

Visual Communications: An Analysis of University Students' Perceptions of Rural America Based on Select Photographs

Catherine "Dru" Glaze, Leslie D. Edgar,
Emily Rhoades-Buck, and Tracy Rutherford

Abstract

Urban populations have been outgrowing rural populations since the 1920s. Studies exploring the shift in rural residents have noted items such as the job market, economy, and conveniences as factors of this change. However, few studies have been completed to examine mass media's role in this trend. The purpose of this study was to explore college students' perceptions about rural America, based on images selected from newspapers. This qualitative study consisted of five focus groups: two focus groups conducted at the 2009 Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow's (ACT) Professional Development Conference in Stillwater, Oklahoma (agricultural student focus), and three conducted at Texas A&M University (non-agricultural student focus). The focus groups followed Krueger's (1998a, 1998b) method of questioning. Focus groups were recorded, and data was transcribed and analyzed. Common themes such as culture / values, efficiency / conservation, experience from environment, experience through observation, lack of technology, lack of accurate information, media impact / framing, occupation, proximity, relationship / ties, and stereotypes were found in both groups; however, the agricultural group indicated stronger ties to rural America. This study noted further research must be conducted to understand the total effects visual media has on rural America perceptions.

Keywords

rural America, visual communications, perceptions, college students, photographs

Introduction

While perceptions of rural America tend to be positive (Kellogg, 2001; 2005), rural areas are experiencing a decline in population (ERS, 2008; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003). Isserman (2001) noted "much of what we consider rural America today will be urban America in 2050" (p. 128). Research shows a decrease in farming is not the reason for this rural population loss, but a lack of natural amenities, resources, and services (Rogers, 2002; Whitener & McGranahan 2003). Many geographic areas including the East, Mid-Atlantic, and South have seen an increase in suburbs growing out of cities (Kellogg, 2005), known as urban sprawl. Where agricultural land is being replaced with luxury homes, resulting in increased land prices and the inability of rural residents to afford to stay in their communities (Kellogg, 2005).

Previously, this research was presented at the Southern Region American Association of Agricultural Education (AAAE), the National AAAE, and the Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences conferences as three different manuscripts.

While the literature indicates both young and old people are moving to areas with more resources and amenities (Rogers, 2002; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003), the largest percentage of people moving out of rural areas in the mid-1990s were college graduates (Cromarite, 2001). Isserman (2001) explains this phenomenon by describing the primary economic source in rural areas as farms, ranches, forest, and mines. Additionally, Isserman (2001) noted careers in farming, ranching, forestry, and mining are avoided by many college graduates.

A 2001 Kellogg Foundation study surveyed 242 rural, suburban, and urban Americans about their perceptions of rural America. Both the rural and non-rural participants perceived that agriculture was the largest contributor to economies in rural areas; however, only 11.7% of jobs in rural areas are actually in agriculture. This study also noted that nearly half of the respondents living in rural areas had considered moving because of low pay and limited opportunity for advancements in their current location. While respondents had some negative views of rural America, they also had positive views. Of the respondents, 75% indicated rural area residents have stronger families, and 53% believe rural residents work harder than people living in cities (Kellogg, 2001).

Research has found when settling down young people tend to avoid remote, sparsely settled, typically rural, areas that do not have the conveniences of urban areas (Rogers, 2002; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003). Children living in these areas are more likely to live in households that fall below the poverty line, causing higher mortality rates than children in non-rural areas (ERS, 2008). In 2005, 95% of the 100 counties with the highest poverty rate were rural (O'Hare & Mather, 2008). Other concerns identified in rural areas included health care and a lack of other services (Kellogg, 2005).

Residents of rural areas tend to have a lower education level, lower income level, and higher probability of being unemployed than urban residents (Marans et al., 1980; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003; Williams & Mann, 2011). This results in young people leaving rural areas in search of higher education and job opportunities (Kellogg, 2005), and these individuals are increasingly less likely to return to a rural setting. But, not everything is negative about living in rural areas. Isserman (2001) noted rural towns and cities can be described as places where “the pace is a bit slower, the crimes are fewer, and the children are above average” (p. 128).

Research priority area (RPA) #2 in the *National Research Agenda (NRA): Agricultural Education and Communication, 2007-2010* noted the explicit need to aid the public in effectively participating in decision making related to agriculture (Osborne, n.d.). The most recent National Research Agenda also promotes this area and adds to it with the need to focus on informed policy makers and improving agricultural literacy and messages associated with building citizens “capable of making agriculture-related informed decisions” (Doerfert, 2011, p. 8). Research should focus on the mass media's role in influencing young people's decisions whether or not to live in a rural area.

Mass Media's Role

Research conducted before the 1980s on mass media effects showed that mass media did not tell audiences what to think, but what to think about. More recent research has shown that mass media has a more significant role in influencing audiences than originally found in previous years (Entman, 1989; Patton, McKim, Cummings, & Rutherford, 2011; Rhoades & Aue, 2010; Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004). Many studies have explored the traditional definitions of mass media, but few have looked at these effects in terms of media images (Entman, 1989; Lester 2006).

“Visual images are very powerful in their occupation of the public's time and the shaping of how we process our surrounding environments” (Sadler-Trainor, 2005, p. 9). Additionally, visual images

play an important role in society because of the messages these images can portray, both positive and negative, regarding social class, cultures, etc. (Rhoades & Irani, 2008). “It is imperative as communicators that we continue to study how rural cultures are portrayed in the media” (Rhoades & Irani, 2008, p. 24). “Photographs and images on video are typically seen as direct copies of reality” (Messaris, 1997, p. vi). However, even images seen daily such as street signs, graphic designs, and music notes cause people to think about what the image represents, and they interpret its meaning differently based on personal perspective and experience (Lewis, 1995). People see several images a day, and images in newspapers are often looked at prior to reading the text (McLellan & Steele, 2001; Rosen, 2007). Not all images are positive; many can negatively affect perceptions of certain people and programs (Singletary & Lamb, 1984; Smith & Price, 2005; Sotirovic, 2001).

Guiding Theories

The Interpreter Model, the theory of omnihasism, and semiotics guided this study. The Interpreter Model was developed by David K. Berlo (The Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 2004). This model denotes that whenever humans communicate there is a stimulus present. A stimulus is anything that can be perceived by one of the five senses (touch, sight, voice, smell, and taste), and every stimulus has a response. Once an individual receives a stimulus, the response is the action taken (for example an individual smells smoke and, therefore, runs out of the house). Denoted in the model, an individual has the ability to both decode and interpret the stimulus.

Philosopher and photographer Rick Williams developed the theory of omnihasism. The theory combines rational and gut reaction thoughts into balanced and equal attributes used to analyze an image (Lester, 2006). Williams uses an eight-step approach. He has viewers look at the image then lists primary words. The viewer is then to write associative words with the primary words. The process continues with one of the most significant associative words being picked. Viewers continue this process until use of the primary and significant word are paired to create meaning with things in the viewers’ own life.

Barthes developed a theory of semiotics in regards to photographs in newspapers and their logico-semantic relationship to surrounding texts (as cited in Barr, 2007). The theory notes photographs represent the reprint of an actual event and an implied meaning, which viewers make according to their own interactions, experiences, and understandings of culture codes. Barr (2007) explained photograph meanings are fusions between the viewer’s personal experiences and the cultural codes (personal and decoded by the viewer). Researchers like Saussure and Locke furthered such ideas with their work in semiotics (Craig & Muller, 2007; Moriarty, 2005). The philosophers indicated images are expressed through the relationship of the signifier (or the image) and the signified (or the concept the sign stands for). For example, a tent would be a signifier and camping would be the signified concept for a particular viewer. Thus, each image may bring to mind a different meaning in the viewer’s mind based on experience and culture. Ronald Barthes and Stuart Hall expanded this semiotic definition to further examine non-language-like signs through connotative (implied meaning understood by similar viewers) and denotative (specific or direct meaning assigned by the individual viewers) meanings (Moriarty, 2005).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine if selected images of rural America taken from popular newspapers affected college students’ perceptions of rural America; and if the images affected the

desire for students to return to or move to a rural area after completing their degrees. The research questions for this study were:

- 1) What are college students' perceptions of selected newspaper images of rural America?
- 2) What are college students' perceptions of how students with different backgrounds perceive rural America?
- 3) What are college students' perceptions of factors inhibiting movement to rural areas?
- 4) Do college students believe media images affect the desire to live in a rural area?

Methods and Procedures

In this qualitative study, five focus groups were conducted: two at the National Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT) 2009 Professional Development Conference in Stillwater, Oklahoma (agricultural-related college students), and three at Texas A&M University (non-agricultural related college students). Participants in the agricultural-related focus groups were selected by reference. One week prior to the beginning of the ACT conference, advisers at each participating university received an email requesting that two students participate in the study. The advisers were asked to provide student names to the researchers. Of the 11 universities in attendance at the conference, students from 10 universities participated in the study. One student from each of the participating universities was randomly placed into one of two groups. For the non-agricultural focus groups, students enrolled in a general communications course at Texas A&M University were targeted to participate. An email offering bonus points was sent to enrolled students one week prior to the focus groups. Participants were asked to log on to a website and sign-up for a specific focus group time. Upon registering for a focus group, the room location was provided.

A researcher searched the Internet for images printed in newspapers depicting what the researcher believed to be rural America. Using the theoretical framework of semiotics to categorize photographs, the researchers studied the denotative and connotative aspects of each image to determine meaning and, via negotiations, categorized each image as positive, negative, or neutral. The researchers classified two images as negative, two images as neutral, and one image as positive by using semiotics to assess the entire image. The researchers used all aspects of the image to create an overall classification of each image. Faculty members from three universities assisted the researcher in assessing the images, categorizing them, and selecting five images to be used during the focus groups.

A moderator guide was developed to guide the focus groups, which was reviewed by faculty members from the University of Arkansas, Texas A&M University, and The Ohio State University and adjustments were made. All facilitators had received prior training on leading focus group moderation, discussion, and observation techniques. When designing a focus group, it is important to ask the correct types of questions. This study followed Krueger's (1998a, 1998b) method for questioning. Krueger (1998a) expressed that during focus groups, some questions are more important than others. Questions are assigned different levels of importance. This determines how much time is spent discussing the question and at what level the question is analyzed. There are five types of questions that affect the flow of the focus group: opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending (Krueger, 1998b). This study followed these questioning techniques. Additionally, to understand the differing backgrounds of each participant, a demographic survey was administered immediately following each focus group.

During the ACT focus groups, participants met in one room and divided into two groups. One group moved to another location. Four tables were placed in as close to a circle shape as possible.

Two audio recorders were placed in the middle of the group and on opposite sides. The moderator and an observer were seated at a table at one end of the focus group. A scribe was seated outside the focus group circle and to one side. The screen for the images was on one end of the room and opposite the moderator and observer.

For the urban focus groups, participants reported to a specified location. There were five tables placed together making one long table. Four recorders were set in the center of the tables. The scribe was seated outside the group. The moderator and an observer set at one end of the participants with the screen projecting the images behind the moderator. The observer kept time and observed participants' facial expressions and body language. The scribe recorded the conversation between each participant and moderator during the focus group.

After participants answered a series of questions about rural America, the participants were shown the five images previously selected. Participants were asked to write down their initial thoughts and reactions regarding each image on an index card (following the omniphase approach) (Lester, 2006). Participants used five different colored index cards; each color was assigned to a specific image. After the participants recorded their initial reactions, the moderator asked questions to initiate discussion regarding each image.

The study maintained peer debriefing and member checks. At the end of each focus group, the moderator summarized participants' responses from the session and asked for confirmation; participants were also asked to clarify anything the moderator had misinterpreted. Transferability in this study is limited to the focus group participants. Though generalization does not exceed that of the groups, it gives future researchers insight into how similar groups could react in future studies. Dependability was met by audio recording each focus group and initial reactions to images were recorded on index cards. This study maintained triangulation. In each of the focus groups three different sets of notes were taken by the scribe, moderator, and observer. The moderator took notes of major themes emerging from each image. The observer watched and recorded body language and facial expressions. The scribe kept notes of the focus group conversation. Following each focus group the audio recordings, note cards, and moderator notes were transcribed and analyzed to identify emergent research themes in the study. A researcher reiteratively read through the data in order to identify recurring specific ideas or themes. These themes were identified as important and supported with details such as quotations, passages, and field notes taken from interviews and observations (Creswell, 1998).

Limitations of the study included participants at the 2009 Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT) Regional Conference in Stillwater, Oklahoma (primarily agricultural audience), involved in the study may have had previous knowledge of analyzing media images. Also, participant selection bias may have been introduced due to bonus points being issued to the non-agriculture student group for participation.

Participants at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas (primarily urban audience), used in the focus groups received bonus points for participating, causing some to attend, but not engage in the discussion. For all focus groups (at College Station and Stillwater) many of the participants did not realize there was a section located on the back of the instrument for demographics and, therefore, did not complete the instrument. A final limitation of this study was the number of observers (2-3) present in each room. Krueger (1998) explained that participants are less comfortable when more observers are present. Due to random sampling, the researcher could not control if students from an urban background were eliminated from the agricultural groups and students with a rural background were eliminated from the urban groups.

Results and Findings

Agricultural Student Demographics

Of the 20 participants, 18 were female and all of the participants classified themselves as Caucasian. Between the two focus groups, there was one freshman, one sophomore, eight juniors, and 10 seniors. Participants in the study represented 10 universities: California Polytechnic State University, Kansas State University, The Ohio State University, Oklahoma State University, Texas A&M University, Tarleton State University, Texas Tech University, University of Arkansas, University of Florida, and University of Nebraska-Lincoln. For both focus groups, 60% ($n = 12$) of respondents indicated that they had grown-up on a farm. Ninety percent ($n = 9$) of participants in one group, and 80% ($n = 8$) in the second group had grown-up in a rural community. Of the participants, 80% ($n = 8$) in one focus group and 50% ($n = 5$) in the other group had grown up in a community of less than 25,000 residents. The mean age of participants was 20.5 and 20.9 years, respectively.

When asked if their parents or a close relative had ever owned or operated a farm or ranch, one focus group had a 100% ($n = 10$) “yes” response rate; the other focus group had an 80% ($n = 8$) “yes” response. Of the 18 participants who answered the question “what economic status level would you say you came from?”, eight participants responded \$50,000 to \$74,999 annually. The second largest response was \$100,000 to \$149,999 annually. Two participants reported levels less than these numbers and two reported higher figures. One respondent did not know their families’ economic level, and two did not respond. When responding to the question “do you plan to live in a rural area in the future?”, one focus group had 80% ($n = 8$) of the respondents note “yes”, and the second group had 90% ($n = 9$) respond “yes.”

Urban Student Demographics

Of the 28 participants, 19 were female and 77.8% ($n = 21$) of participants classified themselves as Caucasian, 14.8% ($n = 4$) as Hispanic, and 7.4% ($n = 2$) as Asian. Between the three focus groups, there were six freshman, two sophomores, 10 juniors, nine seniors, and one graduate student. All participants responded they had not grown-up on a farm, and only 10.7% ($n = 3$) of the participants had grown-up in a rural community. Of the participants who responded, 54.2% ($n = 12$) reported growing-up in a community of more than 250,000 residents, 25% ($n = 6$) grew-up in a community of 100,000-249,999 people, and 12.5% ($n = 2$) in a community of 25,000-99,999. One of the participants reported growing-up in a community with 3,500 or less residents. For these three focus groups, the mean age was 20.3 years, with the highest age reported being 28 years.

When asked if their parents or a close relative had ever owned or operated a farm or ranch, 54% ($n = 13$) responded “no”. Of the 23 participants who answered the question of “what economic status level would you say you came from?”, eight responded over \$150,000 annually. The second largest response was \$125,001 to \$150,000 annually. The third highest annual income level response was \$100,001 to \$125,000. All other respondents reported lower income levels. When responding to the question “do you plan to live in a rural area in the future?”, 87.5% ($n = 21$) said “no” and 12.5% ($n = 3$) said “yes” (of those that responded).

Emerging Theme Areas

All five focus groups were analyzed and themes were developed and compressed into key terms and phrases. There were 11 unique themes identified: *culture / values, efficiency / conservation, experience from environment, experience through observation, lack of technology, lack of accurate informa-*

tion, media impact / framing, occupation, proximity, relationship / ties, and stereotypes. Quotes denoted with “A” or “B” indicates a participant response from the agricultural focus groups. Quotes denoted with “C,” “D,” and “E” indicates a participant response from the urban groups. Themes are represented in *italics* and key terms associated with the themes are underlined in the discussion of results.



Figure 1. Photograph accompanying an August 2008 New York Times article, titled *In Rural New York, Windmills can Bring Whiff of Corruption*. Accessed online at http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/18/nyregion/18windmills.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all

For image one, the agriculture based focus groups comprised eight major themes *advancement / technology, culture / values, efficiency / conservation, experience from environment, experience through observation, media impact / framing, relationship / ties, and stereotypes*. Seven themes were delineated from the non-agricultural focus groups *culture / values, efficiency / conservation, experience from environment, experience through observation, media impact / framing, proximity, and stereotypes*.

Terms used to describe the *efficiency / conservation* theme were saving money, wind turbines, and saving energy. One participant expressed this theme by saying, “It’s smart because she’s saving money and not using electricity” (B9). Words and phrases used to express the *culture / values* theme were work ethic, traditional, and simplicity of rural America. Most of the participants related the discussion involving this theme back to the lady hanging clothes. One participant said, “It kind of describes the simplicity of rural America” (C4). Words and phrases that emerged from the agricultural group’s theme *relationship / ties* theme had such terms as family, mom / grandmother does that, and relating to their farm. The wind turbines and lady hanging clothes were noted by participants while discussing the words and phrases used to create this theme. “My grandmother used to do that,” said one participant (B2). For the *stereotypes* theme participants used key terms, such as white trash, poor, and low-income. One participant expressed that belief with the statement, “My first thought is they’re poor and she’s got to hang her clothes on the line” (A2).

The majority of the agricultural group found this image to be a neutral representation of rural America. Agricultural participants used terms such as: white trash, old days, and stereotype to describe how someone from a non-agricultural background might describe the image. The urban group had a majority of neutral or positive responses. The urban group believed those from a rural background would be able to relate to the image, and believed this image would be more normal to them. In general, the urban group believed someone from a rural background would describe this image as normal, everyday life, and familiar. One participant from the urban group said, “I think this picture has a lot of what we assume and what we were taught was rural so we weren’t surprised that they don’t have a laundry machine, but maybe in a rural town it’s normal for them to have it” (E10).



Figure 2. Photograph accompanying an August 2007 New York Times article, *Ethanol is Feeding Hot Market for Farmland*. Accessed online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/08/us/08farmers.html>

For the second image, the themes that emerged for this image from the agricultural groups were *culture / values*, *experience from environment*, *experience through observation*, and *relationship / ties*. For the urban group themes that emerged were *culture / values*, *experience from environment*, *experience through observation*, *proximity* and *stereotypes*. A phrase used to describe the *experience from environment* theme in the urban group was my family has a farm and they do this. For this image participants focused their conversation on the man in the foreground, the calf being tagged, the man in the background, and the John Deere Gator. Participants in the agricultural group discussed my dad and I working cattle and family as words and phrases for the *relationship / ties* theme. For this theme, participants indicated the two men as the primarily object of discussion. One participant related the situation to their own life, “Seeing the two guys together, I thought, well they’re family like that’s my dad pushing the other cow away so I can take the calf” (A8). Participants in the urban group also discussed [image is rural] because you see lots of land, land goes on forever, and no buildings or flues as words and phrases placed in the *proximity* theme. For this theme the participants noted the cattle, the two men, the land, and the crops. “I just noticed how open it was and how much land they were on and again, you don’t really see any buildings” (C4). Participants from both the agricultural and urban groups mentioned PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals); this was the only organization either pro or against agricultural that was mentioned specifically in the research.

The agricultural participants felt the image was positive for people who understood what was going on, but negative for non-agricultural-related people or people who did not understand what was being done. Agricultural participants saw this image as him doing his job, the lifestyle of a rancher, and a normal day. The urban participants believed the image was negative because of the appearance of pain inflicted on the calf. They believed individuals from a rural background would note the image as nothing special, pride, and/or normal duty. One participant expressed, “This is what I would think of when I think of rural; what I picture people doing” (E11). Another urban participant said, “Maybe if you gave this picture to somebody that’s in PETA or something they would go crazy, but if you gave it to a farmer they’d say it’s a normal daily activity” (E7).



Figure 3. Photograph accompanying an April 2007 New York Times article, titled *Trailer-Park Sales Leave Residents with Single-Wides and Few Options*. Accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/18/nyregion/18trailer.html>

Discussion of the third image generated six themes from the agricultural participants: *culture / values, experience from environment, experience through observation, media impact / framing, relationship / ties, and stereotypes*. Participant comments in the urban groups were compressed into six themes: *culture / values, experience from environment, experience through observation, proximity, relationship / ties, and stereotypes*. Words used to describe the *media impact / framing* theme were movies depict trailer parks bad, 8 Mile, and Sweet Home Alabama. A comment illustrating this theme was, “I think in movies that they depict trailer communities as bad names such as white trash people fighting, beating their spouses and stuff are all in trailer parks” (A9). Want a house, don’t want to live like this was used to generate the *experience from environment* theme for the urban group. For this theme, participants noted the trailer park.

Most participants in both the agriculture and urban groups believed this image did not represent rural America. The agricultural participants viewed the image as positive because of the family, close-knit, love displayed. However, they also indicated it was negative because of how others might view this image. Agricultural participants said they believed someone from a different background than themselves would say things like “oh sick” (B7). The urban group had some participants say positive for the sense of family and love, but negative because it might not be the ideal image for a family. Participants in the urban group said they believed someone from a different background than themselves would be offended or think this was a “bad stereotype” (C7). Participants from two of three urban groups mentioned the image could not be a rural area because of the power lines and telephone poles in the background. Some participants believed these amenities would not be available in a rural setting or there would be greater separation in the power lines.



Figure 4. Photograph accompanying a February 2006 Arkansas Democrat-Gazette article, titled *Flea Markets Bring Income to Rural Areas*. Accessed online but story/ photograph is no longer available digitally.

The themes for this image from the agricultural group were *culture / values*, *experience from environment*, *experience through observation*, *relationships / ties* and *stereotypes*. Themes from the urban group were *culture / values*, *experience from environment*, *experience through observation*, *relationships / ties*, and *stereotypes*. For the urban group's *stereotypes* theme, words and phrases such as what a lot of stores look like in the country, no AC because they have fans, and looks like farmers were used. "Look at them all over, it's just like farmer to me" (E9). The *culture / values* theme for the agricultural group was summarized in words and phrases such as barber shop atmosphere, "home", and know everyone. "You can tell it's an antique store, because he has prices on stuff" (A5). Friends, grandfather, and chatting with each other were used to describe the *relationship / ties* theme in the urban group. A participant discussion that supports this theme was, "I mean, it looks like you'll go there and you'll see friends" (E6).

Some in the agricultural group, however, believed it could be negative, because of how others might see it, but also positive because of the friendliness. The agricultural participants believed someone from an urban background would think of a lack of technology, might think the men were arguing and would not envision themselves in that environment. One participant expressed this with the statement, "They'd probably never walk in" (B2). The urban group believed the image could be seen as negative for the clutter in the store and positive for the friendliness and community. The non-agricultural participants believed someone from a rural background would think this was normal, or that they could relate to the store.



Figure 5. Photograph accompanying an August 6, 2008 New York Times article, titled *Niche Farming Offers Way Back to the Land*. Accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/07/business/smallbusiness/07hunt.html>

The last image emergent themes in the agricultural group were *culture / values*, *experience from environment*, *experience through observation*, and *relationship / ties*. The urban group developed the following themes *culture / values*, *experience through observation*, *proximity*, and *stereotypes*. The agricultural group's theme of *culture / values* generated from such words as normal and hard-working. "That's just normal or they're goofing off," said one participant (B3). For the theme of *proximity*, words used to describe this theme were acreage, it's hot, and have a lot of land in the urban group. "The obvious acreage in the back," was one comment supporting this theme. In the urban group terms like this is what they do for fun since there is nothing to do and best or only way to travel together were used to describe the *stereotypes* theme. Most participants in both the agricultural and urban groups perceived the image was positive. Some participants in the agricultural group believed others from a differing background would think it was redneck. Some participants in the agricultural group said the perception of someone from a non-rural background would believe it looked like fun. Some participants in the urban group believed others from a different background from their own

would be able to relate because either they had done something similar or knew what they were planting.

Image Summary

The themes in both the primarily agricultural group and the primarily urban group are similar, but when analyzed deeper, the context behind the groups changes. In the *experience from environment* theme, participants in the agricultural group related to their own experiences working on the farm, while the primarily urban group discussed experiences such as “my family has a farm” or “you would not find this image in the city”.

The participants in the agricultural group had a more vivid, descriptive discussion of the image. These participants related the images back to their personal lives, while the primarily urban group did not. The primarily urban group believed rural America was lacking appliances, electricity, and telephones in the *stereotypes* theme. The agricultural group’s *stereotypes* theme was created from words and phrases about how someone not from a rural background would think negatively about rural America.

The research discovered the agricultural group could relate to the image from experience through environment, while the primarily urban group could only relate to the images by experience through observation. A complete list of research themes for each image can be found in Table 1.

Participants’ Thoughts Toward Living in Rural Area

A majority (85%) of the agricultural participants expressed a desire to return or move to a rural area after graduating from college; however, they were not sure if that would be possible. Several said while they are single, living in the city would be fine, but once they have a family they would prefer to live in a rural community. A majority of the non-agricultural participants expressed a desire to return or move to an urban area. A marginal percentage of participants had considered living in a rural area. One participant expressed that thought with this statement, “I think it’s a nice thought to have your own land and no one bothers you, but in reality I really wouldn’t want to become accustomed to having to do all that extra work, like driving out to go to the store or something when I’m use[d] to just going around the street to Wal-Mart or whatever” (E1). The urban group felt it might be easier for dating and meeting new people in urban areas.

Participants were asked to identify factors they believed kept people from moving to rural areas. Participants said *economics* was one factor; with several participants who mentioned *jobs* and *money* were located in larger cities. A participant example was, “I see myself as winding up living in a large city because [that is where] these big companies are being based” (A4). Another factor participants identified as keeping people from rural areas was *convenience*. Being close to things like doctors, schools, and restaurants were some key items mentioned by participants. “I think a lot of it has to do with how our generation wants things instantly. If you’re hungry you can go down the street and grab some fast food. If you were somewhere far away, you’d have to make dinner. If something happens you have to wait, like if your car breaks down you would have to wait to get a part and things would take a lot longer and we’re use[d] to getting things instantly” (E8). Another factor addressed by agricultural participants was the rising cost of land in rural areas. For example, one participant said, “In our area, land has gotten really expensive, like a lot of our farmers and stuff are having to cut off different sections of their land and sell it to city people, because that’s all that can afford it” (B5).

Table 1
A Comprehensive List of Themes for Each Image and Group

Image	Themes from Agricultural Group	Themes from Primarily Urban Group
One	Advancement / Technology Culture / Values Efficiency / Conservation Experience from Environment Experience through Observation Media impact / Framing Proximity Relationship / Ties Stereotypes	Culture / Values Efficiency / Conservation Experience from Environment Experience through Observation Media impact / framing Proximity Stereotypes
Two	Culture/ Values Experience from Environment Experience through Observation Proximity Relationship / Ties Stereotypes	Culture / Values Experience from Environment Experience through Observation Proximity Stereotypes
Three	Culture / Values Experience from Environment Experience through Observation Media impact / framing Relationship / Ties Stereotypes	Culture / Values Experience from Environment Experience through Observation Proximity Relationship / Ties Stereotypes
Four	Culture / Values Experience from Environment Experience through Observation Relationship / Ties Stereotypes	Culture / Values Experience from Environment Experience through Observation Relationship / Ties Stereotypes
Five	Culture / Values Experience from Environment Experience through Observation Relationship / Ties Stereotypes	Culture / Values Experience from Environment Experience through Observation Proximity Stereotypes

Participants’ Thoughts About Media Influence

Participants were asked if they felt mass media could influence decisions to live in a rural area. Some in the agricultural group indicated it depended on the viewer’s mindset, while others noted people moving to a rural area would do their research and that the images shown during the focus groups would not be a significant deterrent. Several of the participants in the urban group agreed mass media could influence decisions about where to live. “If that’s what the newspapers say, people who don’t know what it [rural] looks like are going to believe it,” was one participant’s view (E5). A few participants expressed that mass media did not really influence a person’s decision of where to live. “I don’t think an image really affects someone living out in the country. I think they would know if they wanted to live there in the first place,” said one participant (C5). Other participants indicated that mass media puts a negative connotation on rural America.

Conclusions

This research supports the Kellogg (2001, 2005) studies that indicated 75% of participants believed rural communities had stronger families than their city counterparts. The *relationships/ties* theme that associated the word family was included in the discussion of every image. The Kellogg (2001) study also found many consider rural Americans to be hard workers. Hard-working was a key word used to describe several of the images presented. Other factors keeping people from moving to rural areas discussed in the study were land prices, which is also discussed in the 2005 Kellogg study. Rogers (2002) discussed a lack of health care as a reason for a decrease in rural America, as well as, a lack of facilities and amenities. The participants in this study described similar things in these images as they discussed a lack of conveniences and services as a factor keeping people from returning to a rural area. Participants mentioned that for young people it was easier to date in urban areas, making them leave rural America. This supports Isserman's (2001) study stating a lack of peers for recent college graduates is a disadvantage to living in rural areas.

Participants in this study reinforced findings from the Kellogg (2001, 2005) studies noting that they believed rural America may be more aesthetically pleasing and build individuals with traditional values. The participants repeatedly commented on crops, landscape, greenery, and trees. It was also mentioned that the second image was rural because of the cows in the photograph. Many times participants noted that images with a lack of greenery could be an urban setting. Though the Housing Assistance Council (HAC) (2006) found 15% of rural housing was manufactured homes, the participants in this study felt the image of a trailer home did not depict rural America. Studies completed by O'Hare and Mather (2008) and the Economic Research Service (ERS) (2008) found rural areas have some of the highest poverty rates in the country. Most participants of this study felt rural America was not in fact low-income, but low-income was a stereotype placed on rural areas by urban residents, a contrast to the Kellogg (2001) study. This study also supported research by McGranahan and Beale (2002, 2003) noting that while participants felt job opportunities would be greater in larger cities, most would prefer to live in a rural area with some of the conveniences of living in a city.

This research supports the guiding theories and models outlined in the study. The research reinforced the Interpreter Model (TAECT, 2004) specifically through the reporting that a stimulus was received and created a specific reaction to media. Additionally, Barthes' (2010) theory was supported in this research. In this study participants were able to assign meaning to the images based on personal experiences and perspectives. The study also supports the omniphiasism theory, in which audiences use both gut reaction and rational thought to create a balanced idea and provide meaning to visual stimuli. In the study many participants made comments such as, "I thought this first, but the more I thought about it I believe this."

The research found while several factors such as how a person's background and lifestyle influence perceptions of rural America, mass media also influenced participants' perceptions. Messratis (1992) found photographs are usually seen as copies of reality. This study helped support this when, viewing specific images, participants expressed what came to their mind when they thought of rural America.

Recommendations

While this study supports some of the perceptions of rural America and factors keeping people from moving to a rural area, both groups had some misconceptions about rural America. The agricultural participants of this study believed a non-agricultural audience would view all of the images

as negative, which was not found to be true. The urban group felt someone from a rural background would be able to relate to the image, which was supported in this study; however, some in this group believed all people from rural areas worked on farms or in the agricultural field. Future research should be conducted with larger numbers of participants and with varying age groups. Additional research should continue to determine the impact photographs and visual images have on people's perceptions of rural America. Other mass media outlets should also be studied. It is important to look at the process of how rural images are selected by mass media outlets and how these outlets can be better used to correct some of the misconceptions of rural America. Furthermore, it is important to educate the public, as well as mass media outlets, on the realities of rural America.

About the Authors

Dru Glaze holds a Master of Science degree in Agricultural and Extension Education with an emphasis in Agricultural Communications from the University of Arkansas. She is employed as an account coordinator with Mitchell Communications Group in Fayetteville, Ark.

Associate professor and ACE member Leslie Edgar teaches agricultural communications and education courses at the University of Arkansas.

ACE member Tracy Rutherford, associate professor and associate head for undergraduate programs, teaches agricultural communications and journalism at Texas A&M University.

Emily Rhoades, PhD is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Agricultural Communication, Education and Leadership at The Ohio State University. As a 10 year member of ACE, she has published and taught in the area of online media and visual design.

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