

Interactions between the Protein Industry and Blogs: An Analysis of Content and Perceptions

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Need for Research

Animal agriculture (the protein industry) is facing new challenges in communications. Now more than ever, consumers are getting their information regarding their food through social media rather than from producers. Specifically, bloggers are perceived to be more trustworthy than the news media, and have become the communication industry's critics (Sweetser et al., 2008). Journalists are granting blogs more credibility and are beginning to reference more blogs in their reports (Sweetser et al., 2008). Transparency within the protein industry is necessary as consumers demand to know where their food was produced, what it was fed, how it was harvested, and if any supplements were used at any point within production (Beulens et al., 2005). Because of the increase in consumers trusting blogs, it is important for farmers to use these outlets to communicate about the industry well.

Theoretical & Conceptual Framework

Agenda setting (McCombs et al., 1997), framing (Bateson, 1972) and gatekeeping (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) theories help explain the ways that journalistic media shape public perceptions. The theories collectively describe how news is mediated by journalists, and now bloggers. Moore (2015) and Morris (2018) were able to successfully study blogs and social media while conceptualizing the theories of framing and social media, as well as interactivity theory.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive research design consisting of content analysis of blogs pertaining to the protein industry or containing information about the protein industry as a whole. Due to a lack of research conducted on blogs in the United States concerning the agriculture industry, a qualitative study was the best approach. Qualitative research uses inductive reasoning to obtain a valid answer through the lens of the researcher (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). A snowball sampling method (Patton, 1990), was used to identify bloggers and their blog posts containing information about or published by the protein industry. Each blog post was identified as a single unit of analysis, but words, quotations, and phrases within posts also became units of analysis as well. The instrument was an emergent codebook that included open codes that became obvious in the initial content analyses, which grew into axial codes as the analysis progressed. This inductive approach was described by DeCuir-Gunby et al. (2010). The study followed an observational protocol as follows:

1. What were common themes throughout the blog posts?
2. What tones were present throughout the blog posts?
3. Were multiple tones present within single blog posts?

Data analysis for this study involved the identification of themes and tones using guidance from the emergent codebook and operational definitions for the concepts of positive and negative tones. The constant-comparative method was used to ensure latent emergent themes were constant across all content. Thematic analysis was accomplished by using NVivo 11, a qualitative visual analysis software. The researcher used NVivo 11 to evaluate blog content, where themes were identified and annotated using the software. Once themes were identified, specific content that showed support for the themes was highlighted and recorded. When new themes were identified, constant-comparative analysis was used to identify emergent themes across all content. When identifying tone, the researcher examined the balance of negative tonal words and phrases versus positive tonal words and phrases.

RESULTS/ FINDINGS

It is apparent the protein industry's views on important public issues related to animal production are being mediated by bloggers.



Nine themes emerged from the blog posts evaluated.

TOP FOUR THEMES ENVIRONMENT

- CONSUMPTION OF PROTEIN
- ALTERNATIVE PROTEIN SOURCE
- ALTERNATIVE DIETING

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATORS

This research implies the industry should pursue presenting what protein consumers want to see in the social media platform of blogs—either through their own blogger or by providing blogger-relations information to bloggers who frequently write about protein-related issues. It would be helpful to pursue research exploring why bloggers post what they do concerning animal agriculture. Aside from the protein industry, researchers should consider similar studies in other agricultural industries.

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