

Information Pathways to Dairy: Exploring Information Channels and Dairy Information-Seeking Behaviors Among Community Members

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Introduction and Framework

Social media and other communication platforms have become influential in shaping community members' beliefs and opinions about the agricultural industry (Atabek & Atabek, 2019; Beckett et al., 2024; Locke et al., 2023). The agricultural industry, for example, continues to research and leverage communication channels to aid information dissemination, product promotion, and relationship building. This has led many community members to turn to social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter), for food- and health-related information, but they receive it through ad hoc engagement and may not interact with relevant and credible information (Paleologo et al., 2024). Additionally, community members may be interacting with agricultural, or more specifically, dairy-related content in a passive, rather than an active manner. Due to this, we wanted to examine the information channels and social media platforms through which potential consumers are exposed to, or choose to be exposed to, dairy-related information and messaging. Essentially, we wanted to know what platforms our population prefers, which of those platforms have exposed them to dairy, and how often they actively search for dairy-related content. Grunig's Situational Theory of Publics (STP) and Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) provide theoretical perspectives that can help us determine our respondents' information consumer type (e.g., active or passive) and consumer behavior (e.g., problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement) related to information channel preferences and dairy-related information-seeking behaviors (Illia et al., 2013; Middleton et al., 2018). Viewing the data in this study through the lens of STP and SCT might help us develop a more direct and efficient avenue to reach our community members.

Purpose and Objectives

This research was conducted as part of a larger study aimed at enhancing the communication practices, engagement, and self-efficacy of U.S. dairy farmers. The purpose of this study was to identify and examine community members' information channel preferences and their dairy-related information-seeking behaviors. To do so, we developed three research objectives: (1) describe community members' social media use and preferred platforms, (2) identify the information channels through which community members have encountered dairy-related information, and (3) describe community members' dairy-related information-seeking behaviors

Methodology

We administered a Qualtrics survey to obtain a non-probability opt-in sample of adult community members across 11 of the states supported by the Southeast Dairy Business Innovation Initiative (SDBII), including Tennessee, North Carolina, Kentucky, South Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Florida, and West Virginia. Qualtrics recruitment panels were used for distributing the online survey link. Responses were collected until a minimum of 1750 completed responses were obtained within the population frame parameters and demographic quotas we set. The survey instrument was developed in consultation with faculty from the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications, and a Tennessee Dairy Extension Specialist, and it was evaluated for readability, accuracy, and flow (Colton & Covert, 2007). A pilot was conducted with the first 50 respondents. Additionally, attention filters were embedded into the survey. Community members' social media use was

examined using a dichotomous item asking respondents, “do you use social media platforms?” with a skip logic embedded to follow up with those selecting “yes” and having them “select all that apply” from a predetermined list of social media platforms prior literature indicated as the most used. Information channels where respondents were exposed to dairy-related information were identified using a “select all that apply” item asking respondents, “Of the information you have seen about dairy (whether you looked for it or stumbled across it), where have you gotten this information? Check all that apply”. Dairy-related information search frequency was evaluated using a single item asking respondents, “In the past year, how often have you actively looked for information about dairy?” asking them to indicate their information search frequency on a 5-point Likert-type scale: 1=*Never*; 5=*Very often (more than 6 times)*. The research objectives were analyzed using descriptive statistics via SPSS v. 31.

Results

Research objective one was to describe community members’ social media use and platform preferences. Responses to social media use indicated that 1,602 (92.7%) of respondents use social media platforms. In-depth assessment of which social media platforms community members preferred revealed that Facebook ($f = 1415$) was used more than other platforms, followed by YouTube ($f = 1331$), and Instagram ($f = 1045$). Other preferred platforms selected included TikTok ($f = 912$), X ($f = 678$), and Other ($f = 65$). Research objective two was to identify information channels where community members have been exposed to dairy content, specifically. Of the information channels that exposed respondents ($N = 1,725$) to dairy information, social media posts, stories, reels, etc., were the most common ($f = 951$), followed by word of mouth ($f = 591$), and farmers’ markets ($f = 551$). Less common information channels exposing respondents to dairy included TV shows ($f = 430$), documentaries ($f = 345$), and digital News ($f = 65$). Research objective three was to describe community members’ dairy-related information-seeking behaviors, which revealed that most respondents never ($f = 594$; 34.4%) or rarely (1-2 times) ($f = 466$; 27.0%) sought information about dairy. Fewer respondents actively sought dairy information occasionally ($f = 342$; 19.8%), often (5-6 times) ($f = 173$; 10.0%), or very often (more than 6 times) ($f = 150$; 8.7%).

Conclusions, Discussion, and Implications

Bandura’s SCT prior applications in information systems research and media and communications studies contribute a valuable framework for evaluating groups’ information-seeking behaviors. Additionally, Grunig’s STP guides the examination of our respondents’ active or passive behavior while acknowledging the public before examining their relationship with an organization or researchers. If we consider the role these two frameworks play in describing community members’ information-seeking behaviors and information channel preferences, we could prioritize reaching passive information-seekers through their preferred information channels. For example, defining this group’s information-seeking behaviors supports industry and institutional efforts to reach and create more actively engaged dairy consumers. Further data analysis is recommended to connect information channel preferences to active or passive information seekers. Furthermore, we recommend this study as a guide for other agricultural sectors to evaluate information-seeking behaviors amongst their target populations. Lastly, considering the role of knowledge, beliefs, and value alignment per SCT and STP, future research could consider how these variables explain community members’ active and passive involvement and communication behaviors.

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