

**The Social Media Presence of International Rural Development Nonprofit Organizations**

**Joanna King**

Graduate Assistant  
Texas Tech University  
Department of Agricultural Communications & Education  
Box 42131  
Lubbock, TX 79409  
806-742-2816  
joanna.king@ttu.edu

**Hannah Ford**

Undergraduate Student  
Texas Tech University  
Department of Agricultural Communications & Education  
hannah.ford@ttu.edu

**Savanna Barksdale**

Undergraduate Student  
Texas Tech University  
Department of Agricultural Communications & Education  
savanna.barksdale@ttu.edu

**Dr. Courtney Meyers**

Associate Professor  
Texas Tech University  
Department of Agricultural Communications & Education  
courtney.meyers@ttu.edu

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### **Introduction/Need for Research**

The past half-century has seen marked growth in food production, allowing for a dramatic decrease in the proportion of the world's people that are hungry, despite a doubling of the total population (World Bank, 2009; FAO, 2015). Nonetheless, more than 795 million people worldwide live in states of hunger and poverty (FAO, 2015).

Social media are some of the most utilized applications on the Internet (Qualman, 2011; Ramanadhan, Mendez, Rao, & Viswanath, 2013), and they are used by millions of people each day (Meredith, 2012). Social media can serve as a powerful relationship builder when used by organizations to connect with their stakeholders in two-way communications (Meredith, 2012; Ramandhan et al., 2013). Researchers postulate that the reduced transaction costs of social media enable organizations to improve efficiencies and effectiveness in achieving goals and missions (Curtis et al., 2010; Frye, 2014; Shirky, 2008; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009).

With the population expected to exceed nine billion by 2050, it is important for nonprofit rural development agencies to understand effective communication strategies in order to engage stakeholders, increase funds, and accomplish their mission (Pardey, Beddow, Hurley, Beatty, & Eidman, 2014). Because the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations is often a result of the relationships they have with the community and their stakeholders, more comprehensive research is needed to better understand effective communication models for international rural development nonprofit organizations (IRDNPOs) (Ramanadhan et al., 2013). The purpose of this study was to explore the social media presence of IRDNPOs. The following research questions were used to address the purpose of the study:

RQ1. Which social media platforms are IRDNPOs using?

RQ2. Are IRDNPOs listing their social media presence on their websites?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this research is based on relationship management, which was developed from Grunig and Hunt's (1984) definition of public relations (Ledingham, Bruning, Ki, & Kim, 2000), and has become a dominant focus of public relations practitioners (Waters, Friedman, Mills, & Zeng, 2011). The theory posits relationships, not communication, are the correct focal point of public relations (Ferguson, 1984) and encourages the use of two-way symmetrical communications to cultivate and maintain relationships with key publics rather than manipulating the publics (Ledingham et al., 2000). The theory of relationship management works to define the quality of relationships that an organization has with its publics as a measure of the public relations' function's success (Ferguson, 1984).

### **Methodology**

To identify IRDNPOs, the researchers consulted a list of the most followed 501(c)(3) registered nonprofits on social media (Top Nonprofits, 2014), asked key informants for suggestions, and conducted an online search using keywords. Only organizations with an existing social media presence of at least an organizational Twitter handle and Facebook page were included in the study. This resulted in a total study population of 25 organizations. Each organization's website, Twitter handle, and Facebook page was then evaluated to determine if any social media links

were present. If social media sites were not provided, a search for the organization was conducted on Pinterest, Google+, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Flickr.

### Results/Findings

Of the 25 organizations, 24 (96%) had at least one social media outlet in addition to Facebook and Twitter. Table 1 provides the frequency for various social media outlets. Of those that had additional social media, all (100%) listed their social media presence on their website. The number of social media outlets used, in addition to Facebook and Twitter, varied from zero to seven with a mode of 4.0 and a mean of 3.60 (SD = 1.64).

Table 1

*Frequency of social media outlets used by international rural development nonprofit organizations*

Social Media Platform	<i>n</i>	%
YouTube	21	84.0
Blog	19	76.0
Instagram	17	68.0
Pinterest	12	48.0
LinkedIn	7	28.0
Google+	6	24.0
Flickr	3	12.0
Vimeo	2	8.0

Note: Percentages do not equal 100% because organizations could use more than one social media outlet.

### Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

Of the organizations studied, all except one are currently using social media in addition to Facebook and Twitter. The majority of the organizations used YouTube, blogs, and Instagram, while other platforms were present, but to a lesser extent. All of the organizations cross-promoted their social media accounts on their websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter handles. This improves the visibility of these communication outlets. On average, organizations were using multiple social media platforms, but one did not have a social media presence outside of Facebook and Twitter. This might limit the ability to engage audiences in social marketing efforts. These organizations should select social media outlets that best reach their audience segments and help accomplish recognized objectives. Having a more comprehensive social media presence will provide more opportunities for organizations to build relationships with their stakeholders (Meredith, 2012; Ramandhan et al., 2013).

Additional research is needed to more closely examine the content provided on these social media outlets. Future research could explore what relationship may exist between the types of content provided and impacts on social media engagement from audience members in the form of likes, shares, and comments and how that relates to offline success in the form of donations and volunteer time.

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