

Building Tourism Resilience through Communication

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Abstract: The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the tourism industry called attention to how crucial it is for tourism operations to be resilient, as their ability to overcome crises also impacts communities and adjacent industries. The communication theory of resilience argues that resilience is a dynamic capability that can be developed through communication processes. Exploring the role of communication processes in building resilience is important to establishing holistic strategies that strengthen the tourism industry. This work applies the communication theory of resilience to explore the employment of communication processes by agritourism operators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Seven agritourism operators in North Carolina, USA, were interviewed about resilience strategies at three points in time in 2020. These interviews revealed the value of communication processes in building resilience in agritourism operations and the facilitating role of communication technologies. These findings reveal that resilience is built collaboratively through social engagement and interaction.

Keywords: COVID-19; communication theory of resilience; agritourism resilience; tourism crisis

1. Introduction

The devastating impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the tourism industry motivated the proclamation of February 17 as Global Tourism Resilience Day by the United Nations (UN). In doing so, the UN seeks to raise awareness about the crucial role of tourism resilience for communities and interconnected industries to overcome crises. It is also intended to prompt member nations to advance strategies for rehabilitation after disruptions, such as diversifying tourism products and promoting sustainable tourism (e.g., ecotourism and agritourism) [1]. Resilience is the ability to change and adapt to disruptive events while maintaining the system's basic functions [1]. Communication in resilience studies is often regarded as an interactive exchange of information between the system and its environment that facilitates adaptation to changing conditions [2]. Hence, communication is often considered instrumental to disseminating information and timely feedback necessary for problem solving during a crisis [3]. Studies exploring communication in relation to tourism resilience have focused on the effectiveness of crisis communication and the role that information flow plays in collaboration and teamwork [3], the importance of risk communication (i.e., risk messaging) on travel fear and intentions during a health crisis [4], and the importance of collaboration in overcoming communication and information barriers for disaster preparedness [5]. Effective communication is also regarded as an important motivator for members of an organization, encouraging proactive behavior, clarifying misunderstandings, and limiting misinformation [6,7].

In these studies, communication and resilience are regarded as capabilities that an organization may or may not have [6]. Yet, the research studying communication for resilience as a process, rather than a capability, is limited. This may be related to the fact that several studies on communication for resilience have been quantitative, which tend to focus on the what rather than on the how [3]; thus, qualitative approaches to study the role of communication in resilience may enrich its understanding. The communication



Citation: Brune, S.; Knollenberg, W.; Vilá, O. Building Tourism Resilience through Communication. *Tour. Hosp.* **2024**, *5*, 51–59. <https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp5010004>

Academic Editor: Brian Garrod

Received: 15 December 2023

Revised: 19 January 2024

Accepted: 24 January 2024

Published: 31 January 2024



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theory of resilience differs from previous communication approaches because it envisions resilience as a process through which people adapt by actively creating a new normal through social interaction and anchoring their identities and identifications [8]. Rather than regarding resilience as a capability that a system may possess, the communication theory of resilience argues that resilience can be built, sustained, and developed through communication processes [8,9]. More specifically, the communication theory of resilience proposes that resilience can be developed through five processes: (1) crafting a new normalcy; (2) affirming or anchoring identities; (3) using and/or maintaining salient communication networks; (4) looking beyond conventional ways of thinking about and living life by putting alternative logics to work; and (5) foregrounding productive action while backgrounding unproductive behaviors or negative feelings [8–10]. Thus, the communication theory of resilience departs from the assumptions that resilience is a process of reintegrating from disruptions involving “profound negotiations and contestations” [9] (p. 2), which occurs through discourse (talk-in-interactions) embedded in a cultural and societal context. To our knowledge, the communication theory of resilience has not been used in tourism resilience studies, which may prevent a holistic understanding of the numerous processes involved in building resilience among tourism businesses [11].

The purpose of this study is to explore the resilience of agritourism (i.e., visiting a farm for education or recreation [12]) operations during the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of the communication theory of resilience. Agritourism operations rapidly adapted their services to the restrictive measures imposed, implemented digital innovations, and relied on diversified operations to boost their resilience, suggesting much can be learned from the agritourism industry in terms of resilience [13–15]. Although our initial work focused on diversification and reorganization adaptive strategies [13], the role of communication processes in agritourism operators’ resilience emerged in the data. These communication processes aligned with the communication theory of resilience and underscored the importance of communication networks and technologies in facilitating these processes. The agritourism literature has explored the role of communication needs by agritourism operators mostly from the marketing perspective, focusing on promotion and advertising [16–18]. Thus, this study has the twofold objectives of: (1) better understanding the role of communication processes in building resilience in agritourism operations, and (2) to develop recommendations to build resilience through communication. The processes proposed by the communication theory of resilience have not yet been explored in agritourism resilience studies. Exploring the role of communication processes in building resilience for agritourism operations is paramount to promoting practices that strengthen the agritourism industry.

This study addresses the need to incorporate communication processes in analyzing resilience and portrays the role of communications in the enactment of resilience in agritourism operations through their communication practices. Given the increasing incidence of crises and disruptive events, it is pressing to promptly foster communication resources and action to advance and sustain resilience. This study is also relevant because it focuses on the agritourism industry, which is on the rise in the US [19]. Finally, this study provides practical implications to strengthen tourism industry resilience from a communication perspective, which has received little attention in the tourism resilience literature.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Background and Sampling Procedures

There are 46,418 farms that offer agritourism attractions in North Carolina, representing almost 2% of the total farms in the state [20]. Agritourism activities in North Carolina fall within five categories: direct sales to consumers, educational activities such as school tours, hospitality activities such as farm stays, outdoor recreation (e.g., corn mazes, fishing), and entertainment (e.g., festivals) [20]. A study conducted by the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services in 2005 revealed that 52% of farms reported an agritourism annual gross income below \$10,000, 32% of farms reported an agritourism

annual gross income between \$10,000 and \$50,000, and 17% of farms generated more than \$50,000 a year [21]. These numbers suggest agritourism still signifies a relatively minor share of farm revenue, yet agritourism income in the United States more than tripled from roughly 280 million in 2002 to 950 million in 2017 (adjusted for inflation). This illustrates the increasing importance of the agritourism industry to the nation's economy [19].

During the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism businesses faced unprecedented challenges, including agritourism operations. Early on in the pandemic, the research team identified the importance of collecting perishable data to document the challenges dealt with by agritourism operators. Perishable data refers to transient data that may decay in quality or be permanently altered or lost if not captured shortly after it is produced [22]. Agritourism operations may employ temporary practices and strategies to adapt to changing agricultural markets, public preferences, and tourism seasonality [23], which is a characteristic of perishable data. Capturing perishable data as early as possible has helped governmental agencies and humanitarian organizations to capture the immediate impacts of crisis or disasters and prioritize and adapt efforts to effectively address future planning and response [22]. Given the ongoing and constantly changing impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, the capture of this data during the early days of the pandemic proved crucial. To accelerate data collection, a convenience sample was employed [24], given the time and resource limitations posed by the COVID-19 crisis. The sample comprised agritourism operations located across the west, east, and central regions of North Carolina participating in a parallel research project. The selection criteria for the parallel project were operations with an on-farm store that offered a combination of educational activities, such as farm tours, as well as hands-on agricultural activities (e.g., U-Pick). Ten operators were invited to participate and were informed about the research procedures by email, and seven operators consented to participate. The sustained engagement with these operators through three in-depth interviews (an hour long on average) and engagement through the parallel project facilitated a comfort and openness between the main researcher and the operators. The IRB approval was submitted and approved in April 2020 (NC State IRB 20942).

2.2. Instrument and Data Collection Procedures

A semi-structured interview guide was designed to inquire about the challenges respondents faced during the COVID-19 crisis and the strategies they employed to overcome those challenges. (e.g., what changes have you currently implemented in your operation?). Participants were sent a recruitment email with a link to a Qualtrics survey that included the informed consent form with more information about the research protocol and they were offered the option to participate in the interviews on Zoom or over the phone. All participants stated that they preferred to conduct interviews over the phone. Phone interviews were scheduled with each participant three times in 2020 (Time 1: May-June, Time 2: August-September, and Time 3: November). Interviewees were offered a participation incentive (USD 25 gift card for each interview). The participating operations offer a range of U-pick crops such as pumpkins and apples and range in size from 17 to 688 hectares. Most of the participating operations are open for about four months of the year, mainly during the fall season.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data saturation—where no other themes regarding the research questions emerged—was accomplished with the seven participating agritourism operations [25]. After each round of interviews, data were coded to determine if there were strategies, challenges, or practices that were not fully understood or exclusive to one operation. The interviews were transcribed verbatim for data analysis via a transcription service. Any personal information about the interviewees was removed from the interview transcriptions before data analysis. The NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software was utilized to manually conduct thematic analysis. The researchers initiated thematic analysis of the data to identify challenges and coping strategies used by agritourism operators in each of the three stages of data

collection. Initial codes were generated and peer debriefing of these codes categorizing the varied challenges and coping strategies operators employed was conducted (i.e., diversification, reorganization, information seeking, communication, and mindset). Given the wide variety of coping strategies employed by agritourism operations, this study only focused on the codes regarding information seeking, communication, and mindset (See Brune et al. [13]). For the codes regarding the participant's information seeking and communication strategies, axial coding was performed to connect them with the communication theory of resilience under the five communication processes: (1) crafting a new normalcy; (2) affirming or anchoring identities; (3) using and/or maintaining salient communication networks; (4) looking beyond conventional ways of thinking about and living life by putting alternative logics to work; and (5) foregrounding productive action while backgrounding unproductive behaviors or negative feelings. Two researchers participated in the analysis of the data, and a peer debriefing was conducted to discuss the connections between open and axial coding.

3. Results

The following subsections discuss how agritourism operators during the COVID-19 pandemic employed the processes proposed by the communication theory of resilience: (1) crafting a new normalcy; (2) affirming or anchoring identities; (3) using and/or maintaining salient communication networks; (4) looking beyond conventional ways of thinking about and living life by putting alternative logics to work; and (5) foregrounding productive action while backgrounding unproductive behaviors or negative feelings. An in-depth explanation of the context and COVID-19 restrictions in North Carolina is provided by Brune et al. [13].

3.1. *Crafting Normalcy*

Normalcy discourse refers to how individuals produce a system of meanings to maintain the “mundane, the regularities in life that previously might have gone unnoticed” [9] (p. 3). Agritourism operators reported this behavior when they were unable to host visitors due to COVID-19 restrictions. Some operators offered Facebook Live videos at the time they scheduled an in-person farm tour, as Operator 7 explained: “Until we reopened, we did Facebook Live videos on the days we would have had a public tour, at the time we would have had a public tour. . .” Operator 6 also sought to craft normalcy by conducting Facebook Live sessions:

We would every day through the week, at 11 o'clock, we just pick a different book and read to the children. . . Sometimes, we would do a farm tour. . . But it was more or less to continue engagement with our customers and try to help the parents find something for their children to do.

Thus, communication technologies enabled operators to offer virtual tours to engage customers and sustain a routine that provided a sense of normalcy. Another aspect of crafting normalcy is that it helps to envision a path forward. For instance, when crafting a new normalcy, operators adapted to the new context using communication technologies to sustain public engagement while following the stay-at-home order. This normalcy crafting might help operators to probe the foreseeable future of their business in which communication technologies are increasingly incorporated in public engagement [26].

3.2. *Affirming Identity Anchors*

Identity anchors are terms or concepts upon which individuals and their community members use to explain who they are [9]. Agritourism operators are motivated to educate the public about agriculture [12] and their identities are anchored in offering recreational and educational services [27]. Operator 1 explained how offering virtual experiences contributed to their farm's mission: “Also going back to our core mission here at the farm, which is [agricultural] education. [Virtual tours] seemed like really a wonderful project to devote some time to”. Additionally, they sought to continue their roles as recreation

providers, as Operator 2 explained: “After the first wave, we had a lot of people that were really antsy, wanted to get out. We created a drive-through experience on the farm that met all the guidelines that were in place”.

Thus, adapting to the context by continuing to offer educational and recreational services to the public enabled operators to reaffirm the core mission of their operations and anchored their identity. Affirming their operations’ most important identities during a time of crisis facilitated operators’ feelings of achievement and success [28].

3.3. Maintaining Communication Networks

Buzzanell [9] argues that resilience can be built by creating and maintaining communication networks, citing Granovetter’s work [29,30] to refer to how peer or professional association connections provide support through systems of weak and strong ties. Operator 3 explained: “. . . we’ve reached out to some community college, small business center managers, Western Carolina University. . . We’ve reached out to several groups that have helped us with some ideas of what we could do to operate for the fall”. Operator 2 reinforced this point:

A lot of the associations I’ve been affiliated with like the North American Farmers Direct Marketing Association, . . . , the North Carolina Agritourism [Network] Association, those have done a lot of things as far as webinars and networking, to help people deal with or learn how people are dealing with things.

Agritourism operators leveraged their access to diversified networks associated with agriculture and tourism to facilitate informed decision making, learn from other agritourism operators, build resilience as a community, and share best practices.

3.4. Putting Alternative Logics to Work

Resilient organizations might engage in communicative processes to reframe the situation through “alternative logics” and reorganize in contradictory or paradoxical ways [9] (p. 6). This may include implementing new rules that better adapt to the new reality. Part of the agritourism operators’ processes to construct resilience entailed recognizing the chaotic context, as Operator 5 explained when asked about their main challenges: “This year everything’s crazy. . . It’s very different and new this year. It’s not predictable at all”. Nonetheless, operators sought to follow the rules imposed by local regulations. For example, operators’ decision making depended on the Governor’s executive order, as Operator 4 explained: “We are not doing any advertising, or making any announcements about the upcoming Fall season, until after the governor’s executive order is announced in September. . .” Operators explained their desire to follow the rules to avoid the potential consequences of neglecting the health of visitors, as stated by as Operator 1: “Why would any business that is involved in bringing people to the venue, subjugate themselves to a backlash due to a spread of COVID based off of something that they did not do to protect the public?” Thus, agritourism operators sought to abide by the changing regulations and context: “The plans change as far as the consumer’s expectations, the policies, or the governor’s. . .” (Operator 6). In short, agritourism operator behavior cannot be fully categorized as “putting alternative logics to work” or devising their own set of rules. Rather, operators were interested in discussing the most efficient ways to operate under an uncertain context while complying with rules and regulations.

3.5. Legitimizing Negative Feelings While Foregrounding Productive Action

This process refers to acknowledging the detrimental circumstances while advancing productive action. Agritourism operators in North Carolina revealed how the North Carolina Agritourism Network Association (NC-ANA) was both a support group and space to encourage action. As Operator 1 explained about their motivations to attend the annual NC-ANA reunion: “Part of that is just wanting to get together. . . and lick our wounds together. . . We’ve got friendships and we’ve all been through hell together. . . You can call it therapy session if you want to”. Therefore, operators felt that NC-ANA

gatherings helped to legitimize their negative feelings. Nonetheless, they also foregrounded productive action: “We’re continuing to be virtually as leadership for NC-ANA. We’re putting out information that we deemed as helpful to our members. . . With members to try to bring questions to the table. . .” (Operator 1). This adds to the importance of social networks in the construction of resilience both to process negative feelings and advance positive action.

4. Discussion

In this work, the value of communication in building resilience in agritourism operations is revealed as well as the facilitating role of communication technologies. Operators initially sought to sustain engagement with their customer base through platforms such as Facebook, and this virtual interaction helped to materialize routines in order to provide a sense of normalcy (e.g., conducting a farm tour at the same time every day). This offers new evidence that despite the social distancing protocols implemented during the COVID-19 crisis that prevented in-person social interaction, communication technologies like Facebook helped to provide a sense of normalcy necessary for resilience. Given the fact that rural residents are persistently excluded from a reliable broadband internet connection [31], these findings further stress the urgency of increasing connectivity in rural areas already devastated by a lack of technological innovation. Furthermore, ensuring internet access in rural areas and disadvantaged communities can strengthen resilience in a post-pandemic landscape characterized by the heightened digitalization of business, education, health, and retail, among other sectors.

Another important aspect revealed by this study is the value of reaffirming and anchoring identities during times of crisis to help guide action. Affirming their operations’ mission allowed operators to anchor their identities and visualize a path forward during the time of crisis [9]. Searching for ways to operate under COVID-19 restrictions while incorporating their core mission facilitated operators’ feelings of achievement and success, which has been found to trigger a positive mindset and encourage further positive action [28]. The importance of anchoring identities is also a meaningful aspect practitioners can foster to encourage resilience. These findings illustrate that, in times of crisis, it is key to prompt tourism organizations to anchor operator identity (e.g., as entrepreneurs, educators, entertainers, and innovators) and facilitate their ability to revisit these identity anchors in order to clarify a plan of action.

Organizations such as the NC-ANA facilitated communication practices beyond enabling the flow of information and resources. These networks can also help to reaffirm identity and legitimize negative feelings while advancing developing and sharing effective coping strategies. Thus, these findings highlight the notion that resilience is built collaboratively through social engagement and interaction [32]. Since crises may not offer ideal circumstances to create or advance novel networks, operators can build resilience by engaging in sustained intentional efforts to encourage diversity and meaningful relationships and alliances during times of normal operation. Networking can be facilitated through organizational membership and interorganizational networks, increasing the opportunities to access a variety of resources and information [26]. This adds to the importance of diversification regarding how agritourism operations build resilience [15,33], which this study revealed goes beyond economic diversification, spanning diversification of social networks and sources of information and knowledge. Government officials, tourism extension leaders, and tourism operators seeking to build resilience should also focus on promoting and supporting these networks before crises arise. These processes can be catalyzed through instruction, messaging, or training.

The enactment of the five processes may vary contextually, which was manifested in our research by the lack of evidence regarding the process “putting alternative logics to work”. The absence of the process “putting alternative logics to work” in agritourism operators’ behavior may reflect a concern with the health risks posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to follow regulations to avoid spread of the virus. Our findings

highlight the importance of cross-context comparison for theory development. Thus, this research note enriches the communication theory of resilience by illustrating a context (i.e., a health crisis) that motivated following authoritative knowledge rather than devising new rules. Yet, more cross-context research is necessary to continue to inform the communication theory of resilience or perhaps learn about new manifestations of “putting alternative logics to work” that may have been too subtle to capture.

Finally, foregrounding productive action while backgrounding unproductive behaviors or negative feelings is crucial to the communication theory of resilience. An emerging practice by agritourism operators was that negative feelings were not denied or suppressed but rather exposed as legitimate emotions. Validating negative feelings and emotions helps people to regain their dignity and authenticity whilst enabling the discussion of potential paths forward [9,26]. It is worth noting that these five communication processes proposed by the communication theory of resilience overlap and potentially capitalize on each other. For example, in the case of agritourism operators, their engagement with the NC-ANA enabled foregrounding productive action while backgrounding unproductive behaviors or negative feelings; thus, the role of nurturing social networks also embodies other communication processes necessary for resilience, such as diversifying sources of information.

The communication theory of resilience poses that people’s way of communicating during times of crisis aligns with five processes but does not specify when or where people will engage in these processes [9,10]. Instead, the communication theory of resilience advances the understanding of how people communicate during times of disruption and reorganization, cultivating resilience through social interaction and networks [8]. This understanding can help to devise strategies specifically devoted to crafting normalcy, affirming identity, foregrounding productive action while validating negative feelings, and developing and nurturing communication networks during times of crises. It is also important to acknowledge the limitations of this study given its qualitative nature and the small sample size, which is not intended to be representative of the North Carolina agritourism industry. Thus, future tourism studies could take advantage of the recently developed Communication Resilience Processes Scale grounded on the communication theory of resilience to measure the degree to which a community engages in the five communication processes with a representative sample [34].

5. Conclusions

The literature on communication for resilience focuses on how communication practices build resilience by enabling the free flow of information that allows organizations to improve their decision making [3]. This study reveals other essential functions accomplished through communication that strengthen resilience, such as affirming identity anchors and enabling productive action. The communication theory of resilience [8,9] considers resilience to be a process through which people adapt and actively create a new normal through interactions [8]. Agritourism operators used strong network ties, affirmed identity anchors, retained routines and rituals, and focused on productive actions and feelings that might encourage transformation. Although this study is exploratory, using the communication theory of resilience helped to reveal the processes involved in systematically incorporating the role of communication in resilience beyond the mere transfer of information for decision making. Finally, our focus on operator-level resilience can be considered as part of the puzzle for a bottom-up approach to understanding tourism industry resilience at large.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.B.; methodology, S.B. and W.K.; validation, W.K. and O.V.; formal analysis, S.B.; investigation, S.B.; resources, W.K.; data curation, O.V.; writing—original draft preparation, S.B.; writing—review and editing, W.K. and O.V.; supervision, W.K.; project administration, S.B. and W.K.; funding acquisition, S.B., W.K. and O.V. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by a Quick Response grant from the Natural Hazards Center, University of Colorado, Boulder. The Quick Response program is based on work supported by the National Science Foundation (Award #1635593). Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NSF or Natural Hazards Center.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of North Carolina State University (IRB 20942, April 2020).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements during the ethics process.

Acknowledgments: We are especially grateful to the farms that participated in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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