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Lauren Chase
Oregon State University

Whitney Stone
Oregon State University

Melissa Millhollin
Oregon State University

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What's on Netflix? An Exploratory Content Analysis of Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resource-Related Videos on Netflix

Abstract

Consumers increasingly seek to understand the people, systems, and processes behind their food, and many turn to entertainment media for that information. Streaming platforms such as Netflix, with more than 200 million global subscribers, have become influential spaces where audiences encounter agriculture, food, and natural resources (AFNR), some for the first time. Previous research indicates that entertainment media can shape public perceptions, reinforce stereotypes, and spread misinformation about agriculture. Yet, no studies have examined how agriculture is represented within Netflix's search environment itself. This exploratory study conducted a quantitative content analysis of 73 agriculture-related videos identified through six Netflix search terms (agriculture, farming, ranching, food production, food, and natural resources). Written descriptions were coded for emergent themes, and thumbnail images were analyzed for dominant visual features. The most frequent theme was cultural knowledge (23.8%), followed by miscellaneous (19.0%) and real-life characters (14.2%). Thumbnails most often featured people (26.7%) and food (25.3%). Findings suggest audiences encounter agriculture on Netflix primarily through culinary and cultural frames, rather than production or policy contexts. Agricultural communications researchers, practitioners, and educators should be aware of the representations of agriculture in entertainment and educational media, especially as these media may be the only exposure the public has to AFNR. As viewership of AFNR-related content grows, agricultural communicators should recognize streaming media as a key venue for engaging and educating the public about modern agriculture. This study underscores the need for agricultural communicators to monitor and engage with digital portrayals to foster accurate representations of the industry.

Keywords

Entertainment media, Netflix, streaming platforms, representation of agriculture

Authors

Lauren Chase, Whitney Stone, Melissa Millhollin

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Introduction

Netflix, the largest subscription-based streaming service with more than 200 million global users, has become a dominant cultural force (Cook, 2024). The so-called to Netflix effect is the impact Netflix videos have on e-commerce sales, the development of trends, and public opinion, and public discourse (Robinson, 2022). For instance, after the popularity of the Netflix show *The Queen's Gambit,* which tells the story of an orphaned chess prodigy on her journey to becoming the best chess player in the world, so did the sales of chess sets. Since Netflix released the show in late October 2020, sales for chess sets rose by 125% and online chess websites welcomed 2.8 million new members, along with an increase in female players (Fazio, 2020). When Netflix premiered *David Attenborough's A Life on Our Planet*, which showcases that animal agriculture significantly contributes to climate change, social media saw spikes in "meat-free meal" searches (Torpey, 2022). The previous examples illustrate the cultural, economic, and behavioral impacts Netflix videos can have today. Marketers and companies should pay attention to what is trending in streaming services as it may help boost sales and messages, and as inform consumers' habits and beliefs (Fazio, 2020).

For many users, platforms like Netflix are a source of entertainment and a gateway to learning about social, political, and environmental issues. Documentaries such as Food, Inc. and Cowspiracy illustrate how food and farming content can gain wide exposure, influence public opinion, and even impact consumer behavior (Spolarich et al., 2018; Torpey, 2022). Research has shown that emotion-driven and story-based narratives such as those common in food documentaries are more persuasive to the public (Holt & Cartmell, 2013; Perloff, 2008). However, such framing may attract and engage audiences, but it also may oversimplify our food and fiber system.

As majority of Americans are not directly engaged in farming, many may rely on mediated portrayals to construct perceptions of agriculture and rural life. Studies suggest that entertainment media can reinforce outdated stereotypes and romanticize rural lifestyles while omitting the complexities of production agriculture (Lundy et al., 2007; Specht & Beam, 2015). Previous literature suggests that media framing plays a role in shaping public understanding and support of agriculture, especially for those with little firsthand exposure to agriculture.

As Netflix's viewership continues to increase (Cook, 2024), it is essential to consider what types of videos, and the content of the videos are readily available and easily accessible to consumers as they seek to learn more about the agriculture, food, and natural resources (AFNR) through streaming services. By investing in resources and time to appear on streaming platforms such as Netflix, the AFNR industries could appear to have better credibility, shared values, and be perceived more positively overall (Beam, 2017). Despite the growing influence of streaming platforms, limited agricultural communication research has systematically examined how AFNR content appears within streaming search results. Given that audiences may actively seek AFNR content on Netflix, understanding what they may encounter is important for understanding how impressions and discourse of the of AFNR industries might be formed.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), which posits that heavy exposure to mediated messages can shape individuals' perceptions of reality. Beam (2017) showed that cultivation theory can work in sync with source credibility when evaluating AFNR documentaries. Cultivation theory can help shape public perceptions of specific industries, especially when the public is less likely to interact with the industry regularly, such as agriculture (Beam, 2017). If Netflix emphasizes certain themes, such as cultural narratives or environmental crises, audiences may internalize those portrayals as reflective of AFNR's reality.

Additionally, the concept of audience communicative agency in digital environments (Ytre-Arne & Das, 2019) provides context for examining how algorithm-driven platforms influence what viewers encounter. Netflix recommendations and search results reflect both user behaviors and system-level categorizations. Audiences may feel empowered by choice but are simultaneously constrained by the framing decisions of the platform. In a daily media use context, Kapsch (2022) found users expect algorithmic filtering as part of platform-based media services but reported spending limited time or thought tactically investing time into curating their media engagement. Users they exercised agency yet simultaneously reported uncertainty with engaging with algorithms in their daily media use (Kapsch, 2022).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to take an initial inventory of AFNR content available on Netflix and analyze how it is presented to audiences. In this study, we wanted to describe themes in the written descriptions of AFNR videos (RO1) and determine the characteristics of thumbnail images representing AFNR videos (RO2).

Methods

The study employed a quantitative content analysis of AFNR Netflix videos. Content analysis allows researchers to systematically describe patterns in messages and draw inferences about meaning and representation (Riffe et al., 2014). Six search terms were selected to capture a range of AFNR topics: "agriculture," "farming," "ranching," "food production," "food," and "natural resources." For each term, the first three rows of search results were collected. This decision reflected typical user behavior, as most Netflix viewers spend less than two minutes browsing before selecting a program (Zahid, 2021). After removing duplicates, the final sample consisted of 73 videos. Two units of analysis were examined. The first unit of analysis were video descriptions, which are the textual descriptions accompanying each video. Video descriptions were coded for emergent themes using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A codebook was developed by three trained coders, who independently analyzed 20% of the sample for intercoder reliability, achieving Krippendorff's $\alpha = .94$. The second unit of analysis were thumbnail images. Thumbnail images are still images used to represent each video. Thumb nails were captured and coded for dominant characteristics (e.g., people, animals, landscapes, food, or mixed categories). Frequencies were calculated for both thematic and visual categories.

Results

Within the sample, the range of the production year was 1993 to 2022, and the highest number of movies, which was 18 (24.7%), Netflix released in 2022. Moreover, 49 (67.1%) videos were released within the years 2020 to 2022, and nearly 70% of all videos (n= 51) were Netflix Original content.

RO1

Ten themes were found in the written AFNR video descriptions The most frequent theme was cultural knowledge (23.8%), which highlighted food, travel, and cultural practices. Some examples include *Heavenly Bites* and *Gather.* Other common themes included miscellaneous (19.0%), representing videos not overtly related to AFNR such as *Rambo Last Blood* and *Something in the Rain.* Less frequent themes included environmental terrorism (2.4%), such as *Cowspiracy* (see Table 1).

Table 1

Presence of Themes in AFNR Netflix Videos

	Present	
Theme	*f*	%
Cultural Knowledge	20	23.8
Miscellaneous	16	19.0
Real Life Characters	12	14.2
Preservation	9	10.7
Rural Life Challenges	8	9.5
Other	7	8.3
Promoting Rural Life	7	8.3
Cooking Show	4	4.8
Children's Entertainment	3	3.8
Environmental Terrorism	2	2.4

Note: The *Miscellaneous* theme included videos that did not fall into agricultural and natural resource categories. The *Other* theme referred to videos with a presence of ANFR but did not fit into the themes.

RO2

Thumbnail images most often featured people (26.7%), followed by food (25.3%). Faces were typically serious or pensive, with only a minority showing smiling expressions. Other categories, such as agricultural landscapes or animals, appeared less frequently. "Miscellaneous" images had no direct relation with AFNR. "Other" images were related to AFNR but were not identified in the characteristic categories, such as the image of coral. The "People" category had only a person or people in the thumbnail as the main image (see Table 2).

Table 2

	Present	
Image Characteristic	*f*	%
People	20	26.7
Food	19	25.3
Miscellaneous	8	10.7
Animals	6	8.2
Animals & People	4	5.5
Ag Environment/Working Landscape	4	5.5
Natural Env. With People	4	5.5
Ag Env./Working Landscape People	3	4.1
Natural Environment.	3	4.1
People & Food	2	2.7
Other	2	2.7

Note. Characteristics could also be double coded.

Limitations

The study is limited by the reliance on Netflix's search function, which may differ across accounts and regions. Results reflect U.S. availability only and do not capture how algorithms personalize recommendations. Thumbnail imagery also changes over time, limiting replicability. Additionally, this study analyzed only the descriptions and thumbnails, not the full content of the films, so future studies should examine whether the promotional materials align with the narratives within these films.

Discussion

The study looked at how agriculture and natural resources is represented on the world's largest streaming platform, Netflix. The prominence of the cultural knowledge theme suggests audiences might more frequently be exposed to agriculture in relation to food, travel, and cultural exploration. Prior research shows that food-based storytelling has become a primary mode the public engages with agriculture, often emphasizing culinary and lifestyle perspectives rather than production or policy aspects (Roberts et al., 2016; Spolarich et al., 2018). This aligns with Holt and Cartmell's (2013) findings that food documentaries can influence viewers' attitudes toward agriculture when framed through personal or cultural experiences. While the cultural knowledge theme can attract audiences, it might oversimplify aspects of agriculture and reinforce the distance between producer and consumer (Center for Food Integrity, 2022; Lundy et al., 2007; Specht & Beam, 2015).

The prevalence of "miscellaneous" content raises questions about how effectively audiences can find accurate AFNR media. If viewers are using Netflix to learn about AFNR, irrelevant results might undermine the process. The prominence of thumbnails featuring images of people may align with Netflix's strategy of using people showing emotions to drive

engagement (Nelson, 2016). Together, these findings suggest the Netflix "search" function offers only a partial and perhaps sometimes distorted view of ANRF content. Repeated exposure to these frames could shape public perceptions (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), especially for those who do not have direct agricultural experience (Beam, 2017).

Agricultural communicators should be aware that streaming platforms can shape public discourse about AFNR industries as noted by the cultural force of the Netflix effect (Robinson, 2022). Netflix can heavily influence consumers' habits and beliefs (Fazio, 2020), positioning agricultural communicators to use it as an educative tool for audiences to learn more about the AFNR industries and practices. Proactively creating, supporting, or commenting on documentaries and series that highlight modern agriculture accurately or showing how media is inaccurately portraying modern agriculture could also help with mis- and dis-information about AFNR practices. Monitoring public responses to AFNR video content on social media may help provide real-time insights on public perceptions. These findings also emphasize the importance of teaching media literacy in college courses and degree programs. Students should learn how to critically evaluate portrayals of ANFR in entertainment media and critically assess their own personal agency in an algorithm context. Classroom exercises using Netflix or other streaming platforms could spark discussions about representation, framing, and public perception.

Nearly 70% of the AFNR videos sampled were Netflix Originals, meaning Netflix is controlling the narrative since they decide what is being produced for their audiences (Iordache & Raats, 2022), giving more control to Netflix and a sense of the audiences' communicative agency. This has implications for agricultural educators and practitioners when considering how media could influence audiences and stakeholders. Viewers' perceptions can be influenced by what they watch whether it is true to reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). People are turning to entertainment spaces (such as streaming services) to learn, and it is important to consider what type of media is readily available and easily accessible people to access from their couch (Lundy et al., 2007). AFNR industries should produce their own media to ensure that their voice and perspectives are being represented (Oesterreicher et al., 2018).

For researchers, this initial exploratory study demonstrates the value of examining streaming platforms for AFNR content. Future research should expand to other streaming platforms and investigate how audiences interpret AFNR media. Mixed method approaches like focus groups or surveys could deepen the understanding of how media portrayals of agriculture influence knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.

Conclusion

The findings from this exploratory study provide an initial foundation in examining AFNR's representation in streaming media highlights the need for intentional and proactive communication strategies that ensure audiences experience accurate, diverse, and engaging portrayals of food, farming, natural resources, and the people who work in these industries. The agricultural communications industry might not be able to control what AFNR media is produced or becomes popular, but we can control how we capitalize on and educate about it.

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