

Increasing Information Dependency of Farmers on Social Media; A Study On the Amritsar District of Punjab

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Abstract:

Farmers always strive for latest information and knowledge to get best crop outputs. Traditionally the most reliable source of farmers have been the fellow farmers or the most experienced farmers of their area. But modern agriculture have become more demanding and diversified. Changing environmental and societal needs have increased the challenges for the farmers. To meet the challenges of modern agriculture, farmers seek for more information from varied sources. Social media has emerged to be a reliable and implicit source of information within the farmer community. Due to easy availability and cheaper rates, India has the deepest penetration of mobile phones, smart phones and internet in the society. That's why farmers have easy accessibility to all the platforms of social media. Present study is done on the increasing dependence and reliability of farmers of Amritsar district of Punjab on various social media platforms like: YouTube, Facebook and other mobile agricultural apps. For this study primary data has been collected through survey on the farmers of the Amritsar district of Punjab. Interviews have also been conducted on Agriculture Development Officers of the district to know their perspective on the concerned issue.

Key Words: Agriculture, Social media, Information, Farmers

Introduction:

Last decade has seen a paradigm shift in the sources of information and communication. Wireless technology and internet as changed the way we used to communicate and perceive knowledge. Recent technological advancements have made a drastic impact on the way individuals communicate (Subramanian, 2018). Modes of communication have become more portable and handy, facilitating more quick exchange of information between sender and receiver. Alhadlaq(2016) says that technology comes in handy to facilitate smooth communication among individuals and businesses.

Humans are social beings and communication has always been their fundamental need. Information seeking has always been an integral part of human behaviour. There is a continuous process of generating and passing information for various social, economic, business and personal needs in the human society. Alhadlaq (2016) says that continuous exchange of information amongst the two parties increase harmony and ensures the appropriate course of action which ultimately lead to the development of the society.

Like other sections, information seeking is an integral part of farmer's behaviour also. Farmers always seek for best information available to get maximum crop outputs from their fields. Farmer's information needs are specific and objective. It is tough to generalize the information needs of the farmers. Farmers keep on venturing with different modes of information to get the best knowledge available. Recently various modes of social media have gained much popularity amongst the farmers due to their portability and approachability.

This paper focuses on how farmers are verging on the modern social media platforms to fulfil their information needs and are denying the traditional modes of information. The study tends to explain how social media platforms are helping the farmers in getting right and timely information making farming a riveting and remunerative venture.

Statement of the problem:

Information is of utmost importance to the farmers. Right and timely information help the farmers in taking right and timely decisions to get maximum crop outputs. Accuracy, timeliness and relevance determines the quality of any agricultural information. Accuracy makes the information free from bias. Timeliness means that recipients can get information when they need it, while relevance means that information is equipped with all the necessary elements and answers user's questions of what, when, where, who and how (Salau, 2013). Recent societal and environmental challenges has made agriculture much more vulnerable affair than ever before. That's why farmers are becoming more information savvy to stay updated. Madhvan (2017) says that in the changing global scenario agriculture is becoming more information oriented than ever before, and access to accurate and adequate information has become essential, for increasing agriculture productivity globally.

Punjab is an agriculture dominant state. It is known as the food basket of the country, as Punjab gives maximum grain inputs in the central grain pool. In 2014-15 Punjab contributed 116.4 lakh tonnes of wheat and 77.86 lakh tonnes of rice in the central pool. (Statistical

Abstract, Punjab. 2018). Agriculture in Punjab is supported by strong information extension system which includes State Agriculture University in Ludhiana, Krishi Vigyan Kendras in every district and Government agriculture departments at district block and village levels. Extension officers are appointed by the government to provide farmers with latest information. While state universities and KVKs are involved in constant agriculture researches to find out the solutions of various agricultural problems and issues. But still these services have limited reach and impact. India has a huge population of over 1.6 billion and more than 65 % of population is dependent on agriculture either directly or indirectly. NSSO, 2014 said that of the 40.6 percent households who received extension assistance, only 11 percent services come from the government machinery(cited in Thakur and Chander, 2018). So there exists a huge gap between information providers and information seekers in the agriculture sector. That's why farmers look for other alternative and accessible modes of information to fulfil their needs.

In the recent times along with other ICT tools social media has emerged to be a reliable source of information amongst the farmers. Social media is equipped with all the audio-visual tools and farmers can learn with the help of text, videos, photos, web links and numerous other ways. Farmers can form their networks and can learn from each other's experiences through virtual discussions and meetings. Social media gives farmers an opportunity of co-creating the content and also promotes the collective learning amongst the farmers. (Jackson et al., 2009). Social media promotes interactive learning thus provide a platform to the farmers to talk to the policy makers and have a say in the decision making process also. Neill (2011) says that The benefits of social media goes beyond cost effective ways of communication. It empowers the farmers through social connections and facilitates long term engagements through extension programs (cited in Thakur and Chander, 2018). All the platforms of social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, other mobile agricultural applications provide an interactive platform to both sender and receiver, yielding profitable results for the farmers.

There is deep penetration of mobile phones and internet services in the society due to their availability at the cheaper rates. Almost 85% farmers own mobile phones in Punjab and majority of them are android based phones(Singh & Gill, 2020). As government extension services have quite a limited access Government is doing utmost efforts to promote extension services through various ICT platforms. Simultaneously many private organizations and individuals are also exploring social media platforms to provide farmers with the latest

agricultural information. Many progressive farmers have their You Tube channels where they discuss current agricultural problems with their fellow farmers and also give them live demos about the usage of new agricultural technology. Some of the you tube channels have viewership in millions and the founders of some channels are earning in millions. These channels have become Krishi darshan of modern era (Dhar, 2019). Apart from this there are numerous agriculture based pages on Facebook which provide relevant information to the farmers on various aspects of farming. Even ministry of Agriculture and Farmer Welfare have their own Facebook page where they keep on updating about current agricultural issues and their solutions. Various mobile applications are also available free of cost on android and apple stores to provide farmers with the current agricultural information.

Methodology:

The study is based on the collection of primary data through a survey conducted on the farmers of the Amritsar district of Punjab. A sample of 100 farmers has been selected through simple random sampling. Survey was conducted through a structured questionnaire designed to understand the approach and attitude of farmers toward social media for information seeking.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted on government extension officers to know their perspective about the usage of social media for extension services.

Profile Of Amritsar:

Amritsar is the cultural and religious hub of Punjab. Total geographical area of Amritsar district is 2.64 lac ha. of which 2.17 lac ha. is cultivated area and 97% of cropped area is irrigated. District has 70705 farming families. Wheat and paddy are the major crop grown in the district (Census. 2010-11).

Discussion:

As shown in table no 1 it is clear that large number of farmers have access to various social media platforms. As farmers are equipped with android or other types of smart phones they have complete access to all online platforms of agricultural information and extension. Most of the farmers have downloaded one or other social media application in their mobile phones like Facebook, YouTube, whats app and other agriculture based applications. Amongst all social media platforms You tube is most popular amongst the farmers as it is equipped with

audio, visual and textual features. It provides an interactive platform to the farmers where they can fix many of their queries by watching various demonstrative videos and asking live questions to the experts. Apart from this progressive farmers have also joined some of the Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups which are based on agriculture. Mobile agriculture applications are also gaining popularity amongst the farmers but some farmers find them complex to use in comparison with other modes of social media. Most sort after information on social media by the farmers is about weather updates and mandi rates.

Table: 1

Total number of farmers : 100

1.	Farmers who access various social media platforms	94
2.	Age group of farmers who prefer to access social media platforms	25years-55years
3.	Number of farmers who access social media platforms to access agriculture related information	80
4.	Most preferred social media platforms amongst the farmers	
	a. You Tube	74
	b. Facebook	22
	c. whats app	15
	d. Mobile agricultural apps	36
5.	Number of farmers who use social media to access agriculture related information	70
6.	Most sought after information by the farmers on various social media platforms	
	a. Weather updates	63
	b. Mandi rates	44
	c. New mandis	20

	d. New types of seeds	8
	e. New and updated technology	27
	f. Expert advice	35
7.	Number of farmers who think that social media provides them relevant and timely information	53
8.	Number of farmers who earned profits due to social media information	34
9.	Number of farmers who think that social media can replace the traditional modes of information like TV, Radio, interpersonal interactions	10

Interviews with the extension workers reveal that there is growing trend toward the social media amongst the young and educated farmers but still there is a long way to go in this direction. Farmers still have strong believe in traditional modes of information. Advice of the fellow farmers and expert farmers from their own links is one of the most trustworthy source of information for the farmers.

Major findings:

- There is upsurge in the interest of farmers towards the social media
- Erudite and enlightened farmers have started understanding the worth of social media as a potential source of information.
- There is a section of enlightened farmers who says that social media provides them timely and effective information and has helped them in earning good profits out of the farming.
- Weather updates or mandi rates are the most coveted and merchantable information on the social media.
- There is a very less percentage of farmers who rely solely on social media for finding solution of their intricate and fiddly farming issues.

Summing up:

Certainly future of agricultural information and extension lies with the social media only. Global population is rising at a very fast pace leading to mounting of pressure on our agricultural lands for increased productions. Traditional means of information would be unable to meet these challenges. So it is very important to equip various social media platforms with relevant information to help farmers in their farming problems. Government extension agencies should strengthen their social media presence and should encourage farmers for using social media platforms for any kind of agricultural queries. Private players should be encouraged and rewarded to strengthen their social media presence.

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