

Riding High: Social Media Strategies of College Rodeo Teams

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Introduction

Rodeo is considered a non-traditional sport (Myers & Laurent, 2012), and as such, is deeply rooted in cultural meaning, often reflecting sports, lifestyle, and work (Pearson & Haney, 1999; Rhea & Martin, 2010; Thatcher, 2022). As a sport, rodeo has been identified by some as one of the most respected sports in the United States (Pearson & Haney, 1999), with collegiate rodeo serving as an important factor in its cultural success and importance (Mahoney, 2004). Despite its uniqueness as both a sport and cultural influence, research exploring rodeo remains scant, especially when it comes to sports media coverage. Specifically, there appears to be few studies that have sought to explore how rodeo athletes have been framed in popular media.

This gap served as the foundation of this study, which aimed to explore media coverage and the subsequent portrayal of collegiate rodeo athletes through their respective teams' social media posts on Instagram – an important strategic communication mainstay of collegiate sports programs. Specifically, this study examined perceptions of rodeo, utilizing previous societal beliefs derived from a review of related literature and media coverage regarding professional rodeo and Western culture. Ultimately, the results from this study will identify how collegiate rodeo programs frame rodeo as a sport, lifestyle, and culture through self-coverage.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in media framing theory, specifically from a sociological perspective (see Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, 1989; Gitlin, 1980). Framing is concerned with the selection and emphasis of certain qualities of messages, ideas, or storylines, which provide meaning (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). Frames can be metaphors, catchphrases, visual images, moral appeals, and other symbolic devices (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989), as well as continually calculated perceptual patterns (Gitlin, 1980, p. 7). This meaning can influence individuals' perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and behaviors. Thus, understanding how topics are framed in media can provide insight into how audiences make sense of said topics.

Methodology

We conducted a content analysis by coding Instagram posts of teams ($N = 7$) that had an active Instagram account and were in the top 10 National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association (NIRA) women's teams in 2023. We coded 238 individual posts, spanning from October 1, 2022, to May 31, 2023, or the complete 2022-2023 NIRA season. We excluded videos and reels and coded the first image for carousels, assuming the first image was intentionally chosen.

A literature review led to the creation of a codebook focused on product-related and non-product-related subthemes. Product-related pieces were identified when posts highlighted team success (and/or quality/style of play of the team), star athlete(s), and/or a head coach(es). Non-product related pieces were identified when posts centralized brand mark (logo, mascot, colors, and/or uniforms of the team), management (executive), history & tradition (winning records, past successes, tragedies, legendary matches, and/or past players/coaches), culture & values (and/or role of team in community), event's image (particular competition and/or opponent), sponsor, fans, and stadium (arena, facilities, and/or concessions). Sample photos of recurring frames will be displayed on the final poster. A 20% sample of posts ($n = 48$) was coded independently by 2 reviewers and analyzed for intercoder reliability, where agreement coefficients were found to be

acceptable (.73 to .98) using Gwet’s (2014). The same reviewers coded all posts and analyzed them using descriptive statistics to illustrate post emphasis.

Results and Findings

The quantitative coding revealed that branding ($f = 176, 73.9\%$) and culture ($f = 81, 34.0\%$) appeared in most posts, while non-product related frames appeared less frequently. Table 1 indicates the frequencies and percentages of the prime media frames of interest.

Table 1

Occurrence of Framed Emphasis Areas in Collegiate Rodeo Team Instagram Posts (N = 238)

Emphasis Areas	<i>f</i>	%
Branding	176	73.9
Culture	81	34.0
Team Success	55	23.1
Star Athlete	55	23.1
Sponsors	55	23.1
Events	38	16.0

Conclusions

Regarding our initial objective to explore collegiate rodeo teams’ internal social media framing and coverage, the results conclude that they favor framing their coverage via branding and culture. This aligns with general Western framing and the media. A logical connection considering rodeo’s significance and deep cultural connections within current broadcasted Western culture, given its evolution from traditional rodeo roots (Patton, 2012).

Further, results imply a continued resemblance to professional rodeo and Western culture, given the alludes to remarkable narratives that frequent general Western media through the non-product related emphasis areas, respectively. In consequence, results of this analysis reveal that collegiate rodeo is framed with a strong affinity to portray emphasis areas of branding, culture, team success, star athlete, sponsors, and events, notably maintaining relevant, unique relatedness to broadcasted Western culture.

Implications/Recommendations

These findings provide insight into how collegiate rodeo teams knowingly frame their social media, as well as the general distinctive nature and culture of this community, given the emphasis areas. While college rodeo programs function with similarities distinctive to Western culture, additional research opportunities lie in further exploration of these non-traditional programs, possibly considering operation, environment, and connection to the collegiate agriculture community/college.

For example, the rodeo team at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo is not associated with university athletics but is housed within the college of agriculture. This unique set of affairs may create its own inherent programmatic culture, which could be analyzed to investigate branding and marketing through social media in comparison to other college rodeo programs. Ultimately, this study enlightens society on what related communities find paramount and can serve as fundamentals for social media strategies for other rodeo teams, collegiate or professional level, as well as be of use to Western and agricultural communities in general.

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