

**The Influence of Social Media on College Students' Perceptions and Attitudes Toward the  
Agriculture Industry**

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## **Abstract**

With fewer people having direct experience in farming and animal husbandry, social media sites have become a primary source of information, forming perceptions of rodeo. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X frequently post emotion-based content highlighting animal rights and portraying rodeo events as morally dubious or even harmful. Such depictions tend to perpetuate misconceptions, spread misinformation, and erode confidence in rodeo and agriculture, especially among non-agricultural people. The purpose of the study was to examine the impact of social media use on public perceptions of rodeo and animal welfare issues. Using framing theory and previous literature on media effects, agricultural literacy, and perceptions of livestock production, the following three research questions were formulated for this study: (1) How does social media affect public perceptions of rodeo and animal welfare? (2) What kind of content is likely to have an impact on public perceptions? and (3) Does the type of content that is consumed vary depending on whether one has previous knowledge of agriculture/rodeo events? Participants in the study were 75–100 social media users, primarily college students and young adults. The research shows that conflicting digital stories affect people's perceptions of rodeo and their confidence in agriculture. The research data offer useful insights into improving social media communication plans for both rodeo clubs and agricultural communicators.

## **The Influence of Social Media on College Students' Perceptions and Attitudes Toward the Agriculture Industry**

Over the past several decades, the relationship between the public and agriculture has shifted as fewer individuals have direct, firsthand experience with farming, ranching, and livestock production. As populations become increasingly urbanized, many people now rely on mediated sources of information to understand agricultural practices rather than personal exposure. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X have become central spaces for discussing, interpreting, and evaluating agricultural topics, particularly among young adults who frequently use these platforms as primary sources of information about food systems, animal welfare, and rural industries (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). While these platforms allow users to rapidly share information and opinions, they also tend to amplify emotionally charged content and simplified narratives, which can strongly influence how audiences form attitudes toward complex industries (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Vraga & Bode, 2020).

Within this larger context, rodeo occupies a highly visible and often controversial position in public discourse. Rodeo has strong historical and cultural roots in the American West and remains closely tied to traditional ranch work, livestock handling, and rural identity. For participants and supporters, rodeo represents athletic skill, heritage, and agricultural tradition. However, for individuals without agricultural backgrounds, rodeo is often encountered mainly through social media, where short-form videos, viral clips, and activist messaging frequently dominate. These portrayals tend to emphasize animal welfare concerns and frame rodeo as unethical or harmful, while offering limited context regarding industry regulations, animal care standards, or the perspectives of those involved in the sport. As a result, audiences may form

opinions based on isolated or emotionally framed content rather than a complete understanding of rodeo practices (Brossard, 2013; Yang et al., 2021).

Social media plays a critical function in shaping how rodeo is framed and interpreted by the public. Framing theory suggests that how information is presented influences how audiences interpret issues, assign responsibility, and form judgments (Entman, 1993). On social media, content that evokes strong emotional reactions—such as outrage or sympathy—is more likely to be shared and engaged with, increasing its visibility (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Vraga & Bode, 2020). Consequently, rodeo-related content that highlights perceived animal mistreatment may circulate more widely than content explaining training practices, veterinary oversight, or animal welfare guidelines. This imbalance can reinforce stereotypes about rodeo participants and the broader agricultural community, portraying them as careless or resistant to change, despite ongoing industry efforts to improve disclosure and animal welfare standards (Vraga & Bode, 2020).

These problems are further compounded by wider issues related to agricultural literacy. Research has consistently shown that individuals with limited exposure to agriculture often have a lower understanding of livestock production and animal management practices (Frick, 1995). When audiences lack basic knowledge, they may be more susceptible to simplified or misleading narratives encountered online (Abrams & Meyers, 2019). This dynamic might lead to misunderstandings not only about rodeo but also about animal agriculture as a whole. Public concern for animal welfare is a major factor influencing attitudes toward the livestock industry (Bennett & Blaney, 2003). Consequently, negative perceptions formed through social media may go beyond the sport itself and affect public trust in agricultural industries more broadly.

Community confidence is an essential element of the relationship between agriculture and society, influencing consumer attitudes, policy support, and the social license of animal-related industries. Prior research emphasizes the importance of transparent, effective communication for maintaining public trust, particularly when addressing controversial or emotionally charged topics (Ruth, 2017). When communication gaps exist, social media can fill the void with competing accounts that may not accurately reflect industry practices. This poses a major challenge for agricultural communicators and rodeo organizations seeking to involve audiences who are skeptical of or unfamiliar with the industry.

Additionally, perceptions of animal agriculture vary across audiences. Studies indicate that demographic factors and information sources play a key role in shaping attitudes toward animal-related industries, with individuals with an agricultural background often holding different perceptions than those without such experience (McKendree, 2014). These differences show that prior exposure to agriculture or rodeo may influence how social media messages are interpreted and evaluated. Understanding these variations is important for identifying which messages appeal to different audiences and for developing communication strategies that address concerns while recognizing public values related to animal welfare.

Despite the growing influence of social media on public understanding of agriculture, limited research has examined how these platforms shape perceptions of rodeo and animal welfare. This gap underscores the need to better understand how digital content influences attitudes, particularly among individuals with varying levels of agricultural exposure.

This study addresses this problem by examining how social media influences public opinions and stereotypes about rodeo and animal welfare. The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How does social media influence public views and stereotypes about rodeo and

animal welfare? (2) What types of social media content most strongly shape these perceptions? (3) Are perceptions different between individuals with prior exposure to agriculture or rodeo and those without? This study researches how exposure to rodeo-related social media content shapes attitudes among young adult users through an online questionnaire. By studying patterns of exposure and perception, this research adds to a deeper understanding of agricultural communication, public trust, and the challenges of representing traditional agricultural practices in digital environments.

## **Method**

### **Study Population**

The population of interest for this study consisted of college students aged 18 to 25 who actively use social media. This population is highly relevant to the research topic, *The Influence of Social Media on College Students' Perceptions and Attitudes Toward the Agriculture Industry*, because college students are among the most frequent users of social media platforms and commonly rely on digital content to form opinions about industries with which they have limited direct experience. Many students lack direct exposure to agriculture, making social media an influential source of information that shapes their perceptions, attitudes, and trust in the agricultural industry. Studying this population allows for meaningful analysis of how the frequency of social media use, content type, and engagement behaviors relate to students' understanding of agriculture.

### **Sampling Technique**

Sampling in quantitative research includes selecting a subset of individuals from a larger population to make inferences about the population as a whole (Taherdoost, 2016). For this

study, a convenience sampling method was used. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are selected based on accessibility and willingness to participate (Etikan et al., 2016). This method enabled the efficient recruitment of participants who actively use social media and are likely to encounter agricultural content online.

Participants were recruited through university classes, student organizations, peer networks, and social media platforms commonly used by college students. This approach was appropriate given the study's focus on college students and its exploratory nature, which aims to examine relationships between social media use and perceptions rather than produce nationally representative findings. Convenience sampling is commonly used in communication and social science research involving student populations and is well-suited to examining attitudes, perceptions, and media behaviors (Etikan & Bala, 2017).

However, this method has limitations. Because participants were selected based on accessibility, the sample may not be representative of all college students or the wider population, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, self-selection bias may occur if individuals with stronger opinions about agriculture are more likely to participate. These limitations are taken into account when interpreting the study's results.

### **Sample Size**

The intended sample size for this study was approximately 100–150 participants. This range is appropriate for a survey-based quantitative study examining relationships between variables such as social media use, content engagement, and attitudes. The sample size was also feasible given time constraints and access to college students. A sample of this size allows the use of descriptive statistics and basic comparative analyses while remaining realistic within the scope of the research project (Taherdoost, 2016; Etikan & Bala, 2017).

## **Research Findings**

### **Research Question 1: Social Media and Perceptions of Rodeo and Animal Welfare**

The first research question examined how social media shapes public perceptions of rodeo and animal welfare. Results indicated that participants widely use social media, with 85% reporting use multiple times per day and an additional 10% reporting once-daily use.

Exposure to agriculture-related content was also common. Approximately 51% of participants reported seeing this type of content “often” or “very often,” while 25% reported seeing it “sometimes.” Additionally, 77% indicated they had seen rodeo-related content on social media.

Despite this high level of exposure, perceived influence varied. About 29% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that social media influences their opinions about agriculture, while 40% reported neutral responses. Similarly, 25% agreed or strongly agreed that social media influences their opinions about rodeo, while 41% remained neutral.

These results indicate that although exposure to social media content is frequent, its influence on perceptions is not uniform across participants.

### **Research Question 2: Types of Content and Their Influence**

The second research question explored which types of content most strongly modify perceptions.

The results showed that participants are most frequently exposed to visually stimulating and emotionally driven content. The most commonly reported content types included farming or ranching lifestyle posts (86%), rodeo content (76%), and informational agriculture posts (47%).

Additionally, 32% of participants reported exposure to animal welfare-focused content, and 22% reported seeing activism-related posts. Over half of respondents (53%) agreed or strongly agreed that social media content about rodeo often focuses on animal welfare concerns.

Perceptions of accuracy were mixed. While 36% agreed or strongly agreed that social media provides accurate information about agriculture, 40% remained neutral. However, 64% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that seeing agriculture-related content increases their understanding.

This evidence shows that while social media can enhance awareness, emotionally framed content, particularly related to animal welfare, plays a key role in shaping perceptions.

### **Research Question 3: Difference Based on Agricultural Experiences**

The third research question examined whether perceptions differ based on agricultural experience. Results showed variation within the sample: 47% reported an agricultural background, 33% reported some experience, and 20% reported little to no experience.

Participants with agricultural experience were more likely to report either neutral or balanced perceptions and were less likely to rely solely on social media when forming opinions. In contrast, those without experience were more likely to report that social media influenced their perceptions and to voice concern about animal welfare in rodeo.

Overall, 45% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that social media has affected their perceptions of how animals are treated in rodeo. Additionally, 54% agreed or strongly agreed that social media sometimes portrays agriculture negatively, while only 22% reported strong trust in the information they encounter

These results indicate that prior experience influences how social media content is interpreted and trusted.

### **Summary of Findings**

Overall, the findings show that social media plays an important role in shaping young adults' perceptions of rodeo and animal welfare. High levels of exposure, combined with emotionally driven content, contribute to the formation of attitudes. However, prior agricultural experience influences how content is interpreted and the level of trust placed in information on social media.

## **Limitations, Recommendations, and Conclusion**

### **Limitations**

While this study gives valuable insights into how social media influences perceptions of rodeo and animal welfare, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study used convenience sampling, with participants primarily college students. As a result, the findings may not be generalizable to the wider population. In particular, individuals outside the 18-25 age range or those with different levels of education or social media use.

Second, the sample size of 75-100 individuals is relatively small, limiting the ability to draw broader conclusions or identify more complex relationships among variables. Additionally, the use of self-reported survey data introduces the possibility of response bias, as participants may have answered questions based on assumed expectations rather than their true beliefs or behaviors.

Another limitation is that the study focused on general exposure to social media content rather than particular platforms or algorithms. Differences between platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook may influence how content is presented and interpreted, but such differences were not examined in depth. Finally, the study measured perceptions at a single point in time, meaning it does not account for the fact that attitudes may change with continued exposure or over time.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations can be made for agricultural communicators and rodeo organizations. First, there is a clear need for more transparent, informative, and engaging content that explains rodeo practices, animal care, and industry regulations. Since emotionally driven content tends to have the greatest impact, communicators should consider using storytelling and visuals to present accurate information in ways that resonate with audiences.

Second, efforts should target individuals with limited agricultural experience, as this group is more likely to rely on social media in forming their perceptions. Educational campaigns and outreach strategies focused on improving agricultural literacy could help reduce misperceptions and increase citizen trust.

Subsequent research should build on this study by using large and more diverse samples to improve generalizability. Researchers could also examine differences between specific social media platforms to better understand how algorithms and content formats influence perceptions. Additionally, longitudinal studies would be beneficial in exploring how attitudes toward rodeo and animal welfare evolve over time with continued exposure to social media content.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant role social media plays in shaping young adults' perceptions of rodeo and animal welfare. The findings demonstrate that while social media increases awareness and exposure to agricultural topics, it also contributes to mixed perceptions regarding accuracy and trust. Emotionally driven, visually engaging content, particularly related to animal welfare, plays a central role in shaping attitudes.

Furthermore, prior agricultural experience was found to impact how individuals interpret and respond to social media content. Participants with an agricultural background were more likely to have balanced perspectives, while those without such experience relied more heavily on social media when forming opinions.

Overall, this study emphasizes the importance of effective communication within the agricultural industry. By addressing misinformation and providing transparent, accessible content, agricultural communicators and rodeo organizations can better engage with the public and build trust in an increasingly digital environment.

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