

Influencing the Herd: A Phenomenological Exploration of Beef Instagram Influencers

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Introduction

Social media influencers have become crucial voices in the agricultural sector, particularly within the beef industry, where they help bridge the knowledge gap between producers and consumers. While influencer marketing has been extensively studied in mainstream industries such as fashion and travel (Joshi et al., 2023), research examining how influencers emerge and operate within agriculture remains limited. Consumers increasingly rely on social media for information, yet misconceptions about agriculture persist, influencing public perception and industry policies (Malone et al., 2000; Kuykendall, 2010). With over one billion users (We Are Social et al., 2024), the Instagram platform allows information and communication transfer to be quickly shared and consumed. Agricultural influencers play a vital role in countering misinformation and fostering trust by sharing their experiences authentically. This study investigates the factors that influence the emergence of beef influencers and their effectiveness in audience engagement through compliance, identification, and internalization.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in opinion leadership theory and social influence theory, allowing for an examination of how key individuals influence public opinion and behavior through interpersonal communication. Social media has expanded the role of opinion leaders, who traditionally gathered information from mass media and disseminated it through personal networks (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). Today, agricultural influencers function as digital opinion leaders, shaping consumer perceptions of beef production by sharing their real-life experiences (Ishak et al., 2019; Djafarova & Bowers, 2021). Through the lens of Social Influence Theory, compliance occurs when individuals engage with content due to external social norms or expectations (Kleiman, 1974). Identification happens when followers embrace influence to forge or uphold a self-defining connection with the influencer, integrating it into their self-image (Kleiman, 1974). Internalization occurs when followers embrace influence because it aligns with their value system (Kleiman, 1974). This study explores how these influencers gain credibility, engage audiences, and emerge from casual social media users to industry advocates.

Methodology

A phenomenological qualitative approach was used to explore beef influencers' experiences. Data collection involved thirty semi-structured interviews with beef influencers, along with content analysis of 2,404 Instagram posts, identifying engagement trends and messaging strategies. Thematic analysis and constant-comparative methods were used to explore influencers' journeys into advocacy. Findings were validated using member checking and reflexive journaling, to ensure credibility in data interpretation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study sought to understand how influencers transition from personal content sharing to strategic education and advocacy.

Findings

Three key themes emerged regarding the emergence of beef influencers. First, many influencers developed their connection to agriculture through multi-generational ranching, youth programs such as 4-H and FFA, or direct industry involvement. Others entered the industry later in life and developed a passion for sharing their newfound experiences. Influencers emphasized

that their credibility stemmed from lived experience rather than formal expertise, reinforcing the importance of authenticity in audience engagement.

Second, many influencers described their emergence as unintentional, initially using social media to document daily life but later realizing its impact as an advocacy tool (Warnimont, 2019). One participant noted, “I started posting pictures of our cattle just for fun, and before I knew it, I had people asking serious questions about beef production.” The organic nature of this transition highlights how influencers develop trust by consistently engaging with their audience and addressing questions and concerns.

Third, as influencers gained larger audiences, they shifted toward educational content, addressing misconceptions and sharing industry realities. This shift aligns with internalization in Social Influence Theory, where audiences not only engage but begin adopting agricultural messaging into their belief systems (Kelman, 1974). Influencers who initially posted personal content began integrating factual and educational posts, often balancing storytelling with data-driven information to strengthen their credibility.

Conclusions

The findings indicate that many beef influencers do not set out to be industry advocates but evolve into the role as their content resonates with audiences. Their authenticity, relatability, and transparency drive audience trust and engagement (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). The three social influence processes—compliance, identification, and internalization—are evident in how influencers shape consumer attitudes, demonstrating the importance of personal storytelling in agricultural communication. The study shows that audience trust is built over time as influencers share personal experiences, engage in conversations, and transition from casual content creators to credible voices in the beef industry.

Implications, Recommendations, & Impact

Findings from this study suggest several practical implications. The beef industry should leverage influencers as trusted voices to counter misinformation and engage consumers (Weeks et al., 2017). Industry organizations can support influencers through training, networking, and content development resources, equipping them with tools to effectively communicate complex industry topics in an accessible manner.

From a theoretical perspective, this study extends Social Influence Theory by demonstrating that opinion leaders can emerge unintentionally, building credibility through audience interaction rather than traditional expertise (Rogers & Cartano, 1962). Findings suggest that compliance and identification often precede internalization, highlighting the role of progressive engagement in influencer credibility (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Thus, online opinion leaders should be added to the theory from a current digital landscape. As influencers continue to shape consumer perceptions of agriculture, understanding the dynamics of this process is critical for developing effective communication strategies.

Future research should analyze the follower perspective, examining how audience members perceive and internalize influencer content. Additionally, a comparative study on anti-agriculture influencers could offer insights into how opposing viewpoints shape consumer opinions, which could help refine messaging strategies within the beef industry (Van Eenennaam & Werth, 2021). By exploring the lived experiences of beef influencers, this study provides critical insights into how social media advocacy develops organically and how digital platforms can be leveraged to strengthen consumer-agriculture relationships.

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