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***Stewart, R.*[1]**

[1]County Extension Coordinator, University of Georgia, Lincolnton, Georgia, 30817

Describing Georgia Horse Owner Communication Source and Channel Preferences: A Preliminary Study

Abstract

This quantitative survey explores horse owner information-seeking behaviors in Georgia by identifying demographic patterns in information preferences, describing factors influencing source selection, and evaluating perceptions of information channels. Findings reveal that accuracy, practicality, and current research are key factors influencing source selection, while social factors such as peer recommendations are less important. Despite perceiving high-cost channels like in-person events as more useful, respondents primarily relied on free sources such as social media and the Internet. These findings can guide Extension professionals in designing communication strategies for horse owners.

Keywords: communication, education, Extension, horse owner, information

Introduction

The U.S. equine population includes an estimated 7.2 million horses owned by 2 million Americans, contributing $122 billion in economic impact (AHP, 2018). Despite the availability of Extension resources, only 58% or fewer horse industry respondents use

academic institutions for information (Hartmann et al., 2017; Martinson et al., 2006; Spahn, 2005). Veterinarians are the primary source of information for horse industry respondents, but the equine veterinary industry faces a severe shortage, particularly in rural areas (AAEP, 2022; Hartmann et al., 2017). While horse industry respondents express interest in learning about equine management, research has not definitively identified their preferred channels for receiving this information (AHP, 2018; Greene et al., 2023; Hartmann et al., 2017; Landreth and Miller, 2009; Martinson et al., 2006).

Theoretical framework. The theoretical framework of this study combined social exchange theory and uses and gratifications theory. Extension clients often use a combination of different sources and channels to access information (Israel and Wilson, 2006). Social exchange theory (SET) can be used to frame the decision-making process employed by horse industry respondents seeking equine management information. The SET proposes that the major force in interpersonal relationships is the satisfaction of self-interest and that individuals seek to maximize benefits and minimize costs (West and Turner, 2021). Prior research suggests that Extension clients selectively use sources and channels of information with high benefits and low costs (Israel and Wilson, 2006). Researchers were able to establish that Florida horse industry respondents rely on four basic sets of information sources, with Extension included in only one of the four (Israel and Wilson, 2006). The study also found that horse industry respondents use a wide variety of communication channels, but channel selection did not explicitly align with the cost-benefit framework from SET theory, implying that Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and affective motivations may also play a role in resource selection and use (Israel and Wilson, 2006; Katz et al., 1973; West and Turner, 2021).

UGT can be used to describe the knowledge-seeking behavior of individuals and how they choose sources to meet their cognitive, affective, personal, tension release, and social needs (Katz et al., 1973). The UGT implies that horse industry respondents are active decision-makers whose information-seeking behaviors are directed by needs fulfillment (West and Turner, 2021). The UGT frames not only what sources and channels of information are preferred by horse industry respondents but also the

motivations that drive engagement. Extension resources often seek to fill cognitive needs by providing clear, relevant, and applicable equine management information that meets immediate on-farm needs. However, horse industry respondents may seek to fill affective needs that resonate emotionally such as storytelling of Georgia's equine industry, social needs of building community with other horse industry respondents, or personal needs by increasing their confidence and competence in managing their horses. If the communication methods employed by Extension do not adequately meet horse owner needs, they are likely to seek alternative sources that better align with their expectations.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify what sources and channels of educational content relating to horses are used by Georgia's equine industry. The research objectives were:

1) Identify demographic patterns in Georgia's equine industry information preferences.
2) Describe factors affecting information source preferences of Georgia's equine industry.
3) Evaluate user perceptions of information channels used by Georgia's equine industry.

Methods

Study design

This study used an online survey (Qualtrics, LLC, Provo, UT) to identify which sources and channels of information regarding equine management were most commonly used by Georgia horse owners in the last year. Study respondents were contacted via email using the three-contact method suggested by Dillman's Tailored Design Method (Dillman, 2000; Martinson et al., 2006). The first invitation to respondents included a cover letter inviting participation in the research project and a link to the survey instrument on November 7, 2024. A second contact was made on November 11, 2024,

and included a reminder to all individuals asked to participate with the survey link, with a final reminder sent on November 18, 2024. After the conclusion of data collection, a thank you email was sent to all study respondents. IRB review indicated this study was not human research as it was used to inform Extension programming.

Sampling methods

The population for this pilot survey was adult horse owners in Georgia. The survey was piloted with distribution to past Georgia Equine Exchange Lunch and Learn registrants, a population size of approximately 350 individuals representing 42 Georgia counties via email. This study was conducted as part of doctoral coursework and the sample was selected for convenience and accessibility due to time limitations on data collection. The Equine Exchange program was open for anyone to join, with the only requirement to attend being internet access. Respondents were informed that they were voluntarily participating in the study and that their responses were anonymous via a disclaimer displayed at the onset of the questionnaire. After bounced emails and respondents from outside the state of Georgia were removed, a total of 44 responses were included in data analysis, a response rate of 12.6%. Unless otherwise noted, percentages are based on a total number of 44.

Survey instrument

The survey instrument was used in two previous studies and adapted to reflect modern knowledge of communication channels and sources (Israel and Wilson, 2006; Martinson et al., 2006). After adaption, the online survey (Qualtrics, LLC, Provo, UT) was reviewed by faculty members at University of Georgia and piloted to a representative sample of horse owners to establish instrument validity and reliability. The original instrument contains 33 questions designed to assess horse owner educational needs. For this study, the instrument was shortened to eight questions that focus on how frequently horse owners seek equine management information; the channels through which this information is obtained; desired related to information sources; efficacy of resources; and intention to use specified resources. The format of these questions varied but included five-point Likert scales, ranking items, and selecting all that apply. Additionally,

demographic information was collected through seven questions regarding horse ownership and its role in the equine industry and the characteristics of individual respondents.

Data analysis

Only surveys that were fully completed by respondents from Georgia were analyzed. The survey instrument was analyzed for reliability using Cronbach's alpha, with a minimum reliability of 0.7 widely used in Extension reporting (Taber, 2018). Data analysis was conducted in SPSS (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY). Descriptive statistics of frequencies and percentages, and measures of central tendency (mean) were used to summarize demographic characteristics of respondents. Descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages were used to identify and describe the preferred source and channels of information used by survey respondents. Inferential statistics including Chi-square analysis were not conducted as the objective of the study was to describe and identify preferences, not explore relationships between variables.

Results

Objective 1: Identify demographic patterns in Georgia's equine industry information preferences.

Demographic questions were asked to identify specific characteristics of survey respondents. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of respondents identified as female, and 98% self-identified as white or Caucasian. Ages were widely distributed, with the largest categories including ages 65 and older (28%) and individuals between the ages of 45 and 54 (23%). Most respondents had completed some level of higher education, with 37% possessing a bachelor's degree and 35% possessing a graduate or professional degree.

Survey respondents were asked to identify their primary involvement in the equine industry. The largest proportion, sixty-seven percent (67%), identified as horse owners, followed by equine facility owners or managers (12%). Data regarding horse use

(recreation, competition, breeding) was not collected in this study. Other roles in the industry included non-horse owners who lease or take lessons (7%), industry professionals (5%), academia (5%), and horse enthusiasts who are otherwise uninvolved in the industry (5%). Respondents were also asked to self-identify their experience level with equine management. None (0%) of the survey respondents identified as beginners, who have no or very little experience with horses. Novices, with some experience with equine care and riding, represented 16% of respondents. The largest number of respondents self-identified as intermediate (49%), or experienced in equine care, training, and riding. An additional 35% of responses identified as advanced, or very experienced in equine care, behavior, health, training, and riding.

The survey asked respondents to identify the information-seeking behaviors they engaged in throughout the prior year. First, respondents were asked to report how frequently they had horse-related questions in the last year. Thirty-seven percent (37%) indicated having questions several times (every 2-3 months) in the last year, while 28% indicated having questions weekly. Others indicated having horse-related questions rarely (1-2 times; 16%), monthly (14%), and daily (5%). Similarly, most survey respondents were very interested (42%) or extremely interested (47%) in obtaining information about horses. Respondents self-reported the frequency with which they sought information about horses in the last year, with 33% doing so weekly, 26% daily, 19% monthly, 14% several times (every 2-3 months), and 9% rarely (1-2 times).

Objective 2: Describe factors affecting information source preferences of Georgia's equine industry.

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of ten specific characteristics when selecting a source of horse information (Table 1). Respondents were not asked to rank these characteristics against one another. The information source preference construct had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.702, which is consistent with the cutoff of 0.70 from prior research. Accuracy (93%), use of current research (62%), and provision of practical advice (78%) were most frequently identified as "very important." Accessibility, cost, and access to specialists were commonly rated as "somewhat" (9%; 22%; 20%) or "moderately important" (44%; 33%; 38%). In contrast, characteristics such as affiliation,

education level, peer recommendations, and existing relationships were generally considered “not at all important” (11%; 7%; 4%; 11%), “not very important” (11%; 4%; 16%; 36%), or “somewhat important” (22%; 31%; 36%; 36%). Finally, respondents were asked how likely they are to use a new source of horse information in the next year. Most respondents were extremely likely (33%), very likely (33%), or somewhat likely (30%) to do so.

Table 1. Information source characteristics valued by horse owners during information-seeking.

Source Characteristic	**Not at all important**	**Not very important**	**Somewhat important**	**Moderately important**	**Very important**
Accuracy	0%	0%	0%	7%	93%
Education level	7%	4%	31%	31%	27%
Affiliation	11%	11%	22%	22%	33%
Use of Current Research	2%		7%	29%	62%
Accessibility	0%	0%	9%	44%	47%
Practical Application	0%	0%	2%	20%	78%
Cost	0%	4%	22%	33%	40%
Existing Relationship	11%	36%	36%	13%	4%
Specialist Access	2%	4%	20%	38%	36%
Peer-recommended	4%	16%	36%	29%	16%

Objective 3: Evaluate user perceptions of information channels used by Georgia’s equine industry.

The survey asked respondents several questions regarding nine channels through which they may access horse information. The channel usefulness construct had a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.75, which is higher than the suggested 0.70 cutoff. First, respondents were asked to indicate how useful they perceive different communication

channels to be for receiving horse information (Table 2). Respondents indicated that in-person educational events (38%), internet or websites (36%), and paid consultations (31%) were “extremely useful” channels for accessing information. Other channels were considered “very useful”, including scientific publications or research articles (58%), extension services (49%), and print media (38%). Respondents indicated that word of mouth, podcasts, and social media were “not at all useful” or “not very useful”.

Table 2. Perceived usefulness of information channels for accessing equine information among horse owners

Information Channel	Not at all useful	Not very useful	Sometimes useful	Very useful	Extremely useful
In-person educational events (expos, field days, farm tours, etc)	0%	4%	27%	31%	38%
Paid consultation with veterinarians, trainers, nutritionists, consultants, etc.	2%	4%	18%	44%	31%
Extension services (consultations with agent, farm calls, etc.)	4%	4%	18%	49%	27%
Scientific publications or research articles	2%	4%	7%	58%	29%
Internet or Websites	0%	0%	22%	42%	36%
Word of mouth from other horse owners.	2%	9%	47%	20%	22%
Print media (books, magazines, newsletters)	4%	4%	38%	38%	16%
Podcasts	2%	13%	49%	27%	9%
Social Media	4%	29%	44%	11%	11%

In addition to identifying the perceived usefulness of different communication, respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they accessed these channels in the last year. The most frequently used communication channel, accessed monthly or more

frequently, was the internet or websites (71%), followed by social media (49%) and word of mouth (47%). For social media specifically, respondents indicated a preference for using Facebook (53%) and YouTube (35%) to access horse information. Other channels were used rarely (1-2 times per year) or several times (every 2-3 months), including in-person educational events (67%), paid consultations (64%), and scientific publications or research articles (53%). Many respondents indicated they had not accessed horse information via podcasts (47%) or Extension resources (33%) in the last year.

Discussion

The results of this study provide insight into the information-seeking behaviors, source preferences, and channel perceptions of Georgia's equine industry as framed by Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT).

Respondent demographics in this study are consistent with prior findings in the U.S. The majority of survey respondents were female (88%) and white or Caucasian (98%), similar to prior findings that women dominate horse ownership and participation in equine activities in the U.S. (AHP, 2018). Respondents were also highly educated, with 72% holding a bachelor's degree or higher, reflecting earlier studies that suggest higher levels of education among horse owners compared to the general population (AHP, 2018; Martinson et al., 2006). Age distribution was diverse with the majority of respondents over 65 years of age (28%) and between 45 and 54 (23%), which supports previous findings that involvement in the equine industry peaks among middle-aged and older adults, which may have different educational preferences and needs than their younger counterparts (Hartmann et al., 2017). In addition, the predominant role of respondents as horse owners (67%) and high self-reported levels of equine experience (84% identifying as intermediate or advanced) is consistent with prior observations that experienced individuals are often highly engaged in information-seeking behaviors (Israel and Wilson, 2006). In alignment with prior research, survey respondents reported having frequent questions regarding horses and a high level of interest in horse-related

information (AHP, 2018; Greene et al., 2023; Hartmann et al., 2017; Landreth and Miller, 2009; Martinson et al., 2006).

While SET emphasizes the prioritization of low-cost, high-benefit resources, respondents in this study placed greater importance on the source's accuracy of information, practical advice, and the use of current research. This finding aligns with UGT's proposition that information-seeking behaviors are driven by the fulfillment of cognitive needs, such as acquiring knowledge and practical skills, rather than solely focusing on minimizing costs (Israel and Wilson, 2006; Katz et al., 1973; West and Turner, 2021). Additionally, the low perceived importance of peer recommendations and existing relationships on source selection suggests that, for this population, the fulfillment of social needs and the impact of opinion leaders play a smaller role than what has previously been suggested (Katz et al., 1973).

An interesting trend emerged regarding the communication channel preferences of survey respondents. The SET and prior research have shown Extension clients frequently prefer information sources that maximize benefits and minimize costs (Israel and Wilson, 2006). Contrary to SET's assumption that individuals will pursue the highest-benefit options, respondents reported using low-cost resources like social media and internet sources most frequently—even though these were perceived as less useful. Meanwhile, higher-cost formats (in-person events, paid consultations, scientific publications) were viewed as highly useful but used far less often. This pattern suggests that accessibility and convenience are more important than information quality when cost or effort is a factor, even among users who value credibility and depth.

This contradiction highlights a significant concern for Extension: respondents want research-based, practical information but may not access it if delivery mechanisms are perceived as inconvenient or costly. Respondents also reported frequent information-seeking behavior—daily or weekly—yet used only a few channels (internet, social media) regularly, suggesting that convenience is more important than perceived value of information provided. These findings reinforce the need for Extension to consider cost-benefit perceptions in educational content design and delivery.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this study provide valuable information regarding the sources and channels of equine educational content used by horse owners in Georgia. The findings of this study suggest a need for communication strategies for Georgia's horse owners that leverage widely accessible, low-cost channels while maintaining the accuracy, practicality, and timeliness of information. Specifically, communication efforts should focus on using the internet, websites, and social media platforms, particularly Facebook and YouTube, to provide up-to-date, research-based content that is widely applicable and relevant for horse owners. Content should be developed using source validation, expert review, clear references and citations, provided on a regular and consistent basis, and use examples or case studies to enhance understanding of the application.

These findings highlight an opportunity for Extension to better engage horse owners with educational resources and programs. Extension communication efforts to this audience should emphasize accessibility and flexibility, focusing on maximizing the cost benefit analysis for horse owners. This audience recognizes the high value of face-to-face interactions but often experience higher costs and barriers with participation in these events. When planning in-person events, care should be taken to address logistical needs such as time of day, location, and cost of attendance to reduce as many barriers as possible for participants. Alternatively, the use of hybrid or virtual programs and consultations may preserve the benefits of individualized learning while increasing accessibility and convenience.

In addition to face-to-face options, Extension horse information should be provided in a variety of low-cost, easily accessed formats such as social media, the Internet, and through Extension websites. By offering clear, practical education targeting real-world equine management issues through the channels horse owners prefer, Extension can better engage this audience.

A key finding from the data was the gap between the high perceived usefulness of in-person events and paid consultations and their infrequent use by respondents to seek horse-related information. This discrepancy highlights an opportunity for further

research to explore the underlying factors driving these preferences. Future studies could investigate this through methods such as economic threshold analysis, logistic assessments, sensitivity analysis, and cost-benefit comparisons to better understand the barriers that prevent respondents from utilizing these higher-cost channels despite their perceived value.

Finally, this study is limited by a small sample size and low response rate. Respondents represent primarily older, white, highly educated individuals, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should emphasize a broader, more representative sampling procedure to better reflect the diversity of the equine industry.

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