

External Perceptions of the Oklahoma Youth Expo's March 2020 COVID-19 Response

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External Perceptions of the Oklahoma Youth Expo's March 2020 COVID-19 Response

Abstract

Livestock shows are a prevalent part of youth agricultural programs in the United States, but they are not well understood, particularly in terms of risk and crisis communication. Through in-depth qualitative interviews, this study evaluated the perceptions of Oklahoma agricultural education instructors, Extension agents, and parents of youth exhibiting at the 2020 Oklahoma Youth Expo (OYE). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic caused the stock show to cancel in the middle of its schedule. The study evaluated perceptions of the event through the lens of crisis communication as it relates to brand reputation and crisis management. The study was guided by situational crisis communication theory. The results of the interviews indicate that OYE's brand reputation was not harmed as a result of the crisis, and some responses indicate that participants may have increased their respect of the organization. Instead, participants directed fault toward city officials who cancelled the stock show. Future research is recommended to evaluate how other stock shows responded to the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak, as well as assessing how stock shows continued to deal with the pandemic in subsequent years.

Keywords

livestock show, youth agriculture, situational crisis communication theory, brand reputation, qualitative interviews

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Introduction

COVID-19 Pandemic

The first reported COVID-19 case was on December 31, 2019, at the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China (WHO, 2022). The first recorded COVID-19 case outside of China was reported in Thailand on January 13, 2020 (WHO, 2022). The virus continued to spread across the western pacific region throughout the following weeks and the first reported case in the United States was reported in the state of Washington on January 20, 2020, from a sample that was taken on January 18 (CDC, 2022). The first official case of COVID-19 in Oklahoma was reported in Tulsa County on March 7, 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted industries across the board, causing economic loss and supply chain disruption (Siche, 2020). COVID-19 forced many events to be cancel or postponed in the early stages of the pandemic, and research shows the event planning and tourism industry lost more than \$660 million in the first few months of the pandemic alone (Madray, 2020). Livestock shows were among those events that were forced to come to a halt in late February and early March of 2020. The Oklahoma Youth Expo (OYE) was one of the events forced to cancel in the middle of its event in 2020 (K, Newell, personal communication). This put OYE's brand reputation at risk. This study assessed external perceptions of OYE's COVID-19 response in 2020 when the event was forced to shut down.

The Oklahoma Youth Expo

OYE is a junior livestock show for Oklahoma FFA and 4-H participants who show swine, sheep, goats, cattle, and/or participate in the agricultural mechanics show (K. Newell, personal communication). The show is a 10-day event that typically takes place during the Oklahoma public schools' spring break and is hosted at the Oklahoma State Fairgrounds in Oklahoma City (K. Newell, personal communication). Exhibitors from all 77 Oklahoma counties travel to attend the show each spring (K. Newell, personal communication). On a typical year, OYE awards roughly \$2 million to exhibitors, over \$300,000 in scholarships, and has an estimated economic impact on the Oklahoma City metropolitan area of \$25 million (OYE, 2022). The 2020 show had more than 22,000 entries (OYE, 2022).

OYE devotes most of the first half of the 10-day experience to the breeding livestock shows and agricultural mechanics show (K. Newell, personal communication). The second half of the show is predominantly devoted to the market livestock shows, sales, fitting contests, and other small events (K. Newell, personal communication). "Market week" is debatably the most anticipated week of the show (K. Newell, personal communication). This is primarily because of OYE's market show grand drive (K. Newell, personal communication).

On March 9, 2020, the OYE staff started the show as they typically would, with the opening of the fairgrounds to breeding livestock tack, equipment, and agricultural mechanics projects (K. Newell, personal communication). Soon thereafter, information began to spread the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, which was happening during the same time period in Texas, was cancelled due to the pandemic (Staff, 2020). The OYE show continued as planned with the start of the breeding animal livestock shows, but concern for COVID-19 began to grow as positive cases began to rise in Oklahoma (K. Newell, personal communication). OYE staff worked closely with state officials, namely the state secretary of agriculture and the governor, to

adjust the show in an effort to continue the remaining livestock shows while still staying within state and health guidelines, (K. Newell, personal communication).

On March 14, 2020, OYE released an updated schedule that announced the remaining show events would be expedited (OYE, 2022). The new schedule packed the remaining livestock shows into the following four days, which normally occurred over seven days (K. Newell, personal communication). Volunteers and workers were assigned roles and schedules as all-night move-in and move-out procedures were established to move livestock and people through the fairgrounds as quickly as possible, (K. Newell, personal communication). Exhibitors and stakeholders were directed to pay close attention to the OYE app, which was where the most recent information related to show updates would be placed first (OYE, 2022).

On March 15, 2020, Oklahoma City government officials issued a State of Emergency, which resulted in the cancellation of the remainder of OYE's 2020 show (OKC-County Health Department, 2020). On March 16, 2020, OYE announced they would be offering 100 scholarships, in the total amount of \$100,000 to high school seniors who did not get to exhibit their market livestock to help with any financial hardship they may have faced (OYE, 2022).

Crisis Communication & Reputation Management

How organizations and businesses respond to those interruptions can affect the futures of those organizations. When dealing with a crisis, many factors come into play that can leave an organization's brand reputation vulnerable to public scrutiny (Coombs, 2002). The way in which a crisis is handled can influence public opinions, make stakeholders uneasy, and put the brand's reputation at risk. Public perception and the perception of stakeholders are two key attributes in maintaining a company's brand reputation (Coombs, 2002). Unsuccessful responses to crisis situations can result in irreparable damage to an organization's brand or to the organization as a whole, resulting in the loss of stakeholders, a restructure of the organization or a merger, loss of public trust, or ultimate loss of an organization.

Research relating to youth livestock shows in general is limited, much less related to crisis responses affecting reputation and brand management. The only study found that specifically addressed COVID and livestock shows, which showed that fairs used a variety of crisis communication postures (e.g., victimage, reminding, scapegoating) in communicating about cancelations (Opat et al., 2023). Therefore, it is important to evaluate the perceptions of stakeholders from the 2020 OYE. The evaluation of OYE's COVID-19 response in 2020 can help inform crisis management at youth livestock shows across the country.

Purpose & Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the OYE's crisis response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. While the COVID-19 pandemic is still causing many crisis communication challenges, this study looked at the impact of COVID-19 in its earliest stages when information about the virus and how it spread was extremely limited making communication and response more difficult. The study was guided by the following research questions.

1. How did OYE's handling of the 2020 crisis affect OYE's brand reputation from the perspectives of agricultural education instructors, Extension agents, and parents?
2. What type of impact, if any, did the 2020 OYE crisis have on agricultural education instructors, Extension agents, parents, and/or their exhibitors?

Literature Review

Youth Livestock Exhibitions

There is limited research in agricultural communications about youth livestock exhibitions, but one of the most common lenses used for research is the potential to affect agricultural literacy. Fairs have become hubs for agriculturalists to share their message regarding animal agriculture (Holloway, 2004). Johnston and Cummings (2015) found that older generations of fairgoers look at signage relating to livestock at fairs in an effort learn about the animal agriculture industry, while younger generations enjoying interacting with the animal itself. Supervised agricultural education experiences (SAEs), which include livestock exhibitions, for high school students have helped to bridge the agricultural literacy gap for students who lack traditional agricultural backgrounds (Cheek et al., 1994). Anderson (2010) used social representation theory to evaluate the perceptions of California fairgoers' attitudes toward fair exhibits and found fairgoers generally have a positive view of youth livestock exhibits. Fairgoers' attitudes toward the industry had a direct correlation to participants' experiences with the youth livestock industry as a whole, regardless of whether or not they come from agricultural backgrounds (Anderson, 2010). Fairs are seen as a place to share insights about the industry through educational exhibits (Avery, 2002). They provide an opportunity to shape public perceptions through interactions with agriculturalists (Avery, 2002; Duncan, 2004).

COVID-19 Impact

COVID has strained many industries, and the hospitality industry, which includes event planning and livestock show, has arguably been impacted the most (Madray, 2020). Perceptions of the COVID virus and the pandemic at large have left event facilitators reevaluating the structure of events, including moving to virtual platforms (Rahman et al., 2021).

With a lack of reliable health information distribution regarding COVID-19, especially in the early stages of the pandemic, some members of the public have lost trust in health and medical information (Fell, 2021). Researchers have found that social media and rumors are major factors in the distribution of COVID misinformation (Tasnim et al., 2020). Researchers also found misinformation/conspiracies, infodemic coverage, and fact-checking to be contributing factors as well (Evanega et al., 2020). Social media and internet technologies have served as the primary vehicle for spreading COVID-19 misinformation (Barua et al., 2020).

Research related to understanding perceptions about a topic can aid in providing a holistic view across a specific public (Flick, 2018a). This understanding is imperative when it comes to understanding the way consumers perceive a brand's identity, especially as it relates to a crisis (Coombs, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

Coombs (2007) defined a crisis as "a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat" (p. 164). Public perception and the perception of stakeholders are two key attributes in maintaining a company's brand (Coombs, 2007).

Coombs' situational crisis communication theory identifies a crisis as "negative events

that cause stakeholders to make ‘attributions’ (interpretations) about crises responsibility, affecting how stakeholders interact with the organization” (Coombs, 2002, p. 167). This theory breaks crises down into three categories: victim, accident, and intentional (Coombs, 2002). When the organization is considered the victim, there is only a minor reputational threat. When the organization’s actions are considered an accident, there is a medium reputational threat. When the organization’s actions are considered intentional, there is a major reputational threat.

Situational crisis communication theory is a prominent guide throughout existing research related to evaluating crisis response. Jeong (2009) examined the handling of the 2007 oil spill in South Korea using Coombs' situational crisis communication theory when evaluating public perceptions regarding the handling of the oil spill and found management flaws that could have been avoided if a crisis response plan was in place. The study found that distinctive or detailed information created a more negative relationship history and punitive responses from participants (Jeong, 2009). Whereas, when participants evaluated less detailed or low distinctive information, it created a more positive perception of the handling of the accident (Jeong, 2009). This typically means that more general and consistent statements expressing that responders were doing everything they could to correct or get a handle on the situation was perceived better than detailed updates that contained technical terms and jargon (Jeong, 2009). Irlbeck et. al. (2013) used the role of excellence theory and Coombs’s situational crisis communication theory to evaluate objectives relating to the crisis response plan used in a salmonella outbreak. They found that the public perceived various miscommunications throughout the crisis and ultimately felt distrust toward the peanut industry (Irlbeck et. al. 2013).

When organizations are faced with a crisis, it is imperative the reputation of the organization is maintained, as well as the trust of stakeholders (Griffin, 2014). Technology has restructured the way news is received, creating social pressures, and a need for stimulation within the news media (Pintér 2016). The development of social media has also added to the disruption of news media distribution with the evolutions of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Castells et al., 2006). Platforms such as these have forced news media coverage to align with consumers’ habits of consuming media almost instantly (Anthonissen, 2008).

With an increasingly intense and competitive media market, crises have become a lasting topic within news media cycles (Zelizer, 2010). This can leave organizations susceptible to public opinion and scrutiny of stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2014).

Existing research has found organizations can benefit from understanding how stakeholders perceive an organization's response to a crisis, which can lead to the organization reevaluating or ultimately building a new crisis response plan as a whole (Coombs, 2013). A crisis can place an organization’s brand reputation at risk, ultimately leading stakeholders to doubt or lose trust in the organization (Julian et al., 2008). Stakeholders are defined as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 508).

A brand’s reputation develops over a period of time, based on stakeholders’ perceptions and experience with the brand and its ability to meet stakeholders' goals or standards (Coombs, 2007). Perceptions of a brand’s reputation can also be perceived through experiences related publics have with the organization (Kim et al., 2015). A crisis can give people reasons to criticize a brand, which threatens an organization’s brand reputation (Coombs, 2007). Crisis handlers’ approach in deescalating a crisis has a major impact on the relationship between organizational leadership, stakeholders, and public perceptions (Bundy et al., 2017, p. 1671).

Coombs's situational crisis communication theory also emphasizes the relationship between an organization's accountability related to a crisis and the reputational damage that could follow (Coombs, 2002). Relationship management around a crisis is shaped in how relationships are built before a crisis and mended after a crisis, not just how a crisis is managed as it happens (James et al., 2011)

Methods

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research was chosen for this study to explore and understand the worldviews and assumptions of participants from their personal settings or circumstances (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This approach is designed to give the most in-depth responses and allows research questions and discussion to guide the methodology (Flick, 2018a). This type of research allows researchers to make sense of and interpret participants' experiences and emotions, bringing meaning to the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Using a qualitative approach fostered an environment for natural dialogue with participants and allowed themes to develop naturally (Flick, 2018a), which was particularly beneficial given the dearth of literature about crisis management of youth livestock exhibitions.

When designing qualitative research, it is important the research perspective aligns with the theoretical background of the study (Flick, 2018a). Therefore, the foundation that guides this study is situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2002).

Population and Sampling

Oklahoma agricultural education instructors, Extension agents, and parents of youth exhibiting at the 2020 OYE were identified as key external stakeholders who could provide insight into OYE's response to the crisis. Participants who aided in providing the best understanding of the crisis were those directly affected by it (Coombs, 2007). While youth participants were considered for the study, they were not included in the research because youth often provide inconsistent and unreliable information in qualitative research (Mason & Hood, 2011), and they were less accessible because they are minors who cannot assent to participating in research. OYE staff was also considered as possible participants for this study. However, to truly evaluate the success or failure of the handling of the 2020 crisis and its effect on OYE's brand reputation, looking at the crisis from the perspective of external stakeholders was deemed the most important group to study, though OYE's response is documented in the introduction of this paper.

Once the target population was determined, a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling was used to identify participants. The qualifying criteria for participants included the following: They must have attended the 2020 OYE as an agricultural education instructor, Extension agent, or parent of youth exhibiting livestock; were willing to participate in the study either via Zoom or over the phone; were willing to be recorded; and were willing to share their thoughts on the handling of the 2020 OYE. The purposive sampling technique was used to identify agricultural education instructors and Extension agents because their information could be obtained through publicly available information. Parents were found using the snowball sampling method during interviews with agricultural education instructors and Extension agents.

To help ensure participants represented a variety of perspectives, sampling ensured participants represented different regions of the state (Table 1). Some of the participants had overlapping roles that likely affected their perspectives. Four of the agricultural education instructors and two Extension agents were also parents of children who attended the 2020 OYE. There was also an agricultural education instructor who oversaw the local 4-H program. Three of the participants were parents only. Three parents participated in this study including a couple. By the end of the data collection process, the depth of the research no longer expanded and new themes stopped developing, therefore data saturation has occurred concluding the data collection process (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Data saturation began to occur after six interviews, but scheduled interviews were completed before finishing data collection.

Table 1

Description of participants

Pseudonym	Role	Region
Dan	Ag Education Instructor	Southwest
Nick	Ag Education Instructor	Northeast
Sam	Ag Education Instructor/Parent	Southwest
Allen	Ag Education Instructor	Southwest
Kate	Extension Agent	Central
Lizzy	Extension Agent/Parent	Northwest
Ally	Parent	Northwest
Clair	Parent	Southwest
Tom	Parent	Northwest

Note. Ally and Tom were a married couple who participated in their interview together.

Data Collection

Each participant received a recruitment email providing an overview of the study and the estimated time commitment. After committing to being interviewed, participants were emailed meeting information and a participant information form. Participants were asked to view the information form before the interview and the first question of the interview ensured that the participant had read the form before the interview started.

All but two interviews were done using the Zoom platform. The two exceptions were via phone because they were more accessible options for those participants. The interviews began on August 11, 2021, and ended on February 12, 2022. The duration of the interview window was needed to recruit an adequate number of participants who could provide various perspectives. While this was a wide interview window, all interviews were being conducted more than one year after the crisis began, and all interviews were conducted between the 2021 and 2022 OYEs. To help limit confusion, interviews were prefaced with a reminder to participants that the purpose of the study was to evaluate the 2020 OYE, not the most recent OYE. While participants were able to provide in-depth interview responses, doing interviews after most participants attend the 2021 OYE may have affected their responses.

All interviews were recorded, and notes were taken throughout the interview. Participants were read a summary of the interviewer’s notes to ensure accuracy, which served as a member check (Flick, 2018b). Once the interview was completed, the recordings were transcribed verbatim, which helps to ensure credibility (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Instrument Development

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. Semi-structured interviews allow for comprehensive and informative conversation among participants (Ruben & Ruben, 2012). Two versions of the interview guides were created with similar questions. One was tailored for agricultural education instructors and Extension agents, and the other was tailored toward parents. The main topics included their perception of the overall handling of the 2020 crisis, how information was communicated and received, and the emotional impact of the crisis. If a participant was a teacher/agent and a parent, the teacher/agent interview guide was used, but they were also able to provide their perspectives as parents during the interview. Situational crisis communication theory underpinned the develop of the interview guide, most notably in ensuring the interview guide facilitated responses relate to stakeholders' perceptions of OYE's responsibility and reputational threat due to the crisis.

This project was a master's thesis. The interview guide was reviewed by Quisto Settle who served as chair of the thesis committee and has experience with qualitative research, crisis communication and youth livestock exhibitions; Nathan Smith who served as a thesis committee member and is a former Oklahoma agricultural education instructor who has supervised FFA participants at OYE; Morgan Pfeiffer who served as a thesis committee member and whose family breeds show goats; Audrey King who has expertise in qualitative research; and Ruth Inman who has children who are Oklahoma 4-H members who were exhibitors at the 2020 OYE event.

Data Analysis

A combination of thematic analysis and the constant comparative method was used to evaluate the data. Thematic analysis allows participants to describe various aspects of a topic in detail without restrictions (Braun & Clark, 2006). Using Glaser's (1965) constant comparative method, patterns were identified through what is referred to as incidents, and patterns in those incidents aided in developing themes (Glaser, 1965). Incidents were compared and sorted into themes and sub-themes. Creswell's method of describing, classifying, and interrupting was used throughout the coding and theme development process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

After reading and listening to the interviews, sections of the interviews were sorted into codes, and the codes were later sorted into themes (Flick, 2018a). The data was evaluated, sorted into themes, and coded using the MAXQDA software tool. Using qualitative analysis software helps ensure transparency, consistency, and organization when evaluating data (Trochim, 2020). Meanings that are expressed verbally are known as semantic codes, which were sorted from the data first, and then underlying meanings, known as latent codes, were sorted (Flick, 2018a). Some statements were coded using multiple codes.

After a thorough evaluation of the themes, a dependability audit was conducted by Katerina Weingarten, who was an agricultural communications master's student. She reviewed the themes and confirmed they were representative of the interviewees' responses rather than my bias.

Subjectivity Statements

Bree Rosman was an agricultural communications graduate student who grew up in rural Oklahoma and participated in OYE stock shows. She also worked on the staff at the 2020 OYE, is engaged to the vice president of communications at OYE and has a sibling who still participates in OYE. Quisto Settle is an agricultural communications faculty member who grew up in Texas and participated in stock shows as a youth. Nathan Smith is an agricultural education faculty member who grew up in Oklahoma and participated in stock shows as a youth. Smith advised students who participated in the OYE as a teacher and serves as a superintendent for the Agricultural Mechanics Show at OYE. Morgan Pfeiffer is an animal and food sciences faculty member that grew up in rural Colorado involved in production agriculture and youth stock shows. Her involvement in youth shows, including OYE, continues today as her family raises competitive show goats and she is the sister-in-law of the OYE executive vice president. While these attributes may have affected development and analysis of the study, steps were taken to limit these influences.

Findings

The following themes resulted from the interviews: the 2020 COVID crisis could not be foreseen, uncertainty regarding the necessity of the show's early shutdown, participants perceived OYE was forced to shut down early, OYE did everything in its power to keep the show going, factors that brought on concern prior to participants' arrival at the 2020 show, the cancelation of the 2020 show had an emotional impact on participants, and show communication was timely and informative.

The 2020 COVID Crisis Could Not Be Foreseen

When participants were asked if they believed the 2020 COVID crisis could have been foreseen, participants were quick to state they believe there was no possible way the impact of the crisis could have been foreseen. Participants believed there was little to no time to prepare or make adjustments due to the abrupt manner of the crisis. Ally, a parent, said, "You know, 95% of the people that were there have never had to deal with a pandemic before. So, I believe that nobody knew how to deal with it or prepare for it." Tom, a parent said,

No, because at the time, I felt it was so new at the time, and it was just really hitting all at once, nobody knew how to deal with it anywhere, you know it was just coming upon us so fast. I don't know if they could have prepared for it enough. That's my outlook on it.

Dan, an agricultural education instructor, said,

You know, in dealing with significant numbers of parents, and people, and exhibitors, I gotta say, they handled it as well as it could have been. I'm saying no, I don't think anybody could have expected that or something like that.

Lizzy, an Extension agent said,

I mean, I think, by them starting the week out and going ahead and you know, bringing in the [female livestock for breeding shows] and bringing in the exhibitors and everything else, I think that shows on their part, their due diligence, to try to go ahead and have some sense of normalcy. And I also think that maybe their mindset was that if they kicked the week off and started OYE, we wouldn't be shut down because we'd be seen as an event in progress. So, I feel like they did everything they could have, and that it just couldn't have been avoided.

Uncertainty Regarding the Necessity of the Show's Early Shutdown

When participants were asked if they believed the cancellation of the remainder of the show was necessary due to COVID-19, they provided mixed answers. Participants seemed to grapple with their own opinions of COVID-19, and if they believed it was necessary to shut the show down to achieve a greater good from a safety standpoint. Many participants would immediately answer the question one way, but after talking through the situation a little more, participants would often see the value in both sides of the argument, often ending their answers in a state of uncertainty or confusion. Clair, a parent, said, "Do I feel like they needed to shut down, no. Do I feel like they had to, yes." Kate, an Extension agent said, "No. But at that time, everything was so unknown, and no one knew what the heck was going on. But [OYE] did what they thought was right at the time." Dan, an agricultural education instructor, said,

I think, at the time, I don't think we realized what the nation, the world, was going to face. So, at the time I questioned it, but it didn't take long to understand why it was done. And I think that can be a mixed answer there, at the time, maybe possibly no, but three days later yeah, had to be done or glad it was done.

One participant also said they thought the cancellation of the show was necessary, not necessarily because they felt unsafe at the show, but because they believed the show had a moral obligation to protect the image of the youth livestock industry. Sam, an agricultural education instructor, said,

Yes, it was the right thing to do from an aesthetic standpoint for our community and industry. I just think where we were at with everything shutting down, we were going to face too big of a battle if we didn't shut down. I just think it's the right thing to do or the responsible thing to do.

Participants Perceived OYE Was Forced to Shut Down Early

Throughout the interview process, the majority of participants alluded to or stated they believed OYE was forced to end the show early due to personnel outside of the show's staff. Participants believed show officials were forced into making the cancellation by the Oklahoma City government or the mayor himself. The Oklahoma City mayor was mentioned several times throughout the interviewing process by participants, as they believe he is solely responsible for the early cancelation of the 2020 show. Other participants would use terms like "government officials" or "the city government." Overall, it was apparent in this theme participants believe OYE did not make the call to end the 2020 show early. Lizzy, an Extension agent said,

I feel like the show officials had no other choice but to cancel the show because of the enforcement of outside entities. And ultimately, like I said, you know, ultimately, the decision was unfortunately taken out of their hands, and you know, made by somebody else that maybe doesn't understand exactly what we do and why we do it. So no, I have no fault to them [OYE] whatsoever.

One participant mentioned specifically the state of emergency that was issued for Oklahoma County, ultimately causing OYE to cancel the remaining shows. Allen, an agricultural education instructor, said,

Then Oklahoma City canceled all events in Oklahoma City, and I think [the mayor] issued something like a state of emergency or something like that. Anyway, it made it where the Oklahoma Youth Expo had to shut down, they didn't have a choice in the matter at that point.

Some participants said the Oklahoma City government was responsible for the early shutdown of the show. Clair, a parent, said, "Everything was so new on all the restrictions, and everything shutting down, and that a lot of hands were tied at higher, at the government level as far as what could happen." Tom, a parent, said,

I thought our state government was handling it properly, and I think they had the right decisions in mind. I think it was the city that, like I said, I'm not impressed with the city government, that ended the show.

Dan, an education instructor, said,

I mean that moment that day was real fluid, I mean there were many rumors going around, and again they [OYE] were just victims, in my opinion, I mean it was obviously the mayor, that is, in my opinion, who shut it down like the rest of Oklahoma City.

OYE Did Everything in Its Power to Keep the Show Going

Throughout the interview, participants were asked questions relating to OYE's handling of the 2020 crisis and asked if they thought the staff could have done more. Participants believed OYE staff did everything in their power to keep the show going and were ultimately left in a no-win situation. This was the largest theme coded when analyzing the data and was broken into four sub-themes. The sub-themes are as follows: OYE offered good alternative opportunities after the cancellation of the show, OYE did an overall good job handling the 2020 crisis, considering the circumstances, and keeping the show going.

Sub-Theme 1: OYE Offered Good Alternative Opportunities After the Cancellation of the Show

In this sub-theme, participants were overall pleased with the scholarship opportunity offered to market exhibitors, and the invitation for seniors who did not get to show at the 2020 OYE to have the option to do so the following year. Allen, an agricultural education instructor,

said, “I think what they did was good, and giving those seniors the option to come back was also a really good thing I thought they did. A first-class thing.”

Participants said they were appreciative of the scholarship opportunity extended to high school seniors who did not get to show their market animals. Dan, an agricultural education instructor said,

I think that it was an opportunity that [the scholarship opportunity] was very appreciated. You know, I know that scholarships are very difficult for them, you know them, and the majority of people to obtain money-wise, so you know there's a disappointment, they couldn't show, but I think that was very well received and an appreciative way to approach not being able to show.

Participants said the scholarship was a good opportunity for the exhibitors who did not get to show their market animals, but it did not make up for the memories and experiences that could have been made at the 2020 show. Lizzy, an Extension agent said,

I do think it was a good idea, but it doesn't account for all the experiences that could have come from that OYE, but it was a positive way for OYE to still recognize those students. And I thought it was really great of them to allow those seniors the option to come back the next year.

Though most participants agreed the scholarship opportunity was a good alternative opportunity, awareness was not high for everyone interviewed. When asked about her thoughts on the scholarship opportunity during the interview, Clair, a parent, said, “I have to say I don't know a whole lot about it.”

Sub-Theme 2: OYE Did an Overall Good Job Handling the 2020 Crisis

In this sub-theme, participants overall felt OYE did a good job handling the 2020 situation, and the staff's actions continued to reflect that. Clair, a parent, said, “I feel like they handled it very well. Very professional and also supportive of the exhibitors and trying to find avenues or opportunities or safeguards should it continue.” Nick, an agricultural education instructor, said, “I can't find anything that I think they could have done better. I think that they handled it as professionally and as correctly as they possibly could.” Ally, a parent, said, “I thought it was handled, I mean, I honestly don't feel that they could have done anything more, in all honesty.”

The following participants said they also believed OYE did everything they could to keep the show going, but they were the only participants who mentioned the idea of switching the order of the breeding shows and the market shows. The first participant believed switching the shows could not happen but acknowledged it was an idea he had heard, Nick, an agricultural education instructor, said,

I heard people saying they should have switched around the schedule and things, but by the time— everybody started being put on the short timeline, breeding animals were already there, and it was not feasible to switch out and get market animals there.

Sam, an agricultural education instructor, said,

The only thing that I would have done differently is, or I would have tried, and I don't know that it could be done, but I would have tried to switch the market shows and the breeding shows to try to get those market animals in there and show them suckers instead of all the breeding animals. They showed almost all the breeding animals knowing that we could potentially have an issue. They may have tried, I haven't ever asked Tyler [stock show executive] that, so I don't know that it was actually an option.

Sub-Theme 3: Considering the Circumstances

The phrase “considering the circumstances” and phrases very similar to it surfaced throughout many interviews when participants would describe OYE staff's efforts in keeping the show going. Tom, a parent, said: “Dealing with the situation that we dealt with, I don't think anything could have happened, I don't know what could have been done better considering the circumstances that we were under at the time.” Sam, an agricultural education instructor, said, “They handled it as well as they could have with the circumstances that were given. That was as good as it could have been done.” Nick, an agricultural education instructor, said,

I thought it was very professionally done. And I think it was, with all the circumstances involved, I think that they executed everything to the best of their possible ability. Just with unforeseen circumstances, and all that I think they tried to adapt the best they could.

Sub-Theme 4: Keeping the Show Going

This sub-theme relates to the earlier discussed theme, participants perceived OYE was forced to shut down early. However, this topic is discussed in a different context throughout this theme. The theme, keeping the show going takes a holistic look at what participants perceived as OYE's efforts and goals were in the facilitation of the show. This theme discusses less about what or who was perceived to be at fault for the show's early end and focuses more on the perceived steps OYE's staff took to keep the show going.

Allen, an agricultural education instructor, said,

I think, in the end, they did what they had to do to keep it going the best they could. They ran the show as long as they could, but in the end, I think they had to abide by the city and cancel.

Participants said they believe their goals to finish the show aligned with the goals of the OYE staff. Dan, an agricultural education instructor, said,

I stated earlier, I feel like the staff and our ultimate goal was to continue and have the show. And in a way, it became out of their control. They did all they could do. Yes, and again I think they handled the situation as bad as it was, as good as possible.

Participants said they perceived OYE staff worked hard to keep the show going and felt staff sympathized with exhibitors and their families. Ally, a parent, said,

Even though it is out of their control, I mean you could tell that this is something that you know they live for. They put a lot of work and effort into it, and they knew what it was going to do to all the exhibitors and families.

Participants said they believed OYE staff worked with state government officials in an effort to keep the show going. Sam, an agricultural education instructor, said,

They handled it in a timely manner. I know they were in contact with the secretary of agriculture, the governor, and the mayor. I know for a fact that they were in contact with all of those people, and I think that was a good thing. So, I would say overall it was handled well.

Kate, an Extension agent said, “Oh, I know they did everything they could. . . . I saw [the secretary of agriculture] in tears, I knew they worked very hard to try to keep it going.”

Factors That Brought on Concern Prior to Participants' Arrival at the 2020 Show

To gain an understanding of the mindset participants were in upon arriving at the 2020 show, they were asked if they had any reservations or concerns the show may face challenges regarding COVID-19. Many of the responses included events that took place outside of the show that were affected or canceled due to COVID-19. Kate, an Extension agent, said,

Seeing all of the Houston livestock shows, and all of those [shows] get shut down, I knew it was coming. But I do appreciate the OYE staff, still trying to push through and get it done. I did have a concern just because you know, the Houston livestock show was shut down, and we have a lot of kids that attend OYE so it was a little nerve-wracking.

Participants said the news coverage also aided in their growing concerns regarding the show's success. Tom, a parent, said, “Our concerns were that with everything that was going on in the news prior to the show and the way things were getting shut down, we were afraid the show might get shut down.” Sam, an agricultural education instructor, said,

The news was pretty bleak about the virus amongst everyone, and then when we heard that the Thunder game had been canceled, that was when I really amped up my worry. I was pretty certain at that point that we were done.

Participants said another factor that contributed to their concern about the show were rumors and discussion throughout the barns at the show. Nick, an agricultural education instructor, said, “Just getting there and showing the breeding females, but not knowing once the rumbling started that they may cancel OYE and students may not get to show.”

The Cancellation of the 2020 Show Had an Emotional Impact on Participants

An overwhelming majority of participants expressed their feeling about the emotional impact the early cancellation had on themselves, their students, and/or their children. Participants were very descriptive when answering this question, using detailed language to describe how

they felt and the lasting impact it had on them. This theme consists of two sub-themes: emotional disappointment, and sense of appreciation.

Sub-Theme 1: Emotional Disappointment

Throughout this sub-theme, participants expressed their disappointment with the show's rapid end and the impact it had on them financially, mentally, and emotionally. Allen, an agricultural education instructor, said, "There were kids and parents were upset all around you. That was probably the hardest part, seeing all those kids throughout the barn just in tears." Tom, a parent, said,

Just disappointment, that's something that these kids look forward to every year. You work your tail off all year long, and this is your reward is to walk down the ramp into the big arena. It was more disappointing for my son being his first year there and not being able to experience being so close to that experience.

Some participants also said there was a financial impact that was coupled with their disappointment. Dan, an agricultural education instructor, said,

It had an emotional and an economic impact, both. And elaborating on that, it was so sudden there were no forecasting ideas that was going to happen, so we had our animals in the trailers, we had them on the way you know, in the pens we had them ready for transportation to go away and then market value became the value of that stock as if it was market stock [instead of show stock]. Kids were disappointed. Families and ag teachers were disappointed.

Lizzy, an Extension agent, said,

You know that the financial risk that you took, it's not going to pay off. The time and the effort and the dreams and all of that are put into that one time in the ring, and you know all of that is being taken away. I mean there were a lot of tears shed when that decision was made to shut it down. I mean to see the heartbreak of my own personal kids, but my 4-Her's, as well that I love, just like my own, and then to see how they reacted, I mean yeah, it was absolutely heartbreaking.

One participant said there was a shock factor that came along with the cancellation of the show, but that factor eventually wore off. Kate, an Extension agent, said, "I would say, at first, yes, first shock, yes, but then, once OYE released that they were letting the seniors come back, and they definitely were more at ease about it all."

Sub-Theme 2: Sense of Appreciation

Throughout the interview process, participants indicated a deep value and appreciation for the OYE staff's efforts that expanded beyond interview questioning. This appreciation appeared to stem from the respect participants have for the OYE staff's understanding of the livestock industry as a whole. Participants said they were appreciative of OYE's efforts to keep

the show going. Tom, a parent, said, “I appreciate everything they did to try to keep the 2020 show going.”

When asked about their thoughts regarding the overall handling of the 2020 show, Clair, a parent, said, “[OYE staff were] very professional and also supportive of the exhibitors and trying to find avenues or opportunities or safeguards should it continue.” Participants said they felt compassion toward OYE staff. Nick, an agricultural education instructor, said,

After the announcement was made, I went into the office and spoke with Kass and gave her a big hug, and we both cried, and then I thanked Tyler for everything that he had done and tried to do to get [the show] to go off.

Ally, a parent, said,

I could remember seeing some higher-up OYE officials that [looked] very upset that they were having to make the decisions they were having to make. I know it really hurt a lot of those people that put the show on, I really feel that.

Show Communication Was Timely and Informative

Participants were asked questions about how they received information at the show associated with schedule changes and concerns. Overall, participants understood the COVID situation was very fluid in how it affected the show and said they believed communication was as timely and as informative as possible.

Clair, a parent, said, “I think the information was filtered through to everybody pretty quickly. So, I really couldn’t foresee anything being done differently on it.” Dan, an agricultural education instructor, said, “I thought OYE staff was as current as they could be and had some huge decisions to make, and then all of a sudden, boom, it’s over, we’re done, go home. Out of our control.” Allen, an agricultural education instructor, said, “I thought they did a very good job with it. I thought they were as timely and as detailed as they could be, considering.”

Some participants said they looked to social media for show updates. Ally, a parent, said, I thought they did a very good job, communicating through social media with it. I mean I thought their response on decisions was given timely, you know, I mean, it wasn’t a big way, [but] I thought they did very well with it.

One participant said they preferred to look at Facebook for show updates versus other platforms, as it was the platform they were most comfortable with. Nick, an agricultural education instructor, said,

I probably prefer Facebook, because I’m more familiar with it, but I thought that the information on the app was very useful also. It’s just, I may have tried to go to Facebook, to the page first, and then followed up with the app to check to see if one was updated before the other.

Conclusions and Recommendations

RQ1: How Did OYE's Handling of the 2020 Crisis Affect OYE's Brand Reputation from the Perspectives of Agricultural Education Instructors, Extension Agents, and Parents?

Participants were asked questions regarding their perceptions of OYE's overall handling of the 2020 crisis, their thoughts on OYE's efforts to keep the show going, and how they received information for show updates and schedule changes. The themes found for this research question included the 2020 COVID crisis could not be foreseen, OYE did everything in its power to keep the show going, show communication was timely and informative, and participants perceived OYE was forced to shut down early by outside entities.

Participants said they believed OYE looked into every option when it came to keeping the show going. Many participants said an example of their efforts showed in their communication updates and their schedule change attempt to condense the show while still allowing for all the livestock exhibitors to show their entries. This supports Griffin's (2014) claim of maintaining the trust of stakeholders is imperative when organizations are faced with a crisis, as it informs stakeholder that their goals and views align with the organization.

Participants said the 2020 COVID pandemic was a new type of crisis that could not have been foreseen by OYE staff. Participants believed OYE was a victim of the crisis with low responsibility for what happened (Coombs, 2002). Participants said they felt the 2020 OYE was forced to shut down due to the rising COVID case numbers and uncertainties that came along with the pandemic. Instead, participants were inclined to blame the Oklahoma City government and often the mayor specifically.

Part of what kept participants from blaming OYE was their belief that OYE staff did everything they could to keep OYE running. This helped provide additional assurance in stakeholders' trust in OYE, aligning with existing research that supports the idea of maintaining stakeholders' trust helps maintain an organization's brand reputation (Coombs, 2007). Overall participants said communications regarding updates and schedule changes were timely and as informative as they believed possible, regardless of which platform participants looked to receive this information. Maintaining transparent communication between crisis handlers and external stakeholders can limit reputational threats to an organization (Bundy et al., 2017), which was seen in this study. Participants said they believed OYE's actions, both during the show and after it was canceled, showed OYE's compassion towards exhibitors and stakeholders affected by the crisis, ultimately helping to maintain OYE's brand reputation (Coombs, 2007).

RQ2: What Type of Impact, If Any, Did the 2020 OYE Crisis Have on Agricultural Education Instructors, Extension Agents, Parents, and/or Their Exhibitors?

The theme associated most with this question was the cancellation of the 2020 show had an emotional impact on participants, which was composed of two sub-themes: emotional disappointment and sense of appreciation. Participants said the early cancelation of the show impacted them and the youth they were responsible for on an emotional level. Participants used words such as devastation, disappointment, and heartbreaking to describe their emotions after the 2020 OYE was canceled. Despite this negative affect, the participants did not blame OYE for the cancellation and handling of the show, instead distributing blame elsewhere (Coombs &

Holladay, 2014). Past experiences with an organization shape how stakeholders perceive the organization's reputation and brand (Coombs, 2007; Kim et al., 2015), and OYE likely benefited from the participants having long-standing interactions with OYE and its staff members. Participants valued the OYE staff's efforts to keep the show going and felt the OYE staff was just as disappointed in the cancellation of the show as participants.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research contributes to the role of crisis communication within the livestock industry, specifically related to youth livestock shows. It would be valuable to research the handling of other livestock shows that faced similar challenges related to COVID-19 during the same time period, namely the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, San Antonio Livestock Show, and Rodeo Austin. More specifically, research should assess how the shows' crisis communication approaches may have differed from OYE's and how their crisis responses affected their brand reputation among external stakeholders. It may also be valuable to expand upon this study to assess how OYE and other livestock exhibitions approached the shows in future years to see what lessons were learned from the initial onset of the pandemic and how external stakeholders' perceptions and expectations have shifted as the pandemic has continued. While COVID-19 is a large-scale, salient crisis, livestock shows face other crises, and research should address how event organizers respond to other types of crises. Future research should also address perceptions of audiences not directly engaged in OYE. As one of the participants noted, continuing the show may have been perceived positively by the stock show community but negatively by external audiences. If livestock shows are an opportunity to improve agricultural literacy among external audiences (Anderson, 2010; Avery, 2002; Duncan, 2004; Holloway, 2004; Johnston & Cummings, 2015), those audiences' perceptions of OYE's actions are important to understand.

Recommendations for Practice

Livestock facilitators should be aware of the role they play when managing a livestock show a large, let alone when affected by a crisis. The perceptions of their management skills are not only evaluated by stakeholders, but also the public at large. This research shows external stakeholders' perceptions can impact the brand reputation of a show, which could result in brand vulnerability if done without the alignment of the stakeholders' and organization's overall goals. Based on the results from this study, it is recommended livestock show coordinators should implement a crisis communication plan that not only holds safety regards, but also includes communication with external stakeholders. It is worth noting that these communications and crisis responses can be aided by fostering connections *before* a crisis occurs (Coombs, 2007).

This research revealed that stakeholders felt valued by OYE, as they perceived staff members were transparent in their communication and outreach efforts both during and after the 2020 show. Based on this study, livestock shows should evaluate their brand reputation and brand loyalty among stakeholders to gain understanding of stakeholder perception's regarding the show.

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