



Perceptions of the Role of the Social Media in Agricultural Information among Bangladeshi Farmers

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Abstract: The development of agriculture depends on communication networks and knowledge exchange. The use of digital platforms to engage with other farmers and consumers in the agricultural industry has recently been advocated. Particularly social media have come to light as user-friendly and easily accessible tools for farmers. This study, based on the Uses and Gratifications Theory, employs structured interviews with Bangladeshi farmers to study how they see social media as tools for their agricultural practices. The study reveals that farmers stay connected on social media like Facebook groups, Messenger groups, Facebook pages, and YouTube channels. They prefer social media to traditional sources of agricultural information. From obtaining ideas for agricultural output to marketing agricultural products, they use them for a variety of purposes. As shown by the results, farmers claim to use social media to communicate with consumers, look for agricultural information, and keep continuous communication with customers leading to the creation of a brand. While using social media, they face several problems like inadequacy of information and confusing information. Many of their expectations from the government to overcome these limitations emerge from the interview. Farmers expressed their expectation that government-certified doctors' active participation and easy access to them on social media, especially for treatment-related information, would play a vital role in their farming.

Keywords: Perception; Social Media; Agriculture; Farmers; Bangladesh

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the report of UCB Asset Management, at the beginning of 2021 social media users in Bangladesh were 45 million (Habib, 2021, [1]). The number of social media users in Bangladesh became 44.70 million in January 2023 (Kemp, 2023, [2]). Along with the increase in the rate of use of social media among the general population of Bangladesh, the use of Facebook and YouTube for agricultural information is also increasing at a high rate among farmers (Independent Desk, 2021, [3]). The number of farmers using social media in Bangladesh is unknown. However, in research work done in the Chapainawabganj district and published in 2021, the researchers found 11.7% out of sampled 60 farmers were using social media (Ghosh et al., 2021, [4]). In this era of the information revolution, the use of social media for obtaining agricultural information has opened up new possibilities in the agricultural sector (Chowhan & Ghosh, 2020. [5]). In the light of the Uses and Gratification Theory, the present research employing structured interviews deals with finding out the perceptions of the role of social media in agricultural information among Bangladeshi farmers. The main objectives of the study are to know the medium they prefer to obtain agricultural information, to find out the ways of social media (Facebook pages or groups, Messenger groups, and YouTube Channels) engagement of farmers, to explore the types of information for which they use social media, to find out whether there are any limitations in using social media information and to inquire their expectations regarding social media. The study reveals that farmers stay connected on social media like Facebook groups, Messenger groups, Facebook pages, and YouTube channels. They prefer social media to other ways of getting agricultural information and they use social media information for various purposes, from getting ideas for agricultural production to marketing agricultural products. While using them they face several problems like inadequacy of information and confusing

information. Many of their expectations from the government to overcome these limitations emerge from the interview. Farmers expressed their expectation that access to government-certified doctors on social media, especially for treatment-related information, would play a vital role in their farming.

1.1. Definition of Terms

Social Media: A new media method that involves communication between individuals or groups of individuals is referred to as social media. Social networking websites enable communication between people individually or in groups (Manning, 2014, [6]). In the present research, the researchers took Facebook, Messenger, and YouTube as social media.

Agriculture: Agriculture is defined as a wide range of activities done for the cultivation of lands in order to raise plants or vegetables and rear animals for the production of foods and other products (Harris and Fuller 2014, [7]). Any work done at the basic level of production such as tilling land, growing plants or vegetables, farming poultry, other birds, livestock, fish, etc. is considered as agriculture.

Information: In this research, the researchers consider any text, image, audio or video that is related to agricultural production, marketing or branding as information.

1.2. The Rationale of the Research

The importance of digital media inclusion in development is asserted by media experts (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011, [8]). As scientific inventions are bringing new forms of media, communication pattern is also changing (Lule, 2013, [9]). Effective ways of communication in agriculture can contribute to the development of the sector. For the development of agriculture, the inclusion of media in disseminating agricultural information has been acknowledged for long days (Shaikh et al, 2020, [10]). Besides other media, social media can play a vital role in the development of the agricultural sector. Social media users in Bangladesh are increasing day by day. The use of social media by farmers is increasing with the rapid growth of social media users in the country (Ghosh et al., 2021, [11]). As the use of social media by farmers is growing, it is necessary to know how farmers stay connected with social media, what types of information they get and seek, how credible they feel about the information they get from social media, and what they expect from social media so that the government can take proper steps to facilitate agricultural communication among Bangladeshi farmers.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study's primary objective is to explore the perceptions of the role of social media in agricultural information among Bangladeshi farmers. The research's main goals are

1. To find out the medium, they prefer to get agricultural information.
2. To know the ways of social media engagement of the farmers.
3. To explore what types of agricultural information the farmers get and seek from social media.
4. To find out whether there are any limitations in using social media information.
5. To inquire whether the farmers feel the need to avail certified experts in providing agricultural information on social media.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Farmers' use of social media for communication in order to get and provide agricultural information can be better understood through the Uses and Gratifications theoretical framework. The uses and gratifications theory refers to an attempt to explain something of the way in which people employ communications, among other resources in their surroundings, to meet their demands (Katz et al., 1973, p.510, [12]). People use media and make decisions based on their access to it and their perceptions of its advantages. The Uses and Gratifications theory asserts that everyone has unique demands. Media consumers actively consume media and its contents to satiate these demands. In this context, theorists argue that individual needs influence their media use patterns and responses to media (McQuail, 1987, [13]). According to the theory, individuals choose various forms of mass

media for a variety of purposes based on their social and psychological needs (Severin & Tankard, 1997, [14]). Farmers utilize social media to connect with similar people, share tactics, engage in discussions and get information that might not be present in their immediate regions (Phillips et al., 2018, [15]). Understanding how and why farmers may or may not use social media for agricultural information can be done using the Uses and Gratifications framework in agricultural contexts (Phillips et al., 2018, [16]). The uses of media and the gratifications it provides are cyclical in nature as those who use media and find it useful are more likely to keep doing so than people who don't (Whiting & Williams, 2013,[17]). There are three potential types of uses and gratifications of media use. They are content gratification, process gratification, and social gratification. Users who are driven by content gratification seek for specific information, and users who are motivated by process gratification enjoy browsing the sites. The use of media for interpersonal communication and social networking is referred to as social gratification (Stafford et al., 2004, p. 268, [18]). Gratifications may differ based on the users' ultimate purposes for using social media, which will probably impact the media they choose. Most studies conducted recently to analyze social media use in and outside of agricultural contexts are guided by the Uses and Gratifications theory. A survey on American farmers revealed that those who use social media platforms for personal purposes might be prone to utilize them for commercial purposes (Shaw et al., 2015, [19]). A better understanding of the relationship between social media and the persistence of farmers will help maintain the positive impact of small farms on agricultural production which is the base of the economy of the country (Daigle & Heiss, 2021, [20]).

It would be valuable to learn more about how farmers of Bangladesh use social media. This information can increase the usefulness of training on the use of social media for farm businesses as well as more effectively disseminate information to those who seek it.

3.1. Research Method

Bangladeshi farmers are widely using social media for agricultural information (Independent Desk, 2021, [21]). In order to find out the perceptions of the farmers of Bangladesh about the role of social media in agriculture, it is necessary to know the medium they prefer to get agricultural information, how they stay connected on social media, what types of agricultural information they get and seek on social media, what limitations they face in using social media information and what their expectations from social media are. To conduct the research, the researchers employed structured interviews to collect data from a total of 16 farmers from 8 divisions of Bangladesh. Data from the interviews were first summarized by open coding. Similar codes were then grouped into categories that formed individual themes. The adoption of open coding has kept no role of social media pronounced by the farmers left. Hence it has been possible to highlight various aspects of the role of social media in the field of agriculture in Bangladesh.

3.2. Sampling

The sampling process was done in several stages in the study. First, since the research is related to the perception of farmers of Bangladesh about the role of social media in agricultural information, to facilitate data collection, the researchers decided to take structured interview of a total of 16 farmers. That means 2 farmers from each division of the country. Then, farmers were identified by the accidental sampling method. In the next step, the farmers who had 3 years or more working experience on the farm were selected from there. In the last step, those who have 3 years of experience and use social media were selected as the sample. Farmers with at least 3 years of experience have been recruited as those with less experience are likely to be unfamiliar with various aspects of social media. This would have reduced the chances of proper data coming to the research on the perceptions of the role of social media among Bangladeshi farmers.

Name, division, type of farm, age and experience of farmers sampled in the study are given in tabular form below.

Table1.

Name	Division	Type of Farm	Age	Experience (years)
Md. Ashiqur Rahaman	Dhaka	Fruits Garden	27	3
Md. Mojnu Mia		Fruits Garden	60	22
Md. Javed Khan	Chottogram	Pigeon Farm	31	7
Md. Mujibur Rahaman		Quail Birds Farm	40	3
Md. Abdul Majed	Khulna	Fruits Garden	46	27
Shamim Ahsan Vuyan		Poultry Farm	22	3
Fayej Box	Sylhet	Herbal Kitchen	41	12
Masum Ahmed		Poultry Farm	27	3
Imran Ahmed	Rajshahi	Hybrid Paddy Field	36	7
Rabiussani Shawon		Quail Birds Farm	25	5
Mufti Maksudur Rahaman	Rangpur	Seeds Nursery	37	5
Shohel Masun		Grass Field	26	3
Ayub Khan	Barishal	Cattle Feed and Grass	36	5
Md. Abdul Kader		Poultry Farm	45	24
Shudhen Ray	Maymensingh	Fishery	25	5
Aladin Ahmed		Fishery	36	8

3.3. Data Presentation

How the Farmers Stay Connected and What Media They Prefer to Get Agricultural Information

Table2.

Variables	Number of Respondents	Percentages
Use Facebook, Messenger and YouTube	16	100%
Use Only Facebook	0	0%
Use Only YouTube	0	0%
Use Only Messenger	0	0%
Prefer Social Media	7	42%
Prefer Social Media in a Limited Way.	1	8%
Prefer both Govt. Office and Social Media to Get and Seek Agricultural Information	4	25%
Prefer neither Social Media nor Govt. Office for Agricultural Information	4	25%

Farmers’ Purposes of Using Social Media

Table3.

Variables	Number of Respondents	Percentages
To Get the Idea	4	25%
For Technical Information	12	75%
Information for Management	14	88%
For Treatment Related Information	8	50%
For Getting the Idea about Market	16	100%
Marketing Agricultural Products	15	92%
For Creating Brand	13	83%

Limitations They Face in Getting and Using Information from Government Offices and Social Media

Table4.

Variables	Number of Respondents	Percentages
Don't Get Information from Govt. Office	4	25%
Indifferent to Govt. Office	12	75%
No Information in Govt. Page	8	50%
Not Enough Information on Govt. Page	8	50%
Information in Social Media is Enough.	2	13%
Information in Social Media is Not Enough	7	42%
Information in Social Media is Not Credible	13	83%

Solution Sought by the Farmers

Table5.

Variables	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Increased Activity of Govt. Officials Needed	16	100%
Increased Activity of Govt. Doctors Needed	16	100%

4. FINDINGS

4.1. How the Farmers Stay Connected and What Media They Prefer to Get Agricultural Information

Farmers selected to collect data, use all three platforms taken to research on in this study. 100% of the interviewees said that they communicate about agriculture through Facebook pages, groups and Messenger groups. 100% of the interviewees said that they stay connected on YouTube and watch videos on agriculture. From the beginning of agricultural production, they maintain communication through Facebook pages, groups, Messenger groups, and YouTube to get and supply information related to technology, management, market ideas, marketing, branding, etc. Numerous Facebook pages have been developed on the Internet focusing on the sharing of agricultural information. Some of these pages are made by farmers themselves and some are made by others. Farmers interested in agricultural information get involved by liking, commenting on posts and sharing these pages. On their own pages, farmers share agricultural information and use them for the purposes mentioned above. Many farmers also have their own YouTube channels. They also use it for the same purpose. Most of the farmers use YouTube more than other social media.

Among farmers, 42% of the interviewees using social media said, they prefer social media for any information they need in their respective fields of agriculture. 25% of them said, they prefer both social media and government offices for agricultural information. However, 8% said they look for information in both social media and government offices very little.

Overall, 75% of sampled farmers search social media for agricultural information. On the other hand, though 25% of farmers said that they do not look for social media for agricultural information, in reality, they use social media for information on management, market ideas, marketing, and branding as the interview data suggest.

4.2. The Farmers' Purposes of Using Social Media in Agriculture

From the interview data, the researchers find that the sampled farmers look for 7 types of agricultural information in social media. Interviews reveal that 25% of farmers use social media to get the idea about farming, 75% for technical information, 88% for farm management, 50% for information on treatment, 100% for getting market ideas, 92% for marketing agricultural products and 83% for creating brands. 50% of farmers do not look for information on treatment on social media because they do not think the information on treatment on social media is credible.

These are explained below.

1. To Get Farming Ideas: 25% of farmers said they got farm-related ideas from social media. Later they got involved in agriculture and increased their activities on social media. They got an idea about how to do concerned farming, how much possibility of income there is, etc. from social media. Apart from that, they take all the ideas from production to marketing from social media. They learn from the stories of success or failure shared on social media by experienced farmers involved in farming. This education encourages them in farming and helps them to take up new initiatives.

2. To Get Technical Information Needed: In this age of technology, various technologies which have accelerated production are being added to the agricultural sector. There is a need to know how these technologies work, what they are used for, and how to use them. 75% of the farmers said they get information about agricultural technology from social media. Through social media, these farmers gather information related to the technologies used in their respective agricultural fields. Such as in the case of poultry farms, how to set up and use the equipment like electric wiring, incubator, brooder etc. Besides, getting information from social media content, they are being familiar with new technologies introduced in agriculture. By using these technologies, they are becoming more successful in agriculture compared to traditional technology.

3. To Get Information about Agricultural Management: After the start of any agricultural work, there are various tasks related to management. For example, after setting up a pigeon farm, how to manage it, when to feed, what quality of food to feed, when to provide what quality and quantity of water, what vaccinations to give at what age, when to clean the litter, keeping accounts of the farm etc. all are related to management. 88% of the farmers said in the interview that they get information about management from social media. From this information, it suggests that social media can play an important role in providing information related to agricultural management.

4. Treatment-Related Information: Treatment-related information is one of the most important pieces of information in increasing agricultural production and sustaining the existence of farmers in agriculture. Whether the farmers grow crops in the field or establish a poultry farm, there is always a need for treatment-related information. Just because of the lack of information about treatment or lack of easy access to treatment-related information, many farmers face huge losses and stop farming. There, by facilitating easy access to treatment-related information in the field of agriculture, social media can make a revolution. In this study, 50% of the farmers said that they use social media information for treatment purposes in their agricultural fields. In other cases, the responses to using information from social media are high, but in the case of treatment, this percentage is low because in their word, on social media they become confused by a lot of misleading information related to treatment. Therefore, they said in the interview that they do not consider social media information in treatment credible. Before applying information from social media on treatment to their farm, 19% of farmers said, they seek opinion leaders to comment on the particular information first. Of those who use social media information during treatment, 25% said they use social media to a limited extent in treatment. 13% of farmers said they contact government offices for agricultural treatment. The rest do not approach anywhere for agricultural treatment. They give treatment in their own way.

5. To Understand the Market of Agricultural Products: The pre-requisite for success in agriculture is to understand the market of agricultural products. In the pre-IT era, farmers were isolated from each other. They could not easily understand the product market. As a result, many farmers sold their products at low prices. Thus, they would have been deprived of a large amount of profit. But in today's information technology era, farmers who are active on social media do not have to rush to understand the market for agricultural products. 100% of the sampled farmers use social media information to get an idea about the market for their agricultural products. In fact, research shows that farmers use social media information the most for market-related information.

6. Marketing of Agricultural Products: With the rise in popularity of social media, there has been a revolutionary change in the marketing of agricultural products like the marketing of other products. Farmers can now easily market their products and sell it at a fair price. According to Md. Mujibur Rahman, the sampled farmer of Comilla, earlier the market for agricultural products was very limited for the farmers. Currently, using social media, it is possible to sell their products anywhere in the country. That is, now the whole country has become its marketplace thanks to the availability of social media. 92% of sampled farmers use social media to market their products. It does not involve any middlemen. A direct buyer paying delivery charges can purchase goods by bargaining with the seller.

7. In Branding: 83% of sampled farmers said, from the beginning of their production, they increase familiarity with their products and farms by regularly uploading photos and videos on social media pages, groups, or YouTube channels. In this process, regular contact with customers creates a fixed perception of customers about their agricultural products and farms which we call branding. Images and videos play a big role in building trust in the minds of buyers. Such innovative interactive branding processes are not available on traditional advertising-based mainstream channels.

4.3. Limitations They Face in Getting and Using Information from Government Offices and Social Media

Although farmers go to govt. office and use social media for agricultural information, the study revealed that they face several problems in times of need. These are highlighted below.

Not Getting Information from Govt. Office

25% of the interviewees said they don't get information from govt. office when needed. Agriculture is a sector where proper steps have to be taken at the proper time. The interviewees complain that most of the time govt. officials stay unavailable in their offices. As they don't get essential information timely, they look for help on social media.

Indifferent to Govt. Office

As the govt. officials are unavailable at the time of emergency, most of the farmers become impatient and lose faith in govt. officers. 75% of the interviewees said they don't go to govt. office to look for urgent information needed for their farms.

No Information on Govt. Pages

Most of the farmers look for information online but while searching for information they become frustrated as they don't get the necessary information on govt. pages. 50% of the farmers said that although there are government pages, information is not available there.

Not Enough Information on Government Pages

There are various official pages on social media for agricultural information. 50% of the farmers said that there is not enough information on the govt. official pages. There is no government Facebook page, group, or YouTube channel in front of them where there is enough information like pictures, videos, or texts that can be found in time of emergency. Moreover, according to 50% of the farmers, there are government pages but the necessary information is not available there.

Enough Information on Social Media

Few of the farmers found enough information on social media. According to 13% of the farmers, different Facebook groups, messenger groups, and YouTube channels provide enough information for their respective farms. They mainly get and seek information on non-government Facebook pages, Messenger groups, and YouTube channels.

Not Enough Information on Social Media

Although farmers use social media as the most accessible way to get information, 44% of farmers say that there is not enough information available. According to them, many a time even posting in different groups for any agricultural information, they do not get any solution from anyone. They said in the interview that most of the people who are connected here have little knowledge. So, they would have benefited if there was enough information provided on social media.

Confusing Information on Social Media: On the one hand there is not enough information and on the other hand most of the information they get is misleading. 81% of the sampled farmers have drawn attention to misleading agricultural information on social media. The most misleading information comes from treatment-related posts. If a farmer posts any query regarding the treatment of his farm's animals, birds, or plants, each person shows different treatment methods. Looking at different types of treatment methods shown in different channels, the farmers get confused. Therefore, the study revealed that 50% of the sampled farmers do not use social media information for treatment. 19% of farmers said they use treatment-related information if opinion leaders suggest them.

The Farmers' Expectations on Social Media: 100% of the sampled farmers expressed their expectation that access to government-certified doctors on social media, especially for treatment-related information, would play a vital role in their farming. Their expectation is that each Upazila needs a government Facebook and Messenger group where government officers on agriculture will be the admins and will be active for 24 hours. Thus, any agricultural information requested by the group can be provided immediately. Again, there needs a YouTube channel based on each Upazila where government agricultural training videos, market-related information or any other agriculture-related

information will be uploaded. By doing this, any farmer can search for videos on the channel whenever necessary and apply them to his own agricultural farm. According to them, it will play a revolutionary role in the agricultural development of the farmers as well as in changing their fortunes.

5. LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

As accidentally any 2 farmers from each division who use social media are taken as the sample, the limitation of accidental sampling remains. The possibility of under or over-representation of the population remains. Biased results may be produced due to the reasons why some people choose to take part and some do not. Again, due to the limitations of farmers' own knowledge, there is a possibility that many may not be able to provide the correct information.

6. CONCLUSION

The study on the perception of the role of social media in agriculture among farmers in Bangladesh was conducted by the researchers employing structured interviews. Research shows that farmers are connected through Facebook pages, Facebook groups, Messenger groups, and YouTube channels and the majority of the farmers prefer social media for agricultural information. They use social media for agricultural ideas, technical information, management information, treatment-related information, market ideas, agricultural product marketing, and branding. The use is subject to limitations such as misleading information, inadequacy of information, and in some cases lack of information. To overcome these limitations, they expressed their hope to the government to open Upazila-based Facebook pages, groups, and YouTube channels and ensure the supply of sufficient information. The agricultural development of the country will go one step forward if the necessary measures are taken by realizing the role of social media in the agricultural sector that has emerged in the research.

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