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# Targeted Social Media Strategies: The Study of Family Farms in Georgia

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## Introduction

As entrepreneurs, farmers have to wear many hats from producing to market their products. In order to capture the most value from their customers, small family farms (gross under \$250,000 according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture) sell directly to final consumers or business buyers. Competing with other family farms as well as grocery stores, their objective is to create a loyal, long-term and profitable relationship with their buyers.

Over the past two decades, farmers' communication strategy has progressively evolved to taking advantage of available digital tools such as social media platforms (Haire, 2020). Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and more have offered an incredible potential to **increase customer reach and enhance customer relationships** (Cesarani et al., 2015). According to Lohr (2015), social media also presents a powerful marketing tool for farmers to **convey their brand** built on dependable personal values and trustworthy production practices.

Sponsored by Southern Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education, our study focuses on **identifying digital platforms and contents** engaging small family farms in the State of Georgia with their local buyers. This study is part of a bigger project aiming at increasing small producers long-term profitability and buyers' retention.

## Methodology

An online survey was administered equitably in six Southern states; Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee, in December 2021, using a panel provider, Qualtrics.

OVERALL OBJECTIVE: to analyze consumer preferences and behavior when purchasing fruits and vegetables with a particular emphasis on direct marketing from local farms.

TWO APPROACHES:

1. SURVEY: A sub-part focused on digital tools. Using a Likert scale, 1820 respondents were prompted to answer **questions related to how likely they are influenced or they interact with different types of social media contents or what platform they prefer in general and with respect to local farms**. These questions allowed us to evaluate which content was the most beneficial for farmers when targeting an increase of interactions with their buyers.
2. CASE STUDY (IN-DEPTH) ANALYSES OF FARM BUSINESSES: In addition to this online survey, **we partnered with 10 small Georgia farms and recorded all their social media posts in 2021**. Based on Tafesse and Wien (2017) framework for categorizing social media posts, we collected information related to the type of posts farmers use as well as the level of interaction (like, share, comment...) with their followers.

**SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES:** To combine these two different sources of information and assess; 1. the type of posts that followers or buyers are more likely to interact with, and 2. highlight socio-demographic characteristics correlated with social media platform and content.

## SURVEY Results

Figure 1

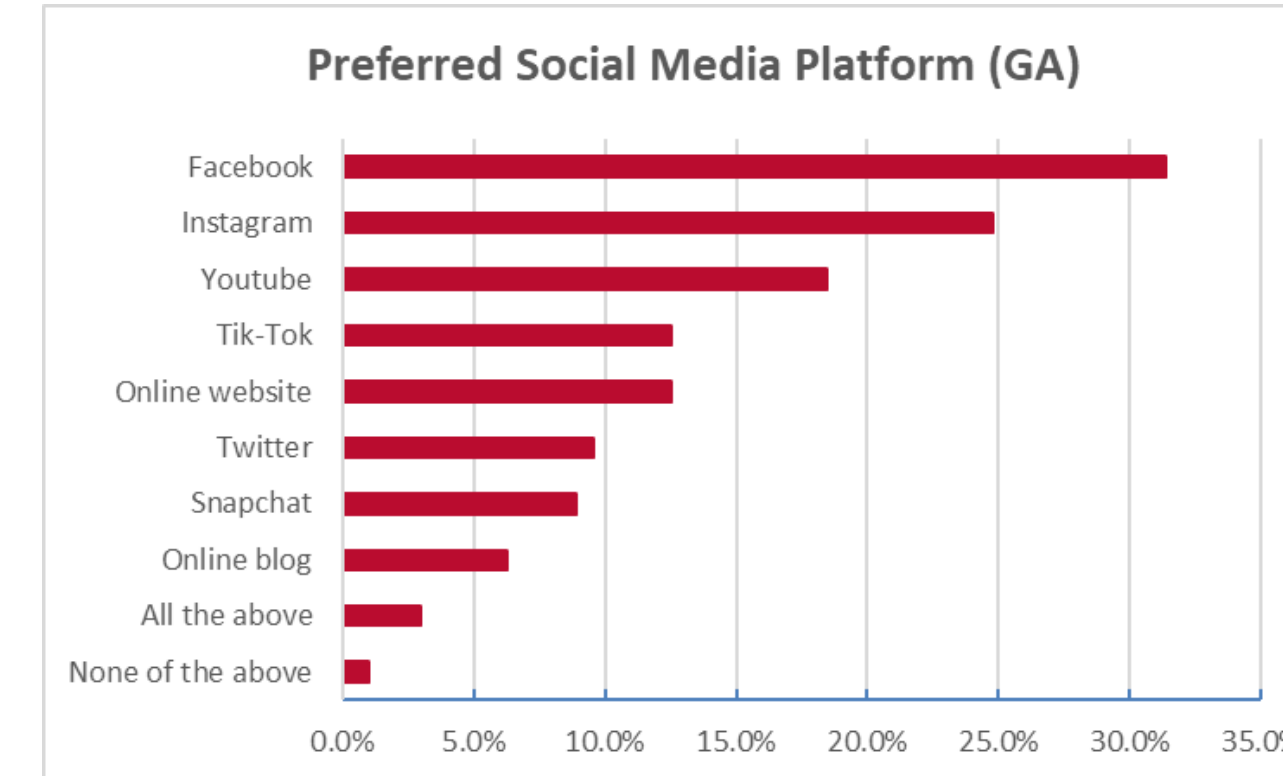


Figure 2

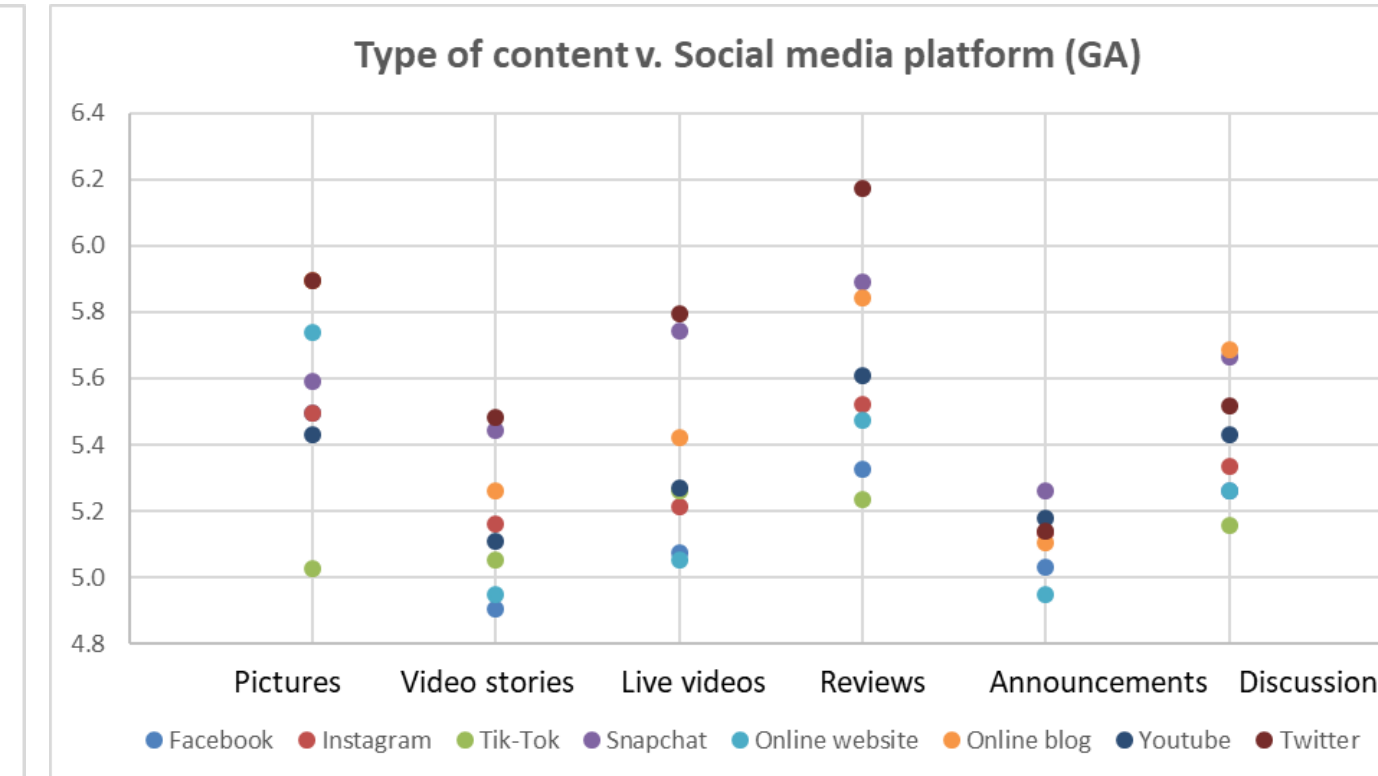


Figure 3

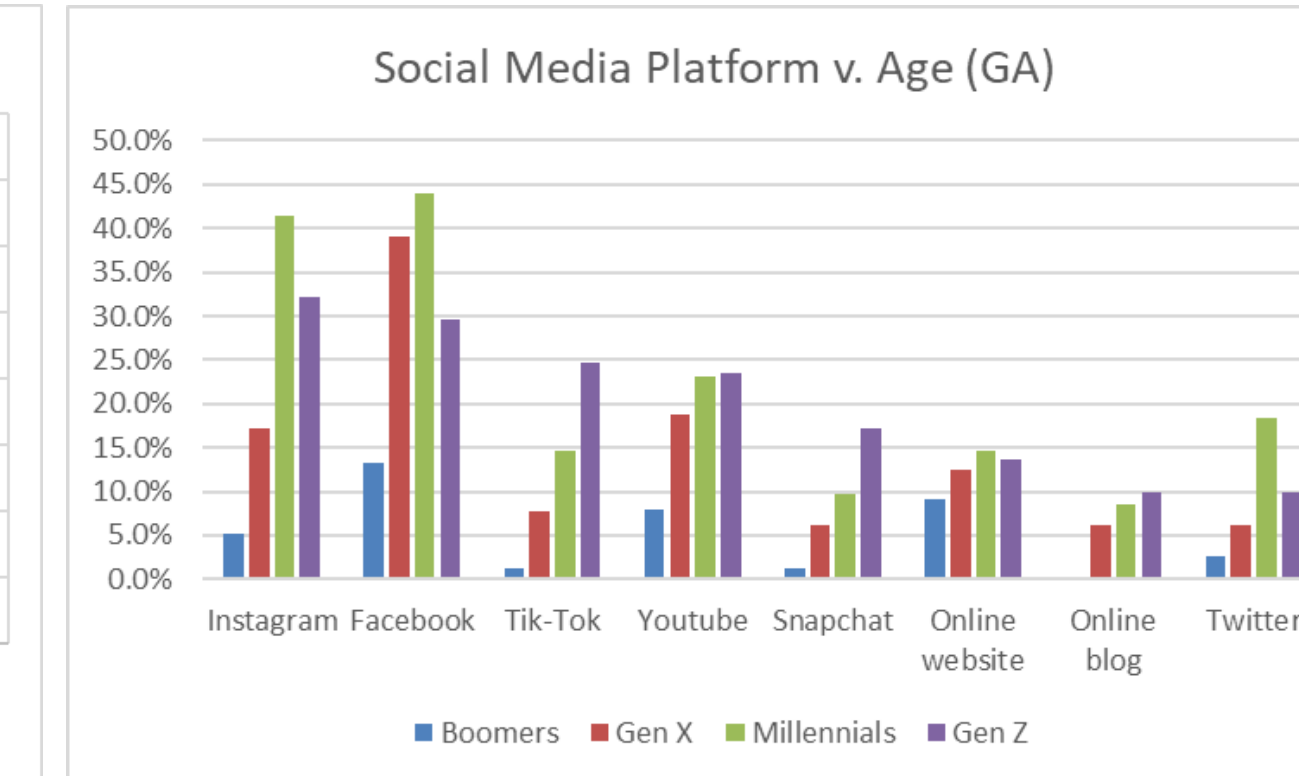


Table 1

Rating	%	Rating	%
Not at all	0.8%	Strongly disagree	5.3%
2	2.3%	Disagree	7.6%
3	9.8%	Somewhat disagree	5.3%
A moderate amount	18.2%	Neither agree nor disagree	21.2%
5	28.0%	Somewhat agree	20.5%
6	18.2%	Agree	22.7%
A great deal	22.7%	Strongly agree	17.4%

Table 2

- ✓ **Figure 1** summarizes responses to the question: "Which of the following digital platforms do you use the most to follow/to get information from local farmers?" (Georgia sample, N=303).
  - ✓ Among the social media platforms, **Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube** combine for 74.6% of the most used platforms. Facebook ranks the most beneficial (31.4%) for family farms to allocate their time resources. Instagram 24.8% and YouTube 18.5% chart the second and third most usage.
- ✓ Across all platforms and among several types of social media posts, users are easily and quickly attracted to posts with **pictures (Figure 2)**. **Reviews come second**.
- ✓ After cross-referencing the social media platform question with age, results indicate that younger generations, **Millennials and Gen Z, use more social media to follow local farms** than older generations (**Figure 3**) and **diversify their sources of information**. **Gen X** has a strong preference for Facebook (39.1%) among all other platforms.
- ✓ **Table 1** summarizes responses to the question: "How often do you look for information from/about local farmers (on social media)?" (Georgia sample, N=132).
  - ✓ 87.1% of the respondents answered they look for information on farmers through social media at least "A moderate amount".
- ✓ **Table 2** summarizes responses to the question: "Based on your most recent social media activities related to local farms, would you say: I liked, commented, and or shared a post." (Georgia sample, N=132).
  - ✓ 60.6% of the respondents at least "Somewhat agreed".

## CASE STUDY Results

The analysis of 10 small Georgia farms social media accounts (Facebook and Instagram) provide additional insights on the interactions with followers.

Content Category	Count	Total Likes	Comments	Shares	Total interactions
Production Process	159	5232 (44.96%)	213 (21.01%)	49 (16.50%)	5494
Event Opportunity	155	2837 (28.38%)	570 (56.21%)	189 (63.64%)	3596
Farm Site	62	1753 (15.06%)	122 (12.03%)	35 (11.78%)	1910
Community Interaction/Humorous	34	1397 (12.00%)	73 (7.20%)	12 (4.04%)	1482
Inspirational	7	381 (3.27%)	35 (3.45%)	6 (2.02%)	422
Political	2	37 (0.32%)	1 (0.10%)	6 (2.02%)	44
Total	419	11637	1014	297	12948

Source: Farms Social Media accounts

**Likes were by far the most observed interactions** (89.87%) with comments second (7.83%) and shares ranking last (2.29%).

In terms of type of posts, our results highlight that content centered around **production processes and learning opportunities tend to generate a lot more interactions** (mainly likes) than other type of contents related to general posts regarding the farm (15%) or the community (12%). Inspirational or political type of content seem to generate the least interaction (respectively 3.27% and 0.32%).

## Discussion

Based on these results, it seems that social media is an advantageous promotional tool for family farm businesses in Georgia. If a farmer wants to increase its consumer reach, interactions, and total following on social media, there are several components of strategy that should be considered:

- **Preference to interact with pictures over other types of posts.** Capturing pictures for content development requires the least amount of time when compared to other types of posts. Also, pictures serve as a simple way to share information compared to live video streams and discussions.
- **Greater interactions with content related to Production Process and Event Opportunities.** This means content with readily useful information about the products and the farmers' practices. Event opportunities would include sales, cooking with fresh vegetable classes, field trips for local students, and home gardening workshops.
- **Diversify the social media platforms.** Tik-Tok, Snapchat and Twitter seem to be underutilized as a part of farmers promotional tools. The online survey suggests that younger buyers more actively use these for most type of content.

### References

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