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Exploring the Uses and Gratifications of Agricultural Blog Readers

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Keywords

Blogs, uses and gratifications, social media, agricultural communications, Association for Communication Excellence Conference

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Introduction

Social media have become an important part of how people communicate. Because of this, social media can impact how, why, and where people choose to find their information (Dunne, Lawlor, & Rowley, 2010). The majority of adults who utilize the Internet use some sort of social networking site, and of those adults, 42% use more than one social networking site (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Those social networking sites include Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Twitter, and Instagram.

Blogs are another form of social media, which allow the host blogger to post individualized information, links, photos, and videos, which other users may reply to through a variety of forms (Kaye, 2010). Although the number of people creating content for blogs is decreasing, many online users still rely on blogs to source information. Nearly 50% of Millennials (ages 18-33) and 40% of Gen X (age 34-45) frequently engage in reading, commenting on, and sharing blogs (Zickuhr, 2010). For businesses, blogs provide a unique opportunity to "alleviate some of the concerns that come with traditional marketing" (Singh, Vernon-Jackson, & Cullinane, 2008, p. 290). Blogs can increase cognizance and consumer loyalty through engagement of the consumer in the development of expectations and experiences. By opening the door to personal communication, blogs help foster an honest and trustworthy environment for consumers to easily participate (Anderson-Wilk, 2009; Singh et al., 2008).

Kaye (2010) indicated blogs are becoming an increasingly more popular way to communicate

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information because users prefer the interactivity of blogs. Blogs have given people the power to share a lot of information instantly and allow others to respond and contribute to the topic (Kaye, 2010). According to Smith (2008), blogs give consumers an outlet to exercise a legitimate online voice to share their opinion without having to go through traditional media channels such as television, newspapers, magazines, or radio shows. Blogs can provide a large amount of information for audience members, encourage interaction through comment features, and allow syndication of content to make the blog posts more accessible (Kabani, 2013).

Previous research on blogs has explored how blogs could be used in education (Kim, 2008); public relations practitioners' use of blogs (Porter, Sweetser, & Chung, 2009); how blog credibility affects how consumers select blogs (Kaye & Johnson, 2011); and the influence of blog readers' demographics on expectations (Kim & Johnson, 2012). These studies are only a few of the many empirical investigations into the use of blogs for personal, educational, organizational, and professional purposes.

As the availability and prevalence of social media tools has increased, so too have empirical studies to investigate how these tools are being utilized in agriculture. In an examination of how agriculturists used Facebook to promote agricultural advocacy efforts, Meyers, Irlbeck, Graybill-Leonard, and Doerfert (2011) found these individuals believed their efforts would not be possible without the use of social media. The in-depth interviews with administrators of Facebook groups revealed this form of communication was effective in encouraging conversation and building relationships.

Doerfert, Graber, Meyers, and Irlbeck (2012) conducted a study about what traditional and nontraditional media channels Texas agricultural producers used. The findings indicated while agriculturists predominantly used traditional media (such as magazines and radio), Internet use is increasing for finding agricultural information, particularly related to commodity markets. Overall, the respondents indicated very little use of social media to find information related to agricultural production (Doerfert et al., 2012).

A qualitative study of agriculturalists' use of social media for agri-marketing revealed participants were positive about using social media to communicate about their own agricultural operations and the industry as a whole (White, Meyers, Doerfert, & Irlbeck, 2014). These participants started using social media because they wanted to combat negative or incorrect information about agriculture (White et al., 2014). In a study of agriculturists in three states, Shaw et al. (2015) found Facebook was the only social media tool used frequently for both personal and business use. Other social media tools such as Twitter, blogs, and photo sharing sites were used less frequently, and the majority of respondents did not use these sites at all for personal or business use.

Within agricultural communications, several researchers have studied blogs. Fannin and Chenault (2004) explored how blogs could disseminate agricultural information to journalists and non-media consumers. In a content analysis of agriculture-focused blog content, Rhoades and Hall (2007) analyzed the characteristics of blogs in agriculture and what information the blogs contained. They found although agricultural blogs were a new communications tool, they did address a variety of industry-relevant topics. Rhoades and Aue (2010) surveyed agricultural editors and broadcasters to determine their use of Web 2.0 and social media technologies. These agricultural communicators understood the need to adopt new technology, but had difficulty maintaining blogs with pertinent information (Rhoades & Aue, 2010). Moore, Meyers, Irlbeck, and Burris (2015) investigated U.S. agricultural commodity organizations' utilization of blogs to reach their target audience. The results indicated agricultural communicators found value in using blogs to reach audience members, but said this communication outlet required constant attention to successfully develop relationships (Moore

How agricultural media portray important and relevant issues is becoming increasingly important because of the increased use of social media (Rhoades & Aue, 2010). As social media tools, such as blogs, become more popular outlets for agricultural news and information, there is a need to discover what motivates readers to access certain agricultural blogs over others. Although there has been research conducted about how agricultural commodity organizations use blogs to reach and communicate with readers (Moore et al., 2015), we need more information about why readers access agricultural blogs. It is important for the agriculture industry to have knowledge about blog readers to meet the audience members' expectations and information needs.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework in this study draws upon the theory of uses and gratifications. The uses and gratifications approach attempts to understand and analyze the way people communicate to satisfy their own needs and expectations (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). This theory contains several assumptions. The researcher must assume the person involved has some level of internal coherence and can understand the questions being asked. Each person must be perceived as active and unique; therefore, researchers should not assume all people are the same and have the same expectations. Another assumption is media sources are constantly competing with each other and researchers should not neglect older forms of needs fulfillment (Katz et al., 1973).

Media researchers should focus on the users' needs to more effectively evaluate how well media meet users' gratification criteria (Katz et al., 1973). A combination of features helps readers determine which media source is more or less qualified or credible to fulfill their particular needs or expectations. By studying peoples' uses and gratifications for accessing certain forms of mass media, communication professionals can potentially better target and serve their audience in the future (Katz et al., 1973).

Although uses and gratifications theory was established more than 30 years ago, it has had recent resurgence with more studies examining Internet and social media use (McQuail, 2005; Urista, Dong, & Day, 2008). Rubin (2009) stated newer online media "are continually altering how people, organizations, and societies function" (p. 155) and adopting a uses and gratifications perspective will help better understand relationships between people and communication technologies. Drawing upon past uses and gratifications research, different channels and content of media have been found to fulfill different gratifications (Kaye, 2010). Overall, traditional media users tend to be more passive, while Internet users are more interactive with their choice of media channel (Kaye & Johnson, 2011).

In regard to user-generated content such as that found through social media, Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz (2004) identified five main gratifications: recording one's life, giving options, articulating sincerely felt emotions, expressing thoughts through writing, and establishing and sustaining relationships. Through focus group interviews, Dunne et al. (2010) explored why young people use and participate in specific social networking sites. They found communication and friending were sought gratifications among participants and participants obtained peer acceptance and relationship maintenance (Dunne et al., 2010). Specific to blog use, Kim and Johnson (2012) developed four general reasons people use political blogs: political surveillance/guidance; expression and affiliation; convenience/information seeking; and entertainment. They surveyed political blog readers and determined the primary reason readers accessed these blogs was for political surveillance and guidance. The respondents wanted to find out what others thought of important issues and remain up-to-date with current events. The authors recommended additional research to more fully understand how blog use may be related to knowledge or behavior (Kim & Johnson, 2012). It is

evident determining why people access blogs provides a better understanding of their motivations and needs, but this may vary depending on the type of blog content, such as agricultural blogs.

Purpose and Research Questions

This research fits into Priority Two of the *National Research Agenda*, which includes new technologies, practices, and products. Doerfert (2011) said the drastic and constant increase of scientific information must be maintained and utilized through the use of technology, to better and more efficiently inform consumers, particularly in agriculture. Therefore, there is a need for research about the use of new technologies and how social media within agriculture can be used to better serve the selected target audience. By understanding readers' motivations and expected rewards from visiting agricultural blogs, agricultural communicators can make blogs more appealing, informative, and effective.

The purpose of this study was to describe the uses and gratifications of agricultural blog readers. This study investigated the following research questions:

1. What are respondents' Internet and blog use characteristics?
2. What are respondents' attitudes toward agriculture?
3. What are respondents' primary motivations for accessing agricultural blogs?

Methods

This study used a descriptive survey research design. A Qualtrics online questionnaire was employed because of its cost effectiveness and surveys are frequently administered to the public for research purposes; therefore, users are already familiar with the instrument format (Irani, Gregg, & Telg, 2004). To reach blog readers, a systematic random sample of 18 active blogs was identified from a full list of farm and ranch blogs published on www.causematters.com (Payn-Knoper, 2014). Because no universal list of agriculture blogs exists, this list of blogs was selected because Payn-Knoper strives to include links to blogs from people who blog about their farms and ranches. Blog authors can request to be listed on the site or someone else can recommend a blog to be listed. The list on causematters.com has more than 100 blogs representing farms and ranches nationwide.

Farm and ranch blogs were selected because these are typically administered by those directly involved in production agriculture versus a communications professional representing an agricultural organization. The administrators of these blogs were contacted via email to seek their participation in the study; six blog administrators agreed. A link to the online instrument, developed in Qualtrics, was posted on these blogs. The blog administrators who agreed to participate were provided with information to post on their blog that contained a brief introduction to the study and a link to the online questionnaire for blog readers to access. This does result in a convenience sample, which is a limitation of the study, but this method of reaching blog readers has proven effective in prior research (Kim & Johnson, 2012). The blog administrators were contacted twice to remind them about the study and encourage them to remind their readers to participate.

When readers clicked on the link for the online questionnaire, they were first asked to indicate if they were at least 18 years old. Only those who said yes were allowed to participate. Respondents were provided with a definition of agriculture to help them understand the context for the survey. The online questionnaire contained four major sections: demographics; Internet and blog use; attitudes toward agriculture; and motivations for blog use. In the demographics section, respondents provided gender, age, education, primary industry, income, marital status, and number of children.

The Internet and blog use section asked respondents to indicate how many years they had used

the Internet, time spent per week on the Internet and how often they accessed online news sites per week. This section also asked them to report the number of general blogs read on a regular basis and how often they read blogs in a typical week before having them indicate the same for agricultural blogs. Finally, this section asked respondents to identify how much they rely on blogs for agricultural news and information on a five-point Likert-type scale where *1 = not at all* and *5 = extremely*.

The third section of the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate how knowledgeable they were about agriculture and how interested they were to learn about agriculture. These questions were answered using a Likert-type scale where *1 = not at all* and *5 = extremely*. To measure attitudes toward agriculture, respondents were provided the following statement: "American agriculture is ..." They then responded using a five-point semantic differential scale with six bipolar adjective pairs: *bad/good*, *unethical/ethical*, *unimportant/important*, *not beneficial/beneficial*, *negative/positive*, and *not valuable/valuable*. Ary, Jacobs, and Razavieh (2002) said four to eight adjective pairs can be adequate for this type of scale, and the selected adjectives have been used previously to measure attitudes toward agricultural topics (Meyers, 2008; Wood, 2006).

The final section of the questionnaire explored the motivations for reading agricultural blogs using 21 statements adapted from Kim and Johnson (2012) that represented four main reasons people read political blogs: surveillance/guidance, expression/affiliation, convenience/information seeking, and entertainment (see Table 1). Respondents indicated their level of agreement to each statement on a Likert-type scale where *1 = strongly disagree* and *5 = strongly agree*.

A panel of experts reviewed the instrument to establish face validity. Post-hoc reliability analysis established Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .86 for the attitudes toward agriculture construct. The following Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated in post-hoc analysis for the motivation to read blogs sub-constructs: surveillance/guidance (.88), expression/affiliation (.82), convenience/information seeking (.86), and entertainment (.74).

Data collection began February 10 and was completed March 31, 2014. During that time, 163 people clicked on the questionnaire link and 122 completed enough items to be included in study, resulting in a 74.8% completion rate. All of the collected data were analyzed in SPSS to calculate descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies, means, and standard deviations.

The average age of respondents was 39 years old. The youngest respondent was 19 years old and the oldest respondent was 69 years old. Table 2 provides the demographic characteristics of respondents. Of the 122 respondents, the majority were female (80.3%, $n = 98$). The greatest percentage (41.8%, $n = 51$) had a bachelor's degree, and 31.1% ($n = 38$) had completed a graduate or professional degree. The majority of respondents were married (62.3%, $n = 76$) and did not have children under the age of 18 in the home (59.0%, $n = 72$). Income levels were divided among the five categories provided. Nearly one-quarter (26.2%, $n = 32$) earned \$25,001-\$50,000 annually, and 19.7% ($n = 24$) reported earning more than \$100,000 annually. When asked what type of industry best describes where they spent the majority of time working, more than half (52.2%, $n = 64$) said agriculture. The majority of respondents spent most of lives in areas classified as rural, either on a farm (59%, $n = 72$) or not on a farm (17.2%, $n = 21$).

Table 1

Sub-Constructs and Motivations for Reading Blogs (Kim & Johnson, 2012)

Sub-Constructs	Motivations
Surveillance/guidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To find out what other people think about important issues or events To find alternatives not covered by traditional news sources To keep up with main issues of the day To feel in touch with what is happening in the country For a wide range of viewpoints To help me make up my mind about important issues or events To get detailed analysis of complicated issues To feel in touch with international events
Entertainment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To find stories that are enjoyable Because news web browsing helps me relax Because news web browsing is exciting
Convenience/ information seeking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Because the information is easy to obtain To access information quickly To access information at any time To access information at any place To find specific information I am looking for
Expression/affiliation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To communicate with others about issues To give me something to talk with others about To express my thoughts online To use as ammunition in arguments with others To participate in discussion/chat rooms

Table 2
Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

	<i>f</i>	%
Gender ^a		
Male	21	17.2
Female	98	80.3
Education ^a		
Less than High School	1	0.8
High School Grad or GED	7	5.7
Some college	12	9.8
2-year associate's	10	8.2
4-year bachelor's degree	51	41.8
Graduate or professional degree	38	31.1
Marital Status ^b		
Single	37	30.3
Married	76	62.3
Divorced	3	2.5
Widowed	2	1.6
Children Under 18 in the Home ^a		
Yes	47	38.5
No	72	59.0
Annual Income ^c		
Less than \$25,000	20	16.4
\$25,001-\$50,000	32	26.2
\$50,001-\$75,000	18	14.8
\$75,001-\$100,000	23	18.9
More than \$100,000	24	19.7
Industry ^a		
Agriculture	64	52.5
Other	25	20.5
Education	16	13.1
Health	5	4.1
Manufacturing	3	2.5
Public Service	2	1.6
Retail trade	2	1.6
Finance/Insurance/Real Estate	1	0.8
Construction	1	0.8
Community Where Spent Most of Life ^a		
Rural, on a farm	72	59.0
Rural, not a farm	21	17.2
Suburban, outside a major metro city	12	9.8
Suburban	10	8.2
Urban	4	3.3

^a*N* = 119; ^b*N* = 118; ^c*N* = 117

Results

RQ1: What are respondents' Internet and blog use characteristics?

To assess respondents' use of the Internet and blogs, they were asked to indicate how much time they spent online and how often they read blogs. The majority of respondents (60.7%, $n = 74$) reported spending more than 8 hours online each week. Table 3 displays respondents' time spent on the Internet each week.

Table 3

Respondents' Time Spent on the Internet per Week (N = 119)

Time	<i>f</i>	%
30 minutes to one hour	1	0.8
1-2 hours	8	6.6
3-5 hours	14	11.5
6-8 hours	22	18.0
More than 8 hours	74	60.7

Table 3 describes how frequently respondents accessed online news sites and read blogs each week. Forty-one percent of respondents ($n = 50$) reported accessing online news sites more than 10 times a week, while 20.5% ($n = 25$) accessed online news sites 7-10 times each week. When asked how often they read blogs each week, 30.3% ($n = 37$) indicated 4-6 times a week. Another 28.7% ($n = 35$) said they read blogs 1-3 times each week (see Table 4).

Table 4

Respondents' Frequency of Accessing Online News Sites and Reading Blogs per Week

	<i>f</i>	%
Accessing Online News Sites ^a		
Never	4	3.3
1-3 times	22	18.0
4-6 times	17	13.9
7-10 times	25	20.5
More than 10 times a week	50	41.0
Reading Blogs ^b		
1-3 times	35	28.7
4-6 times	37	30.3
7-10 times	19	15.6
More than 10 times a week	28	23.3

^a $N = 118$; ^b $N = 119$

Respondents also provided how often they read agricultural blogs in a typical week (see Table 5). Close to half (45.9%, $n = 56$) reported 1-3 times a week and nearly a quarter (23.8%, $n = 29$) said 4-6 times a week.

Table 5

Respondents' Frequency of Reading Agricultural Blogs per Week (N = 118)

	<i>f</i>	%
1-3 times	56	45.9
4-6 times	29	23.8
7-10 times	9	7.4
More than 10 times a week	24	19.7

In addition to how frequently they read agricultural blogs, respondents were asked to indicate how much they rely on blogs for agricultural news and information. Respondents indicated their level of reliance on a Likert-type scale where 1 = *not at all* and 5 = *extremely*. The mean score of 2.97 ($SD = 1.18$) indicates respondents somewhat rely on blogs for this type of information.

RQ2: What are respondents' attitudes toward agriculture?

Respondents were asked to indicate how knowledgeable about agriculture they were and how interested they were to learn about agriculture on a Likert-type scale where 1 = *not at all* and 5 = *extremely*. The mean score for how knowledgeable they felt they were about agriculture was 4.13 ($SD = 0.97$) indicating a moderately high level of self-perceived knowledge. The mean score for their interest in learning about agriculture was 4.64 ($SD = 0.69$), again revealing respondents were very interested in this topic area.

To measure attitudes toward agriculture, respondents provided their response to the statement: "American agriculture is ..." This index used a five-point semantic differential scale with six bipolar adjective pairs: *bad/good*, *unethical/ethical*, *unimportant/important*, *not beneficial/beneficial*, *negative/positive*, and *not valuable/valuable*. Overall, respondents indicated very positive attitudes toward agriculture with a mean score of 4.74 ($SD = 0.48$).

RQ3: What are respondents' primary motivations for accessing agricultural blogs?

To measure respondents' primary motivations for accessing agricultural blogs, respondents were provided with 21 statements and asked to provide their response on a five-point Likert-type scale where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*. Table 6 displays the descriptive statistics for all the motivation statements grouped by the sub-constructs identified by Kim and Johnson (2012).

Table 6

Agricultural Blog Readers' Motivations for Accessing Agricultural Blogs

	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Surveillance/guidance	119	3.65	0.74
Convenience/information seeking	117	3.55	0.78
Entertainment	120	3.27	0.83
Expression/affiliation	121	3.04	0.86

Note. Scores based on Likert scale with 1 = *strong disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*.

The motivation sub-construct with the highest mean score was surveillance/guidance ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.74$). Expression/affiliation had the lowest mean score, but it was still above the mid-point on the scale ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 0.86$).

Conclusions & Implications

Previous research on agriculture's use of social media found those who are providing the information find this form of online communication to be worthwhile and effective (Meyers et al., 2011; Moore et al., 2015; White et al., 2014). However, others have found only a small number of agriculturists are using social media tools (Doerfert, 2012; Shaw et al., 2015). The current study provides valuable insight into a nascent area of research regarding agriculture's use of a specific form of social media — blogs. While others have examined agricultural blogs (Fannin & Chenault, 2004; Moore et al., 2015; Rhoades & Aue, 2010; Rhoades & Hall, 2007), the current study is the first effort to understand the readers' motivations for accessing this form of online communication.

The respondents in this study were primarily female and well educated. The average age was 39, and most were married with no children under the age of 18 in the home. One quarter of the respondents had modest annual incomes (\$25,001-50,000) while nearly 20% earned more than \$100,000 annually. Respondents were very engaged in agriculture, either through their careers or in the community where they have spent most of their life.

In terms of general Internet use, three-quarters of respondents spent more than six hours online each week. This indicates participants spend a significant amount of time online, which presents an opportunity for blog authors to reach more readers. The number of times blogs were read varied as did how often they accessed online news sites. When asked specifically about agricultural blog readership, the majority of respondents said they read agricultural blogs one to six times a week. This implies most respondents visit agricultural blogs on a regular basis.

Respondents were overall very positive in their attitudes toward agriculture. The semantic differential items indicated they viewed American agriculture as valuable, important, and beneficial. They also indicated high self-perceived values of agriculture knowledge and interest in learning more about the industry. These findings, combined with the demographic characteristics, indicate the readers of agriculture blogs are already familiar with and supportive of the agriculture industry. Agriculturists are often criticized for "preaching to the choir," and it appears these respondents support this critique. This study did not explore the blog administrators' purpose and targeted audience so this finding may or may not be in line with what they intended.

Although uses and gratifications research is more than 30 years old (Katz et al, 1973), it continues to have heuristic value in application to online media (Kaye & Johnson, 2011; Kim & Johnson, 2012; McQuail, 2005; Rubin, 2009). As the sources of media have evolved, so too have consumers' preferences for how they use that media to achieve their needs. The exploration of readers' primary motivations for accessing agriculture blogs indicated the highest mean was for the surveillance/guidance sub-construct. This is in agreement with the primary motivations Kim and Johnson (2012) identified for political blog readers. Smith (2008) recognized blogs can be valuable communication outlets because they do not have the traditional gatekeeping barriers that would prevent some from having a voice in the conversation on a topic. It seemed respondents appreciated being able to find information from a variety of sources. Although the expression/affiliation sub-construct for motivation had the lowest mean score of the four sub-constructs, it was still above the mid-point of the scale. This indicates blog readers are accessing this form of online communication for a variety of reasons including entertainment and information seeking.

Recommendations

One of the basic principles of effective communication is to know your audience, and Kaye (2005) recommends the need to understand more about blog readers. Blogs are an important online source for

information (Zickuhr, 2010). By having a deeper understanding of what motivates readers to access agricultural blogs, agricultural communicators can improve the design and placement of agricultural information. It appears readers of agricultural blogs are primarily those who already have a connection and positive perspective of the industry. While these individuals represent an important audience, they are not the consumers who need to be reached most to encourage a better understanding of the agricultural industry. In their study of why agriculturists used social media, White et al. (2014) said the participants wanted to combat negative or incorrect information about agriculture. Practitioners need to be creative and seek innovative ways to draw in readers from a broader base to fully extend their information to those outside the traditional audience.

Studying the uses and gratifications of readers will improve future efforts to target publics with accurate and informative content via blogs. Based on this study's findings, agricultural blog administrators should strive to provide blog content that presents alternative perspectives not presented in traditional news outlets. This means blog authors should be aware of current issues and events of importance to their readers and strive to provide another viewpoint or interpretation of the information.

This study provides a glimpse into who agriculture blog readers are and what they want. However, it does highlight the potential issue these blogs may not be reaching audience members outside of the agriculture industry. It could be those individuals did not participate in the study so additional research is needed to further examine blog readers' uses and gratifications. A limitation of this study is the small number of blogs included. In the future, additional blogs should be included so more readers can be surveyed. The blogs in this study were all farm and ranch blogs, but many other types of blogs exist in agriculture such as those for commodity groups and agribusinesses. Subsequent data collection and analysis would help further explore what influence demographic characteristics have on motivations to read agricultural blogs. Finally, the motivations assessed in this study are based on previous studies completed outside the agriculture industry. It is possible additional motivations for reading agricultural blogs could exist and would be best identified through the use of qualitative methods.

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