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EXTENDING THE ARGUMENT: A CASE STUDY EXPLORING HOW TO COMBAT AND DECAY CONSUMER GRUDGES

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ABSTRACT

We study the process involved in diminishing consumer grudges against an industry. Through a qualitative case study of an organization tasked with changing consumer's negative perceptions and beliefs about the Canadian agriculture industry, we uncover how the process of decaying grudges involves presenting information, creating credible sources, and building positive affect. Our findings extend Thota and Wright's (2006) grudgeholding decay framework.

INTRODUCTION

The modern digital era, the time period after the mid-2000s when Facebook and Twitter opened to the public and Yelp began allowing public reviews of businesses, moved us into an age where it is easy for consumers to communicate their grudges against offending firms and industries. Perhaps no industry has experienced this more acutely than the agriculture industry. For instance, following a National Post article on “Frankenfood”, the agriculture industry was inundated with negative press, including Sierra Club of Canada demonstrations and a \$9 million “True Food” campaign by Greenpeace Canada (McKinnon, 1998; Schultz, 2000; Baxter, 2000). While many industries have had to deal with consumers grudges (e.g., the airline industry), in these industries we do not see consumers performing domestic terrorism attacks (Yang, Su, & Carson, 2014) or spending millions of dollars to retaliate (Baxter, 2000) as has happened within the agriculture industry.

Today, a quick online search yields many posts promulgating grudges against farmers. For instance, in 2011, Vani Hari, better known as “The Food Babe” began to actively criticize the food industry in her blogs, talks, and on her website (Hari, 2015). While very little of what she claimed was correct, her narrative about how she transformed from frumpy to “babe” by rejecting the unhealthy food being produced by our food system struck a chord with many consumers. The Food Babe’s blog received over 54 million views, her Instagram and Twitter built over 250,000 followers, her Facebook accrued over a million fans, and her book – *The Food Babe Way: Break Free from the Hidden Toxins in your Food and Lose Weight* - hit the bestseller list (Godoy, 2014). Similarly, in 2013, Dr. Perlmutter published the book – *Grain Brain*, which deemed wheat a “dietary poison” and William Davis published the book – *Wheat Belly*, which claimed that grains were killing people (Perlmutter, 2018; Davis, 2019). Both *Grain Brain* and *Wheat Belly* quickly amassed a huge following and reached #1 on multiple best-seller lists, including *The New York Times*. All this has raised the question, *how can the agriculture industry combat and decay these grudges?*

¹ The authors gratefully acknowledge the Management and Marketing department at North Dakota State University for providing the funding to collect the data used in this study.

Previous research has much to say about why consumers hold grudges and why they persist over time and decay slowly, if at all. Indeed, research has produced important insights about the mechanisms that mediate the persuasiveness of arguments looking to diminish consumer grudges and support counterattitudinal information (Ahluwalia, 2000). However, this scholarship has had little to say about the process of decaying grudgeholding (Thota & Wright, 2006). We address this gap by exploring the process involved in trying to change grudgeholders negative attitudes. Using an abductive case study approach (e.g., Nordstrom, Tubilaski, & Peterson, 2021), we develop a model of the process. “Abduction” is a qualitative research method useful for examining case studies in order to discover new things and elaborate theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Peirce, 1955). In the sections that follow, we review theory and research to lay the groundwork for our case study. We then describe our discursive exploration of the texts released by Agriculture More Than Ever (AMTE) before theorizing the process involved in grudge decay. We conclude with a discussion of contributions and implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior literature has established that consumer’s dissatisfaction can lead to grudgeholding (Hunt & Hunt, 1990; Aron, 2001; Aron, Judson, Aurand, & Gordon, 2006). Grudgeholding is more than simply avoiding or exiting the relationship, consumer grudgeholding is an “extreme exit” (p. 228), “an exit overladen with strong negative emotions” (Hunt, Hunt, Hunt ., 1988; Huefner & Hunt, 1992), and a desire to actively spread negative word-of-mouth communication (Hunt & Hunt 1990; Huefner & Hunt, 1992).

Previous work has estimated the detrimental effects of incurring consumer grudges. Customers are generators of revenue streams and have a lifetime value (Stahl, Matzler, & Hinterhuber, 2003) with lifetime customers being the most profitable. For instance, Kotler (2001) estimated that losing a single customer could cost Lexus up to \$600,000 and losing a Taco Bell customer would cost the company more than \$12,000. Additionally, Javalgi, Whipple, Ghosh, and Young (2005) estimated that a lost customer can lose a grocery store as much as \$50,000 over a 10-year period while Aron et al. (2006) suggested that “the costs associated with lost revenue from missed sales could easily run in the tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars” (p. 158). Moreover, while it is more difficult to monetize, Bunker and Ball (2009) proposed that the cost of negative word-of-mouth can be even more substantial. People who engage in negative word-of-mouth talk to more people than those who engage in positive word-of-mouth (Naylor & Kleiser, 2000). And the rise of the Internet has made it possible to quickly spread negative word-of-mouth to more people. Berger and Milkman (2012) stated that approximately 60 percent of individuals share information with their friends online. Whether through discussion boards, blogs, elaborate anti-brand web sites (Aron & Muniz, 2002) or anti-brand advertisements (Muniz & Schau, 2007), dozens to hundreds of thousands of consumers can be warned online against the risk imposed by a brand or company. Consumer research found that more than 50 percent of Canadian shoppers will not even walk into a store if they have heard something bad about it from a friend or family (Verde Group & Wharton University of Pennsylvania, 2019). Given the recognition that grudgeholding is extremely costly to business and industry, it is somewhat surprising that little has been reported about what it takes to reduce or reverse consumer grudgeholding. This can likely be attributed to the large body of consumer behavior and psychology literature, which suggests that because of biased assimilation, minimization of impact, and relative weighting of attributes (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1981), strong attitudes are resistant to change (e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1995; Haugtvedt & Petty, 1992; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

In the consumer behavior literature, Thota and Wright (2006) is one of the only studies that has theorized how grudgeholding can be diminished. Their study suggested that consumer grudgeholding could possibly undergo a change if the consumer is repeatedly exposed to factual and objective counterattitudinal information from credible sources. Given the lack of consumer behavior literature on weakening grudges, we turned to the institutional theory scholarship that has focused on altering actor's judgments. Building on concepts from the sociology of emotions (Turner & Stets, 2006), recent institutional works have suggested that emotion can alter actor's judgments and behaviors (Huy et al., 2014; Grodal & Granqvist, 2014) and motivate people's actions (Voronov & Vince, 2012). "Emotions" are feeling states that can be communicated verbally or behaviorally (Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen, & Smith-Crowe 2014; Huy, 1999; Huy, Corley, & Kraatz, 2014). Emotions, this scholarship argues, grab an audience's attention (Green, Babb, & Alpaslan, 2008) and dominate in assessments and decision-making (Keltner, Oatley & Jenkins, 2014). Additionally, emotional messages more effectively capture audience attention, enhance processing, and promote recall (Lefsrud, Graves, & Philips, 2015): We may forget the logical arguments in a message, but its emotional dimension will motivate us to remember and convince us of its credibility (Redlawsk, 2002; Konijn & Ten Holt, 2011; Konijn, van der Molen, & van Nes, 2009). Thus, an emotional connection should increase consumer's identification with the message (Grodal & Granqvist, 2014; Gray, Purdy & Ansari, 2015) and create a state of 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim, 1965). For example, Haidt (2003) and Wijaya and Heugens (2018) showed that appealing to moral emotions helped to motivate actors to take action to maintain, protect, and defend institutional values and practices. As well, Creed et al. (2014) and Toubiana and Zietsma (2017) showed how invoking strong emotions of hope, betrayal, and disgust helped to change perceptions.

Our study takes an in-depth look at the process of decaying grudgeholding. We concern ourselves with understanding the process a social movement organization – Agriculture More Than Ever (AMTE) – deployed in an attempt to weaken consumer grudges towards the Canadian agriculture industry. The time period that forms the focus of our analysis is 2012 – 2020. To briefly foreshadow our findings, our case empirically supports Thota and Wright's (2006) idea that consumer's grudges can be decayed by factual and objective information. We find that releasing a mix of objective information that presents the broader benefits of agriculture and refutes misinformation was the first step in the grudge-diminishing process. However, we find that the process involved in decaying grudgeholding is more complex than Thota and Wright (2006) originally theorized. Our study shows that the grudge-diminishing process also involves transforming actors into credible sources and building positive affect.

METHODS

Focal context. We addressed the above-noted research question by studying what has been happening within the Canadian agriculture industry. Canada is a world leader in agriculture and food production, but across the past 30 years the number of people actively spreading negative word-of-mouth communication about Canadian agriculture has increased. An online search yields disgruntled consumers expressing their negative perceptions about how farm animals are being treated, negative attitudes towards GMOs, complaints about the liberal use of unsafe pesticides, and criticism about farms being big bad corporations (Howard, 2015). With one click of a button, potential consumers can be inundated with YouTube videos that portray livestock producers as evil and diatribes against crop biotechnology (Vogt, 2013, p. 16).

Of especial significance for this paper is the previous attempts that have been initiated to reduce or eliminate these consumer grudges. Powerful agriculture companies, the scientific community, and government regulators have all attempted to combat these grudges by providing data and information to persuade the public that these grudges were misdirected. For instance, food companies had scientists criticize the Food Babe's ideas on food as pseudoscience and chemophobia and claim that "nothing she writes is evidence-based" (Food Science Babe, 2020). In response to attacks against glyphosate, Monsanto released hundreds of scientific and regulatory-based studies stating that glyphosate was safe (Lamphere & East, 2017). In sum, all this suggested to us that the Canadian agriculture industry represents an 'extreme example' (Stake, 2005) of a setting where consumer grudgeholding became prolific. By studying extreme cases, researchers can often gain a better understanding of the more regular cases (Yin, 1981).

Focal case. While there were numerous organizations attempting to combat consumer grudgeholding, we focused in on one particular organization called Agriculture More Than Ever (hereafter referred to as AMTE). We selected this organization because its key purpose was "to improve perceptions, dispel myths and create positive dialogue about Canadian ag" (Agriculture More Than Ever, 2017a), i.e., to decay consumer grudges against the industry. Second, because the data were easily accessible and available from the founding days up to the present time.

Agriculture More Than Ever is funded by the Canadian Government and Farm Credit Canada (FCC), Canada's primary financial lender to farmers, agri-food operations and agribusiness (a federal Crown corporation reporting to the Minister of Agriculture). Other partners are Agriculture in the Classroom, a not for profit, and Farm and Food Care: a national charity that receives funding from the Canadian Government, Canadian Canola Growers, Alberta Canola Producers, SaskCanola, John Deere and Dow. AMTE was established in 2012 and tasked with starting positive conversations about agriculture. Across the next six years, they posted videos, songs, blogs, webinars, 17,000 tweets, and thousands of Instagram and Facebook posts. By 2019, AMTE had over 95,000 people following them and promoting their posts.

Data Collection

We collected and analyzed the texts released by Ag More Than Ever between 2012, when AMTE was established, until 2020. Texts are symbolic forms of representation (e.g., documents, books, media accounts, interviews, speeches, committee reports, etc.) that are spoken, written, or otherwise depicted, thereby "taking on material form and becoming accessible to others" (Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, & Robichaud, 1996, p. 7). In our case, texts took the form of blogs, webinars, speeches, songs, and photos. In total we collected 118 blog posts, 1200 images, and 39 pages of transcripts. We imported all these texts into NVivo. NVivo is a qualitative data software program used to manage and analyze data. This became our primary data source.

Data Analysis

Our analysis followed established techniques and procedures for grounded theory building (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001) and consisted of a series of steps. In the *first step* of the analysis, the text files were entered in to NVivo and then coded on the basis of "in vivo" words. These comprised phrases, terms, descriptions, and images that AMTE posted to improve perceptions and create positive dialogue revolving around decreasing consumer upset and avoidance. Such phrases and descriptions included facts that promoted the economic and social benefits of agriculture, images of children playing with farm animals, and stories about raising children on the farm. These formed our first-order codes. While assessing our initial texts we were

struck by the data and statistics being used in arguments as well as the highly emotive visual images. We noted that the statistics were interesting and relied on logic while the visual images touched us and triggered an emotional reaction. In abductive research, being struck by something in the data is part of “the firstness stage” (Atkins, 2006; Khachab, 2013), the initial stage of analysis where the researcher is appraising or getting a sense of the importance of an observation.

The *second step* of the analysis involved looking at the first order codes to determine if they could be collapsed into second-order themes or higher-level nodes. This was a recursive rather than a linear process; we moved iteratively between our first-order categories and the emerging patterns in our data until adequate conceptual themes emerged (Eisenhardt, 1989). For example, information like “97% of farms are family farms” and “since 1987 soil erosion has decreased 69% in corn production” we grouped into a node called “counterattitudinal information.” In the *third step*, we organized the second-order themes into the overarching dimensions that underpinned our theorizing. Three overarching themes emerged as key. The first theme was the issue of providing trustworthy information as a driver for encouraging consumers to rethink their attitudes and values; the second theme explored the transformation of farmers; finally, the third emphasized emotions. Figure 1 illustrates our final data structure, showing the categories and themes from which we developed our findings and the relationships between them. This figure contains representative first-order data, which underpin the second-order themes.

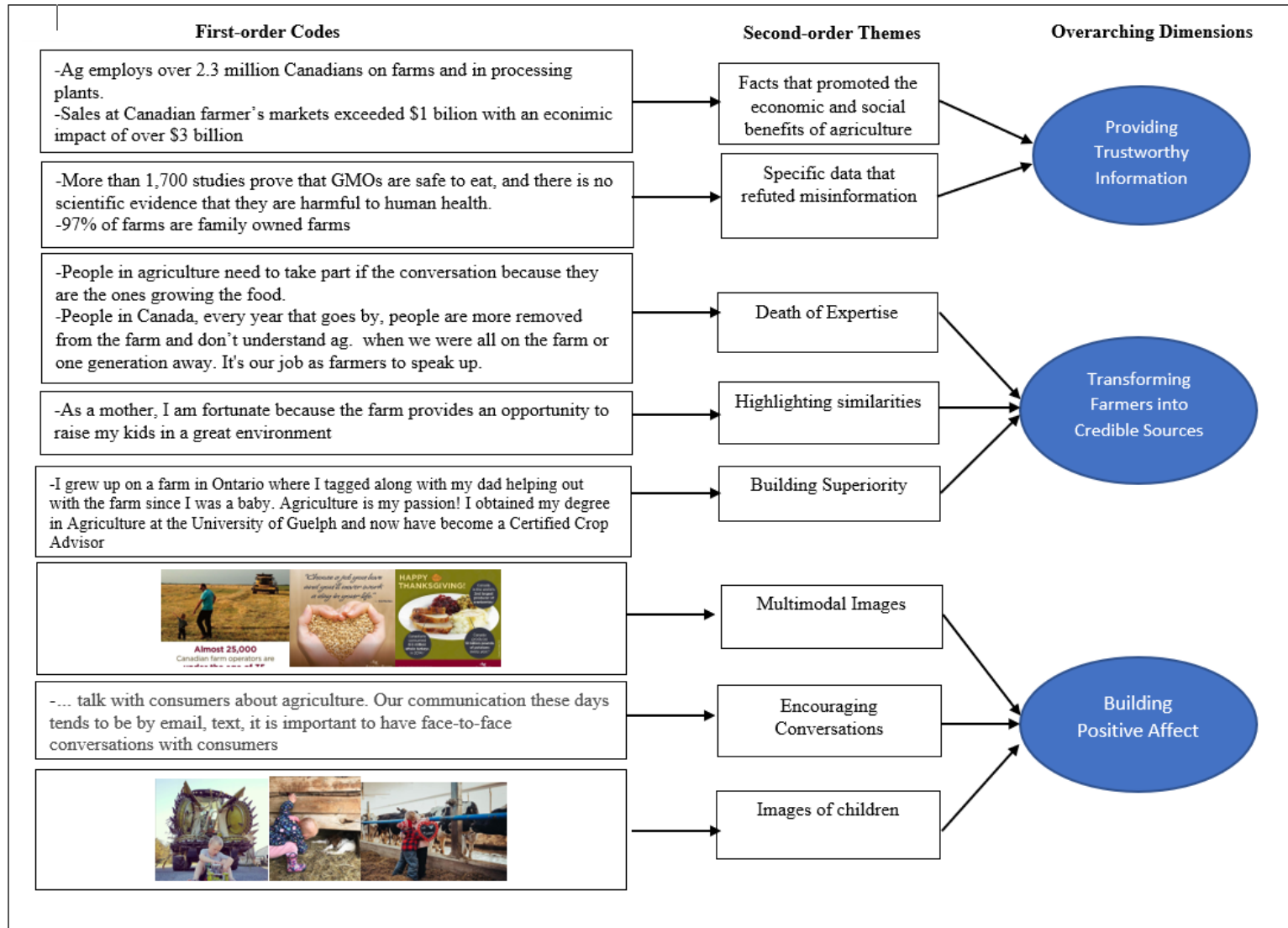
FINDINGS

The digital era has enabled the scale and reach of consumer grudges to increase exponentially and in so doing made the case for the need to understand how to diminish or reverse consumer grudges. Our findings illustrate that (1) releasing objective information, (2) transforming farmers into credible sources, and (3) building positive affect are key steps in the process of diminishing consumer grudges against agriculture. First and foremost, AMTE’s strategy rests on the repeated release of a mix of objective information. This information presents the broader benefits of agriculture and refutes misinformation. Next, AMTE transforms the image of farmers making them similar yet superior to urban consumers, which in turn increases their credibility and their role as ‘advocate’. Finally, AMTE built positive affect by developing multimodal texts, encouraging conversations, and releasing images of farm children. This helped to make consumers more emotionally invested in the message and consequently more susceptible to being convinced. Below we describe our findings in greater detail.

Credible Trustworthy Information

Our analysis suggests that the first step in decaying grudges involved releasing a complex mix of credible information. AMTE released texts that presented objective information about the benefits of modern agriculture. The view that agriculture was destructive and evil was countered by data that suggested farming was an important and beneficial industry. For example, facts and statistics were used in social media posts to highlight how Canadian farms were needed, how farmers help consumers save money, and the advantages farming provides to Canada’s economy:

Figure 1: Data Analysis Framework





Agriculture More Than Ever, 2017. Image used with permission.



Agriculture More Than Ever, 2017b. Image used with permission.

Other texts presented specific data intended to refute misinformation and decay consumers avoidance and negative attitudes. These claims were designed to expose consumers to factual and objective counterattitudinal information, for instance:

Fact: *The use of growth hormones in milk production is not allowed in Canada.*

Why this is important: *While some other countries have approved use of the growth hormone recombinant bovine somatotropin (rBST) to increase milk production, it is not approved for sale in Canada, and this has created confusion for consumers.*

Advocate message: *The standards for Canadian milk are among the highest in the world for safety and quality. Thanks to improved genetics and advancements in technology, Canadian dairy farmers have been able to increase milk production while still maintaining quality without the need for added hormones. (Everything you need to know about hormones, in one place, 2018).*

Myth: *GMOs are not thoroughly tested before being commercially available.*

Fact: *GMOs must undergo extensive testing before being approved for sale. As Health Canada states, “foods from genetically modified plants are subject to a far higher level of regulatory oversight and of scientific requirements than traditionally bred plants.”*

Truth: *Canada’s food system has strict standards for safety and quality. GMOs are certainly no exception to these standards and undergo more rigorous safety assessments than non-GMO varieties. It typically takes seven to 10 years of research, development, and testing before a GMO can be approved for sale in Canada. The science-based evaluation process ensures that approved GMOs are safe for humans, animals, and the environment. (Dispelling myths about GMOs, 2018)*

Transforming Farmers Into Credible Sources

The texts outlined in the previous section created a body of facts and statistics. As noted, this collection of facts and data presents numbers that are sound and logical and back up the idea that consumers should support Canadian agriculture. However, as Thota and Wright (2006) suggested, facts and figures on their own are not very persuasive. In order to be persuasive, the message needs to come from a credible source (Thota & Wright, 2006). When it came to the agriculture industry, everyday consumers were rejecting the validity of data and information from sources within the scientific or business community. For instance, when food companies had scientists criticize the Food Babe’s ideas on food as pseudoscience and chemophobia and claim that “nothing she writes is evidence-based” (Food Science Babe, 2020), the amount of Food Babe followers remained largely unchanged (Purvis, 2014). And, Monsanto’s attempts to have experts correct misinformation led to a flurry of consumers and consumer groups claiming that Monsanto was “greenwashing” (exaggerating facts and lying) (e.g., ASEED, 2016) and “ghostwriting” independent reviews of its products (e.g., Buyniski, 2020). Moreover, a report from the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine highlighted how the consensus among scientific experts in the United States was not translating down to the consumer: While the scientific experts reported that GMs were safe, only 13% of consumers reported that they thought that GM foods were nontoxic. These examples point to “the death of expertise” (Nichols, 2017) - people increasingly rejecting the validity of experts within the scientific or business community.

AMTE noted this death of expertise phenomenon but believed that farmers might be able to become credible sources that could influence the beliefs and attitudes of consumers. Our

analysis shows how AMTE initiated a series of strategies designed to position farmers as trustworthy and credible sources of information. First, they worked to highlight similarities between farmers and the consumers that were questioning them. AMTE introduced farmers as parents, environmentalists, and everyday people struggling like the rest of us, rather than as scientists or business people. Many texts released by AMTE focused on how farmers were “regular moms working to raise their children,” and “proud fathers teaching their children.” One video opened with this:

Hi, I'm Lyndsay Smith, and I'm a mother, a consumer, and an advocate for the Canadian beef industry. This is my beautiful daughter, Madison. Like many parents, my concerns include providing a nutritious balanced diet, as well as ensuring my daughter grows up in a healthy, safe environment. When I think of the 83,000 Canadian beef producers, I realize that there are a lot of similarities between my concerns as a parent and their concerns as a beef producer. Canadian beef producers are also concerned with raising healthy, safe Canadian beef. (Smith, 2012)

AMTE also released texts that highlighted farmers as citizens concerned about the environment.

And I think it's really important that people know that we are the stewards of the land. We love the land that they graze, we love the cattle and we are conscious of the fact that we need to fulfill feeding the world a high nutrient dense protein. And that's what we do.

CleanFARMS is best known for operating its successful empty pesticide and fertilizer container program. Since 1989, over 100 million containers have been collected at 1,000 collection sites across the country. (Timmer, 2015)

Moreover, AMTE posted messages that showed people that farmers and consumers were more similar than different. For example, one post shared about “Farmer Tim”, an Ontario dairy producer who occasionally struggles with his mental health. Tim’s stories about daily life on his farm including how he is feeling and how farming affects his mental health has more than 40,000 followers. Tim states: “I share that I’m a consumer, too. I go to the grocery store and I have a family and I have good days and bad days” (Connecting with others through our mental health stories, 2018). Repeated posts like these helped to create similarities and gain consumer trust by showing people that consumers and farmers are much more the same than different.

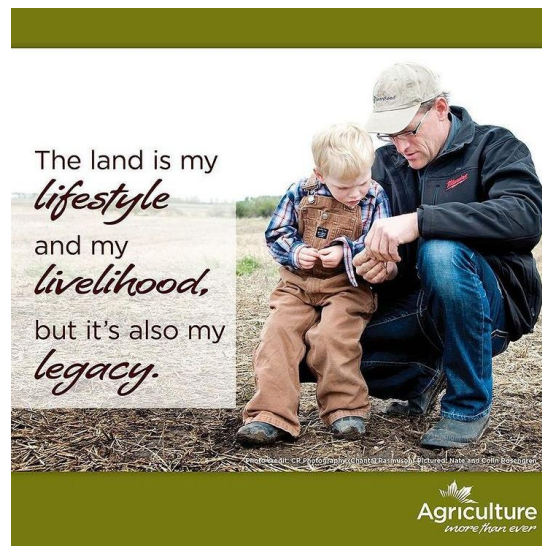
In addition to highlighting similarities, AMTE built the superiority of the farmers. AMTE noted how farmers were superior sources of information because they were embedded in the life and often had been for many generations. Additionally, many texts referenced the farmer’s additional credentials such as certified crop advisor designation, agriculture degrees, and advanced agricultural courses. For instance:

Education is really important in agriculture and particularly on our farm. We both have a university degree in Agriculture Science. It's given us the ability to think critically in a way that we didn't before and expose us to new experiences and people that could help us advance the farm. (Pedrick, 2012)

Building Positive Affect

Thus far we have argued that providing credible information and transforming farmers into credible sources are key to combatting and decaying consumer grudges. The data excerpts presented above show how AMTE followed Thota and Wright's (2006) suggestion about having credible sources provide trustworthy information. AMTE also engaged in an additional strategy, they worked to build positive affect. The goal behind Ag More Than Ever was *"to improve public perception of our industry so ag can attract the people, investment and public trust it needs to reach its full potential. While this goal is admirable, how do we, as an industry, achieve it? People's perceptions won't change just by us asking them to – we need facts to back up why they should appreciate what ag brings to the table. But facts and figures on their own don't work either – people also need to make an emotional connection to something to truly appreciate it."* Specifically, our analysis suggests that AMTE helped to build positive affect by releasing multimodal images, encouraging conversations, and posting many images of children.

First, our analysis reveals that AMTE posted multimodal messages (texts that combined words and images). These multimodal images were both verbal and visual and made readers cognitively process the information in order to comprehend the message. Neither the text nor the image alone communicates the meaning. However, the element of surprise inherent in the combination contributes to the message's emotional appeal, for instance:



Agriculture More Than Ever, 2016. Image used with permission.



We all live off the land.

Let's work together to find
common ground.



Agriculture More Than Ever, 2016a. Image used with permission.

“We have not inherited the earth
from our fathers; **we are borrowing
it from our children.**”
– Lester Brown



Agriculture More Than Ever, 2016b. Image used with permission.

Images like these demand audience attention because some thought and effort is required to decipher the message. This, we suggest, makes readers more emotionally invested in the message and consequently more susceptible to being convinced. Since unraveling meaning gives pleasure (Lefsrud, Graves, & Phillips, 2017), consumers are more likely to be seduced by these meaning constructions.

In addition to the emotional resonance created by multimodal images and pictures of children, AMTE released texts that encouraged farmers to start conversations because conversations become meaningful. AMTE noted how communication these days tends to be by email, text messaging or social media. “*But it’s difficult to truly understand another person’s*

concerns when they are not actually physically present. It can be tempting to be impolite or rude. Worse, we are unable to empathize with the other person's situation. When engaging consumers in face to face conversations about food, something magical happens – it makes it much easier for us to share our experiences and feelings” (Before the Plate, 2018). Yet, AMTE was careful to try and balance the idea that farmers should be having conversations and teaching consumers about agriculture with the message that it was important not to lecture. Notable, in the data, were a number of instances where AMTE asked farmers to temper their desire to lecture. For instance:

There is a difference between starting a conversation with “I love ag because....” Versus “You should love ag because...” The first choice moves the dialogue from telling to sharing, and when we share, we're inviting people in. Several of my farmer friends have mentioned lately in their Facebook status, “If you ate today, thank a farmer”, and I get where they're coming from but I have a slightly different message to share. If you take time to look for “made in Canada” or the “little blue cow” on the food you put into your cart at the grocery store, THANK YOU for being our customer. By intentionally selecting groceries made domestically you are supporting Canadian Agri-businesses, many of which are small family-run businesses like the one I work on. So, don't worry about thanking me, I thank you for being my customer. Thank you for looking for Canadian product on the store shelf. (Giving Thanks, 2014)

On top of using multimodal images and promoting face-to-face conversations, AMTE also used pictures of children. It has been shown that readers tend to give greater attention, are pleased by, and more motivated to process those messages that contain visually arresting images (Mothersbaugh, Huhmann, & Franke, 2002; Toncar & Munch, 2001; Lerner & Keltner, 2000). A comparison of the Instagram posts released during the same period of time showed that posts that featured children received on average over 2.2 times more “likes” than posts that presented facts, statistics, or pictures of adults. This, we argue, suggests that consumers emotionally identified with the images of children and helped AMTE's message to get noticed. AMTE posted many images of children. For example:



Barstownmiller, 2019. Image used with permission.



Lazymbarranch, 2018. Image used with permission.



Samantha Piersma, 2018. Image used with permission.

DISCUSSION

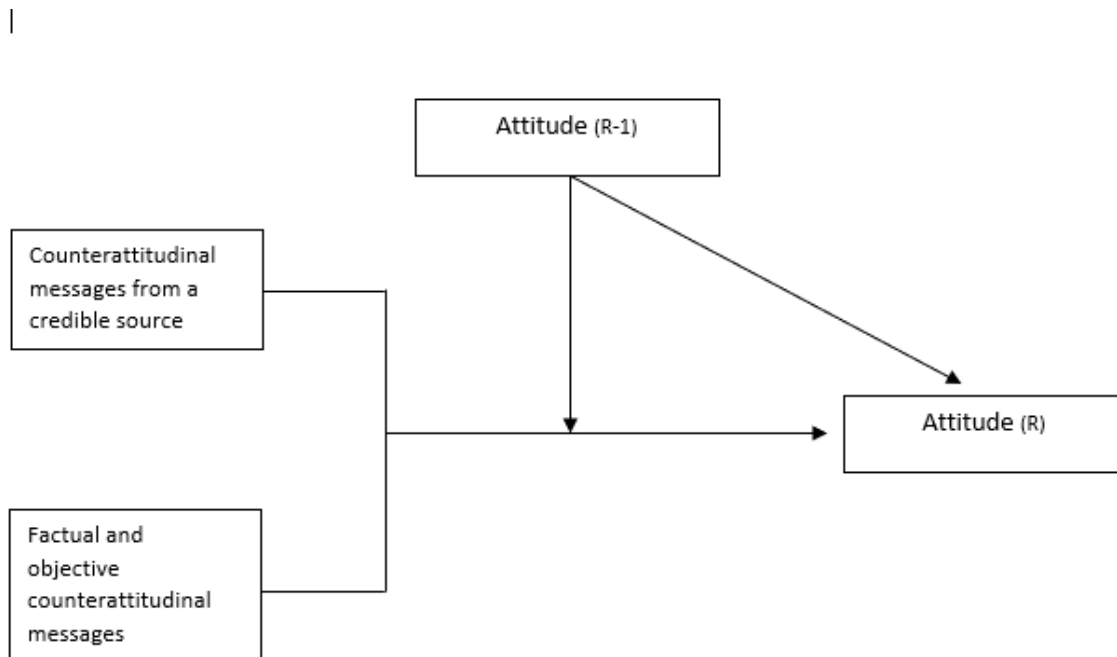
This study was motivated by the desire to address an important shortcoming that we had noticed in the consumer behavior literature; notably, the limited empirical research conducted to date on the process involved in reducing or reversing consumer grudges. We studied the social organization called AgMoreThanEver and uncovered the process involved in diminishing grudges. First, they released texts that presented objective information about the benefits of modern

agriculture and exposed consumers to factual counterattitudinal information. Second, AMTE initiated strategies that helped consumers perceive farmers as credible sources worthy of listening to when forming their opinions about Canadian agriculture. Third, AMTE built positive affect by releasing multimodal images, encouraging conversations, and posting many images of children. We will elaborate the contributions, implications, limitations, and future directions suggested by these findings.

Contributions

First and foremost, our study contributes to the grudgeholding literature. Thota and Wright (2006) noted that “grudgeholding and avoidance can be quite costly to business and industry [and] it would be in their best interests to understand the process by which grudgeholding can be reduced” (p. 96). However, until now, relatively little attention has been given to the process of decaying grudgeholding even though it is of growing importance in a practical sense. Specifically, consumer grudgeholding and consumer retaliation are highly relevant given the ubiquity of social media in the Digital Era (Lau, 2003). By empirically exploring a case of grudge decay, we extend upon Thota and Wright’s (2006) theory.

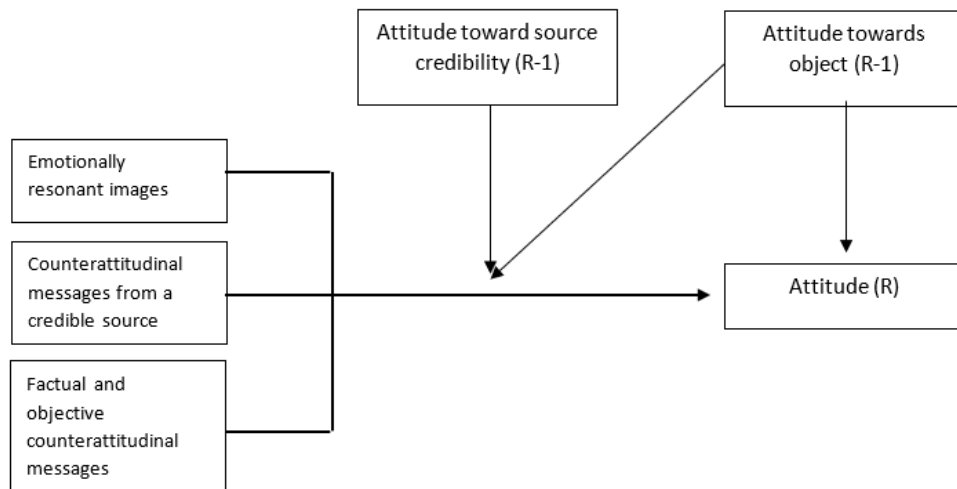
Figure 2: Thota & Wright’s (2006) Original Framework



We, like Thota and Wright (2006), find that having credible sources provide trustworthy information is a key step in the grudgeholding decay process. However, while Thota and Wright (2006) contended that “if a message originates from an expert or objective source, that message influences beliefs more than the same message from a non-expert source” (p. 93), the world has changed since the Thota & Wright (2006) article. Since the Thota and Wright (2006) article, trust in traditional media sources has declined precipitously (Gottfried & Liedke, 2021). Additionally, more consumers obtain their news from social media sources (Walker & Matsa, 2021). Specifically

in Canada, surveys show that Canadian consumers trust in mainstream media has declined and now more than half of Canadian respondents get their news from social media (Bricker, 2021; Edelman, 2021; Reuters & Oxford, 2020). As trust in experts has declined, so has trust in people (Rainie & Perrin, 2019), but as AMTE found, there are ways to bridge that gap and improve source credibility. Specifically, our analysis suggests that AMTE created new “experts”, in this case farmers, who were able to connect with consumers through stories. They created resonance with the consumers and established trust about their own credibility as farmers and as people who care about the welfare of their farmland and families². They were persuaded because AMTE made farmers both similar and superior to the everyday consumer, thus making claims more intuitively persuasive.

Figure 3: Modification to Thota & Wright’s (2006) Framework



Additionally, our study extends Thota and Wright’s theorizing by adding the importance of ‘emotion work’ (cf. Hochschild, 1983) - work that evokes (provoking a desired feeling which is initially absent) or suppresses (minimizing an undesired feeling which is initially present) emotion (e.g., Creed et al., 2014; Sadeh & Zilber, 2019; Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017). While emotion has been studied by micro-level organizational behavior scholars (see Lerner et al., 2015), it has received less attention in the consumer grudgeholding literature. Yet our study suggests that it is influential; emotion “persuade[s] when the facts alone do not” (Katula, 2003, p. 9). Emotion grabs an audience’s attention (Green, Babb, & Alpaslan, 2008) and dominates in assessments and decision-making processes (Keltner, Oatley & Jenkins, 2014). However, while our study suggests that emotional resonance is key, our study also suggests that emotional resonance on its own is not sufficient. AMTE built both cognitive and emotional resonance. Furthermore, our case supports

² A CCFI 2019 report shows that 71% of Canadians hold farmers and producers responsible for providing credible information.

and extends Goodrick, Jarvis, and Reay's (2020) finding that persuasion involves incorporating different emotions into rhetorical appeals over time. However, while Goodrick et al. (2020) found that attempts to persuade involved invoking fear, hope, and shame, in this AMTE case pride, gratitude, love, and fear were the dominant emotions.

Furthermore, we provide insights that are potentially beneficial to practice. Abductive research involves "suggesting that something may be" (Taylor, Torugsa, and Arundell, 2018, p. 209) and thus we suggest that AMTE was effective for a number of reasons. First, we observed that AMTE used many visual images and multimodal messages, especially in the later years of our study. Kids playing in mud puddles, babies tucked in to the corner of the combine, family meals being held out in the fields are all examples of the images, posted by AMTE, which received many likes, heart emojis, and comments like "*we love our farmers.*" These images ushered into the public realm aspects of farm life that are hidden away, habitually ignored, or routinely disconnected from urban consumers. These images evoked emotions which altered the propensity of consumers to listen to farmers and accept facts and information they presented as credible. The emotional component of these images gave them greater impact and persuasive potential than solely word-based ones (Adesope & Nesbit, 2012; Rosch, 1975; Sojka & Giese, 2006). Moreover, the texts AMTE released were nuanced, the consumer had to make an effort to decipher the message. This, we propose, made consumers become more emotionally invested in the message and more susceptible to re-examining their beliefs and attitudes (Olson & Goodnight, 1994). However, the texts were not too complex or dissimilar to readers. AMTE was careful to balance nuance and subtlety against the risk of the consumer failing to decipher the message and subsequently rejecting the possibility of being persuaded.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As with any piece of research, the study described in this article is not without limitations. One limitation is that the findings derive from an 'extreme case' (Stake, 2005) of grudgeholding characterized by unique contextual elements. We can not say whether our findings are generalizable. Unlike other industries, a century of change had moved us from a society where more than 50% of members were directly connected to a farm to a society where less than 2% are (Farm & Food Care, 2017). Agriculture is an industry that few consumers understand or are directly connected to. That being said, we contend that our proposed extension to Thota and Wright's (2006) framework is not applicable only within the agriculture industry. Indeed, the fast pace of change and advanced technologies that are now a part of most industries is decreasing all consumer's understanding of these industries. This suggests that our findings are likely to be informative for other industries. Further, we suggest that this process may actually be easier to apply to other industries. Creating new "experts", evoking specific emotions, and altering the propensity of individuals to accept facts and information as credible is likely to be quicker and easier in industries in which the grudges are less extreme. This, of course, needs to be further tested.

Another limitation pertains to the issue of whether the process we uncovered (1) releasing objective information, (2) transforming farmers into credible sources, and (3) building positive affect is actually decaying consumer grudges on a large scale. While AMTE's posts were replete with claims that farmers engaging consumers in conversation was helping to change consumer's perceptions and convince them that agriculture was a safe and sustainable industry, we can not present quantitative evidence that consumer resistance has been overcome in a statistically significant manner. Empirical work that explores the change in the overall percentage of posts that

are negative, as compared to positive, would be an interesting study. Adding to this, another limitation pertains to the issue of whether all three steps in the process are necessary and sufficient for grudges to decay. Due to our methodological choices, it is not possible for us to determine whether all of three steps must be present. Perhaps one of these steps is more crucial than others? Comparative work of this nature constitutes an important direction for future research.

We also feel that an interesting future extension would be to approach from the perspective of the consumer. Does/how does the consumer's prior beliefs, attitudes, and experiences impact grudgeholding decay? Dalrymple (2021) provides an interesting framework for thinking about individual beliefs. His graphic of an informational world depicts one half of the globe as an information curve with more trusted sources located in the center and less likely to be questioned. These trusted sources may include people, communities, authorities, and media. Less trusted sources appear further out from the center and require more persuasion to be convinced by them, whereas sources outside of the curve are deemed untrustworthy (Dalrymple, 2021). The other half of the globe depicts a plausibility curve where central and more believable are claims that "conform to what an individual experiences, already believes, and wants to believe" (Dalrymple, 2021). These require the least amount of evidence before being trusted, similar to the biased assimilation and attribute weighting discussed in the resistance to persuasion portion of Thota and Wright's (2006) article. As we addressed aspects that affect perception of source credibility, future researchers could delve into consumer side facilitators and barriers to overcoming avoidance and grudgeholding behaviors. For example, how do their beliefs about the industry, company, product or brand affect grudgeholding decay? Or, do Porter's Five Forces play a role – that is, if a consumer is more readily able to find a substitute, is it harder to decay their grudgeholding than if they have few alternatives? Thota and Wright's (2006) model notes that the change in attitude also relies on the initial attitude of the grudge holder and reviews some of the literature on resistance to persuasion due to people perceiving information in line with their prior attitudes (pp. 92-93). Is the resistance of these attitudes to change based entirely on the strength of said attitude or do other factors facilitate grudgeholding decay, such as personality (e.g. Haugtvedt & Petty, 1992)? Recent research using the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) provides some additional avenues to explore in relation to changing attitudes, attitude strength, and attitude-related behaviors (Susmann et al., 2021).

Finally, we extended the consumer grudgeholding decay process by suggesting that it also involves building credibility and positive affect. Yet, with our data, we are not able to say how long this process takes. Nor, are we able to suggest how many multimodal images or images of children need to be viewed, or how many conversations need to take place, before a consumer's negative attitudes are diminished. Future research could usefully examine the process over time and analyze the amount of images and conversations that need to be viewed and engaged in before attitudes change.

CONCLUSION

While hard to measure, many suggest that the dollar loss to the industry as a result of "grudges" against the Canadian agriculture industry have been fairly significant. The ag industry's success depends first and foremost on consumer satisfaction, which is the telos, or ultimate goal of marketing strategy (Larsen & Wright, 2020). Happy consumers buy more; unhappy consumers stop buying. Not only that, they also voice their opinions, influencing the purchasing choices of others. Thus, it is of crucial importance to develop theory about what influences consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Previous research on grudgeholding focused on how credible and

factual counterattitudinal messages can decay grudgeholding. But, as trust in traditional information sources has declined and the use of social media as a primary news source has increased, source credibility has become more subjective. Social media has become a platform where consumers look for information. This case study of AgMoreThanEver provides insights for how companies and organizations can use images and stories to elevate credibility and create resonance with consumers. It also delves more into how social media can invoke positive emotions to change consumer attitudes. Together, these strategies add more granularity to Thota and Wright's (2006) grudgeholding decay framework.

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