

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

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Need for Research:

- Texas state parks have approximately 10 million visitors in an average year.
- The research analyzed if park visitors used individual park Instagram accounts for COVID-19 information.
- 69 of the 89 Texas state parks have an Instagram account--often a secondary duty for a staff member.
- It is important to ensure a target audience is able and willing to utilize resources during a crisis.
- Effective communication on social media is important.

Framework:

- Qualitative research studies the world in its natural state through the lenses of human interpretations.
- Semi-structured interviews allow researchers ask planned questions and the subjects to focus on the aspects relating to them.
- The constant comparative method uses a systematic approach to collect data and discover the emergent themes through the analysis process.
- Grounded theory discovers the evolving theory and patterns of multiple individual experiences.

Methodology:

- Participant criteria included 1) be within 18-25 years of age, 2) attend Texas state parks, and 3) follow Texas state park accounts on Instagram.
- Qualifying participants were found by purposive sampling through Texas Parks and Wildlife posting an Instagram story.
- Interviews were conducted with 15 participants over Zoom.
- Questions covered interactions with Texas state parks on Instagram and using Instagram as a source for information about COVID-19.

Findings:

- Visitors use Instagram for technical information, such as closures, and visual information, such as scenery.
- Some use Instagram as a main source of information, a few used the website more, and most used both.
- Most did not use Instagram for COVID-19 updates.
- Most viewed posts announcing parks were out of day passes as beneficial, but did not like or comment.
- Visitors want posts about campsites, trails, rentals, purchasable items, and events.

Recommendations:

- Park's should showcase variety and include images.
- Regularly posting places the park in a user's feed and often encourages them to plan a visit.
- Having an Instagram account benefits the park.
- Communication practitioners should post informational content despite less engagement.
- Further research includes measuring if posting park events on Instagram increases attendance and if geotags from Instagram users influence experiences.