

**Exploring the Public's Perception of Beef Sustainability: Implications for Values-Based Messaging**

**McKenna Pavelock**

Undergraduate Student  
Department of Agricultural Education & Communications  
Texas Tech University  
[Mckenna.pavelock@ttu.edu](mailto:Mckenna.pavelock@ttu.edu)

**Laura Fischer, Ph.D.**

Assistant Professor  
Department of Agricultural Education & Communications  
Texas Tech University  
[Laura.fischer@ttu.edu](mailto:Laura.fischer@ttu.edu)

**Cara Lawson, Ph.D.**

Assistant Professor  
Department of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership  
The Ohio State University  
[Lawson.182@osu.edu](mailto:Lawson.182@osu.edu)

## Exploring the Public's Perception of Beef Sustainability: Implications for Values-Based Messaging

### Introduction/Need for Research

Known for their active involvement in the climate change movement (Versace & Abyss, 2023), Generation Z and Millennials are interested in “sustainability-first buying decisions” (Wood, 2022, para. 1). Demanding sustainable products, these generations are fully prepared to change their buying habits if a product is not deemed sustainable (Versace & Abssy, 2023). However, mixed feelings arise when people hear the word “sustainable” because there is no clear definition attached to it (Gosnell et al., 2021; Mancini et al., 2019). To best define sustainability, a three-pillar concept has been developed to include economic development, social equity, and environmental protection (Gosnell et al., 2021; Mancini et al., 2019). Unlike consumers, producers have a different perception of sustainability, and research has shown that they tend to shy away from the thought of sustainability despite growing concerns (Meng et al., 2022). Apprehensions about costs and additional unknowns that arise from change in operations have producers unsure of sustainability (Gibson et al., 2020). However, consumers are driving the sustainability industry forward despite these hesitations from producers (Petro, 2022). With a willingness to pay more for sustainable products, Petro (2022) adds that it's crucial for the producer to “become aligned with these consumers before it's too late” (para. 8). A united front between the producer and consumer allows for trust, which correlates positively to their relationship (Mancini et al., 2019). Agricultural communicators can communicate to audiences by understanding their perceptions of sustainability and their personal values to create more effective messaging.

### Theoretical Framework

Personal values were used as the framework for this study. Values-based messaging can be used by agricultural communicators to appeal to the consumers by connecting with the values they rate as important in their lives (Dwyer et al., 2023; Fischer et al., 2020). Schwartz (2012) identified that humans have different value priorities, similar to how we each have different cultures.

There is a strong need to understand these values that shape consumers' perceptions of sustainability in the beef industry and how to communicate with them. Developing messages that align with someone's values gives them the opportunity to resonate and absorb more of a message (Fischer et al., 2020). By developing these tailored messages, communicators can more effectively discuss topics such as sustainability (Gibson et al., 2020; Lawrence, 2015).

### Methods

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between the public's perceptions of environmental responsibility for the beef industry, attitudes toward sustainable consumption, and personal values. Data were collected through an online survey instrument that was distributed to a population of U.S. residents. Through Qualtrics, a third-party company, we gathered a non-probability sample of 1,441 useable responses from U.S. residents 18-years or older who aligned with U.S. census characteristics for age, gender, region, and race to participate in the study. The respondents answered a series of questions related to their perceptions of environmental responsibility for the beef industry ( $\alpha = .84$ ), their attitude toward sustainable consumption ( $\alpha = .88$ ), and their personal values ( $\alpha = .88$ ) that were adapted from the prior literature (Burnier et al., 2020; Schwartz, 2012). To understand perceptions of environmental responsibility and

attitudes toward sustainable products, respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert Scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 5 = *Strongly Agree*). For environmental responsibility, respondents rated statements such as: “I am concerned if producers adopt practices that reduce greenhouse gas emissions.” To measure sustainable consumption attitude, respondents rated their agreement toward five statements such as “I would be willing to stop buying products from companies guilty of polluting the environment. Personal values were collected using Schwartz’s (2012) short value scale, which asked respondents to rate their levels of importance of 10 values on an 8-point Likert scale where 0 = *opposed to your principles* and 8 = *of supreme importance for you*. Data were analyzed in SPSS Version 29 using correlations following Field’s (2018) guidelines for statistical procedures and correlation coefficient effects following nomenclature from Kotrlik et al. (2011).

### Results/Findings

As seen in Table 1, a series of correlations were assessed to examine the relationships between the participants’ values, the perceived environmental responsibility of the beef industry, and sustainable consumption behavior.

**Table 1**

*Pearson Correlation Coefficients between Personal Values, Environmental Responsibility, and Sustainable Consumption Behavior*

Measure	Environmental Responsibility	Sustainable Consumption
Power	.198**	.245**
Achievement	.175**	.206**
Hedonism	.201**	.206**
Stimulation	.209**	.254**
Self-Direction	.233**	.246**
Universalism	.357**	.412**
Benevolence	.228**	.247**
Tradition	.185**	.184**
Conformity	.201**	.206**
Security	.165**	.213**
Sustainable Consumption Behavior	.642**	-

*Note:* \*\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level

### Conclusions and Recommendations

These findings confirm prior literature that differing personal values affect the consumer relationship and sustainable buying decisions (Lawrence, 2015). We found the values of universalism, self-direction, and benevolence are of higher importance to the public. When we communicate about beef sustainability efforts, we need to focus on highlighting how the beef industry relates to these values. Appealing to these values with targeted messages allows us to make information about the agricultural industry and its sustainable efforts relevant to the public (Fischer et al., 2021). There is a need to conduct more research on the publics’ and producers’ perception of agricultural sustainability, and what shapes these perceptions. Specifically, what messages could be developed to resonate more effectively with these audiences.

## References

- Dwyer, K., Lawson, C., & Fischer, L.M. (2023). An Exploratory Study of Risk Experience and Personal Values on Support for Climate Change Policies. Paper presented at the National Agricultural Communications Symposium, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
- Fischer, L.M., Opat, K., Jennings, K., and Meyers, C. (2021). "Visualizing Values: A Content Analysis to Conceptualize Value Congruent Video Messages Used in Agricultural Communications," *Journal of Applied Communications*: Vol. 105: Iss. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.2368>
- Food Insight (2023). Food trends for 2023 include wellness drinks, gut health, confusion around new labels and terminology. *Food Insight*, 1-5 <https://foodinsight.org/food-trends-for-2023/>
- Gosnell, H., Emard, K., & Hyde, E. (2021). Taking Stock of Social Sustainability and the U.S. Beef Industry. *Sustainability*, 13(21), 11860. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132111860>
- Lawrence, M., (2015). Incorporating values into sustainability decision-making, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Volume 105, 146-156, ISSN 0959-6526, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2015.04.014>.
- Mancini, M.C., Menozzi, D., Donati, M., Biasini, B., Veneziani, M., Arfini, F. (2019). Producers' and Consumers' Perception of the Sustainability of Short Food Supply Chains: The Case of Parmigiano Reggiano PDO. *Sustainability*, 11, 721. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11030721>
- Meng, F., Chen, H., Yu, Z., Xiao, W., & Tan, Y. (2022). What Drives Farmers to Participate in Rural Environmental Governance? Evidence from Villages in Sandu Town, Eastern China. *Sustainability*, 14(6), 3394. MDPI AG. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/su14063394>
- Petro, G. (2022). Consumers Demand Sustainable Products and Shopping Formats. *Forbes*, 1-6. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/gregpetro/2022/03/11/consumers-demand-sustainable-products-and-shopping-formats/?sh=52ea3f1f6a06>
- Schwartz, S. H. (2012). An Overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1116>
- Versace, C., & Abssy, M. (2022). How millennials and gen Z are driving growth behind ESG. *Nasdaq*, 2-3. <https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/how-millennials-and-gen-z-are-driving-growth-behind-esg#:~:text=Why%3F,to%20favor%20environmentally%2Dfriendly%20products.>
- Wood, J. (2022,). Gen Z cares about sustainability more than anyone else – and is starting to make others feel the same way. *World Economic Forum*, 2-4. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/03/generation-z-sustainability-lifestyle-buying-decisions/>