

USDA Publication Messaging and Women in Agriculture: A Content Analysis

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Introduction

From their role as hunter-gatherers, to the early settlers of the prairie, to modern roles as feedlot managers and farming operators, women have been actively involved in production agriculture (Folk, 2020). However, a particular time period in American history saw the most dramatic rise of women into agricultural roles. During World Wars I and II, millions of women stepped up to take on the tasks left behind by the nearly six million men who had left their farms to serve the war effort (Rasmussen, 1951). Historical research regarding agricultural publication messaging toward women in the United States is relatively scarce. What literature does exist shows that gender roles and frames of bias are prevalent (Enns and Martin, 2015; Schwieder, 1990). A small body of literature exists in relation to analyses of USDA publications and films, and found that propaganda contained masculine frames and pressured women to assimilate into production agriculture roles through aggressive messaging and imagery (Jellison, 2018; Mathis, 1994; Ponder, 1995). For present-day and future agricultural communicators, knowing the effect of various frames and messages on women's motivation to become involved in agricultural efforts can help communicators craft persuasive messages for their own unique audiences. This study closely aligns with priority area three of the AAAE National Research Agenda, which asks what strategies are effective in recruiting diverse populations into agriculture and natural resource careers (Roberts et al, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by framing theory as developed by Goffman (1974). According to Goffman, framing theory refers to how facts take on their own meaning by being embedded into a story line that organizes them and gives them coherence. Framing theory posits that the media play a part in establishing the saliency of issues, (Entman, 2004) and an assumption exists that the media's intentional depiction of certain issues will influence how they are processed by audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). This study incorporated framing theory to better understand how USDA framed its messages toward women and common framing themes for publications within the specified time period.

Methodology

The purpose of this exploratory study was to describe the intended audiences of USDA publications and identify frames within USDA publications during World Wars I and II. This study consisted of a qualitative content analysis of pamphlets, technical bulletins, posters, and other written or visual works produced and disseminated by USDA. As part of the content analysis process, publications were coded by frame theme, developed using a modified data-driven strategy, for further analysis. Coding was completed separately. To ensure trustworthiness, the research team followed qualitative content analysis guidelines from previous studies and qualitative methodology publications (Guest & MacQueen, 2008; Schreier, 2012). Upon completion of coding, the research team implemented descriptive statistics to analyze the audience gender and frame theme categories for the final set of publications (N = 179).

Results/Findings

Research question one sought to identify the genders of audiences targeted through USDA publications created during the specified time period. Although most of the data set (n = 145) had an unknown or gender-neutral audience, 13.41% of the publications were directed explicitly toward women. Research question two sought to identify the frame themes used to describe messages within USDA publications created during World Wars I and II. Using a data-driven strategy to develop a coding frame, the research team identified eight categories to describe messages within the data set (N = 179). These frame theme category codes included 'Do Your Part,' 'Surplus,' 'Information,' 'Product,' 'Housewife,' 'Waste,' 'Other,' and 'Ration'. Research question three sought to identify the patterns existing in message frame themes within USDA publications created during World Wars I and II and found that themes of 'Do Your Part' and 'Surplus' were common within the data set.

Conclusions

By performing a content analysis of USDA publication data set from a critical time in American agriculture history, it is evident that specific message frame themes were implemented in order to promote involvement in the war effort. USDA made an appeal to the audience's sense of patriotism in publications where the 'Do Your Part' code was applied; despite gender, the audience was encouraged to contribute to the war effort through the production and resourceful use of food, fuel, or fiber because of their civic duty. Additionally, a frame theme of surplus and increased productivity emerged by means of the 'Surplus' code. Although a majority of audience coding was found to be of unknown gender, it should be noted 13.41% of publications could be identified as specifically targeting women. Often, the publications that were clearly targeted toward women, called upon them to use their household skills, like canning or other food preservation techniques, to contribute to the war effort.

Recommendations/Implications

Recommendations for future research, beyond replication of this study, include analyzing publications from other sources during the specified time period and continuing to perform content analyses on USDA publications from other significant time periods. Additionally, correlating message framing themes and subsequent economic impacts of said message frames would be an intriguing inter-disciplinary study for researchers in a variety of agricultural fields. Implications for these findings are multi-faceted. From a historic viewpoint, this study adds to the relatively small body of literature examining audience gender and targeted messages within publications. From a practitioner perspective, understanding how USDA effectively rallied both women and men to increase food production, food conservation, and general involvement in supplying agricultural resources to the war effort can be used today. When planning communication strategies that intend to encourage and promote agricultural involvement, agricultural communicators could implement messaging tactics that involve evoking specific emotions or appealing to patriotic values. In the process of encouraging women and minorities to become involved in the agriculture and natural resource industries, developing a campaign specifically targeted to these audiences that appeals to their emotions and values is essential in seeing visible results.

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