

**Insights from Urban and Rural Youth: How Environment and Community Shape
Perceptions of Agriculture**

Cayden J. Barton
East Texas A&M University
P.O. Box 3011, Commerce, TX 75429
Cayden.Barton@etamu.edu

Maggie R. Pfeiffer Salem
East Texas A&M University
P.O. Box 3011, Commerce, TX 75429
Maggie.Salem@etamu.edu

Whitney L. Figland
East Texas A&M University
P.O. Box 3011, Commerce, TX 75429
Whitney.Figland@etamu.edu

Introduction

The youth of America today face competency issues regarding agricultural literacy; with agricultural education as the primary vector of agricultural literacy development, this concern is relevant to both industry and education (Cosby et al., 2022). As the public becomes increasingly removed from production agriculture, society grows disconnected, resulting in knowledge gaps between consumers and producers. Knowledge gaps hinder an individual's agricultural literacy, which directly affects their perceptions of agricultural commodities and the agricultural industry (Specht et al., 2014). An individual's likelihood of interacting with production agriculture may depend on their environment (Frick et al., 1995). The agricultural literacy of the younger generation is important, as they represent the next generation of lawmakers and world leaders who will need to be agriculturally literate to meet the needs of an ever-growing world population, projected to reach 9 billion by 2050 (Cosby et al., 2022). Despite the importance of agricultural literacy, a substantial portion of the population remains agriculturally illiterate (Cosby et al., 2022).

Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of undergraduate students with agriculture and how those experiences shaped their perceptions of the agricultural industry. Two research questions framed the study: (1) What are East Texas A&M University undergraduate students' experiences with agriculture, and (2) How have those experiences influenced the students' perceptions of agriculture?

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes Social Constructivism Theory as the theoretical framework to explore undergraduate students' perceptions and experiences of agriculture. Social Constructivism posits that learning originates in social contexts; therefore, cognitive functions must be rooted in social interaction (UC Berkeley Graduate Student Instructor Teaching & Resource Center, 2026) and knowledge is actively constructed by the learner in response to their interpretation of the environment (Cole et al, 1978, p.86).

Methodology

This study utilized a phenomenological methodology to best allow the researcher to extract the theme of participants' experiences. Qualitative research best allows participants to share lived experiences with the researcher (Tenny et al., 2022). Utilizing a phenomenological approach enables the researcher to identify common phenomena, themes, and patterns among participants, thereby observing the central meanings of participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994 & Creswell, 2013). Participants were sampled via purposive sampling and snowball sampling from the population of the East Texas A&M University Student Government Association; then interviewed utilizing open-ended questions derived from areas of agricultural literacy defined by (Frick et al., 1995).

Results

Data analysis revealed two distinct themes regarding an individual's environmental impact on their perceptions of agriculture: (1) influence of place typologies, and (2) influence of social communities.

Theme 1: Influence of Place Typologies

Place typologies refer to geographic locations, such as rural, urban, and suburban. Throughout the study, participants consistently described how the physical environments in which they were raised shaped their perceptions of agriculture. Participants who resided in urban areas reported feeling removed from production agriculture. Wendy stated, “I’m literally surrounded in the city. If I want to see any type of land, I would have to drive”. Erin stated, “Since I’m in an area where I live, my hometown is not really big on agriculture. It’s much more city-like”. While participants who defined their place typologies as rural felt that their place typologies allowed them to gain more firsthand experience with agriculture. Participants reported that their firsthand experiences with agriculture shaped their perceptions of the agricultural industry. Participants who engaged in first-hand experiences reported feeling a strong appreciation and deepened understanding of agricultural practices. While participants who had little to no first-hand experiences expressed that they were less knowledgeable than they would prefer to be and did not understand the agricultural industry.

Theme 2: Influence of Social Communities

Participants routinely reported that their social communities impacted their perceptions of the agricultural industry. During the interview process, connections between the construction of perception and social communities, such as family, peers, and social media, began to emerge. These connections underscore the theoretical framework by demonstrating that social environments influence the construction of perception. Participants attribute familial influence as a primary source of their agricultural knowledge. Wendy stated, “I would say that most of my knowledge when it comes to ag would come from my uncles and, like older generations of my family”. In addition to family, peer influence was common among participants, often occurring in the classroom or college settings. Finally, social media was reported to be a primary source of agricultural information, often used as a substitute for firsthand experience. Erin stated, “I feel like social media has mainly driven my knowledge of agriculture”.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

This study shows that environmental factors, such as place typology and social communities, influence perceptions of the agricultural industry. Rural participants were generally more knowledgeable and experienced with agriculture, while urban participants felt less knowledgeable and more disconnected. Social communities, including family, peers, and social media, were the main sources of agricultural knowledge and helped shape participants’ perceptions. These findings suggest several practical implications. Educators should incorporate experiential learning and encourage social engagement in classrooms to enhance agricultural understanding. Youth agricultural programs should prioritize hands-on experiences in urban areas, and student agricultural ambassadors should help create informative academic communities. Future research should examine how place typologies affect agricultural literacy during formative years.

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