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How to raise career aspirations in farming via digital media

A closer look at social media savvy urban farmers

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Farming is facing a generational renewal problem, with an increasing proportion of farmers near retirement age and a lack of people who are able or willing to take over farms. The low percentage of young farmers in the EU and the US impairs resilience in farming and threatens food security. Findings from a study in the EU and the US identify two main challenges: a global difficulty in attracting youth into farming, and the increasing pressure on institutions to provide efficient knowledge transfer to youth via online platforms.

What is the best way to connect with Gen Y or Gen Z and pique their interest in farming? In the EU, under the Marie-Curie-funded YOUNG FARMERS project, researchers from the Leibniz Institute of Agricultural Development in Transition Economies, together with partners from the University of Chicago, and Pennsylvania State University, are working on the digital communication dimension of the generational renewal problem. With studies on urban agriculture movement, they are exploring how digital media contributes to shaping the career paths of urban and rural youth and the role of social movements in influencing career choice in farming.

Informal education initiatives, such as internships and apprenticeship programmes for those interested in farming careers, have increased in recent years. However, the average age of farmers in the EU and the US is still between 50 and 60 years. Besides economic factors such as access to land, the challenges faced by aspiring new farmers are also strongly tied to societal and cultural norms. This generational renewal problem signals a need for strategic career communication approaches, with honest conversations about the challenges – as well as the opportunities – of a farming career.

The YOUNG FARMERS Project

Today's youth are known for their extensive use of digital media, including for knowledge acquisition and sharing information on careers and jobs. Hence, it is important to explore the digital communication revolution and understand its effect on the career aspirations of the youth. Scrolling through digital media will show that

there is still a knowledge gap in interactions that can successfully influence young people's career aspirations in the farming profession.

The YOUNG FARMERS project aims to explore how digital media interactions might attract a new, younger population to farming and create opportunities for overcoming generational renewal problems, through comparative studies in the EU and the US. The outcomes of the project activities shed light on the broader question, "What can digital communications do for generational renewal in farming?". The answers are presented below under three pillars:

Pillar I:

Digital communication as a tool to establish farming as a career of choice

An interdisciplinary literature review enabled the project to explore the reported impacts of digital communication on attracting young talent towards a career in farming¹. The project used the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analysis (PRISMA) method with three objectives:

- develop an inventory of digital communication tools used to create farming careers for the youth;
- the key ideas and rationales behind these tools; and
- the reported impact of these tools in creating career initiation in farming.

The study found that mainstream online career communication supported individuals who were already within the farming profession. However, digital career communication paid little attention to fostering a wider interest in farming careers. Careers in farming could be

better integrated into digital communication strategies through online agricultural, environmental, and science communication and public engagement campaigns. The findings suggest three pathways that might promote successful online interactions:

- 1) Consideration of the changing nature of career motivations amongst today's youth is essential. The current trend toward working in sustainable sectors, which are associated with self-fulfilment and personal achievement, could be a major motivator for the youth.
- 2) Communication campaigns targeted toward specific groups such as young females, urban youths, and young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET) may help shape more positive perceptions of a farming way of life.
- 3) Highlighting innovative and commercial urban farming practices, such as greenhouses, indoor farming, and hydroponic farms, may encourage young people to pursue farming careers outside traditional rural regions. The geographic flexibility of innovative urban agriculture is reported to be attractive to young people.

Pillar II:

The value of online social movements as motivators in creating farming careers

Based on interviews with experts and young farmers in the EU (France, Greece, Portugal, Slovenia, and Cyprus), the project results were encouraging. Online social movements such as agroecology, back-to-the-land, and food movements were found to be valuable in motivating individuals to make farming career decisions.

In the context of the back-to-the-land movement, individuals migrate from urban to rural areas to adopt an alternative lifestyle, where some become involved with full-time or part-time farming. The pursuit of subjective career success contributes to a positive view of farming as a career for both professional and personal accomplishment². Digital media creates awareness of social and environmental challenges, provides inspiration

from other farmers, facilitates unplanned careers in farming, and motivates individuals to start farming as a second career or a part-time job³.

The primary results, based on interviews with experts and small-scale young farmers in the US (Pennsylvania), show that social movements can inspire those who haven't grown up on farms to make career decisions in farming. Narratives underline that alternative food movements play a role in farming career decision by providing career aspirations, online training opportunities, and career progress with online marketing opportunities. The role of social movements in career construction supported by the recent US National Young Farmers Coalition report that young farmers are motivated by environmental conservation, anti-racism, and social justice topics. Among the young farmers nationwide, 31% are located in sub-urban land that includes home gardens, urban lands, and community gardens⁴.

To gain a more profound understanding of the relationship between online social movements and career creation in farming, the YOUNG FARMERS project narrowed down the research focus. It investigated one of the important alternative food movements: the urban agriculture movement.

Pillar III:

The portrayal of urban farmers on Instagram

Even though alternative food movements have motivated many farmers to go online about their environmental concerns, farmers are generally still learning the ropes when it comes to Instagram and other social media channels⁵. Therefore, to investigate the online communication strategies of urban farmers, the researchers first interviewed professionals from urban agriculture networks. They spoke with experts in community gardens, school farms, rooftop gardens, urban farmers market initiatives, aquaculture, and hydroponics across Pennsylvania and Chicago.



Growing Home Farms, Chicago, IL. Credit: The Female Farmer Project

Second, the researchers studied the Instagram pages of four players in urban agriculture:

- a university students' farm and farmers' market in State College;
- a high school students' farm and farmers' market in Chicago;
- a Black-owned and led nonprofit urban farm and fishery in Pittsburgh; and
- a nonprofit farmers' market initiated by chefs and urban farmers in Chicago.

A total of 1100 Instagram posts between January 2022 and January 2024 were analyzed. The initial results are as follows:

1) Urban agriculture networks are highly connective and inclusive.

Instagram accounts of urban agriculture networks serve as highly integrated and inclusive online hubs. Their posts connect with viewers through inclusive messages involving families, people of different genders, races, cultures, refugees, and marginalized groups. They connected people from all age groups and socio-demographic backgrounds in different locations. The accounts studied consistently displayed the personal values, attitudes, and beliefs of urban farmers. As one of the professionals from a nonprofit farmers' market in Chicago said:

"One of the greatest things about social media, especially when it comes to farming and farmers, is your ability to very transparently show who your farmers are. [...] And, we're able to reach a lot of people. [...] If you live in another place and are still interested in urban and sustainable agriculture [...] you can listen to our stories."

2) It is not solely about farming careers but includes multiple career exhibitors.

The Instagram accounts of urban agriculture networks highlight farming careers and also present multiple career opportunities. They connect with other careers (e.g. agricultural specialist, environmental scientist, ecologist) through online and on-site events, including workshops on farming, cooking, summer schools, field trips to urban farms, and organized dinners. Events might also include talks from different professionals such as farmers, writers, chefs, journalists, food educators, plant and food scientists, and artists.

The Instagram feeds of these accounts feature national and local professionals from urban agriculture networks, such as successful farmers, leaders, and scientists who have contributed to the agriculture sector. The feeds also include award-winning local professionals from urban gastronomy initiatives, schools, and hospitals who collaborate with urban agriculture sites. Instagram feeds of more specific and involved network participants, such as students,



Malcolm Evans, Iron Street Farm, Chicago, IL. Credit: The Female Farmer Project

interns, and graduates on their career development paths, detail their farming career experiences through short interview posts. An urban farm educator from Philadelphia said:

"We found that just getting the documentation of photos of apprentices on farms really increases the amount of engagement. [...] The written interview posts where we sort of talk through their experience, their motivations, their goals [...], we saw just some really big bumps in engagement and interest to our farming programmes."

3) Urban agriculture networks encourage a sense of responsibility.

The Instagram accounts of urban agriculture networks have been highlighting the importance of taking responsibility for the negative effects of not acting in a pro-social and pro-environmental manner. The posts convey a sense of control through messages about 'professional responsibility', 'civil responsibility', and 'personal responsibility'.

The professional responsibility messages communicate the good qualities of a profession while applying skills for, or on behalf of others, as professionals. Such posts include information on the actions taken as professionals on the topics of accessing clean energy, reducing water and pesticide use, undertaking soil testing, and reducing emissions in urban agriculture sites. The following quote illustrates this:

"Did you know synthetic fertilizers used at factory farms release a greenhouse gas 300x more potent than CO2? In response, our sustainable, local farmers are working directly to reduce emissions."

The civic responsibility messages encourage active participation in public life to improve one's community or address broader public issues beyond individual responsibility. These messages promote involvement in urban agriculture networks to enhance the community through civic actions such as donating to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), subscribing to Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), and volunteering at local food kitchens. As a consumer,



Stacey Kimmons, Legends Farm, Chicago, IL. Credit: The Female Farmer Project

one can support organized dinners, concerts, cooking demonstrations, and urban farmers' markets, especially during the winter months. This is illustrated by the Instagram text message:

"You are the patrons of local farmers during winter sales."

The self-responsibility messages were strong in terms of their sentence structure and word choice. They indicated certain behaviours by presenting ideas that aimed to be both thought-provoking and engaging, as demonstrated by the quote below:

"Sustainability is not about driving expensive electric cars. It's about making life choices on a daily basis."

General conclusions

- The current literature doesn't give much attention to the potential of digital media in attracting young people to pursue a career in farming.
- Most research focuses on supporting existing farming careers, rather than exploring how digital media can inspire people to choose farming as a career. Careers in farming could be better integrated into online agricultural, environmental, and science communication strategies.
- Online social movements play an important role in inspiring career choices in farming as well as contributing to career break adaptability.
- Social media messages from urban agriculture networks increase the awareness of the negative consequences for oneself, and others, when not acting pro-socially and pro-environmentally. These messages also encourage a sense of responsibility for self, others, and the environment.
- Urban agriculture networks represent a population interested in farming with a decreased intergenerational knowledge transition. Online profiles of urban farmers provide an opportunity for them to connect with people interested in farming and bridge this knowledge gap.

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