

Let's Walk and Talk: Using Walking Interviews to Explore Agritourism Operations

Introduction/Need for Innovation

In a world of information overload and technological advancements, farmers have a difficult time trusting science due to the way information is communicated (Rust et al., 2022). To build the relationship between researchers and farmers, information needs to be accessible and easy to understand (Rust et al., 2022). In-person interactions between farmers and researchers create a greater sense of trust and collaboration in the agriculture community (Kinuthia, 2023). Trust is an asset used to build a relationship with farmers and consumers, increase sustainability, and encourage innovation to have a resilient food system (Kinuthia, 2023). To promote trust and establish connection amongst agricultural communications researchers and agriculturalists, researchers can conduct walking interviews (Furness et al., 2022). In [State], researchers and Extension are trying to create better working relationships with agritourism operators to gain insights on their barriers and communication opportunities. In-person interviews can serve as a way to create a comfortable and inclusive environment between the researcher and agritourism operator.

Agritourism is defined as a commercial enterprise that links agricultural production and/or tourism to attract visitors onto a farm, ranch, or agricultural business (AgriTourism, 2023). Visiting farming operations in rural communities has become more popular in recent years (Oromjonova, 2022; Khanal et al., 2020). The public is drawn to these locations to learn more about production agriculture, while the owners have another income to support their operations (Oromjonova, 2022). Agritourism can benefit an operation through farm diversification, increased profit, and environmental improvement; however, there are significant challenges that these operations face, such as lack of accessibility to resources, financial constraints to update infrastructure and lack of transportation to rural communities (Canvi, 2019; Petrovici, 2013). For an agritourism operation to effectively communicate with its audience, owners need to utilize online platforms and marketing efforts to highlight a compelling on-site experience; this is seen as a huge challenge due to the lack of accessibility and knowledge of those skills and resources (McCabe, 2013). To evaluate an agritourism operation, a walking interview can be used as an effective method to build a relationship between the researcher and interviewee.

How it Works/Methodology

Walking interviews, a qualitative research method, are used to add more value and understanding of the lived experiences at each operation (Bartlett, 2023). The walking interviews method incorporates five major themes: shifts in power dynamics, making things known and knowable, revealing barriers in the environment, embodied knowledge of place, and being one (Bartlett, 2023). The method involves the researcher walking or travelling alongside a participant asking questions along the way (Bartlett, 2023). In the early 2000s, walking interviews originated through ethnography and human geographers for fieldwork research (Bartlett, 2023). Walking interviews are an innovative cross-disciplinary method of qualitative research to offer detailed multisensory data generation (King & Woodroffe, 2017). The interview style of a walking interview allows open dialogue and builds a stronger sense of trust between the researcher and interviewee to promote participation and place-based approaches (Bartlett, 2023). In this study, the researcher contacted operations by email or phone to set up a time for the walking interview. Once the researcher arrived on site of the agritourism operation, the walking interview started by touring the operation and learning about the agritourism sector of the operation.

Results to Date/Implications

In [State], the researcher conducted 15 walking interviews to analyze the educational components and communication strategies of an operation. Each operation ranged in size and scale in terms of acres owned (3-2,000 acres) and on-site farm events and activities (farm tours, farm stand/store, workshops, and classes). This method of research helped break down any power dynamics or barriers between the researcher and participant through the in-person conversations when touring the operation. The participant could point out the agritourism features of an operation such as where workshops, classes, and farm tours are held. The researcher had the opportunity to discover how consumers are gaining educational information about agriculture and talk in-depth about the communication strategies of an operation. Participants expressed their appreciation for the researcher traveling to their operation and felt the interview questionnaire fit well with the format of the interview.

An implication of the walking interviews was the time commitment on the participants' behalf, many operations are preparing for the busiest season of agriculture so recruitment of operations was a challenge for the researcher. Most operations were an hour drive from [State] University campus with walking interviews lasting about one hour therefore one interview was a three hour time commitment for the researcher. To get a sample size of 15 participants, the researcher had to send recruitment emails and phone calls to about 45 operations in the Willamette Valley.

Future Plans/Advice for Others

Walking interviews could be used to analyze the consumer's relationship with agricultural lands. Rather than focusing on agritourism operators and landowners, this method could be used alongside other theoretical frameworks, including place attachment, place-based education, and sense of place with consumers. Consumer perceptions should be explored to learn more about their connection with the local food economy and agriculture industry. Walking interviews can be performed when consumers visit a farming or ranching operation. Walking interviews allow deeper insight and richer data for agriculture-related research.

We recommend to clearly describe the expectation of a walking interview with each interviewee prior to arriving to an operation. From our experience, some participants were unclear that the interview required movement around their operation. A potential challenge of walking interviews could be the limited mobility of the participant so being clear about what the researcher needs is recommended. In addition, we recommend creating a strategic plan about how to walk around operations especially when the size and scale of each operation may be different. The researcher interviewed operations ranging from a few acres to thousands of acres so being aware of what part of the operation to walk to practice time management for the researcher and participant.

Costs/Resources Needed

Time and mileage were the main costs of implementing the walking interviews. To conduct the 15 walking interviews, it took the researcher approximately about 40 hours including driving to each operation and conducting the interviews. The average interview was around 56 minutes. The researcher used a campus vehicle that cost about \$500 worth of miles total for all interviews. This time and mileage cost was worth the investment to interview operators in the niche field of agritourism as well as to begin to build trust with agricultural communications researchers and agritourism operators.

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