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Short Communication

Virtual Horse Shows: Participants Perspective on a Novel Alternative During COVID-19 Pandemic

Neely Walker a,*, Chelsie Huseman b, Melissa Cater c, Dean A. McCorkle d, Daniel Hanselka d, Jennifer Zoller b

a LSU Agricultural Center, School of Animal Sciences, Baton Rouge, LA
b Texas A&M University, Department of Animal Science, College Station, TX
c LSU Agricultural Center, Agricultural & Extension Education & Evaluation, Scott Research & Extension Center, Winnnsboro, LA
d Department of Agricultural Economics, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, The Texas A&M University System, College Station, TX

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The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the availability of virtual horse showing opportunities. The objectives of this study were to describe survey participants’ personal characteristics and participation in virtual and in-person horse shows, level of satisfaction, attitude toward technology and motivation to participate, and internal and external factors influencing the decision to participate in virtual horse shows. A survey was distributed to a target audience of adult horse show participants and/or adults supporting youth horse show participants via Qualtrics (n = 251). A majority of respondents (91.2%) reported benefits to participating in virtual horse shows, and 59.8% plan to continue showing virtually when in-person shows resume. The opportunity to show virtually has resulted in 76.1% of respondents anticipating increasing their participation in showing (in-person or virtual). An improvement in attitude toward technology (M = 1.6; SD = 0.4; Range = 1.0–2.3) and an increase in motivation to participate, ride and show (M = 1.4; SD = 0.4; Range = 1.0–2.8) was also reported. In addition, respondents indicated they were somewhat likely to be influenced to participate in virtual shows by internal factors such as their budget and ability to record the ride. External factors such as feedback from judges, available divisions, and awards were extremely likely to influence their decision to participate. In conclusion, virtual horse shows have provided a satisfactory outlet to keep people engaged in the industry. Additional research should be done to determine if the current popularity of virtual horse showing persists once in-person shows have fully resumed.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused major adjustments in the equine industry including rescheduling, redesigning and cancellation of horse shows. However, a study evaluating the early effects of COVID on horse owners revealed that despite COVID-19 restrictions 66% of U.K. respondents indicated they were still riding [1], 44%–84% of North American owners were still riding, and Australian respondents reported no real difference in their riding habits. Additionally, U.K. and North American respondents indicated adjusting their riding activities such as when they would ride, or not jumping or working with young horses [2]. Although many changes have presented challenges and undue burden on horse owners and businesses, virtual horse showing has opened the door for increased opportunities to show.

The benefits of participating in horse show activities are well documented and include improved self-esteem, learning to set goals, priorities, and to have a responsible attitude; [3], as well as learning to handling pressure, respect officials, sportsmanship; self-motivation and leadership [4]. With the shift in society towards a more technological-driven life and an increase in virtual platforms available for competition paired with consumers becoming more comfortable with social media [5], participation in virtual horse shows appears to be a logical progression. However, the motivation and benefits to participate in virtual horse shows have not been previously described.

The purpose of this study was to better understand participants’ involvement in in-person and virtual horse shows amid the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The study objectives

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* Ethical Statement: The survey procedures were deemed exempt by the Louisiana State University Agricultural Center’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). No animals were used to collect this data.

* Corresponding author: Neely Walker, PhD, LSU Agricultural Center, School of Animal Sciences, 205 Franchi Hall, Baton Rouge, LA 70803.

E-mail address: Nwalker@agcenter.lsu.edu (N. Walker).
included describing survey participants’ personal characteristics and participation in virtual and in-person horse shows, monetary expenditures on horse shows, level of satisfaction with virtual horse shows, attitude toward technology, motivation to participate in virtual horse shows and the internal and external factors influencing the decision to participate in virtual horse shows.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Population and Sample

The target population for this survey was adult horse show participants and/or adults supporting youth horse show participants. The accessible population was adult subscribers to 42 state Extension listerservs and national equine listerservs. The convenience sample consisted of 251 respondents to the survey (collected between 1 May to 15 June, 2020), which limits our ability to report response rate.

2.2. Instrument

The survey consisted of 35 items covering attitude toward technology (three items), motivation to participate in virtual horse shows (four items), internal factors influencing virtual horse show participation (seven items), external factors influencing virtual horse show participation (four items), and demographics (17 items). Response options for the “attitude toward technology” and “motivation to participate in virtual horse shows” items were “increased,” “no change,” and “decreased.” Response options for the internal and external factors items were “extremely likely,” “somewhat likely,” “neither likely nor unlikely,” “somewhat unlikely,” and “extremely unlikely.” The 18 items comprising the constructs of attitude toward technology, motivation to participate in virtual horse shows, internal factors influencing virtual horse show participation, and external factors influencing virtual horse show participation were assessed for construct validity using exploratory factor analysis. Collectively, the four constructs explained 55.6% of the variance in virtual horse show participation, with internal factors influencing virtual horse show participation explaining the greatest amount of variance (32.4%), and external factors influencing participation explaining the least amount of variance (0.7%). Motivation to participate in virtual horse shows and attitude toward technology explained 11.5% and 71.2% of variance, respectively. Reliability analysis was used to assess the internal consistency of the constructs. All constructs had acceptable levels of reliability (Cronbach’s alpha >0.70): attitude toward technology (α = 0.78), motivation to participate in virtual horse shows (α = 0.84), internal factors influencing virtual horse show participation (α = 0.89), and external factors influencing virtual horse show participation (α = 0.78). This survey was approved by the Louisiana State University Agricultural Center Institutional Review Board.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected using Qualtrics (2020), an online survey software. An online link to the questionnaire was distributed through social media including virtual horse show Facebook group pages and via email to breed association members, extension specialists, and extension specialist email lists. The survey remained open for six weeks. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics: frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation.

3. Results

The majority of survey respondents were female (n = 240; 95.6%) representing a cross section of U.S. states (n = 42; 84.0%).

Table 1

| Items                                                                 | M     | SD    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Use of social networking sites (Facebook, Instagram, etc.)          | 1.64  | 0.48  |
| Confidence in ability to use technology                            | 1.62  | 0.51  |
| Awareness of technology                                            | 1.58  | 0.50  |
| Confidence in riding ability                                       | 1.52  | 0.54  |
| Confidence in ability to show                                      | 1.49  | 0.55  |
| Desire for training opportunities                                   | 1.38  | 0.50  |
| Motivation to make goals                                           | 1.33  | 0.51  |

a Items for the Attitude Toward Technology Construct.

b Responses for the Motivation to Participate in Virtual Horse Shows Construct.

The most responses were recorded from residents of Texas (n = 47; 19.2%) and the fewest responses were provided by residents of Delaware, Georgia, Nevada, New Jersey, Vermont, Wisconsin, and Wyoming (n = 1; 0.4%). Six (2.4%) respondents did not provide a state or international place of residence. Twelve respondents (4.9%) reported international places of residence: Canada (n = 8; 3.2%); Netherlands (n = 3; 1.2%); Belgium (n = 2; 0.8%); Brazil, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, and Norway (n = 1; 0.4%). Responses collected from international locations and those that did not provide a location were not included in the analysis. No responses were gathered from residents of Alabama, Hawaii, Maine, Maryland, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and Rhode Island. Participants ranged in age from 18–77 years old with an average age of 44.13 (n = 251, SD = 13.69). Respondents had been active in the equine industry for an average of 29.07 ± 14.64 years. They also reported participating in open shows for an average of 19.97 ± 14.67 years, breed association 12.86 ± 13.46 years, discipline specific 11.12 ± 12.67 years, and virtual shows for 0.85±0.87 years.

Participants planned to attend as many as 52 and as few as zero in-person shows in 2020. The average number of shows that participants planned to attend was 9.70 (n = 249, SD = 7.15). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, participants have not attended as many as 21 and as few as zero in-person shows (n = 251; M = 4.17; SD = 3.11).

Respondents reported either actively showing or supporting a youth show participant (n = 173, 68.9%). The remainder of the respondents were either both actively showing and supporting a youth participant (n = 41, 16.3%), or not doing either (n = 37, 14.7%).

The average expenditures associated with participating in-person shows was $991 (SD = $722; Range = $0–$4000 average per show; n = 251). The average number of days spent at an in-person show was 3.27 days (SD = 4.3), with an average daily amount of money spent at an in-person show of $279.21. The average amount of money spent for virtual shows was $66.82 (SD = $72.50; Range = $0.00–$650.00 average per show; n = 251).

The majority of participants were extremely satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the cost of entry fees to compete in a virtual horse show (n = 207, 82.5%). Some respondents were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the cost of entry fees to compete in a virtual horse show (n = 36, 14.3%) and a very small percentage were dissatisfied with the cost of entry fees to compete in a virtual horse show (n = 8, 3.2%).

In terms of future plans for virtual shows, the largest percentage of respondents planned to continue to participate in virtual horse shows, if still available, when in-person shows resume (n = 150, 59.8%), while some were undecided (n = 74, 29.5%). Others did not plan to continue to participate in virtual horse shows when in-person shows resume (n = 27, 10.8%). The overwhelming majority of respondents saw benefits to participating in virtual horse shows (n = 229, 91.2%), while a small percentage either did not know or did not think there were benefits associated with virtual horse shows (n = 22, 8.8%).
A large percentage of respondents anticipated increasing their participation in showing (in-person or virtual) due to the additional opportunities to participate in virtual horse shows \((n = 132, 76.1\%)\), while a smaller percentage did not plan to increase their participation \((n = 37, 21.9\%)\). About a third of respondents did not provide a response \((n = 82)\).

Survey respondents were asked a series of questions to assess their perceptions of how their attitude toward technology and motivation to participate in virtual horse shows had changed as a result of their participation in virtual horse shows (Table 1). For each individual responding to the survey a mean value was computed for the constructs of attitude toward technology and motivation to participate in virtual horse shows. The overall mean and standard deviation for the two constructs was computed to determine the group average for the constructs. Responses \((n = 251)\) indicated an improvement in attitude toward technology \((M = 1.6; SD = 0.4; \text{Range} = 1.0–2.3)\) and an increase in motivation to participate in virtual horse shows toward riding and showing \((M = 1.4; SD = 0.4; \text{Range} = 1.0–2.8)\). Responses were coded 1 = increased, 2 = no change, and 3 = decreased.

Respondents were also asked a series of questions assessing how both internal and external factors influenced their decision to participate in virtual horse shows (Table 2). For each individual responding to the survey a mean value was computed for the constructs. Responses indicated that respondents were somewhat likely to be influenced to participate in virtual shows by internal factors like budget and ability to record the ride \((M = 2.1; SD = 0.7; \text{Range} = 1.0–4.6)\). Respondents reported that external factors such as feedback from judges, available divisions and awards were extremely likely to influence their decision to participate in virtual horse shows \((M = 1.7; SD = 0.6; \text{Range} = 1.0–3.5)\). Responses were coded, extremely likely = 1, somewhat likely = 2, neither likely nor unlikely = 3, somewhat unlikely = 4, and extremely unlikely = 5.

### 4. Discussion

The results of this study are early indicators of the interest of the equine industry to continue participating in horse shows despite in-person restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents to this survey have indicated that virtual horse showing opportunities are a satisfactory outlet to sustain continued involvement in the horse show industry. The majority of respondents \((91\%)\) reported a belief that virtual horse shows have a number of positive benefits such as an increased attitude toward technology, increased motivation to participate and prepare for a show, and a decrease in costs associated with competing. With virtual shows costing a participant an average of $66.82 per show, the shift from traveling to in-person show can save an exhibitor an average of $924.18 per show. This decrease in costs associated with competing is a clear benefit especially when considering that 33–45% of owners surveyed by Marlin et al., indicated worrying about their financial ability to provide for their horses essential needs [2]. However, the economic impact of decreased participation or lack of availability of in-person horse shows is profound and has been estimated at close to $4 billion for 2020, in terms of the reduced contribution to gross domestic product (submitted manuscript). A noted positive for the equine industry, opportunities to participate in virtual horse shows has resulted in a large percentage of respondents \((n = 132, 76.1\%)\) that anticipate increased participation in showing (in-person or virtual). Virtual horse showing appears to provide a unique opportunity to recruit new participants who may not have traditionally attended an in-person show due to external factors, and may serve as an interesting learning opportunity. However, additional research is needed to determine if the current popularity of virtual horse showing persists once in-person shows are fully resumed.

### Author Contributions

Neely Walker: Conceptualization, Project Administration, Writing- Original Draft & Review and Editing. Chelsea Huseman: Conceptualization, Project Administration, Writing- Original Draft & Review and Editing. Melissa Cater: Methodology, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft. Dean A. McCorkle: Resources, Writing – Review and Editing. Daniel Hanselka: Resource, Writing-Review and Editing. Jennifer Zoller: Writing- Review & Editing.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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