

From Ranch to Reel: Understanding What Drives Viral Beef-Related Instagram Content

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Introduction

In an increasingly digital world, the spread of information, accurate or otherwise, can shape public understanding of food systems in seconds. Social media influencers within the beef industry serve as grassroots communicators, offering visibility and powerful storytelling often absent in traditional media. Influencers act as bridges between subject-matter experts and the general public, transforming complex industry information into stories that are both understandable and relatable (De Veirman et al., 2019). Despite an increase of research on influencer marketing (Joshi et al., 2023; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020), little is known about how agricultural influencers themselves perceive, strategize, and disseminate viral content. This study explores the factors that influencers believe contribute to the creation and spread of viral beef-related content. In addition to its relevance for agricultural communication, this study advances broader insights into digital advocacy and highlights social media influencers as modern-day opinion leaders (Abidin, 2021). Understanding the content characteristics that influencers associate with high engagement can inform industry practices and enhance strategies in agricultural communications and education.

Theoretical Framework

As society grows increasingly digital, social media has transformed the internet into both a dominant source of information and a powerful tool for influence (Hanna et al., 2011). This study was grounded in opinion leadership and social influence theory which together offer insight into how individuals impact public perceptions and engagement through interpersonal communication. With the rise of digital platforms, the traditional role of opinion leaders, once limited to sharing mass media information within close-knit circles (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948), has evolved. In agriculture, influencers now act as online opinion leaders who influence audience attitudes by sharing behind-the-scenes glimpses into beef production (Djafarova & Bowers, 2021; Ishak et al., 2019). Social Influence Theory (Kelman, 1974) helps explain why certain content achieves high engagement: compliance is driven by social expectations, identification by alignment with the influencer's persona, and internalization by resonance with the audience's values. This framework was used to explore how influencers interpret the dynamics of virality; why certain posts gain traction and how authenticity, timing, and emotional connection contribute to widespread content engagement.

Methodology

A qualitative phenomenological design was employed to examine the shared lived experiences of beef industry influencers. Data were gathered through thirty semi-structured interviews and a content analysis of 2,404 Instagram posts, focusing on patterns in engagement and messaging. Researchers used thematic analysis and constant comparison techniques to trace the influencers' progression from personal storytelling to advocacy roles. To enhance trustworthiness, strategies such as member checking and reflexive journaling were utilized during analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The overarching goal was to explore how influencers evolve from sharing everyday content to communicating with purpose in educational and advocacy contexts, as well as, better understand their strategy and tactics in creating viral beef-related content.

Findings

A content analysis of 2,404 Instagram posts from 30 beef influencers revealed 16 primary content categories. Posts portraying the American ranching lifestyle, family, and other agriculture topics received the highest audience engagement, with the "American Rancher/Ranching

Lifestyle" category alone generating over 2.4 million engagements. Posts featuring daily chores, trending audio, and personal storytelling also performed well, while topics such as branding or vegan/anti-meat debates had comparatively lower interaction. Posts that included visual depictions of beef (e.g., animals, production, meals) generated significantly higher engagement (4.49 million) than those without (1.35 million), suggesting that beef imagery positively influences audience interaction. Reels (short-form videos) were the dominant format, accounting for nearly 68% of posts and over 5.2 million total engagements, confirming that video content drives virality more effectively than carousels or single photos. Top-performing posts often blended ranch lifestyle, family, and trend-based storytelling, highlighting the value of authenticity, relatability, and emotional connection in achieving high content reach.

Conclusions

An analysis of viral beef-related content revealed 16 core categories, with “American Rancher/Lifestyle,” “Family,” and “Other Agriculture” generating the highest engagement. These categories not only dominated in frequency but were also supported by influencers’ interview narratives, where participants consistently described lifestyle content as both enjoyable to create and highly valued by their audiences. Rather than simply sharing visuals, influencers used these posts to convey deeply rooted traditions, intergenerational values, and the everyday realities of ranch life; content that audiences either related to or were curious to better understand. Through a phenomenological lens, these posts served as cultural storytelling, knowledge preservation, and a mechanism for bridging the gap between producers and consumers—supporting earlier findings on influencers’ motivations to build trust, authenticity, and advocacy through personal experience (Neves, 2021; Shank et al., 2024; White et al., 2014). In contrast, content related to sustainability, branding, and vegan/anti-meat discourse appeared infrequently and had the lowest engagement rates. These categories reflect “maximally controversial” topics (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017) that often trigger polarized reactions which some influencers cited as emotionally draining or conflict-prone, potentially discouraging frequent posting. Reels were the most effective content format, consistently outperforming other media types, aligning with current literature on Instagram engagement trends (Chan & Allman-Farinelli, 2022; Habibi & Salim, 2021).

Implications, Recommendations, & Impact on Profession

The findings of this study offer timely insights for agricultural communications professionals, educators, and industry advocates seeking to expand their digital impact. By understanding the content strategies influencers link to virality, including values-based storytelling, visual authenticity, and short-form video, agricultural organizations can collaborate more effectively with influencers to amplify key messages. These results suggest that communications curricula should integrate influencer-informed strategies, including content design, audience psychology, and algorithm literacy. Additionally, Extension educators and advocacy groups can leverage these insights to train producers and youth leaders in digital storytelling practices that resonate with public audiences. As influencers continue to shape food system narratives, the profession must adapt by equipping future communicators with the tools to build trust, foster connection, and communicate complex agricultural issues in accessible and engaging ways.

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