

Influencers and the Next Generation of Farmers: The Impact of Transformational Leadership on Agricultural Social Media Influencers

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Introduction

Leadership is not limited to traditional organizational settings. It can be found in different fields, such as communication, where individuals influence, motivate and inspire others through their messages (Borah et al., 2022). Social media has emerged as a powerful tool in communications strategies, where influencers play an important role in shaping public opinion creating trends (Prost et al., 2024). Influencers, as opinion leaders, can shape their followers' attitudes and behaviors through the dissemination of specific information, promotion of products and even advocating for different causes (Shank et al., 2024). Despite the growing influence of social media influencers as communication efforts in the agricultural industry, there is limited research exploring the application of specific leadership theories to this context. This study aimed to bridge this gap between leadership and communications by investigating the application of transformational leadership components in the context of agricultural influencers in social media. Two research objectives framed the study: (1) to analyze how agricultural influencers personify the four influence tactics embedded within transformational leadership in their social media posts and (2) to examine how followers perceived the transformational leadership style through the available and posted comments in the posts.

Theoretical Framework

For this study, transformational leadership was used because it emphasizes how leaders inspire and motivate followers to achieve goals (Bass & Avolio, 1994). This theory is characterized by four key components (the 4 I's): idealized influence (influencers are positive role models who can be trusted and respected) inspirational motivation (inspiring followers through a compelling visions), intellectual stimulation (encourages followers to think critically and creatively to solve problems), and individualized consideration (focusing on providing support and guidance to each follower) (Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016; Bass & Riggio, 2006). By understanding the principles of transformational leadership, we can analyze how influencers use social media to inspire, motivate and empower their followers, shaping the future of the agricultural industry (Siangchokyoo et al, 2020).

Methodology

A descriptive quantitative content analysis approach was used to analyze a sample of social media posts from agricultural influencers. For this study, a purposive sample was utilized to select ten agricultural influencers' accounts based on their follower count and content relevance to agriculture. These influencers were identified through a combination of Instagram search algorithms (using the search term "Agricultural Influencers United States") and recommendations from industry experts. Ten recent posts from each account were chosen, obtaining a total of 100 posts analyzed. A codebook was developed to describe and categorize the posts based on different variables, such as the post type, number of followers, engagement metrics, likes, and comments (Powell, 2022). Also, it included the presence of the four I's of transformational leadership to categorize the post according to the leadership style used by the influencers and perceived by their followers. The codebook was created based on previous transformational leadership research and was revised by an expert in the area for its validity. Also, three coders were trained to measure reliability in the coding process, analyzing a total of

10 posts (10 percent of the total content to be analyzed). A Krippendorff's alpha was used to measure intercoder reliability of the 10 posts, obtaining an average of 0.84 for the elements from the codebook. After measuring intercoder reliability, the researcher continued with the rest of the content analysis. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, were used to analyze the collected data by counting the number of posts and overall comments aligned to the four I's.

Results

The content analysis revealed that 60 percent of the influencers ($n = 6$) were female, and the other 40 percent were male ($n = 4$). The average number of followers was 77,310. The average number of likes per post was 852, and the average number of comments was 12. The influencers predominantly shared video posts (48%, $n = 48$), followed by photo posts (36%, $n = 36$) and carousel posts (16%, $n = 16$). Regarding research objective one, the embodiment of transformational leadership principles, intellectual stimulation ($n = 40$), and idealized influence ($n = 31$) were the most frequently observed components. However, inspirational motivation ($n = 14$) was the least frequent. On the other hand, in the results obtained in the analysis of followers' perceptions through the comments for research objective two, individualized considerations ($n = 37$) emerged as the most prominent component, while inspirational motivation was the least perceived ($n = 8$).

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations/Impact

Intellectual stimulation was the most prominent component/style used by influencers as it is employed to encourage critical thinking and problem-solving among their audience, often through the promotion of innovative products or practices (Janssen et al., 2020). Idealized influence was frequently used as it aligns with the expectations of followers in the agricultural industry who seek trustworthy and respected figures (Shank et al., 2024). However, individualized consideration was the most perceived style used by followers, likely due to the reciprocal and empathetic nature of social media interactions, where influencers often try to respond to comments and engage with their audience on a personal level (Correia, 2023). This study demonstrates how the principles of traditional leadership theories, such as transformational leadership, can be applied to the context of social media influencers. By analyzing how influencers interact with their followers, we gain valuable insights into the evolution of leadership in the digital era. These findings have significant implications for various fields, including marketing, public relations, and education, where understanding the dynamics of influence and persuasion is essential for success. By understanding how agricultural influencers utilize transformational leadership principles, the industry can leverage social media to build strong brand identities, foster customer loyalty, and promote sustainable agricultural products/practices. The recommendation for the industry is that agricultural organizations should invest in training and development programs that utilize approaches related to this leadership style to equip their employees with the necessary skills to effectively communicate and engage with their target audience on social media. Future research could explore the impact of leadership styles on influencers' content creation. While this descriptive study identifies the presence of transformational leadership components, future research employing quantitative methods could explore the causal relationships between these leadership styles and specific influencer outcomes, such as audience engagement or adoption of promoted practices.

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