

An Urban View of Agriculture

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Introduction & Need for Research

There are currently fewer people working in agriculture; the majority of people are several generations detached from agriculture. Their perceptions of non-farmers can be vastly different from reality (Goodwin, Chiarelli, & Irani, 2011). Despite this detachment, more than ever, people want to know the origin of their food and the process for obtaining it, especially youth (Forde, 2015), which puts agriculture in the spotlight (Krause, Meyers, Irlbeck, & Chambers, 2016; Morris, 2016). The dissemination of the information needs accurate information and in a way that attracts and accurately informs youth (Verbeke, 2005). However, consumers have been receiving multiple and contradictory messages that are not always accurate, and that can distort consumers' perceptions of agriculture (Terry & Lawver, 1995). This adds a lot of pressure to the industry. Therefore, it is important to have an overview of the current views young people have about agriculture to better design communication strategies in order to effectively inform consumers.

Theoretical Framework

This study used as a theoretical framework the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1979). The model expresses the connection between attitudes and behaviors and locates persuasion as the principal source of influence for the interaction. This study maintains that youth are going to be influenced by previous information gathered influencing their perceptions of agriculture.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to understand the knowledge that urban youth have about agriculture and their views of agricultural communications in West Texas. The following questions were developed to guide the study:

1. What is the overall perception that participants have about agriculture?
2. What are the most common words to describe agriculture according to the participants?
2. What is the most commonly used channel of communication to teach about agriculture according to the participants?
3. What is the perception participants have about the accuracy of agricultural messages?

Methodology

Researchers used a convenience sample in which 85 young people, who did not have any type of agricultural education before, completed a questionnaire developed by the researchers. The questionnaire consisted of 22 items including demographics, ten 5-point Likert-type items from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree, and five open-ended questions. The population consisted of urban college students from West Texas. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. Themes and categories were used to describe students' responses to open-ended questions. Due to the sample size and the fact that researchers used a convenience sample, results cannot be generalized.

Results

On average, participants were 23.9 years old ($SD = 5.06$). Seventy-eight percent of the participants were enrolled in graduate school, and 85% of the participants were currently studying a degree in the university. Results of objective one showed that on average, most of the participants have a neutral perception of agriculture ($M = 3.53$; $SD = 0.56$).

Objective two aimed to understand the most common words to describe agriculture. The words that were mentioned the most were: farming (21%), food (17%), livestock (15%), crops (7%), and farms and farmers individually obtained 6% each category.

Objective three aimed to understand the channels of communication used to provide messages about agriculture. Thirty-eight percent of the participants say that they receive agricultural information through the Television. The second category with the highest frequency is the internet with 15%, and classes/campus has 13%. Furthermore, 12% of the participants expressed that they were unaware, and responded: "I do not know."

Objective four assessed the degree to which the participants think the agricultural information they receive is accurate. Results show that most of the participants scored neither disagree nor agree to these statements: "Most of the agricultural advertisements I am exposed to tell me the truth" ($M = 2.80$; $SD = .85$) and "Most of the agricultural information I see in the ads is false" ($M = 2.97$; $SD = .91$).

Conclusions

This study was developed with the purpose of creating a baseline and starting conversations that involve agricultural education for non-farmers. Results show that participants consider agriculture to be a fundamental practice and they have a slightly positive perception of it. Results of objective two show that participants have a limited view about agriculture and they are not aware of its diversity. Furthermore, participants consider they have little knowledge about agriculture, and most of the knowledge they receive is through ads on the TV. Consequently, they are not sure if the content that they see about agriculture is accurate.

Implications & Recommendations

These results support the fact that many people are detached from agriculture, and they have limited knowledge about agriculture. Similar results were mentioned by Goodwin et al., (2011). Furthermore, these results show that youth receive limited information about agriculture, and since they have limited knowledge about the topic, they struggle to differentiate between the real and false advertisement which is supported by the study developed by Terry and Lawver (1995).

It is recommended to develop follow-up studies to confirm these results in order to have a base for future interventions. Programs focused on increasing the knowledge about agriculture to non-farmers are recommended as a way to improve the understanding of agriculture among the majority of consumers: non-farmers.

This study found that TV was one of the most commonly used communication channels; therefore, it is recommended to strengthen the agricultural ads and information on TV, and to develop further studies in order to assess the accuracy and quality of the programs/information/ads that youth and people detached from agriculture are currently receiving.

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