

Student Perceptions of Influence Emerging from Agricultural Influencer Instagram Posts

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Introduction

Influence is the force a person employs to enact a change in a target individual by altering their opinion, attitude, or behavior toward a certain product, idea, or concept (Hall & Barret, 2007). Individuals who use social media as a channel for influence or advocacy have been coined as influencers (Carpenter & Bonin, 2020). Influence is directly related to how much trust is formed between influencers and their followers (Shank, 2022). There is a cultural shift happening in which social media has overtaken television as the main source of information, as surveyed of 18- to 24-year-olds (Wakefield, 2016; Buster et al., 2021) with 71% of this age group using Instagram (Pew Research Center, 2021). University students often use social media to quickly secure the information they desire (Wang, et al., 2011). Previous research found social media followers are more likely to trust and share content where argument quality is more prevalent than emotion (Weismueller, et al., 2022). Within current social media platforms, Instagram establishes connections between influencers and their followers (Blight et al., 2017) formed through the process of users uploading photos or videos to share with other users (Ting et al., 2015). In agriculture, there is minimal research of influencers, and it is assumed that agricultural influence is like general social media influence (Powell, 2022; Shank, 2022). As social media platforms like Instagram are widely used among university students, influence is a necessary topic of research for agricultural influencers to utilize when advocating for agriculture.

Theoretical Framework

Today's society cannot be imagined without the presence of social communication media (Mehrad & Yousefi, 2018). The way people receive information is greatly influenced by social media; so much so that there is a co-dependency between the media platforms and the media consumers (Roese, 2018). The theoretical framework that guided this study was the Media-Systems Dependency Theory conceptualized by Ball-Rokech and DeFleur (1976) which explains the overall relationship between media and the people, and how media affects audience behavior. Kim and Yung (2016) confirmed that individuals who are more dependent on a social networking service (SNS) are more likely to engage in interactive activities on SNS (e.g., posting, commenting, and sharing) related to the topics of politics, shopping, and sports. The results also indicated that SNS dependency influences individual's offline behaviors including interpersonal storytelling with others offline about the topics to which they were exposed and pay attention to on an SNS creating implications for agricultural literacy efforts.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify student perceptions of influence through agricultural Instagram posts after receiving instruction about advocacy. This study was a one-group, pretest-posttest quantitative design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963) that used two Qualtrics questionnaires to collect data from college-age students with six weeks (12 units) of advocacy-related instruction between the data collections. Three research objectives guided this study:

1. Determine how student's perceptions of influence in agriculture-related Instagram post changed after receiving instruction about advocacy.
2. Determine what characteristics of the post they used to make that determination.
3. Determine if a student's background affect their level of perceived influence.

Study participants were recruited from an undergraduate agricultural advocacy course at Texas Tech University. Participation was voluntary with 67% of the students completing the two questionnaires. Participants rank-ordered Instagram post screen captures of 16 agricultural

advocates in 10 states located identified through snowball sampling. Following their ranking, students were asked to describe the factors that led to their top and bottom post rankings. Students also responded to demographic questions. Data analysis included the use of descriptive statistics being calculated. For the open-ended questions, thematic analysis techniques were used.

Findings

Objective 1: Nearly 57 percent (56.25%) of the Instagram posts changed in their ranking following the advocacy instruction. The greatest changes in rankings were a four- and five-placing decline and a three-placing increase.

Objective 2: Three themes emerged from the findings of this study reflecting how students perceive influence through agricultural Instagram posts and what characteristics they used to make that determination: (a) relatability to post; (b) captions with facts; (c) use of comprehensible pictures. Regarding relatability to a post, a survey participant said:

“Influencer F influenced me the most because they highlighted a topic that is relatable and significant to me and addressed a conversation that needs more attention in the agriculture community. By quoting an LGBTQ+ member, it was impactful to learn that there are LGBTQ+ people and allies with similar experiences as me in the agriculture community.”

Several survey participants reiterated the same explanation about how captions with facts increase a post’s influence. One survey participant stated:

“Influencer P showed the most feelings towards the subject while staying factual in their words.”

With reference to the use of pictures in an Instagram post, a survey participant said:

“I picked this one to be my top choice because this one used a picture that was easy to look at and know what was going on. The picture and the copy told the same story.”

Objective 3: Findings suggest an agricultural background does affect the level of perceived influence. Survey participants indicated people without an agricultural background are more likely to perceive a greater influence from an Instagram post than people with an agricultural background with differences in geographic location (rural or urban area) and 4-H and FFA involvement found.

Conclusions

Instruction in advocacy related topics may have impacted perceptions of influence in agriculture-related Instagram posts. Student perceptions of influence through agricultural Instagram influencer posts are analogous based on the identified themes. A greater perceived influence is increased when influencer posts are relatable, when the captions state facts, and when pictures are comprehensible. Perceptions of influence may be greater for individuals who do not have an agricultural background, whereas those who do have an agricultural background may not have an increased level of perceived influence.

Implications/Recommendations

The results illustrate the potential of instruction changing perceptions of content gained via Instagram social media posts. The results also indicated that both content and imagery are considered by college-age students when determining the quality of an Instagram post. Related to Kim and Yung’s 2016 study, this could impact how a user of Instagram may share agriculture content with others as well as the development of agriculture-related social media posts.

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