

Assessing Agricultural Undergraduate Students' Social Media Comprehension

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Introduction

With over 4 billion daily users (Chaffey, 2022), social media has a captive audience, although how much do users understand effectively using this powerful tool? Social media is defined as a user-focused and interest-driven technology that uses the distribution of user-created content within self-determined networks (Carr & Hayes, 2015). Modern college students within the Gen Z generation spend roughly 4.5 hours daily on social platforms such as Facebook and Instagram (Herman, 2021). Research signifies that young people use social media to search for information for self-motivated learning, focusing on personal development, gaining knowledge, and acquiring new skills (Rutledge et al., 2019). Many industries have seen exponential growth due to the constant sharing of information. Agriculture is an industry that needs more proficient social media communicators entering the field. Social media provides a platform where consumers interact daily, providing the perfect opportunity for agricultural information to be shared and gained. Are agricultural students prepared to portray agriculture messaging through these channels?

Theoretical Framework

Humans are social beings, so connection, experiences, and interaction can impact their learning. Social media has created a digital format where these factors can co-exist and bring people closer without physical proximity. Social cognitive theory (STC), or social learning theory, emphasizes the impact that observing, modeling, imitating, and the emotions and attitudes of others have on learning (Bandura, 1977). Bandura's social cognitive theory highlights human behavior as being shaped by "personal cognition in a social environment" (Lin & Cheng, 2018, para.11). The algorithms and engagement patterns of social media mirror the social cognitive theory framework concept. The new social media paradigm allows imitation to be shared and encouraged (Deaton, 2015). The combination of the environmental, behavioral, and cognitive factors involved in the social cognitive theory makes its application to this study appropriate.

Methodology

This basic qualitative research study aimed to uncover and interpret how participants make sense of social media use (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Purposive sampling identified participants meeting specific outlined criteria; this sampling method also aided in the transferability of the study. The criteria for participant selection included a) undergraduate Poultry Science student and (b) enrollment in [POSC 381: Professional Development for the Poultry Science Industry] *or* [POSC 308: Poultry Anatomy and Physiology]. POSC 381 included a unit of instruction about social media while POSC 308 did not include the unit of instruction on social media. After IRB

approval, six interviews lasting 15-20 minutes were conducted over Zoom with members of both courses. Audio was recorded and then transcribed for coding and theme identification purposes.

Results/findings

Findings revealed the emergence of three main themes: comprehension, impact, and importance of proper use. Results signified a prominent use of social media in students' lives, but a lack of application and interpretation. Students who had experienced the social media lesson, used terms like "target audience," "curated and created content," and "reliable sources". Student who did not receive the lesson did not use specific terms for a successful campaign strategy or provide additional detail. Under the impact theme, the idea of social cognitive theory and its connection to social media was demonstrated through the participant's explanation of how social media impacts behavior and perspectives. Lastly, the importance of proper use became evident through the participant's notion of social media possibly being a "make or break" factor in future employment and for controversial agricultural topics.

Conclusions

Findings demonstrate differences in responses between students who received a lesson over social media and those who did not. It should be recognized that individuals who did not participate in the lesson lacked comprehension of elements evident in participants who did. Students enrolled in the course with the social media lesson content could decipher particular success strategies and logic. Media literacy will empower students to engage effectively within society and develop applicable skills in determining information accuracy and improving real-world knowledge (Third et al., 2019). These differences are essential to discuss, as they exemplify a need and a gap. Students who partook in just one lesson provided answers leading to assumptions about being more equipped to use social media professionally and effectively.

Implications/ Recommendations/ Impact on Profession

We explored undergraduate students' social media understanding in the agricultural industry as a professional and as an effective communication tool. With only 2% of the population involved in the industry, there is a clear divide between producers and consumers (American Farm Bureau Federation, 2021). Similarly, there is a disconnect between undergraduate learners and educators. Assessing agricultural undergraduate students' social media comprehension for communication use provides guidance for instructors. The intersection of using social media as a learning objective, mainly in agricultural colleges and departments, is a new exploration with various research opportunities. There is little empirical research documenting agricultural undergraduate students' preparedness to use social media as a communication strategy. Further research should focus on establishing grounded theory and teaching models related to social media.

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