

Research in Brief

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Clickbait crime in the Sunshine State

A feminist political economic analysis of the Florida Man and Florida Woman phenomena

Abstract: The Florida Man and Florida Woman phenomena were created by U.S. news outlets reporting on shocking and unusual events committed by people in Florida and has proliferated over time. Yet, these news stories stereotype men and women, poke fun at serious crimes and acts, and bring attention to trivial events through clickbait titles in exchange for profit. Using textual analysis as a method, we use a feminist political economy lens to investigate news coverage of the Florida Man and Florida Woman to explain how news outlets are capitalizing on the Florida Man and Florida Woman to attract readers, while perpetuating stereotypical, problematic news coverage in the process.

Keywords: Feminist political economy of media, Florida Man, Florida Woman, textual analysis, journalism, clickbait, crime media

»Florida Man Assaults Mom with Spaghetti Sauce, Hides in Bushes from Police« (Aurielle Eady, 2024). This headline demonstrates the often-comedic sensation known as Florida Man, which refers to attention-grabbing news headlines about unexpected, typically criminal acts people commit in the state of Florida, that originated after memes of various news stories circulated online in 2013 (Ira Robbins, 2021). While the term Florida Man encompasses bizarre stories of Floridians regardless of their gender identity (Robbins, 2021), journalists now use the term »Florida Woman« when writing stories about women, complicating the term Florida Man as a catch-all definition. Therefore, we need to understand how both the Florida Woman and Florida Man are portrayed. Accordingly, we examine how the Florida Man and Florida Woman are framed in news stories through a

textual analysis of coverage in three U.S. newspapers – two national (*New York Times* and *USA Today*) and one Florida-based (*Tampa Bay Times*) – using a feminist political economy of media framework.

Feminist political economy

While scholars can apply a political economic lens to explore how economic systems and power relations impact societal structures, including media systems, this research »often ignores the gendered nature of capitalism« (see Ellen Riordan, 2002, p. 9). For example, U.S. mass media owners have typically been »corporate, elite, and male« (Caroline Byerly, 2002, p. 130). Owning many media outlets in multiple industries brings one wealth and the ability »to set in motion a particular set of ideas, values, and role models that become self-perpetuating in the messages their industries purvey« (p. 130). Feminist political economy, defined as »the study of the gendered production, distribution, and consumption of goods and resources and the examination of how ideology is used to stabilise the unequal relations« (Micky Lee, 2011, p. 83), helps us to understand how media structure and content are grounded in capitalistic and patriarchal motives. The industry’s capitalistic drive is more concerned with earning a profit than promoting »equality and diversity,« which impacts the media representations that are disseminated (M. Cruz Tornay-Márquez, 2024, p. 312). The profit-over-everything mindset is concerning because news media define and circulate discourses »about things central to women’s lives and status« (Byerly, 2002, p. 131), influencing how women are viewed and treated. We see this in how crime is covered. Media representations are not always accurate reflections of crime patterns (e.g., Jessica Grosholz & Charis Kubrin, 2007) and can reinforce gender norms and skew perspectives regarding crime (see Robert Entman & Kimberly Gross, 2008). For example, Felipe Estrada et al. (2019) found that while news coverage about men and women criminals¹ was similar, women’s behavior was more likely to be rationalized, and coverage of women is more likely to contain details about the perpetrator’s criminal history and occupation and include a discussion of the ubiquity of crime (e.g., Rachel Collins, 2016).

Popular stereotypes for women criminals include the sad, bad, or mad woman. The bad woman narrative includes women offenders »who willfully defy traditional gender-role expectations through their own intentional actions« (Pauline

1 It is important to acknowledge that although studies of mainstream crime coverage of perpetrators have largely focused on men and women, gender is a social construct and a range rather than a binary. Recent research has explored news coverage of nonbinary and genderqueer victims of homicide (e.g., Susana Avalos, 2024; Susana Avalos et al., 2024; Max Osborn, 2021; Hannah Walsh, 2025); and Autumn Bermea (2023) notes that the news media focused their attention in part on the gender identity of the Club Q shooter in Colorado as nonbinary.

Brennan & Abby Vandenberg, 2009, p. 145). For example, with filicidal women, bad women have been framed as extremely deviant, divorced from »appropriate feminine behavior,« specifically »from the motherhood mandate,« and such »deviance is perceived as being unexplainable or inexcusable as a result of mental illness or life circumstances« (Siobhan Weare, 2017, p. 205). The mad or sad woman narrative depicts offenders »as not fully responsible for their actions« because »some external factor excuses the criminal behavior« (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009, p. 146), such as being »out of their minds« (Estrada et al., 2019, p. 141). As Weare (2017) argued, »mad« and »sad« representations not only reinforce, but also *reproduce*, gendered norms associated with appropriate femininity, such as irrationality, passivity, and weakness,« and the bad woman narrative »constructs these women as non-women, non-human, monsters in order to mitigate and nullify the challenge they pose to the motherhood mandate and appropriate femininity« (p. 220). The use of gendered stereotypes normalizes patriarchal ideologies and the discourses surrounding them.

Method

We analyzed Florida Man and Florida Woman coverage from *USA Today Online*, *The New York Times*, and the *Tampa Bay Times*. We collected articles published April 1, 2023, through April 1, 2024, using Nexis Uni. Opinion pieces, duplicates, and articles unrelated to the Florida Man / Woman context were excluded, resulting in 36 »Florida Man« and 20 »Florida Woman« articles, which aligns with previous research that found U.S. newspapers report significantly more cases of men as offenders than women as offenders (Kellie Carlyle et al., 2008). We coded inductively based on Suman Mishra's (2020) framework for textual analysis, focusing specifically on how Florida Man or Florida Woman were represented and the ideological functions of these representations. We originally planned to analyze the intersections of gender, race, and class, but the articles examined did not explicitly mention race or class.

Florida Man

Florida Man is often described as deceitful or a con artist willing to lie, cheat, and steal for his own benefit. For example, one story centered around a man and his children who created a business disguised as a church to sell bleach, claiming that it »could cure Covid-19, Alzheimer's disease, diabetes, H.I.V.-AIDS, and leukemia among other serious diseases« (Orlando Mayorquin, 2023, para. 8). These stories spotlight men who have intentionally wronged others through their

deception, joke about serious events that negatively impacted people, and draw attention to stories that do not necessarily need to be given such exposure without proper context.

Another narrative regarding Florida Man focuses on celebrity culture, featuring men who commit extreme crimes to gain public attention. For example, a Florida man was said to have murdered his wife over »a dispute over whether they should appear together on a home-renovation television show« (Associated Press, 2023a, para. 1). The focus on popular culture themes minimizes the severity of dangerous and cruel acts these Floridians committed in an attempt to become famous.

Other narratives include the Florida Man as angry, irrational, and violent. For example, one headline read, »Florida man charged with battery after puppy sale argument leads to stabbing, police say« (Kinsey Crowley, 2024a), while another stated, »Florida man pointed gun at woman after her friend backed into his driveway, sheriff's office says« (Frank Fernandez & Thao Nguyen, 2023). Florida Man stories also include sexual violence, such as the »Florida Man who police said shot three women last week at a home, killing one after allegedly admitting he wanted a »romantic relationship« with his own daughter« (Natalie Neysa Alund, 2024, para. 1). Such frames sensationalize violence as a Florida Man punchline rather than highlight the very real problems apparent in these stories.

Several Florida Man stories focus on non-criminal, unexpected events that some readers might find unnewsworthy, underscoring the exploitation of Florida Man stories to attract readers. For example, news headlines such as »Florida man to give vasectomies to peacocks« (Douglas Hanks, 2023) and »Man says exploding toilet in Dunkin' left him covered in waste, debris. Now he's suing« (Kinsey Crowley, 2024b) capitalize on unusual acts to grab attention. These stories may be entertaining, but they contribute to news trivialization and click-bait rather than investigative news that takes longer to research, requires more resources, and provides context.

Florida Woman

There are considerably fewer Florida Woman stories, which is not surprising as there is an overall lack of representation of women in news coverage, not only in the U.S. but globally (Global Media Monitoring Project, 2025; Luba Kassova, 2020). Florida Woman articles most often include the gender stereotypes of the sad, mad, and bad woman. An example of the sad woman narrative is the story of a Florida woman who was bitten by a bat and received an expensive bill after seeking lifesaving care; the article focused on her emotions: »I went through all seven stages of grief. I started crying. I thought there must be a mistake« (Skyler

Swisher & Caroline Catherman, 2024, para. 6). This narrative contributes to the stereotype that women are emotional rather than, for example, a discussion of the commercial healthcare system in the U.S., taking attention away from the seriousness of the injury.

Examples of the mad woman narrative are present in headlines like »Florida woman stabs boyfriend in eye with rabies needle for looking at other women: Police« (Kinsey Crowley, 2023a), and »Florida woman partially bites other woman's ear off after fight breaks out at house party, officials say« (Natalie Neysa Alund, 2023). Unlike the violence discussed in Florida Man stories, Florida Woman articles that highlight violence tend to justify their actions by focusing on how women are jealous and angry, consistent with stereotypes of women as hysterical.

The bad woman narrative includes a Florida woman story noting that she »faces criminal charges for allegedly attempting to hire a hit man to kill her 3-year-old son« (Kinsey Crowley, 2023b, para. 1) and that her intention may have been to please an ex-partner who ended their relationship because she had a child. Another example explained: »A Florida woman was charged with aggravated child neglect and arson after her car caught on fire – with children inside – while she was allegedly shoplifting at a mall, according to an arrest report« (Francisco Guzman, 2023, para. 1). This bad woman frame often focuses on Florida women as bad mothers who, as Weare (2017) noted, are »monsters.« The sad, mad, and bad woman stereotypes simplify and minimize complex issues and exploit cases that real people experienced to create sensational media headlines.

Florida Woman stories also included an emphasis on gender not prominent in Florida Man coverage. An example of a gendered frame is the focus on a love interest to guide the narrative, such as displayed in the lede: H. M. »was in a Miami hospital room, high on morphine and down one kidney, when she met her future husband« (Gabrielle Calise, 2024, para. 1). Stories about women that center around romantic relationships often normalize the idea that a woman's identity and prominence are closely tied to her partner. Another example is the focus on feminine traits, as shown in the headline: »Florida woman sues Hershey over Reese's Peanut Butter Pumpkins packaging not being >cute« (Sarah Al-Arshani, 2024). Lastly, women's crimes were rationalized, which aligns with existing crime media scholarship (e.g., Estrada et al., 2019). For example, an article about a Florida Woman who threw wine at U.S. Representative Matt Gaetz noted that her attorney said that Gaetz was an »aggressor« and »agitator« (Associated Press, 2023b, para. 7). The need to justify women's behavior ties into the patriarchal ideology that women should be »appropriately feminine,« pure and nurturing; when women break gender norms, there must be an explanation for their behavior, often negating women's agency.

Conclusion

This study revealed that news organizations capitalize on the Florida Man phenomenon and portray protagonists in a gendered stereotypical fashion in exchange for clicks, as »readers relish in and share the stories, largely on social media« (Robbins, 2021, p. 1). Feminist political economy provides a framework to help us understand the popularity and influence of the Florida Man; if U.S. news media corporations can profit from these stories, which are cheap to cover due to the openness of Florida's public records laws, they will continue to do so, often in gendered ways. By producing such stories, commercial interest takes precedence over fair, accurate representations (see Tornay-Márquez, 2024), leading to the perpetuation of gendered ideologies. For example, Florida Woman is portrayed differently than Florida Man, as Florida Man stories often promote harmful masculine stereotypes that normalize and sensationalize violence, while Florida Woman stories suggest that women are emotional and that their identities are tied to their relationships, and the stories often provide rationales for their deviant behavior that align with patriarchal expectations of how women should behave (see Mary Becker, 1998). Presenting women as bad, mad, or sad is not new, but what the Florida Woman trope does is add mockery and ridicule, encouraging readers to laugh at individual trauma rather than address structural problems that affect women, including domestic and sexual violence. Systemic gender inequities are reduced to punchlines.

Instead of signifying Florida Man and Florida Woman stories as jokes or memes, news outlets that cover events in Florida should refrain from using stereotypical language, avoid sensationalizing unnewsworthy events, stop creating clickbait titles that exploit people facing unfortunate events, and instead provide context in ways that do not trivialize, mock, or demonize. Future research should investigate other ways crime media, in pursuit of profit, have propagated harmful ideologies regarding women.

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