

Spurring Change: Coverage of Gender in College Rodeo

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Introduction

Trends in media frame and coverage of the non-traditional sport of rodeo tend to focus on a single gender despite being a mix-gendered competition (Bushy, 1990). Often this coverage, from youth to professional divisions, will frame males as “aggressive” or “rowdy risk takers” (Bushy, 1990, pp. 75-76) and, if at all, females as a “beautiful object of desire” (Thatcher, 2023, p. 128) or “decorative objects subordinate to men” (Shields & Coughlin, 2000, p. 182). This notion was the foundation for this study, which explored the framing and media coverage of female intercollegiate rodeo athletes through their respective teams’ social media presence on Instagram. The objectives of this study were to: 1) Determine if there was a difference in the frequency of posts where males or females were represented, and 2) Explore differences in how gender was portrayed via passive, active, and sexualized frames.

Theoretical Framework

Sociological accounts of framing (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Gitlin, 1980) served as the theoretical framework. Media frames refer to the “central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events...the essence of the issue” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143). Frames can be made up of metaphors, catchphrases, visual images, moral appeals, and other symbolic devices (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Further, Gitlin (1980) explained framing as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse” (p. 7). Although framing has been used to explore gender in sports (Billings & Hundley, 2010), this study would be the first to use framing to explore media coverage related to female intercollegiate rodeo athlete representation in media.

Methodology

This quantitative deductive content analysis looked at Instagram posts from National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association’s (NIRA) women’s teams placing in the top 10 at the 2023 College National Finals Rodeo (CFNR). Teams selected ($N = 7$), were in the 2023 CFNR top 10 women's teams and had Instagram pages. A complete list of teams will be included with the poster. Across the Instagram pages, 238 individual posts were generated between October 1, 2022, to May 31, 2023 (the 2022-2023 NIRA season). We excluded videos and reels. For carousel posts, we assumed the first image was intentional and only coded the first image.

A review of the literature structured the formulation of a codebook for deductive analysis. While the codebook was created for a larger study and included additional subthemes, the subthemes of focus for this portion of the study included general post information (including gender present in post), and visual framing. The visual framing pieces of interest were *passive*, *active*, and *sexualized*. Passive was identified when the persons in the photo were not participating in a collegiate rodeo event whereas active was identified when a person was participating in an event. We identified a sexualized frame in posts when the focus of the post appeared to be the physical appearance of the person or emphasized more stylized coverage

rather than prioritizing skill or talent. Intercoder reliability agreement coefficients were found to be acceptable (.73 to .98) based on a sample of 20% ($n = 48$) of posts coded independently by two reviewers (Gwet, 2014). All posts were then coded by the same reviewers. To address our first research objective addressing differences in the number of times males and females are portrayed, we used descriptive statistics including percentages. For our second research objective we used chi-square to look for statistical significances in categorical data (Field, 2013).

Results and Findings

Across posts, people appeared in 125 of 238 images. Males appeared 61 times (49%) and females appeared 64 times (51%). Comparing gender framing, there were statistically significant ($p < .05$) differences for passive and sexualized frames (Table 1).

Table 1

Prevalence of Visual Framing in Intercollegiate Rodeo Instagram Posts (N = 238) by Gender

	Male		Female		χ^2 (1)
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Passive	30	12.6	44	18.5	4.95*
Active	22	9.2	14	5.9	3.07
Sexualized	20	8.4	35	14.7	1.14*

Note. Percentages calculated as percent of total posts ($N = 238$)

* $p < .05$

Conclusions

Concerning the first objective, males and females appeared to have equal representation in posts where people were present. When looking at the second research objective, there is a statistically significant likelihood of female athletes being represented as passive and sexualized when compared to their male counterparts. The findings indicated male and female rodeo athletes are represented equally on social media, however the representation of the genders is not equitable as posts with female athletes were framed as more passive and sexualized.

Implications/Recommendations

These findings provide insight on how intercollegiate rodeo teams consciously or unconsciously frame their athletes on social media. Despite equal representation, female rodeo athletes are represented more for their appearance than their skill. As framing provides a narrative for how people interpret information (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Gitlin 1980) caution should be used when considering how differently gendered athletes are represented across social media platforms to move away from the narratives of previous literature surrounding female and male rodeo athletes (Bushy, 1990; Shields & Coughlin, 2000; Thatcher, 2023). These narratives may perpetuate passive and sexualized frames of how female athletes view themselves, and how others view women in rodeo.

Further research should include interviews with female intercollegiate rodeo athletes to uncover perspectives of how they view they are framed, and how they want to be framed, by the media. A qualitative approach, exploring equity and not equality, as a construct, may impact more than women in just rodeo and sports. There is additional opportunity to look at the equity of framing of women in agriculture overall as well.

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