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Entertainment and Agriculture: An Examination of the Impact of Entertainment Media on Perceptions of Agriculture

Lisa K. Lundy, Amanda M. Ruth, and Travis D. Park

Abstract

This study was conducted as a follow-up to Ruth, Park, and Lundy's 2005 study, which found that the portrayal of agriculture in reality television programming reinforced traditional stereotypes of agriculture and corresponding schemas. Qualitative focus groups were conducted in July 2005 with undergraduate students at a large southern university. Participants responded to questions about their perceptions of agriculture and then reacted to a short clip from the 2004 film *Napoleon Dynamite* that featured agriculture. This study substantiated Ruth et al.'s findings that entertainment media have potential short-term and long-term effects on individuals' perceptions of agriculture. While portrayals of agriculture in entertainment media may not actually create negative perceptions of agriculture, they may serve as significant reinforcement for existing negative stereotypes and perceptions. Since many young adults hold uninformed stereotypes about agriculture that are reinforced by entertainment media, agricultural communicators are challenged to communicate the significance of agriculture to this audience in a format they perceive as relevant.

So What?

Young adults rely increasingly on entertainment programming and late-night television more than traditional news media for information about news and public affairs. This study investigated the phenomenon of entertainment media influencing perceptions of agriculture. This study substantiated Ruth, Park and Lundy's (2005) findings that there are potential short-term and long-term effects of entertainment media on perceptions of agriculture. While portrayals of agriculture in entertainment media may not create negative perceptions of agriculture, they may serve as significant reinforcement for existing stereotypes and perceptions.

Few Americans understand the true role of agriculture and its implications for their own lives. Although agriculture significantly impacts the life of every American, it continues to be a neglected topic in the mass media (Stringer & Thomas, 1999). To facilitate knowledgeable decision-making about agriculture, it is necessary to educate Americans regarding the food supply and renewable resources (Mawby, 1984). Existing research has established that the news media provide an effective means for communicating about agriculture due to the public's reliance on mass media sources for information on agricultural issues (Reisner & Walter, 1994; Stringer, 1999; Terry, 1994). However, this finding does not recognize the importance of targeting younger Americans with agricultural information. This is increasingly important as Americans become more and more removed from their agrarian roots, a distance that is only increasing. Russell, McCracken, and Miller (1990) indicated that the significant "role that agriculture plays in the history of the United States, in the quality of life for the nation, and in the economic well-being of the nation and its states is poorly understood by youth and the general public" (p. 13). As a result, it may be necessary to consider a new model for reaching youth, who increasingly rely on entertainment media more than traditional news media (Atkins, 2005).

Newspaper readership is declining, particularly among young adults (Maynard, 2000). "Young adults are more likely to name Comedy Central's Jon Stewart as a primary source of news rather than *The New York Times*," according to Larry Atkins of *Quill Magazine* (2005, p. 42). As many as 40% of young adults rely on entertainment programming and late-night television for information about news and public affairs (Bennett & Rademacher, 1997). The line between news and entertainment media is becoming increasingly blurred. As news becomes progressively more commercialized and focused on infotainment (Anderson, 1995), news stories that promote entertainment events or products are becoming more common.

There is currently a lack of substantive research in agricultural communication that addresses the portrayal of agriculture in entertainment media (Ruth, Park, & Lundy, 2005). Based on empirical evidence supporting the power and influence of entertainment media on viewers' attitudes, opinions, and perceptions, this area merits further investigation.

Ruth et al. (2005) explored the impact that the portrayal of agriculture in reality television programming had on viewers' perceptions of agriculture. The study found a discrepancy between groups of viewers: Those with agricultural knowledge viewed the portrayal of farm life as inaccurate and disturbing, while those with less agricultural knowledge found the

program entertaining, if not exactly “real.” Those viewers who were lacking in agricultural literacy realized that the program did not accurately portray real agricultural life, but could not discern where the program failed in its accuracy. The portrayal of agriculture as “hickish and backwoodsy” in reality television programming reinforced traditional stereotypes of agriculture and corresponding schemas. The authors suggested that the agriculture industry may be well served by further exploration of the impact of entertainment media on public perceptions of agriculture (Ruth et al.). The present investigation draws on this suggestion to further examine the phenomenon of entertainment media influencing public perceptions of agriculture.

Literature Review

Entertainment media often portray lifestyles focusing on social relationships and shared taste to convey the status of various characters (Keum, Devanathan, Deshpande, Nelson, & Shah, 2004). Entertainment media portrayals of agriculture convey meaning to audiences about the place and status of agricultural workers in society. According to Gerbner and Gross (1976), television plays a role in cultivating or creating a worldview that, while potentially inaccurate, may be perceived as reality by many viewers. Cultivation theorists contend that “recurrent patterns of television images are society’s primary source of socialization” (Chory-Assad & Tamborini, 2003, p. 199). Indeed, cultivation may have a mainstreaming effect on heavy viewers, whereby the symbols viewed on television become a lens through which all other media and sources of information are filtered (Gerbner, 1990).

Framing and Schema Theory

The concept of communicating and receiving information through a lens of previously held meaning is intrinsic to the concepts of framing and schema. In general, framing involves the organization and packaging of information (Simon & Xenos, 2000). “Frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001, p. 11). According to Entman (1993):

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (p. 52)

Schema theory conceptualizes receivers of communication as seeking to arrive at a schema or a set of schemas that decodes the events or new information presented (Crockett, 1988). Media frames interact with

audience frames, or schemas. According to Graber (1988), a schema is "a cognitive structure consisting of organized knowledge about situations and individuals that has been abstracted from prior experience" (p. 23). Individuals use schemas to process incoming information and link it to stored information (Graber). Schemas, or prior knowledge, are chunks of knowledge that exist in our minds and represent all that a person knows about a given concept (McKenna & Robinson, 2002; Rumelhart, 1980; Ryder & Graves, 1994; Vacca, 2002). Schemas are used for "processing new information and retrieving stored information" (Graber, p. 28).

Based on the framing and schema literature, it is assumed that when agriculture is portrayed in entertainment media, the frames used to portray agriculture interact with viewers' schemas about agriculture. The images and frames presented in the media are powerful because most viewers are lacking in the kind of first-hand agricultural experience that would lead to accurate schemas.

Social Construction of Reality

Social construction of reality is a philosophical view that has led to various hypotheses about how individuals create meaning in groups. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), "All symbolic universes and all legitimations are human products; their existence has its base in the lives of concrete individuals, and has no empirical status apart from these lives" (p. 128). Applying this philosophical view to entertainment media, Lang and Lang (1984), who summarize this connection in their book *Politics and Television Re-Viewed*, suggested that the link between television and social construction of reality can be broken down into four major concepts:

- (a) Television emphasizes close-up views, creating a sense of familiarity with distant people and places;
- (b) Live event coverage gives viewers a sense of participation in public affairs;
- (c) Television pictures seem authentic to viewers; and
- (d) Television coverage may provide a more complete picture of the event than any other media. (Lang & Lang, 1984, p. 26)

Concurring with Lang and Lang on this relationship between television exposure and social construction of reality, various studies have provided supporting evidence that television portrayals shape viewers' conceptions of reality (Flerx, Fidler, & Rogers, 1976; O'Bryant & Corder-Bolz, 1978). In fact, Bandura (2002) indicated that:

To see the world as the televised messages portray it is to harbor

some misconceptions. Indeed, many of the shared misconceptions about occupational pursuits, ethnic groups, minorities, the elderly, social and sex roles, and other aspects of life are at least partly cultivated through symbolic modeling of stereotypes. Verification of persona conceptions against televised versions of social reality can thus foster some collective illusion. (p. 137)

Ruth et al. (2005) found that when individuals lacked a developed, accurate schema about agriculture, scenarios portrayed in a reality television show (*The Simple Life*) could become part of their schema regarding agriculture. The present study sought to further examine this phenomenon of entertainment media influencing perceptions of agriculture. This study was exploratory in nature; its primary purpose was to examine the perceived effects of entertainment media on participants' attitudes, opinions, and perceptions regarding agriculture and to explore the potential effects of an agriculture-related movie clip on viewers' attitudes, opinions, and perceptions of agriculture. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of participants regarding agriculture?
2. Do participants attribute their perceptions of agriculture to the media?
3. What perceptions do participants have of entertainment media portrayals of agriculture?
4. How did a clip from *Napoleon Dynamite* featuring agriculture influence the perceptions and opinions of participants toward the agricultural industry?

Method

Qualitative focus groups were used in this study to explore the opinions and perceptions of agriculture and entertainment media. Focus groups allow for meaningful exchanges between participants. By observing the interactions of the participants, the researchers sought to identify how entertainment media can influence opinions and perceptions of agriculture. Three focus groups were conducted, with 7, 6, and 10 undergraduate participants, respectively, in each group. According to Morgan (1997), three to five focus groups is an appropriate number for a research project because more groups seldom provide meaningful new insights. The focus groups were conducted in a classroom environment due to its convenience and familiarity for participants. Focus group participants were recruited from an undergraduate, core curriculum course offered at a southern university.

The focus groups were conducted in July 2005. Prior to the start of

each focus group, participants were asked to complete a short survey that included several demographic questions as well as basic questions about their television viewing behaviors. Each focus group consisted of two phases. In the first phase, participants responded to several questions regarding their opinions, perceptions, and behaviors toward agriculture and its portrayal in the media. The second phase of the focus groups included a clip from a popular movie, *Napoleon Dynamite*. Following the 2-minute clip, participants were asked to respond to several questions regarding their reactions to the clip.

Originally released in June 2004, *Napoleon Dynamite* started as an independent film shot in the director's hometown of Preston, Idaho, for only \$400,000 (Weiss, 2005). The main character, Napoleon, is a sort of antihero; the plot is loosely centered around his brother's Internet romance and his friend Pedro's run for class president. The movie was a hit with teenage and college viewers. Of the 23 participants in the three focus groups, 16 noted that they had previously seen the movie. In the clip shown, the main character (Napoleon) spends the day working on a chicken farm.

The focus groups were moderated by undergraduate students in a media research course (supervised by the course instructor). This provided the students with valuable experience in preparing for, conducting, and analyzing focus group sessions. The moderators of the focus groups opened and guided the group discussion. Moderator involvement varied depending on the facilitation needs of each group. Once the informed consent process and a short explanation of the study's procedures and purpose were reviewed, a question guide (developed collaboratively by all the students and the instructor of the media research course) was used to facilitate participant discussion and interaction.

Focus group data were recorded using audiotape, which complemented the observations and field notes made by the research team during the focus group discussions. The audiotapes were transcribed, and the transcripts were compared with field notes and analyzed using the constant comparative analysis technique outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Each researcher analyzed the data by searching for salient themes that emerged from the three focus group transcripts. Following the analysis, the research team discussed emerging themes and identified dominant domains that characterized the data.

Results

Data was gathered from three focus groups. There were 20 females and 3 males for a total of 23 participants. The average age of participants was 20 years, and all were juniors and seniors in college. Nearly all participants

were mass communication majors, indicating a heightened interest in and relative sophistication with the mass media in comparison to other college students. Most participants were from suburban areas ($n = 14$), but several were from rural areas ($n = 6$) or urban areas ($n = 3$). The majority of participants had had little to no exposure to the agricultural industry, though some had some minimal exposure through family or friends working in the industry (Table 1).

Table 1. *Participant Exposure to Agriculture*

Work in an agriculture-related field	Yes	No
Immediate family (parents, siblings)	0	23
Extended family (grandparents, aunts/uncles/cousins)	7	16
Friends	6	17

Participants, on average, watched 9.1 hours of television per week, with the responses ranging from 1 hour to 24 hours per week. In addition, participants indicated that in the course of a month, they rent more movies ($M = 2.1$, $SD = 1.34$) than they see in the theater ($M = 1.5$, $SD = 1.99$).

What are the perceptions of participants regarding agriculture?

While most of the participants lacked direct experience with agriculture, participants indicated overall positive perceptions of agriculture. Individual perceptions of agriculture varied from a "hardworking and difficult career" to a "predominantly male industry," with common beliefs involving the typical stereotypes about overalls and pitchforks. When asked about their perceived image of a farmer, participants expressed such ideas as "male," "young," "rugged," "denim," "overalls," "country accent," and "tan from working outside." Participants expressed other ideas about the difficulties of agricultural life, saying that it is "dependent on the weather," "a 24-hour job," and "a hard job."

Some participants noted that agriculture is an essential part of the economy and is taken for granted by many; in fact, participants acknowledged they often take agriculture for granted. One participant remarked, "It doesn't really affect me. I mean, as long as it gets to the grocery store and is there when I want it, I have no reason to think twice about it."

When asked what perceptions they held about agriculture, one male participant replied, "I think of the cover of *The Simple Life* with people wearing overalls. That's what I thought agriculture was, carrying a pitchfork."

There was a clear differentiation of perceptions regarding different

commodities within the agricultural industry. Dairy farms were thought to involve "cows" and "lots of machines" while chicken farms were described (prior to viewing the clip) as "dirty," "disgusting," and something "no one should ever do."

In the third focus group, there were two participants with first-hand agricultural experience. One participant proudly described her experience with agriculture, to laughter from the other participants, saying:

I actually used to be an ag major. I was an ag business major. I was a member of FFA for 6 years. I am getting my natural farmer degree this fall. I have a purple hull pea farm [group chuckles], and I grow hay [group chuckles], and I've shown livestock. So, yeah, I have [group chuckles], like, a connection with agriculture.

Throughout the rest of that focus group, field notes recorded by the research team noted that there was an uneasy tension in the group. Participants went back and forth between looking to her as the expert in agriculture and weighing their answers for fear of offending her. For example, this was the only focus group in which participants did not laugh while watching the movie clip. The other participant with first-hand agricultural experience had worked on a chicken farm and only spoke up when prompted by another participant. "I was a chicken judge in high school. I don't like to tell people that [group chuckles]. It's gross. It's gross and nasty and no one should ever do it."

Do participants attribute their perceptions of agriculture to the media?

Generally speaking, participants agreed that media shape their opinions and perceptions and even influence their behaviors regarding various issues. Furthermore, several participants indicated that the media have even more powerful effects on those media consumers who lack guidance or direct experience on respective issues. This belief was particularly relevant to the present study. The idea that consumers' perceptions of agriculture may be derived entirely or in part from media portrayals was validated in focus group responses like, "I really don't know, but I assume that [scene from movie clip] is what a chicken farm is like" and "I have never been on a dairy farm, so I really do not know, but I would expect to see cows." In addition, there was unanimous agreement by participants that the overall portrayal of agriculture in the media is negative. Moreover, participants agreed that the majority of portrayals of agriculture in entertainment media reinforce existing stereotypes and perceptions. Participants indicated that these existing stereotypes include "overalls," "rednecks," "country accents," "cows," "uneducated," and "poor."

Although most participants revealed that their individual perceptions of

agriculture are, to some extent, derived from or influenced by mass media sources, they also suggested that their exposure to agricultural information and issues depends on their selection of media for news and information. For example, while agricultural information may be disseminated primarily through the news media, several participants referred to the news media's coverage of agriculture as "irrelevant and boring," and most were unable to recognize a connection between their lives and agriculture. As one male participant stated:

I watch the evening news. There's usually at least one story at night that has to do with agriculture, and I may not know the importance of it, but, like, it's something in the news media that we don't pay attention to.

These findings regarding the attribution of participants' perceptions of agriculture to mass media sources suggest that not only is there a connection between the two, but that participants' perceptions are, in part, coming from entertainment media rather than news media.

What perceptions do participants have of entertainment media portrayals of agriculture?

Participants acknowledged the impact entertainment media have on their lives. One female participant noted, "I think it shapes a lot of what we do. We're always looking at the movie stars and celebrities and what they're wearing and how they look...it definitely shapes us a lot."

Specifically, participants noticed that portrayals of agriculture in the entertainment media often focus on manual labor rather than technology and mechanized agriculture. One participant commented, "They paint the overalls and pitchforks in our heads." Again, participants emphasized that entertainment media undeniably help to shape attitudes and ideas about agriculture among people who have little or no experience with the industry.

In all three focus groups, there appeared to be strong recall for *The Simple Life*, which supports findings by Ruth et al. (2005). There were repeated mentions of *The Simple Life* and *Son-in-Law*, a 1993 film featuring Pauly Shore visiting a farm, as media events that helped reinforce negative agricultural stereotypes. Additionally, the majority of participants, without hesitation, mentioned *The Simple Life* as an entertainment program in which they witnessed and recalled the overalls and pitchfork portrayal of a "real" farm in Arkansas. Participant responses implied confusion over the realism of this particular program, a confusion which appeared to stem from participants' lack of knowledge and experience of agricultural communities. Further probing revealed that 19 of the 23 participants reported having seen *The*

Simple Life. One of the student moderators even remarked after the focus groups, "It was surprising that all three of the groups made reference to *The Simple Life*, as I thought of it as only a silly fad."

The overall feeling was that agriculture was portrayed negatively on *The Simple Life*. One female participant remarked, "Well, I don't think that *The Simple Life* show helped it out any because it made people who are involved in stereotypical farming aspects of agriculture look like they are just poor rednecks, that they just don't have the skills to do anything else." Participants seemed to believe *The Simple Life* to be representative of other stereotyped portrayals of agriculture in entertainment media. One female participant noted, "I don't think I've ever seen a movie that's portrayed agriculture in a positive way."

How did a clip from Napoleon Dynamite featuring agriculture influence the perceptions and opinions of participants toward the agricultural industry?

After viewing the clip from *Napoleon Dynamite*, participant responses addressed the portrayal of the characters more than the portrayal of the agricultural scene/situation. The majority of the participants indicated that the farmers were portrayed as "low class," not needing "that many skills," and "disgusting." One participant described the portrayal this way: "It was very stereotypical. I think they're trying to portray what we actually think about chicken farmers...like what we were saying earlier that they're low class...that's what they portrayed them like...I think they hit that on target."

Most felt that while the movie exaggerated some details in an attempt to be humorous, the portrayal of the chicken farm was fairly accurate. One participant commented on the impact of the clip, saying, "It kinda stops people from actually wanting to go to college and major in that [poultry farming/agriculture]." Another participant remarked, "I laugh at it, but if I were a farmer, I probably wouldn't."

Several participants indicated that the movie clip involving a chicken farm made them think of news stories about KFC's treatment of chickens. Additional comments included participants' opinions that the movie was yet again a stereotypical portrayal of the rural "redneck" South. One participant said, "I think generally that's what people think of the South." In actuality, the movie was filmed in Preston, Idaho, but the location of the town was not evident to the viewer. Some participants mentally connected this stereotypical portrayal of agriculture to the South, and in their interactions with one another, they seemed to identify with this generalization more than others.

Conclusions

Like Ruth et al.'s 2005 study, this study demonstrates the potential short-term and long-term effects that these entertainment media events have on their young adult viewers. While the aforementioned study was limited in its ability to provide conclusions regarding the lasting effects of these entertainment media portrayals of agriculture, the present study sheds some light on viewer recall of these instances and validates the influences these instances have on viewers' schemas. Although entertainment media portrayals influence all media consumers, the participants in this study believe that the degree of influence differs depending on the amount of experience individuals have with the respective issue.

The findings from the present study not only provide clarification and additional insight into the portrayal of agriculture in the entertainment media, but also offer inspiration for future research. For example, the finding that revealed the differentiation in individual commodity perceptions uncovered an area for further research. Participant responses suggested that perceptions of agriculture in general may not be indicative of views of individual commodities. In addition, this finding reveals that consumers have different perceptions of different agricultural commodities, meaning that communicators should not assume that general perceptions of agriculture are all-inclusive. This finding suggests it may be appropriate to research perceptions regarding individual commodities in order to effectively deal with the differing perceptions and opinions of each commodity.

Most of the focus group participants had little or no direct experience with agriculture. The participants' responses even suggested that association with agriculture may be accompanied by a social stigma or embarrassment within the young adult population. Our findings suggest that future research explore the source of this stigma.

The unanimous agreement that agriculture is negatively portrayed in the media also warrants attention by communication professionals. It is not possible to eliminate the negative portrayals or stereotypes that surround agriculture in the media; however, recognition of these portrayals by industry educators and communicators could help combat, or at least challenge, the consequences that ensue. The researchers believe the answer lies partly in education. Educators could use these popular media portrayals in the classroom to provide an open discussion that fosters critical thinking and analysis of the situations portrayed in entertainment media. The ultimate goal for agricultural educators and communicators should be to provide students with the skills to assess information critically and to seek out additional sources of information when needed rather than relying on entertainment media sources to construct their realities.

This study does not posit that portrayals of agriculture in entertainment

media programming actually serve to create negative perceptions of agriculture, but it does suggest that they reinforce existing stereotypes and perceptions (overalls, redneck, country accent, cows, unintelligent, poor). This perpetuation of stereotypes is particularly concerning in the case of a movie that was very popular with young audiences. "People feel that they discovered Napoleon and bought a copy for themselves and others. It was easily one of the most talked-about pop culture pics of the last year" (Snider, 2005, p. 4D). This movie did well in the theater, but most of its earnings have come from DVD sales. *Napoleon Dynamite* matched its entire \$44.5 million theatrical box office earnings in its first week on DVD (Snider). The popularity of this movie demonstrates the communication power of the entertainment media in young adult populations. The broad implication is that consumers, specifically young adult consumers, will continue to watch this movie repeatedly, and agricultural stereotypes will continue to be reinforced. This practice of repeat viewing of entertainment television shows and DVDs also supports the idea of focusing agricultural communication efforts on entertainment media. In other words, consumers are likely to be repeatedly exposed to negative stereotypes of agriculture portrayed in entertainment media, which may further establish these stereotypes in the schemas of consumers.

Another implication for practice is the notion that young adults selectively expose themselves to media that present information they consider "relevant" to their lives. The finding that young adults are not generally turning to the news media for their information indicates that agricultural communicators may need to utilize different means of communication when targeting younger populations. For example, focusing on entertainment media and popular television media like MTV, VH1, and other pop culture television outlets could prove extremely successful in reaching agriculturally unaware young adults. Agricultural communicators should follow the lead of successful anti-tobacco and anti-drug campaigns targeted at young adults (Farrelly et al., 2002). As this study demonstrates, younger populations are clearly lacking in education and understanding of the agricultural industry, making them an important target audience.

One important finding of this study was that participants clearly understood that entertainment media is merely entertainment. However, even though students claimed to recognize that most entertainment media portrayals of agriculture are humorous and inaccurate, they also indicated this is the only "agriculture" that they know. Herein lies the most important implication of the study: Most students will continue to mock the agricultural way of life because agriculture, for them, is what they see in the media (the overalls, the country rednecks, and the uneducated farmers).

While participants may recognize that their perceptions of agriculture are not completely accurate, those stereotypes are all they know about agriculture. If the agricultural industry is to continue to foster new generations of agriculturalists, this challenge needs immediate attention.

About the Authors

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Keywords

entertainment media, agriculture, social construction of reality, young adults

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