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Harvesting Insights: Rural Community Members' Perceptions of Agritourism in Oklahoma

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Abstract

Rural communities face significant challenges such as persistent poverty, aging infrastructure, food insecurity, and natural disasters. With agriculture as a primary focus, these communities increasingly depend on external income and technology. Agritourism offers a promising solution by allowing farmers to diversify their income streams while promoting rural development. In Oklahoma, there are over 400 agritourism venues (USDA NASS, 2022). However, urbanization and climate change continue to reshape the agricultural landscape, affecting farmers and rural communities. This study examines the perceptions of agritourism among rural citizens in southwest Oklahoma and its potential for rural development. Utilizing the Community Capitals Framework (Flora et al., 2007) and Chase et al. (2018) agritourism framework, the study surveyed 159 residents, revealing a generally positive perception of agritourism as beneficial for communities and agriculture. Despite recognizing its benefits, respondents indicated a need for more guidance on how to engage in agritourism. The findings suggest although there is awareness and appreciation of agritourism, there is also a significant opportunity for expansion and support. Extension services and state agencies are recommended to provide targeted education and training to maximize agritourism's economic and community development potential in rural areas.

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Introduction and Problem

Rural communities face a multitude of hardships, including persistent poverty, aging infrastructure, food insecurity, and natural disasters (Blue Bird Jernigan et al., 2017; Burton et al., 2013; Sadri et al., 2018). Furthermore, most rural communities are agriculturally focused and face the same vulnerabilities of the agricultural industry (Gowda et al., 2018). Agricultural producers continue to seek opportunities to diversify and seek alternative sources of income to increase profits (Khanal & Mishra, 2014). Agritourism is known to assist in both the development of rural communities and allow farmers to diversify their incomes (Barbieri & Tew, 2016; Ramsey & Schaumleffel, 2006). Agritourism in Oklahoma is responsible for $64 million USD in overall economic impact in 2012 (Murphy et al., 2017).

Urbanization and climate change have changed the agricultural landscape, negatively affecting rural communities that are agriculturally dependent (Brune et al., 2021; Che, 2008). However, agritourism is one approach that can rejuvenate such communities. The benefits of agritourism include positive economic impacts for producers and communities, improvement of agricultural literacy, and strengthening of local food systems and communities (Brune et al., 2021; Che, 2008; Lupi et al., 2017). Agritourism is extensive in Oklahoma, it encompasses over 400 registered operations, consisting of u-pick farms, hunting/fishing guides, and other experiences (USDA NASS, 2022).

Agritourism has been extensively researched in Oklahoma regarding its marketing, legality, and overall economic impact (Bowman et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2017). However, the perceptions of community members who live near agritourism operations have not been studied. Understanding such perspectives will guide the support and training needed to expand agritourism further in Oklahoma.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study used Emery and Flora's (2006) Community Capitals Framework along with Chase et al. (2018) Agritourism Framework to inform survey design and interpretation of results. The Community Capitals Framework outlines seven capitals, or resource categories, that can be leveraged for community development: (a) human, (b) financial, (c) built, (d) natural, (e) political, (f) social, and (g) cultural. Natural and financial capitals are the foci within the community capitals framework which best align with agritourism. Natural capital is widely known as the existing resources a community possesses that can be used for sustainable development (e.g., weather, natural beauty, and amenities; Emery & Flora, 2006). Financial capitals encompass wealth, security, credit, and investment (e.g., taxes, grants, and loans) (Flora et. al., 2007). The Community Capitals Framework includes the flows and stocks of resources available for community development. Capitals can be invested or leveraged to increase the livability of communities. For example, the natural capital resource of timber could be cut and sold, resulting in increased financial capital (Emery & Flora, 2006).

Chase et al.'s (2018) agritourism framework sorts agritourism into five broad categories: Direct sales, hospitality, education, outdoor recreation, and entertainment. Within the five broad categories, core and peripheral activities contribute to the agritourism framework. Core activities are generally accepted as agritourism, such as direct sales or farm experiences such as pumpkin patches. Peripheral activities lack an active connection to production agriculture, such as farmers markets and hunting experiences. Although the definitions of agritourism related activities vary, researchers agree on agritourism's value as a whole (Chase et al., 2018). However, agritourism perceptions of rural community members have not been widely explored.

Purpose

This research aims to explore the perceptions about agritourism in rural southwest Oklahoma and its possible use for rural development. The four main objectives of this research were to:

1. Describe the rural citizen participants.
2. Describe participant's interactions with agritourism.
3. Determine the level of awareness of agritourism offerings in participants' counties.
4. Describe the perceptions of agritourism in rural communities.
5. Determine the relationship between agritourism perception and connection to agriculture.

Methodology

To gain a comprehensive understanding of rural community members' perceptions of agritourism, a mixed-methods convergent design survey was employed in southwest Oklahoma (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This approach offers a more complete insight than relying solely on quantitative or qualitative methods. We employed the questionnaire variant of convergent mixed methods, adopting a QUANT + qual lens (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). In this variant of the convergent design, closed-ended quantitative questions and open-ended qualitative questions are included in a single questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 19 questions: (a) seven demographic questions, (b) six, five-point Likert-scale questions, (c) four close-ended questions, and (d) two open-ended response questions. The close-ended question asked participants if they had agritourism experiences and what experiences they are aware of in their community. The two open-ended questions asked participants to define agritourism and asked for any additional comments concerning agritourism. The questionnaire was reviewed for face and content validity by two experts in survey design who were external to the authorship team (Creswell, 2014). One expert was an associate professor of agricultural communications, and the other was a social science research coordinator at a Land-Grant institution. Per the panel's recommendations, the instrument was edited for readability and navigability.

Online, non-probability, opt-in sampling was used (Creswell, 2014). The Qualtrics-created questionnaire was distributed in 2023 utilizing Facebook posts, Facebook advertisements, and a flyer posted in rural communities. The distribution of questionnaires was focused on the southwestern region of Oklahoma. Specifically, the questionnaire was promoted in three ways:

(a) Posted in Facebook groups that served southwestern Oklahoma; (b) Advertised through paid, tailored Facebook posts to the region; and (c) Posted by flyer within communities, which included an accompanying QR code. The questionnaire included a screening question to ensure only residents and/or landowners of southwest Oklahoma participated in the study. In total, 13 Facebook posts were made to various community groups and extension social media pages. The questionnaire was open to responses for eight consecutive weeks, and 174 responses were recorded. Of the 174 responses, two responses were from QR codes from posted flyers, and 172 originated from Facebook. The Facebook advertisement had 84 link clicks and a reach of 3,061 users. Of the 174 responses, 159 were included in the analysis. The remaining 15 were not analyzed due to incomplete responses. If the only question answered was the informed consent, the response was considered incomplete and excluded from analysis. Participants were not required to answer all questions. Questions left blank were not used in the analysis.

Descriptive statistics and Chi-Square analysis were used for quantitative data, an alpha level of .05 was used for statistical tests. Qualitative data were analyzed using MAXQDA24 and the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965). A total of 136 responses were first open-coded, and 16 codes were assigned. Next, axial and selective coding were completed, resulting in seven themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). One researcher led the qualitative analysis, and themes were confirmed by the entire research team. Verbatim responses from participants were used to support the analysis process and reduce researcher bias (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, the following measures were taken: (a) themes were negotiated by the research team, (b) data were triangulated using quantitative question responses, (c) data were reviewed several times to achieve prolonged engagement, and (d) bracketing and reflexivity were used to reduce bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Due to the sampling method and sample size, these findings are not generalizable. It is unlikely all residents of southwest Oklahoma were reached by this survey. In addition, we recognize the questionnaire variant (QUANT + qual) of the convergent design often limits the richness of qualitative data collection (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Further, we were unable to implement member checking to increase the trustworthiness of data analysis. Although demographic information was collected, researchers are unable to determine if the perceptions of agritourism represent the demographics of southwest Oklahoma.

Findings

The personal characteristics of the 159 participants are displayed in Table 1. Tillman County had the highest response rate, followed by Greer County. Both counties are located in southwest Oklahoma and were part of the targeted demographics for the scope of this study. Participants had a varying connection to agriculture, with most respondents having grown up on a farm or ranch or were currently farmers or ranchers. The majority of participants were female (58%), and 15% of participants were male.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	*n*	%
Gender		
Female	92	58%
Male	24	15%
Prefer Not to Answer	43	27%
Age		
18-24	6	4%
25-34	12	8%
35-44	19	12%
45-54	21	13%
55-64	24	15%
65+	31	19%
Prefer Not to Answer	46	29%
Race		
White	104	81%
American Indian or Alaska Native	4	3%
Asian	2	2%
Black	1	1%
Prefer Not to Answer	6	5%
Hispanic/Latino(a)	11	9%
Connection to Agriculture		
Grew up on farm or ranch	29	18%
Farmer or Rancher	27	17%
Other	22	14%
None	20	13%
Grandparents or relative	17	11%
Prefer Not to Answer	44	28%
County		
Tillman	36	23%
Greer	33	21%
Jackson	17	11%
Harmon	10	6%
Beckham	5	3%
Kiowa	5	3%
Comanche	2	1%
Other	7	4%
Prefer Not to Answer	43	27%

Overall, participants indicated they were familiar with agritourism. One hundred and three respondents (64.8%) knew what agritourism was, and 56 respondents (35.2%) did not know what agritourism was. Of the participants who indicated they were farmers or ranchers (*n* = 27), 11 indicated they would add agritourism, eight said they would possibly add agritourism, and eight indicated they would not add agritourism to their operation.

Sixty-one respondents (43.6%) had visited an agritourism experience, 55 (39.3%) had not, and 24 (17.1%) were unsure if they had visited an agritourism experience. Most respondents reported being aware of one to three agritourism operations in their county. Table 2 displays respondents' awareness of agritourism in their community quantifying the number of agritourism operations that they have knowledge of in their county.

Table 2

Community Awareness of Agritourism Operations (n = 129)

	0 Agritourism Operations		1-3 Agritourism Operations		4-7 Agritourism Operations		7+ Agritourism Operations	
Question	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%
How many agritourism operations are you aware of in your county?	37	28.7	74	57.4	15	11.6	3	2.3

Respondents had most frequently visited farmers' markets, pumpkin patches, and hayrides when asked what agritourism operations they have visited. The least frequently visited were fishing guide services, hunting guide services, and on farm concerts. Table 3 displays the results of the type of agritourism experience respondents had visited.

Table 3

Agritourism Visitation (n = 159)

	Have Visited		Have Not Visited	
Agritourism Activity	*f*	%	*f*	%
Farmers Market	104	65.4	55	34.6
Pumpkin Patch	92	57.9	67	42.1
Hayride	81	50.9	78	49.1
Hiking	55	34.6	104	65.4
On Farm Weddings	35	22.0	124	78.0
U-Pick Experience	30	18.9	129	81.1
Other on Farm Events	26	16.4	133	83.6
Farm to Dinner Experience	24	15.1	135	84.9
Fishing Guide Service	20	12.6	139	87.4
Hunting Guide Service	16	10.1	143	89.9
On Farm Concerts	11	6.9	148	93.1

Note. Respondents chose which experiences they have visited. Ones that were missing were counted as not visited.

Participants were asked to define agritourism in an open-ended response question. Three themes emerged from their responses. When defining agritourism, participants described it as education-focused, experience-centered, and revenue-driven. These three themes are explored below.

Education-Focused

Participants frequently described agritourism with words like “learning,” “education,” or “immersive.” One participant defined agritourism as “Educational tours on farms.” Another replied with, “Education about farm life.” Yet another described agritourism as: “Agriculture-based businesses and sites that are open for tourists to visit and learn about agriculture.”

Experience-Centered

Participants also referred to agritourism as an experience. One participant described agritourism as “Tourists visit your farm to engage with nature. Having the opportunity to participate firsthand in the farming experience.” Participants described these experiences as exclusively for people not involved in agriculture. For example, one response said, “A farm visit experience for non-ag folks.” Participants also described these experiences as advantageous for producers, particularly in an economic sense, saying “Attracting visitors. . . to make a profit out of the experience in the farm environment.”

Revenue-Driven

Participants described agritourism as revenue and profit-driven, describing agritourism as “Anything that is agricultural that will bring people to see it or spend money” and a “great way for farmers and ranchers to supplement their income.” One farmer described agritourism as particularly beneficial to his operation, saying “It’s a way I can make extra income from my farm by allowing people to stay in my cabin, hunt on my farm, and fish in some of my ponds.”

The Likert-scale perception questions had varying results regarding agritourism, with positive perceptions of existing agritourism operations and optimism of the ability to utilize agritourism as a rural development component. The belief that agritourism is beneficial to their county was majority agreed upon (67.2%) as well as agritourism bringing value to their community (58.5%). The majority of participants strongly agreed that agritourism should be expanded in their county (58.2%) where two respondents disagreed that it should be expanded (1.6%). Most participants agreed that agritourism brings tourism to their county (73.1%) and that their counties had enough resources to sustain agritourism (60.2%). Participants disagreed that there were enough agritourism offerings in their county (42.6%). Table 4 shows the results of the perception Likert scale questions.

Table 4

Frequencies and Percentages of Participants' Perceptions of Agritourism

	Strongly Agree		Somewhat Agree		Neutral		Somewhat Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Total
Question	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	
Agritourism is beneficial to my county	82	67.2	26	21.3	12	9.8	1	.8	1	.8	122
Agritourism brings value to my community	69	58.5	32	27.1	13	11	4	3.4	0	0	118
Agritourism should be expanded in my county	71	58.2	35	28.7	14	11.5	0	0	2	1.6	122
Agritourism brings tourism to my county	47	39.5	40	33.6	22	18.5	8	6.7	2	1.7	119
My county has enough resources to sustain agritourism	29	24.6	42	35.6	23	19.5	15	12.7	9	7.6	118
There are enough agritourism operations in my county	2	1.6	6	3.8	21	17.2	41	33.6	52	42.6	122

Note. Respondents were not required to answer all questions; therefore, totals do not equal the study's sample.

The last question on the survey was an open-ended question asking participants had additional comments regarding agritourism. Four themes emerged from their responses: (a) Agritourism is Good for Agriculture, (b) More Guidance is Needed, (c) Increase Agritourism, and (d) Agritourism is Good for Rural Communities.

Agritourism is Good for Agriculture

Participants perceived agritourism as beneficial for all agriculture, offering an opportunity to promote the industry and educate consumers. One participant said agritourism was an opportunity "to draw visitors from urban areas to enjoy and appreciate the fruits of agriculture. It helps them [visitors from urban areas] understand how agriculture actually and directly affects them." Another participant had similar ideas saying, "This is a good way to get the word out to people about something the agricultural industry provides to others."

More Guidance is Needed

When asked for final thoughts about agritourism, Participants expressed a need for more guidance to engage producers in agritourism. One participant said "My county has some folks that grow and sell products. We could use a market for them to sell and a few more farm-type venues in my opinion. We are waiting for guidance." One farmer also directly asked for guidance, saying "I'm working to create new opportunities on my farm. Guidance would be great if you're tracking respondents!"

Increase Agritourism

Participants were excited about agritourism and wished to see more in their areas, saying "I feel people would like to see more agritourism activities in my area." One participant even called for greater efforts state-wide saying, "Any expansion of farming activities that brings an additional revenue stream is desperately needed, statewide!" Finally, another participant called for greater engagement in agritourism saying "I believe there should be more agritourism activities to promote agriculture and to help demystify what agriculture is really like."

Agritourism is Good for Rural Communities

In the final question, participants commented on the benefits agritourism offered for rural communities. One of these perceived benefits was community revenue. One participant said "Agritourism helps build business within the community . . . and gains revenue in rural communities." Another participant thought agritourism had the potential to bring new visitors to their community saying "it would increase the people that visit my community, I think it would be good, a positive thing for our rural area."

Chi-square tests of independence were used to determine if relationships existed between participants' perceptions of agritourism and their connection to agriculture. Researchers wanted to explore whether the influence of rurality and agriculture affected respondent's perceptions of agritourism. For each of the six items measuring participants' perceptions, there was no significant association with their connection to agriculture when measured at an alpha set a priori of .05. Table 5 displays the results of the chi-square analyses highlighting the insignificant association between connection to agriculture and perceptions.

Table 5

Results of the Chi-Square Tests of Independence

Perception Question	No Connection		Farmer or Rancher		Grew up on Farm/Ranch		Grandparents Farmed or Ranched		Other		χ^2	*p*	Total
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%			
Enough Agritourism operations in my county	20	17.39	27	23.47	29	25.21	17	14.78	22	19.13	25.87	.056	115
Agritourism should be expanded in county	20	17.39	27	23.47	29	25.21	17	14.78	22	19.13	12.49	.408	115
Agritourism is beneficial to my county	20	17.39	27	23.47	29	25.21	17	14.78	22	19.13	19.41	.079	115
Agritourism brings tourism to county	20	17.39	27	23.47	29	25.21	17	14.78	22	19.13	11.96	.746	115
County has enough resources to sustain agritourism	20	17.54	27	23.68	28	24.56	17	14.91	22	19.30	25.77	.057	114
Agritourism brings value to my community	20	17.54	27	23.68	28	24.56	17	14.91	22	19.30	6.94	.862	114

Note. Respondents were not required to answer all questions; therefore, totals do not equal the study's sample.

Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

Residents in rural southwest Oklahoma viewed agritourism as an unsaturated market with room for expansion in their communities. This poses an opportunity to use agritourism for rural development in Oklahoma. The majority of respondents' perceptions of agritourism were positive, and they viewed agritourism as beneficial for their community. Participants indicated a need for additional guidance on how to get started with agritourism or the opportunities available.

Overall participants were well aware of the agritourism operations present in their communities. The majority of respondents indicated there were three to five agritourism operations in their county. In actuality, there are four registered in Tillman County, three in Jackson County, one in Greer County, and none in Harmon (Oklahoma Department of Food and Forestry, 2024). Participants viewed agritourism as a revenue-driven, educational experience.

This aligns with Chase et al. (2018) framework and definition of agritourism. Participant's varying definitions of agritourism, also aligns with previous research. Some research defines agritourism as recreational activities (i.e., visiting farms, ranches, or other agricultural settings) and other considers visiting farmer's markets as agritourism (Ammirato et al., 2020; Barbieri & Tew, 2016; Brown et al., 2014; Carpio et al., 2008).

Participants' connection with agriculture was not statistically related to their perceptions of agritourism. Perhaps this is because the sample included mostly rural citizens who, if lacked a direct connection to agriculture, have higher exposure to agriculture than urban citizens (Gowda et al., 2018). Furthermore, the primary economic driver in three of the seven counties represented is agriculture (United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2017).

Since there was no significant relationship between participant's connection to agriculture and perceptions of agritourism, future research should consider if audience segmentation based on rurality would be beneficial to agritourism operations. The lack of a relationship between the variables suggests agritourism should be marketed to audiences, regardless of their connection to agriculture. Moreover, the qualitative responses revealed participants viewed agritourism as an activity exclusively for urban audiences or those not connected to agriculture. Although urban audiences likely have much to learn from agritourism, and are a worthwhile audience to pursue, rural and agricultural audiences can also benefit from agritourism experiences and should be equally considered. Agritourism operations could benefit from marketing their experiences specifically to agricultural and rural audiences.

Extension and state agencies should work together to continue to educate agricultural producers about opportunities in agritourism. Perhaps offering regional trainings or informational sessions would provide the guidance our results indicate producers are craving (Schmidt et al., 2022). The economic feasibility of agritourism in this region should be further explored. Further, the relative cost benefit to producers and communities alike should be studied.

Whether agritourism can be used as an aspect of rural development should be researched further to determine the impact existing agritourism operations have on rural Oklahoma. Where Schmidt et al. (2022) found western states' rural communities benefiting from the expenditures agritourism tourists have. Due to the limitations of sampling and response rate of the questionnaire, future research should focus on the distribution of the instrument in other regions of Oklahoma to investigate the differences in perceptions across regions. Although Facebook advertisements are convenient for data collection, considering in-person data collection may result in higher response rates and more complete responses. Perceptions of agritourism research should include a qualitative analysis of agritourism from both producers and consumers of agritourism in rural communities to expand on the perceptions.

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