

# ACCEPTED VERSION

Emily Buddle

**Meet your meat! How Australian livestock producers are using Instagram to promote 'happy meat'**

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## Meet your meat! How Australian livestock producers are using Instagram to promote 'happy meat'

Dr Emily Buddle

Food Values Research Group, School of Humanities, The University of Adelaide, North Terrace,  
Adelaide SA 5005

*"I don't really want to support the process of factory farming. I think it is horrific. We don't really have the right to be treating another sentient being like that. I choose to eat meat so I try to make as many good choices around that as I possibly can... We started going to the farmers market and just by chance stumbled across this lovely producer. I had given up red meat at that stage and I said I am not really keen on this but my mum was buying some [meat] so I started chatting to the actual farmer and he explained and showed me photos. I actually follow him on Instagram and he posts everyday about how his cows live and they're literally out in beautiful paddocks, they have a gorgeous dam, they've got gum trees, they have a really beautiful life. I tend to only buy beef through that one supplier because I know they have a good life."*

The quote above was captured in an interview that I conducted as part of my PhD research exploring Australian meat consumers' understanding of farm animal welfare. This interview inspired the analysis presented in this chapter about how some Australian livestock producers are using Instagram to highlight their methods for producing what I call "happy meat." This quote together with this chapter's analysis demonstrate how and why social media, particularly Instagram, is now a popular way for livestock producers to share information about meat production, particularly against the backdrop of popular representations of industrialized livestock production and mounting concerns for farm animal welfare.

### Did my meat live a happy life?

Whether consumers are devoted to eating meat, exploring ways in which to reduce their meat consumption for ethical, health or environmental reasons, or abstaining from meat altogether, one recurring concern amongst all groups is how livestock animals are treated within the meat value chain. The question of "what's for dinner?" has been complicated in recent decades by an increasing interest from consumers in how food transitions from paddock to plate.<sup>1</sup> Answers to the problem of what to eat have become less about what we can source and more about what we feel like consuming, with some consumers questioning the origins of their food and how it was produced, or whether that food should be consumed at all.<sup>2</sup> Questions about ethical and sustainable production are particularly evident in debates about meat production and consumption, and the role of meat in our diet has fuelled one of the most heated ethical discussions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to date as a result of increasing

attention towards animal welfare, sustainability, environmental footprint, plant-based protein products, and personal health.

Meat consumption has become normalized as a daily staple in high income countries. Australia's meat consumption remains among the highest in the world. In the relatively short period since European settlement, Australians have been amongst the world's largest per-capita meat consumers, consuming approximately 100kg (about 220 pounds) per capita in 2018.<sup>3</sup> However, many Australian consumers are seeking to reduce their meat consumption, with two and a half million Australians reporting that they consume completely or nearly vegetarian diets.<sup>4</sup> Malek, Umberger, and Goddard suggest that concerns for health and animal welfare were the most common reasons motivating meat avoidance in Australia, including among those who are not lifelong vegetarians.<sup>5</sup> In addition to reducing meat consumption, many consumers seek meat products that come with ethical claims such as free-range chicken or grass-fed beef as they believe that these types of meat have been produced under higher welfare standards because animals lived what are perceived to be "happier lives" compared to animals raised in intensive production systems.<sup>6</sup> Concerns for caged egg production or the use of sow stalls in piggeries are some prominent examples that made recent headlines in Australia, particularly due to the perceived negative impacts that these production practices have on animals' quality of life.<sup>7</sup>

In part due to the lack of transparency, intensifying media attention, and a growing amount of concern for animal welfare in Australia, meat producers have increasingly been targets of animal welfare activism in recent years. Producers have experienced a rise in trespass on farming properties and rallies have been held in almost every capital city to protest against the use of animals in agricultural production. The activist organization Aussie Farms has been particularly prominent in the animal rights space and are known for their publication of an online map listing the locations and details of various farmers and supply chain businesses across Australia, and their encouragement of activists to visit these farms in protest.<sup>8</sup> Social media has also become a primary platform for animal rights activists to communicate with one another and promote their cause to a wider audience.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of this expanded media attention and activism, agricultural advocacy bodies, such as the National Farmers Federation, encourage Australian livestock producers to "share their stories" as a means to increase transparency within the industry.<sup>10</sup> Some people involved in agriculture are turning to social media to "bridge the urban-rural divide in Australian agriculture".<sup>11</sup> This turn to sharing stories coincides with a growing number of consumers seeking extrinsic information from credible sources to be reassured about the life the animal lived.<sup>12</sup> Livestock producers adopt social media to share their stories as it enables users to connect with or find favorable content from trustworthy

actors such as farmers to assist in building their legitimacy and to counteract the critiques of activists.<sup>13</sup> Social media also enables producers to embrace benefits of connectivity and visibility to increase transparency.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, some meat producers are using social media as a vehicle to provide greater levels of transparency, sell their products, and share the practices through which they produce meat with their customers.

One notable group of livestock producers who have adopted social media to share their story are those that Leroy and Praet describe as “happy meat” producers.<sup>16</sup> Happy meat is generally defined as meat products that are sold with a story, that is, meat that comes from smaller-scale producers who not only sell a product but sell reassuring narratives about how that product came to be. Happy meat narratives emphasize the relationship between human and farm animals, which “...entails that the animal partner indeed lives a satisfactory life and that the human partner feels reassured about it.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, as people continue to be more interested in how their food is produced, the popularity of happy meat has increased.<sup>18</sup> Happy meat is said to come from animals that have lived a “wholesome life,” enjoying their natural diets and environments alongside their responsible and loving farmers.<sup>19</sup>

This chapter describes and analyzes the types of images that happy meat producers share on Instagram and how they assist in creating the reassuring narratives that accompany happy meat products. As the results demonstrate, Instagram has provided an ideal platform for happy meat producers to increase their transparency by sharing idyllic presentations of their production methods. The functionality of Instagram also provides producers with the ability to instantly edit and share their images. Happy meat producers do not share, however, information about some of the conflicting and increasingly controversial issues that they face, particularly practices associated with slaughter, which may raise questions about the level of openness and transparency that these Instagram accounts actually provide. I argue that while these images help to describe one method of livestock production, they ultimately produce negative implications for the perceptions of other types of livestock producers.

## Methods

In order to identify the images and captions shared by happy meat producers, I conducted an initial exploration of Instagram content in order to determine which accounts would be used for this analysis. As Manovich describes, an initial observation/description phase allows the researcher to rely on her experience with the platform to explore the way in which images are presented, noting observed patterns from which to form a hypothesis.<sup>20</sup> This preliminary analysis identified ten Instagram accounts that use the platform to promote their production of happy meat (based on Leroy and Praet’s definition) in Australia.<sup>21</sup> I collected images that were posted between 1 January and 30 June 2019, as

this six-month period captured enough data to reach saturation during analysis.<sup>1</sup> I collected the images and captions posted on these accounts by taking a screenshot on a smart phone for each posting. I printed each screenshot, which then underwent thematic analysis using inductive coding to allow the themes to organically emerge from the content.<sup>22</sup> I analyzed the image and caption as one unit; although as the truism claims, an image is worth a thousand words, the use of a caption on Instagram is common to help the content creator provide context and direct how one should read or interpret the image. The use of captions was also an important part of the analysis as captions allow producers to add richness to the narratives they construct about happy meat production by describing what the image is trying to portray. The overall approach to the analysis allowed for a typology to be developed, so I could identify similarities and differences in the narratives appearing on different Instagram accounts.

This approach was not designed to be a comprehensive analysis of all Australian happy meat producers. Rather, it involved selective identification of active Instagram users—defined by account holders having shared content at least once during the month that data was collected—who use Instagram as a means to communicate about the production of happy meat. The analysis does not aim to be representative but instead to determine and explore commonalities between the types of images that happy meat producers use to construct their narratives on Instagram as a publicly available forum. I used purposeful sampling to ensure that some producers for each of the dominant meats consumed in Australia (chicken, beef, pork, and lamb) were included in the analysis to ensure I captured any nuances between the types of animals raised for meat. Many Australian farming businesses are family-owned enterprises; therefore it is reasonable to assume that a member of the family involved in the business is sharing these images on Instagram, as opposed to postings by a paid social media manager. Furthermore, due to the recent activist backlash experienced by Australian livestock producers, I have anonymized any identifying information from the accounts used in this analysis, and the account handles and any images or quotes from these accounts are not included in the results presented. Lastly, my focus is on how producers used Instagram, rather than how consumers perceived such images. This remains an area for future research, particularly using a mixed methods approach to capture the dynamics between Instagram posts and messaging, producers, and consumers.

### Meet your meat!

The vast majority of Australian consumers do not live near sites of food production, resulting in what is often described as an urban-rural divide.<sup>23</sup> Many of those who work in food production claim that this distance is the reason for mounting concerns about how food is produced, and in this case, the

way animals are raised for meat. For the consumers who want to know more about their food, social media sites such as Instagram may assist in reducing the distance between producers and consumers, narrowing the urban-rural divide. Happy meat producers share images of their livestock animals on Instagram so consumers are able to virtually meet their meat, following a set of strategies. The images shared by producers often focus on the environment in which the animals are raised, with the animals central to many of the images to highlight the “happy life” that the animal experienced before the time of its death. The posts also refer to the animals by name and captions often describe their individual personalities. The images also emphasise the animal breed, the relationship between the animals and the farmer, and the quality of the resulting meat product.

For the happy meat producers I studied, sharing images of the environment in which their animals live was a common way to provide reassurance to their consumers about the quality of life these animals experience. These Instagram accounts frequently share images of idyllic, rolling green landscapes and picturesque sunrises or sunsets with animals freely grazing. For example, one producer shared a scenic image of a lush green pasture with tall gum trees in the backdrop flanked by the setting sun, describing the paddock as “a little bit of heaven.” All of the farmers included in this study also identified as free-range, grass-fed, and/or organic producers either through their use of hashtags or including descriptions of these husbandry practices in their bios. In my previous research, Australian meat consumers described their preference for meat products grown using free-range or grass-fed methods of production they are more closely aligned to what they consider to be “normal” methods of farming and are believed to be better for the animal due to a more “natural” quality of life.<sup>24</sup> What Australians consider to be “normal” methods of farming are strongly associated with notions of the “rural idyll” or romanticized notions of agriculture that are typically associated with a pastoral narrative that emphasizes artisanal farming, particularly smaller family-owned operations that use more traditional methods of production, rather than larger agribusinesses and mass produced products.<sup>25</sup> These narratives are often reinforced through popular media and marketing campaigns, particularly in attempts to alleviate concerns relating to the perceived risks that modern food production pose to consumers and our ways of life.<sup>26</sup> Providing a product that is not mass produced and that comes with a story, particularly a story that plays on the rural idyll, is one of the reasons why happy meat producers and their products are appealing to some consumers. The happy meat narrative provides reassurance that the meat purchased comes from animals that lived good, wholesome lives, and was produced using “natural” or “normal” production methods.<sup>27</sup> Instagram has proven to be an ideal vehicle for happy meat producers to share the quality of life that their animals experience, and to equate the best quality of life with idyllic images of rurality.

On their Instagram accounts, these happy meat producers often described the unique personalities of each animal, particularly the breeding animals, identifying them individually by name. Using a number of images over the course of a few days, one producer shared the story of their sow “Wanda” building her nest and giving birth, describing their farm’s “lovely girls” as “excellent mummas.” Giving names to non-human animals has been argued by some to be a symptom of anthropomorphism, namely the attribution of human mental states (thoughts, feelings, motivations and beliefs) to non-human objects or creatures.<sup>28</sup> Humans commonly anthropomorphize things we love, and not those we hate or to which we are indifferent. The naming of animals in this instance emphasizes the loving relationship that producers have with their animals – a key feature of happy meat products – and helps to create a personal connection between the Instagram user and the animal.<sup>29</sup> Happy meat producers also demonstrate care as they treat livestock similarly to how we treat our pets, communicating to consumers that these animals are cared for more than those in industrialized, “faceless” herds.<sup>30</sup> While some may question why anyone would want to eat an animal after establishing a personal relationship with it, Australian consumers consider the idea of treating each animal as an individual important for animal welfare.<sup>32</sup> Providing names to their animals and describing their individual personalities further adds to the narratives constructed on Instagram by happy meat producers, emphasising that these animals are thought to be more than a number and are cared for as such.

A number of happy meat producers I studied produced heritage (also referred to as heirloom) breeds of livestock, a detail captured either within the image itself or the supporting caption and hashtags. The use of heritage breeds can be considered as a form of food activism, as for many producers and consumers it is a way to reject the fast-growing livestock breeds used in today’s agriculture. The emphasis on heritage breeds by happy meat producers was particularly evident amongst pork and poultry producers, which are the industries that have seen the greatest levels of intensification and genetic changes due to their short generation interval relative to other livestock species, such as sheep and beef cattle. Leroy and Praet argue that the use of heritage animals “seems to point towards a form of neo-romanticism and a longing for origins and lost innocence” and ties directly into the rural idyll narrative.<sup>33</sup> Using heritage breeds can be viewed as demonstrating to consumers that these breeds can still be used in food production, and supports the rejection of widespread intensive methods of production that require a fast-growing breed that has been developed specifically to reduce the costs of meat production. The producers using heritage breeds in this study also often emphasized the enhanced flavor that these breeds provide to the meat, describing the meat provided by modern breeds as bland. Furthermore, focus on heritage breeds implies that only these animals can be “happy” and that other, modern breeds are likely to have a lower quality of life, as they are designed with intensive production systems in mind.

Happy meat images on Instagram also included the farmers personally involved in the care of the animals. Bruckner, Colombino, and Ulrich suggest that ideas of “good” and “bad” animal welfare manifest themselves when farmers and consumers understand their lives as entangled with animals which they rear and eat.<sup>34</sup> The farmers in the current research were seen holding animals, often in a close embrace, or standing in the paddock with the animals to which they were tending. One producer shared an image of her “morning snuggles” with a lamb, while describing her quest to demonstrate that animal farming can be done with high levels of animal welfare by being 100% grass fed and professing her love for what she does. Increasing evidence suggests that people are becoming more concerned about the disappearance of family farmers alongside the increase of technologically-intensive agriculture. In my earlier research, it was evident that the way Australian consumers construct their idea of what a farmer is based on the behaviours they expect farmers to exhibit, such as the provision of high standards of animal welfare in meat production, and that people involved in intensive meat production were not even considered to be “farmers” in the public imaginary due to the perceived lower standards of animal welfare in such production systems.<sup>35</sup> In nearly all cases, images posted by happy meat producers tended to show them sharing positive interactions with their animals. Displaying this level of interaction through their Instagram feeds reinforces the idea that farmers genuinely care for the animals they are raising.

Not only were farmers featured in many of the images shared on Instagram, but so too were their families. Farmers’ children were often depicted holding farm animals or enjoying the bucolic lifestyle associated with happy meat production. One pork producer shared a photo of their children cuddling a piglet with the caption “a calm pig is a happy pig.” Another producer shared an image of their child getting grain out of the silo to feed their pigs, coupled with the hashtag #farmingfamily. By using children as part of the happy meat narrative, farmers attempt to create personal connections with their consumers, emphasising that farmers are not so different from their consumers, as they also care for their families. These images arguably also convey the message to the potential customer that if this meat is good for the farmer’s children to eat, then it must be good for the customer to feed their family. The focus on children also reinforces the view that small family farms are central to the rural idyll construct, particularly in relation to the level of care provided to the animals and compared to large intensive agribusiness managers.<sup>36</sup>

Despite producers’ desire to share an animal’s journey from paddock to plate on Instagram, the point at which the animal is slaughtered and the practices associated with slaughter remain noticeably absent. The Instagram accounts only feature images of animals in paddocks and meat on a plate. The processes which resulted in that meat essentially become “black boxed,” that is, most people are aware of the inputs and outputs of the box (in this case, that an animal dies in order for us to consume



meat) but the processes used to arrive at the output are remain hidden or unknown (in this case, the process of slaughter).<sup>37</sup> The presumption seems to be that if these processes are out of sight, they will be out of mind. The practice of slaughter is confrontational and often brings about feelings of guilt relating to the consumption of meat and Australian meat consumers are happy not knowing about the details of slaughter.<sup>38</sup> Despite many acknowledging that slaughter is just “one bad day” in the animal’s life (at least for happy meat animals), it is likely that sharing images of slaughter processes would offend or cause unease for many Instagram users and potential customers. More often than not, slaughter occurs off-farm<sup>ii</sup> and thus the process is outside of the control (and arguably out of sight) of the producers themselves, which adds a layer of complexity for them when they attempt to be transparent. It is likely that slaughterhouses would not be comfortable with images being captured during the slaughter process, particularly for publication on social media.

In addition to not sharing images of the slaughter process, not one of these happy meat producers talk about slaughter on their Instagram accounts, which raises the question as to whether they wish to black-box the process in their own consciousness. It was striking that these producers *were* willing to post discussions about death on their Instagram, so long as death had not occurred via slaughter. One producer described the loss of a piglet through the mother crushing it as a reality of “a free-range life.” Another producer shared their grief at losing one of her favourite breeding sows to old age, writing a long, almost poetic account of her memories of this sow, signing off with “see you old girl” and a kissing-face emoji. While some may claim that it would be more ethical to have slaughtered and eaten the animal before she died of old age, sharing these stories on Instagram creates a sense of compassion and humanity, and may further highlight the personal relationships that are developed between animals and farmers.

Although the slaughter process remains absent from the images on Instagram, posts often feature butchers. Alongside the images of the animal in the paddock are pictures of the butcher who was responsible for breaking down the animal’s carcass into the retail cuts provided to the end consumer. In most of the cases I studied, it is likely that the butcher is the same person who conducted the slaughter of the animal. Rather than being pictured on the slaughter floor, images show the butcher hard at work standing next to the hanging carcass or cutting the meat at the butcher’s table, almost always smiling. Technological advances in meat processing—with slaughtering and butchering of livestock becoming concentrated in large-scale, specialised facilities—provide retailers with pre-packaged retail cuts ready for the supermarket shelf, which has reduced the necessity for skilled butchers on site. In response to growing concerns about industrial agriculture and “big food”, happy meat producers highlight their use of local, skilled butchers to emphasize the artisanal qualities of their meat and to put a trusted face to their products.<sup>39</sup> Including butchers within the happy meat

narrative on Instagram allows producers to further address consumers' concerns about the origins and production methods associated with their meat, particularly as images of the butcher provide greater connection to the site of production.

This chapter highlights how Australian happy meat producers use Instagram to share narratives that credentialize their products as better alternatives, particularly in relation to growing consumer concerns about meat and associated production methods. The use of Instagram by happy meat producers aligns with increasing use of social media platforms as ways to engage in digital food activism.<sup>40</sup> However despite increasing concerns, mass-produced meat products remain the most consumed meat products in Australia, due to the large majority of consumers shopping in large retail chains and their price point relative to more boutique meat products, such as those sold by happy meat producers. Happy meat producers use Instagram to highlight the connection between their families and the animals, show the quality of the environment that the animals live in, and reiterate the popular rural idyll that perpetuates the idea of Australianness. Interestingly, happy meat producers are not completely transparent, as they do not share every detail of the meat production process, as highlighted by ensuring that the slaughter process remains absent from view. Instagram ultimately gives happy meat producers the power to introduce their meat to their consumers in provocative and idealistic ways, while still maintaining a certain level of censorship.

Instagram remains an ideal platform for happy meat producers. It is easy to use, does not require large advertising budgets, is readily accessible by potential and actual customers, and perhaps most importantly, is popular amongst foodies who are a major target market for these producers. However, despite the accessibility of the platform, the narratives being shared on Instagram may be having greater impacts on understandings of meat production which may have implications far beyond their immediate domain. This chapter highlights the need to explore the broader context in which these happy meat narratives are constructed and the role that producers "telling their story" is having on understandings of meat production and the associated trust within the mainstream meat value chain.

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<sup>i</sup> Saturation refers to the point where the researcher is seeing similar instances over and over again, meaning that no additional themes are emerging thus the results becomes 'saturated'.

<sup>ii</sup> In Australia, in order for meat to be sold to the public it must be slaughtered and butchered in a facility that has food safety approvals. There are very few, if any, farms that have a certified slaughterhouse on site and, up until the recent introduction of approved mobile abattoirs, farmers had no means to slaughter an animal on-farm for sale to the public.