

Budding Knowledge: Consumers' Information Needs Related to Agricultural Hemp

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Introduction

The production of agricultural hemp was federally legalized in 2018 (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2022). This legalization was aimed to help address the rapidly expanding domestic hemp market in the United States, which was valued at \$824 million in 2021 (USDA, 2022). In 2019, Nebraska legalized the production of hemp, providing licenses to 84 farmers to start production in 2020 (Nebraska Department of Agriculture, 2020). While hemp is very different from marijuana, the two are often associated with one another leaving hemp with a potentially negative reputation (Cherney & Small, 2016). Consumers have trouble distinguishing the differences between hemp and marijuana and identifying associated misinformation (Ruth et al., 2023; Colclasure et al., 2021). Cooperative Extension programs can help address this issue because they are designed to bring “cutting-edge discoveries from research laboratories to those who can put knowledge into practice,” (USDA, 2023, para. 1). To combat misinformation and consumers’ lack of knowledge related to hemp (Ruth et al., 2023; Colclasure et al., 2021), Extension professionals and agricultural communicators should tailor their outreach and communication programs to provide accurate information that is relevant to their stakeholders. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore Nebraska consumers’ information needs related to agricultural hemp.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for this study was the *knowledge* element of the five-staged Innovation Decision Process (IDP) Model (Rogers, 2003). According to the IDP model, when individuals or other decision-making units decide to accept or reject an idea, concept, or physical practice, they pass through different stages of the model. The stages consist of gaining initial knowledge, forming an attitude toward acceptance or rejection, followed by implementation and confirmation. Specifically, in the knowledge stage, information-seeking activities occur, and then the information seeker processes it for further decision-making (Rogers, 2003). Guided by the knowledge element, this study sought what information Nebraska residents were interested in learning more about related to agricultural hemp. A display of expressed interest would show that the residents were motivated to change their knowledge, which would lead to a better understanding of the conversations centered around hemp and overcoming misperceptions related to hemp (Colclasure et al., 2021). However, people prefer to reject information that conflicts with their predispositions, either consciously or unconsciously, and only tend to expose themselves to ideas that align with their interests, needs, and existing attitudes, known as selective exposure (Hassinger, 1959). Therefore, it is important to understand consumers’ information needs related to hemp so that Extension professionals and agricultural communicators can develop tailored education and communication campaigns.

Methods

Quantitative methods were used to fulfill the purpose of this study, and an online survey was distributed in February of 2022 via the online survey platform, Qualtrics. Purposive sampling was used, and the survey was distributed to an opt-in, non-probability sample of Nebraska residents who had to indicate they lived in Nebraska to take the survey. To help increase the generalizability of the responses, quotas were used to match Nebraska’s census data for race, ethnicity, and gender. There was a total of 500 ($n = 500$) complete and usable responses for this study. The online survey instrument asked questions about attitudes and purchasing intent related to hemp, but only one question related to information needs was reported in this abstract. The

question asked, “If you had the opportunity to learn more about hemp, which of the following topics would you be interested in learning more about?” Respondents were provided a list of topics based on prior literature (Colclasure et al., 2021) and were instructed to “check all that apply.” Prior to distribution, the instrument was reviewed by a panel of experts with expertise in hemp cultivation and agricultural communication to account for face validity and was piloted at Doane University – no validity or reliability issues were identified (Field, 2013). All data were exported to and analyzed in SPSS version 26, and descriptive statistics were reported.

Findings

Data showed that about half of the respondents were interested in learning how hemp products can impact health (52.80%; Table 1). Other common hemp-related areas that respondents were interested in learning more about were the impact of hemp on Nebraska’s economy (41.80%) and the differences between hemp and marijuana (36.80%). A minority of respondents said they were not interested in learning more about hemp (9.80%).

Table 1

Respondents Selection of Agricultural Hemp Topics They Wanted to Learn more About

<i>Topic</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
How hemp products can impact health	264	52.80
Impact of hemp on Nebraska’s economy	209	41.80
The difference between hemp and marijuana	184	36.80
Regulation of hemp production	168	33.60
How hemp products are regulated for safety	164	32.80
Impact of hemp production on the environment	151	30.20
Where hemp products can be purchased	123	24.60
I am not interested in learning more about hemp	49	9.80

Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Results from this study highlighted that respondents wanted to learn more about hemp. At least one-third of respondents were specifically interested in learning information about the health impacts of hemp products, hemp’s economic impact in Nebraska, and differences between hemp and marijuana. Assuming Nebraska residents are in the knowledge stage of the IDP Model based on prior research highlighting a lack of knowledge regarding hemp (Colclasure et al., 2021), Extension and communicators should focus on these key subject areas to encourage further adoption as consumers progress through the remaining four stages of the IDP Model (Rogers, 2003). As Extension and communicators provide tailored outreach programs to their stakeholders, consumers will most likely turn to these groups to seek reliable information related to agricultural hemp, which can help to increase overall knowledge and adoption of hemp. For future research, replications of this study should seek to identify differences between rural and urban populations’ understanding of hemp, which would be beneficial to inform targeted communication. These findings could also be compared to actual hemp knowledge to understand if there is consistency between what consumers want to learn about and where they are lacking knowledge. Finally, this study should be replicated in other states to increase the generalizability of the findings and develop comprehensive information campaigns related to agricultural hemp.

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