

**Texas State Parks and the Effect of COVID-19 on their
Communication Styles and Frequencies: Consumer Perceptions**

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Introduction and Need for Research

Texas state parks have approximately 10 million visitors in an average year according to The Economic Contributions of Texas State Parks, a 2014 report updated and re-released in February 2019 (Jeong & Crompton, 2019). According to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) social media specialist, only 69 of the 89 Texas state parks have an Instagram account and the management of the account is often a secondary duty for a staff member, commonly the superintendent, and is not the primary task of the employee unless the park has an interpreter on staff. Throughout the pandemic, COVID-19-related updates and regulations were regularly posted to the TPWD Instagram page, but did the Instagram pages for specific Texas state parks keep visitors up-to-date? It is important to ensure a target audience is able and willing to utilize resources during a crisis (Mirbabaie et al., 2020). Many park visitors use social media, so effective communication on these platforms is important to ensure information is obtained (Wilkins et al., 2020). This research will inform Texas state park accounts on the effectiveness of their social media campaigns through rich data from personal testimonies. This will provide added insight to other research on TPWD communication by looking at the effect of a global pandemic on communication through social media. Additionally, this study will help inform TPWD and Texas state parks if more focus should be placed on the management of a park's social media.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Qualitative research is designed to study the world and social phenomena in their natural occurrences through the lenses of human experiences and interpretations (Ary et al., 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Semi-structured interviews allow for the researcher to guide the interview with planned questions while allowing subjects to focus on the experiences relating to them to provide the researcher with valuable, in-depth looks at various viewpoints (Evans, C., & Lewis, J., 2018). The use of semi-structured interviews in qualitative research is considered one of the most prevalent data collection methods in social sciences (Bradford & Cullen 2013). As exploratory research, the constant comparative method and the grounded theory approach were used in this study. The constant comparative method uses a systematic approach to collect data and discover the emergent themes through the analysis process (Waters, 2017). In grounded theory, interview questions are focused on discovering how multiple individuals experience events to find the evolving theory and patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Methodology

Interviews were conducted using Zoom over the course of two weeks. The criteria for participants were 1) they must be within 18-25 years of age, 2) they must attend or have attended Texas state parks, and 3) they must follow individual Texas state park accounts on Instagram. There was no requirement for which state park accounts the participants needed to follow. Purposive sampling was used in this study. Qualifying participants were found through TPWD posting on their Instagram story inviting their followers who fit the criteria to fill out an interest form saying they were willing to be contacted to set up an interview time. There was a total of 15 participants referred to as P1, P2, P3, etc., when quoted in this study to protect identities and privacy. Participants were asked in a semi-structured interview about their interactions with

Texas state park accounts on Instagram and if they used the accounts as a source for information about the parks' policies and closure notices during COVID-19. The comments from the interviews are organized by cohesive thought using the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009).

Results/ Findings

The first emergent theme describes how visitors use Instagram in regards to the Texas state parks. It was ubiquitous among those interviewed that the state park Instagram accounts were used for information but the types of information they were looking for differed. Some use Instagram as a source for technical information such as park closures, day passes, and other forms of information that could be found on the website. Others use Instagram as a source for visual information such as what the park looks like during the season they want to attend, what can they see on a trail, what wildlife might they see, etc.

The second emergent theme helped describe why users turn to Instagram for information and what makes them choose Instagram over the website as the first choice for information. The three emergent sub-themes were 1) some users said they use Instagram as their main source of information, 2) a few said they still used the website more, and 3) most said they used both depending on the circumstance. Those who use Instagram as their main source of information often said they did so because its information felt timelier than information on the website.

The third emergent theme showed how users interacted with Texas state park Instagram accounts for COVID-19 information. Most participants did not turn to a park's Instagram account first for updates regarding COVID-19. Additionally, while most agreed that the posts announcing parks were out of day passes due to limited capacity for COVID-19 were beneficial, not interacting with these posts was almost ubiquitous among the participants.

Throughout the interviews, participants would describe the content they enjoy seeing on the park's Instagram accounts and content they would like to see on a park's account. There is a divide between the desire for aesthetic visuals they enjoy seeing and functional visuals they would like to see. The most common photos users enjoyed seeing the parks post were those showing the landscape, local wildlife, and either a sunset or sunrise. Visitors also described content they would like the parks to post more about. One common request was more visual information on campsites. Other common requests were trail recommendations, information on rentals, purchasable items, and events.

Implications/ Recommendations/ Impact on Profession

Consumers enjoy seeing pictures that showcase the park's features and wish to see more about individual trails and campsites. Park rangers should focus on showing the park's variety and include images of the scenery, trails, campsites, animals, and plant life. Posting to show the park and its features regularly causes the park to end up in a user's feed, which often encourages them to start planning a visit to the park. Even if Instagram was not the first location people went to for COVID-19 related information, it is a source where visitors can see what the park has to offer and receive other information, both technical and visual. Texas state parks would likely benefit from having someone at the park, be it a full-time staffer or an intern, manage and run an Instagram account. Communication practitioners should continue to post informational content even if it receives less engagement and ensure they post about all aspects of their organization. Further research includes measuring if posting park events on Instagram increases attendance and if geotags from Instagram users influence park audience experiences.

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