We Speak for the Corn: An Analysis of organizational use of the "corn kid" meme

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Introduction

Richard Dawkins is credited with coining the term "meme" (Guadagno et al., 2013). In this original definition, a meme was described as "individual bits of cultural information that propagate from person to person while undergoing variation, selection, and retention" (Guadagno et al., 2013). Baker and Gammon (2008) assert that memes move through society via social learning channels and, "at any given time, members of a population either are adopting cultural traits, which become memes, or rejecting those traits through a complex interplay of social, emotional, and cognitive processes." Internet memes are essentially a digital version of Dawkins's 1976 idea (Baker & Gammon, 2008). When embedded within an existing network of like-minded individuals (e.g., online political organizations), this contagion can spur appropriate behavioral responses by a mass of people (Guadagno et al., 2013), a.k.a. "going viral." Such memes may present an opportunity for businesses and organizations to integrate pop culture into their social media posts and stay relevant or to use viral memes to grow their social media engagement.

TikTok has spurred a large growth in viral memes and videos. The latest of these viral TikTok memes is the Corn Kid meme, which debuted on August 18, 2022. During an interview, a young boy expresses his love for corn. A recording of that interview was remixed into a catchy song and published as a "sound" on TikTok. This sound "blew up" on TikTok and has since had 1.3 million videos made from the original sound. This project explored the use of the viral corn kid meme by corn growers' organizations and its effect on their Facebook engagement rates.

This research supports Research Priority 1 of the American Association for Agricultural Education which is focused on public and policy maker understanding of agriculture and natural resources. With engagement critical to online learning (Martin & Bolliger, 2018), it is important to understand how agricultural groups capitalize on spontaneous public engagement with an agricultural topic.

Conceptual Framework

The research was guided by Mills (2012) the SPIN Framework, specifically his integration. stage. This stage occurs when marketers launch campaigns in offline or 'traditional' media as well as online (Mills, 2012). Most straightforward integration occurs between several online social media platforms (Mills, 2012). Truly explosive growth in viral exposure requires a catalyst that can be provided by mainstream and therefore widespread exposure (Mills, 2012).

Methodology

This study consisted of a quantitative content analysis of Facebook posts made by state and national corn checkoff organizations. The researchers identified 25 corn-related organizations with aid from a United States Department of Agriculture's website. They then sought out the Facebook accounts of each organization. The following organizations did not have Facebook pages: Alabama Soybean and Corn Association, Arkansas Corn and Grain Sorghum Board, and Mississippi Corn Promotion Board.

The researchers randomly divided the remaining list of organizations into equal sections. For each organization, the researchers recorded the engagement on all posts from July 15 to September 15, 2022. Data collected included both likes and shares on each of the posts. As data was limited to quantitative, descriptive data, no coding agreement was necessary. Data collection

occurred over two weeks in October 2022. In total, 570 posts were recorded. Team members worked from a shared Microsoft Excel document. All statistical analysis was completed within Excel.

Results

The mean number of posts per state was 23.79. Researchers found that across all the analyzed posts, the mean number of likes was 18.75, and the mean number of shares was 2.78. The total number of references to the corn meme was 11.

Prior to August 18, 2022, the mean number of likes was 15.04 (*SD* = 55.42). Starting on August 18 and tracking forward, the mean number of likes was 24.05 (*SD = 135.48)*. The mean number of shares prior to August 18, 2022 was 2.97 (*SD = 12.92)*. The mean number of shares after August 18, 2022 was 2.52 (*SD* = 9.68). In order to determine if any statistical difference existed between those numbers representing the time before the corn meme's emergence and those that occurred after, two independent sample's t-tests were run within the Excel with results displayed in Table 1. No significant difference was indicated for either likes (p = .34) or shares (p = .63).

Table 1.

Independent Samples T-Test for Post Likes (*n = 570)*

Engagement	August 17 & Prior		August 18 and After		*t*(568)	*p*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Likes	15.04	55.42	24.04	135.48	-0.95	.34
Shares	2.97	12.92	2.52	9.68	0.48	.63

*$p < .05$

Discussion

There was no significant difference in corn growers' association Facebook engagement before and after the corn meme. The average number of likes and shares was low with the exceptions of a few outliers unrelated to the meme in question, implying a low amount of engagement across corn growers' associations nationwide. While there appeared to be a slight increase in the mean amount of likes after the corn meme was at its peak, statistical analysis showed no significant difference between these groups.

Of note, only 11 posts could be identified as relating to the "corn kid" meme. This suggests that corn growers' organizations did not take advantage of the corn meme while it was at its height of popularity. This may have been a missed opportunity to capitalize from the meme within Facebook.

For practice, the research team recommends commodity organizations continue close monitoring of social media channels for viral memes and trends on the internet, and work to integrate these into a social media mix when/if they emerge.

Future research could use qualitative methods to engage with social media managers at corn associations to be better understand what pressures and decisions their engagement or lack thereof with this meme.

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