

Is This Really Ranching? An Exploratory Analysis of Agricultural Priorities in Yellowstone Television Trailers

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Abstract

Entertainment media has become a primary source of agricultural knowledge for many Americans, particularly those without direct agricultural experience. Yellowstone, a contemporary western television series, is among the most watched shows in the United States and features recurring themes of land, succession, and ranching life. Whether this show is accurately portraying elements about ranching is up for debate amongst real ranchers and industry groups. The agricultural community has noted for better or worse, Yellowstone is telling a story about ranching and people are tuning in. The livestock industry has publicized the issues they are dealing with to inform members of the public about the efforts they are taking to address these issues. This study sought to explore what agricultural priority issues were present and how they were being presented in each of Yellowstone's five seasons' trailers through collaborative analysis. Findings included the show featuring "next generation" and "land resources" as the most present priority areas. The "power" value was the most present among priority areas. Agricultural communicators should consider the impact a popular film can have on the industry, as well as where opportunities of joining the discourse around scenes in the film can help lead to education or consumers understanding agriculture processes better. Implications of popular media of agriculture should also be explored. Future studies should test how impressions and perspectives may shift after consuming entertainment media on agriculture.

Keywords

Agricultural priorities, media portrayals, values, Yellowstone

Authors

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Introduction

Although 96% of farm/ranches are family owned and operated, less than 2% of the general U.S. population is directly involved with agriculture (Kirshenbaum & Buhler, 2018). Because more people are moving to cities and suburbs, the general population is removed from agricultural processes and practices (Kirshenbaum & Buhler, 2018). At the same time, younger generations such as Gen Z and Millennials are nearly twice as likely to want to know where their food comes from compared to other generations (Beaton, 2022). Gen Z seeks out information through video content (Jones, 2018). For this reason, videos have the power to shape public perception, policy, and e-commerce sales of the agricultural industry (Kirkpatrick, 2017).

For consumers with limited agricultural experiences, they might find information about agricultural industries and food systems through films, documentaries, and movies (Holt & Cartmell, 2013). As such, it is important to consider the potential economic, social, and political impacts of videos and films on an industry (Fazio, 2020). Agricultural communication practitioners should monitor the content of popular videos that may feature agricultural content to address any misconceptions, or stereotypes, and present accurate representations of the agricultural industry (Chase et al., 2026).

One prominent example of agriculture entering mainstream popular culture is the television series *Yellowstone*. Premiering in 2018 on Paramount Network, *Yellowstone* follows the fictional Dutton family as they navigate conflicts related to ranching, land ownership, Indigenous sovereignty, government regulation, and urban development in Montana (White, 2023). The series has achieved widespread popularity, particularly among urban audiences in the Midwest and South, and was the most-watched cable entertainment program of 2020, averaging 3.9 million views (Porter, 2020).

Beyond its commercial success, *Yellowstone* resonates with audiences through recurring themes such as family legacy, land stewardship, power, and justice (Petty, 2023). Ranching activities and agricultural issues, including land encroachment, succession, drought, and cattle marketing, are featured throughout the series, positioning agricultural issues and ranching as a central narrative element (Roysdon, 2023; Shelton, 2021). Because many viewers lack firsthand agricultural experience, these portrayals may meaningfully shape public understanding of ranching and rural life.

In applied agricultural communication research, industry-identified priorities and perspectives are commonly used to examine how agricultural issues are framed and represented to public audiences (Ruth et al., 2005; Rumble & Buck, 2013; Specht & Beam, 2015). The National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) created a set of priority areas that reflect ongoing concerns within the U.S. beef industry, including land stewardship, succession planning, market access, animal health, and water resources. Because these priorities align closely with recurring themes depicted in *Yellowstone*, they offer an applied framework for assessing how entertainment media frame agricultural challenges and values for non-agricultural audiences.

Audiences are introduced to a television program through promotional trailers. Trailers function as condensed narrative tools designed to shape viewer expectations by highlighting genre,

conflict, and core values (Finsterwalder et al., 2012; Hixson, 2005). As the primary promotional for a television series, trailers may play a critical role in framing how agricultural and rural issues are presented to audiences prior to viewing the full program (Finsterwalder et al., 2012).

Given the influence of video media on public perceptions of agriculture, the cultural reach of *Yellowstone*, and the prominence of agricultural themes within the series, examining how agriculture is framed in *Yellowstone* trailers is both timely and relevant. It is important that agricultural communicators continue to study how agriculture and other rural industries are portrayed in the media (Rhoades & Irani, 2008). This descriptive study examines how agricultural priorities adapted from the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) are represented in *Yellowstone* season trailers and how values associated with those priorities are visually framed. By linking industry priorities, media framing, and popular culture, this research contributes to applied agricultural communication scholarship and offers insights for practitioners navigating entertainment-driven perceptions of agriculture.

Literature Review

Media Portrayals of Agriculture & Rural Life

Within agricultural communication research, descriptive content analyses have played an important role in establishing proof-of-concept findings and setting research agendas around emerging issues and phenomena (Cannon et al., 2016; Regusci et al., 2022; Steede et al., 2018). Ruth et al. (2005) found that when viewers lacked experience and an accurate representation of agriculture, certain outdated agricultural activities shown in the reality show *The Simple Life* could become part of the viewers' schema concerning agriculture. Specht (2013) conducted a visual analysis of the same show and found that the visuals used in the show supported typical stereotypes of agriculture such as "green fields, dirt roads, and backward people" (p. 257).

In a different study exploring the use of agricultural imagery and stereotypes on the reality television show *The Bachelor*, Specht and Beam (2015) found the show contained both positive and negative agricultural stereotypes such as farmers being hard working individuals and isolation in rural towns. Specht and Beam (2015) noted repeated exposure to agricultural stereotypes through media can impact viewers' beliefs and attitudes toward agriculture. The representations of agricultural and rural communities in these mass media spaces are likely to form impressions on non-agricultural viewers (Specht, 2013).

Yellowstone and Themes in Ranching

Yellowstone is an American contemporary western television series that premiered on June 20, 2018, on Paramount Network (White, 2023). The dramatized series follows conflicts between the fictional Yellowstone Ranch owned by ranching family the Duttons, the Broken Rock Indian reservation, Yellowstone National Park, and urban investors and land developers (White, 2023). The show is set in Montana, and filming occurs across the state (Kidston, 2020). Basic human ideas and values such as "freedom, liberty, family, vengeance, and justice" are shown throughout the series and viewers are drawn toward these themes (Petty, 2023, para. 5). Other western themes that arise in the series include "the struggles of Native Americans, the

harsh realities of cowboy living, the consequences of violence and stolen land, and the battle against progress” (Petty, 2023, para. 5). *Yellowstone* features bucolic landscapes of Montana, hard-working cowboys who spend their days on horseback and their nights dancing at a local bar, and it highlights a slower pace of life on the ranch, which romanticizes the western lifestyle (Petty 2023). Rural viewers are attracted to the show’s blue-collar stories that highlight farmers, rural law enforcement, ranchers, and industrial workers, who feel their voices are rarely heard in mainstream media (Petty 2023). The show features ranching activities, rural problems, murder, high-stakes power plays, romance, and other dramatic events (Fink, 2023). The series portrays both the day-to-day activities and broader challenges of ranching. Common depictions include rodeos, cattle branding, livestock transportation, and auctions, alongside issues such as low market prices, drought conditions, predator conflicts, poaching, and land encroachment (Shelton, 2021). Because there is so much focus on the intrinsic and financial value of the land, land becomes a primary theme in the show with conflict arising between preserving and developing the land (Roysdon, 2023).

Across empirical studies, key values of ranchers have been identified (Didier et al., 2004; Liffmann et al., 2000; Sketch et al., 2020; Willcox & Giuliano, 2011). Many ranchers value the ranching lifestyle because of their close relationship with nature, quality of life, and working with family and their relationships within the ranching community (Liffmann et al., 2000). Ranchers identify as stewards of their land (Didier et al., 2004) and have reported promoting wildlife and the ecosystems supporting them as a daily part of ranching operations (Willcox & Giuliano, 2011). Ranchers make decisions about land management through a multitude of influences, which are not only limited to financial reasons as perceived by many non-agriculturalists, but also through cultural, human, social and political dimensions (Sketch et al., 2020). Maintaining healthy lands and preserving the lands for future generations all contribute to ranchers’ attitudes about the benefits of promoting wildlife on their land (Willcox & Giuliano, 2011). However, many ranchers are concerned with the ability to pass their operations to future generations (Sketch et al., 2020), and many have left their operations due to the negative societal perception of ranching and the financial challenges those perceptions have created (Liffman et al., 2000).

Discourse Surrounding *Yellowstone* Within the Agricultural Community

The television series *Yellowstone* has generated substantial discussion within agricultural and rural communities regarding the accuracy and implications of its portrayals. Ranchers and agricultural media outlets have offered mixed assessments of the series, noting that while certain elements reflect real ranching concerns, others exaggerate or misrepresent industry practices (Carlson, 2022; Earl, 2023; Shelton, 2021). Shelton (2021) suggested that the show’s depiction of land disputes and eminent domain may be among its most realistic aspects, reflecting genuine tensions faced by ranchers. In a review of the series, Earl (2023) identified several real ranching elements the show features such as family farming and the tension that can come with working together, land encroachment, impacts of state government on agriculture, western clothes, real-life rodeo athletes, and having pride in the land they work.

Similarly, agricultural media coverage has highlighted episodes addressing industry-relevant topics such as cattle prices, direct-to-consumer beef sales, and market consolidation

(AgDaily, 2022). These narratives intersect with growing consumer interest in local beef and transparency within food systems, amplifying their potential influence (AgDaily, 2022). Some ranchers shared the unrealistic elements of ranching that are portrayed in the show include ranchers having a lot of money, using top-of-the-line equipment (e.g., helicopters) on ranches, and the constant violence and overuse of profanity (Earl, 2023). Some agricultural stakeholders have expressed concerns that one of the negative impacts of *Yellowstone* is spreading misconceptions about animal health (Woods, 2023). For example, in an episode where some cattle are found to have a disease, the Dutton family contemplates killing the herd, when in reality, herds do not get killed off for disease but would be promptly cared for and tested (Woods, 2023). Doherty (2023) reported that ranching professionals frequently debunk misconceptions perpetuated by *Yellowstone*, including the belief that humans are branded like cattle, that horses can gallop continuously for extended periods, and that Montana has a "train station" where bodies are disposed of. Mark Greeno of Bozeman, a frequent visitor to the dude ranch Nine Quarter Circle Ranch, was quoted as saying "The show has given our ranchers a bad name" (as cited in Doherty, 2023, para. 30). The violence, political fighting, and murdering of people who cause ranchers trouble is not an accurate portrayal of any rancher (Doherty, 2023).

Additionally, Carlson (2022) discussed how the *Yellowstone* series is blurring the reality of cattle ranching while also presenting both the potential opportunities and challenges associated with ranching being featured in such a popular television series. Carlson (2022) further noted that although the ranching lifestyle is being dramatized, the series reaches millions of viewers who have never experienced a working ranch and may form perceptions based solely on its portrayal. Carlson (2022) observed that "like a broken record, we have all been told to 'tell our story before someone else does.' Good, bad, or otherwise—this show is telling our story" (para. 7). This captured and ranching-curious audience presents an opportunity for ranchers to show the U.S. what ranching is truly like, and the industry needs to capitalize on this (Carlson, 2022). Some sectors of the agricultural industry have welcomed the visibility that *Yellowstone* has brought to ranching, as evidenced by the invitation extended to creator Taylor Sheridan to speak at the 2023 annual meeting of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (Myers, 2023).

Yellowstone's Impact on Ranching & Rodeo Industries

Yellowstone's impact can also be traced to ranching and rodeo industries. Allison Ryan, co-founder of a firm that specializes in upscale ranch stays, reported that visitors ask for the "Yellowstone experience" when visiting (Carlton, 2023, para. 13). In fact, many Montana ranchers are now creating *Yellowstone* experiences for people to partake in on their ranch to help supplement their income as land prices increase (Carlton, 2023). *Yellowstone* has contributed to increased interest in dude ranch tourism, with one ranch manager noting, "Every week or so someone tells us, 'We decided to look into dude ranches because of the show *Yellowstone*'" (Doherty, 2023, para. 4). Vognar (2022) reported that "rodeos, which feature prominently in the show, have experienced a surge in popularity, with increased attendance at events and star rodeo athletes appearing in cameos on the show" (para. 7).

Economic, Tourism, & Housing Impacts of *Yellowstone* on Montana

A study conducted by the University of Montana's Bureau of Business and Economic

Research found that *Yellowstone* has had a substantial impact on the state's economy and tourism industry, with film-induced tourism contributing hundreds of millions of dollars in visitor spending and increasing global interest in Montana (University of Montana, 2022). The study also reported film tourism, a niche sector of tourism where visitors explore locations and destinations made famous by films, is especially prevalent to *Yellowstone* as it sparked a new interest in Montana from a worldwide audience (University of Montana, 2022). In fact, according to the study, 3,305 people moved to Montana due to the show and 2.1 million visitors to Montana in 2021 indicated that their visit to the state was a result of the show, and they spent \$730.1 million in Montana (University of Montana, 2022). The report concluded by sharing the popularity of *Yellowstone* has overpowered the state's marketing efforts (University of Montana, 2022). This phenomenon, often referred to as the "Yellowstone effect," mirrors the impact of *A River Runs Through It*, after which Montana's fly-fishing industry grew by 60% following the film's 1992 release (Brewer & Golden, 2022, p. 3).

Pop Culture Impact of *Yellowstone*

Along with economic effects of *Yellowstone* comes *Yellowstone's* pop culture impacts on society. Media outlets have documented shifts in fashion trends, naming practices, and cultural aesthetics linked to the show's popularity (Chen, 2023; Yu, 2023). Further, Myers (2023) described how *Yellowstone* has influenced western fashion trends, including one fashion industry employee's decision to wear cowboy boots inspired by Beth Dutton. The resurgence of western apparel and the emergence of character-inspired consumer behaviors illustrate how entertainment media can normalize and romanticize specific rural identities and values. Such cultural diffusion underscores the symbolic power of entertainment media in shaping meaning-making around agriculture and rural life. These symbolic representations, when combined with limited direct agricultural experience, may contribute to perceptions that influence public attitudes toward agricultural industries.

Trailers in Entertainment Media

One way consumers may find out about different shows and movies about rural life and western heritage are through trailers. Videos are one of the most powerful media tools for storytelling, and the key to effectively marketing a series is to give consumers a condensed preview of what the movie or show will be about, through a shortened clip called a trailer (Finsterwalder et al., 2012). Producers of television trailers use different components such as genre, plot, and actors to differentiate themselves from other series and to position themselves with viewers who may align with some of the trailer's content and values (Hixon, 2005). Trailers are among the most effective promotional tools for television and film, significantly shaping consumer expectations and interpretations of content (Finsterwalder et al., 2012). As condensed narratives, trailers establish themes, values, and emotional cues by emphasizing selective scenes and symbolic imagery, ultimately framing how viewers understand forthcoming media (Finsterwalder et al., 2012; Hixson, 2005). For media that feature agriculture and rural life, trailers may play a critical role in shaping initial impressions of industry priorities, values, and conflicts before audiences encounter more nuanced portrayals within full episodes. Official *Yellowstone* trailers released on platforms such as YouTube have accumulated millions of views, indicating levels of exposure comparable to or exceeding typical cable television

audiences at the time of release (Porter, 2020). Given the widespread reach of *Yellowstone* and the role of trailers in shaping viewer expectations, this study examines how agricultural priority issues are represented in *Yellowstone* season trailers and how values associated with those priorities are visually framed.

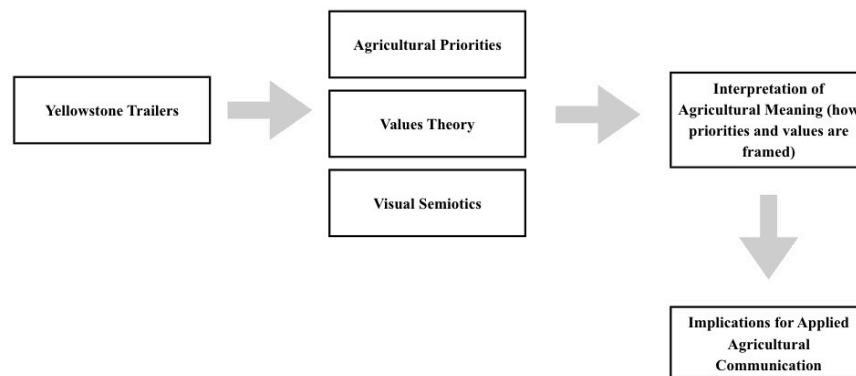
Taken together, existing literature demonstrates that entertainment media shape public perceptions of agriculture, that *Yellowstone* has become a culturally influential site of meaning-making around ranching and rural life, and that trailers play a critical role in framing audience expectations. However, prior research has not examined how specific agricultural priorities are visually framed within entertainment media texts. To address this gap, the present study applies an integrated conceptual framework combining industry-identified agricultural priorities, values theory, and visual semiotics to examine agricultural representations in *Yellowstone* trailers.

The Power of Media

Television, movies, and films play a huge role in the social construction of reality (Adoni & Mane, 1984; Gerbner & Gross, 1976). One type of social reality is subjective reality which is what a person's perception of the world is (Adoni & Mane, 1984); however, subjective reality is impacted by media consumption where viewers make substitutions "for a reality that has no foundation in experience" when the viewer does not have any personal experience with what is shown (Adoni & Mane, 1984, p. 374). These substitutions for reality have great power to influence values, ideologies, and beliefs (Adoni & Mane, 1984). People form conceptions of reality while viewing media and these conceptions are aligned with consistent imagery and values shown in a show (Gerber & Gross, 1976). Cultivation theory can help mold public perceptions of specific industries, such as the agricultural industry, as the public is less likely to interact with the agricultural industry regularly (Specht & Beam, 2015).

Conceptual Framework

The study is guided by an integrated conceptual framework that draws on industry-identified agricultural priorities, values theory, and visual semiotics. The framework guides the analysis by identifying what agricultural priority issues are represented, why those issues are framed as meaningful, and how meaning is communicated visually. Together, these perspectives provide a structured approach for examining how agricultural issues and values are framed in entertainment media and how meaning is communicated to public audiences through visual storytelling (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Note. Visual representation of this study's conceptual framework.

Agricultural Priority Areas

National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) agricultural priority areas were considered in this study because many ranchers noted *Yellowstone* featured agricultural issues they currently face (AgDaily, 2022; Earl, 2023; Shelton, 2021). In recent years, the livestock industry has shared initiatives with consumers and have publicized the issues they are dealing with to inform members of the public the efforts they are taking to address these issues (Catching et al., 2023). Agricultural priority issues were featured as part of this study's codebook and were adapted from NCBA priority areas (Catching et al., 2023). Table 1 presents these priority areas and definitions.

Table 1

Agricultural Priorities Adapted from NCBA's Priority Areas

Agricultural Priority Areas	Definition
Animal Health	Taking care of animals, animal husbandry, livestock handling
Community Resilience	Working as a community to overcome rural challenges, being resilient as a group
Carbon Sequestration	Removing carbon from the air and putting it into plants and soils
Efficiency and Production Levels	Having a good harvest, successful crop or lot of livestock, being efficient in production, high yields
Employee Safety and Well-Being	Employee safety and health

Agricultural Priority Areas	Definition
Climate Change	Gas emissions, climate change, global warming, weather patterns, high temperatures, etc.
Land Resources	Access to land, running out of land, not being able to afford land, soil depletion, lack of space, erosion
Next Generation	Succession planning, passing on the land to the next generation
Water Resources	Lack of water, no access to water, water wars, irrigation
Government	Policy issues, overregulation, trade disputes
Natural Disasters	Fire, floods, and other natural disasters
Indigenous Use	Indigenous rights to land, Indigenous lack of resources and land, mistreatment of Indigenous people

Values Theory

When making decisions, values allow individuals to describe the beliefs and assumptions behind their choices (Rohan, 2000). An individual's wants, goals, moral obligations, desires, and preferences can be captured within their driving values (Williams, 1979). Personal values serve as standards for which attitudes, judgments, rationalizations, and choices are molded (Rokeach, 1979); beliefs and values are inseparably linked (Schwartz, 2012). Opposing values stimulate conflict (O'Brien & Wolf, 2010), and values in alignment bring groups of individuals together (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022). Schwartz's Theory of Basic Values (1992) identified 10 distinct values, universally recognizable across cultures. These values are motivationally driven and include power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security (Schwartz, 1992). It is important for researchers and practitioners to know which specific values consumers reference when viewing agricultural messages (Chase et al., 2026). Table 2 provides Schartz's (1992) definitions of the 10 distinct values.

Table 2

Schwartz's (1992) Theory of Basic Values

Value	Definition
Power	Control or dominance over people and resources
Achievement	Personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards
Hedonism	Pleasure of sensuous gratification for oneself

Value	Definition
Stimulation	Excitement, novelty, and challenge in life
Self-Direction	Independent thought and action, expressed in choosing, creating, and exploring
Universalism	Understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature
Benevolence	Preserving and enhancing the welfare of those with whom one is in frequent personal contact
Tradition	Respect, commitment, and acceptance of the customs and ideas that one's culture or religion provides
Conformity	Restraint of actions, inclinations, and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms
Security: Safety	Safety, harmony, and stability of society, of relationships, and of self

Visual Semiotics

The study of semiotics examines codes and signs and the symbols they hold (Eco, 1970). According to social semiotics, viewers draw connections between images and their own realities and cultural contexts (Chandler, 2004; Eco, 1979). Social semiotics has been used in agricultural communications to identify agricultural stereotypes in reality television imagery (Specht & Beam, 2015) and learn Floridians' perceptions of water use based on visual images (Epstein et al., 2017). Images help inform communication researchers what individuals perceive about agriculture (Epstein et al., 2017).

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to determine what agricultural priority issues were present in each of *Yellowstone's* five season trailers. The following objectives were developed to guide the study:

RO1: Identify agricultural priority issues present in the trailers.

RO2: Describe the values associated with agricultural priorities identified in the trailers and examine how those values are visually represented through corresponding imagery.

Methods

This qualitative, descriptive study used collaborative analysis to conduct a social semiotic investigation of five *Yellowstone* season trailers. Social semiotic codes allow researchers to

establish meaning within textual and visual elements within a sociocultural context while considering the researchers' own perspectives (Chandler, 2007). This approach allows researchers to look at images as framing mechanisms (Entman, 1991). Verbal and visual elements in film can be systematically coded, and their interaction contributes to the construction of meaning and viewers' perceptions of reality (Mikos, 2014).

One way examining films can take place is through collaborative analysis (Mikos, 2014). Collaborative analysis is informed by the epistemological stance of perspectivism and can be referred to as the process by which there is a joint focus and dialogue between two or more researchers when examining data to agree on an interpretation (Cornish et al., 2014). Such dialogues are permitted to take place in person or over the Internet, can involve both senior and junior researchers, can involve two or more coders, and can bring together academic researchers with professional experts (Cornish et al., 2014). The main point is that different perspectives are brought together to analyze and interpret the data (Cornish et al., 2014). A benefit of collaborative analysis is that it brings a diversity of perspectives to analysis, especially those of geographically dispersed teams (Cornish et al., 2014). Collaborative analysis of qualitative data has "the potential for a variety of valuable gains, from producing a more informed, nuanced, complex or useful analysis, to creating new, perspective-transcending knowledge, or individual learning on the part of researchers" (Cornish et al., 2014, p. 90).

While qualitative content analysis is inherently interpretive and subject to researcher bias, steps were taken to enhance analytic rigor. Collaborative coding procedures ensured that all team members contributed to the analysis. During coding meetings, each researcher shared their interpretations prior to group discussion, minimizing the influence of social status on participation. The team established a norm that all members, regardless of experience or position, were expected to contribute equally to data interpretation (Cornish et al., 2014).

Combining perspectives enables researchers to step back from their own perspectives and engage in critical reflection (Gillespie, 2012), which involves adopting more than one perspective so that researchers can understand both positive and negative aspects of data as well as insider and outsider perspectives (Bartunek and Louis, 1996; Cornish et al., 2014). Collaborating on the coding process can help with transparency and clarity (Hall et al., 2005). In research projects that work with small amounts of data, it is recommended that researchers work with a subset of the data to check for reliability of the codebook (Cornish et al., 2014).

The research team developed the codebook collaboratively (Cornish et al., 2014) and because *Yellowstone* only has 5 seasons trailers, the team tested the codebook on trailers from a similar western/ranching show to *Yellowstone*, which was *Longmire*. After coming together collectively to discuss results, the research team clarified different agricultural priority area definitions. Agricultural priority areas were initially treated as distinct analytic categories. Agricultural priority issues were featured as part of this study's codebook and were adapted from NCBA priority areas (Catching et al., 2023) in conceptual framework section (see Table 1).

However, during coding, certain scenes simultaneously reflected multiple priority areas that could not be meaningfully separated without fragmenting the representation. In these cases, combined categories were used to capture the integrated nature of the depicted priorities. This

approach aligns with qualitative content analysis practices that allow for overlapping and co-occurring codes when analyzing complex media texts (Cornish et al., 2014). Because agricultural representations often conveyed multiple values and priorities simultaneously, codes were not treated as mutually exclusive. Trailers or scenes could be assigned more than one agricultural priority or value code when warranted. For example, “Next Generation” reflects representations focused primarily on youth or succession, whereas “Next Generation & Animal Health” reflects scenes in which youth involvement was explicitly tied to animal care or herd management.

Additionally, because media texts often convey multiple values simultaneously through imagery and narrative, values were coded in a non-mutually exclusive manner. Segments could receive multiple value codes when warranted, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of meaning, consistent with qualitative and semiotic approaches to media analysis (Cornish et al., 2014; Mikos, 2014). For instance, “Tradition” captured representations emphasizing heritage or legacy, while “Tradition & Security” reflected instances where tradition was inseparable from protecting land, livestock, or family livelihoods. Following Hall et al.’s (2005) iterative collaborative analysis process, the four researchers developed the codebook collaboratively, coded a subset of data (*Longmire* trailers) individually, compared their individual codes for the same data together, adjusted the codebook and clarified definitions, and then coded data in the five *Yellowstone* trailers collaboratively, critiquing and questioning discrepancies to meet a mutually agreed upon answer. When coding the five *Yellowstone* trailers, the researchers coded for the presence of any agriculture priority issues, the values of any agriculture priority issues identified, and what visual representations were present within each identified agricultural priority.

Promotional trailers represent a highly visible and frequently consumed form of media content. Official *Yellowstone* trailers released on platforms such as YouTube have accumulated millions of views, often exceeding the audience size of individual television episodes at the time of release. Trailers are designed for repeated viewing and broad circulation across digital platforms, making them a critical site for shaping audience expectations and framing meaning prior to program consumption (Finsterwalder et al., 2012; Hixson, 2005). The viewership of each trailer is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

View Counts for Analyzed Yellowstone Trailers

Trailer	Views
Season 1 Official Trailer	1.33 million
Season 3 Official Trailer	9 million
Season 4 Official Trailer	4.1 million
Season 5 Official Trailer	5 million

Subjectivity Statement

It is necessary for researchers who participate in collaborative analysis to identify points of bias (Cornish et al., 2014). Additionally, social-semiotic discourse analysis requires the dialogue of the researchers' perspectives and experiences on the subject matter (McKee, 2001). The researchers drew upon their personal experiences with agriculture to inform their analysis of agricultural priority areas and imagery in the season trailers. This research team consisted of four agricultural communications faculty members at universities across the Western, Southern Northern, and Midwest regions. All researchers have at least one degree within agricultural communications and have worked within the agricultural industry in different capacities (e.g., water conservation, state farm bureaus, animal agriculture groups, food organizations, youth organizations, and commodity groups). Two faculty members grew up on farmers/ranches and two did not. Researchers had seen episodes of *Yellowstone* in some capacity. Data were analyzed by coding together via Zoom.

Results/Findings

RO1: Identify Agricultural Priority Issues Present in the Trailers

Out of the twelve agricultural priorities adapted from NCBA, only six were represented in the data. The priorities community resilience, carbon sequestration, efficiency and production levels, employee safety and wellbeing, and natural disasters were not present. The season four trailer did not feature any agricultural priority areas. The agricultural priority area of "next generation" was the most present and was featured in trailers in every season outside of trailers in season four. In the codebook, this category was described as regarding passing land down to the next generation, working with multiple generations, threat of not being able to pass ranching operations down to the next generation, or succession planning. An example of a scene that was coded as exhibiting a next generation priority area, was in season three when Beth Dutton said, "And just like that, seven generations of our family legacy will be taken from you." This statement reflects concerns about the loss of generational land and highlights the importance of preserving family legacy within ranching operations. In this context, the threat of land development represents a disruption to succession and the continuity of agricultural practices across generations.

The second most present priority area was land resources. "Land resources" was defined in the codebook as access to land, running out of land, not being able to afford land, taking care of the land, and urban sprawl and development. An example of a scene that was coded as "land resources" was in the season five trailer when John Dutton said, "When I say we give everything to this land, I do mean everything." This statement positions land not only as an economic resource but also as a core component of identity and legacy within ranching culture. The emphasis on total sacrifice underscores the perceived vulnerability of land ownership and reflects broader concerns about land loss, development pressures, and the sustainability of agricultural operations.

The least present priorities were government and water, government, Indigenous use, and next generation and animal health. "Government and water" were coded for scenes that

emphasized both regulatory action and water scarcity. An example of a scene that was double coded as “government and water” was in the season 5 trailer featured toxic contamination of waterways and legal ramifications involved in protected wildlife in water sources. “Government” was defined as involving policy issues, overregulation, trade disputes. An example of a scene that was coded as “government” was in the season 1 trailer featured land use and property disputes around private developers and the ranch. “Indigenous use” was defined as involving Indigenous rights to land, Indigenous lack of resources and land, mistreatment of Indigenous people. An example of a scene coded as “Indigenous Use” was in the season 1 trailer where Chief Thomas Rainwater tells John Dutton he is going to buy John’s ranch and tear down every fence, so the land will look like what it did when it belonged to Indigenous people. “Next generation and animal health” reflected scenes in which youth involvement was explicitly tied to animal care or herd management. An example of a scene coded as “next generation and animal health” was in the season 1 trailer when John Dutton is talking about his legacy, stating that it is “the lives of his children and livestock.” Table 4 features the presence of agricultural priority areas in *Yellowstone* trailers. Please note agricultural priorities areas could be coded more than once.

Table 4*Presence of Agricultural Priority Areas in Yellowstone Trailers*

Agricultural Priority Areas	Present	Seasons
Next Generation	6	1, 2, 3, 5
Land Resources	5	1, 3, 5
Government & Water	1	5
Government	1	1
Indigenous Use	1	1
Next Gen. & Animal Health	1	1

RO2: Describe the Values Associated with Agricultural Priorities Identified in the Trailers and Examine how those Values are Visually Represented through Corresponding Imagery

Out of the priority areas identified in season trailers in RO1, the researchers sought to identify values present in identified agricultural priority areas. Values examined in this study were operationalized based on prior values scholarship (Rohan, 2000; Schwartz, 1992) and are defined in Table 2. Values in the codebook were adapted from Schwartz (2012) Theory of Basic Values and given an agricultural context. These values included achievement, benevolence, conformity, hedonism, power, security, self-direction, stimulation, tradition, and universalism (Schwartz, 2012). Values were coded in a non-mutually exclusive manner to reflect the

complexity of meaning conveyed in media texts. Individual scenes or trailer segments could be assigned more than one value when multiple values were simultaneously expressed and could not be meaningfully separated. This approach allowed the analysis to capture the layered and co-occurring nature of values communicated through visual imagery and narrative cues, consistent with qualitative content analysis practices that recognize overlapping interpretations in complex texts (Cornish et al., 2014; Hall et al., 2005). For instance, “Tradition” captured representations emphasizing heritage or legacy, while “Tradition & Security” reflected instances where tradition was inseparable from protecting land, livestock, or family livelihoods. “Security” reflected family security, preservation of the land, and protection of assets. “Achievement” involved success related to business, social recognition, or being influential. Not all values were present in the trailers. Table 5 shows the presence of values present in agricultural priority areas in Yellowstone trailers.

Table 5

Values Featured in Yellowstone Trailers

Values	Present	Seasons
Power	7	1, 2, 3,
Tradition	3	1, 3, 5
Security	3	1, 3, 5
Achievement	1	5
Tradition & Security	1	3

Note. Values could be double coded.

Power was the most common value present in the trailers. Power was defined in the codebook as control or dominance over people and/or resources and using violence, intimidation, or weapons to exert power. Within the identified priorities (RQ1), power within the next generation priority area was most common. An example of power within the next generation priority was represented in season one by Beth Dutton said, “Mess with my family, I will chop down your family tree.” The imagery shown during this scene, was Beth Dutton yelling at a man from a finance firm, followed by the same man getting punched in the face at a bar (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Note. Man being punched in the face at a bar (S1).

The priority area, “next generation,” was commonly associated with the value of tradition and security. Tradition was defined in the codebook as respect and commitment to farming and ranching culture and passing tradition down to the next generation. Security was defined as protection, keeping stable, and keeping things safe. An example of tradition was represented in the season 1 trailer by John Dutton stating, “That’s the thing about being a grandfather, I get to do all the things I wish I’d done with my children.” The scene featured imagery of John Dutton’s son Kayce, on a horse fly-fishing in a river with Kayce’s son Tate (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Note. Kayce riding a horse with his son, while fly fishing in a river (S1).

Discussion/Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore what agricultural priority issues were present in each of *Yellowstone*’s five seasons’ trailers and to examine how those priorities were visually

represented and what values they conveyed. Because multiple ranchers (AgDaily, 2022; Doherty, 2023; Earl, 2023; Shelton, 2021; Woods, 2023) commented on how accurately and inaccurately *Yellowstone* portrayed real issues they currently face, the researchers wanted to see what agricultural priority areas were being shown in *Yellowstone* season trailers, as trailers are the most influential driver of a consumer watching a film (Finsterwalder et al., 2012).

Regarding RO1, the priority areas “Next Generation” and “Land Resources” emerged as the most prominent across *Yellowstone* season trailers, reflecting values that have long been identified as central to ranching culture. Prior research has documented the importance of family labor, intergenerational succession, and continuity within ranching operations (Didier et al., 2004; Liffman et al., 2000). Consistent with this scholarship, *Yellowstone* frequently depicts ranching as a family-centered endeavor, emphasizing cooperation among relatives and the transfer of land and responsibility to future generations (Earl, 2023). These portrayals align with ranchers’ expressed desire to preserve both livelihood and legacy, reinforcing “Next Generation” as a core agricultural priority.

Similarly, the prominence of “Land Resources” reflects longstanding concerns surrounding land ownership, access, and preservation within agricultural communities. As Shelton (2021) noted, the series’ focus on land conflict may represent one of its most realistic dimensions. Prior research has shown that maintaining agricultural land is increasingly difficult as land prices rise, water access becomes more constrained, and environmental pressures intensify (Willcox & Giuliano, 2011). *Yellowstone* amplifies these challenges by framing land not only as an economic asset but as an intrinsic component of identity and survival, positioning land resources as inseparable from family continuity and cultural heritage (Roysdon, 2023).

While these portrayals reflect real industry concerns, the study’s findings also suggest that *Yellowstone* selectively frames agricultural priorities in ways that may oversimplify or distort lived ranching experiences. The agricultural industry and media have noted instances in which the series dramatizes ranching practices or misrepresents animal health and operational realities (AgDaily, 2022; Earl, 2023; Doherty, 2023; Woods, 2023). According to cultivation theory, repeated exposure to consistent media narratives can shape audience perceptions of social reality (Gerbner & Gross 1976), while the social construction of reality framework emphasizes that media representations contribute to shared understandings of complex social systems (Adoni & Mane, 1984). Viewed through these lenses, *Yellowstone* trailers may reinforce simplified or romanticized interpretations of ranching, underscoring the importance of examining how agricultural priorities are framed within widely consumed entertainment media.

Next, RO2 examined the values present in agricultural priority areas in the trailers. The value of power emerged as the most prominent value across the agricultural priority areas identified in RO1, reflecting *Yellowstone*’s emphasis on dominance, control, and conflict. This finding aligns with prior commentary suggesting that viewers are drawn to values such as vengeance, justice, and authority within the series’ narrative structure (Petty, 2023). Visually, power was most frequently communicated through scenes depicting physical confrontation, firearm use, and threatening nonverbal cues, reinforcing associations between ranching and aggression.

From a semiotic perspective, such imagery can play a central role in shaping how audiences construct meaning from media texts. Visual symbols and repeated cues invite viewers to draw connections between representation and reality, particularly when audiences lack firsthand experience with the depicted context (Eco, 1979). In the case of *Yellowstone*, these power-filled visuals may contribute to exaggerated or distorted perceptions of ranching culture. Ranchers have publicly expressed concern that the show portrays ranching as inherently violent and aggressive, a characterization they argue does not reflect everyday agricultural life (Doherty, 2023; Earl, 2023). These concerns are further supported by reports of viewers questioning ranchers about fictionalized practices depicted in the series, such as branding humans or disposing of bodies at train stations, highlighting the extent to which dramatized narratives can blur boundaries between fiction and reality (Doherty, 2023). Such responses illustrate the relevance of cultivation theory and the social construction of reality, which suggest that repeated exposure to consistent media imagery can shape audience perceptions of social groups and industries, particularly when alternative sources of knowledge are limited (Adoni & Mane, 1984; Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

The prominence of “power” as a framing value stands in tension with values traditionally associated with ranching, including stewardship, care for land and livestock, and long-term preservation (Didier et al., 2004). While *Yellowstone* does feature some authentic agricultural priorities, such as land ownership, succession, and generational continuity, the repeated framing of these priorities through violence and power struggles may overshadow values of resilience, responsibility, and stewardship that ranchers consistently report as central to their identities (Earl, 2023; Shelton, 2021).

For urban audiences with limited direct exposure to agriculture, these representations may serve as a primary source of agricultural schema formation, shaping how ranching and rural life are understood (Rhoades & Irani, 2008). Together, these findings highlight the dual nature of *Yellowstone*’s portrayal of agriculture. While the series captures some prominent industry priorities, it simultaneously exaggerates them through dramatized expressions of power. This dynamic highlights the importance of agricultural communicators and industry practitioners to actively contextualize entertainment portrayals and providing alternative narratives that more accurately reflect agricultural realities. This study contributes to agricultural communication scholarship by demonstrating how industry-identified priorities are visually framed within entertainment media, which is increasingly influential in shaping how younger audiences learn about agriculture. By integrating industry priorities with values theory and semiotics, this study offers an applied framework for examining how agricultural meaning may be constructed for public audiences.

Limitations

The study examined *Yellowstone* promotional trailers rather than full episodes or multiple series. While this focused scope allowed for in-depth qualitative analysis of how agricultural priorities and values are framed in *Yellowstone* trailers, future research could expand the dataset to include additional promotional materials, episodes, or comparable series to further explore these patterns. The findings of this study should be interpreted within the context of a purposefully delimited dataset. By focusing on a limited number of promotional trailers, the

study emphasizes analytic depth and interpretive insight rather than representativeness or generalizability. Descriptive studies using content analysis have informed agricultural communication scholarship by providing focused, exploratory examinations of specific issues and phenomena rather than broad generalizations (Cannon et al., 2016; Regusci et al., 2022; Steede et al., 2018). Although descriptive research is inherently limited in scope and generalizability, it plays a critical role in establishing an initial understanding of a phenomenon and informing future research questions and directions (Sirisilla & Sirisilla, 2023). Consistent with descriptive qualitative research, this study was designed to provide an initial, focused examination of agricultural representations rather than an exhaustive analysis of entertainment media. As such, findings reflect patterns within the analyzed trailers and are not intended to represent all portrayals of agriculture in popular culture.

Future Research

Future research should analyze the content featured in episodes of *Yellowstone* to gain perspective on how different ranching elements are being presented and what opportunities or implications arise from those representations. Additionally, researchers should have non-agricultural participants and agricultural participants watch episodes of the show with dials to see what values and imagery viewers find most appealing. Researchers should also examine whether consuming agricultural entertainment, such as *Yellowstone*, changes viewers' perceptions of agriculture through a pre-and post-survey, because some viewers may not be familiar with agriculture, may learn about agriculture through entertainment media (Lundy et al., 2007). Lastly, like other mass communication programs, agricultural communications programs should create curriculum that is focused on social construction of reality and takes examples of pop culture and media and work with students on case studies to expand upon and highlight the power of cultivation theory and social construction of reality. Agricultural images regularly seen in the media, may influence such viewers' perceptions of the industry (Rumble & Buck, 2013).

Application for Practitioners & Industry

Although agricultural industry groups have noted how the show is blurring the reality of ranching (Carlson, 2022), the industry should not ignore that *Yellowstone* is introducing ranching, western landscapes, and rural communities to one of the largest television audiences in the United States (University of Montana, 2023). For some, this show may be their first, and possibly only, glimpse into ranching, which may have them forming associations of what ranch life is like based solely on the show (Carlson, 2022). The industry needs to capitalize on this ranch-interested and captured audience (Carlson, 2022) and take time to put out their own ranching content, debunk misconceptions that may be present in *Yellowstone*, and highlight what are accurate portrayals in the show. “Good, bad, or otherwise— this show is telling our story” (Carlson, 2022, para. 7). Industry should take advantage of the “*Yellowstone Effect*” and see where they can maximize opportunities to increase ranchers' profits, interest in different areas of industry, and educational opportunities around ranching (Brewer & Golden, 2022, p. 3). Industry should create educational campaigns, digital storytelling initiatives, and tourism experiences that harness public curiosity while correcting misconceptions (Brewer & Golden, 2022; Carlson, 2022). Additionally, industry should consider where *Yellowstone* experiences and other film tourism opportunities could be implemented across other states and commodities, where

consumers can learn from the agricultural industry from someone who works directly in it. While the impacts of other types of shows may range, the potential of a states or industry exposure on national television affecting economic, tourism, and other elements should be considered (University of Montana, 2023). By engaging strategically, agricultural communicators can help transform popular culture from a potential barrier into a bridge between producers and the public. Although agricultural communicators and researchers cannot control how agriculture is portrayed in entertainment media, they can shape how they respond to those portrayals and capitalize on the opportunities they create.

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