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Empowering rural and agricultural communities through social media.

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## **Empowering rural and agricultural communities through social media.**

More than ever, people are beginning to realise it matters what food they put in their body. We used to know who made our food and where it came from. They were the people in our community, the farmer down the road, the local dairy, the town baker. Now, it is hard to tell what fruits and vegetables are in season, as most fresh produce is available year-round at the large supermarket chains. Education is key in knowing where your food comes from, and the best way to get this information is from our farmers. Since farms mean remote communities spread across Western Australia's (WA's) ten regions, we need to use social media platforms to share knowledge and raise awareness to the larger group of consumers to encourage them to preference buying and eating local produce.

Social media is user-generated content on an online platform that is published by an individual's profile. Other users can interact and collaborate on content through their own registered profiles (Joshi, 2017). The interactions happen in real-time and are more than one-to-one discussion, this allows for a broad discussion on a variety of topics with relatively few restrictions on the content (Hudson, 2020). Using groups to link together similar work in the community across the country helps spotlight your combined message and connect, further increasing awareness. Social media plays a vital role in reconnecting consumers to farmers. This essay explores how the social media platforms Facebook and Instagram are being utilised to educate consumers on the journey of their food from farm to table.

In the early days of settlement, one of the main occupations was a farmer, and everything was manually harvested by hand or with the assistance of animals. In 1900 WA's agriculture was not developed enough to feed the needs of its communities, so, until 1910, they relied on imported produce (LISWA, 2001). Over the years of land clearing, crops of wheat were predominantly planted and became the states main export. In 1920 dairy cow operations commenced in the

states major population areas. Wool production boomed after the Second World War until a crash in the 1970s when the world recession affected export prices (LISWA, 2001). It was safe to say many Australians had either grown up on a farm or knew someone who had. A recent study from 2016 shows the agriculture industry in Australia employed 228,372 people Australia-wide working with sheep, beef cattle, or grain farming, with 82% of these people living in regional areas (Binks, 2018). With only 2.2% of Australia's population employed in farming, it is no surprise that farmers and their customers have become disconnected due to physical distances.

A traditional community is known as a close-knit group of people through narrow connections of like-minded individuals. People rarely had a need to leave their home community, they had everything they needed, they knew everyone they needed to know, and everything they learnt came from the knowledge of that community. Now it is far more accepted and expected that people will not remain in the same place, that they will move for residential or more likely, for work purposes (Hampton, 2018). As these rural communities become smaller and more isolated it is increasingly important to ensure primary producers have access to communication technologies through the Internet. As the community redispersed to cities, to stay in contact people moved to the internet and geographical distances seem lessened with online social networks as they provided a method to connect.

Online communities help people to connect with each other and support otherwise isolated people. Rural communities can reach further to find online help, rather than being limited to their physical community (Kirmayer, 2013). An example of this is the Country Woman's Association (CWA). They are small community groups all over WA that help to improve the wellbeing of all people, especially those in country areas. Friendship and support are very important to people who live in regional and remote areas of the State. Times can be tough on the land, especially during times of drought and disasters such as fires and floods. The CWA use Facebook groups to engage their communities in local

activities to lend a helping hand, provide friendship and financially assist when necessary.

Billi Marshall recognised this isolation in the peak of COVID-19 as the intrastate borders were closed and she continued her normal routine as did many other farmers. They continued as essential workers and it was during this time that she used Facebook to develop AdvocateAG to keep farmers in the Midwest of WA connected through online networking, catchups, and events to assist with farmers mental health (Powe, 2021).

WA Farmers have promoted the journey of WA produce through Instagram handle @foodyoucantrust. They use this platform to discuss why it's important to know how food is produced. This group facilitate the information spread from farmers of grain, meat, honey, and milk to the consumers in a friendly and informative manner. By working with nature rather than against it and prioritising a focus on consumer values rather than costs we would see that we are ensuring farming industries to continue for future generations (WAFarmers, 2021).

When you understand the connection of farm to table, it is a reconnection with nature. While agriculture is an industry with a bottom line, farmers are caring for the environment for future generations and long term sustainability for the land. It comes down to environmental management, animal welfare, biosecurity, and looking after the businesses employees. To be profitable, to have a future to continue, farmers have to look after their biggest resource, the land and animals. While they're striving for improvement in agriculture, the consumers need to care where their food comes from. It is as simple as recognising the choice to buy local. This is made easier by the promotion of the Buy West, Eat Best logo to signify trust in what you're eating is WA produce. They use their Facebook and Instagram pages to "spot the logo" and promote the produce of WA farmers. Their digital media campaign "Good Choice, WA" is advertised across television, radio, signage, and social media. Recently there has been a saturation of television advertising, using a consumer to actively make better choices whilst being followed around the supermarket by farmers i.e. The produce displaying

the 'Buy West Eat Best' logo. This type of media tends to resonate well with the consumer as it is media that is remembered. Seeing this trustworthy logo reminds them of the importance of their choice to buy local carries (BuyWestEatBest, 2021).

Farmer On Your Plate is a unique event that showcases the farming families who provide the food and fibre for our state, our nation, and to international markets. The event brings the farm to the city as an educational platform to highlight where our food comes from. The annual event is in its eighth year and encourages a range of producers the opportunity to demonstrate their innovations and resourcefulness supported by their passion that is required to build a strong future in agriculture (Hummerston, 2021). Rick Scoones, from Manjimup, grows rarely seen and unusual vegetables (Brammer, 2021). He loves when his customers realise flavour is more important than presentation. He has been a part of the event promoted through Facebook and Instagram for the last five years and uses this to share the importance of choosing local and knowing your money will go back to the growers who need your support (@farmeronyourplate, 2021).

The most appealing aspect of farmers using social media is the instant accessibility of raising awareness to consumers (Watts, 2018). Platforms like Facebook and Instagram allow discussion between agricultural experts around the world to learn from each other on seasonal changes and geographical differences. There is an element of curiosity and being allowed an inside look into a day in the life of a farmer can encourage better relationships. This information exchange of telling their story through images of their life, they can influence what and when consumers buy, in return, further educating them to eat seasonal and local.

By using the internet, farmers can advertise their services and produce directly to their target market. They create a niche market by focusing on what they do best and simplifying it for customers to understand why they should choose local. The

Covid-19 pandemic has created a heightened awareness to people. They now appear to care more about locally grown, organic, free-range, pesticide-free, etc. By advertising these values, they build stronger relationships in local communities. These labels are a trend that has been increasing as agricultural 'alternatives'.

The concept of information exchange has been discussed as a useful tool within organisations and also within applications of broader industries such as agriculture (Beck, 2014). Carr, 2018 completed a study, though more focused on farmers in India, they discussed the relationship between using a Facebook page and horizontal exchange of knowledge across farmers in their regions. They found when Facebook pages are used specifically for relevant information, followers are more likely to share their experiences with their online community (Carr, 2018). They can use the platform to help others implement what they have learnt, especially across varying distances. The innovations of technology are allowing the agricultural industry to expand. Farmers can exchange knowledge in the development of crops and farmlands, the condition of soils, climate, and harvest quality (Joshi, 2017).

Further to this a study by Ardianto, 2014 has linked social media participation to better food resilience choices through education from farmers focusing on urban sustainability within an online community (Ardianto, 2014).

As an attempt to educate consumers back to the concept of farm to table social-network-based apps are in development. Fresh Chain Solutions is a blockchain-enabled application that uses Quick Response (QR) codes placed on fresh produce to trace the farm it comes from, to the consumer that purchases it in-store. It allows farmers to tell their story and build relationships with their customers. The program is Australian owned and operated in New South Wales (NSW). The NSW Government used the program to track the supply chain of fresh produce like melons, berries, and leafy vegetables and help prevent bacteria outbreaks (McGoverne, 2020).

A similar app is in the development stages at the University of Tokyo. The goal being food traceability, to assure the customers the food they are purchasing is what it says it is, fresh and, safe. Normally this is confirmed by costly certification systems that are not practical for small family farmers and can easily be hacked and fabricated anyway. A food tracking system like this would be good not just for individual produce, but to trace the ingredients that go into a chef-prepared meal, as they can then create a new QR code to highlight all the individual items of farm origin (Lin, 2020).

In 2015 a Western Australian company called AgConnect launched a QR code system across dairy, meat, and bread products in Farmer Jack's stores in Mandurah. Along with informing consumers about where their produce was coming from, they wanted to further assure their customers that the food was safe. By following the code they would see information on how the produce is grown, its journey to them, and the price the farmer gets for the produce (Garnett, 2015).

Furthering this research, would be to combine the blockchain and food tracing with an enabling technology like QR, to link the consumer with the full value chain process of farm to table on a social media communications campaign. It would allow consumers to scan the QR code of their fresh produce, see the journey it has taken but also have the ability to connect with the producers social media forming an online community closing the loop between product purchase and community engagement.

IntellectAg is a digital agriculture consulting company that is encouraging the industry to think more about their online presence and improving their digital literacy. Through digital innovation, the Australian agricultural sector could improve its production gross value by \$20.3 billion (Sauer, 2019). It's a great place to start with communicating and reconnecting directly with consumers and other industry players.

In conclusion, social media has allowed farmers to remain connected and interact with consumers that reach further than their physical location. This

benefits the community for the promotion of education and creating a new sense of online community. The use of social media should be for both educating consumers on the journey their food takes from farm to table, but also to assist farmers in sharing knowledge about the industry. The use of blockchain and food tracing would link consumers to multiple producers via social media, creating an online community. This would benefit consumer education and promote the importance of farming. If we decide to make a deliberate choice to buy just one item that's local, and in season, we collectively take one step forwards to protecting the integrity of our food supply.

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