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First-Generation Livestock Producers' Experiences Starting Operations and Sharing Their Stories Online

Abstract

First-generation livestock producers are a relatively niche population who have the chance to help address the dwindling numbers of farmers in the United States, while also offering a chance to tell a unique story online. This study sought to understand how being a first-generation livestock producer shaped their experiences and how they were sharing their experiences online. The results of the qualitative interviews found the following results. While many participants were introduced to the industry as youth, they also tended to lack access to the same resources multi-generational operations had, though this allowed for creativity in how they addressed challenges, such as hiring workers. While agricultural production was not something they were born into, working in this area became a piece of their identity, including overlapping with how they want to raise families. As for telling their stories online, the participants exhibited a mix of goals, including trying to balance marketing their products and educating members of the public about livestock production. It is also a way for them to connect with other producers. Notably there is intentionality in their social media use, including choosing outlets for specific purposes and trying to cultivate certain types of followers. Those working with first-generational agriculturalists should be aware of different needs from other producers, especially in terms of access to material and social resources in the industry. Future research could expand the scope of this research by assessing different types of operations and doing quantitative studies to address generalizability.

Keywords

Livestock producers, social identity, social capital

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Introduction & Literature Review

First-Generation Agriculturalists

Agriculture in the United States continues to face an issue of a declining number of farmers, from more than 6 million in the 1930s to fewer than 2 million than today (Lacy, 2025). Part of the issue is that as farmers retire, their children often are unwilling or unable to continue the family farm (Lamb, 2026). While finding ways to keep subsequent generations on the farm can help address this issue, so can getting new producers engaged, but beginning farmers and ranchers face unique challenges that are often unmet by policy structures in the U.S. (Obudzinski, 2016).

For first-generation farmers, it can be difficult to break into the industry because land can be difficult to acquire and they do not have generational knowledge to rely on as they seek to establish and grow their operations (Obudzinski, 2016). They are an inherently niche but important population to study as the U.S. agricultural community seeks to decrease the average age of producers in the industry and increase the number of new farmers and ranchers. From a communications standpoint, these producers also have the opportunity to share perspectives on agricultural production via social media, which could serve to encourage or discourage others from following that same path. Over the past 20 years (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019), social media use has fundamentally changed the communication landscape, unleashing the ability to reach thousands and potentially millions of other users online, which allows operations to develop two-way relationships with consumers (Olanrewaju et al., 2020; Rutasert et al., 2013; White, 2014).

Social Media in Agriculture

Many researchers have recommended social media use by the industry, including producers, to tell the story of the industry (Abrams & Sackmann, 2014; Adams & Salois, 2010; Graybill-Leonard et al., 2011; Langusch et al., 2023; White et al., 2014). This research is ongoing because it is still a relatively new media environment and is rapidly changing, but past research can help illuminate what is happening, as well as help recommend some best practices.

A decade ago, a survey of agriculturalists found websites to be highest area that needed training (Meyers et al., 2015), while websites and Facebook were also the most frequently used (Shaw et al., 2015). More recent research has found Facebook to be the most often used tool by agricultural producers to promote their operations and products (Miller et al., 2023; Weingarten et al., 2023), which is in line with overall social media use numbers (Pew Research Center, 2021). But when Facebook pages of Oklahoma agricultural operations were studied in 2019, pages did not post consistently (King & Settle, 2020).

Research has also looked at agritourism operations. A content analysis showed that best practices for audience engagement were posting consistently, though many operations were not posting for months at a time (Bowman et al., 2020). A later qualitative study was conducted to address why producers engaged online, and a lot of the producers were engaging in trial and error to learn how to use social media, which is not an ideal way of learning new business practices (Miller et al., 2023).

A pair of direct-to-consumer marketing studies were conducted looking at how producers engage in online practices. Langusch et al. (2023) found that producers were focused on creating and maintaining relationships with consumers, though they were not strategizing their communications. Weingarten et al. (2023) found that Facebook was the primary outlet the producers were using, but they were constrained by minimal training and the need to keep their primary focus on operating their business as opposed to promoting it. The study also showed that producers were using social media to educate and sell to consumers, as well as connect to other producers.

Social Media Influencers

A unique aspect of social media that comes from people's ability to more directly interact with each other is the rise of influencers. Influencers are similar to traditional celebrities in their reach, but whereas most celebrities became famous through another occupation (e.g., acting, sports, music), influencers are famous for being online (Khamis et al., 2017). They may have specific topic areas, but their online status can become its own job they have to maintain. Audiences develop parasocial relationships (i.e., they feel like they know the influencer even though they do not actually know the influencer) with these influencers (Reinikainen et al., 2020). The audiences could be more influenced by them than they would by traditional celebrities (Jin et al., 2019; Schouten, 2019). While we were not explicitly choosing participants based on their status as a social media influencer, which is difficult because it does not have a single definition, understanding influencers can help illuminate the potential role that first-generation agriculturalists who are telling their stories online could have on reaching consumers we have been trying to reach as an industry.

What we know about influencers in agriculture and natural resources is relatively limited. In the past few years, a handful of studies have happened in agricultural communications. Steede et al. (2018) looked at how key influencers discussed antibiotics in livestock using a social media monitoring platform to identify the most prominent influencers. Tweets were more likely to be negative than positive. It is worth noting that many of these influencers had no meaningful expertise or training in the topic area. Specht et al. (2020) assessed online conversations about cultured meat, including tracking who the key influencers were. The social network analysis identified four broad communities of influencers: news and technology, vegan and clean meat, policy and agricultural advocates, and less connected influencers who happened to be interested in food and diets. Specht and Buck (2019) found that the most prominent influencers on food waste tended to be located in physical locations associated with environmental policies and movements, indicating the link between the physical and digital worlds. Shank et al. (2024) studied influencers regarding transparency on Instagram. The influencers were wanting to share their authentic experiences to help bridge the gap between the industry and consumers. In their desire to be transparent online, they were concerned about information being taken out of context or being misunderstood. Settle et al. (2023) assessed young mothers' trust of celebrities and influencers about food safety and nutrition. They found that traditional celebrities, in this case TV chefs, were more well known and trusted than influencers who were engaged in agriculture or alternative viewpoints of food and agriculture.

Theoretical Framework

While theory did not drive the development of the study, it was used to help understand the findings of the study. Two theoretical areas help illustrate the findings: social identity and social capital.

Social identity theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), states individuals classify themselves as belonging to certain groups (i.e., their in-groups) and not belonging to others (i.e., their out-groups). These self-selected classifications influence an individual's social identity or self-image. In general, people tend to favor members from their in-groups over those in an out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The basic premise of social identity theory is an individual's identity is tied to the groups they belong to (and do not belong to; Ellemers & Haslam, 2011). The process of coming to terms with that shows up in social categorization, social comparison, and social identification. People are inclined to show how they belong to their groups and how their groups differ from other groups. People may seek to escape lower-status groups, thereby showing how they differ from other group members. They may also use social creativity by reinterpreting group characteristics to make the group seem better. Social competition may be present as groups seek to change their circumstances.

For this study, we see social identity show up in participants' adoption of an agriculturalist lifestyle. It becomes something that links to other aspects of their identity, particularly family. King and Settle (2021) found that farming and family were strong aspects of agricultural producers' identities. They relied on producer networks as sources of information and support. Of note, social media was one of the ways that allowed them to communicate with each other. That said, producers may be underutilizing social media (King & Settle, 2020; Telg & Barnes, 2012).

Social capital is the idea that people's interactions with each other is a resource (Bourdieu, 1986). Unlike other forms of capital, social capital is inherently shared between both parties (Coleman, 1990). This social capital can then be used for fostering further connections, sharing information, and building trust within communities (Domínguez & Arford, 2010; Putnam, 1993). In the case of the current study, being first-generation agriculturalists means the participants did not have the same social capital multi-generational producers have, which impacted their operations and how they sought out information and connections. Social identity extends itself to social capital, which are the benefits individuals share with each other by being connected. Kramer (2006) purported that social capital was more likely to be developed by individuals who they were part of a collective.

Purpose & Research Questions

A commonly cited issue in the agricultural industry in the United States is the dwindling number of farmers. The number of farms in the U.S. has declined by more than 70% over the past century (Lacy, 2025). This is partly explained by subsequent generations not staying on the farm, but another avenue is getting new people into agricultural operations. As such, it is important to understand the experiences of first-generation agriculturalists, including how they

share their stories online, which may encourage or discourage others from following that same path. There were two guiding research questions for this study:

- 1) How has being a first-generation livestock producer shaped their operations and experiences?
- 2) How are the producers sharing their experiences online?

Methods

This study used a qualitative approach through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Because first-generation livestock producers who tell their stories online is a relatively niche population, interviews were deemed the best option to understand these individuals' experiences. Purposive sampling was used to ensure variety within that target frame, including by geography. Table 1 provides descriptions of the participants. Of note is that all participants were women, except for a husband who participated in the interview with his wife. While a limitation of the study, it is also noteworthy considering gender dynamics on agricultural operations (Allen & Sachs, 2012; Beach, 2013; O'Brien, 1986; Pilgeram & Amos, 2015).

The interview guide covered background information of the participants, why they got involved in agriculture, how they learn agricultural practices, perceptions of being a first-generation agriculturalist, and perceptions and goals for social media presence related to their operation. At the end of the interview, a summary of the discussion was provided to serve as an initial member check for participants.

The interview guide was reviewed by two agricultural communications faculty members at other institutions who were familiar with qualitative interviews, livestock production, and social media promotion. Two pilot interviews were also conducted with individuals not in the prospective pool of participants who were first-generation livestock producers. Changes from their feedback related to clarity of questions.

Interviews were conducted in the spring and summer of 2024. Eight interviews were conducted in total. Data saturation was reached by the last interview. Interviews were conducted on Zoom to provide face-to-face interactions phone calls cannot provide while still allowing for further geographic reach than would have been feasible through in-person interviews. Interviews lasted between 25 and 100 minutes, with most lasting about 60 minutes. Transcripts were provided through the Zoom recording and were cleaned up by the interviewer before being sent to each participant to ensure accuracy and serve as the second member check. The transcripts were then analyzed using Glaser's (1965) constant comparative method.

To help ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the following steps were taken: Faculty members with topic area expertise reviewed of the instrument (Kallio et al., 2016); The lead researcher conducted pilot interviews to ensure usability of the question guide (Kallio et al., 2016); Data source triangulation occurred by interviewing participants from a variety of states and backgrounds (Flick, 2018); Member checking occurred by giving participants the opportunity to provide clarifications after hearing a summary of their interview, allowing participants to review transcripts before analysis, and sending a summarized version of the

findings to participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018); An audit trail was maintained during the analysis process in MAXQDA (Flick, 2018; Guba, 1981); Verbatim transcripts were used to help ensure credibility (Creswell, 2007); Thick descriptions of participants' responses were provided (Guba, 1981); and the research team completed reflexivity statements outlined below (Peshking, 1988; Preissle, 2008).

Table 1

List of Participants, Including Descriptions

Participant Pseudonym	Description
Mary	Operation is in southern state. Married to James. Grass-fed custom-finished beef operation. Runs social media while also helping with cattle. Posts on Instagram and Facebook, with website to sell beef.
James	Operation is in southern state. Married to Mary. Grass-fed custom-finished beef operation. Mainly handles cattle aspects, not much to do with social media.
Patricia	Operation is in southern state. Regenerative and humane cattle operation. Posts on personal and business LinkedIn. Sharing herd updates and marketing grass-fed beef.
Jennifer	Operation is in midwestern state. Cattle producer. Has website, TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram. Uses social media to share both consumer and producer education.
Linda	Operation is in two western states. Red Angus cattle operation. Has Facebook and Instagram. Uses website to sell products and write blog.
Elizabeth	Operation is in midwestern state. Marketing as direct-to-consumer beef. Has Instagram, Facebook, and website. Mainly marketing but some educational content.
Barbara	Operation is in southern state. Family-owned, farm-to-table ranch and butcher shop. Uses Facebook, Instagram, and website.
Susan	Operation is in western state. Cattle rancher and consulting. Posts on LinkedIn and Instagram.
Jessica	Operation is in midwestern state. Regenerative, grassfed sheep operation. Uses LinkedIn but looking to expand to Facebook to sell product.

Note. Region is defined by U.S. Census Bureau.

Bella Bowen grew up in California working on cattle and livestock operations growing up. She owns a first-generation cow-calf operation and is completing a bachelor's degree in animal science and agricultural communications. Quisto Settle grew up in Texas around cattle, sheep, and goat operations, including stock shows and working on ranches as a child. He has a bachelor's degree in animal science. His past research has included promotion of agricultural operations on social media. Audrey E. H. King grew up in a rural community in Kansas that was predominately dependent upon agriculture and briefly showed livestock. Her past research has included promotion of agricultural operations on social media and regularly engages in Extension efforts with livestock producers to improve their social media presence.

Results

Themes are divided by research question: 1) How has being a first-generation livestock producer shaped their operations and experiences, and 2) How are the producers sharing their experiences online?

RQ 1: How Has Being a First-Generation Livestock Producer Shaped Their Operations and Experiences?

This RQ's themes addressed how participants got into production agriculture, including what resources and help they had along the way.

Pre-existing appreciation and experiences in agriculture are a driving factor in participants starting their livestock operations

Individuals who gained experience in agriculture as youth or young adults found themselves eager to continue their careers in agriculture and work towards their own operations in the industry. This eagerness is typically a result of their pre-existing appreciation for the industry as well as other personal factors. These experiences included childhood hobbies or jobs, youth leadership organizations, or internships. Mentors in individuals' lives also become a factor in the start of first-generation livestock operations. Mary said the following:

I grew up in a small town, but my dad was a doctor, and it is actually a family practice, and if you're from a small town also, you know that everybody just gets invited to brandings. And so, since my dad was everybody's doctor. He took me to the brandings with him. And so, I was like, well, I really like this, this is really cool. And then I thought, well, since I don't own cows, I must, I probably have to be a vet in order to work with cows. So I started going the pre-vet route undergrad and ended up actually working for [veterinary medicine company], doing an internship with them.

Linda said, "[Husband] had milked at a local dairy farm when he was in high school, and that's kind of what got him to thinking that that's how he wanted to raise a family. And then I didn't really have any experience with cattle at all."

Struggles and Resource Availability

Without a pre-established operation, the already scarce resources in agriculture can be even harder to acquire. Struggles with finances, manpower, advice, land availability and learning the industry and business were very prevalent in participants' responses. Without an abundance of money to spend, finding work and property, let alone buying livestock, can be challenging.

Mary spoke of the difficulty of accessing land to run cattle on and having to split them up into small groups:

Sure we have 40 cows, but there's like four here, four here, ten here, four here And I'm not complaining because those are great leases for us because basically they give us the land in exchange for the property tax exemption.

Barbara spoke of the difficulties in hiring workers:

But the biggest hurdle that he's had is employees. He does get guys, and then I don't know how the process works, from Mexico, Ecuador, South Africa. He's got currently one from Norway. He tried to hire local, but local guys didn't show up, they may show up and be drunk.

Patricia spoke about being creative to find workers: "We actually started using Craigslist. That's the beautiful thing about first-generation ranches. You don't have anything. You don't have the money to do anything."

Family Oriented

While production agriculture was not a part of participants' families prior to their own involvement, they were still family-oriented in their agricultural engagement. Despite not having this heritage, many of these participants shared some sort of family value or plan for succession planning with future generations in mind.

Barbara spoke of her husband being influenced by providing for his children:

He doesn't care if they want to take over the business. He doesn't care if they want to take over the farm. He doesn't care if they want to even be in ag. He just wants to be able to provide help if needed.

Similarly, Linda said, "It was really [husband's] desire to raise a family that way, and I just agreed that that would be a great idea."

Goal Oriented, Future Focused

Scale of business goals varied, but plans for the future were demonstrated in each participant interview. Land stewardship, succession planning, and business expansion were mentioned, as well as smaller and more niche topics.

Mary said, “So the long-term goal for the business is sustainability economically and environmentally.” Barbara’s husband was focused on family, but he also wanted to help out others, including a sober living facility, programs to help people leaving jail get jobs, and providing events for special-needs children: “So, yes, it’s an ag business, but it’s kind of the foundation to go off and do all these other things.” Susan spoke of branching out to other business ventures:

I would like them to find me and then always have a backlog of people who want to work with me on a consulting basis or a ranch management basis or speaking basis. And to help as many people as possible. A big goal that I have is to compile a vetted list of all of the ranch internships that are decent. And make kind of a resource about what skill level they require, if they’re paid or not, do they provide housing?

The Amount of Help Getting Started Varies Between Producers

As first-generation producers, participants lacked the multi-generational knowledge that a multi-generational operation would provide and had to find help getting started in other places. Many producers received help as children in youth leadership organizations, from family and family friends, or as young adults in internships and jobs. These resources have become essential in how they started and run their operations. However, not all producers had help available to them and had to work to find resources and information on their own.

Susan said, “We’ve had lots and lots of mentors. Along the way that have made it possible for us to be in this business at all because without a network, you really don’t get to ranch, unfortunately.” Patricia’s experience was a feeling of isolation:

No help. No, so I think a lot of people didn’t take us seriously. To be honest. I think, like even my mother-in-law would make jokes about how I just liked going out and spending time with the cows because I like animals.... So nobody took us seriously. We didn’t get any kind of financial support.... We did everything. We dug our own water line down to repair the cistern so we could get water up. It was all self-motivation, self-support. Really I can’t think of anyone that helped us at all. Not a bad way. It just didn’t happen.

Barbara also spoke of not having initial connections but also talked about making them along the way:

Not having mentors directly, like a like a parent or a grandparent being able to say, “Hey! What do you think of this idea?” has made it a little bit more difficult, but he’s not one to sit and dwell on that, so he’ll find other people that he’s known through, you know, associations or work, or whatever to go ask ideas. But I think he would like more mentorship, but you know he’ll find a way to figure out what to do.

Government Aid

Running a business, especially in agriculture, has expenses that some cannot afford, so there are often grants and loans available through government-ran or -funded agencies. These

agencies often also offer classes, information, and assistance to help provide information and resources. While helpful, there are also struggles that come with using these agencies.

Jennifer spoke of the difficulty of navigating the paperwork process:

That was probably the biggest thing is just not knowing the ins and outs of financing or cattle to begin with, and then just the daunting task of all the paperwork and the responsibility that would follow. Didn't realize that after I took out that loan that they would follow up every year with wanting to know operating expenses. They do farm visits, all of that stuff. So it was really just not knowing what resources were there, and what the requirements were for FSA loans, I think.

James found the government employees helpful: "USDA financing, Farm Service loan services, farm service agents. Yeah, they actually want to give you money, like the people in our offices do. So they're like, 'We'll help you. We'll help you figure it out.'"

Information Gathering

Without generations of family knowledge in their respective operations, or a pre-existing operation to take over, first-generation producers have to find information other ways, using a variety of outlets. These can include research publications, print media, social media, websites and other online forums, trainings, work experience and people. There is constantly new information available. Jessica spoke of the mix of options available: "Just videos and books and visiting other farmers. All self-taught kind of stuff, really. You know, and I've connected with a whole bunch of nonprofits in my area."

Barbara said her husband was very excited about artificial intelligence (AI): "I think that there could be a lot of good potential for Ag people. AI can condense a lot of stuff quick for you and give you concise answer. And so he's been using that a lot to learn." Patricia spoke of the learning from ranchers being transparent about their experiences on YouTube:

I was watching something about a guy had like a huge trough of water, and one of his calves actually drowned in it. And he came on and did a whole thing about, "Hey? You know, make sure. Here's some options like, here's what happened to me. Here's how we could have prevented it." So online that way.

Barbara spoke of her husband using publications and online resources:

He gets all the ag publications. I kind of keep him updated on what I see coming in from press release and stuff like that. But for the most part Ben is a tech guy. He loves researching online, reading publications there and stuff like that.

Patricia kept in touch with her old boss, though their operation was in a different place, which limits some of applicability of advice:

They were in such a different world than we are with their reproduction and everything. You know he's like, "Oh, you never want a bull. They just tear down fences. You do all artificial insemination," and I'm like "We don't have the resources for that."

James spoke about wishing he would have better utilized his connections from when he was younger:

I wish I could go back and tell my younger self then to don't just do it for the fun aspect of it, but actually, like pick those guys' brains that I work for because they have a lot of knowledge."

RQ2: How Are the Producers Sharing Their Experiences Online?

This RQ's themes address how the participants have been engaging with social media for their operations.

Social Media Uses

Agriculture in social media is a growing space, with producers spreading it along various platforms in different ways. Through longform posts, stories, Reels, question polls, email lists, and websites, there are multiple ways to share daily life, connect with media users and consumers, and promote businesses. Participants all used various platforms (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) to share their personal lives or businesses.

Barbara said,

There was a need for that storytelling and of all the things that I could have gone out and did that summer. I felt like super connected to it, because I felt like I could have a purpose, but also personally, then I could also be a voice for all of ag through that work.

She also spoke of the balance of selling products and humanizing the industry: "I have a fine balance of push product, push product, push product, sell product, sell product, here's our face, and that that has gone very well." Susan spoke of preferring LinkedIn over other options:

You can't be this random dude with like a cat picture. People are still really awful sometimes, which is wild to me, but it's a little bit little more above board than Instagram or TikTok, and you don't have to be quite as algorithm focused on LinkedIn like you can kinda do whatever the hell you want so I like it.

Elizabeth spoke about her approach evolving over time:

I wasn't necessarily sharing our message so much, just our views of what we simply do, and that's when I thought you know what, I'm going to start sharing more regularly. I guess that's when I decided to start investing in thinking, you know, if I'm going to do this and take the time to do this, I want to do it well.

Jessica spoke about providing a targeted approach:

On LinkedIn, I write at a higher level, and I learn at a higher level, based on what other people are writing. So I see it as a much more professional site. I don't necessarily see that as where my target audience is, though I'm doing that as a way to keep up my writing skills to stay networked, to meet people in a wider geographic area. I think my target audience, I probably will hit more with Facebook. I think that's where you can build a small farm following more so than LinkedIn

Social Media Networking, Branding, and Comraderies

While social media presents opportunities for marketing and sharing with consumers, it also provides a space to network with others with similar interests, in the same industry, and anyone around the world. Participants each used social media as a pathway to connect with other producers, create digital branding for their businesses and themselves, and form friendships that have led to growth.

Patricia spoke about following ranchers around her age:

To have that camaraderie, and that's who I want to connect with and see our ranch, too, and hopefully somebody gets inspired from seeing, you know, they do X,Y and Z, or operating with such a small budget, and they're still making it work. That kind of thing.

Mary said, "Imagine all the ways we could meet people through social media. And now, all of a sudden I'm shipping calves to Nebraska because I met somebody online." She also said,

We don't pay for any marketing right now. Because we have more demand than supply, and we do all of our marketing through social media and email.... Social media is so much easier. It takes less of my day to create an Instagram post than it does to like go to Staples, print out a hundred flyers, put them on every windshield at Walmart, for people to throw it away.

Elizabeth spoke about the collective nature of promotion in agriculture: "We are our biggest cheerleaders.... We promote each other. We pat each other on the back."

Follower Demographic

Posting on social media brings an audience; each business account on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn has abilities to see follower counts and demographics, such as age ranges, gender distributions, even locations, in general areas. Participants spoke about how knowing and understanding demographics, as well as a target demographic, can help social media users and business owners understand the styles they would want to use online to market and share their presence with followers. Linda noted that her audience is largely women: "It's women, oftentimes, and moms that are younger than me.... I would almost say, like probably women like 25 to 40 is probably like kind of my largest following now." Susan said,

If you look at my stats, it's across the board and over the world. I probably had 50-50 on women and men. And my ages are pretty split.... So, Gen Z, all the way up to, even past boomers, probably.

Jennifer spoke of the problems male audiences can cause sometimes: "Some of that male audience is not a male audience that I want, and they're not actually there to engage. They're just there to be creeps. So I would prefer a majority female audience." Barbara spoke about shifting their target demographic online to fit their business's approach:

We lost the people that want to show that "I'm supporting my local farmer by buying this half from this overall-wearing woe-is-me farmer" versus I'm walking into this butcher store to buy this steak that I know was raised by a farmer, and has been dry aged, or the quality of the meat is higher than I can get at Walmart.

Improving Consumer Knowledge

There is a divide between producers and consumers in agriculture, a gap in knowledge, experience, understanding. Participants spoke of efforts in bridging that gap can be made via social media, communications, and a drive to educate and market a product. Consumers may simply not know, rather than what some call ignorance. Sharing knowledge in agriculture is a way to educate consumers of an industry that has a high impact on their lives but can also help them make decisions on their purchasing.

Susan said,

I think sometimes people who grew up in rural America on farms and ranches don't actually know how to talk to people who didn't.... I'm not gonna make fun of you if you don't know what a Baldy cow was because I didn't either. I'm not gonna make fun of you for not knowing what a heifer versus a steer is. Like I actually really hate it when people do that because it's like why would they know? I don't know what a plumber does, like at a deep level. I know plumbers fix broken pipes, but that's it.

She continued saying. "[The audience loves] to hear about what range is, how we manage it, why we don't deforest in the United States. And just to kind of provide a real-world foil for all of the sensationalism that exists in the media."

Speaking about the perspective of moms, Mary said,

Her goal is like, "I want to feed my family, I want to feel good about what I'm feeding, because the Internet tells me I should feel bad about everything. And I really don't even know where to start. I don't know who to believe. What do I do next?"... That's usually the person that I imagine myself talking to every time I'm writing post.

She also said:

We get a lot of questions, and one of my favorite things to do is to answer the questions that come into our DMs. I'll take the person's name out of it and then post it publicly... so that people know that it's okay to ask us questions.

Conclusions & Discussion

The findings of this study help illuminate how first-generation livestock producers went from entering a new industry to telling their story online. A notable aspect is the lack of resources that were available to those who grew up in agriculture (Obudzinski, 2016). They lacked knowledge and land that would come from family properties, but they navigated their way around through a variety of ways: seeking out agricultural mentors, government assistance, and online resources.

While these producers did not grow up in agricultural production, it still became a family affair. Spouses were typically both engaged in the operation and its promotion, and they were wanting to have the operation benefit their kids, whether it was the inheriting the operation itself or providing a springboard to support whatever else their kids might want to pursue in life.

As they were engaging online, there was a mix of uses occurring. Many were trying to tell the story of agriculture to those who were new, but selling a product was also present. Like Weingarten et al. (2023), many were engaging in both telling the story of agricultural production while also engaging in business online. There was at least some notice of the need for tailoring things to a target audience or at least trying to foster that kind of audience. Notably, they noticed when mismatches occurred, such as a butcher losing followers who were looking for a farmer in overalls or a female producer not wanting male followers who were creeps.

Serving as a bridge between the industry and the public was important for some participants. They wanted to inform in a way that was welcoming to those with little agricultural knowledge, with one participant noting they were that way once.

Social identity is a key underpinning of the findings of this study. While an agricultural identity was not how they grew up, it became a part of their identity. They were seeking to be a part of the agricultural community and had to be fairly self-directed in getting access to resources and knowledge that others may have grown up with. While that was often considered a limitation, there were times that lack of a multi-generational identity also came with the freedom to try new things. And by being online, they were able to portray their agricultural identity to others through connecting with other producers and sharing their version of agriculture's story online.

From a social capital perspective, they were gaining it and leveraging it in different ways. They could connect with local producers and professional associations, but they could also do so online. And being online also had the ability to help them extend their own knowledge to others who might not be engaged in agriculture but were interested in knowing where their food comes

from. So even though they lacked that initial social capital by being first-generation producers, they were able to develop it over time.

The main takeaway from the study is how inherently intertwined these producers are with others. Sometimes connections were pre-existing, but other times they were having to build those connections from the ground up. And those connections have meaningful impacts on their abilities to be successful as agricultural operators. Whether it is for connection or technical information, being an agricultural producer means connecting with other people.

Recommendations

For agriculturalists looking to grow community, the results of this study illustrate the need to welcome new people. While some participants felt welcomed and aided by the agricultural community, others did not and were left to their own devices to find resources. When producers are increasingly aging and families are not always able to keep operations in the family, it is important to be able to welcome new producers into the industry. Welcoming newcomers can be as simple as making it known you are willing to answer questions or pointing them to resources that could help them.

For organizations wanting to target new producers, it is important to be aware of how their needs differ from multi-generational agriculturalists. These new producers may not have the same size operations (and accompanying resources) or knowledge of government assistance and professional associations. As such, the new producers need to be more proactively sought out than those who grew up in agriculture and programming needs to be tailored to meet their needs. If nothing else, social connection to other producers would be particularly valuable because that would be an ongoing resource via social capital.

As for those who are looking to get into agriculture, they need to build their social network to gain access to the information they need. If it cannot be done in person, it can be done online. Engaging in the agricultural industry does not have to be done on one's own.

Future studies can expand on this research by broadening the scope of who is studied. This study looked at a relatively niche group who were first-generation livestock producers who were engaged in telling the story of their operations online. Widening the scope to crop producers would provide a different perspective on entering the industry. Quantitative studies could also be beneficial, though they may struggle with reaching adequate participant sizes to reach generalizability. Other studies, such as content analyses, could more directly assess how first-generation agriculturalists are telling their stories online, as well as how they are connecting with other producers.

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