Encountering Negative Pork Information: A Qualitative Study of U.S. Consumer Communication and Consumption Behaviors

Introduction

Humans are more drawn to negative information and exhibit stronger reactions to it compared to positive information, a tendency known as negativity bias (Baumeister et al., 2001; Soroka and McAdams, 2015; Trussler & Soroka, 2014). This bias makes people focus more on negative content, remember it better, and react more, leaving a stronger impact than neutral or positive messages (Tsugawa & Ohsaki, 2015). Today's media environment amplifies this bias, where sensational headlines, emotionally charged language, and dramatic visuals are common strategies used to boost viewership and engagement (Trussler & Soroka, 2014).

It is in this context that misinformation becomes particularly powerful. Emotionally provocative, negative messages, whether entirely false or only partially misleading, are more likely to be believed, shared, and remembered (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Melios et al., 2025). This is especially true online, where unverified claims can go viral before fact-checking catches up. Influencers and even well-meaning individuals can amplify food-related misinformation without realizing its broader social consequences (Vasconcelos et al., 2021).

The pork industry is particularly vulnerable to this dynamic. Pork makes up about 30% of global meat consumption and remains a key part of the diet worldwide (Penkert et al., 2021; Vicente & Pereira, 2024). However, public sentiment toward modern pork production is increasingly negative. In the U.S., concerns around animal welfare, antibiotics, environmental impact, and food safety have become common, often driven by disturbing imagery, partial truths, or outdated information circulated online (Cummins et al., 2016; Font-i-Furnols et al., 2019; Grunert et al., 2018; Ngapo et al., 2003; Rice et al., 2020).

Although much research has explored how food information affects consumer attitudes in general, little is known about how individuals behave after exposure to negative information specifically about pork. This study addresses that gap by identifying consumers' communication and consumption behaviors after encountering negative information about pork.

Conceptual Framework

Individuals, when exposed to information, particularly negative or emotionally charged messages, often engage in a range of communicative behaviors. Prior research in problem-solving contexts has categorized these responses into types such as information selection (the decision to accept or reject information) and information transmission (sharing the information with others) (Kim et al., 2010). Studies on communicative actions have further identified behaviors like information seeking, information forwarding, and information forefending (Krishna, 2017). On social media platforms, users may also save, share, discuss, explore, ignore, or directly use information (Fallatah & Harvey, 2024, p. 263). Understanding such post-exposure behaviors provides insight into whether negative claims result in meaningful shifts in communication practices.

In addition to communication, exposure to negative information about food may also lead to changes in consumption behavior. When a negative claim contradicts an existing consumption habit, individuals often experience psychological discomfort known as cognitive

dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2012, Ong et al., 2017). To reduce this discomfort, individuals may either avoid products associated with the negative information or rationalize the content in order to maintain their current behavior (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). This internal negotiation helps explain whether individuals modify their eating habits, seek alternatives, or dismiss the information entirely, offering insight into how exposure can translate into concrete dietary change.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the communicative behaviors and consumption behaviors U.S. consumers tend to have after encountering negative information regarding pork production. Specifically, this study was guided by two research questions:

RQ1: What communicative behaviors will consumers engage in after encountering negative information about pork?

RQ2: What consumption behaviors will consumers engage in after encountering negative information about pork?

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative focus-group design to explore how consumers construct, negotiate, and contest their perceptions of pork production. Focus groups were an ideal method for exploring and assessing these dynamics since people's attitudes, perceptions, and opinions are shaped through social interaction (Goodwin et al., 2011).

Twelve focus group sessions were held during May and June 2025 on the east and west coasts of the United States: New York City, NY; Boston, MA; Portland, OR; and Los Angeles, CA. Participants were recruited by a professional firm and met these criteria: adults aged 20-50 with self-reported average household income who serve as the primary grocery shopper for their household and consume meat. Eligible participants do not have to consume pork; however, their non-consumption should not be due to cultural or religious reasons. Each focus group had 6 to 10 participants with a total of 98 participants. A moderator's guide was developed and reviewed by a panel of experts in agricultural education, communication, food systems communication, and animal science for face and content validity. The moderator's guide included questions about consumer experiences and perceptions of pork products, pork producers, and pork production in the U.S., as well as behavioral intentions after encountering negative information related to pork. Specifically, we asked the participants to respond to what they would do with negative information about pork production in mediated channels such as social media and television, as well as through interpersonal channels such as conversations during a family/friends gathering.

Each focus group session lasted for about 90 minutes and was facilitated by a moderator with the assistance of a second moderator and a notetaker. After written informed consent, the sessions were audio-recorded and later professionally transcribed by Rev.com. Each transcript was assigned a pseudonym list to safeguard confidentiality. Transcripts were coded in MAXQDA with a hybrid deductive–inductive approach, while communicative and consumption behavior codes were refined through open coding and constant comparison of early transcripts (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To ensure the study's trustworthiness, the researchers maintained detailed documentation, used investigator triangulation, and engaged in peer debriefing to validate interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2016;

Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The study protocol was approved by the University's Institutional Review Board. All participants provided informed consent and were reminded that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw at any time without penalty.

Results

RQ1: Communicative Behaviors after Encountering Negative Information about Prok Production

Themes of communicative behaviors include *disengage, fact-checking, and amplification through interpersonal and mediated channels.*

Disengage

Several participants indicated that they would actively avoid engaging with negative information related to pork. For instance, Johnny shared that he would dismiss a clip criticizing industrial hog farms, stating, "It's like anti-meat propaganda. I'm going to eat my meat, dammit." Similarly, Tyler anticipated avoiding such discussions in real-life settings, particularly during meals: "Please, let's not talk about this while I'm finishing up this rib."

Fact-checking

Some participants emphasized the importance of verifying information before making consumption-related decisions. Evan explained, "I'm a researcher as well, so I try to find out who's funding this video and where it's coming from, who the researchers are, who's making the documentary. I definitely go for who's funding the research over just watching the video." Similarly, Chilada described a preference for official sources: "We would go to the FDA, go to the website, and Google these government agencies to see what's being recalled and so forth."

Amplification through Interpersonal Channels

Some participants reported actively sharing negative information about pork with others, particularly with family and friends, through conversations. Jacob described how he communicates his personal stance in social settings: "I'll just be like, 'I don't eat pork,' and they're like, 'Oh.' And I'll tell them, 'Yeah, they're not healthy animals and I just don't want to…" Similarly, Kristen stated, "[After viewing a concerning video], I probably tell my family…. I had a friend that had colon cancer, and they said be careful with red meat…. Being an informed consumer is important. So, I try to spread the word, if I know it's the truth."

Amplification through Social Media

Other participants described sharing negative pork-related information through social media platforms. Nora illustrated what she would do regarding negative pork-related content online: "If it's something I want to share…. I'll screenshot the headline and write something like, wow, oh my God, did you know? Something to grab people's attention…. then I post it on Facebook or BlueSky, or both… Even though I eat pork, I don't shy away from letting everybody know in general." Henry explained, "We all know it [pork production] is bad. We all think it's kind of gross, and we would love to change [it], but we're so far behind the game that we can't fix it right now…. I would obviously rant about it and share it with all my friends on Facebook…. I guess I would say something and share it with the world at the rooftops like I am now."

RQ2: Consumption Behaviors after Encountering Negative Information about Prok Production

Themes regarding consumption behavior changes include consumption reduction, consumption resumption.

Consumption Reduction or Avoidance

Participants shared that they had reduced or eliminated pork from their diets in response to negative information. For some, the change was substantial and long-lasting. Ashley shared, "I haven't eaten pork since 2012. I saw a nasty video of a pig eating some stuff, and I was just like, yeah, I'm all set." Others adopted more selective consumption patterns. Camila noted, "If it were about a specific company and the information was negative, like from a whistleblower showing unethical practices, then I'd probably just stop buying from that specific company."

Consumption Resumption

Some participants described a temporary suspension of pork consumption after encountering negative information, followed by a gradual return once the emotional impact diminished. Hazel recalled, "I want to say it was PETA or something that had done it……they snuck into a pig farm, and it was all just like the undercover footage, but it was brutal……so I did stop eating pork for a little bit after that… but I do always have that similar conflict, because I love it so much." Simon reflected on the swine flu outbreak, stating, "I was like I'm not touching that…Once that [sentiment] died down, three to six months, and I smell bacon, and I'm grabbing that and forgetting about that [the footage]."

Conclusion and Recommendation

The findings from this study provide insight into how individuals respond after encountering negative information about pork production, particularly through both communicative and consumption behaviors. Participants demonstrated a range of post-exposure communication behaviors; some dismissed the content outright, while others engaged in fact-checking or shared the information with peers or online networks. These reactions align with earlier scholarship on ignoring, exploring and sharing the information, suggesting that even casual encounters with negative messages can trigger meaningful communicative action (Fallatah & Harvey, 2024; Kim et al., 2010; Krishna, 2017).

Pork consumption behaviors, while often discussed in prior research as attitude-based (Grunert et al., 2018; Cummins et al., 2016), emerged in this study as emotionally and situational driven. Participants who viewed graphic or disturbing content, such as undercover videos or disease-related imagery, described reducing or eliminating pork from their diets. In line with Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957), this discomfort appeared when new information clashed with existing eating habits. To reduce the dissonance, some chose to change their behavior, mostly temporarily, while some permanently. Others resolved the conflict by downplaying the message or returning to prior habits once the emotional impact wore off (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2012; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019; Ong et al., 2017).

Additionally, misconceptions about pork's nutritional value and production practices appeared to reinforce avoidance behavior. Although pork is nutrient-dense, emotionally charged media portrayals often exaggerate its health risks and ethical concerns, fueling public skepticism

and shaping misperceptions (Penkert et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2020; Tiplady et al., 2013). In this study, such portrayals contributed to beliefs that pork was inherently unhealthy or unethical, even when participants did not have direct evidence.

Importantly, the variation in participants' responses can be understood through the interplay of individual attitudes, social influences, and perceived ability to act (Ajzen, 1991; Conner, 2020). For example, some participants held firm beliefs about animal welfare or food safety that aligned with their long-term behavioral changes, while others cited convenience, habit, or fading emotional impact as reasons for returning to previous pork-consumption patterns. In communicative behaviors, participants often shared information within social environments that appeared to support or validate their views, suggesting that perceived social alignment may reinforce such actions.

A limitation of this study is that it relies on self-reported data, which may not fully capture the complexity of real-life behavioral responses to negative information. Participants' stated intentions and reflections during focus groups may differ from their actual behaviors in everyday settings. Future research could employ experimental or observational designs to assess behavioral responses more directly and compare results with this study. Additionally, further investigation is needed to understand what motivates individuals to engage in specific communicative or consumption behaviors after being exposed to negative information about pork, including the emotional, cognitive, and social drivers that shape such responses.

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