010) notes that computer-mediated communication is a basic function to which organizations around the world need access. In the context of agricultural business, Shaw et al. (2015) showed web-based communications and social media—Facebook, in particular—were the two most preferred methods of personal and professional communication among agriculturalists. Graybill-Leonard et al. (2011) mention that Hoffman reported on a previous American Farm Bureau Federation study that almost half of the Young Farmers and Ranchers were comfortable with computers and used social media as a way of staying connected and spreading information about their farms. This method of communication has grown to be a key factor in helping the flow of communication between an organization’s employees and clients.

Theoretical Framework

Using computer-mediated communication forms is a tool that has been increasing in use among many people (Siekpe & Kamssu, 2005). Maignan and Lukas (1997) recognize that the internet is used for many different reasons, such as shopping, connecting with friends and gaining insight on topics. Although these uses of the internet are beneficial to many, the use of internet has shown to be a vital tool for businesses to connect with customers and employees as well as stay on trend and be competitive with others in their industry (Siekpe & Kamssu, 2005).

Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory was used to guide this research and evaluate the results. Numerous researchers have completed studies using this theory and it has been found to be a useful tool in understanding the motivations and apprehensions of users toward various modes of media communication, which can include telephones, texting, and emails (Eighmey & McCord, 1998). U&G Theory is unique in it does not look at the effect media has on people, like many human communication theories, but rather why people choose certain media outlets, suggesting individuals seek specific modes of communication or media to satisfy their own needs (Katz et al., 1974). The primary objective in research applying this theory, is to understand the factors motivating people to engage in specific media or communication use (Siekpe & Kamssu, 2005). This theory proposes four main reasons why individuals choose to use specific mass communication outlets. Those include diversions, personal relationships, personal identity, and surveillance (Katz et al., 1974).

Uses and Gratifications

Audiences have a want for certain media or communication methods based on the perceived ability to gratify their social and psychological needs (Siekpe & Kamssu, 2005). McQuail (1987) identified entertainment, socialization, information, and personal identity as common needs individuals fulfil by using media. Although motives to fulfill specific needs vary among individuals, situations, and media outlets, common motivational factors include relaxation, pass time, social connections, and entertainment (Lin, 1999)

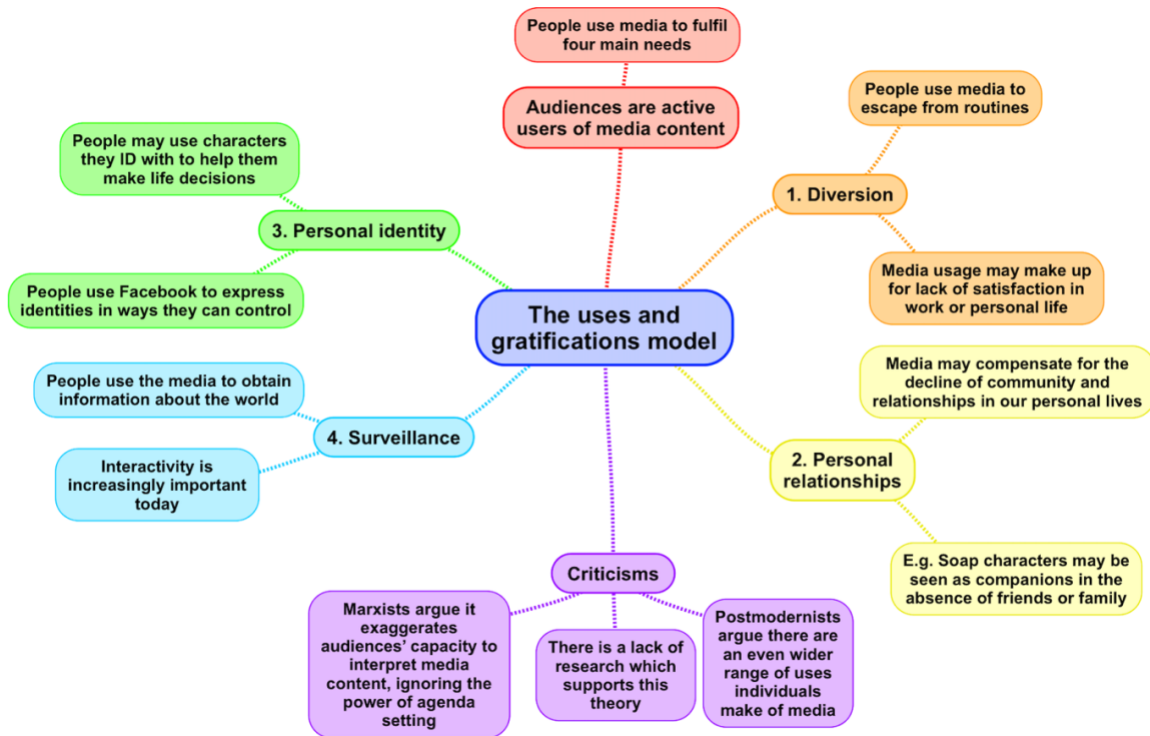


Figure 1: Uses and Gratifications Model from Thompson, K. (2019). The uses and gratifications model of audience effects. *ReviseSociology*. <https://revisesociology.com/2019/09/18/uses-gratifications-model/>

Figure 1 shows the four main reasons identified as why active media users, choose certain media outlets. Diversion is explained as individuals who use media as an escape from their daily routines or tasks. This can also be described as making up for lack of satisfaction one may feel in their life. Personal relationships are the next reason one may choose to use media communication. Seeking to connect online may be a result of one having limited connections in their day-to-day life, such as daytime television characters may fill the void of being home alone all day. The third reason that has been determined to bring people to media use is their personal identity. For example, Facebook or other social media outlets are a place for people to put their feelings and beliefs on display. The last need indicated is surveillance; people use media to gain information about the world around them, primarily the news (Katz et al., 1974).

Rubin (1985) mentions five interface assumptions of personal and mediated communication associated with U&G theory. First, communication within mass media is largely goal driven and motivated. People seek out interaction with others for many reasons, some to persuade its audience and others to offer casual information. Second, people are consistent in selecting and using modes of communication to satisfy needs. In the paradigm of U&G theory, the array of needs met by interpersonal communication are not restricted to that of basic needs. Third, audience members know their gratification needs and can choose a communication mode accordingly. Interpersonal communication is an interaction that includes more than one individual and one or both can initiate conversation by using verbal and nonverbal cues. Fourth, mass media U&G theory assumes an account can be made by each audience member regarding their purpose of communication and gratification. Fifth, the audience's motives and gratification when choosing a communication alternative can be influenced by various social and psychological factors.

Katz et al. (1974), noted little is understood as to why individuals turn to mass media for communication and why others actively avoid it. Many factors are presumed to have a hand in determining individuals' specific use of media such as an individual's psychological nature and environmental condition. Katz et al. (1974) goes on to list five factors, to go along with the four previously mentioned, that can be seen to generate a need for individuals to turn to media use. First, it is suggested tension and conflicts potentially produced by social situations may lead to media use. Secondly, awareness of problems brought about by social situations may demand information to be sought out in the media. Third, opportunities are offered through social situations to meet certain needs people have, and then those opportunities are directed to mass media platforms for complementary servicing that is also substituting. They go on to explain that

the fourth factor regards social situations bring forward certain values, in which the consumption of corresponding mass media materials facilitates. Lastly, social situations provide a familiar expectation to be connected to certain media materials and maintain membership of social groups.

Both computer-mediated and face-to-face communication methods are competing factors that individuals must choose between (Katz et al., 1974). Rhoads (2010) explained humans are a social and competitive group that rely on their communication skills for survival. With this said, these two rivaling communications efforts must compete against each other to create their own individual purpose for users (Rossi, 2002).

In past studies, computer-mediated communication has been the most used communication method in the workplace (Ean, 2010; Licht & Martin, 2006), but in each it is mentioned that face-to-face methods of communication are preferred if individuals are given the option. These studies are reminders that though individuals feel that they need computer-mediated communication to fulfil needs they have, face-to-face communication is prevalent in what most individuals do. Users of computer-mediated communication forms intentional seek this avenue of communication while face-to-face communication is unavoidable in most situations (Ruggiero, 2000).

Summary of Literature

Throughout this literature review, face-to-face communications and computer-mediated communications were discussed in relation to past research and the U&G theory. It can be determined that within each of these communication methods, there are forms of communication that individuals as well as businesses choose to use, based on specific needs they desire to fulfil (Katz et al., 1974). The needs individuals have can range from saving time, to having a desire to

build a strong relationship. The following chapter will discuss the design of this study and an overview of the subject selection process, the instrument used, and the data collection and analysis methods.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

It can be assumed that organizations find value in the investments they make toward marketing communications, whether those be face-to-face measures or computer-mediated (Rhoads, 2010). Though value is found in those areas within the company, the true effectiveness of each method is not fully understood or being evaluated. Characterizing the efforts put toward face-to-face communication and the output received by the company will help in proving or disproving the organizational assumptions of communication methods. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the characteristics that go along with putting time and money toward face-to-face communication. By doing this, both new and experienced professionals will better understand the effectiveness of different communication methods. This study focused on the perceptions of the ArFB organization's employees and active members, who spent much of their time communicating with each other.

The research questions asked to achieve the study's purpose regarding employee perceptions were:

1. What forms of face-to-face and computer-mediated communication did the organization's employees and members use?
2. What were ArFB's employees' and members' preferences among communication forms?
3. What is the perceived value among ArFB's employees and members regarding the face-to-face communication method versus the computer-mediated method?

Within this chapter, discussion will be made regarding the design of the study, subject selection, instrumentation, data collection methods and data analysis.

Design of the Study

A qualitative case study was conducted regarding employee and customer perception on face-to-face communication efforts within ArFB Federation. A qualitative research approach was valuable in this study because it provided results that described and reflected the feelings of the audience. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) view qualitative research as involving the interpretations that people have about things in their natural settings. Similarly, Merriam (2009) views this research method as finding and understanding an individual's life experiences and the meaning they associate with those experiences. Those experiences can be understood in a cost-effective way through case studies, Kitchenham et al. (1995) expresses that conducting research in the form of a case study, is a cost-effective way to examine individuals as well as organizations experiences.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with employees and members of ArFB Federation. Within this semi-structured interview process, a series of questions were prepared to ask the participants, but the interviewer had the freedom to follow up with probing questions if they thought it was beneficial to the study. Semi-structured interviews, according to Cohen and Crabtree (2006) provide a clear set of instructions while conducting the interview and can produce reliable qualitative data.

Subject Selection

Subject Recruitment

Ghalkaie (2017) discusses snowball sampling as a method of data collection that is efficient to use when there is a need to locate and identify subjects that would otherwise be difficult to find. In this study, the approach to identifying and recruiting subjects involved dividing potential participants into two groups: employees and members. Interviewing

employees was valuable because they provided a prospective on the use of face-to-face communications from within the organization toward their audiences. Along with the employees, were the company's clients who are considered members of the organization. ArFB Federation employees work closely with the members and strive to maintain strong lines of communication with them. Interviewing members provided insight into the organization's use of various methods of communication from the audience's perspective.

Following the snowball sampling approach, employees were interviewed first, then members were interviewed based on references from the employees. Employees were selected based on their position within the company to create a well-rounded group of employees that collectively represented ArFB Federation geographically and in terms of work responsibilities. Particular focus was placed on recruiting ArFB district representatives because their work roles involved the most frequent communications with members.

Subjects participating in this study were protected from harm of any kind as a result of a protocol review by the University of Arkansas Internal Review Board (IRB# 2011300564) (see Appendix A).

Subject Characteristics

Employees including the President, Vice President and Directors are seen to offer a more advanced critical prospective on communicating with the members given their insight to all issues and decisions made within the organization. Field personnel and district representatives were also seen as a valuable asset to this study as they had direct contact with the members daily. When selecting members for this study, we used the knowledge and relationships that the participating employees had already established with members across the state. This allowed for a diverse group of members to participate from different counties, age ranges and genders.

Demographic Variables

A collective group of 21 individuals involved with ArFB Federation were selected to participate in this study. 11 of the individuals were employees; four were female and seven were male. Each employee was selected based on their position within the organization to ensure a diverse group. The other ten individuals were members of ArFB; two were female and eight were male. After speaking with the ArFB employee participants, the snowball method was used to gather a diverse group of members from a range of counties across the state (Ghaljaie et al., 2017). Table 1 displays demographic information for the participating employees, including their gender, age, level of education and primary location.

Table 1
Employee Demographics

Participant Number	Gender	Age	Education
1	Female	37	Bachelor's
2	Female	48	Bachelor's
3	Male	30	Bachelor's
4	Female	37	Master's
5	Male	47	Bachelor's
6	Female	25	Doctorate
7	Male	49	Bachelor's
8	Male	40	Master's
9	Male	35	Master's
10	Male	35	Bachelor's
11	Male	65	Master's

Six of the eleven employee participants were district representatives. These individuals were chosen as primary participants because they communicate regularly with members across the state. The other five employees work at the state office in various roles. They do not travel as much as the district representatives but are frequently in contact with members about various issues and topics.

Table 2 displays demographic information for the participating members, including their gender, age, highest level of education, number of years they have been a member of ArFB, employment status and primary location.

Table 2
Member Demographics

Participant Number	Gender	Age	Education	Years with ARFB	Occupation	Location
12	Male	58	Masters	33	Retired	Newton Co.
13	Male	35	Masters	11	Self Employed	Monroe Co.
14	Male	62	Masters	35	Self Employed	Faulkner Co.
15	Female	55	Masters	34	Self Employed	Boone Co.
16	Male	41	Bachelors	11	Employed for wages	Washington Co.
17	Male	35	Bachelors	11	Employed for wages	Craighead Co.
18	Male	49	Bachelors	15	Employed for wages	Hempstead Co.
19	Male	32	Bachelors	8	Employed for wages	Columbia Co.

Arkansas’ North Central, Northwest, Northeast, Southwest, and Central regions in Arkansas were represented in member participants, with ages ranging from 27-67 and over 100 years of membership among them. These factors along with others like education, gender and years engaging with ArFB, provided a group of individuals with diverse backgrounds and ensured the researcher was collecting a well-rounded survey of members’ preferences and value of face-to-face and computer-mediated communication forms within the ArFB organization.

Instrument

Qualitative research is frequently conducted by use of interviews. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) suggest that when conducting interviews, researchers should be able to identify and

describe areas in a person's subjective interpretations of experiences and attitudes that would otherwise go undetected. Though an interview guide was created with a list of specific questions asked during each interview, this study utilized the semi-structured interview process. McIntosh & Morse (2015) described this process as a way for participants to answer the specific questions that have been outlined based on the goals of the research but gives the interviewer the opportunity to ask further questions based on the participants response. There were unique interview guides for each category of subjects – employees and members (see appendix B). The interview guides, which were reviewed by a panel of communications experts for validity, included four questions, each of which elicited responses that addressed the specifics of the research questions.

Pilot Testing

Once created, pilot tests were conducted with four test subjects who were not a part of the group of subjects being studied, but who had similar characteristics. Cognitive interviews were employed with these test subject to refine the questioning route and mitigate the presence of bias (Creswell, 2013), but no major changes were required.

Data Collection Method

Field interviews were conducted via phone to ask members and employees an organized list of questions. This type of method of data collection was used to help obtain detailed information as well as ensure a higher response rate among the interviewees. The use of telephone interviews provided access to participants that face-to-face could not, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Opdenakker, 2006). Interviews were scheduled based on the contacts given by employees at Arkansas Farm Bureau Federation. Once scheduled, interviews were conducted by asking a prepared list of four questions and if necessary, follow up questions. Each

interview lasted approximately eight to ten minutes. Each interview was audio recorded to ensure every detail was captured accurately. Since semi-structured interviews often contain follow up questions to the interviewee, Cohen and Crabtree (2006) mention that it can be difficult to take notes during an interview and that recording the conversation to later be transcribed is essential to collecting reliable data from the interviews. Transcriptions for each interview occurred using a Zoom audio transcription and were further edited for accuracy by the researcher.

Data Analysis

Once all interviews were conducted a thematic approach, described as the constant comparative method, was used to determine themes among the collection of conversations. Constant comparative method is an analysis tool that looks at categorizing a particular event or action into a more defined class (Miles, 2020). This is a valuable tool in analyzing the raw qualitative data through its ability to identify areas of relative repetition that led to the emergence of themes. Williams and Moser (2019) describes a three-step process when identifying themes in qualitative research. Open coding is used first to pull all the data together in larger groups. The second process is axial coding which is the process of sifting through the larger groups of data and categorizing specific themes. Lastly, selective coding is the process in which the researcher takes the themes identified in the axial coding process and creates meaningful conclusions about them. In using this approach with the data collected from this study, all transcribed interviews were put into NVivo11 software to help organize the transcribed interviews with participants. This software was further used to guide the axial coding process by helping organize specific words or phrases used by participants to create themes and subthemes of the study. The researcher then put together all the results of the study by considering the research questions,

U&G theory and interview themes to create a comprehensive and meaningful conclusion to the study.

Summary of Methodology

This chapter explains the steps that were taken to collect and analyze data based on the research questions discussed. The employee participants were chosen based on their position within ArFB and what region of the state they worked in. Member participants were selected by use of snowball sampling where we relied on the help of participating employees to help us reach willing members. Using an interview guide, ten employees and ten members were interviewed for this study. NVivo 11 software was used to organize and analyze the data collected. After the data analysis, themes were identified and discussed in the following chapter.

Reflexivity Statement

The researchers involved in this study worked to maintain objectivity throughout the data analysis. However, an understanding of their personal professional backgrounds is important to provide context for the study and to help account for potential biases in interpretation. The lead author and research director has taught and studied agricultural communications for more than 20 years. He is also a member of the county Farm Bureau where he resides. The other primary researcher, who conducted the data analysis, has worked closely with the Arkansas Farm Bureau Federation through a summer internship with the Public Relations Department. Both the primary researchers' backgrounds include obvious connections to the Arkansas Farm Bureau Federation that could be the source of subjective interpretations. Likewise, the rest of the research team (who provided assistance and peer review during and after the data analysis process) were experienced qualitative researchers with ties to agriculture through academia.

Chapter 4

Results

Agricultural marketing and customer service organizations have incorporated various computer-mediated communication forms into their daily routines to help in connecting their employees and customers, yet little research has been conducted to confirm technology preferences among both parties as well as their preferences for computer-mediated communication forms over the use of face-to-face communication forms. The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the characteristics that were attached to investing time and money into connecting with customers through face-to-face communication. Focusing particularly on perceptions of an organization's employees who spend much of their time conducting face-to-face communications as well as looking at the preferences of the members they serve. In this study, face-to-face communication was defined as a social interaction between individuals present in the same location, normally through speech and nonverbal communication. Computer-mediated communication was defined as various forms of communication through network computers, involving exchanges of text, audio, and/or video messages between individuals at the same time or at different times.

Organization of Data

To collect data, phone interviews were used, and conversation was guided by a semi-structured list of four questions (Appendix B). These questions were developed using the research questions that were formulated at the beginning of the study as well as the fundamental principles discussed in the U&G theory. The findings of the study were broken down by research question.

The Communication Forms section of the findings refers to research question one, which focuses on defining the characteristics of the two communication methods. The first two interview questions that were asked during data collection helped to identify specific examples of communication forms, including meetings, conferences, workshops, farm and office visits, email, texting, phone calls, and Zoom meetings. Both members and employees of ArFB were asked the same questions regarding communications forms used within the organization.

The Communication Preferences and Values section refers to research questions two and three, which were used to guide this study in determining the preferences and perceived value of face-to-face and computer-mediated communication forms among all participants. The last two interview questions helped guide participants in revealing their communication preferences and which form of communication they valued most when communicating with Arkansas Farm Bureau.

Communication Forms

Identifying specific ways that ArFB communicated with its members and employees contributed to understanding how they sent and received information daily and what was considered *normal* for the organization. Interview questions one and two were used to help participants explain the different efforts that ArFB used to communicate back and forth with employees and members—both face-to-face and computer-mediated. Overall, participants were familiar with ArFB’s communication methods and were able to go into detail about both face-to-face and computer-mediated efforts.

RQ 1: What forms of face-to-face and computer-mediated communication did the organization's employees and members use?

Face-to-Face

Participants were asked to describe how they as ArFB employees and members use or have used face-to-face communication forms while interacting with other employees and members of the organization.

Arkansas Farm Bureau is a grassroots organization that works at the state and national level but ultimately begins at the local community level. Employees working as district representatives are the liaisons for the local communities to get their comments and concerns to the state office officials. Several members mentioned their district representative as a form of communication and that their presence at meetings were beneficial to ArFB face-to-face communication efforts. District Representatives were in contact with the leaders in all departments at the state office to ensure that they were up-to-date with all information that might be important to the counties they oversee. Each month they travel to most, if not all, county meetings to provide information to the members present, answer questions, and take concerns back to the state leaders. Members stated that they really appreciated their district representative and the personal aspect that he/she/they brought to the organization through their in-person presence at the county meetings. Employees, especially those who were district representatives themselves, commented on their experiences going to county meetings and how that allowed them to have a deeper connection with the members across the state through personal interactions on a regular basis.

Member 12: The best way that they [ArFB] communicate face-to-face is throughout monthly board meetings when we have our district representative come and give us updates. That's a direct face-to-face and very personal interaction. In my mind that is one way to get valuable information.

Employee 2: *Farm Bureau is good about reaching the grassroots members, and they [ArFB] do this through county meetings and annual meetings, where they bring together all the leadership and members.*

Employee 10: *We have several meetings throughout the year, like the county board meetings that are monthly in all 76 counties. In a typical year, we use our face-to-face communications and go to meetings extremely frequently; I mean each district Director has 10-12 counties and they're going to hit 10-12 board meetings a month for most of the year.*

Though conferences and county meetings were the two main forms of face-to-communication discussed among both employees and members, farm and office visits were also mentioned as ways for members and employees to effectively communicate face-to-face.

Employee 5: *We [ArFB] make farm visits with our members. Sometimes the only way to catch our members is on their combine during harvest season or on a tractor during planting season or maybe when they are getting a new flock of chicks at their poultry houses.*

Member 15: *We have our monthly board meetings as well as county meetings that are face-to-face. If there are special projects to be worked on, there are meetings for those who usually happen in the office.*

Computer-Mediated

In a similar way, participants were asked to describe how they as ArFB employees and members use or have used computer-mediated communication forms while interacting with other employees and members within the organization. The use of email and text messaging were among the top responses for both employee and member participants. When talking about emails and text messages, Farm Bureau's Public Affairs and Government Relations Department was mentioned as using this tool as a convenient way to send out reminders to a mass group of individuals regarding political issues or bills to be voted on, as well as to give updates on legislative sessions throughout the year.

Member 13: *We get a lot of emails that give us updates as to what is going on with Farm Bureau. After we've talked about issues and policies, either before or after meetings, updates are sent (by email and text messaging) regarding discussions that occurred.*

Employee 11: *I use email for convenience, as well as text message. If I'm not able to get ahold of individuals, I will send text messages in a quick, timely fashion.*

Employee 10: *Probably in the last five years, we've moved to a more email base for things like letters that go out to county presidents and member service representatives. I used to get tons of paper mail and we've transitioned majority of that over to emails and even phone calls.*

Farm Bureau has social media accounts that are kept up-to-date on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. These platforms were discussed by one employee and one member as a way that information is distributed not only to them but also members of the public who follow the accounts.

Member 13: *They do a great job using social media and letting the public follow them. That is a great place that they keep up -to-date with what is going on with agriculture around the state and Farm Bureau in general.*

COVID-19 Challenges

In the middle of this study, COVID-19 resulted in drastic changes in communication forms around the world. Face-to-face communication was limited because of social distancing. Therefore, computer-mediated forms of communication became the new norm ArFB. Throughout the interviews, participants often compared their experience from previous years to the current year, describing the positives as well as negatives that came with this change in communication. All participants—employees and members alike—discussed COVID-19 in their responses.

Employee 2: *In the past, [ArFB] didn't do a lot of computer-mediated communication unless it was by email or text message, but elements like Zoom and Microsoft Teams have mostly come about since COVID. Now [ArFB] will have meetings that would normally be face-to-face with the different commodity's people, by Zoom or Microsoft Teams.*

Member 15: *Because of COVID-19, we have the option to attend the monthly board meetings face-to-face or using the Zoom platform. They have done an amazing job at reaching out to members through this difficult time.*

Two employees and one member mentioned how important Zoom became during county and state meetings. Members were not having to travel long distances or leave their farms; therefore, attendance for county and state meetings that were conducted via Zoom exceeded that of past face-to-face meetings. With more member engagement via video, more votes were being recorded during business meetings, and an opportunity for ArFB to spread more awareness of issues became clearly evident to employees and members.

Employee 9: The first few months, engagement wasn't very high. People really didn't know how to use it, and then, once everyone became more comfortable with it, we've seen the best turnout we've ever had! In December for the Annual Convention, we had counties that hadn't been to a meeting or voted in 15 plus years present and participating. In short, Zoom was very well received.

Employee 10: Since COVID-19 and having to use Zoom for most meetings, we have found that member engagement is actually up from when we were meeting face-to-face because our members are able to be at home and just jump on to the Zoom call and stay up-to-date and engaged all while never leaving their home or tractor cab.

Throughout the interviews, it was clear participants were familiar and comfortable with the face-to-face communication forms like county meetings, state conferences and farm visits as well as a few computer-mediated forms such as texting, phone calls and email. They had only recently been required to adapt to computer-mediated methods like Zoom, because of the circumstances presented by COVID-19. Participants were clear in their preferences for face-to-face communication over Zoom meetings, but a majority of them had adapted well to the changes and had found a positive outlook on the shift in communication.

Member 17: When COVID-19 came, Farm Bureau, just like everyone else, switched everything they did to Zoom. I like to use Zoom because before COVID-19 we did a lot of driving for just a quick meeting. Even at the county level, the ability to call a meeting with short notice and have people able to attend is a great asset.

Communication Preferences and Values

Interview questions three and four were important in identifying the participants preference in which communication form they rely on most as well as their perceived value of

face-to-face versus computer-mediated methods of communication. These results were used to answer the last two research questions.

In the initial parts of the interviews, participants were asked to describe the forms of face-to-face and computer-mediated communication used by the ArFB organization. Their responses provided a good foundation and segue to discovering their true thoughts and feelings regarding the two methods of communication. The final two questions, then, asked about their preferences among the communication forms and about what they value most among the communication methods.

RQ2: What were ArFB's employees' and members' preferences among communication forms?

In this study, we asked participants to explain their preference in communication forms (phone calls, county meetings, texting, etc.). Nearly all expressed a preference for face-to-face, except one employee, who preferred computer-mediated forms of communication. Among the majority who preferred face-to-face, many also expressed that they still used both methods, even though their preference was for face-to-face. The opportunity to build relationships was a common theme that emerged throughout this study. Employee and member participants wanted to build relationships with others involved in ArFB and found it easiest to do so through face-to-face interactions. Participating in county and state meetings were among the top forms of face-to-face communication preferred. Employees found building relationships with members of the organization as one of the top priorities in their job. Those who work in the office as well as district representatives mentioned having a strong relationship with ArFB members was a priority to them.

Employee 4: *Establishing relationships within this organization is important, and it's so much easier to do that when we can talk face-to-face at a meeting or conference or even just in the office.*

Employee 3: *To have a long conversation with someone, I prefer meeting with them face-to-face. It just allows for a more personal interaction, and I feel like I make a better connection with people that way. If all I ever do is send texts and emails, they are probably less likely to sit and listen to what I have to say.*

Likewise, members also found it important to build relationships with the employees and other members in order to stay connected. Multiple mentioned body language and how important of an element that can be to understanding the way someone feels about the situation being discussed.

Member 16: *I like face-to-face communication; it is just the way I've always done business. I know that you can't always do everything in person, especially during COVID-19, but I think the best form of communication for me is in those face-to-face events, I think a person just gets more out of it and is able to stay more connected.*

Member 13: *I prefer in person meetings, not just Zoom call video because I am able to better feel what the other person is saying. You're not just looking at a person's face when you are in a face-to-face meeting, like on a video call, you're getting to see their whole-body language and get a better feel as to how they feel about a topic you're discussing.*

Member 12: *I like to pass information on to my district representative personally or at a county board meeting at a regional meeting, the second-best way to communicate is through telephone.*

Though computer-mediated forms of communication were mentioned, no participants preferred strictly computer-mediated communication forms over face-to-face forms; rather they chose an avenue of communication based on their situation. It was common for those employees and members that found importance in both computer-mediated communication forms and face-to-face forms to mention texting, phone calls or email as being a great time saver but in person meetings being a great relationship builder.

Employee 8: *I think it kind of depends on the situation. Personally, I prefer face-to-face meetings, I like building those relationships and I think Farm Bureau as an organization*

that really drives on those relationships between members, employees, and leaders. With that being said though, in today's world having the ability to do that with a lot of people in a hurry sure has its benefits. With having a legislative session right now, we can spur of the moment send out action requests and engage our members with group texts and emails. So overall, I think it just depends on the situation. I think they both have their place, and both can be a good thing.

Employee 6: Anytime I can have a face-to-face conversation with someone that is preferred but I am willing to pick up the phone and call someone if need be; it just depends on the situation and topic being discussed.

Member 14: Face-to-face meetings are still my preference. I like to interact with my audience, and I think that is due to my age and the fact that it's just my comfort zone. Though I would rather be in person with someone, I am vastly adapting to other forms of communications, particularly with video conferencing, it is a time saver.

Overall, both employee and member participants preferred to engage with ArFB by use of face-to-face communication like county meetings and state conferences, though it was a common theme for participants to acknowledge their use of computer-mediated communication forms in certain situations to save time. Their awareness of the value of computer-mediated communication forms made for an easy transition to the last research question which was established to evaluate the value that both employees and members placed on face-to-face versus computer-mediated communication methods.

RQ 3: What is the perceived value among ArFB's employees and members regarding the face-to-face communication method versus the computer-mediated method?

In determining if the extra time, money, and effort exerted to communicate face-to-face was as valuable as the time, money, and effort that could be saved using computer-mediated communication, it was important to get a direct response from the employees and members regarding what they valued most when communicating with ArFB. Of all participants, eight members and six employees said that they found face-to-face communication methods to be most valuable and were in agreeance that this method will not be replaced by computer-mediated

methods. The other two members and five employees found both face-to-face and computer-mediated to be valuable but if given the choice would rather communicate face-to-face. No participant found computer-mediated to be most valuable.

The themes that emerged during the analysis of the interviews in relation to why employees and members found value in face-to-face communication methods were the ability to build relationships, the ease of reading body language as well as facial expressions and the comfort one may feel to voice their opinion or ideas.

Employee 8: To me, face-to-face is more valuable. With the relationship's aspect of ArFB, that's at the core of what we do and how we operate and that can't be replaced with virtual communication at all.

Member 15: I would say face-to-face for the simple fact that I like to read peoples actions and get an idea of their communications style. Given the challenges COVID-19 has presented I am okay with other methods but face-to-face would be my number one most valuable way of communicating

Member 14: Face-to-Face. Particularly in meetings where there are needs to be discussion, I think it's better. For the participants, I think they feel freer to voice their opinions face-to-face rather than over the phone or Zoom.

Like mentioned under research question two, some participants found value in both face-to-face and computer-mediated communication forms. Employees and members alike mentioned they understand and found value in both forms, though most had just recently been introduced to a high volume of computer-mediated communication because of COVID-19. The common theme among all who valued both face-to-face and computer-mediated was that face-to-face was their number one form that they valued most but that computer-mediated options were time savers and allowed people to continue their day-to-day activities while also participating where they may not be able to otherwise.

Employee 1: It honestly depends on what our task is. When we are really getting into the nuts and bolts of what we are planning, face-to-face is better. We can break up into

groups easier and I feel like people are a little more comfortable in person to share their ideas and opinions. Having a computer-mediated option though, is very resourceful. It can be hard for some to get away from their day jobs to be at a meeting but with a Zoom option, where they would normally not be able to attend and contribute, they have been able too.

Employee 3: I think they both have their purpose. In my job, I am responsible for 13 counties, so I've got a lot of people to get information out to. For the most part, I will send out texts or pick up the phone and call. I can get more information from someone in a 15-minute face-to-face conversation than I probably can by sending emails back and forth for weeks, so I feel like face-to-face is a lot faster and a lot more effective, but it's not always possible, so it takes a mix of both.

Member 17: I would say both at times. If it's a discussion that I feel needs to have a great impact, I like to have that face-to-face but at the same time, the world is not slowing down and the ability to get 10-15 people on a call is a great asset. So, I would say both are very important assets to the organization's communication efforts.

Summary of Key Findings

ArFB's communication characteristics were defined as in-person meetings, office visits, farm visits, emails, texting, phone calls and Zoom calls. Results revealed that though there was a strong preference and value placed on all face-to-face communication forms among both employees and members, there was a shared appreciation for computer-mediated communication forms when necessary. County and state meetings were mentioned as a place where member could bring information forward to ArFB leaders and in the same way members could speak freely and openly to their district and state leaders. Phone calls, texting and email are computer-mediated communication forms that were used before the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was clear that during the pandemic, employees and member became accustomed to these forms of communication along with others like Zoom video calls as their primary form of communication. Employees made it clear that though they would rather be face-to-face with members and other employees, Zoom has allowed members that did not normally engage with the organization an opportunity to stay connected and be informed. The next chapter will analyze the research

questions discussed throughout the study and how the qualitative data along with the U&G theory could be used to answer them.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study examined the communication methods of ArFB Federation to determine the preference and value of face-to-face and computer-mediated communication forms among both employees and members of the organization. Chapter five reports on conclusions drawn from chapter four, implications for practice, and recommendations for further research.

***RQ 1: What forms of face-to-face and computer-mediated communication did the organization's employees and members use?
efforts?***

The most frequently discussed characteristic of face-to-face communication used by ArFB employees and members was county meetings. As mentioned by Employee 10 in the previous chapter, these meetings take place in all 75 counties, each month, ran by the counties board members or individuals that live in that county attend the meetings along with the district representative. The importance of members at the grassroots level meeting and communicating in person is supported in the literature. Carter's (2004) description of Florida Farm Bureau's grassroots structure demonstrated the importance of strong communications among Farm Bureau's grassroots members. The second communication form that was mentioned most frequently by ArFB participants was conferences, which take place throughout the year and are a time for all counties to come together as one. These two forms of face-to-face communication involve members and employees to travel to a designated location and participate in discussion. The U&G theory that was used to formulate this study strives to find the why behind communication form choices to gratify specific needs (Rubin & Rubin, 1985). Katz (1974)

mentions the factors that go into these discussions often include the individual's psychological nature and environmental condition.

When looking at the responses regarding computer-mediated communication efforts, Zoom was mentioned by each participant. Texting and email were the second most frequent communication forms mentioned with phone calls being last. During the time of this study, COVID-19 was at its peak, which brought about responses from participants about computer-mediated communication forms that may not have been consistent with responses pre-COVID-19. Text, email, and phone call were all mentioned as everyday forms of computer-mediated communication that most were familiar with and very comfortable in using. Zoom on the other hand is a new concept to most. For example, employee 2 mentioned,

“In the past, [ArFB] didn't do a lot of computer-mediated communication unless it was by email or text message, but elements like Zoom and Microsoft Teams have mostly come about since COVID-19.”

Graybill-Leonard et al. (2011) referred to a study by the American Farm Bureau Federation reporting that 46% of young farmers and ranchers use social media as a way to stay informed and spread information about their farms. Shaw et al. (2015) refers to web-based communication and social media platforms as preferred forms of communication among individuals involved in agriculture, though the results of this study showed social media was not at the forefront of communication forms among participants. In fact, only two participants mentioned the use of social media in their responses.

An obvious omission from several subjects' discussions about communication forms was social media. Though one member and one employee noted that the organization invests significant effort into communicating with members through social media, the bulk of the subjects did not mention social media as a computer-mediated communication form.

Research Question One Summary

Arkansas Farm Bureau Federations employees and members alike mentioned county meetings and state conferences most when asked what forms of face-to-face communication ArFB uses. Regarding computer-mediated communications, text and email were among the top responses, though Zoom was mentioned by each participant as being a communication tool used frequently within the last year because of COVID-19.

RQ2: What were ArFB's employees' and members' preferences among communication forms?

Among all communication forms mentioned throughout the interview process, county meetings, texting and emails were among the top communication forms preferred by both employees and members. Though face-to-face communication forms (county and state meetings) were the overwhelming preference, it is important to note that most participants had an appreciation for computer-mediated communication forms (texts, emails, phone calls); mentioning it is a convenient, time saving and inclusive tool. Because of COVID-19 and the changes it brought forward for communication methods around the world, Zoom was mentioned as an avenue of communication that individuals do not mind using if a face-to-face option is not available. Connection through video conferencing is allowing more flexibility for individuals with full schedules as well as decreasing the pressure for introverted individuals that wouldn't normally not come to meetings or speak up (Lowenthal et al., 2020).

Despite the shift to computer-mediated communications during COVID-19, county meetings were the preferred communication form which emphasized the notion that relationships were important to not only the ArFB organization but also to the members they served. Rubin (1985) pointed out that there are five assumptions of personal and mediated communication that

the U&G theory was formulated around. The second assumption mentioned was the idea that people chose to use a mode of communication based on a need they are trying to fill. When looking at the results of this study we find it is consistent and accurate to say that participants identified a strong need to build relationships and to be able to see body language, therefore, they prefer attending county and state meetings in person to interact with other individuals in the organization face-to-face. Similarly, when employees needed to save time or provide a convenient option to meetings, they prefer to send text messages and emails or have a Zoom calls. Overall, it was common for participants, both employees and members, to opt for a computer-mediated communication form if they felt it was the right thing or if other options were unavailable. The fifth assumption was that the audience's motives can be influenced by various factors when choosing a communication alternative. Though most participants had a clear response to which communication form they preferred, some mentioned they had awareness of the advantages of the other forms of communication if their preferred form of communication or the best option for the situation was not available. For example, Employee six mentioned that anytime they could have a face-to-face conversation with someone, it was what they preferred. Picking up the phone and calling someone, though not preferred, was something they were willing to do if a face-to-face option was not available.

Research Question Two Summary

Though face-to-face forms of communication were preferred among all participants, employees mentioned that they were willing to text or have a phone call with coworkers or members of the organization if need be. Similarly, members made it clear that going to county meetings and speaking with others in person was important to them, but they were willing to use texting, email, and phone calls to communicate with the organization. Mentioned by each

participant, Zoom video calls were a form of computer-mediated communication that were appreciated and preferred if a face-to-face option was unavailable. Multiple employees mentioned this form of communication as being not only an asset to the organization during the pandemic where people could not come together, but a tool that allowed non-engaged members, who pre-COVID-19, were not able to be involved because of situations like travel restrictions or work schedule issues, the opportunity to continue with their day-to-day responsibilities while also being engaged and informed on business pertaining to Arkansas Farm Bureau.

RQ 3: What is the perceived value among ArFB's employees and members regarding the face-to-face communication method versus the computer-mediated method?

Bouare and Bowen (1990) found in a study regarding the communication methods agriculture Extension Agents find most appropriate, that office calls and telephone calls ranked highest among all participants. Conversely, Martin and Omer (1988) found farmers would rather Extension agents use community or county meetings when communicating with them. When discussing the value of communication methods with ArFB employees and members, face-to-face communication was the most valued communication methods among all participants in this study. Throughout the interviews, being able to see non-verbal cues, especially body language and facial expressions, were notable themes.

While it was not the most valued method among participants, the computer-mediated method of communication was mentioned as being a valuable tool, especially during COVID-19 times, but also during non-COVID-19 times. When talking about the value of computer-mediated communication, employees mentioned how having a paper trail is a great asset to their job and how email and texts provide an avenue for those to be organized well. Many members mentioned how convenient it is to participate in meetings and other activities via Zoom. Katz et

al. (1973), explained that an assumption that could be made regarding U&G theory was that there were other sources than just media that compete to satisfy specific needs. This idea brings forward the needs individuals have for using face-to-face communications while also holding room for computer-mediated methods, depending on situations and needs they would like to satisfy (Rubin, 1985). The interviews conducted throughout this study give a clear understanding of the needs that the members and employees involved with ArFB have when communicating with the organization such as building relationships, offering convenience, and improving engagement.

Research Question Three Summary

Both employees and members of ArFB continued to circle back to their preference of building relationships with others in the organization and the value they place on seeing others body language and hearing what others have to say face-to-face.

Implications for Practice

Based on the conclusions gathered by the investigator, recommendations for practice for communication methods in ArFB can be made. These recommendations can help improve communication efficiency and effectiveness to their audience in a way that they prefer and value with respect to time, money, and effort.

1. Recognize members and employee's preference for face-to-face communication and their sense of value for it and continue to prioritize face-to-face with regard to budget.
2. Continue to use computer-mediated communication forms, especially video conferencing, after COVID-19 and as a tool to foster growth and inclusion.

3. Promote media that could foster stronger communications with members, especially social media, which is being used by the organization but was not mentioned as an important medium by either employees or members.

Recommendations for Further Research

The investigator has made the following suggestions for further research based on the conclusions and recommendations for practice found in the study.

1. Conduct similar studies with non-agricultural organizations that stereotypically may not embrace face-to-face communication forms as much as conservative, traditional agricultural organizations like Arkansas Farm Bureau.
2. Conduct similar studies with other agriculture entities such as Farm Credit, USDA, state Cooperative Extension Services, which have some organizational similarities to Farm Bureau.
3. Arkansas Farm Bureau could further examine how COVID-driven changes in communication forms have affected marketing communications and customer service in order to build on successes and prevent repeating failures.

References

- Bettancourt, B. A., Dillman, G., and Wollman, N. (1996). The intragroup dynamics of maintaining a successful grassroots organization: A case study. *Journal of Social Issues*, 52(1).
- Bouare, D., and Bowen, B. E. (1990). Communications Methods Used by Agricultural Extension Agents, *Journal of Applied Communications*: 74(1), <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.1507>
- Brynjolfsson, E., Horton, J., Ozimek, A., Rock, D., Sharma, G. and TuYe, H. (2020). COVID-19 and remote work: an early look at US data. DOI 10.3386/w27344
- Carter, H. S. F. (2004). Leadership expectations and perceptions of the Florida Farm Bureau Federation (Publication No. 3144179) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Florida]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Census of agriculture facts sheet. Retrieved Aril, 2019 from www.nass.usda.gov/AgCensus
- Cohen D, and Crabtree B. (2006). Qualitative research guidelines project. <http://www.qualres.org/HomeSemi-3629.html>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). Qualitative inquiry & research design: choosing among five approaches (3rd ed.). *Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*
- Denzin, N. K., and Lincoln, N. S. (2005). The sage handbook of qualitative research (3rd ed.), *Sage Publications*
- Ean, C. L. (2010). Face-to-face versus computer-mediated communication: exploring employees' preference of effective employee communication channel. *International Journal of the Advancement of Science & Arts*. 1.
- Eighmey, J., and McCord, L. (1998). Adding value in the information age: uses and gratifications of sites on the world wide web. *Journal of Business Research* 41, 187-194 [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963\(97\)00061-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963(97)00061-1)
- Faulconbridge, J. R., and Beaverstock, J. (2008). Geographies of international business travel in the professional service economy. *Mobility and technology in the workplace*, ed. D. Hislop. Milton Park, 87-102.
- Flaherty, L., Pearce, K., and Rubin, R. (1998). Internet and face-to-face communication: Not functional alternatives, *Communication Quarterly*, 46(3), 250-268.
- Ghaljaie, F., Naderifar, M., and Goli, H. (2017). Snowball Sampling: A Purposeful Method of Sampling in Qualitative Research. *Strides in Development of Medical Education*, 14(3), doi: 10.5812/sdme.67670

- Graybill-Leonard, M., Meyers, C., Doerfert, D., and Irlbeck, E. (2011). Using Facebook as a Communication Tool in Agricultural-Related Social Movements, *Journal of Applied Communications*: 95(3), <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.1164>
- Herring, S. C. (2010). Computer-mediated conversation part I: Introduction and overview, *Language@Internet*, 7(2).
- Kalla, H.K. (2005). Integrated internal communications: a multidisciplinary perspective, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 10(4), pp. 302-314. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13563280510630106>
- Katz E., Blumler J. G., & Gurevitch M. (1974). Uses and Gratifications Research, *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 37(4), 509-523.
- Kitchenham, B., Pickard, L., and Pfleeger, L. (1995). Case studies for method and tool evaluation, *IEEE Software*, 12(4), pp. 52-62, doi: 10.1109/52.391832.
- Leamer, E. E., and M. Storper. (2001). The economic geography of the internet age. *Journal of International Business Studies* 32(64), 1-65
- Lee, C. E. C. (2010). Face-to-face versus computer-mediated communication: Exploring employees' preference of effective employee communication channel. *International Journal for the Advancement of Science & Arts*, 1, 38-48
- Licht, M. A. R. and Martin, R. A. (2006). Iowa Corn and Soybean Producers' Use of Communication Channels, *Journal of Applied Communications*: 90(4), <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.1264>
- Lin, C. (1999). Online-Service Adoption Likelihood. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 39(2), 79-89.
- Lowenthal, P. R., Borup, J., West, R. E., and Archambault, L. (2020). Thinking Beyond Zoom: Using asynchronous video to maintain connection and engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Jl. of Technology and Teacher Education* 28(2), 383-391.
- Maignan, I., and Lukas, B. A. (1997). The nature & social uses of the internet: a qualitative investigation. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 31(2), 346-371. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6606.1997.tb00395.x>
- Martin, R. A. and Omer, M. H. (1988). Factors associated with participation of Iowa young farmers in agriculture Extension programs. *The Journal of America Association of Teacher Educators in Agriculture*, 29(1), 45-52.
- McIntosh, M. J., and Morse, J. M. (2015). Situating and Constructing Diversity in Semi-Structured Interviews. *Global Qualitative Nursing Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2333393615597674>

- McQuail, D. (1987). *Mass communication theory: An introduction* (2nd ed.). *Sage Publications, Inc.*
- Merriam, S. B., (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series
- Miles, M., Huberman, A., and Saldana, J., (2020). *Qualitative data analysis a methods sourcebook* (4th ed.), *Sage Publication*
- Miller, K. (2009). *Organizational Communication: Approaches and Process* (5th Ed.). United States of America: Wadsworth.
- O’Dea, S. (2021). Smartphone ownership in the U.S. 2015-2021. *Statista.com*.
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/489255/percentage-of-us-smartphone-owners-by-age-group/>
- Opdenakker, R. (2006). Advantages and disadvantages of four interview techniques in qualitative research. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 7(4), <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-7.4.175>
- Pryor, J. H. and Reedy, E. J., (2009) Trends in business interest among U.S. college students: an early exploration of data available from the cooperative institutional research program. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1971393>
- Rhoads, M. (2010). Face-to-face and computer-mediated communication: What does theory tell us and what have we learned so far, *Sage Journals*, 25(2).
- Rossi, E. (2002). Uses and gratifications/dependency theory, Retrieved March, 2021 from <http://zimmer.csufresno.edu/~johnca/spch100/7-4-uses.htm>
- Rubin, A., and Rubin, R. (1985). Interface of personal and mediated communication: A research agenda, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, (2), 36-53.
- Ruggiero, T. (2000). Uses and gratifications theory in the 21st century, *Mass Communications & Society*, 3(1), 3-37.
- Shaw, K., Meyers, C., Irlbeck, E., Doerfert, D., Abrams, K., and Morgan, C. (2015). Agriculturists personal and business Uue of online communication tools, *Journal of Applied Communications*, 99(2). <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.1045>
- Siekpe, J. S., & Kamssu, A. A. (2005). The effect of culture and uses and gratifications in online shopping. *Southwest Decision Sciences Institute: Proceedings of the 36th Southwest Decision Sciences Institute Annual Conference*, Southweat DSI, Dallas, USA, 370-378.

Tacken, M., Marcellini, F., Mollenkopf, H., Ruoppila, I., and Széman, Z. (2005). Use and acceptance of new technology by older people. Findings of the International MOBILATE survey: 'Enhancing mobility in later life'. *Gerontechnology*; 3(3), 126-137.

Thompson, K. (2019). The uses and gratifications model of audience effects. *ReviseSociology*. <https://revisesociology.com/2019/09/18/uses-gratifications-model/>

Williams, M. and Moser, T. (2019). The art of coding and thematic exploration in qualitative research. *International Management Review*, 15(1), p.45-55.

Appendices

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter



To: Ashlyn Ussery
BELL 4188

From: Douglas J Adams, Chair
IRB Expedited Review

Date: 01/22/2021

Action: **Exemption Granted**

Action Date: 01/22/2021

Protocol #: 2011300564

Study Title: Characteristics of Face-to-Face Communications in Agriculture Marketing and Customer Service

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

cc: Jefferson D Miller, Investigator

Appendix B: Questioning Routes

Member Interview Guide

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the characteristics and values of face-to-face communication vs computer-mediated communication by looking at the perceptions of both employees and members of Arkansas Farm Bureau Federation. In this study, face-to-face communication is defined as a social interaction between individuals present in the same location, normally through speech and nonverbal communication. Computer-mediated communication is defined as various forms communication through network computers, involving exchanges of text, audio, and/or video messages between individuals at the same time or at different times.

Examples of Face-to-Face Communication Forms:

- Meetings
- Conferences
- Workshops
- Office visits
- Farm visits

Examples of Computer-Mediated Communication Forms:

- Phone calls
- Texting
- Email
- Zoom
- Video conferences

Questions

1. Describe how Farm Bureau communicates face-to-face with you as a member.
2. Describe how Farm Bureau uses computer-mediated communications to communicate with you as a member.
3. Which form or forms of communication do you prefer to use when communicating with Farm Bureau? Why?
4. Which form of communication is more valuable to you; face-to-face or computer-mediated? Why?

Demographic Questions

Employment Status: Are you currently...

- Employed for wages
- Self-employed
- Out of work and looking for work
- Out of work but not currently looking for work
- A homemaker
- A student
- Military
- Retired
- Unable to work

How long have you been a member of Arkansas Farm Bureau Federation?

_____ Years

What County are you located in?

What is your age

- 20-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60-69
- 70-79
- 80-89

What is your highest level of education?

- Some High School
- High School
- Associates
- Bachelors
- Masters
- Doctorate or higher
- Trade school
- Other _____

Employee Interview Guide

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the characteristics and values of face-to-face communication vs computer-mediated communication by looking at the perceptions of both employees and members of Arkansas Farm Bureau Federation. In this study, face-to-face communication is defined as a social interaction between individuals present in the same location, normally through speech and nonverbal communication. Computer-mediated communication is defined as various forms communication through network computers, involving exchanges of text, audio, and/or video messages between individuals at the same time or at different times.

Examples of Face-to-Face Communication Forms:

- Meetings
- Conferences
- Workshops
- Office visits
- Farm visits

Examples of Computer-Mediated Communication Forms:

- Phone calls
- Texting
- Email
- Zoom
- Video conferences

Questions

1. Describe how Farm Bureau communicates face-to-face with members.
2. Describe how Farm Bureau uses computer-mediated communication to communicate with members.
3. Which form or forms of communication do you prefer to use when communicating with Farm Bureau members? Why?
4. Which form of communication is more valuable to you; face-to-face or computer-mediated? Why?

Demographic Questions

What is your role at Farm Bureau? (Job Title) _____

What County are you primarily located in?

What is your age?

- 20-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60-69
- 70-79
- 80-89

What is your highest level of education?

- Some High School
- High School
- Associates
- Bachelors
- Masters
- Doctorate or higher
- Trade School
- Other _____

In this study we are looking to gain insight from both employees and members of Arkansas Farm Bureau. We would like the help of participating employees to gain contact with willing members. Do you know of a member or members that would be willing to participate in this study?