# Introduction

Background and Setting

With the introduction of social media platforms, people are better able to connect with others more easily online. Social media has become a part of the average human life with 72% of Americans using social media sites daily (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Marketers have taken note of the popularity of social media and are now focused on reaching consumers where they place their attention (Wagner et al., 2017). The interaction between a consumer and a brand's post can be a measure of communication effectiveness and popularity of the post that leads to a long-forming relationship between the two parties (Wagner et al., 2017). Social media has been found to use words, pictures, videos and audio to communicate information and build trust with consumers and is adapted from the work of Warwick et al., (2021) as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Flow of social media platforms that allows users to create and share pictures, videos, audio, and words.
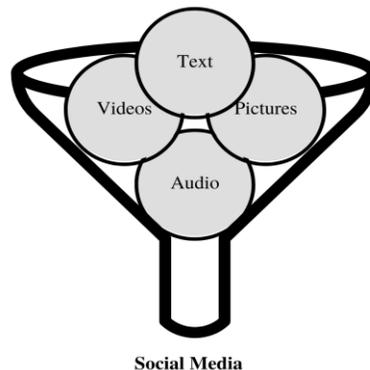
Note. Image adapted from Warwick et al., 2021.

Social media platforms have created a new way for agriculturists to communicate with consumers (Warwick et al., 2021). Instagram is a social media platform that allows the interaction between consumers and brands to form connections (Blight et al., 2017). The social media platform was founded in 2010 and began as a photo-sharing application used as a marketing tool to display products with a visual description (Ting et al., 2016). Instagram has experienced its own evolution over time much like other social media platforms. Instagram now allows users to share pictures and videos. It has been reported that 40% of adults use Instagram daily and has a strong following among Americans, with 71% of adults being under 30 years of age consistently using the app (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Instagram has been reported to be used for personal reasons and for business activities (Ting et al., 2016). The photo sharing platform has also been examined in various studies surrounding influencer marketing. These studies include the evolution of an influencer's follower count associated with follower engagement (Tafesse & Wood, 2021), measures of success of influencers due to their number of followers (Glucksman, 2017), and the psychological bonds formed between influencers and consumers (Audrezet et al., 2018; Ki et al., 2020; Ladhari et al., 2020).

Social media influencers can best be defined as "independent third-party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (Freberg et al.,

2011, p. 90). Glucksman (2017) found an influencer's success on social media is not reliant on their number of followers, but instead on their ability to appear and interact authentically online with followers. There have been several attempts to describe or categorize social media influencers. HubSpot (2022), a social media monitoring company, has created social media influencer categories, as determined by an influencer's number of followers on an individual social media platform. These categories include macro-influencers (individuals with 100,000 or more followers), micro-influencers (those with followers between 10,000 and 99,999), and nano-influencers (1,000 to 9,999 followers on social media). [Note: HubSpot (2024) has changed its content since this study was taken place in 2022. HubSpot (2024) changed these categories as macro-influencers (individuals with 100,000 to 1 million or more followers), micro-influencers (those with 1,000 to 100,000 followers), and nano-influencers (less than 1,000 followers).]

In a study by White et al., (2017), the research team explored how agriculturists use social media for agri-marketing. The qualitative research focused on interviews with four individuals who worked in agriculture and were on several social media platforms and directly involved in marketing their agricultural operation. Results identified a dominant theme from participant interviews that agriculturalists desired to join social media to speak about agriculture. Speaking about agriculture on social media included combatting negative messaging targeting agriculture and correcting misinformation about the industry.

Minimal research has been focused on examining the role of influencer marketing in agriculture prior to the work done in the agricultural communications field (Neves, 2021; Powell, 2022). Neves (2021) explored the use of influencer marketing in the dairy industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. The utilization of influencer marketing within agricultural checkoff programs was examined by Powell (2022). While there is no set definition of an agricultural influencer, they can generally be understood as individuals within agriculture who share industry-related content on social media in the form for blogs, tweets, photos or videos. With minimal knowledge known about agricultural influencers, more research is needed in the use of influencer marketing in agriculture. Rogers-Randolph et al. (2017), explored predominant themes of the National FFA Organization's social media communications during the 2016 National FFA Convention. Findings revealed a theme of influence where organization members would follow newly elected officers on various social media platforms as they shared images of influential quotes (Rogers-Randolph et al., 2017).

Trust is fundamental to the relationship between influencers and their followers (Childers et al., 2019; De Veriman et al., 2017). Consumers tend to trust the social media influencers they follow, often regarding them as credible and being a reputable source of information (HubSpot & Brandwatch, 2023). Marwick (2015) suggest influencers can strengthen this trust by being authentic and relatable, creating an ideal avenue for agriculturists to share their experiences in agriculture with producers. By being authentic and open in their online presence, agricultural influencers can build trust with their followers through the information they share. For example, influencers such as registered dietitians, fitness coaches, or beef industry advocates are often seen as qualified sources of beef nutrition (Funk et al., 2019; Hayman et al., 2023; The Beef Checkoff, 2022). As influencer marketing's goal is to shape consumer perspectives and decisions, influencers build loyal communities that view them as credible leaders, and followers often act on their advice and recommendations (HubSpot & Brandwatch, 2023; Tuten, 2021).

Although trust and transparency have not been directly linked together, transparency aims to cultivate trust by clearly explaining the context behind share content (Dekavalle, 2020; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). Dekavalle (2020) describes transparency as the openness of

disclosing how media is gathered and the availability of information. Glaser and Risius 2018) suggest transparency involves openly stating intentions to demonstrate that nothing is hidden. The idea of transparency is complex due to varying definitions, but for the purpose of this study, Rawlins' (2009) definition guides this study and understanding of how agricultural influencers portray transparency on social media. Rawlins (2009) defines transparency as:

> The deliberate attempt to make all legally releasable information, whether positive or negative in nature, in a manner that is accurate, timely, balanced, and unequivocal, for the purpose of enhancing the reasoning ability of publics and holding organizations accountable for their actions, policies, and practices, (p. 75).

There is substantially more that goes into transparency than reporting the bad with the good and disclosing information for others to access. Different factors play into portraying transparency from the individual's intentions and disclosing information. Perceptions of transparency from social media influencers has been reported to be an important factor for consumers (Woodruff et al., 2020). In agriculture, transparent communication has been shown to increase consumer trust and foster positive attitudes toward the industry (Rumble & Irani, 2016). As influencer marketing grows and consumers become more concerned about food systems, transparency in agriculture becomes even more vital. Pennell (2016) found that social media can promote a more transparent food system, while Rumble and Buck (2013) note that consumers' perceptions of agriculture are linked to their level of knowledge. Similarly, consumers' reactions to agricultural language and livestock images further shape their views (Rumble et al., 2014).

While there has been significant research on influencer marketing and transparency in agriculture separately, there is limited research specifically on how agricultural influencers convey transparency on social media. This study aims to fill this gap by examining how agricultural influencers portray transparency on Instagram, focusing on building trust and providing credible and accessible information for consumers.
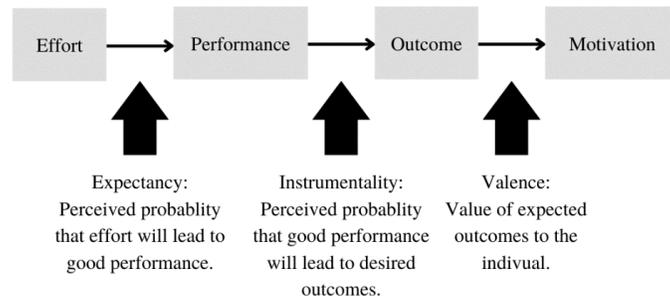
Theoretical Framework

Vroom's Expectancy Theory

Vroom's expectancy theory (1964) guides this study and suggests individuals consciously take courses of action based on their perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs due to their desires of pleasure or avoidance. Porter and Lawler (1968) built upon Vroom's idea with a theoretical model suggesting an individual's desired outcome is determined by their expectations of that outcome and the value they have placed on the outcome (Pinder, 1984). Expectancy theory is described as a process theory of motivation due to the emphasis put on individual perceptions and interactions that lead to a person's expectations (Fudge & Schlacter, 1999).

Expectancy theory offers to explain how individuals are equipped with the tools to influence others through the psychological processes that create expectations for followers. Follower expectations result from perceptions they formed from their environment (Isaac et al., 2001). The follower's expectations lead to the influencer's personal motivations to maximize the self-interests of followers (Isaac et al., 2001). This can be further broken down into figure 2 to explain the expectancy theory model.

Figure 2

Vroom's Expectancy Theory Model

| Effort | → | Performance | → | Outcome | → | Motivation |

Expectancy:
Perceived probablity
that effort will lead to
good performance.

Instrumentality:
Perceived probablity
that good performance
will lead to desired
outcomes.

Valence:
Value of expected
outcomes to the
indivual.

Note. Adapted from Vroom, 1964.

This model suggests that an individual is motivated when three conditions are met (Isaac et al., 2001). First, an effort is met when there is an acceptable level of performance. Next, performance level is achieved when the result is an outcome that is favorable to the person. Third, when the outcome is valued by the person, the individual has a reason to be motivated and perform the task. The linkage between effort and performance is labeled as expectancy. Expectancy suggests that people will show effort when they believe performance is attainable (Karathanos et al., 1994). The second linkage between performance and outcome instrumentality. Instrumentality is when the perception of performance results in a reward or outcome that is favorable (Fudge & Schlacter, 1999). Lastly, valence is when a person places value on the reward or outcome they receive (Fudge & Schlacter, 1999; Van Eerde & Thierry, 1996). Therefore, expectancy theory can be illustrated by the following formula: $M = E \times I \times V$. If there is any sign of weaknesses between the effort-performance linkage or the performance-outcome linkage or in the level of value placed on the outcome, there is an impact a person's motivation (Isaac et al., 2001).

Use of Vroom's expectancy theory in social media is limited. One study evaluated the motivations of bloggers to create and maintain their websites (Liao et al., 2011). Their research found bloggers with a higher motivational reward had higher levels of intention to continue blogging and invest time into maintaining their webpage. Motivational rewards consisted of expressing their feelings online and connecting with other individuals. Similarly, there is little research applying expectancy theory in agriculture, more specifically influencer marketing in agriculture.

Opinion Leadership

An opinion leader is defined as someone who transfers information and spreads influence (Rogers, 1962) and can be an individual who has a strong influence on consumers' attitudes and behaviors (Godey et al., 2016). These leaders help draw attention to a particular issue, product, or behavior, and signal how others should respond (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). This study incorporates opinion leadership due to the nature of influence that opinion leaders possess.

Opinion leadership is closely tied to influencers through previous studies, and Instagram has been reported as the platform most opinion leaders use because of its immediacy and creation of online communities (Casalo et al., 2020). Previous studies support the notion that opinion leaders emerge as influential members of online communities and are a source of advice for consumers (Casalo et al., 2009; Thakur et al., 2016). With the use of Instagram, research has

shown that the number of followers on the platform has an impact on the user's popularity and leads to increased trust in opinion leaders (De Veirman et al., 2017). In a study by Casalo et al. (2020), opinion leadership was found to influence consumer behavior, which supports a second study claiming influencers can shape the attitudes and opinions of their followers through their posts (De Veirman et al., 2017). Opinion leaders on Instagram increase a consumer's intention to interact and recommend the influencer's account, which then leads to an increase in followers for the opinion leader and increasing their value as an opinion leader (Casalo et al., 2020). These prior studies confirm the influencer creates value for the consumer, and the consumer also creates value for the influencer (Auh et al., 2007).

Previous studies in agricultural communications have also examined opinion leadership focused on the use of agricultural influencers (Neves, 2021; Powell, 2022). Neves (2021) examined the motivations of dairy influencers and their strategies to communicate to their audience during the COVID-19 pandemic supporting the use of opinion leadership theory. Similarly, Powell (2022) found that checkoff programs use influencers to promote their commodities. Settle et al. (2023) found influencers are trusted sources for health and nutrition information of agricultural products. Further, Vyvlecka et al. (2024) found agricultural influencers to be effective and trusted sources for beef nutrition information. These studies support the notion that agricultural influencers are opinion leaders who have an impact on the decision-making processes of their followers.

In examining how agricultural influencers portray transparency on Instagram, this research study applies Vroom's expectancy theory (1964) and opinion leadership to understand the motivations behind agricultural influencers' actions and their impact on followers. Vroom's expectancy theory (1964) suggests influencers act based on desired outcomes, balancing their effort in creating social media content, the perceived performance of a post and the anticipated value of transparent communication. For instance, influencers are likely to invest effort in producing transparent content if they believe it will enhance trust and engagement with followers (Liao et al., 2011). Similarly, opinion leadership suggests influencers, as trusted voices within the agricultural industry, can guide consumer perceptions and behavior (Casaló et al., 2020; DeVeirman et al., 2017). Together, these theories combine the motivations agricultural influencers employ to portray transparency on social media.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine and interpret how agricultural influencers portray transparency on social media. The following questions were used to guide this study:

RQ1: What are the motivating factors of agricultural influencers to post about agriculture on Instagram?
RQ2: How do agricultural influencers define transparency?
RQ3: How do agricultural influencers navigate transparency on Instagram?

Methods

To answer the research questions, data were collected through a qualitative study of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with agricultural influencers. Qualitative research is an interpretive approach to identifying patterns or themes in a natural setting (Creswell & Poth,

2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The researcher developed a semi-structured interview guide influenced by the theoretical framework used to facilitate the interviews.

A phenomenological approach guided the methodology of this study. The phenomenon in this study is agricultural influencer's backgrounds in agriculture as it relates to their presence and transparency on social media, namely Instagram. Phenomenological methods are used to describe the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon, (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers are then able to collect data from participants' shared experiences and develop a description of what participants have experienced and use quotes to help describe how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

This research study is considered a transcendental phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology consists of identifying a phenomenon to study, exploring one's experiences, and then collecting data from several others who have experienced the same phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Describing the essence of participants' experiences with the phenomenon, the researcher combines structural and textural essences of transcendental phenomenology to synthesize meanings of the phenomenon being studied (McCain, 2019). In this research study, the researcher has experience in agriculture and has sought to gather data from other individuals who have experience in agriculture. Once data has been collected in a transcendental phenomenology, the researcher analyzes the data by extracting information and quotes to combine them into thematic statements that allow the researcher to develop textural descriptions of participant experiences followed by a structural description of those experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These thematic statements allow the researcher to develop textural descriptions of participant experiences followed by a structural description of those experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Structural descriptions help the researcher to describe the experiences in terms of conditions, situations, and context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A combination of the textural and structural descriptions helps the researcher explain the overall essence of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

This study used purposive sampling where participants in this study were selected based on their follower count on Instagram and how frequently they posted about agriculture. Agricultural influencers were also found by searching "ag influencer" and "agvocate" on Instagram, as well as searching agricultural influencers agricultural organizations used in their social media marketing. Snowball sampling was also used as interview participants provided additional participant recommendations for the research study. Previous studies used purposive and snowball sampling to establish agricultural influencer participants (Neves, 2021).

While the researcher tried to interview influencers across all influencer levels, no influencers at the macro level agreed to participate, which is a limitation to this study. At the time of data collection, micro-influencers were considered to have 10,000 to 99,999 thousand followers and nano-influencers with less than 10,000 followers (HubSpot, 2022). Micro and nano-influencers were represented in this study, as well as different sectors of the agricultural industry. Participants were contacted through direct messaging on Instagram. Once interested participants responded to the message and agreed to be interviewed, an email was sent to each individual with a Zoom link for the interview. Each interview ranged from 45 minutes to an hour. Fourteen participants consented and participated in the study.

All participants were agricultural influencers on Instagram with backgrounds or experiences in agriculture who shared content on Instagram related to advocating agriculture. Table 1 provides a brief description of participants including their level of influence, the state they are from, and what their primary agricultural commodity they grow or raise. Descriptions of participants are minimal to provide them with privacy and participants were assigned a pseudonym at random.

Table 1
Agricultural Influencers Participant Description (N = 14)

Participant	Influencer Level	State	Commodity
Rory	Nano	Idaho	Wheat
Dean	Nano	Virginia	Beef
Lorelai	Micro	Kansas	Beef
Jess	Micro	Wisconsin	Dairy
Paris	Micro	Nebraska	Corn, Soybeans
Logan	Micro	Illinois	Corn, Soybeans
Lane	Micro	Wisconsin	Dairy
Luke	Micro	South Dakota	Beef
Sookie	Micro	Nebraska	Corn, Soybeans
Kirk	Micro	California	Beef
Emily	Nano	Illinois	Corn, Soybeans
Richard	Nano	Tennessee	Cotton, Corn, Soybeans
Patty	Micro	Missouri	Farming
Christopher	Micro	Minnesota	Beef

Note: HubSpot (2022) categorized influencers by the number of followers with Macro-influencers having 100,000 or more followers; micro-influencers between 10,000 and 99,999 followers, and nano-influencers having 1,000 to 9,999 followers on their social media platform.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted over Zoom and recorded before they were uploaded to Otter.ai for transcription. Transcriptions were exported afterwards for coding. A semi-structured interview guide was used to conduct each interview. Interviews began with participants sharing their experience and backgrounds in agriculture, then transitioned into their strategies for posting on social media. Key questions were then centered around how the influencer builds trust with their followers and how they define transparency. Interview questions were informed by the theoretical framework of this study. Rawlins' (2009) definition of transparency was then read to the participants, and they were asked how the definition applied to how agriculture is portrayed on social media.

Data Analysis

Once the data was transcribed by Otter.ai, the researcher exported the transcriptions to a Word document to be printed and coded manually. Data were coded by hand by the researcher

through open and descriptive coding. Open coding is known as the identification of concepts or categories from segmented data like interview transcriptions and then piecing them into smaller pieces with labels and descriptions (Charmaz, 2006). Through this coding process, the researcher sat with printed interview transcriptions and an open notebook, where they noted common phrases in interviews. The researcher then narrowed common phrases down into their respective themes. This method can also be referred to as descriptive coding where the researcher has linked comparable content into a single word or short phrase (Saldana, 2016). This allowed the researcher to form rich descriptions of the common themes that emerged from the interviews.

Research data from the interviews were verified through several validation strategies. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend researchers engaged in at least two validation strategies when conducting research studies. We sought to validate the interview questions with a pilot interview. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend three interviews be conducted to qualify as a pilot study. We were able to conduct seven interviews with separate agricultural influencers not included in this study to pilot interview questions and provide feedback. One of the steps in phenomenological studies is to generate themes and provide descriptions of the essence of participant experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rich and thick descriptions are the process of creating detailed themes and were used in this study to validate data. Detailed descriptions allow the reader to put themselves in the shoes of the participants and allows for transferability. Creswell and Poth (2018) explain transferability allows readers to consider if individuals' experiences are transferable to their own experiences.

Findings

RQ1: What are the motivating factors of agricultural influencers to post about agriculture on Instagram?

The objective of the first research question was to identify agricultural influencers' motivations to post about agriculture on Instagram. The findings indicated agricultural influencers on Instagram are driven by various motivating factors that reflect their personal connection to agriculture and the responsibility they feel to share it on social media. The researcher found the following themes emerge from the data: *sharing their personal experiences*, *bridging the gap between consumers and producers*, *fostering connection* and *acceptance of influence*.

Sharing Personal Experiences

Participants had diverse backgrounds in agriculture with many of them growing up in the agricultural industry, while others were not involved until later. With the rise in social media, participants expressed being early adopters of Instagram because everyone around them was on it. A common response among participants discussed how their content "came naturally" for them to post about agricultural topics on social media, and they wanted to share their life in agriculture with others online. Logan noted they "...shared a little bit about what [they were] doing and saw there was a need for it." Additionally, Christopher stated, "it's easy for me to do that. It's natural, I want to share the highs and lows of farming."

Participants discussed their belief that they are qualified to speak on subjects of agriculture because they live and work in the industry. This is important to note as it does reflect

the intent of phenomenological studies - participants should have experience with the phenomenon they are being investigated for (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With a range of experiences in agriculture, some participants felt that they are the experts in their field to discuss agricultural practices and topics on social media. Sookie had a strong opinion on this, stating, "Farmers are the experts in their field. You have questions about your health, you go to a doctor. You have questions about how your food is grown, you go to the farmer. They have generations of knowledge."

Agricultural influencers interviewed in this study stated it is important to share agriculture stories online. Whether these individuals work on a farm or in the industry, the agricultural influencers interviewed believed everyone has a voice they can use to tell the story of agriculture. As Sookie said, "If we aren't sharing our story, someone else will."

Bridging the Gap

Agricultural influencers felt a disconnect between consumers with agriculture and placed great emphasis on serving in that connection on Instagram. During one interview, Lane stated, "There is just a huge gap between the consumer and what is actually being done on farms and in ranches, and a lot of people don't quite understand. I always try to look at both sides before I post about a topic. Sometimes as individuals, we need to hear it in a different way for it to click in our brains." Christopher agreed and elucidated on the importance of listening to your audience, "I would say the biggest motivating factor is the big disconnect between consumers and producers. If you really listen to your audience, they're going to tell you what they like and what they want to hear. There are certain ways to do it and certain ways not to do advocacy." Lorelai acknowledged a gap between producers and consumers and has changed their approach to conversations with consumers. These insights revealed how the agricultural influencers interviewed are using their platforms to connect with consumers and bridge the information gap.

Fostering Connection

An emergent theme in interviews was agricultural influencers' connection with both individuals with similar interests in agriculture and those outside of agriculture. Participants sought out connections with other individuals in agriculture to share similar experiences. This motivation can be seen as intrinsic because agricultural influencers are seeking to benefit themselves through a connection with others like themselves. Christopher mentioned, "I was finding all these [individuals] from different parts of the US, but they loved agriculture as much as I did. So, I started sharing more and noticed people were sharing my content and they were commenting on it, they were engaging with it, they were asking me questions, and I started finding a lot of joy in that." Along with forming connections with individuals who are similar to themselves, Jess included the want to interact with other agriculturists who wanted to share the story of agriculture on social media. Jess stated, "It's nice to have that space to interact with other people in agriculture, other farmers who care and who want to share their stories and that's something we've really tried to do. It's neat that not only are we reaching consumers, but also other farmers as well."

However, Sookie stated they wanted to reach people who aren't involved in agriculture, but are genuinely interested in learning where their food, fiber and fuel comes from. This response indicated the motivation to post about agriculture on Instagram to reach those not

directly involved in the industry. The motivation to post about agriculture on Instagram is to reach the moveable middle. The group of individuals who are not completely against agriculture but are also not directly involved in the industry but are curious about it.

Acceptance of Influence

It is important to note that participants in this study did not state becoming an agricultural influencer is a motivating factor for them to post on Instagram, however, they each took responsibility for influence but on different levels. When asked if they viewed themselves as an influencer, a majority of the participants seemingly cringed at the word "influencer." Interview participants did not actively call themselves influencers but recognized that they do have influence. The interviewer noted participants' body language changed when asked if they considered themselves to be an influencer. Christopher stated they "don't like the connotation that the word [influencer] gives." Interview participants did not actively call themselves influencers but recognized that they do have influence. Jess asserts, "it sounds so cheesy to be like, 'I'm an influencer on social media,' but I guess, in a way that I am. We're doing the job that we originally set out to do, we weren't like, 'let's get millions of followers.' We were just like, 'let's share what we're doing for consumers.' That was the goal."

Additionally, Lorelai shared they did not seek out to become an influencer, but that it was something that happened. Lorelai said, "I had no intentions of being an influencer. But I view myself as one in terms of not so much products and things like that, but in terms of a voice of agriculture. I've built this network of people, for one reason or another, found me and have trusted me enough to stay. They view me as a trustworthy person, and I take that trust seriously. I feel like I have an obligation with this platform to speak up for people who don't have as loud of a voice. So yes, I am an influencer, but not the kind of influencer that that word really means." "for one way or the other." Along with this, some participants saw the responsibility that comes with influencing others. Dean acknowledged being "an influential voice," in social media advocacy in agriculture. This participant felt that being an influential voice in agriculture is important and noted that their words and actions are being seen by others. Similarly, Luke felt that "everybody is influential in their way," and do not require that a label be put on an individual.

In contrast to previous interview responses, one participant appeared adamant at the fact they were not an influencer and shared their disdain for the practice of being an influencer. Richard asserts, "No. I absolutely hate that word. What do you mean influencing? All I'm doing is showing what a real family farm does, the everyday ins and outs. I just like posting about agriculture to be genuine and have a connection with other people to show them that, you know, I'm just like you." Richard views their social media presence as a highlight of their daily life in agriculture and forming connection rather than a curated effort to shape public opinion.

RQ2: How do agricultural influencers define transparency?

The intent behind this research question was to investigate whether agricultural influencers shared a unified definition of transparency. Analysis revealed participant responses were very similar in nature and led to saturation. Agricultural influencers defined transparency as a means of building a relationship of trust with their followers through the two themes of *authenticity and relatability* and *honesty.*

Authenticity and Relatability

When asked how agricultural influencers defined transparency, Logan stated, "I feel like I build trust with my followers and be my real and authentic self." Similarly, Jess mentioned being "authentic and yourself," while Dean noted "it's being a real person with other people." Some interview responses revealed being a real person on Instagram through their Instagram posts, the agricultural influencer is being transparent with their content, but also appearing as a relatable individual to their audience.

Several participants elaborated on how their online presence reflects their authenticity. For instance, Sookie shared, "One of the ways I'm transparent and build trust with my audience is just by being super real with them. And I think by doing that, they are able to see that I am a real person that they can seem themselves in." This notion of appearing relatable and authentic was echoed by Lorelai, who stated, "I'm being my real and authentic self online."

Participants also linked their authenticity to their ability to foster engagement. Paris explained, "just by being my authentic self, and creating content that is engaging so that people want to reach out to me, and then we can start a back-and-forth conversation." This highlights how agricultural influencers definition of transparency of being authentic and relatable not only strengthens trust but also encourages meaningful interactions. Additionally, Luke noted, "I've really leaned into just being authentically me and it'll attract the right people to come around me." They try to be authentic in their Instagram posts and appear relatable.

Honesty

Honesty emerged as another definition of transparency, with participants describing it as integral to their relationship with followers. Dean noted being transparent is "being upfront and honest" while Rory added "it's being honest about your motivation, your intentions, and your actions. I think in agriculture, at the end of the day, people want to feel good about their choices." Similarly, Lane emphasized the interplay between honesty and factual communication: "I think being transparent can be being authentic, just showing up, sharing a lot of factual information when you can, and being honest."

Participants also defined transparency as being honest and educating their audiences about agricultural practices. Patty noted, "I'd say being honest and upfront is how I would define transparency. I'm being honest and upfront about our practices and how our industry has been changing and the benefits and the drawbacks." This perspective highlights how honesty not only builds trust but connects influencers and their audiences. Logan stated, "I'm not afraid to talk about the hard subjects. I'm not sugarcoating things but being honest and sharing what's happening daily."

RQ3: How do agricultural influencers navigate transparency on Instagram?

The researcher sought to explore how agricultural influencers navigate transparency on Instagram through their posts. The findings indicated how agricultural influencers navigate transparency on Instagram while balancing their *concern posts will be taken out of context, protecting their privacy, desire to be understood correctly, upholding industry reputation, and space for open conversations.*

Concern posts will be taken out of context

Interview participants were asked a series of questions about building trust with their audience and communicating transparency on Instagram. Some of the participants responded that transparency can be a double–edged sword of showing the good and the bad, but sometimes the bad can be taken out of context than what was intended. Paris expressed transparency doesn't entail hiding information from your audience but knowing how to communicate that information properly is important. Luke alluded to the importance of understanding your audience and the conversation when speaking on a subject. Luke said, "sometimes, I think it's important to read the emotional pulse of the conversation and assess how you can steer it in another direction and focus on good things because sometimes I think it hurts us how much we reshare the bad things." Other responses indicated that agricultural transparency involves providing details and information that your audience can easily understand. Logan shared that it can be difficult to be 100% transparent on Instagram because "we don't want someone to take [the post] out of context and twist it the wrong way." Although farmers and ranchers have more knowledge in agriculture compared to the consumer, agricultural influencers find it challenging to be transparent all the time with the risk of being misunderstood.

Desire to be understood correctly

Agricultural influencers indicated they want agriculture to be understood correctly. Responses revealed agricultural influencers get agitated with misinformation about the industry. Participants explained they break down the information they are presenting in a way their audience can easily understand it. Lane in particular said, "breaking it down helps with transparency when you break down a topic into a fifth-grade level," for people to understand it better when they do not have experience or a background in agriculture. Supporting this response, Lorelai added, "You have to take science and put it into easily digestible pieces for the main public to understand." Taking information and compartmentalizing it into pieces an audience can understand, can lead to agricultural influencers being understood correctly. Additionally, Jess stated, "farmers no longer have just one job. We have two jobs; we have the job of farming and the job of educating consumers. I think agriculture as a whole is extremely transparent because we have to be."

Protecting their privacy

With their lives on social media for the world to see, some interview participants reported that privacy and setting boundaries were important to them while also being fully transparent to their audience. Participants also felt it is important to set boundaries as to what they are comfortable with sharing on social media about their personal lives, as well as what they are comfortable with posting about agriculture. Logan shared a personal detail that their audience does not know and added that they want to respect their spouse's privacy on social media as well. Sookie also elaborated by saying, "I don't like sharing a lot of personal things, I just think boundaries are important. But you also have to find a balance of sharing enough that people feel like they know you as a person, but that they don't know every single detail."

Participants also felt that it is important to set boundaries with oneself as to what they are comfortable with sharing on social media about their personal lives, as well as what they are

comfortable with posting about agriculture. Luke provided an analogy that being transparent on social media is, "willing to provide a window into your life. In the social media world we live in, everyone provides a highlight reel. I don't necessarily let people see as much of the bad stuff as you should be transparent, but I also think there's a balance between transparency and boundaries. I'll be transparent, but I'm going to transparently show you the best parts of how we handle our livestock and the best part of our pasture." Dean also added setting boundaries is dependent on your audience. Dean stated, "I think boundaries are kind of 'here's what I will share and will not share.' But knowing the context of your audience, I think is key in being transparent. What context does your audience have for the image or information that you're sharing? And how will that impact their perception or how will that message be received? Not everybody wants to know everything. It's better to understand what your audience wants to know." Lorelai noted having a 24-hour rule to keep themself from responding out of defense or negatively. Lorelai noted, "I think having a 24-hour rule has really kept me out of trouble and made sure I am in a very good, grounded place when I do choose to speak out. Also realizing that you don't have to respond to everything in this society where you have to be on top of everything."

Upholding industry reputation

Agricultural influencers demonstrate transparency on Instagram, aiming to uphold industry reputation. However, data analysis revealed there is always room for improvement to be more transparent. Patty gave the analogy of a puzzle, "we need to get better about providing all levels of transparency versus just one piece of it. We have to piece every single part of the puzzle together." While it can be challenging to share every facet of agriculture, participants agreed that openness is vital in sharing their experiences in agriculture. Posting a photo or video without context, they said, often leaves their audience without understanding, especially for consumers who may lack knowledge in agriculture.

During the interviews, the interviewer read Rawlins' (2009) definition of transparency. After hearing this definition Lorelai felt adamant that agriculture did not uphold to this definition and that there was room for improvement. Lorelai's response, "I don't know that agriculture does that. It's not fully embracing that definition of transparency. There are a lot of agriculturists who have the "consumers are stupid" mindset. We call them ignorant or dumb, and that's not really what we should be calling our customers. I think that definition of transparency is what we should be striving for."

Space for open conversations

Throughout participant interviews, some agricultural influencers placed great emphasis on the ability to have an open conversation with their audience through Instagram. Emily described being transparent as, "sharing in a way that remains authentic but not sugarcoating things that provides context to have a conversation with consumers." Following, Dean explained, "People are interested in learning about what other people do. Some of the most impactful things that we talk about are just answering basic questions that people have." Kirk added the importance of "starting those conversations and following up with those conversations to interact with your audience." This openness allows agricultural influencers to have an honest and

genuine conversation with their followers, further bridging the gap between producers and consumers.

In conjunction, other agricultural influencers believed being transparent on Instagram allowed them a great opportunity to inform consumers. Luke agreed that now is a great time to start a conversation with consumers because "right now, as things get harder for the American public, it is also a really great opportunity and window to talk to consumers. They're looking for answers and solutions to their concerns of the food system." Being transparent with their followers meant proving information they could easily understand.

Conclusions, Discussions and Recommendations

This study aimed to explore how agricultural influencers portray transparency on Instagram, addressing three research questions: their motivations for posting, their definitions of transparency, and how they navigate transparency on Instagram. Figure 3 provides a clearer illustration of this summary, adapting Warwick et al.'s, (2021) graphic and including the themes found throughout the research questions.

Figure 3
The "flow" behind the intent of transparency, adapted from Warwick et al. (2021)
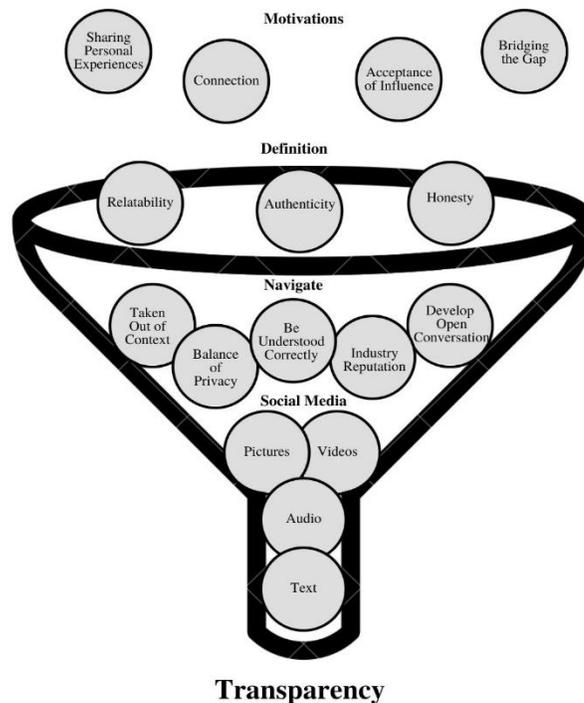
The illustration supports the theoretical framework of this study. Vroom's expectancy theory (1964) suggests individuals are motivated to act based on their expected outcomes and the value they place on those outcomes (Isaac et al., 2001). Within the context of this study, agricultural influencers seek to share information about the industry to shape attitudes (Freberg et al., 2011). The interview results illustrate agricultural influencers' actions to shape attitudes are both driven by personal motivations to share content about agriculture and their expectations

of being transparent on Instagram. Agricultural influencers are motivated to post about agriculture on Instagram by a desire to share their personal experiences, bridge the gap between consumers and producers, foster connections, and acceptance of influence. This aligns with previous studies, such as those by White et al., (2017) and Neves (2021), which emphasized the use of social media by agricultural influencers to speak about agriculture on Instagram and foster connections. These findings also align with literature and highlight the unique role agricultural influencers have as opinion leaders in shaping others' views through sharing information about agriculture (Rogers, 1962), even if some hesitated to adopt the "influencer" label.

Content creators become influencers when they create a relationship between their followers (Childers et al., 2019; De Verimabn et al., 2017). Literature has indicated followers tend to trust influencers who share credible and transparenct information (Hubspot & Brandwatch, 2023). The agricultural influencers in this study defined transparency as being honest, authentic, and relatable, which align with Rawlins' (2009) conceptualization of transparency, emphasizing sharing all relevant information, whether positive or negative. Similarly, the findings support agricultural influencers should appear authentic and relatable to their audience (Marwick, 2015). These results coincide with prior literature which concluded consumers better connect with influencer they can relate to and the influencer's ability to appear authentic online (Glucksman, 2017). Transparency was defined not merely as information sharing but as an interactive process that fosters genuine connections, aligning with Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory, that influencers invested in being honest, authentic and relatable with their audience in order to portray transparency on Instagram.

While agricultural influencers in this study valued transparency, they noted they had to navigate transparency online. Specifically, they shared, they had concerns of being taken out of context, desire to be understood correctly, upholding industry reputation, space for open conversations, and having a balance of privacy. Relating to concern of being taken out of context and having a balance of privacy, transparent actions involve openly stating intentions to demonstrate stories are not hidden from followers (Glaser & Risius, 2018). Agriculturalists may may fear public reactions; however, they stated that they valued the opportunity to share honest stories, aligning with prior literature suggesting transparency increases consumer trust and positive attitudes toward the industry (Rumble & Irani, 2016). In line with sharing transparent stories, agricultural influencers also valued building a connection with their followers to the point their audience feels comfortable asking questions and having a conversation. This finding coincides with the findings of Hsu et al., (2010). The findings also support research by White el al. (2017) that agricultural influencers want to speak about agriculture on Instagram to combat negative messaging targeting agriculture and correcting misinformation. Agricultural influencers' ability to uphold industry credibility while creating relatable content reinforces their role as trust opinion leaders in agricultural communications (Rogers, 1962; Settle et al., 2023, Vyvlecka et al., 2024).

This study provides a snapshot of how agricultural influencers portray transparency on Instagram. While there has been research separately on influencer marketing and transparency in agriculture, there is limited research specifically on how agricultural influencers convey transparency on social media. Overall, this research adds to the literature supporting the motivation agricultural influencers have for posting on Instagram and how they navigate transparency. For the agricultural industry, this information is vital for advocating, supporting, and promoting the industry on social media in a transparent manner.

Recommendations for the Agricultural Industry

The researcher recommends a clear definition of transparency to be established for the agricultural industry based on various definitions provided by agricultural influencers in this study. This would involve setting guidelines for what agricultural brands should share on social media to combat misconceptions and meet consumer expectations. Based on the research, a definition of transparency for the agricultural industry should include open and honest communication of accurate information regarding agricultural practices, solutions to challenges, while ensuring regulatory compliance and ethical standards to foster trust and informed discussions among the audience. Defining transparency can help build trust with consumers by understanding what is expected of agriculture and tailoring content to audiences. Agriculture is headed in the right direction with the use of agricultural influencers portraying transparency on social media, but transparency can depend on the consumer's perception.

Implementing influencer marketing in agriculture is also recommended to create awareness and brand recognition. This approach can attract new clientele and serve as a resource for consumers. It is important for agriculturists to remember they are also consumers and individuals outside of farming and ranching. Agricultural communicators need to not only address producers through communication efforts, but consumers as well.

In addition, agricultural associations and commodity group organizations should advocate resources to assist individuals in communicating their agricultural stories effectively on social media. These resources can be seen as key best practices for advocating agriculture on social media. Having these resources available equips agriculturists with materials needed to address difficult comments and handle situations in a professional manner. Advocacy is not only a representation of the individual, but of the agricultural industry.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research is needed on influencers across all social media platforms. This study only examined a small portion of the current state of agricultural influencers on social media and other platforms should be examined due to their various uses and targeted audiences. The Pew Research Center (2021) found that young adults under the age of 30 are early adopters of social media and use social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat the most. Additionally, the Pew Research Center (2021) reported 72% of Americans use sites like Facebook and YouTube the most. It is recommended that social media platforms, such as TikTok, LinkedIn, and YouTube be explored in agricultural communications and marketing. This research study only examined agricultural influencers on Instagram, but interview participants mentioned being on multiple social media platforms.

The researchers also recommend studying the current state of agricultural transparent Instagram posts. This study could seek to evaluate the current state of posts, what they are composed of and how transparency manifests itself through the posts. Research into social media and agricultural influencers should go beyond the number of clicks that a post receives. In order to measure transparency on social media, a formula would need to be created. Developing a formula and evaluation criteria to measure transparency on social media posts can also be of benefit to how well or poor the industry is communicating transparency. This information is vital when it comes to understanding how consumers perceive transparency of the agricultural industry and interact with agricultural influencers. Additional research recommendations include

understanding consumer behaviors and how they engage in social media based on trust, focused work on commodity groups and agricultural organizations, and the role of partnerships along influencer marketing in agriculture.

Further research should consider interviewing influencers in niche areas of agriculture. For example, research could be explored with influencers who specialize in specialty crops, such as cranberries or citrus. This study could also be replicated with agricultural influencers who primarily concentrate on sectors in agriculture such as beef, dairy, pork or row crops could provide valuable insights. This approach would allow for a deeper understanding of how expertise in specific agricultural fields influences the communication of trust and transparency.

Another area of future research is the exploration of partnerships within influencer marketing. Investigating how agricultural influencers collaborate with brands, organizations and other influencers can provide insights into the dynamics of these partnerships and their effectiveness in promoting agriculture. Understanding the nature of these collaborations can help optimize strategies for leveraging influencer marketing to enhance educational outreach and consumer engagement within agriculture.

The findings of this study revealed agricultural influencers' motivations formed their intentions, leading to actions with desired results. The researcher recommends this study be replicated or adapted using the theory of planned behavior. The theory of planned behavior states that a person's intentions and perceived behavior lead to performance (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). A person's intentions are also controlled by their attitudes, perceived social pressure, and control over behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). Ajzen (1991) also stated that an individual's attitudes are influenced by their beliefs. These attitudes then influence behavior which results in an individual's intentions to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

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