

Understanding Food Recall Communication Across Generations

Taylor Ruth

University of Tennessee, Knoxville
2431 Joe Johnson Dr.
Knoxville, TN 37996
865-974-3522
truth3@utk.edu

Kristen Graas

University of Tennessee, Knoxville
2431 Joe Johnson Dr.
Knoxville, TN 37996
865-974-3522
kgraas@tennessee.edu

Blake Colclasure

University of Tennessee, Knoxville
2621 Morgan Circle Dr.
Knoxville, TN 37996-4500
865-974-7255
bcolclas@utk.edu

Joy Rumble

The Ohio State University
1680 Madison Ave.
Wooster, Ohio 44691
330-287-1368
rumble.6@osu.edu

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Food recalls are a common part of life in the United States, with an average of 62.5 recalls a year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and companies will announce when recalls are needed, and these announcements will be picked up by various news outlets. However, in the modern age of social media and cable news, consumers will not uniformly receive information through the same information channels. For example, differences in media channel use have been identified across different consumer generations. Baby Boomers (1946-1964) typically get their news and information from the radio and television while younger generations, like Gen X Millennials (1981-1996) and Gen Z (1997-2010), primarily receive news from television and social media (Guttman, 2023). Most social media platforms use an algorithm to curate users' feeds and prioritize content based on their previous interactions on the platform (Golino, 2021). Therefore, younger generations may not always be aware of food recalls if they are using social media as their primary news platform. Further compounding the problem, approximately 38% of American do not trust information from newspapers, TV, and radio (Brenan, 2022) and the majority of Americans get their local news from friends, family, and neighbors over newspapers, TV, or radio (Shearer, 2024). So older consumers are likely to either (a) receive food recall information from news sources they deem as untrustworthy or (b) must trust the information communicated to them from family and friends is accurate. Agricultural communicators, Extension professionals, and health communicators must identify appropriate communication channels to effectively reach their target audiences. To support the development of tailored health communication campaigns related to food recalls, the purpose of this research was to explore Nebraska consumers' use of food safety information channels across different generations.

Conceptual Framework

The Shannon and Weaver (1949) Model of Communication served as the conceptual framework for this research. Originally a model for radio communication, this framework demonstrates how messages are passed from a sender (sender) to a receiver through a communication channel. The receiver can also transmit feedback to the sender demonstrating how well they understood the delivered message. Despite being simple in concept, The Shannon and Weaver (1949) Model of Communication is widely accepted in communication research (Lee et al., 2015) and can be helpful when identifying steps toward effective communication (Flensburg, 2009). For this research, we were most interested in identifying the appropriate message channels for communicating food recall information to different generational groups.

Methods

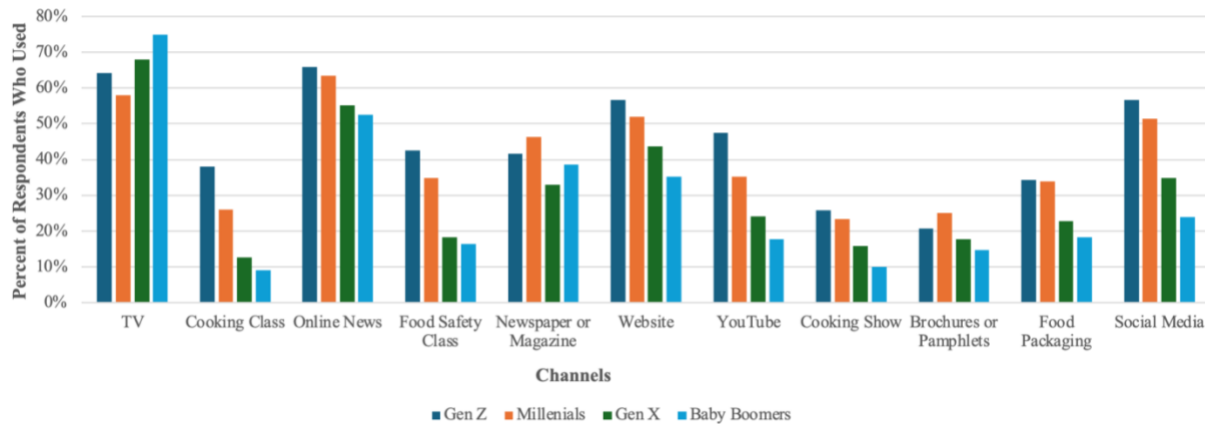
An opt-in-non-probability panel of 750 Nebraska residents were surveyed digitally using the third-party provider, Qualtrics, in spring of 2024. The quota sample was screened to closely match the 2020 Nebraska census for age, gender, race/ethnicity, and urban/rural residence to help increase the generalizability (Baker et al, 2013; Twymann, 2008; Vavreck & Rivers, 2008). Fifteen responses were removed from the study due to not meeting additional quality checks, leaving 735 complete respondents ($n = 735$). As part of a larger study, the survey included a variety of instruments related to food safety. The instruments pertaining to this research included demographic questions to match our desired quota, and the statement, "Please indicate where you have received information about food safety recalls." The statement included 11 check-all-that-apply options modified from prior literature (Leal et al., 2017). Respondents' ages were

transformed to produce categorical variables for generation (Gen Z, $n = 120$; Millennials, $n = 227$; Gen X, $n = 158$; Baby Boomers and older, $n = 230$). Descriptive data in the form of frequencies and percents were used to compare channel sources used by generation.

Results

Television and online news channels were the channels most commonly used across the different generational groups (Figure 1.) These were also the only two channels selected by more than 50% of Gen X or Baby Boomer and older respondents. Additionally, greater percentages of Gen Z and Millennial respondents reported using digital media channels, like websites, YouTube, and social media compared to older generations.

Figure 1. Food Recall Information Channel by Generation ($n = 735$)



Conclusions & Recommendations

The findings from this research demonstrate differentiated channel use for food recall information across generations of consumers, which aligns with prior research (Guttman, 2022). However, a similar percentage of younger consumers are receiving food recall information from social media as they are from television media. Additionally, apart from television, there is a larger percentage of Gen Z and Millennials using each channel compared to the Gen X and Baby Boomers and older groups. The younger generations appear to be using multiple channels to gather information related to food recalls while older generations receive information from only one or two channels. Practitioners should keep these findings in mind when selecting channels (Shannon & Weaver, 1949) for food safety communication campaigns. TV and online news will continue to be an effective way to share food recall information to most consumers, but websites, social media, and YouTube channels should also be updated to help disseminate information to Millennials and Gen Z as well. Younger consumers may be exposed to food recall information in their social media feeds but seeking more information through online news searches. Future research should further breakdown how different generational groups use social media to receive food recall information by specific platform to inform online communication. Exploring trust in specific sources and not just the use of channels will also be a critical step in developing targeted health campaigns. Qualitative research can also help researchers understand how food recall information flows from the source to the receiver (Shannon & Weaver, 1949) and to identify if consumers are actively or passively seeking this information.

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