

# Totally Transparent: A Qualitative Study About the Impact of Farm Tours on Bloggers

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## Keywords

Transparency, expectancy violations theory, agritourism, bloggers, advocacy, Association for Communication Excellence Conference

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# Totally Transparent: A Qualitative Study About the Impact of Farm Tours on Bloggers

Scott Stebner, Jennifer Ray, Jessie Becker, and Lauri M. Baker

## Abstract

*Producers and agricultural organizations often struggle to effectively and efficiently communicate agricultural practices and values across the green divide. Additionally, producers and agricultural communication professionals must compete with inflammatory or misleading statements communicated to uninformed consumers via the blogosphere and rapidly disseminated on social media. Many organizations are beginning to implement agritourism events as a way of educating the consumer and influential bloggers. This study utilized semi-structured interviews to explore the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of four bloggers who were invited to a three-day agritourism event. Results showed participants identified personal exposure to transparent farmers yielded an increase in knowledge and appreciation of farming practices that positively impacted their trust in the American farmer and food system. This study expands upon current research being conducted on agritourism events, transparency, and expectancy violations theory and suggests organizations structure agritourism events in such a way as to demonstrate transparency and positively violate the expectations bloggers may have regarding agricultural producers.*

## Key Words

Transparency, expectancy violations theory, agritourism, bloggers, and advocacy

## Introduction

Social media is an infrastructure of online communities such as blogs, discussion boards, websites, and social networking sites that can positively impact a company or organization (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). This study was focused specifically on the influence of blogs and bloggers. Blogs are an online journal where users can create highly organized posts categorized by subject matter and allow online authors to gather likeminded and interested readers (Gunter, 2009). Blogs have steadily grown in popularity (Singer, 2009) and often include advocacy efforts and opinion pieces (Galer-Unti, 2010), which can be efficient and powerful communication tools to initiate conversation about specific topics (Kerbel & Bloom, 2005). Since consumers trust and value the opinions of people they can identify with, bloggers' opinions may carry more weight than celebrity endorsements (Hsu, Liu, & Lee, 2010). The influence of bloggers on the agricultural industry cannot be underestimated. The blogosphere has the power to influence agriculturally related policy the same way traditional media and personal interest groups do (Baker & Irani, 2014).

Since bloggers are highly influential individuals (Hsu et al., 2010) who can impact an organization or industry (Baker & Irani, 2014; Mangold & Faulds, 2009), blogs with messages related to agriculture are of the utmost concern to agricultural industry leaders (American Farm Bureau, 2014; Cattleman's

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Beef Board, 2015; Tew & Barbieri, 2012). Recognizing the sway such writers have over consumers, commodity groups and corporations have made an effort to educate bloggers by inviting them to sponsored agritourism events (Cattleman's Beef Board, 2015) and farm tours (Bickel, 2014; Henry, 2014; Masker, 2014). The primary goal of agritourism, the process of a member of the public visiting a farm for a non-agricultural purpose (Fleisher & Tchetchick, 2005), is to interact and educate the public about agriculture and farm life (Lobbo et al., 2014). These educational events are on the rise (USDA NASS, 2009) partly because agritourism has been shown to increase event participants' awareness of agricultural production practices (Che, 2007). In addition to being an educational opportunity for the public, farmers also value farm tours because the events allow producers a chance to personally connect with and educate consumers (Tew & Barbieri, 2012).

Recognizing the social clout popular bloggers carry, many businesses now seek to partner with bloggers to convey information about products or services to their readers (Mendoza, 2012). Agricultural industry leaders have also determined there may be value in sponsoring agricultural tourism experiences for bloggers to educate an influential audience (Masker, 2014). However, since bloggers have unique backgrounds and motives behind blogging (Kozinets et al., 2010) and can state opinions conflicting with the interests of the sponsoring organization (Capriotti, 2011), companies should approach such partnerships with caution when enlisting bloggers to help advocate on their behalf and build consumer trust.

Trust in food production has shifted from being based less on personal relationships between producers and consumers to prompting efforts to increase transparency (Jokinen, Kupsala, & Vinnari, 2012). When agriculturalists answer this call for transparency and communicate accordingly, their communication efforts may have a more positive influence on consumer attitudes and trust, which may also establish stronger relationships with consumers (Rumble, 2013). Additionally, "perceived transparency could significantly influence both attitude and trust" (Rumble, 2013, p. 175). In addition to trust and attitude shifts, transparent communication can be effective in increasing consumer competence and understanding (Tampere, 2007). Beyond being transparent, building trust requires explaining one's values (Meijboom, Visak, & Brom, 2006) and helps establish and maintain positive relationships (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). However, increasing transparency also brings a challenge of potentially exposing weakness or information that can be used in a negative manner (Rawlins, 2008).

Participants who attend agritourism events will form expectations for their tour experience. According to Burgoon's (1978) Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT), individuals anticipate what will happen in a given situation based on the traits of those persons involved in the communication, the nature of the area in which the interaction occurs, and social norms. When an experience differs from an interactant's expectations, their expectations are violated. Negative psychological reactions can occur when established expectations are unmet (Negy, Schwartz, & Reig-Ferrer, 2009). Conversely, positive psychological reactions occur when experiences exceed expectations established prior to an event (Negy et al., 2009). Additionally, when an individual's expectations are violated, his or her interest is aroused and he or she will pay more attention to the source of arousal than the message (Le Poire & Burgoon, 1996). In the event of expectancy violation, whether positive or negative, communicators who are considered highly regarded will stimulate more enjoyable and involved communication thus leading to an increased perception of credibility and more persuasive messages (Crano, Burgoon, & Oskamp, 2001). Bloggers have the potential to educate the public about agricultural practices, especially when they encounter first-hand experiences on the farm conducted by transparent and highly regarded farmers. However, a gap exists in the literature

regarding how farm tours can impact bloggers' perceptions of agriculture.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to understand bloggers' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to an agritourism event. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How can an agritourism event impact bloggers' trust in farmers?
2. How can an agritourism event impact bloggers' perceptions of agricultural practices?
3. How can an agritourism event impact the expectations and experiences of bloggers?

### **Methodology**

In October 2014, the Kansas Farm Bureau held a three-day farm tour with eight bloggers. The eight tour participants were chosen purposively by the Kansas Farm Bureau. Criteria for being invited to the event included, but was not limited to, having a pre-existing relationship with the organization, a national readership, little previous exposure to agriculture, and residing in a nearby metropolitan area.

A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because qualitative studies allow researchers to gain a complete understanding of participant experiences (Creswell, 2007). Specifically, this study utilized semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which enable researchers to explore participants' experiences on a deeper level (Flick, 2009). Interviews are frequently used for data collection because participants are more willing to share in-depth information with the researcher (Creswell, 2007). The semi-structured interview approach was utilized for this study because participant viewpoints "are more likely to be expressed in an openly designed interview situation" (Flick, 2009, p. 150).

The researchers obtained the contact information for the eight tour participants from the Kansas Farm Bureau. On the last day of the tour, the research team sent an email to each potential participant inviting them to participate in a 60- to 90-minute interview. Four of the eight participants responded and agreed to participate.

A panel of experts reviewed a 13-question interview guide that included additional prompts. Based upon Flick's (2009) recommendations, broad or unstructured questions were asked first. As the interview progressed, questions were asked with increased structure and specificity to prevent "the interviewer's frame of reference being imposed on the interviewee's viewpoints" (Flick, 2009, p. 151). The interview questions addressed a variety of topics, including a description of the participant's blog; their perception of farms and agriculture prior to the tour and after the tour; and their attitudes toward agriculture and farmers following the tour. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained and prior to the interview, each participant signed a consent form and was given a confidentiality agreement. A summary of the bloggers is listed in Table 1.

The lead researcher conducted the in-person, in-depth interviews with each of the participants approximately one month after the tour. Three interviews were conducted in private meeting rooms at public libraries in the bloggers' hometowns, while one interview was conducted at the blogger's home. Each interview utilized the same questioning guide, and the interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

The interviews were recorded using two audio recorders and were transcribed by the research team. Participant responses were evaluated using Glaser's constant comparative method (Glaser, 1978), which allows coding and the identification of themes to occur in a "formal and theoretically relevant way" (Flick, 2009, p. 314). NVivo was used to facilitate the identification of codes and categories that were then used to develop appropriate themes.

Table 1

*Characteristics of Participants*

Name	Participant Description	Social Media Following
Anna	Anna has children and began blogging approximately two years ago. She says, “blogging is a perfect creative outlet for me as a stay-at-home mom. I feel like it’s key to my mental health because that’s something else to focus on as well as my kids.” The primary source of traffic to her blog is Pinterest. She attended the tour because she knew other bloggers who planned on going, and she had a prior connection to the organization that planned the trip. She, “thought it would be interesting for people to read ... and [she] had never really been to a farm.” She has national readership. She had been on one previous farm tour, but wanted to see what the “large” farms were like.	Facebook: 4,000 + Instagram: 1,500 + Pinterest: 7,000 + Twitter: 1,000 +
Beth	Beth has a formal education in journalism and was attracted to blogging because it was an outlet for self publishing her work. She started a niche “mom blog” in 2009 as a way to get free cloth diapers and some extra income every month. The primary source of traffic to her blog is Pinterest. She, “was excited to see all the different types of farming in Kansas ... and [she had] heard the anti-agriculture side more than [she heard] the pro-ag side, so that’s why [she] wanted to see the farms.” She has national readership and has been on prior farm tours.	Facebook: 5,000 + Instagram: 1,500 + Pinterest: 2,500 + Twitter: 15,000 +
Cassie	Cassie started blogging as part of her job for the company where she works. She realized she enjoyed the blogging process and decided to start her own blog centered around food. The primary source of traffic to her blog is Pinterest, but she believes most of her interaction takes place on Instagram. Although she grew up surrounded by farms, she never had much experience with ranching. She attended the tour because, “it would give [her] the opportunity to have the right perspective on things so that [she] could share that with [her] readers and, hopefully, get good press out there.” She has national readership.	Facebook: 2,500 + Instagram: 250 + Pinterest: 3,000 + Twitter: < 1,000
Diana	Diana started her crafts-based blog six years ago as a creative outlet. Diana employs another blogger to write about food on the blog and receives compensation from companies to promote their products on her blog. The primary source of traffic to her blog is Pinterest. She believes readers interact with her the most on Instagram. She has national readership.	Facebook: 25,000 + Instagram: 5,000 + Pinterest: 50,000 Twitter: 5,000

*Note:* Blog subscribers and readership was not collected because participants did not have that information readily available at the time of the interview. Participants were given pseudonyms for confidentiality.

Instead of generalizability and repeatability, qualitative researchers are more concerned with transferability, confirmability, and credibility (Creswell, 2007). Credibility was addressed in this study by creating an interview instrument that followed the guidelines and recommendations of Flick (2009). In regards to confirmability, the lead researcher utilized communicative validation, which allows the participant to “agree with the contents of their statements obtained” in the interview (Flick, 2009, p. 389). Therefore, participants were debriefed following the completion of the interviews. Though participant responses are not generalizable to a larger audience, their experiences may indeed be transferable to other bloggers with minimal agricultural backgrounds who attend agritourism events. Validity is of the utmost concern in regards to qualitative research and can be addressed in a number of ways (Flick, 2009). Since a concern regarding the validity of qualitative research is “how to specify the link between the relations that are studied and the version of them provided by the researcher” (Flick, 2009, p. 387), coded themes were evaluated by all members of the research team who compared the generated themes to the interview transcripts. To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, each blogger was given a pseudonym as identified in Table 1. In addition, names of farmers or Kansas Farm Bureau employees mentioned in the interview were removed to protect confidentiality.

Subjectivities are a natural part of qualitative research and cannot be removed from the interviewer or interviewee, and as such, any communication, field observations, emotions, or experiences become explicit knowledge and an integral part of the research process and should be noted (Flick, 2009). Members of the research team included three master’s students studying agricultural communication and one faculty member in agricultural communications with an interest in advocacy for the agricultural community that could have generated sympathetic emotions or viewpoints toward the farmers on the tour. The lead researcher on this project also had a small, unestablished agricultural advocacy blog at the time of this study.

### **Limitations**

Although four participants is an acceptable number for a qualitative study (Creswell, 2007), results and findings cannot be generalized beyond the individually constructed experiences of the bloggers within the context of this specific farm tour (Flick, 2009). Additionally, some bloggers had more exposure to agricultural practices or to farmers, which could have influenced their attitude toward agriculture or made them more sympathetic toward the individual farmers. One of the bloggers had previously been on a farm tour that could have influenced attitudes and perceptions toward food and agriculture. Finally, visiting small, niche market operations, rather than average-size, commercial farms could have given bloggers a one-sided view of agriculture and influenced their attitudes and perceptions toward food and agriculture.

### **Findings**

#### **RQ 1: How Can an Agritourism Event Impact Bloggers’ Trust in Farmers?**

Participants’ interview responses yielded the following two themes: 1) the perception of transparency led to increased trust in farmers and 2) direct interaction with farmers put a face to food.

#### ***The perception of transparency increased trust in farmers.***

When participants began describing their experiences on the farm tour, three of the four bloggers mentioned a positive perception of transparency. Anna mentioned this sense of transparency was universal among the farmers they visited, and said, “I felt like everyone we talked to was super open

to asking and answering my questions ... I literally asked every single farmer about GMOs and antibiotics ... they were all super open to answering my questions.” Diana had a similar perception, stating, “I didn’t quite know what we’d see. But I thought the farmers were real transparent and showed us everything. We saw all sides of the farms.” Beth was unsure how the farmers would handle the presence of bloggers, but recalled, “They were being so transparent. I wasn’t sure if they would be nervous ... but no, he took us right there.” When asked how that feeling of transparency impacted her view on the farmers, Beth mentioned, “Very trustworthy. I had more trust in them, like, if I have any questions, they will answer any of them.” The fourth blogger did not mention a lack of transparency; she simply didn’t mention transparency at all.

***The tour put a face to food and the agricultural industry, which also resulted in an increase in trust in the American food system.***

Three of the four participants offered unsolicited responses regarding how the tour increased their trust in the American food system by putting a face to their food. Diana, who indicated an increased trust in the American food system after the tour, offered insight into this theme, saying:

Knowing there’s people behind the food system. It’s not just this big industry without a face that’s printing out food that we don’t recognize ... It’s just real food with real people. That puts a trust in the system and what we’re eating ... After going on this tour, that’s where I gained my most insight who farmers are, who the people are behind the food we eat in our country. It put a face behind the people, a face behind the food I eat as a consumer. This food isn’t just coming from a grocery store; there really are farmers behind it. When you think about organic food, those are grown on farms. But coming off this tour, I feel ... farmers make all the food for us.

Beth had a similar viewpoint, saying “I got to see what those sources [of food] are ... It was excellent at putting a personality to the food. Whenever I think of agriculture, I think of the farmers themselves versus just a nameless farmer doing a certain act.” Cassie also mentioned a newly associated identity between farmers and food as a result of the tour and said, “I’m definitely more aware of it ... It does make me look at things differently. Opened my eyes to want to know the source ... I had a positive experience with those farmers, and I’d probably lean toward buying those products.” Diana offered further insight into how the tour impacted her trust in the American food system by concluding, “My biggest takeaway is from the people. There are really genuine people behind our food. They care about the product and the consumer, which is us.” The theme of trust did not emerge in the fourth blogger’s interview, but the blogger did not mention a lack of trust either.

***RQ2: How Can an Agritourism Event Impact Bloggers’ Perceptions of Agricultural Practices?***

To understand how the tour impacted participants’ viewpoints toward the agricultural industry, bloggers were asked questions pertaining to their experiences on the tour and if any events surprised them. Participant responses yielded the following themes: 1) the tour increased knowledge and understanding of agricultural practices, including GMOs, antibiotics, and hormones; 2) animal welfare concerns were clarified; and 3) the tour created new and unbiased information resources.



***The tour increased knowledge and understanding of agricultural practices, including GMOs, antibiotics, and hormones.***

Three of the four participants identified an event on the farm tour that changed their perceptions or increased their knowledge level regarding controversial topics in agriculture such as antibiotics, GMOs, or growth hormones. The fourth blogger did not mention these issues. Recalling her visit with a beef producer who showed the bloggers how and why they implant their beef cattle with hormones, Cassie said, “You know people think they put so many hormones into ground beef; but, it’s just a miniscule amount compared to what you get from a standard head of lettuce ... You get more hormones from that than you ever would from beef.” Alluding to her visit on the dairy and how that helped clarify her concerns with hormones and milk, Anna said, “I was under the impression that all dairy cows were given hormones to keep them lactating ... I asked the dairy and they said they don’t give any hormones to their cows ... You hear you need to drink organic milk because conventional milk has hormones in it.”

Beth mentioned the tour helped her understanding of how antibiotics are administered to livestock, saying:

Every farmer we saw, they only treat them with antibiotics if a pig is sick. It’s like, if your kid is sick, what are you going to do? You’re going to give them antibiotics. The same thing with animals. They care about them almost like they feel, um, cruelty to animals if they don’t treat them if they’re sick.

Participants also mentioned the tour positively influenced their perceptions of GMOs. Anna shared the tour was a transformational experience for her viewpoints toward GMOs, stating:

It totally changed my opinion about GMOs. Before going, I thought like, we can’t put GMOs in our body, ever. That was really my biggest realization was that GMO feed to animals is not making them sick ... I also came away with the opinion that GMOs really aren’t harming us. I realize that’s a big statement.

***Animal welfare concerns were clarified.***

All participants mentioned the tour helped them gain a better understanding of the agricultural practices commonly used in animal production housing. Cassie commented about the first time she saw calf pens on the dairy farm, saying:

They’re all in little cages. Scary. I was just like, why are they all in little cages? You’d expect them to be with their mom, cuddling up with their mom and learning to be a cow. They’re pulled away for a reason, for their health and safety. After they explained it to me, I realized that was best for them so they could care for them and make sure they weren’t injured or harmed or anything. It made sense after that.

When asked to describe an event or situation that stood out to her, Anna mentioned the calf pens, as well. Recalling a moment that took place a week after the tour, Anna stated:

I was searching [on the Internet] for feedlots and dairy, and I saw pictures that looked exactly like the pictures I’d taken ... of the calves in their little huts and um next to like “terrible

environment for cows” ... like using the same picture ... In my mind I’m sitting here thinking they change those beds every day. If it’s winter, they put coats on the calves. They feed them on a schedule. Those calves are taken care of. They’re not running around, but they’re good. They’re given the best milk. Farmers care about what they’re doing and care about the safety and health of their animals.

Diana also mentioned the cleanliness of the farms and said, “When you think of farms, you think they’re going to be messy or sloppy.” However, reflecting upon her experience on the farms, Diana stated how her original perception was unfounded, stating, “It wasn’t sloppy. They were all really well-organized. They were clean, and the animals were happy.”

Regarding the decisions farmers make involving the welfare of animals, Beth concluded “[Farmers] know why they do what they do, and they know the way they do it is the best for the animal. It helped me understand that it’s not specifically for the money. It’s also for the animal.”

### ***The tour created new and unbiased information resources.***

Participants were asked to explain their rationale behind their post-tour survey answers that indicated the tour helped them identify information resources regarding food and agriculture. Three of the four participants identified the tour organizers or the farmers were newly-found sources of unbiased information. Diana mentioned the Kansas Farm Bureau was a new information resource, saying:

Farm Bureau has been real good about sending links and articles that seem unbiased. I think they’ve done a real good job providing information from lots of different sources and not just their own personal sources. I think that I would know where to get information on food if I ever had a question. If I were to ask them to give me five different articles on five different sources, I would be able to form my own opinion.

Anna mentioned, “Now that I know [the event organizer], I feel like if I have a question, I can just email her and she’ll get some sources to answer things for me.” Although Beth would default to an Internet search for information regarding food and agriculture, she stated she would now utilize the contacts that were created on the trip, saying:

After talking to these farmers and then talking with the Farm Bureau and soybean association, I feel like I now have contacts. So, if I do have a question about food, I can email off to these three people and someone will tell me where to go. I feel like the Farm Bureau will be an extremely valuable resource. She has so many contacts. She emailed us resources that have been done on America’s food system and America’s food and agriculture. That just helps me realize there’s a lot of studies being done to make sure that what we’re eating is safe and farmers are constantly educating themselves about how to keep their animals healthy so we can eat healthy food.

### ***RQ3: How Can an Agritourism Event Impact the Expectations and Experiences of Bloggers?***

The participants were asked questions pertaining to what they were expecting to see at the farms and ranches they visited. Participant responses yielded three themes: 1) bloggers were not expecting educated and highly trained farmers; 2) bloggers did not associate farming with a business; and 3)

some bloggers recognized the popular portrayal of the industry was not accurate.

***Bloggers were not expecting educated and highly trained farmers.***

Some of the bloggers were surprised to discover the farmers were college educated. Anna, for example, stated, “My biggest surprise was everyone was a college graduate. Every farmer I met was a college graduate; I did not expect that.” Asked to elaborate further, she described her prior experience meeting a farmer on a niche farm tour, saying, “He didn’t go to college. He was just out of high school. In my mind, a farmer might be someone who is more blue collar ... So, I was really surprised [farmers on this tour] were all very educated about what they were doing.”

Diana had similar expectations, and said, “They had all gone to college in agriculture. I didn’t know it was a degree. I didn’t even think about the education farmers have to have to be able to raise these crops and raise good cattle.” Further alluding to the educational requirements needed to be a farmer, Diana continued, “You saw highly educated farmers that had a lot of science behind what they do.”

***Bloggers did not associate farming with a business.***

Three of the four bloggers mentioned they had never viewed agriculture as a business and their expectations were positively violated when they met the farmers. Diana mentioned, “It was interesting that it was like a business. They are owning their own business. It’s not just farming on the side. It was calculated, and they’re business owners and that was interesting.” Anna, who has a husband who owns his own business, echoed this sentiment and said, “They’re really not any different than anyone else running a business.” Although Beth had a few experiences with farmers in the past, this trip created the viewpoint that, “no matter who you are, it’s a business. Farming is a business.”

Aside from being impressed that farmers are business owners, some participants also identified they appreciated the niche marketing that was possible with the business aspect of farming. Cassie mentioned the hog farm she visited and said “Know[ing] that their operation was catering to a specific industry, a luxury pork market ... I don’t think it ever occurred to me that farmers could cater to a group like that.”

Diana also mentioned the niche marketing aspect of the farms she visited stood out, saying, “It was interesting to hear their side of the story and how they were able to find that niche and to really stay in business because they were filling this need that they had found.”

***Bloggers recognized popular portrayal of industry was not accurate.***

Anna mentioned she received most of her agricultural information from the media and the media shaped her viewpoints toward conventional agriculture. She said:

Before I went on this tour, I was extremely indoctrinated with a lot of information about four or five years ago. I was kind of swept up in Michael Pollan, *In Defense of Food*, and *Food Inc.* I literally didn’t eat any conventional industrial meat for a year and a half. I was scared of food. I thought this food is going to kill us. Conventional farming was making us all sick. They don’t care about the food they produce ... I was afraid of conventional meat, and I was going to die from E-coli ... And that’s kind of what I believed going into this tour.

When asked to share passages she posted on her blog post about the trip, Anna mentioned her viewpoints on agriculture have changed and she had realized the bias of the media had persuaded her

for several years. She read from her blog post:

So, one thing that I realize is that before we believe something about food and start to apply that principle to our diet, we should do a little bit more research to find out what science says. For instance, when you believe as I did that organic produce has more nutrients and, in general, is healthier for you than conventional produce, um, I think most Americans probably think this as well. The science doesn't back that up though.

Anna concluded her blog post by saying, "The moral of this story is that there are lots of opinions of food for us to eat and really, our decisions should be based on facts about food and not just fear."

When asked what she expected to see at the farms, Cassie identified her perceptions and expectations were shaped by articles she has seen on social media and the Internet, saying, "I expected to see pens full of pigs. You know, sectioned off without much room to move around. That's because those are some of the things you see on TV and on social media." However, she mentioned how her first visit to a hog farm helped put what she had seen in the media into perspective, saying, "Those are the negative perceptions of farming. That wasn't the case on the tour. The pigs were as clean as pigs can be. They were just looking like they were having a great time, rolling in the mud."

### **Discussion / Conclusions**

The findings of this qualitative study suggest the educational agritourism event had a positive and powerful impact on the participants' viewpoints toward the farmers who provided the tours. This positive experience positively violated participants' expectations of the farmers and their operations. Lastly, the personal and positive experiences with the farmers led the participants to generalize their experience and form positive viewpoints toward the larger agricultural industry.

### **Utilizing Bloggers as a Public Relations Experts**

The tour was successful in educating the participants about common agricultural topics, such as animal welfare concerns, use of antibiotics, GMOs, and hormones. The educational outcomes of this event align with the findings of Che (2007). A common goal of agritourism is for public outreach and education regarding production practices and the life of farmers (Lobbo et al., 2014). However, agritourism events may not be a practical way to reach the masses, especially consumers who do not live near a farm. By selecting bloggers for agritourism, the potential reach is expanded in this case to the thousands of followers of these "mommy" bloggers, which allows a hosting organization to reach hundreds of thousands with a handful of people on a tour. The bloggers in this study all shared their experiences via their vast social networks and blogs, which indicated inviting bloggers to agritourism events may indeed be an efficient and effective way to educate the general public about agricultural practices and give insight into the personal lives of farmers. However, the bloggers identified they only wrote about their experience and at the time of the interviews did not discuss their new viewpoints on GMOs or antibiotics.

### **Transparency**

The results of this study indicated the perception of transparent communication among farmers is not only desired by participants on agritourism events, but also it can be profoundly influential in building consumers' trust in the American food system by creating positive associations between the food they eat and the trustworthy farmers that grow the product. Participants created associations

between the honest and transparent farmers they met with the products they purchased in the store, thus transforming nameless products they associated with a corporate entity into those of honest and trustworthy individuals. These findings provide further evidence to support transparency research and how such perceptions of transparency can affect the trust of consumers (Rumble, 2013).

### **Breaking Expectations**

All participants identified varying levels of expectations going into the tour, some of which were shaped by the influence of popular media. The bloggers' most salient memories from the tour all consisted of events or situations that positively violated their expectations, which increased their level of trust or admiration in the farmers they visited and the industries those farmers represented. This finding offers further implications that highly regarded communicators receive more favorable evaluations, even when their interactions differ from participant expectancies (Crano et al., 2001).

### **Recommendations for Practitioners**

Farmers and ranchers who participate in farm tours should consider the expectations of the uninformed consumers and how their viewpoints may have been influenced by popular media sources and films that may have fostered a lack of trust in the agricultural industry. Therefore, to maximize the educational potential of agritourism events and build trust among consumers, organizers, farmers, and ranchers should make every effort to foster an atmosphere of transparency and honesty on the tour while highlighting the family nature of their operations. In doing so, participants may create personal associations and connections to the food they purchase and break down the corporate stigma of the agricultural industry often presented by popular films.

Furthermore, participants indicated positive perceptions toward the educational requirements needed to be a farmer or rancher and how that education increased the validity of the farmers' or ranchers' rationale for their production practices. The participants also identified the trip produced a new resource for unbiased information and the bloggers would contact the individual farmers or event organizers for more information. Therefore, producers and event organizers should realize the educational component of agritourism events is not confined to the event itself, but it lasts as long as the relationship between the organizers, farmers, and agritourism participants remains. Since bloggers are effective means of getting information to the public (Mendoza, 2012) and have the power to influence policy (Baker & Irani, 2014), producers and event organizers should make every effort to continue to invest in those relationships formed on the farm tour and act as informational liaisons to the bloggers in the areas of agriculture and food.

Practitioners also should be cautious about how participants will generalize their experiences on the trip. Several of the stops on the agritourism event could be considered niche markets that deviate from what is commonly found within the industry. Participants' expectations were positively violated by these niche producers, thus producing a positive psychological response that was extremely memorable. Therefore, it could be logical to conclude that, with the newly formed emotional connection to their experience that produced a generalized expectation to all other farms, their violations would be equally violated in the negative if they were shown common practices outside of the niche industry they experienced. Although participants identified the niche markets were a positive aspect of the trip, practitioners should be cautious of how exposure to niche markets may produce long-lasting and possibly inaccurate expectations for the industry as a whole.

## Recommendations for Researchers

The interviews for this study were conducted within approximately one month of the agritourism event. However, little is known about how the tour impacted the long-term attitudes or behaviors of the participants. It is recommended future researchers conduct studies on the perceptions and experiences of bloggers on farm tours and follow the participants throughout the year to determine if the formed attitudes and behaviors remain long after the experience of the trip. Additionally, since the goal of inviting bloggers on agritourism events is for them to communicate with their readers, researchers should actively study the content of the blog after an agritourism event to identify the key themes, topics, and tones associated with agriculture. Bloggers may feel apprehensive communicating complex and emotionally charged issues like animal welfare, GMOs, antibiotics, or hormones to their readers, so researchers should also examine how the spiral of silence influences what bloggers share with their readers. This study further expands upon knowledge of how agritourism events can affect the perceptions of participants and increases the body of knowledge by including how influential bloggers perceive that event and communicate their experience their readers.

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