

Milking Insights: An Ethnographic Examination of Fairlife's Instagram Content

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Abstract

The dairy industry is currently facing challenges in meeting the ongoing needs of a growing population while meeting the increased demands for dairy products, which have resulted from the growing demand for protein-based dairy products. Simultaneously, the dairy industry faces several challenges in improving consumer perceptions of dairy production as they gather much of their information about the dairy industry, including crisis information, from mass media and social media sources. Therefore, we sought to use a short-term ethnographic approach to explore the content presented on @fairlife's Instagram, including categories of products promoted; emerging themes of content presented; consumer interactions and engagement; and @fairlife's presentation during and after the Fair Oak's crisis (a major animal welfare scandal). We analyzed 732 posts posted on the Instagram account between January 25, 2014, and March 6, 2024, with 161 being videos or reels, 506 single photos, and 65 carousels. We found 45,750 comments and 206,510 likes among the 732 posts with a total response (engagement: likes and comments) of 253,260. We found that 2% ultra-filtered milk is presented the most on @fairlife's Instagram profile. We identified 12 emerging themes with the most prominent being seasonal or holiday related. Most comments included positive words with Fairlife being the most frequently used word. Consumers were initially disappointed in Fairlife after the crisis, but consumer sentiment eventually shifted, which could have been the result of the company's strategic crisis communication efforts. Additionally, we found that @fairlife maintains its audience interest beyond product promotions.

Keywords

milk, ethnography, Instagram, self-presentation, crisis communication

Cover Page Footnote/Acknowledgements

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Controversy regarding the dairy industry often gains attention through information scrutiny and advocacy as information presented in mass media often influences the development of consumers' perceptions of dairy products (Atabek & Atabek, 2019). One study found that consumers are exposed to more information when there is a dairy-related issue in the media, and they tend to trust the information (Atabek & Atabek, 2019). Typically, those who lack knowledge of the agricultural industry argue that certain agricultural methods have potential to cause harm to the environment (Godfrey et al., 2010). For example, in a study examining public perceptions of dairy farms and their environmental impact, Ostapovich (2023) found that viewers' comments on TikTok videos are based on scientific research and data and that the public perception of the dairy industry shifted in that the industry's impact on the environment has decreased. Perhaps, because of findings like these, one dairy-based company (@stalladidattica_unibo) uses Instagram to educate and involve consumers in dairy cow nutrition and management. As a result, the brand created a community where individuals can join and advocate for the dairy industry (Muca et al., 2023), and the brand's approach to using Instagram as an advocacy platform created a larger attraction to dairy cow nutrition and management.

Social Media and Branding

Social media play a significant role in modern society including invitations to events, posts emphasizing frustration during current events, setting app preferences, attending online events, or providing a form of payment (Wang & Liu, 2021) while quickly becoming a site for ethnographic and social science studies. Such examples of social media use highlight active social media consumers' regular systematic interactions. Regardless of these modern-day communication conveniences, social media provide a challenging environment for researchers because of the fluid and fragmented nature (Wang & Liu, 2021).

Instagram, an application that allows users to share photos with its followers, is an effective tool for educating consumers because of the high levels of engagement and multimedia content (Essig et al., 2020; Tyler, 2016), and it has grown in popularity as a site where consumers access information (Ishani & Seock, 2019). Instagram is a vehicle for publicizing work and reaching a broader audience (Muca et al., 2023), and as of 2023, roughly half (47%) of Americans indicated they used Instagram (Gottfried, 2024). Users range in age from 18 to 65 years old with women more likely to use the app when compared to their counterparts, and college-educated individuals tend to use the app more than those with high school or less education (Gottfried, 2024). Social networking sites, like Instagram, are gaining attraction as effective tools for consumer engagement and building brand relationships (Bashir et al., 2018) as previous studies suggest that sponsored content created by credible influencers can impact consumers' purchasing intentions (Ishani & Seock, 2019; Locke et al., 2023). In 2023, Locke et al. used Instagram to determine how perceptions of humane animal treatment changed after engaging with posts. They found that participants had a more positive perspective of the beef industry after viewing the posts and argue that social media can be effective in sharing information and cultivating an appreciation for agriculture (Locke et al., 2020).

Branding requires consistent messaging and brand ideation (Healey, 2008) as consumers assign value to brands they encounter, which directly shapes their purchasing behavior (Malik et al., 2013) and attitudes. Consumers' attitudes toward products associated with a brand can be influenced by the brand's popularity, appeal, and uniqueness relative to its competitors (Gwin & Gwin, 2003) with brand commitment based on emotional response (i.e. appeal, engagement,

empowerment). Emotional response, then, is determined by perceived entertainment and aesthetic values, belongingness to the brand, and mutuality (Bashir et al., 2018).

Recent studies revealed that communication crises are inevitable, and organizations need to be proactive in preparing strategic crisis communication plans that include social media (Nesmith, 2020). Furthermore, depending on how an agricultural organization addresses media coverage of a crisis can impact not only the public's perception of the organization itself but also the broader industry (Gibson, 2019). During times of crisis, it is essential to have a social media presence based on facts and not just inferences (Gibson, 2019). Social media can be a pivotal resource during a crisis to identify when and how a crisis is developing and to send prompt messages out to consumers (Coombs, 2008).

For example, during the *Listeria* outbreak crisis at Blue Bell Creameries, the company heavily relied on Facebook as a platform to relay information about product recall, plant closure, reopening, and restocking products (Opat et al., 2018). Furthermore, Calley et al. (2019) explored how the *Listeria* outbreak was communicated via company press releases and news media coverage and how the crisis was managed. Through a content analysis, they found that Blue Bell effectively communicated about the crisis and was commonly found as the source in news stories which, in turn, benefited them (Calley et al., 2019). Another study found that agricultural public relations practitioners believed it was essential for their organizations to take immediate action in response to a crisis, regardless of if the communication plan was in place or not (Irlbeck et al., 2013). However, social media is pivotal in times of crisis because it can be used to listen to the public, monitor unfolding events, respond to requests, crowd source response teams, debunk rumors, and facilitate charitable donations (Alexander, 2014).

Fairlife

Fairlife is an American brand, founded in 2012, that produces ultra-filtered milk distributed by the Coca-Cola Company as of 2020. Fairlife's (2024a) mission is:

To nourish the modern world with great tasting, better for-you products, but our purpose extends beyond what's in our bottles. We go the extra mile to provide better care for the people we nourish, animals that provide use with milk, and the planet we live on.

Fairlife (2024a) has high standards: 1) begin with high-quality milk, 2) quick chill of 37 degrees in route to local stores, 3) ultra-filtration to concentrate the protein and calcium and filter out most of the sugar, and 4) provide rich and creamy milk with less sugar to local grocers. Fairlife does not own dairies but manufactures a variety of milk options, including 2% Ultra-Filtered Milk, Whole Ultra-Filtered Milk, Chocolate 2% Ultra-Filtered Milk, Fat-Free Ultra Filtered Milk, and Strawberry 2% Ultra-Filtered Milk. Fairlife offers Core Power Protein Shakes in Vanilla, Chocolate, Strawberry Banana, Elite Vanilla, and Elite Chocolate flavors. Furthermore, Fairlife processes chocolate and vanilla protein shakes as part of its nutrition plan (Fairlife, 2024a), and all products are available in large retail stores (e.g., Costco, Target, and Walmart).

Fairlife's marketing is based on its specialization in lactose-free milk that is higher in protein and calcium than regular milk, which allowed Fairlife to grow its sales of ultra-filtered milk by 79% in 2016 (Watson, 2017). Fairlife's marketing strategy began with establishing its brand by creating the design of its bottle to make it different from the plastic jugs while staying within consumers' expectations of the milk category, according to the Kaleidoscope Design Agency (2024). Consequently, after Coca-Cola bought a 40% share in the company, Fairlife increased its volume growth by 80% for the year (Kaleidoscope, 2024). The majority of Fairlife

consumers in 2022 were existing buyers who had purchased ultra-filtered milk, but there was an increase in consumers who knew Fairlife for Core Power products (Watson, 2022).

Fair Oaks Crisis

One reason the Fair Oaks crisis caused an uproar is because consumers are increasingly focused on ethical food-purchasing decisions (Thaemert, 2023). Fair Oaks Farms, a previous supplier of raw milk to Fairlife and the largest dairy producer in Indiana, was known as the number one agrotourism location in the Midwest and promoted animal husbandry (Fair Oaks Farms, 2020; Steede & LaGrande, 2019). However, in June 2019, an undercover investigator from an animal activist group was hired to work at the farm and eventually exposed Fair Oaks for poor animal practices via online networks (Nesmith, 2020). The worker released a video revealing graphic animal mistreatment and abuse toward cows that produce milk for Fairlife, contradicting the supposed “extraordinary care and comfort” previously been communicated.

One study conducted by Steede and LaGrande (2019) sought to explore the public’s Facebook response to the crisis based on two Fair Oaks statements and found that responses were significantly more negative on the second statement. Steede and LaGrande argued that agriculture and natural resources industries stray away from being active on social media, which could in turn lead the public to inaccurate information presented by outside organizations. Another study conducted by Nesmith (2020) investigated the impact of media on consumers’ perception of the Fair Oaks crisis on Twitter (now X). Nesmith (2020) found that the videos negatively impacted users based on their interests and beliefs regarding agriculture practices and animal welfare. Those against agricultural practices were primarily the ones who engaged with the information and likely experienced a shift in their perceptions of the agriculture industry.

Although Fairlife did not own or operate any dairies, they purchased raw dairy products from Fair Oaks. So, in 2019, four separate class actions were filed against Fairlife, following the animal welfare violation at Fair Oaks (Michael v. Fairlife LLC, n.d.). To add, Fairlife was charging a premium for their products because they claimed, in advertising, extraordinary care and comfort for their cows (Sabeehullah v. Fairlife LLC, n.d.). To settle the charges, Fairlife agreed to pay \$21 million to the plaintiffs and strengthen animal welfare at the farms that supplied the milk (Thaemert, 2023). This event has ostensibly changed Fairlife’s representation and, more specifically, changed Fairlife’s claims regarding humane animal treatment.

Fairlife’s crisis communication procedures consisted of posting on social media accounts to direct consumers to the company’s website. On the website, Fairlife staff described the immediate steps that took place to mitigate any concerns: a) Fairlife stopped accepting milk from any supplier in question, b) all supplying farms underwent monthly third-part audits, c) Dr. Marissa Hake was hired to lead supplying farm relationships, and d) an Animal Welfare Council was created to ensure that Fairlife’s priorities are maintained (Fairlife, 2024b). Fairlife’s crisis response underscored the importance of crisis communication planning, a topic that has gained increasing attention in studies analyzing the role social media play during organizational crises.

Theoretical Framework

Our study explored content presented on @fairlife’s Instagram profile using the self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959). Originating in 1959, Erving Goffman introduced the idea of impression management, a central component of self-presentation theory. Impression management is achieved through the consistent performance of a desired behavior (Schlenker, 1975). Moreover, the self-presentation theory focuses on how individuals manage their public

image or the impressions they convey to others (Jensen Schau & Gilly, 2003). Goffman argues that self-presentation constitutes the deliberate and observable aspect of identity (Goffman, 1959). However, much of Goffman's theory can apply to a framework that is aligned with online spaces. In these online spaces, impression management can be better understood through metaphor of an exhibition rather than a stage play (Schroeder, 2002). Hogan (2010) highlights the role of a curator in filtering and organizing content. There are ontological differences between online interactions and traditional face-to-face interactions that help to shape the dynamics of self-presentation, social interaction, and privacy in online spaces. The kind of interaction where individuals interact with each other's content linked to their profile differs from the conventional situation that formed the basis of Goffman's relevant dramaturgical approach (Hogan, 2010). Thus, it is necessary to recognize these differences as an ontological matter that allows individuals to consume and view each other's content without interacting directly with the profile owner (Hogan, 2010).

Using this theory in the context of agriculture, more specifically, regarding the public face of an agricultural company is novel. Traditionally, Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory was used to analyze individuals' presentation of self in face-to-face interaction but has since shifted to include online spaces, such as social media (Smith & Sanderson, 2014). For example, Smith and Sanderson (2014) used content analysis methods to examine how athletes use Instagram for self-presentation. They found a few noteworthy points, one of them regarding Goffman's (1979) point of ritualistic touching, a feminine behavior, where the most common type of touch was present among photos of females with their friends (Smith & Sanderson, 2014). In another study, Eagleman and Burch (2016) sought to explore how Olympic athletes use Instagram for self-presentation to build their brand and found differences among genders in types of posts and content that athletes share, which is similar to Smith and Sanderson (2014).

Although traditional studies typically explore individuals' self-presentation, we examined Fairlife's self-presentation as a company within the dairy sector of agriculture rather than analyzing an individual's profile. Similar to Eagleman and Burch (2016), we wanted to understand how Fairlife uses Instagram as a medium of communication to build its brand. Our study applied self-presentation theory to discuss the strategy behind @fairlife's Instagram profile, showcasing products that align with the brand and consumer preferences and analyze the thematic content of @fairlife's posts by considering brand values, audience engagement, and perception influence. Additionally, we used self-presentation theory to discuss how presentation influences the sentiment of comments (i.e., consumer engagement, content relevance, brand perception) and to examine @fairlife's crisis communication strategy, including managing image, addressing public concerns, and maintaining brand reputation during the crisis.

Thus, we sought to explore the culture of @fairlife's Instagram profile and analyze consumer engagement and interaction with the content as well as better understand the Fairlife culture while considering the timeline of the Fair Oaks animal welfare crisis. We examined @fairlife's Instagram presence through the lens of four research questions:

RQ1: What Fairlife products were presented most often as stimuli?

RQ2: What themes were presented through Fairlife's posts?

RQ3: What types of consumer interactions and engagement behaviors were in the comments section of @fairlife's Instagram posts?

RQ4: How was the Fairlife brand presented during and after a crisis?

Method

For the study described herein, we employed a short-term online ethnographic approach to explore the content of @fairlife's Instagram account. Our methods were inspired by Kainer et al.'s (2024) content analysis on @discovercotton's Instagram profile. We modified the methods to reflect more of an online ethnography rather than a content analysis. According to Hart (2017), an ethnography seeks to analyze phenomena from the perspectives of individuals who experience them. For our study, @fairlife Instagram is the phenomena that individuals, in our case the coders, experience. We, like most ethnographers, used qualitative and quantitative data collection methods through immersion in a particular setting (Hart, 2017). There is an abundance of literature around the appropriate amount of time to be immersed in the data to be considered ethnographic, from a few months to a few years (Brett et al., 2022; Pink et al., 2013). In addition, shorter time is needed for short-term ethnographic research, which permits shorter time for fieldwork in return for intense engagement between the researcher and the phenomena (Brett et al., 2022). Traditional ethnographic methods focus on face-to-face interactions and physical spaces through immersive fieldwork, aimed at understanding cultural practices, meanings, and dynamics within a particular group or community (Hart, 2017). An online ethnography employs the same methods as a traditional ethnography with the exception that the ethnography is conducted in a virtual setting where researchers can observe ways in which consumers engage and perceive a phenomenon (Hart, 2017).

We chose to conduct a short-term online ethnography because of our interest in gaining insight into the dairy product promotion culture and company identity of Fairlife, a Coca-Cola company that has a national reach with over \$1 billion in annual sales. However, its success has not come without challenges. Because of the Fair Oaks animal welfare violation of 2019, @fairlife's Instagram provided a unique platform to explore the Fairlife culture and how its content and reputation changed during and after the crisis. Thus, @fairlife's Instagram provides a unique position to examine crisis communication due to the Fair Oak's violation.

Sample

We chose @fairlife's Instagram content as our sample because of its national reach and large following, 53.3K followers as of April 2024. Our sample was comprised of 732 posts from @fairlife's Instagram of which 161 ($f = 22\%$) were videos or reels, 506 ($f = 69\%$) were single photos, and 65 ($f = 8.9\%$) were carousels. Only 37 depicted image(s) or video(s) of dairy cattle, farming, or dairy production. It is important to note that Fairlife has three verified profiles including @fairlife, @corepower, and @fairlifecanada. For our study, we focused only on the @fairlife profile because it had the largest following and was the first Instagram to represent Fairlife products. Through social media posting, Fairlife disseminates news and information about product benefits and nutritional components. In addition, Fairlife collaborates with influencers to create advertisements for display on the @fairlife Instagram. As a research team, we were attentive to content related to the animal welfare crisis early on, and the 2019 crisis allowed us to explore the culture before, during, and after the crisis and identify consumer engagement and perceptions.

Data Collection

We collected 732 posts posted on the @fairlife's Instagram account between January 25, 2014, and March 6, 2024. Researchers were immersed in data collection from January to March 2024. To collect and code the data, we divided 732 posts among four members of the research

team. We used Instagram for Desktop to collect data for each post including the date posted, type of stimuli (single photo, video/reel, or carousel), type of response (number of likes, number of comments), caption, comments, Fairlife product promoted (i.e., vanilla nutrition plan, chocolate nutrition plan, whole ultra-filtered milk, 2% ultra-filtered milk, chocolate 2% ultra-filtered milk, fat-free ultra-filtered milk, 14 oz strawberry, 14 oz chocolate, and 14oz 2%), depiction of dairy production (e.g. dairy cattle, farming), and post promotion (e.g. nutrition, culinary, holiday). In preparation for data analysis, we met several times to check progress, confirm data collection was progressing, and address questions or discrepancies.

Data Analysis

We describe our coding methods below. Four junior scholars (authors on the manuscript) were the primary coders and worked together to confirm the data analysis throughout the project.

RQ1: What Fairlife products were presented most often as stimuli

For research question one, we conducted a quantitative content analysis and categorized posts based on the Fairlife products presented. The products could be counted more than once if a post contained more than one Fairlife product, and if the post did not include a product, we coded it as “other.” Furthermore, we determined the top 10 posts with the highest total response (i.e. comments + likes) and identified the products promoted in the highest response posts.

RQ2: What themes were presented through Fairlife’s posts?

We employed a thematic analysis of @fairlife’s Instagram posts to determine relationships, themes, and connections using open and axial coding (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Additionally, we used the constant comparative methods, continuously comparing newly coded segments with previously coded ones (Kainer et al., 2024; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and sorted all posts based on the major emergent theme as many of them could have fallen into several categories.

RQ3: What types of consumer interactions and engagement behaviors were in the comments section of @fairlife’s Instagram posts?

To address research question three and identify frequently mentioned words in the comment section of @fairlife’s Instagram, we used MAXQDA2024. To collect comments from each post, we copied and pasted each comment to our data Excel sheet. After importing all comments into MAXQDA, we conducted a word cloud analysis and used the stop word list function to remove filler words (e.g., the, for, and, they). We analyzed words mentioned 100 or more times in the comments. In addition, we considered the sentiment of each word as either positive, negative, or neutral. To make meaning of our findings, we discussed how this could reflect consumer interaction and engagement behavior through a peer debrief.

RQ4: How was the Fairlife brand presented during and after a crisis?

To explore research question four, we gathered all posts that were coded as “crisis mitigation” and analyzed their sentiment. Initially, we used MAXQDA 2024 software to determine the sentiment (positive, slightly positive, slightly negative, negative, neutral) expressed in the comments of each post related to crisis mitigation. After the initial sentiment analysis, the primary author confirmed the accuracy of the sentiment analysis conducted by

MAXQDA to ensure reliability of the sentiment data collected. Next, we analyzed engagement with these posts by calculating descriptive statistics (frequencies of comments and likes).

Reflexive Statement

Coder one, the primary author, is passionate about the dairy industry. Her grandmother grew up on a dairy farm, which is the origination of her passion. She is a graduate research assistant at Texas A&M University, where she works on federally funded projects focused on farmers' adoption of conservation practices. She knew early on that she wanted her dissertation to focus on something related to consumer intention to purchase dairy products, so the study described herein lays groundwork for her dissertation research. During her undergraduate and graduate studies, she completed communications coursework with some focus on social media use in agriculture. In her professional experience, she has worked in social media management—creating content, moderating user content, and analyzing metrics for agriculture-related businesses. In addition, she is an avid consumer of Fairlife products and has prior knowledge of the Fair Oaks animal welfare crisis. Prior to data collection, she viewed the culture of @fairlife Instagram as positive and believed the company was successful in managing its brand during the crisis and was successful in rebuilding brand culture and improving reputation post crisis.

Coder two had the most experience in the dairy industry because of her time working on dairy farms in the U.S. and Australia. Her professional experience in the dairy industry brought a unique perspective to the coding team because she had prior knowledge of animal welfare crises. Additionally, she had a business mindset from life-long involvement in her family's restaurant, which allowed her to provide input about Fairlife's marketing. She is a graduate research assistant at Texas A&M University, working on federally funded projects focused on developing identity in agricultural contexts. While her bachelor's and master's focused mainly on agricultural education, her PhD program emphasizes urban planning. Regarding her willingness to consume Fairlife products, she does not enjoy some of their products due to their nutritional components, specifically the additives in their flavored products. Overall, she trusts Fairlife and its business strategy and has positive perceptions about the culture of @fairlife's Instagram.

Coder three is a graduate research assistant at Texas A&M University who recently transferred from food science to agricultural education broadly. She does not consume dairy products and has no prior experience in the dairy industry. However, she is a strong advocate of agriculture and has experience in many other agricultural-related careers. She has recently begun discussing the possibility of conducting a study on food safety regarding raw dairy products for her dissertation. Therefore, our study lays a foundation for her dissertation work as well and helps provide her an understanding of dairy product marketing. After data collection, she indicated that she trusts Fairlife and maintains a neutral position toward @fairlife Instagram content. However, she still chooses not to consume Fairlife products because of her disinterest in milk.

Coder four is an undergraduate student in agricultural communications at Texas A&M University with no experience in the dairy industry. He trusts Fairlife and would consume their products. Overall, he has a positive perspective about the culture of @fairlife's Instagram profile.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed four trustworthiness requirements in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. We established credibility through methodological triangulation, prolonged engagement with the material, statements of the

author's positions as researchers, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling. According to Stahl and King (2020, p.26), methodological triangulation is the use of more than one data collection and analysis method. In a short period (i.e. two months), we spent a prolonged time collecting data and used well-established methods to analyze our data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, we reflected on our biases and relationship to the study, which are disclosed in the reflexive statements above.

To achieve transferability, we used a thick description of the data because qualitative data cannot be generalized to a larger population due to the intimate view of the phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, thick descriptions allow someone interested in data transfer to decide whether the contextual nuances align with their context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lastly, we conducted peer debriefing sessions to achieve dependability and confirmability because they provided an opportunity for sound boarding ideas and findings (Shenton, 2004). Additionally, we kept reflexive journals to record notes and information about the study. The primary coders for the study were involved in the peer debriefing sessions, and two of the coders were undergoing formal qualitative training through an interpretive methods course where they were more familiar with data collection procedures and techniques to relay to other coders.

Limitations

There were several limitations associated with our study. Instagram is a dynamic social media platform, meaning responses can be added or removed anytime. Therefore, the data can differ among viewers based on the algorithm that aligns with their interests in social media content. Furthermore, because of this, we also do not know if any comments or posts have ever been deleted. Due to the algorithm, Instagram automatically removes or hides comments that contain offensive content. This could impact data collection because Instagram's filter prohibited the coders from viewing all comments. In many cases the number of comments was not equal to the comments we could view; therefore, we used the number of comments that Instagram portrayed rather than how many we could view. Although we conducted a comprehensive review of 732 @fairlife posts dating back to the first post, we did not examine the Instagram users or Instagram stories. Last, we cannot generalize the findings.

Findings

RQ1: What Fairlife products were presented most often as stimuli?

The @fairlife Instagram presented 732 posts between January 25, 2014, and March 6, 2024. We sorted 732 posts into nine different categories based on the Fairlife products presented: *vanilla nutrition plan*, *chocolate nutrition plan*, *whole ultra-filtered milk*, *2% ultra-filtered milk*, *chocolate 2% ultra-filtered milk*, *fat-free ultra-filtered milk*, *14 oz strawberry*, *14 oz chocolate*, and *14oz 2%*. We reserved the "other" category for posts that did not present a Fairlife product. The most presented product was *2% ultra-filtered milk* ($n = 180$, 24.6%) with *vanilla nutrition plan* being the least presented product ($n = 13$, 1.8%). We categorized 295 (40.3%) posts as *other*. Typical posts in the *other* category did not present a specific product or presented discontinued products. Some of the *other* posts, however, presented giveaways or charitable events sponsored by Fairlife (see Table 1).

Table 1*Products Presented on the @Fairlife Instagram Account*

Image Category	<i>n</i>	%
Other	295	40.3
2% Ultra-filtered Milk	180	24.6
Whole Ultra-filtered Milk	110	15.0
Chocolate 2% Ultra-filtered Milk	110	15.0
14oz Chocolate	33	4.5
14oz Strawberry	31	4.2
Chocolate Nutrition Plan	28	3.8
14oz 2% Milk	28	3.8
Fat free Ultra filtered Milk	23	3.1
Vanilla Nutrition Plan	13	1.8

Using quantitative content analysis methods, we found 45,750 comments and 206,510 likes among the 732 posts we analyzed. Total engagement (likes and comments) was 253,260. Of the 10 posts with the highest engagement, the top two were regarding the Fair Oaks animal welfare crisis with a total engagement of 24,822. These were the first two posts to mention the crisis, which were posted on June 5, 2019, and June 7, 2019, during the start of the crisis. In the June 5 post (the first post about the crisis), Fairlife directed consumers to a link in their bio through the caption. The presented photo indicated Fairlife took immediate action to “suspend milk deliveries from the dairy in the video” and “immediately implementing unannounced, independent audits of all the farms that supply our milk.” The post described the termination of the abusive employees at Fair Oaks Farms and the potential for criminal charges against individual employees. In the June 7 post dealing with the crisis, @fairlife again directed consumers to the link in the bio. The remaining eight posts with highest engagement presented giveaways/charity, consumer engagement, lifestyle/family, Fairlife Milk products, and seasonal/holiday with five not presenting a Fairlife product (Table 2).

Table 2*Posts with Highest Total Response on @fairlife's Instagram Account*

Date	Stimuli Type	Comments	Likes	Total Response	Product
6/7/2019	Single Photo	11,600	3,598	15,198	Not Specified
6/5/2019	Single Photo	5,352	4,272	9,624	Not Specified
9/28/2021	Video/Reel	219	6,135	6,354	Not Specified
3/14/2023	Video/Reel	46	6,107	6,153	14 oz strawberry, 14 oz chocolate, 14 oz 2% milk
8/24/2022	Video/Reel	31	5,165	5,196	14 oz strawberry, 14 oz chocolate,
11/24/2021	Video/Reel	11	4,939	4,950	Vanilla nutrition plan, 2% ultra-filtered milk
7/6/2021	Video/Reel	470	3,344	3,814	Not Specified
9/28/2021	Video/Reel	107	3,615	3,722	Not Specified

Date	Stimuli Type	Comments	Likes	Total Response	Product
11/7/2022	Video/Reel	22	3,357	3,379	Whole, 2%, or fat free ultra-filtered, or 14oz 2% milk
11/7/2021	Video/Reel	15	3,127	3,142	Vanilla nutrition plan, Chocolate nutrition plan

RQ2: What themes were presented through Fairlife's posts?

We identified 12 themes in Fairlife's posts: *seasonal/holiday, culinary/recipe, lifestyle/family, nutrition/health, consumer engagement, giveaway/charity, dairy production, Fairlife milk products, brand/work environment, crisis mitigation, availability, and modern world.*

Table 3

Themes and Sub-themes Promoted in @Fairlife's Instagram Posts (N = 732)

Themes/Sub-themes	<i>n</i>
Seasonal/Holiday	229
Culinary/Recipe	129
Lifestyle/Family	86
Nutrition/Health	71
Consumer Engagement	68
Giveaway/Charity	59
Dairy Production	25
Fairlife Milk Products	24
Brand/Work Environment	22
Crisis Mitigation	10
Availability	5
Modern World	4

Seasonal/Holiday

Seasonal/Holiday ($n = 229$) was a common theme on @fairlife's Instagram. It was apparent that Fairlife celebrated all sorts of holidays with a major holiday being Christmas and, more specifically, the consumption of hot chocolate (e.g., "the holiday season is here!!! Which means hot chocolate is in constant rotation in our house..." Some seasonal posts (i.e. fall, summer, spring, winter) promoted things like pumpkin spice lattes (e.g., "Celebrating fall with the perfect PSL.#fall #pumpkinspice #psl") or summertime ice cream (e.g., "summer day filled with thrifting, homemade chocolate ice cream with @Fairlife, dog parks and beach sunsets 🍁☀️🌻☐🍦"). One thing that makes up @fairlife's Instagram is posts regarding the fun national holidays like national ice cream day (e.g., "It's #NationalIceCreamDay! We've got just the treat to help you celebrate! 🍦"), national back to school prep day (e.g., "It's National Back to School Prep Day! Did you know that DHA Omega-3 is known to support brain health in both children and adults?..."), or national milk day (e.g., "Celebrate #NationalMilkDay with the perfect dunking technique: Big glass, bite-sized cookie, and Fairlife ultra-filtered milk!").

Culinary/Recipe

Culinary/Recipe ($n = 129$) was the second most common theme with content ranging from savory to sweet like homemade yogurt (e.g., “Got Fairlife purely nutritious milk and a yogurt maker at home? Then it's time for a delicious high protein homemade yogurt! Top with local honey, fresh peaches & pecans. Enjoy!”), healthier alternatives (e.g., “#Fairlife Protein Marshmallow Milk: Treat yourself with this healthier alternative to a regular milkshake (and get your protein to boost!)”), or lactose-free chowder (e.g., “Creamy, flavorful, chock full of veggies, AND lactose-free! We think this corn chowder hits all the right notes for a cozy winter dinner. Let us know what you think!”). Many times, @fairlife would provide a recipe either through a link or graphic for consumers to use Fairlife products in their cooking and baking.

Lifestyle/Family

Lifestyle/Family ($n = 86$) was another major theme presented on @fairlife's Instagram. In our peer debrief sessions we talked about how Fairlife's culture revolves around a family and a healthier lifestyle, which we agreed are related. Many pictures regarding this theme depict families, couples, or children who carry a smile and positive attitude about consuming Fairlife products (e.g., “Thanks for sharing, Gretchen! We're happy to see our new Fairlife six-pack singles are in great hands!”). Additionally, consumers of Fairlife products are like family (e.g., “Introducing to the Fairlife family, Fairlife Nutrition Plan®! With 30g of high-quality protein, 2g of sugar, and 150 calories, it's a satisfying way to get the nutrition you need. 😊”). Drinking Fairlife is a lifestyle (e.g., “Drinking a glass of Fairlife ultra-filtered milk with DHA Omega-3 throughout the day is a great way for the entire family to get the nourishment they need! 🥛”).

Nutrition/Health

Nutrition/Health ($n = 71$) was also a theme of Fairlife. Nutrition was presented consistently in the posts, but the 71 posts we coded as the nutrition/health theme were specific to nutrition (e.g., “How do you like your ice cream? We like ours lactose-free with a cherry on top! 🍒”). Many posts talk presented DHA (e.g., “Fairlife ultra-filtered milk with DHA is the perfect addition to any breakfast - just add it to your cereal or drink it with your meal! Why? Because our ultra-filtered milk with DHA offers three times the DHA vs. the leading brand to help support brain health and overall brain function for the whole family! 🥛”) or the product's low sugar content (e.g., “On-the-go lunch never looked so good! With 50% more protein and 50% less sugar than regular milk, elevate your packed lunch with 14oz Fairlife 2% milk.”).

Consumer Engagement

Consumer Engagement ($n = 68$) posts were a neat addition to @Fairlife's Instagram and created great discussion in the comments section with posts that made consumers state their favorite Fairlife product (e.g., “With 50% more protein than regular milk and an unmatched creamy taste, Fairlife has the perfect glass of milk for every mood and occasion. Which one is your go-to: 2%, fat-free, chocolate or whole? 🥛”). To highlight customer satisfaction, @fairlife presented quotes that followers often shared (e.g., “Thanks, Greg! We're so happy you're a fan of Fairlife. Share your first Fairlife story at Fairlife.com/testimonials”). Another fun way that Fairlife engaged its audience was through trivia tidbits (e.g., “Did you know...? 🧐 The top 5 countries that consume the most ice cream each year are New Zealand, the U.S., Australia,

Finland, and Sweden. ☞ The top ice cream flavors in the U.S. are chocolate, cookies and cream, mint chip, butter pecan, vanilla...”).

Giveaway/Charity

Giveaway/Charity ($n = 59$) was a @fairlife Instagram theme. The company teamed up with organizations like Horderly (e.g., “...From paper products to better-for-you drinks like @Fairlife Nutrition Plan, you can simply store unused items and replenish your supply as needed. Check out the link in our bio to enter the sweepstakes for many chances to win prizes!”) and the Food Recovery Network (e.g., “We’re proud to be supporting Food Recovery Network this #GivingTuesday. This national nonprofit is committed to fighting climate change and hunger by recovering food that would otherwise go to waste and donating to local nonprofits.”) for brand promotion. Additionally, Fairlife created and promoted a grant program to support nutrition leadership (e.g., “The 2021 Fairlife Grant Winners for LA have stepped up to the challenges of the food system and are making a difference in their communities! Get to know their work! ”).

Dairy Production

Dairy Production ($n = 25$) was not a common theme, and it was less common after the animal welfare crisis at Fair Oaks Farms. Before the crisis, Fairlife promoted dairy production by posting photos of milking time (e.g., “Cows know when it’s time to be milked! #Fairlife #farmlife #cows #milk #milkingtime”), happy and healthy cows (e.g., “Only the best care for our cows! We make sure they are healthy and happy! #cowlife #Fairlife #moo #dairy”), and farmers working for Fairlife (e.g., “#NationalFarmersDay is this Thursday, so we have decided to celebrate all week by introducing you to some of our hard-working Fairlife farmers. Meet Steve, a third-generation dairy farmer! You can read Steve’s story at the link in our bio.”). There were no dairy production-related posts during or after the crisis.

Fairlife Milk Products

Fairlife Milk Products ($n = 24$) were an obvious topic of conversation, but the 24 posts we coded as Fairlife Milk Products fell into three categories: introduced new products (e.g., “Introducing Fairlife SuperKids—the new way to start the day like a hero. More protein, more calcium, and more DHA Omega-3.”), said goodbye to old products (e.g., “Quick product update for our fellow coffee drinkers! We’ll be saying goodbye to our Fairlife creamers as we head into the new year. While we’re sad to see creamers go, never fear! We’ve got your morning covered with a few other products sure to spruce up your daily coffee! ☞”), or re-introduced old products (e.g., “The weather is warming up which means more time outside! Don’t forget to grab a 14oz Fairlife Ultra-Filtered Milk for a delicious treat on the go! ☼”).

Brand/Work Environment

Brand/Work Environment ($n = 22$) was a theme more prominent in the beginning of @fairlife’s Instagram life cycle with posts about the Fairlife headquarters (e.g., #Beautiful #BelieveInBetter evening at #chicago HQ. Have a great night everyone!”), branding shoots (e.g., “Behind the scenes at a new #Fairlife #milk bottle #photo shoot! Stay tuned for these, they're definitely going to make a splash!”), or new commercials (e.g.,

“Our #Fairlifemilk TV commercial aired today for the 1st time—keep an eye out for it! Here's a version that features our 2% #milk- Enjoy! #believeinbetter #Fairlife”).

Crisis Mitigation

Crisis Mitigation ($n = 10$) was presented about during and after the event. During the event, the posts directed customers to more information (e.g., “Dear Fairlife fans... Please see our full statement at the link in our bio.”). After the event, Fairlife took a break from posting on social media (e.g., “As you noticed, we took some time off from social media in 2019. Now it’s a new year, and we are heading into it with renewed conviction and commitment. Over the past months, we have been focusing on animal welfare and how we can push for better.”). The most recent discussion related to the crisis was concerning positive animal stewardship and presented customers with ways to learn more about farm life and caring for the animals (e.g., “Great milk starts with well-cared for cows. Learn more about the five domains of care that Fairlife supplying farms focus on to create a calm and comfortable environment at the link in our bio.”).

Availability

Availability ($n = 5$) was presented to direct customers as finding Fairlife products or answering questions about when certain products were going to be in stock again. To help make sure customers could find the products, @Fairlife staff created a link for customers to find where they could buy a variety of products (e.g., “Whether it's in a sundae with sprinkles or served up in a cone, beat the heat this weekend with some Fairlife Light Ice Cream! 🍦 Looking for where to buy? Check the link in our bio!”).

Modern World

Modern World ($n = 4$) may not be a primary emerging theme, but a few posts presented topics regarding events that occurred in modern time (e.g., “At Fairlife, we believe in caring for all living things. The murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor were the latest in a history of racism that needs to end. We can't care for all until all believe that Black lives matter...”, and “Congratulations to #TheBachelor Chris Soules on his #engagement! (Shhh...you chose our favorite girl.) From our farm families to yours—thanks for showing America a little bit about what we do every day.”).

RQ3: What types of consumer interactions and engagement behaviors were in the comments section of @fairlife’s Instagram posts?

Figure 1 depicts a word cloud of the words or emojis mentioned 100 or more times in the comments section. The top 10 words/emojis were *Fairlife*, *milk*, *love*, *chocolate*, *protein*, *make*, *product*, *thank*, and ❤️. We deemed all positive when being used by consumers in the comments.

Figure 1

Word Cloud Depicting Most Frequently Used Words in the Comments of @Fairlife's Instagram



RQ4: How was the Fairlife brand presented during and after a crisis?

Table 4 presents the posts categorized as *crisis mitigation*. There were 10 posts concerning the specific crisis event. The first two posts immediately addressed the crisis as soon as it happened and provided consumers with a link to learn more about the actions that Fairlife was taking to mitigate the impact of the crisis. The comment sections of the initial two posts were negative and included comments like “PROVE IT. NO ONE BELIEVES YOU. WHAT A HORRIBLE COMPANY,” or “Go out of business you shouldn’t be allowed to operate after this[. G]o plant-based or go out of business.” Following the crisis event, Fairlife took a six-month break from posting on social media to focus on animal welfare and to develop an Animal Welfare Advisory Council. Once the company established a council of consumers, staff began posting again. However, comments were still negative—“@Fairlife what a joke. nothing will change. you just want to make money. how dare you”, or “Y’all are CANCELLED.” After the advisory council’s development, Fairlife staff routinely provided stewardship reports and posted regarding well-cared-for cows. @fairlife’s comments even shifted toward being slightly more positive, including comments like “Love this milk. Best tasting, less carbs and sugar. Win win 🐮🐮🐮🐮🐮🐮,” and less negative like “ANIMALLL ABUSERRRR.” However, since June 23, 2022, no posts have presented the issue.

Table 4*Posts Related to Animal Welfare Crisis (n = 10)*

Date	Caption	Comments	Likes	Comment Sentiment
6/5/2019	Dear Fairlife fans... Please see our full statement at the link in our bio.	5,352	4,272	Negative
6/7/2019	Like those of you who love our products, we were devastated by the abuse that was recently discovered at Fair Oaks Farms, one of our supplying farms. Read more on the actions we are taking at the link in our bio.	11,600	3,598	Negative
1/2/2020	As you noticed, we took some time off from social media in 2019. Now it's a new year, and we are heading into it with renewed conviction and commitments. Over the past months, we have been focusing on animal welfare and how we can push for better. As we shared last summer, when we learned of the abuse at one of our supplying farms, we immediately stopped sourcing milk from this supplier. To this day, their milk is no longer being used in our products. We're using this incident to push for better. For us, pushing for better doesn't just mean correcting an isolated issue, but taking a closer look at everything we do to ensure we're raising the bar throughout our supply chain. To guide this journey, we've assembled an Animal Welfare Advisory Council to help us learn and lead. We invite you to learn more about the important work of this council and our animal welfare commitments by clicking the link in our bio. Thank you for being a part of our mission as we strive to always do better. https://Fairlife.com/what-we-believe/care-for-animals/	473	1,706	Negative
4/22/2021	Happy Earth Day! 🌍 Here at Fairlife, we are on a journey to nourish and care for people, animals, and the planet. We have some big goals ahead, and we are excited to share our progress with you through our first Annual Stewardship Report! Swipe to see a few things we've accomplished in 2020. 📱	45	222	Slightly Positive
6/8/2021	In honor of National Dairy Month, we at Fairlife want to highlight what goes into being a leading dairy processor, and that starts with a holistic approach to animal care. From the strong partnerships we have built	94	184	Slightly Positive

Date	Caption	Comments	Likes	Comment Sentiment
	with our supplying farms to the continuous investments we're making with animal care experts, we're on a mission to keep doing better every day. You can learn more about our ongoing progress through the link in our bio.			
1/24/2022	We're proud to share with all of you our 2021 Stewardship Report highlighting our continued journey to nourish and care for people, the animals on our supplying farms, and the planet we share.	2	104	Positive
1/25/2022	This week, we'll be taking a deeper dive into our annual Stewardship Report. Care for Animals continues to be a top priority at Fairlife. From the strong relationships with our supplying farms to the continuous investments we're making to support implementation of animal welfare standards at these farms, we're on a mission to keep doing better every day.	3	116	Slightly Positive
1/26/2022	Care for People is another big focus for us here at Fairlife. We're proud to play a part in the community through our ever-growing Grant Program, to support our employees in their work, and to nourish the millions of households that enjoy our products daily.	0	84	N/A
1/27/2022	Care for Planet is the final focus of our 2021 Stewardship Report. From feeding the animals on our supplying farms to production to the delivery of our product, we're continuously looking for ways that we can improve our carbon footprint and environmental efforts.	6	101	Slightly Positive
6/23/2022	Great milk starts with well-cared for cows. Learn more about the five domains of care that Fairlife supplying farms focus on to create a calm and comfortable environment at the link in our bio.	44	464	Slightly Positive

Conclusions and Discussion

We analyzed 732 posts from @fairlife's Instagram from January 25, 2014, and March 6, 2024, using online ethnography. We immersed ourselves into the data from January to March 2024. Our research shows evidence that @fairlife has high engagement among its consumers, and based on our peer debrief, we perceive that the climate or culture of the profile is somewhat engaged and targeted toward the appropriate audience. In addition, the culture is positive and encourages viewers to engage with Fairlife products through different types of content.

For research question one, we determined the Fairlife products presented most on @fairlife's Instagram and found 2% ultra-filtered milk was the most promoted product, which indicates a focus on or popularity for this product among @fairlife's audience. There is a significant level of interest and interaction among @fairlife viewers with the 2% product specifically. With a large portion of @Fairlife's content (40.3%) falling in the "other" category, we assume that content is being created to maintain audience interest beyond product promotions. Fairlife's successful crisis communication plan was evident as the top two posts with the most engagement collectively received more than 24,000 interactions, emphasizing the importance of developing effective crisis management strategies (Nesmith, 2020) to protect brand perceptions and consumer trust. Fairlife was proactive in responding to the animal welfare crisis, including immediate action and transparency (Gibson, 2019), which likely contributed to the high engagement in posts related to the crisis.

For research question two, we determined the themes presented through @fairlife's Instagram posts. @fairlife enjoys celebrating seasonal holidays, which provides an opportunity to promote seasonal drinks and dishes that could incorporate Fairlife products. Because of the nutritional benefits advertised by Fairlife (2024a), it is no surprise that there were a significant number of posts regarding lifestyle/family and nutrition/health. Overall, the 12 themes reveal that @Fairlife has a comprehensive approach to content creation, focusing on content that resonates with its audience through posts about health, family, celebration, charitable efforts, or recipes.

For research question three, we determined consumer interaction and behaviors presented in the comments section of @Fairlife's Instagram posts. We found three types of interactions: 1) brand recognition and positivity, 2) product affinity, and 3) consumer satisfaction. The large use of the words "Fairlife" and "milk" suggests that consumers have a strong recognition and association with the product and brand. Additionally, the use of words like "love" and "thank" reflects positive appreciation from consumers. For product affinity, consumers are familiar with the specific offerings and nutritional components of Fairlife through their use of words like "chocolate" and "protein." The positive sentiment among the top 10 words indicates customer satisfaction and affection toward Fairlife and its products.

For research question four, we investigated how Fairlife was presented during and after the crisis. Fairlife was prompt with its initial two posts directly addressing the issue and providing a link for more information regarding the crisis. Consumers were overwhelmingly negative in those initial posts, which reflects consumers' disappointment in the brand that so frequently promoted animal husbandry (*Sabeehullah v. Fairlife LLC*, n.d.). Fairlife's decision to take a six-month break was strategic in developing the Animal Welfare Advisory Council. Despite the slightly negative comments Fairlife received in the remaining seven posts, brand representatives continued to engage with consumers through stewardship reports highlighting efforts to improve animal well-being. Eventually, consumer sentiment shifted and there is, now, less commentary about the crisis. Furthermore, after June 23, 2022, there were no more posts related to the crisis, which emphasizes a shift in the communication focus to move past the issue.

Fairlife's focus on promoting products like whole and 2% ultra-filtered milk and 2% chocolate ultra-filtered milk exemplifies Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management. To explain, @Fairlife strategically presented content via Instagram to create a desired image by consistently featuring these products to shape consumer perceptions and preferences. Ultimately, in promoting these products consistently and creating appealing content, Fairlife representatives sought to shift consumers purchasing intention in a desirable way (Ishani & Seock, 2019). Additionally, we can see Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management through Fairlife's crisis communication strategy. @fairlifes' prompt response and transparency during the Fair Oak's crisis demonstrated Fairlife's ability to navigate challenging situations while preserving its reputation. Although there was slander and hate toward @Fairlife in comments to the crisis response posts, the brand representatives never gave up on preserving the brand. We found a strategic shift in Fairlife's communication focus in more recent years as they moved away from the crisis and toward positive messaging. Since June 2022, content has focused on product promotion through posts about recipes, holidays or seasons, and lifestyle.

Regarding recommendations, Fairlife's social media managers should regularly monitor consumer sentiment and engagement to gauge consumer perceptions and make decisions regarding mass media content. This could include revising their content calendar to include more consistent content that excludes products that are low in stock or discontinued. For new content ideas, @fairlife social media managers should visit @oceansprayinc (known for creative, attractive content) and @vollenmansfamilyfarm (known for incorporating agricultural-related content). Because Fairlife is an influencer in the dairy industry, the company should post content that improves agriculture literacy. A great starting point would be to incorporate food science facts about milk nutrition in the posts and captions. Furthermore, because it was not evident if Fairlife had a plan for crisis communications that included social media when leadership made the decision to go silent for six months, we recommend they develop a plan with a focus on social media. Additionally, adding a description in the bio about where Fairlife products can be purchased would be beneficial as many consumers were concerned about purchasing products.

Furthermore, there is a need for this type of research across the agricultural industry and within other agricultural commodities as they seek to understand and improve social media management and crisis communication strategies. By conducting such research, we can gain actionable insights that will enhance brand perception, consumer engagement, and overall effectiveness of communication via social media. Other agricultural organizations seeking social media recommendations based on the current study, they should first consider implementing a crisis communications plan. Second, they should identify and train spokespeople who can provide consistent messages and responses via social media during crises. Third, they should provide an immediate response that is honest and transparent while monitoring public sentiment toward the crisis and adjust accordingly. In the Fairlife case, that meant posting fewer pictures portraying dairy farming and livestock, but overall, organizations can effectively communicate during a crisis if they have a plan and consistently monitor social media presence to address misconceptions or highlight improvements as a result of the crisis.

Our research provides valuable insights into consumer engagement, consumer behavior, crisis communication, and content creation. Because consumers are likely to receive their news about dairy products via Instagram, a mass media platform, as discussed by Atabek and Atabek (2019), it is important for dairy organizations to communicate regularly. Especially during times of crisis, as the primary source of information to ensure accurate messaging, maintain trust, and mitigate misinformation.

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