What's the beef?
Monitoring Social Media Response to Ellen DeGeneres' Encouragement to Eat Less Meat

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Introduction/Need for Research

On September 17, 2019, Ellen DeGeneres, the popular comedian and talk show host of the Ellen Show, aired an episode encouraging her followers to eat less meat because, according to her, "it's better for you and it's better for the environment and for the animals." During the segment, DeGeneres asked fans to use the hashtags #EatLessMeat, #BeNeatEatLessMeat and #ByeBye on social media to assist in spreading awareness about the topic. The common trend to use a hashtag began on Twitter and is now used on all social media platforms as a way to index keywords for search results (Tran, 2019). Widely used keywords in a hashtag will begin to trend on social media platforms (Tran, 2019).

The agriculture industry has been under media scrutiny in recent years for the impact it is having on the environment and overall human health. Conflicting scientific studies contribute to this confusion where one study will link premature death to the consumption of red meat (Pan et al., 2012) while another will refute those conclusions (Kolata, 2019). The other claim DeGeneres made was the reduction of meat consumption would benefit the environment. Due to the expected worldwide population increase, Gibbens (2019) stated a reduction in meat consumption is recommended to be replaced with fruit and vegetables. The management of greenhouse gas emissions and crop fertilizers are believed to reduce climate change (Gibbens, 2019). However, Capper (2007) found improved efficiency of farming operations has reduced the carbon footprint of the industry since 1977 and if improvements are continuously made, farmers will reduce their environmental impact.

In 2005, only 5% of Americans were active on social media, but today 72% of the public uses social media to communicate and gather news (Pew Research Center, 2019). Americans shape their ideas based on social media, which can be troublesome because misinformation about complex scientific issues can be widely distributed using social media platforms (Groshek & Bronda, 2016). However, these online platforms do allow consumers and agriculturists to have two-way communication discussing complex topics (White et al., 2014). Moving forward, it is important for agriculturists to identify the key influencers sharing information pertaining to the industry (Steede, Meyers, & Li, 2018).

Conceptual Framework

Opinion leaders have a vital role in influencing users on social media. Identifying opinion leaders is significant because it can describe "their powerful influence on changing and shaping a trend in business and marketing, to promote and demote products, to lead a politic stream and to raise the awareness of society on a public health issue or environmental problem" (Bamakan, 2019, p. 200). The ease of information being dispersed on social media makes it easier for an opinion leader to lead others in a certain direction (Bamakan, 2019). Opinion leaders are able to influence their following because of their status, education, and social prestige (Li, 2013).

Methods

Meltwater, a social media monitoring platform, was used to collect content for this content analysis study. The sampling frame was all publicly available content on Twitter and Facebook

that contained the #EatLessMeat as a keyword and at least one of the following keywords: #BeNeatEatLessMeat or #ByeBye. These keywords were selected because they related to the recommendations DeGeneres made to use specific hashtags. The study's timeframe was Sept. 17 to Oct. 1, 2019, which began with the original airdate of the Ellen Show when DeGeneres made this request and the subsequent two weeks. The social media posts collected in Meltwater were downloaded as an Excel file. While Meltwater has some built-in analytics, the researchers conducted additional coding to label the social media posts as Support, Against, and Neutral. Support posts were those that agreed the original intent by DeGeneres to reduce meat consumption. Posts coded as Against were those disagreeing that diets should consist of less meat. Finally, neutral tweets were those neither in favor or against a change in consumer diets regarding meat consumption.

Results

Meltwater retrieved 1,609 public Twitter and Facebook posts related to the keywords or phrases identified. Eight posts were removed because they were not in English or did not contain complete comments. The remaining tweets were then coded and analyzed (Table 1). The intended sentiments varied in frequency with supportive tweets garnering the largest amount of posts. The post with the highest overall reach and engagement was the initial tweet from DeGeneres (@TheEllenShow) "Be neat. Eat less meat. It's good for the planet, for the animals, and you. @WATWbook #wearetheweather #eatdifferently #eatlessmeat #beneateatlessmeat #byebye". This particular Tweet reached (users exposed to a Tweet) 78,535,305 users and had an overall engagement (likes, comments, and shares) of 4,828.

Table 1
*Frequency, Reach, and Engagement for Intentions of a Reduction of Meat in Diets (*N = *1,601)*

Intention	Frequency	Reach	Engagement
Support	1,353	82,924,006	6,063
Neutral	26	50,633	212
Against	222	405,696	1,753
Total	1,601	83,380,335	8,028

Conclusions

The analysis of this particular movement on Facebook and Twitter organized by an opinion leader suggests users are likely to engage with the intended message. Users who had differing opinions shared those thoughts through retweeting or reposting. Supportive posts had the most overall engagement while those against the intended message were significantly less.

Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession

Moving forward, agricultural communicators should take into consideration the role opinion leaders have on certain issues pertaining to the industry and the impact their comments can have on consumers. From this data, agriculture organizations should consider cultivating partnerships with opinion leaders to garner positive attention. Creating relationships with these leaders is a way to share messages with a vast array of consumers who may not be reached by leaders in the agriculture industry alone.

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