Feminized Convergence: Bravo TV and Interactivity for Women

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Dedication

To my family, for their unwavering support.

Abstract

This dissertation analyzes the convergence of television and digital technologies in the context of media that is designed for and marketed specifically to women. Taking the female-targeted Bravo TV network and its interactive platforms as a case study, I show how Bravo organizes its participatory, new media initiates around its brand of stylized, melodramatic docu-soap series. My dissertation argues that Bravo draws women into interactivity through the gendered conventions of mass women's culture, setting a template for addressing women as digital media users through the socially-constructed skills of femininity. I refer to the gendered strategies, practices, and content used to integrate women into convergence culture as "feminized convergence." My analysis of feminized convergence suggests a reversion to traditional approaches for attracting female audiences popularized in the twentieth century formats like the soap opera and melodramatic woman's film. Despite the hope that media convergence will "democratize the media" (Jenkins, 2006), feminized convergence reveals a turning back to the stereotypical conventions of mass women's culture and the intensification of gender stereotypes in the digital realm.

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Introduction

Feminized Media in the Age of Convergence

Over the past decade, digital technologies have transformed the way we watch television. Today, multi-screen platforms allow viewers to follow content across old and new media sites and participate in real-time conversations about television on web forums, social media, and mobile applications. The convergence of television and digital technologies has opened the lines of communication between media producers and consumers and substantially restructured relations between the media industry and their audiences. At the same time, advancements in digital media, including the vast expansion of media outlets, digital recording devices, and ad-skipping technologies, have given viewers more control over how and when they watch television. As a result, television networks are revolutionizing their marketing, programming, and distribution models in efforts to maintain dominance in the multimedia environment. With this new institutional context comes a need to better understand new ways of targeting and engaging consumers in a mediascape where television and new media converge. This dissertation examines how interactive television platforms are being designed for and marketed specifically to women.

In the field of media studies, Henry Jenkins (2006) term "convergence culture" has been widely adopted to describe the technological and industry shifts that coincide with the increased "flow of content across media platforms, cooperation between media industries, and migratory behavior of media audiences" (p. 2). While Jenkins (2006) argues that media convergence empowers viewers to influence and create media, other

scholars like Mark Andrejevic (2007), point out that media corporations profit from media convergence by utilizing the free promotion, demographic data, and consumer feedback users wittingly and unwittingly provide through digital interactions. Yet, scholars on both sides of the debate have overlooked how gender structures convergence culture. This dissertation addresses this gap by examining how gender assumptions impact marketing strategies, programming, and interactive platforms used to pursue a tech-savvy female audience.

My project intervenes in the growing body of research on media convergence by considering how the Bravo TV network tailors its interactive platforms to reach female viewers. I argue that Bravo draws women into interactivity through the gendered conventions of mass women's culture, setting a template for addressing women as digital media users. I refer to the gendered strategies, practices, and content used to integrate women into convergence culture as "feminized convergence." My analysis of feminized convergence suggests a reversion to traditional approaches for attracting female audiences established in the twentieth century through popular formats like the soap opera and melodramatic woman's film. Despite the explosion of female-centered programming in the late twentieth century that seemed to signal a shift toward a more diverse media environment for women (Lotz, 2006), my research shows the convergence of television and digital technologies has changed the competitive dynamics of the industry and spurred a turning back to the stereotypical conventions of mass women's culture.

My dissertation advances the argument that media institutions are developing converging media platforms for women around gender stereotypes that have long circulated around mass cultural texts for women. The cluster of assumptions I identify and explore are encapsulated by the "good mother" stereotype (Modleski, 1997), a trope that positions women as motivated by their emotions, experts in the intimate realm of domesticity and care work, eager to give advice and intervene in interpersonal disputes. As Berlant (2008) explains, women's mass cultural texts promote "a core form of gendered personhood for women" that links women through the common experience of "the pleasures and burdens of reproducing everyday life in the family, which…has meant, among other things, being charged with managing dynamics of affective and emotional intimacy" (p. 170). Even with the diversification of women's media (Lotz, 2006) and the decline of the women-centered formats like the soap opera in the twenty-first century (Levine, 2011), the media industry's quest to attract female audiences through the socially-constructed skills of femininity has not dissipated. Rather, it is my contention that the media industries' dependence on gender assumptions has intensified in the era of media convergence.

This project explores feminized convergence through an in-depth examination of the Bravo cable TV network and its interactive television platforms. The case of Bravo, as one of NBC's female-targeted subsidiaries, illustrates how the media industry is tailoring new media technologies to attract an upscale, tech-savvy female audience. Because the convergence of television and new media has been lauded as an improvement to consumer choice and empowerment on one hand, and critiqued as a new

mode of consumer exploitation on the other, it is critical to take account of the ways corporate media strategies amplify social distinctions to more effectively target niche demographics. Placing Bravo's brand of interactive television at the center of my study, I analyze the specific ways that women's digital media participation is constructed and managed in the context of convergence culture.

Bravo: Interactive TV for Women

In 1980, Bravo was launched as a commercial-free network dedicated to the performing arts, theater, and classic film. Throughout the 1990s, the network underwent a significant branding overhaul, transforming from a premium arts channel into an ad-driven basic cable network with popular culture programming. In 2002, when NBC Universal (NBCU) acquired Bravo, it began to solidify its current brand identity as a niche reality TV network for upscale, educated, and trendy women (Becker, 2006). Throughout this period, Bravo developed a unique brand of high-style reality TV programming around the Bravo's five "affinity groups:" fashion, beauty, food, design, and pop culture. According to then-president Lauren Zalaznick, reality shows featured "good-looking people in aspirational roles," (as cited in Adalian and Zeitchik, 2007), placing traditionally feminine pursuits like fashion and beauty within an upscale, entrepreneurial context. Under the leadership of Zalaznick, Bravo became a cable-network success story, increasing its ad profit from $163 million in 2004 to $260 million in 2008, making Bravo more profitable that its parent company NBC (Dempsey, 2008). As a result, Bravo was positioned as a key component of NBCU's female-targeted television and digital platforms (Jones, 2009).

Under its new brand identity, Bravo developed a significant digital media presence by extending all its programming into the digital realm, setting the precedent that each of its shows would have "a legitimate digital DNA to them from the get-go" (as cited in Lafayette, 2006). At the same time, Bravo invested in digital platforms for fans to discuss Bravo programming online, first obtaining the popular message boards on the web forum "Television Without Pity," and later, pioneering interactive "social TV" portals. Bravo's digital media strategy created many opportunities for participation to "increase interest in the brand, foster brand loyalty, build relationships and feelings of community among users, generate free content, and provide insights into viewer behavior and interests through interactive features such as online surveys and the ability to share content with fellow users" (Jones, 2009, p. 21). Since 2010, Bravo has been on the cutting edge of emerging media, claiming to be the first network to develop an interactive event that combined Facebook and Twitter with live TV viewing (The Bravo Talk Bubble, 2010), a smart phone co-viewing application (Bravo Now, 2010), and a "Participation TV" platform that delivers real-time content, questions, and polls associated with the live broadcast (Play Live, 2012) ("Lisa Hsia," n.d.).

As Bravo developed new digital innovations, viewer interactivity remained essential to the network brand. Interactivity is structured into each of its television and online platforms. For instance, Bravo's late-night talk show *Watch What Happens Live (WWHL)* invites viewers' social media comments and questions and relays them to celebrity guests on air. Bravo's "social episodes" feature viewers' Facebook and Twitter posts on screen during repeat broadcasts. Bravo celebrities (dubbed Bravolebrities by the

network) are active on social media and regularly engage with fans on sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr. Bravo's YouTube channel features participatory segments like the *WWHL* after-show and on the BravoTV.com, viewers can play interactive games, read cast blogs, watch the latest Bravo news, and even take a virtual tour of a Bravo star's closet.

Bravo's digital media strategy serves four critical industry purposes; first it encourages real-time viewing and helps to mitigate the threat of DVRs and time-shifted schedules that allows fans to skip over commercials. Second, it creates social media "buzz" that urges viewers to tune in. Third, it creates a more immersive brand experience where viewers can learn more about Bravo stars and series. And finally, it provides a valuable set of audience data that is analyzed to deduce audience enjoyment (Powell et al, 2011) and can be used to fine-tune storylines. As Clifford (2010) explains, Bravo "asks its stars to blog, encourages viewers to comment on its Web site and post to Twitter during episodes, deploys text-message campaigns and Facebook pages for shows, and even studies search terms that viewers use, collected by research firms like Hitwise to parse what viewers are most interested in." The instability of the television industry in the digital age has led Bravo to develop a robust interactive media presence to engage consumers on multiple levels in an attempt to develop network loyalty.

The emergence of Bravo's digital media applications coincides with rising industry instability in relations between producers and consumers on one hand and networks and advertisers on the other. Converging technologies have significantly altered the television industry. The increasing number of channels, outlets, and viewing

platforms, has created widespread anxiety about consumers' ability to personalize their media consumption and, in doing so, circumvent commercials and diminish the potential for loyal network viewers (Lotz, 2006, p .4-5). In response, the television industry has revised its existing business model to remain lucrative in light of increasingly fragmented viewership. To allay anxieties about attracting a valuable audience segment and keeping them engaged (especially during advertisements), networks have made significant adjustments to their marketing strategy, creating more opportunities for live interactions and expanding entertainment portals online.

To unpack the implications of Bravo's convergent platforms, the frames of convergence culture scholarship are instructive. Drawing on Jenkins (2006) optimistic perspective on convergence, we can see how interactive features like *WWHL* and live voting mechanisms empower fans to intervene in and help produce television content, increasing their enjoyment and activating public participation. Yet, Andrejevic's (2007) view of user exploitation illuminates how Bravo's interactive features can be used to conduct extensive marketing research, develop insights into viewer habits and interests, generate free content, increase interest in the brand, and foster brand loyalty. What these accounts leave out is that Bravo's digital media strategy was specifically designed for a niche tech-savvy female audience.

What makes Bravo's digital media strategy distinct from the wholesale industry turn to convergence is its particular manifestation of gendered interactivity. While other television networks utilize digital media to extend convoluted plots or develop character backstory, Bravo uses digital media to engage viewers in the emotional relationships that

play out on its programs. Typically, docu-soap narratives maximize engagement by creating emotional tension, emphasized by the cast's theatrical performance of interpersonal conflict and pain. To deepen engagement with the ongoing, highly emotional drama of these programs, Bravo relies upon the feminine feelings of empathy and sensitivity to encourage viewers to identify with the plight of its reality stars. To propel digital media engagement, Bravo constructs its digital media platforms as space to be a part of the relationships and emotional events depicted in the series. When Bravo stars get into a fight on TV or online, the network calls upon viewers to weigh in on the dispute by voting in an online poll or asking a pointed question on social media that will be relayed on Bravo's interactive fan talk show. When a Bravolebrity has an emotional breakdown on screen, Bravo asks viewers to lend their support by tweeting at the stars or commenting on cast blog posts. As viewers participate on digital platforms, they are increasingly integrated into the emotional lives of the cast and implicated in the gendered norms perpetuated by the show.

One of Bravo's most effective tactics for encouraging mass female participation has been to assimilate interactivity into the feminized docu-soap format. The melodramatic serial is the television genre most explicitly addressed to women (Mattelart, 1997, p. 29), and it is clear that Bravo espouses soap opera conventions to attract female viewers. The majority of Bravo programming falls into the docu-soap category, a format that merges the melodramatic structure of soap opera with the low-cost production of reality TV. As its flagship franchise, *The Real Housewives* exemplifies the type of stories Bravo tells about women. The serialized narrative documents the

intersecting lives of wealthy "housewives" in cities across the United States, documenting the day-to-day lives of the cast with retrospective interviews in which stars detail their thoughts and feelings during key narrative moments. The stories are part aspirational, depicting the housewives entrepreneurial business ventures, lavish vacations, parties, upscale shopping, and narcissistic beauty regimens, and part emotional, chronicling the ups and downs of female friendship and family life with a strong emphasis on melodramatic outbursts, alcohol-fueled arguments, and teary reconciliations. In this sense, the affective sensibility of Bravo docu-soaps mirrors the "tragic structure of feeling," defined by Ang (1991), as the exaggerated highs and lows of women's lives depicted in melodramatic narratives for women.

While Bravo utilizes the melodramatic structure of mass women's media, it has also updated historically feminine women's genres by integrating digital interactivity into and around the text. Bravo celebrates its advanced digital media platforms as a way to recuperate the value of the mass female audience, rehabilitating the negative view of the mass audience as "feminine," overly emotional, and passive (Kolker, 2009) and adopting a new female demographic that is upscale, active, engaged, and tech-savvy. Bravo's construction of an affluent, tech-savvy female audience and its concurrent upsurge in digital interactivity presents a challenge to the prevailing assumption that new media technologies are primarily used by white, middle-class men (Parks, 2004). While many scholars hope the accessibility and anonymity of the Internet will usher in a more democratic media culture (Jenkins, 2006), the mainstream media industry persists in excluding women from the technological realm (Dempsey, 2009). The principal subjects

of convergence culture remain young, white, male, and college educated (Ouellette & Wilson, 2011). Thus, the arrival of Bravo's digital media strategy in the context of its largely female audience marks a critical moment in convergence culture, as a network-lead interactive initiative designed particularly to draw in female audiences.

Moreover, Bravo has updated mass women's genres is by imbuing it with an ironic sensibility. While the network's docu-soaps engender feminine feelings through melodrama, sentimentality, and interpersonal strife, they also provide distance from those feelings through a campy, ironic sensibility. As one producer explains, Bravo "has really cultivated that special brand of reality television that is winking at you, that's letting you feel good about watching a guilty pleasure" (Barbato, as cited in Dominus, 2008). What this means is that Bravo's representation of melodrama is intensified through Bravolebrities' exaggerated performances, high production values, and editing process that presents reality stars as indulgent, maudlin, and narcissistic. Through the "Bravo wink," the network invites audience skepticism and feelings of superiority. Unlike the affective pleasure women have historically received from taking melodrama seriously, ironic viewing is "informed by a more intellectually distancing, superior subject position which could afford having pleasure in the show while simultaneously expressing a confident knowingness about its supposedly 'low' quality" (Ang, 2011).

While Bravo cultivates an ironic viewing position, it also revels in the gendered pleasures of melodrama. To view Bravo docu-soaps as *only* ironic is to obscure the complexity of the ways in which the network encourages both emotional identification and critical distance simultaneously. NBC executive Lauren Zalaznick describes Bravo

programs as "layered." She explains," "You want to be a little bit like one of them?" Here's a guidebook. You want to laugh at them? Go ahead" (as cited in Dominus, 2008). Through irony and camp, Bravo provides the pleasures of the feminized docu-soap genre while also giving viewers permission to judge and critique its stars from a distance. This dual viewing position is reproduced on Bravo's interactive platforms where viewers are called upon to identify with and condemn Bravolebrity behavior. I argue that this framework complicates the traditional pleasures of the soap by asking women to perform both genuine and savvy dispositions through digital media interactions.

This project chronicles Bravo's digital media initiatives from 2008 to 2015 with an eye toward how the network draws upon the emotional core of classic feminized media genres, as well as irony, to encourage viewers' new media participation. The development of interactive media by a female-targeted network illustrates the need for examining the interrelated questions of how female audiences are conceived within convergence culture, what kind of stories and genres are used to attract female audiences to interactivity, and which digital skills are women encouraged to develop. Taking gender as a central analytic, my analysis of Bravo identifies and explores the conventions of women's new media use that are being established within feminized convergence. To begin parsing the conventions of feminized convergence, I draw from and contribute to conversations within three bodies of scholarly work: emerging literature on convergence culture, feminist television scholarship on women's genres, and media studies work on emotional and immaterial labor.

Convergence Culture

In 2006, Henry Jenkins coined the term "convergence culture" to describe a new media system "where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power or the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways" (p. 2). For Jenkins, convergence is not simply a matter of technological invention, but rather represents a cultural shift in which consumers are more actively engaged with the circulation and production of media content. Because new media technologies give consumers the ability to alter, appropriate, and circulate media content, active consumers are pushing media industries to rethink the long-standing assumption that mass media audiences are passive. The upsurge in consumer participation, what Jenkins calls the new "participatory culture," is made up of new media practices where consumers talk about media on dispersed platforms and collectively analyze meanings, track down content and make connections between texts, and create their own media content. Jenkins explains that these types of consumer practices empower users to interact with the media industry while, at the same time, add value for media companies because they generate "buzz," or free marketing for the program.

For Jenkins, interactivity in the new participatory culture promises to reconfigure entrenched power relations between producers and consumers, giving audiences the power to collectivity influence media and potentially subvert corporate control. The promise of participatory culture lies in the transference of consumer power to more "serious" arenas like politics, law, and education. While Jenkins acknowledges the democratic potential of participatory media may be hindered by the fact that "not all

participants are created equal" (p. 3), his analysis elides these distinctions by honing in on the experiences of "early adopters"—users that are disproportionately affluent, college-educated, white, young, and male (Jenkins, 2006, p. 23). By glossing distinctions between participants, Jenkins not only misses the uneven distribution of power and labor that make up convergence culture but also the ways in which social identities are deployed to shape participatory spaces. What this project adds to the growing body of work on convergence is attention to gender as an organizing feature of new media environments.

Since television and computer technologies have merged, long-standing assumptions about "women's interests" have seeped into the digital environments built up around TV content. The media industry's habit of circumscribing content based on gender assumptions extends into the digital realm and reinforces gender hierarchies online. Critically, this practice complicates two of Jenkins core ideas: that media convergence is democratic and that active consumers are driving media convergence. In fact, Jenkins' work attempts to "show how entrenched institutions are taking their models from grassroots fan communities, and reinventing themselves for an era of media convergence and collective intelligence" (p. 22). Not surprisingly, industry rhetoric attempts to support this claim; as Lisa Hsia, Bravos' head of digital media explains, "our fans are usually way ahead of us, so we follow a fairly simple premise in pioneering new digital frontiers — follow the users" ("Lisa Hsia," n.d.). By describing tightly controlled digital platforms as fan-driven rather than corporate engineered, Jenkins obscures the stereotypical ways media companies design and manage digital media spaces. Tracking

the ways Bravo deploys gender assumptions to construct its feminized fan community, this project highlights the continued salience of gender norms for creating "marketable identities" (Davila, 2001) in the age of media convergence.

As a counterpoint to Jenkins' celebratory portrayal of the active audience, Mark Andrejevic (2007) argues that media companies prompt and exploit fan productivity. In particular, Andrejevic points out that viewer interactivity serves industry imperatives to gather market research, build loyalty, and increase viewer enjoyment with no additional cost to corporations. For instance, in the online fan forum Television Without Pity (owned by Bravo), Andrejevic found that contributors were often "savvy" viewers that wrote snarky commentary to entertain each other and make television more interesting. The voluntary work of fan participation, like posting on message boards, voting in polls, blogging and Tweeting about favorite shows, is provided for free, while contributing immense value to media brands. Through digital technologies like online surveillance, sentiment tracking, and data mining, active participants supply free labor in the service of promoting and monetizing media companies. While the industry practice of offloading labor onto viewers is a key feature of convergence culture, Andrejevic's (2008) assessment of interactivity leaves unexamined the significance of gender to the types of free labor performed. Not only do women make up the majority of online fan laborers (87 percent of Andrejevic's respondents were women (p. 28)), they disproportionately contribute to the emotional labor (Hochschild, 1987) involved in promoting and circulating media content.

Both Jenkins and Andrejevic offer productive frameworks for understanding convergence culture. One of the limitations of this body of work, however, has been its inattention to the ways media convergence overlaps with the politics of gender. Because media companies have combined television and digital technologies to more effectively target segmented audiences, one of the primary effects of media convergence has been to extend and intensify stereotypes in the digital realm. As Joseph Turow (2011) notes, niche marketing is a discriminatory practice because it involves digital profiling. When media firms "place us into personalized 'reputation silos,'" Turow explains, they "surround us with worldviews and rewards based on labels marketers have created reflecting our value to them" (p. 8). As media companies seek out more narrow demographics and cater to them with stereotypical content, social divisions become more deeply engrained and naturalized. If we only explore how media convergence empowers or exploits early adopters, we miss the ways that convergent media is increasingly tailored to narrow demographic groups.

While gender is often overlooked in convergence culture scholarship, several important works have explored women's involvement with new media. For instance, Ouellette and Wilson's (2011) analysis of *Dr. Phil's* multimedia self-help franchise, calls into question the pleasures often associated with new media participation. Their intervention focuses on two interrelated trends in convergence literature: the disproportionate attention given to the media practices of primarily white, male early adopters and the overdetermined emphasis on the political potentialities of interactivity. Ouellette and Wilson (2011) argue that the kind of participation encouraged by the *Dr.*

Phil franchise suggest that women's interactivity is being "mobilized as a gendered requirement of neoliberal citizenship, an ongoing, mundane regimen of self-empowerment that does not intensify the pleasure of the text as much as it intensifies and extends a 'second shift' of familial and affective labour historically performed by women in the home" (p. 549). In this way, feminized media reinforces the traditional sexual division of labor by addressing women as domestic caretakers, while also promoting a self-enterprising ethos by implementing market logic in the home.

While Ouellette and Wilson point out how domestic labor is encouraged through women's interactivity, Driscoll and Gregg's (2011) explore gendered labor in online fan communities. They suggest that online fan communities rely upon women's "expertise in intimacy" with coterminous expectations of "obligation and reciprocity," "knowing how to interact," and "intimate networking" (Driscoll & Gregg, 2011, p. 575). Learning how to participate and being actively involved with fan communities involves a substantial amount of unpaid labor that is primarily performed by women. My work builds on these studies, arguing that Bravo is inventing new ways to foster women's digital labor by leveraging the affective pleasures of women's culture.

As Driscoll and Gregg (2011) suggest, we need more feminist investigations of convergence culture that interrogate "which stories are told on which media platforms, and why?" (p. 578). My project begins to answer this question by exploring what kind of stories Bravo tells about women's lives and how the network uses those stories to evoke and mold digital interactions. One of the core strategies Bravo has used to draw women to its interactive platforms has been to structure digital engagement around the genre

conventions of "women's media." In the following section, I examine how Bravo has adapted the narrative principles, viewing positions, and affective sensibilities of the soap opera into its interactive reality TV programs to attract female audiences and shape their digital activities.

Feminist TV Criticism: From the Soap to the Docu-Soap

In the post-network era of television, daytime network soap operas have struggled to remain relevant. Not only have ratings declined, the age of the average viewer has risen and ad sales have dropped to record lows (Levine, 2011, p. 201). While the soap industry waned, docu-soaps seemed to pop up in its place, offering similar feminine pleasures in the cheaper-to-produce and younger-skewing reality TV format. In this section, I review feminist literature on the soap opera and then turn to a discussion of how my project intervenes in this work by updating the concepts of pleasure, identification, labor, and emotions to make sense of the rising currency of docu-soaps increasingly presented across media platforms. The case of Bravo enjoins scholars to consider how the tenets of mass women's culture are being deployed to market new media technologies in the twenty-first century.

The soap opera was developed in the 1930s as a genre of radio programming for housewives that incorporated aspects of "women's culture" such as domestic dilemmas and emotional conflicts. The soap opera has been adapted throughout the twentieth century. In the 1940s and 1950s soap operas disseminated practical and personal advice to allay women's perceived isolation in the home. As Michele Mattelart (1997) explains, soaps were viewed as compensation for domestic labor, alleviating the monotony of

household tasks. While soaps represented an exciting, yet realistic version of women's lives they also served to ingrain women's "natural" place in the home. Soaps invest pleasure in the tensions of domestic life that involve ongoing and unresolved family and romantic concerns. By the 1970s, many middle-class White women entered the workforce, and soap operas reflected this shift in women's experiences, introducing storylines about female characters in high-status positions.

While the content of the soap opera has evolved to incorporate contemporary social issues and changing cultural mores, its narrative conventions have remained consistent. Soap stories are meant to imitate life, featuring the everyday activities of an ensemble cast. Soap characters are designed to be compelling and relatable so the audience can develop identifications and empathy while watching (Baym, 2000, p. 49). Because the majority of viewers are women, female characters are central to soap narratives and they are often portrayed as powerful actors in the story. Soap opera plots hinge on familial and romantic relationships and unfold through intimate conversations between multiple characters (Brown, 1994, p. 48). Soap temporality mimics actual time, allowing storylines and characterization to progress over years. The serial form and never-endingness of narratives cultivates deeper audience investment in the show and its people. Modleski (1982) explains, the lack of closure in soap narratives perpetuate a disjuncture between desire and fulfillment, investing "exquisite pleasure in the central condition of a woman's life: waiting" (p. 88). For women, emotional engagement with soaps cultivates anticipation and disorder as central sources of women's pleasure.

One of the most important features of the soap operas, then, is the way the format engages and activates the emotional capacities of viewers. Harrington and Bielby (1995) suggest that soaps main purpose is to "evoke emotions and to glorify and exaggerate the emotional meaning of everyday life" (p. 45). Soap opera narratives routinely present problems that need to be solved, fostering an uneasy affective undercurrent that Ang (1982) describes as a "tragic structure of feeling." In order to sustain viewers' emotional attachments, the soap opera form provides interesting and believable characters whose struggles the viewers can personally identify with. By telling each story through multiple points of view, the soap invites viewers to project themselves into the story to better understand the conditions of their own lives. A regular soap viewer explains, that while soap characters "didn't share [her] exact problems…their determination, perseverance, and resilience provide great great lessons" (as cited in Levine, 2009, p. 43).

The success of soap operas depends upon viewers' ability to care for the characters. As Rouverol (1984) concludes:

> Whatever else a show may offer, it must contain people we *love*, people whose jobs and tribulations we can share. It must also provide us with people we love to hate, people who offer a continuous threat to the welfare or happiness of those we are fond of. And though the need for suspense is always a given, there can be no real suspense if we don't care about the people we're watching. Above all, we need to *care* (as cited in Baym, 2000, p. 49).

Caring for others is a central facet of women's gender socialization (Chodorow, 1978), and is integrated in most forms of feminized work. Because soap opera viewing is a

relational process of identifying with and feeling for the characters on-screen, women find pleasure in the process of caring for others.

Thus, a key ingredient of soap spectatorship is the emotional empathy. While this type of care work provides pleasure for female viewers, feminist scholars have debated the political effects of empathizing with the negative, melodramatic emotions elicited by soaps. On one side, Modleski (1997) argues that soaps' present women with "numerous limited egos, each on conflict with the others, and continually thwarted in its attempts to control events" (p. 37). Creating multiple points of identification, soaps re-entrench female powerlessness and convince women they must helplessly accept familial and romantic discord. On the other side, Ang (1996) suggests women's identification with tragic female figures gives women a space to fantasize about living as different characters, an exercise that allows women to negotiate the conflicting demands of femininity. These views on soaps as both harmful and helpful to women offer critical insights into the subject positions carved out in the melodramatic structure of feeling. Little attention has been paid to the value of care work within the television ratings economy.

Certainly, soap viewers produce value because loyal viewership translates into advertising revenue for networks. However, the added value of fan labor has received considerably less scholarly attention in the context of soaps. Instead, soap fans' activity has been predominantly discussed as a source of pleasure and empowerment for women. Practices like joining fan clubs, informal discussions with friends and co-workers, and writing letters to soap actors have been examined as a communal space for women. As

Blumenthal (1997) contends, "communal viewing is an act of power, accessible to all, allowing women to symbolically uncover and create their own stories" (p. 106). While fan communities were a source of authentic social relationships that lead to long-term friendships (Harrington and Bielby, 1995), they also worked to further cement fan's investments in the soap industry.

This trend has been amplified in the digital era, as the media industry now has unfettered access to fan discourses taking place online. The Internet has significantly altered fan communities in size and scope, making them more common, more visible, and more accessible than ever before. As Baym (2000) explains, the Internet "makes audience communities more visible for mass media producers, who can log on anytime to get instantaneous feedback" (p. 215-216). But while, Baym (2000) hopes that media convergence will "shift the balance of power between media producers and consumers" (p. 216), my research shows that in fact the opposite has happened. Instead of adapting to fan feedback, networks are engineering fan practices, creating corporate fan platforms that work to modulate fan activity. My work intervenes in feminist research on the soap opera by identifying how Bravo has adapted the central pleasures of the genre (emotional engagement, multiple identifications, and empathy) to encourage fan engagement and emotional connection in the service of building a more lucrative media brand. In what follows, I argue that while soap opera struggled to survive in the post-network era, the feminized docu-soap genre has thrived by adoption to converging media platforms.

The decline of the soap opera in the 1990s has been attributed to a range of factors including the rise of women in the workforce, the extended broadcast disruption

throughout the O.J. Simpson trial, the "soapoperafication" of primetime (Levine, 2009). One of the most significant issues was the aging soap audience, based of the assumption that older viewers have diminished purchasing power and are less desirable to advertisers. To attract young, white, affluent women, soap operas began to adopt some of the tenets of reality television, filming in real locations instead of studios, integrating product placement, and establishing a transmedia presence. Levine (2009) explains, "the daytime soaps of the post-network era have also sought to generate new revenue and attract new viewer by working to maximize the shows' transmedia presence, exploiting media convergence to offer cross-platform distribution windows as well as developing new promotional outlets designed to drive viewers back to the TV screen" (p. 49). However, the majority of soaps' promotional transmedia efforts were short lived. Fan criticisms of soaps' transmedia platforms suggest they feel a "fundamental disrespect," "given the seeming disregard in such ventures for the integrity of the storyworlds" (Levine, 2011, p. 206). Because viewers already had dynamic independent communities and fan-created ancillary texts, soap efforts to extend the storyworlds appeared underdeveloped to fans.

As soap operas struggled to establish an online presence in the convergent media culture, docu-soaps developed an affinity with digital media. Bravo especially honed its use of digital media by introducing interactive features into every aspect of its programming and distribution. Exemplary of this practice is Bravo's interactive talk show *Watch What Happens Live*, advertised as the ultimate fan experience with Bravo executive and self-proclaimed "super fan" Andy Cohen at the helm. The show integrates

fans' social media commentary in real-time into the live broadcast, giving fans an on-screen space for fan discourses that are often relegated to online forums. Produced as an intimate, laid-back, fan-driven space, *WWHL* invites fan participation around the melodramatic narratives of Bravo docu-soaps. Bravo situates this feminized form of interactive engagement as both a way of "giving fans a voice" as well as a way to " create more value and impact for advertisers" ("Play Live FAQ," n.d.).

It is notable that Bravo's docu-soap format has had great success integrating fans into its digital fan forums. Whereas soaps failed to court fans on network transmedia platforms, docu-soaps have thrived. This is not to say that all docu-soaps and all of the correlated new media platforms have been successful. In fact, Bravo has developed a plethora of convergent media technologies from apps to web portals to games that were short-lived. However, docu-soap fans are more likely to engage with network-run digital platforms without extensive criticism. While there are many factors that have contributed to the simultaneous decline of the daytime soap and rise of the docu-soap, it is possible to assess some dimensions of docu-soaps ascendance in the convergent era. I suggest that there are three likely factors that make docu-soaps and corporate-owned digital fan forums easier bedfellows. First, docu-soap audiences skew younger, a demographic that has more experience using new media technologies. Second, reality TV extensions appear to emerge more organically from stars' real lives and so they seem less artificial than the fabricated transmedia storyworlds built up around soap operas. Finally, reality TV programming normalizes pervasive monitoring and control (Andrejevic, 2002), a fact

that explains why docu-soap viewers may more readily accept corporate oversight in approved forms of fandom.

With the decline of the soap opera, Bravo proudly claims to have revamped the feminized genre. Bravo executive Andy Cohen suggests that *The Real Housewives* have all but "replaced the soap opera" (NPR, 2014). Where the soap industry has struggled to cut production costs and find new revenue streams (Levine, 2006), Bravo docu-soaps have excelled; by capitalizing on the everyday lives of real people reality formats slash production costs (there are no professional actors or elaborate sets) and maximize revenue by extending content to digital media platforms. Compared to reality TV, sensational soap opera narratives felt less "real" to younger audiences (Levine, 2006). Even though soap narratives are often implausible, soap opera realism is based on women's affective experiences and feminine narrative codes such as circular, repetitive narratives (Brown, 1994). Within the emotional turmoil of soap narratives, women could recognize their own feelings and experiences. Because soap opera realism privileges women's perspectives and emotional knowledge, it primarily appeals to mass female audiences. But soap opera realism has lost traction in the reality TV era, where viewers can watch the emotional experiences of ordinary people in a range of different relatable scenarios. As Bravo star Lisa Vanderpump explains, "People used to be fascinated by soaps and reality took its place because it provided real-life situations people could get involved in" (as cited in Day, 2014).

The docu-soap update on the soap adopts many of the gendered pleasures of the original genre. For instance, Levine (2006) identifies docu-soaps use of the "egg" shot at

the end of soap scenes, a long close-up that allows the audience to infer the inner feelings of the cast. Becoming emotionally literate in soap conventions is one of the central pleasures of the genre, one that is intensified by Bravo's transmedia extensions that allow viewers seemingly unmediated access to the inner thoughts and feelings of its Bravolebrities on fan forums, social media, blogs, and interactive interviews.

Similarly, docu-soap storytelling mirrors the ongoing and unresolved temporality of soaps. As soaps depict ongoing interpersonal turmoil, they portray the tension and suffering of each character, leaving it up to the viewer to sympathize with all involved. Unlike male-oriented storytelling focused on a main protagonist, soaps present viewers with multiple points of identification with characters that are often in conflict with one another and thus unable to propel the narrative forward. This narrative structure, Modleski (1997) explains, divests viewers of power and thus, the frustrated spectator "will, like an interfering mother, try to control events directly" (p. 38). The sense of powerlessness that comes from the all-knowing yet debilitated spectator position motivates viewers to find alternative means of intervention, most notably taking up letter writing campaigns to soap programs and its stars.

Bravo capitalizes on docu-soaps open structure and multiple identifications to activate fans' desire to intervene and push them onto its interactive platforms. Whereas soap fans wrote letters to actors to "give advice, warn the heroine of impeding doom, caution the innocent to beware of the nasties…, inform one character of another's doings, or reprimand a character for unseemly behavior" (Edmonson and Rounds, cited in Modleski, 1997, p. 29), contemporary viewers now simply go online to interact with TV

stars. Even more compelling is Bravo docu-soaps ostensibly non-fictional representations, intensifying the sense that fan interventions may have a meaningful outcome on the real lives of reality stars. This mode of interacting with TV is gendered female it both its ineffectuality (it is unlikely that soap or reality stars heed the advice of fans) and its emotionality (talking about emotions is a stereotypically feminine trait). As Blumenthal (1997) explains, "soaps' trademark emotionality is associated with other feminine traits which they highlight, like talkativeness, relational capacity, and intuitiveness" (p. 51). It is this feminine register—talking about one's feelings and relating to others—that drives Bravo's convergent media strategy. Interactive features like the Talk Bubble and programming like *Watch What Happens Live* offer fans a space to interact with each other and Bravo stars to give advice and share feelings. The emphasis that Bravo places on emotion has a particular significance for women because women are socialized to believe that "life ultimately derives meaning from our feelings and from the relationships we form with others" (Blumenthal, 1997, p. 53). Because Bravo's digital media strategy is premised upon women's emotional literacy, I am particularly interested in how the network activates and manages women's emotions to help promote the Bravo brand. In what follows, I situate this concern within relevant literature on emotional labor.

Feminized Labor

My project theorizes emotional labor as a key dimension of women's online participation. The aim of this section is to bring together three bodies of ideas— feminist theorizations of the sexual division of labor, autonomist Marxist work on precarious and

immaterial labor, and cultural and media studies research on digital labor. It is surprising that not many connections have been made between work on immaterial, digital labor, and women's reproductive labor (though see Ouellette and Wilson, 2011) since feminists have theorized the affective and immaterial dimensions of "women's work." This project seeks to remedy this gap by bringing an awareness of how the expectations of women's work— including "care labor, affection, consolation, psychological support, sex and communication" (Fortunati, 2007, p. 140)— are espoused as a core component of women's digital labor.

This project draws on Bravo as a case study to explore the role of women's emotional labor in feminized convergence. I suggest that Bravo's convergent media platforms activate gendered forms of participation that encourage women to share their emotions as they interact with and produce brand content. I situate this practice as a form of emotional labor that is typical performed by women in the home and in feminized professions. Arlie Hochschild (1983) defines emotional labor as a "coordination of mind and feeling" that "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (p. 7). Bravo mobilizes interactive engagement through discourses of consumer "passion" and "love," encouraging affective interactions that are organized around the feminized "work of devotion" (Campbell, 2011). Of particular concern are the rules of behavioral display that are established through Bravo's sanctioned forms of fandom. I argue that Bravo uses its corporate fan spaces to disseminate "feeling rules" that are designed to evoke feminine emotions including identification and empathy. By making fan feelings visible, Bravo is

able to substantiate the value of its audience as both loyal feminine viewers and smart tech-savvy consumers. Thus, Bravo's uptake of feminized convergence is bound up with traditional sexual division of labor whereby capital accumulation depends upon women's unpaid affective labor (Federici, 2008), as well as shifts in late capitalism that increasingly rely upon users' immaterial labor to provide the cultural content of the commodity (Lazzarato, 2006). In this project, I situate Bravo's efforts to engage fans in digital interactions at the intersection of emotional and immaterial labor.

Women have historically been tasked with domestic labor including reproduction, childrearing, housework, and care work. Feminist analyses of the sexual division of labor identify the critical role of women's unpaid labor to the reproduction of laborers and thus the success of capitalism. As Federici (2008) explains, feminists Marxists established that "capitalism is built on an immense amount of unpaid labor, that it not built exclusively or primarily on contractual relations; that the wage relation hides the unpaid, slave-like nature of so much of the work upon which capital accumulation is premised." But while women's work is essential to capital accumulation, its unwaged stature has resulted in its social devaluation and a gendered hierarchy between paid employment and unpaid domestic labor. Feminist Marxists trace the roots of gender hierarchies and women's oppression back to the sexual division of labor that diminishes women's work in the home.

The hierarchy of men's productive and women's reproductive labor is replicated within the realm of paid employment. For instance, "feminized" jobs including nursing, serving, and teaching all involve emotional care work traditionally associated with

women's reproductive labor in the home. While emotional labor is devalued, it is increasingly a requirement of waged work. Hochschild (1983) suggests that most jobs require the management of one's emotions, but women more than man have to "put emotional labor on the market" (p. 11). According to Hochschild, emotional labor is the calculated exhibition of feelings through bodily registers, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and appearance. In the workplace, emotions are carefully administered by feeling rules that implore workers to under or over-perform their feelings in order to make others feel cared for and comfortable. In her account of emotional labor, Hochschild distinguishes between private and commercial uses of feeling, coining the term "transmutation" to describe the translation of private emotions into a profit-driven economy. The recurrent process of transmutation sutures the private to the public in such a way that private acts become constituted in relation to capitalist frames. Hochschild postulates that, although private emotions have historically been managed in relation to social codes, now more than ever emotions are engineered by corporations. In exchange for managing emotions, laborers collect monetary wages in capitalist modes of exchange.

I draw upon feminist theories of care and emotion work to unpack the affective labor that women do online. In the digital sphere, feelings are foregrounded in the work women are expected to perform in the same way that femininity is performed in the "real world." As Banet-Weiser (2011) points out, women are judged online and "gain value according to how well [they] fit normative standards of femininity" (p. 18). Conforming to femininity includes a whole range of features including hegemonic beauty standards, sexualized presentation, and the performance of sympathy and care. My project hones in

on the norms of women's emotional labor that are normalized through the soap opera genre and are operationalized in the modes of interactivity including sympathy, multiple identification, intervention, and care. Updating feminist scholarship on women's work, I argue that emotional labor is a central facet of women's online self-presentation.

While feminist theories help to explain how online labor is gendered, the autonomist Marxists theory of immaterial labor sheds light on more recent shifts in the conceptualization of labor in late capitalism. Like classical Marxism, autonomist Marxism is focused on class struggle and social relations. Where autonomist Marxists diverge is their focus on workers' individual ability to affect the structures of capitalism. Rather than promoting a unified revolution and the inevitable fall of capitalism, autonomists stress the sovereignty of workers and self-organized labor movements. Resistance to capitalism in this context does not take shape as activism for egalitarian working conditions but rather as the refusal to work or slacking on the job. This resistance is meant to acknowledge the social effects of capitalism while challenging capitalist systems. Autonomist Marxists' politics of refusal emphasizes the constructive potential of resistance to reinvent social organization and bring into being new was of living (Virno and Hardt, 1996; Hardt and Negri, 2000). However, as Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt (2008) explain, worker contestation prompts capitalist reorganization that in turn requires new subversive struggles (p. 6). These ongoing cycles have lead to the decline of Fordist production models and organized labor and, most critically, the reorganization of labor to include all aspects of society.

Gill and Pratt (2008) explain, “the impact of globalization, information and communication technologies, and changing modes of political and economic governance have produced an apparently novel situation in which increasing numbers of workers in affluent societies are engaged in insecure, casualized or irregular labour” (p. 26). What marks this moment as distinct from past iterations of capitalism is that well-paid positions are also undergoing the “precarization” of labor marked by an uptick in personal risk, contingent employment, and worker flexibility. In this context, labor exceeds the paid workday and extends to all aspects of social life.

Autonomists coined the term “immaterial labor” to refer to unpaid communicative and emotional work labors provide for corporations. Maurizio Lazzarato (2006) defines immaterial labor as the activities that produce both informational and cultural content for the commodity (p. 132). The two aspects of immaterial labor include:

> On the one hand, as regards the ‘informational content’ of the commodity, it refers directly to the changes taking place in workers' labour processes in big companies in the industrial and tertiary sectors, where the skills involved in direct labour are increasingly skills involving cybernetics and computer control (and horizontal and vertical communication). On the other hand, as regards the activity that produces the 'cultural content' of the commodity, immaterial labour involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as ‘work’ – in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms and, more strategically, public opinion (Lazzarato, 2006, p. 133).

These new forms of labor alter the norms of traditional "work" by transgressing boundaries between creative, technical, entrepreneurial, and social skills (Lazzarato, 2006, p. 137).

In media studies, many scholars argue that new media interactivity is an articulation of immaterial labor. This work examines how consumers' online interactions—activities like creating and sharing content, posting on message boards, and voting in polls— provide "free labor" (Terranova, 2000) for media corporations. Not only do fans' promotional activities add significant value to media brands, even mundane activities like clicking on a website or posting on social media can provide media firms with a wealth of information about individual users through online surveillance and data mining (Andrejevic, 2011). Users' active fan participation and quotidian web usage count as immaterial labor as they provide knowledge about consumption habits and develop intimate relationships between consumers and the media brand. As Andrejevic (2009) puts it, "consumers generate the raw (and "immaterial") material that is used by capital as a means of enhancing brand value and profits: capital appropriates forms of productive free creative activity that nevertheless remain external to it" (p. 417). In other words, the intentional and unintentional work fans do online helps to produce what Lazzarato (2006) calls "cultural content," defining the emotions, tastes, consumer norms, and public opinion about the network brand.

The scholarship on immaterial labor in digital media addresses the important role of user interactivity in generating both "cultural content" and economic capital. However, in this body of work, theorists have not yet addressed the critical links between the

affective dimensions of immaterial labor and the gendered dimensions of emotional labor. My research attempts to fill this gap by articulating the feminized iterations of digital immaterial labor, bringing feminist research on affective labor into dialogue with autonomist Marxist theories of immaterial labor.

In the case of Bravo's convergent media platforms, I focus on three key ways the feminized labor of emotional intimacy and the immaterial labor of cultural reproduction mutually shape the norms of new media participation. The first way involves the emotional work of watching women's television genres, where viewers invest their emotional energy into melodramatic narratives that in turn produces profits for the channel. The second way involves what Campbell (2011) calls the "labor of devotion," where women actively promote corporate brands because they feel a strong affinity toward the network. The media industry seeks to cultivate devotion in order to involve consumers in brand promotion on interactive media sites. Not only does this practice suggest that consumers' emotions are capitalist commodities, it attends to the ways the industry figures female consumers as a particularly valuable demographic because they are framed as experts in emotion management with passionate attachments to forms of "women's culture." The third way affective and immaterial labor intersects on Bravo is through the emotional labor depicted on docu-soaps. Reality stars are involved in the feeling work necessary to maintain audience interest and to secure their stardom. Throughout this project, I trace how these three facets of gendered labor are interconnected and mutually constitutive within feminized convergence. In each arena, I

argue that emotions are made an essential aspect of digital interactivity, mapping the economic logics of industry enterprises onto the private, emotional lives of users.

Chapter Outline

To support my argument that feminized convergence intensifies gender stereotypes rather than subverts them, I analyze Bravo's gendered industry strategies in the three following chapters. Chapter One traces the development of Bravo's target market, a technologically savvy female demographic called Affluencers. My analysis of trade industry journals, business-to-business advertisements, newspaper profiles, and psychographic research studies illustrates how Bravo's multi-platform media campaign constructs a fictional audience commodity. I show that the goal of the Affluencer campaign was to convince advertisers that Bravo has a very specific appeal to a previously untapped market of wealthy women with a disposable income, high-end taste, and technological skills. Bravo's tech-savvy female audience demographic, I argue, adds new appeal to the devalued mass female market by emphasizing their active engagement in new media technologies.

To produce the Affluencer audience, Bravo has constructed its interactive digital platforms around the melodramatic conventions of the soap opera. This gendered strategy hails viewers through the pleasures of mass women's texts, including dramatic relationship fluctuations, never-ending storylines, fragmented and oscillating sites of identification, and an emphasis on feminine fashion and beauty. By encouraging new media participation through the feminized genre of the docu-soap, Bravo brings women into interactive spaces and encourages them to gain competency in digital media

platforms. Bravo's strategy thus makes visible the dual qualities of the Affluencer audience as feminine and tech-savvy. In this way, Bravo develops and encourages feminized interactivity, not to empower users or to increase viewer enjoyment but rather to commodify women's digital labor to increase the value of the network brand.

In Chapter Two, I analyze the conventions of Bravo's live interactive talk show *Watch What Happens Live* as an extension of and update on Lauren Berlant's (2008) theoretical framework of the "intimate public sphere" (Berlant, 2008). The imagined consumption communities that flourish around mass women's culture, Berlant explains, function as an intimate public sphere, in which the central condition of belonging is deep-seated belief in the norms of femininity proffered by the texts. Like the intimate public, *WWHL* conveys intimacy via the gendered interests and desires that have historically animated women's culture, as well as through specifically televisual "technologies of intimacy" (Kavka, 2014) including the liveness, set, camera framing, and mode of address. In the first half of the chapter, I argue that the textual features of *WWHL* harness the feeling of intimacy and feminine emotions to draw viewers into the corporate-engineered environment. In the second half of the chapter, I update Berlant's theoretical framework to make sense of a new cultural formation that has emerged within the context of feminized convergence, an *interactive* intimate public that is structured around Bravo's docu-soap programming, what I call the "intimate digital public."

My analysis emphasizes how the intimate digital public diverges from Berlant's original conception it two key ways. First, *WWHL*'s intimate digital public invites live, digitally-mediated interactions on social media, mobile applications, and the web. In

doing so, the show insists upon a new reciprocal relationship between producers and consumers that revises the dynamics of the intimate public by not simply representing its viewers' thoughts and feelings, but by prominently including them in the broadcast. Second, *WWHL*'s intimate digital public adds an ironic, campy sensibility to the traditional melodramatic genre of women's mass culture. The performance of camp complicates the predominant mode of pleasure offered by women's culture (identifying with characters and being "swept away" by the emotional highs and lows of the narrative), by poking fun and distancing oneself from the narrative (Ang, 2011).

In Chapter Three, I explore Bravo's transmedia extensions for its most popular franchise *The Real Housewives.* Transmedia storytelling is an industry strategy used to distribute unique content across digital, broadcast, and print media with each addition telling a new part of the narrative. While most television networks employ producers and low-level employees to create transmedia stories, Bravo depends upon its' stars digital labor to ensure transmedia engagement. In the first half of the chapter, I trace how Bravo incentivizes its stars to produce "the digital money shot," defined as an emotionally climactic moment produced on social media and long-form blog posts on Bravo's website. This concept draws upon Grindstaff (2002)'s description of the televisual "money shot" that is encouraged on daytime talk shows and reality TV. I situate the performance of the digital money shot as a form of gendered emotion work whereby Bravo exploits stars' extreme emotional performance to build out its transmedia worlds. In the second half of the chapter, I explore how Bravolebrities negotiate the imperative to perform the digital money shot by leveraging their emotional labor to promote their

reality TV persona. I argue that Bravo stars purposefully channel their affective reactions on-screen and online to craft a recognizable brand identity and a plethora of related commodities. Throughout this dissertation, I highlight how gender assumptions make up a key, but often overlooked dimension of convergence culture.

Chapter 1

Meet the Affluencers: Constructing the Tech-Savvy Female Audience

In 2007, the Bravo cable network launched its "Meet the Affluencers" marketing campaign to rebrand the Bravo audience and increase its appeal to advertisers. Conceived as a multi-platform strategy, the promotion spanned print advertisements, magazine cover wraps, a one-off *Affluencer* magazine, and even an interactive "road show" where advertisers could interface with stylish actors portraying Bravo Affluencers (Advertising Research Foundation, 2009). The print advertisements present two quintessential Bravo viewers as a pair of white Barbie and Ken-like dolls behind clear plastic in a large purple box. The female doll is young, white, and attractive, dressed in trendy clothing and hauling a bounty of shopping bags. In the ad, her technological devices are prominently featured—cell phone in hand, mp3 player in pocket, and computer visible in her bag—showing that she is an "early adopter" of new technologies. On the box, the Affluencers are described as "influential" and "the most upscale viewers in cable," who now come with "85% extra disposable income" (as cited in Walker, 2007). At the bottom of the ad, Bravo confirms that its Affluencer audience is made up of "TV's most affluent + most influential + most engaged viewers" (as cited in Walker, 2007). By claiming Affluencers as the "most" affluent, influential, and engaged viewers in TV, Bravo positions it audience as a distinct consumer group with a clear value to advertisers.

The imagery of Bravo viewers as pre-packaged dolls implies that Affluencers are commodities that can be bought and sold. This view is supported by NBC President Jeff

Zucker who claims that Bravo is "selling young women and affluent women in a way that virtually no one else can" (as cited in Becker, 2007). The "Meet the Affluencers" campaign marks the beginning of Bravo's larger institutional efforts to convince advertisers they can deliver a previously untapped audience demographic—women who are not only upscale and trendy, but also tech-savvy.

The focus on the technological expertise of the upscale female audience demographic is new and notable for two key reasons. First, accentuating women's expertise in new media helps to recuperate the value of the historically denigrated mass female audience (Huyssen, 1986). The television industry has long been guided by the assumption that women viewers are less desirable than men because they are more passive and have less control over domestic finances (Meehan, 2012, p. 187). By positing its female audience as tech-savvy, Bravo implies that its viewers are active and educated. In the era of media convergence, digital media use is highly valued because online activity is viewed as an index of audience engagement. The hope is that viewers who are engaged on their laptops or smartphones, browsing ancillary web content, or talking to other fans on social media will become loyal to the network in the increasingly fragmented cable TV environment. Second, the invention of the tech-savvy female audience challenges the dominant prescription that new media is primarily the domain of white, middle-class men (Parks, 2004). Because women have historically been situated outside of the realm of technology (Dempsey, 2009), Bravo's tech-savvy female audience signals a significant shift in the conceptualization of the female audience in the era of media convergence.

Bravo's "Affluencer" campaign purposefully brings together the marketable qualities of the upscale female audience (presumed to be easily swayed, loyal consumers with a penchant for shopping) and the highly valued qualities of the tech-savvy audience (assumed to be highly educated and actively engaged) to convince advertisers it has cornered the market on a new and extremely valuable consumer demographic. Tracing the discursive construction of the Affluencers across trade industry journals, business-to-business advertisements, newspaper profiles, and audience research studies, I show how Bravo uses the promise of new media interactivity to construct and sell its female commodity audience. In addition, Bravo produces the tech-savvy female audience by encouraging viewers' to participate on its interactive TV programs, website, and social media pages. I argue that Bravo foments new media participation through the melodramatic conventions of the soap opera—hailing viewers through their desire to intervene in moral dilemmas, to take sides in relationship disputes, and to display their expertise in the feminized areas of fashion and beauty. By inciting digital participation through the conventions of the soap opera, Bravo activates a feminized form of interactivity that makes visible its audiences new media skills and emotional investments in the network.

By drawing attention to the ways women's digital participation is guided by stereotypes about women's emotionality, affective investments, and consumption habits, my research underscores the gendered assumptions that undergird the rapidly converging TV industry. In the process, I intervene in media studies debates about convergence culture that, on one hand celebrate the democratic potential of convergence culture

(Jenkins, 2006) and on the other raise concerns about corporate surveillance and viewer exploitation within interactive environments (Andrejevic, 2007). As I noted in the Introduction, the integration of digital technologies into the television mediascape has, on one hand, provided viewers with increasing opportunities to influence mass-produced media, and on the other, given media corporations new channels to monitor consumer activity. On both sides of this debate, scholars have primarily focused on the experiences of "early adopters"—users that are young, white, college-educated, men—and developed seemingly generalizable theories about the effects of media convergence. But, new digital technologies and platforms cannot be separated from the social, economic, and institutional conditions from which they emerge. By examining how Bravo defines and addresses a niche demographic of upscale, tech-savvy women, I show how gender stereotypes are reproduced and intensified within convergent media platforms.

Constructing the Female Audience

In 2004, under the leadership of Bravo President Lauren Zalaznick, Bravo began explicitly targeting female viewers with its stylized reality programming that depicted upscale pursuits such as fashion and home design, travel, beauty and high-class consumption (Hampp, 2007). Bravo's flagship reality franchise *The Real Housewives*, for instance, chronicles the lives of wealthy women living in exclusive communities across the United States including Beverly Hills, Atlanta, and New York. Each series revolves around interpersonal relationships and gossip against the backdrop of designer shopping sprees, extravagant parties, and excessive beauty regimens. Through its glossy reality TV programming, Bravo attempts to attract a particular type of viewer. On one hand the

melodramatic structure of feeling provides enjoyment for female viewers who have historically become "swept up" in the exaggerated emotional highs and lows of women's relationships (Ang, 2011). On the other, the excess of emotions and over-the-top consumption is presented with the "Bravo wink" that provides savvy viewers with the pleasure of being let "in on the joke" of reality television (Dominus, 2008). The pleasures of Bravo programming are designed to attract a niche demographic of upscale women ages 18-49 with "higher education degrees, plush salaries (median income: $75,000) and trend-spotter sensibilities" (Crupi, 2007). Genuine enjoyment is established through the affective pleasures of melodrama, a genre that has historically appealed to women (Blumenthal, 1997). Savvy enjoyment of the "Bravo wink" provides an intellectual distance from the melodramatic imagination, which is a form of cultural capital meant to appeal to trendy and educated viewers. And, high-end consumption is designed to attract those who are affluent and upscale by depicting designer fashion and extravagant homes as a way of "flattering the viewers' sense of their own good taste" (Dominus, 2008).

In order to market this premium demographic to advertisers, Zalaznick came up with the term Affluencers. Combining the qualities of affluent and influential, the Affluencer audience was designed to imply that Bravo's female viewers had disposable income and proclivity for consumption, making them "a demographic that advertisers are desperate to try and reach," Dominus (2008) avers. Under the Affluencer heading, Bravo developed more specific viewer archetypes including the "P.T.A. Trendsetter," defined as "the young mom who lives in a suburb like Winnetka, Ill., but who still wants to eat at the new hot restaurant in the city and shows up at preschool pickup with a Marc Jacobs

bag," and the "Will and Graces," described as "urban gay men and single female professionals" who are "savvy, plugged in, on top of it" (Dominus, 2008). According to Bravo, what sets Affluencers apart from other female audiences is their "tech-friendly" status, marking them as early adopters of new technology who are actively engaged and quick to pick up on the most recent trends. As I will show, Bravo's emphasis on the Affluencers' technological expertise is a significant departure from past network strategies for defining the female audience and addressing them as consumers.

In this section, I trace the historic development of the female audience commodity in the television industry, beginning with early network conceptualizations of women viewers in 1950s, through the development of cable networks that specifically target niche female demographics in the 1990s and 2000s. This history underscores the significance of Bravo's intervention in the female-targeted cable TV environment; instead of relying solely on stereotypical conceptions of the female audience, Bravo promoted a niche, tech-savvy female demographic that problematized the long-standing assumption of middle-class white men at the helm of new media technology (Parks, 2004, p. 141). Drawing upon the critical lens of political economy, I argue that Bravo's construction of the tech-savvy female audience was a deliberate strategy to carve out a new niche demographic of consumers that have clear economic value for advertisers.

Historicizing the Female Audience Commodity

Political economic approaches attend the ways in which mass media is produced in relation to capitalist agendas. This framework offers a useful point of departure for understanding how the female audience has historically been defined because it centers

the economic relationship between television networks and advertisers as the industry's driving force. Networks develop programming to attract a particular type of audience with a generalizable set of qualities and then advertisers market products and services to that audience segment based on the generalizable qualities (Lotz, 2006, p. 38) In this context, the attentive capacity of audiences is the chief commodity traded between the television network and advertising companies.

Smythe's (1981) initial conceptualization of the "audience commodity" suggests that the media industry requires the construction of a fictional audience to be bought and sold. The illusory construction of a discrete audience is what John Hartley (1987) refers to an "invisible fiction." The invisible "audience commodity," Meehan (2008) avers, is the "main product produced by media to earn primary revenues from advertisers." Thus, the task of television networks is to construct an audience commodity that advertisers believe will buy their products. Historically, the most desirable consumers have been those who (appear to) have a disposable income, high levels of consumption, and brand loyalty (Meehan, 2012). Since the audience commodity is the primary means of revenue for media companies, it is essential that networks construct a clear demographic of consumers that have apparent value for advertisers.

Historically, networks have struggled to produce definitive data about their actual viewers because their lifestyle, interests, and habits were not visible to media companies. As Ien Ang (1991) explains, television viewing generally occurs in geographically dispersed private homes that are inaccessible to media institutions (p. 3). In order to "know" its audiences (in a way that it can be translated for advertisers), networks need to

construct a discernable figure, a marketable version of its ideal viewer. To do so, Ang (1991) explains, media industry discourses create a fictional audience made up of "well circumscribed discursive figures" that could be easily sold to advertisers (p. 3). But as Ang makes clear, the imaginary audience commodity has nothing to do with the complex and heterogeneous viewing habits of real people. Instead, she argues, the television audience "only exists as an imaginary entity, an abstraction constructed from the vantage point of the institutions, in the interests of the institutions" (Ang, 1991, p. 2). Actual viewers remain obscured and unknown while the fictional audience is constructed through industry discourses.

The value of the female audience commodity has been constructed through women's stereotypical role as housewives. Since the early days of television, white middle-class women have been positioned as a valuable demographic based on their assumed role as the principal household consumer (buying cleaning and beauty products for themselves, clothing and gadgets for their husbands, and toys for their children). As Meehan (2012) explains, "in the patriarchal division of domestic labor, women's work included shopping for the household's general needs, for her own needs, and for the man's needs" (p. 187). However, women remained a niche demographic that were viewed as less important than white-middle class men. "Prime time" programming was designed for wage earning white men age 18-49, the most highly prized audience, and women's place in the network schedule was entrenched during the daytime (Meehan, 2012, p. 186). Throughout the 1950s and '60s this gendered logic prevailed and defined the female audience commodity through the figure of the housewife. Programming for

women aired during the day to entertain women engaged in the mundane duties of domestic labor with the melodramatic and episodic structure of the soap opera (Mattelart, 1997). Daytime programming for women was designed to achieve two key purposes: to instill viewing habits into women's domestic routines and to advertise domestic products typically purchased by women (Thumim, 2004). Through stereotypical "women's" programming, networks solidified the figure of the housewife as the "normal" daytime viewer, creating a fictional female audience commodity with a "natural" interest in domestic products.

In the 1970s, the television industry began to target a new niche demographic of working women. Due in part to the gains of second wave of feminism, and the entrance of an increased number of college-educated women into the workforce, a new female audience demographic emerged: "working women." At this time, the terms "upscale" and "downscale" were conceived to denote audiences' social status and income (Meehan, 2012, p. 186). The new audience made up of "working women" was deemed "upscale" because of their ostensible disposable income, thus, became more highly valued than the traditional housewife demographic. Beginning in the 1970s, programs featuring working women were featured on networks' primetime schedule including *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-79), *Maude* (1972-1978), and *Alice* (1976-1985). Throughout the 1980s and 90s, this trend continued with shows like *Cagney and Lacy* (1981-1988), *LA Law* (1986-1994), and *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002). Even with this shift in women's social and economic status, the majority of women-targeted programming remained firmly entrenched in the daytime schedule.

Audience Measurement and the Turn to Engagement

Currently, one of the most significant challenges facing the television industry is that new media technologies—like computers, smart phones, and tablets as well as DVR, illegal downloading, and digital sharing— allow viewers to dictate when, where, and how they will watch television. In the fourth quarter of 2014, for instance, Nielsen (2015b) reported that while 285 million viewers watched traditional TV, more than 181 million watched on time-shifted schedules, 122 million watched on a smartphone, 146 million watched on the Internet and 164 million people used an online web application. Under this new media paradigm it is increasingly difficult to predict and monitor how many people are tuning in to specific programs. Viewers who watch television online or on time-shifted schedules fall outside the purview of established in-home measurement systems like the Nielsen box that registers when and what is being watched (Lotz, 2007, p. 196). In response to changing television viewing habits—made possible by digital technologies—the media industry has altered the parameters of ratings systems in order to derive value from viewers' engagement with digital media platforms. In this section, I explore how ratings systems have adapted to provide more accurate and detailed information about audiences' viewing habits across media platforms.

The practice of audience measurement is one of the most important aspects of the television industry because it is used to determine the rate of advertising, which is the primary model of funding for cable networks. The purpose of audience measurement, then, is to establish how many "audience members who fit into particular markets, defined by age and gender demographics desirable to advertisers" are watching a

particular program (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 114). While ratings are the primary method for assessing audience value, it is important to acknowledge that they do not produce objective measurements. Rather, as Meehan (2012) explains, ratings systems are subjective and emerge out of "corporate rivalries, alliances, and manipulations" (p. 185). In this way, ratings do not reflect the actual people who watch television but rather function to construct the fictional audience commodity.

Prior to the integration of television and new media, networks accounted for audiences through the "appointment-based model" where television schedules were designed to attract loyal viewers who would organize their lives around their favorite programs or just go with the "flow" and stay tuned into a particular network (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 116). With only one way to watch and one time to view television programs, audience demographics were fairly simple to measure. Under this model, measurement companies created a "ratings book" that detailed the number and demographic information of viewers that would determine the price networks could charge advertisers to run commercials and other promotional campaigns (Meehan, 2012, p. 184). To ensure sponsors' messages were reaching their target market, advertising agencies called for increasingly sophisticated audience data throughout the network and post-network era (Lotz, 2007). Advances in audience measurement focused on aggregating demographic data (including gender, age, income) and psychographic data (including values, interests, lifestyle) that correlated with consumption practices. By elaborating the habits and characteristics of viewers, networks hoped to increase the value of their audience. As new television technologies challenge the efficacy of traditional ratings systems, networks and

measurement companies are coming up with new strategies to revise the conventional methods for enumerating and evaluating audiences.

As a result, the television industry has shifted emphasis away from measuring the sheer number of viewers to rubrics that evaluate levels of audience engagement. Engagement is an industry term used to describe the "commitment with which viewers watch television" (Carter, 2008). Rather than simply providing raw numbers of viewers, networks are attempting to measure viewing hours, return rates, and fan activity. This new focus reconsiders long-standing assumptions about television viewing as a passive experience of mindless consumption by calling attention to the ways that viewers are actively engaging with television content. Jenkins et al. (2013) refers to this new appraisal system as an "engagement-based model" that views audiences as "a collective of active agents whose labor may generate alternative forms of market value" (p. 116). Unlike the "appointment based model" of television viewing, the engagement model tries to capture how and when viewers interact with television content. For instance, Nielsen (2015a) now incorporates social media research as a part of their television measurement services. In a press release from March 2015, Nielsen presents research that suggests that live Twitter conversations indicate higher levels of consumer engagement with television programming. To further link social media activity to the desirable qualities of the audience commodity (disposable income, influence, brand loyalty), Nielsen conducted neurological studies on viewers' brain activity, measuring how emotion, memory, and attention are tied to Twitter TV activity (Nielsen, 2015a). The results show that live social media engagement is positively correlated with sales outcomes in advertisement

testing. In sum, the report makes the case that advertisements "perform better on memorability in TV programs with high program engagement" (Nielsen, 2015a). These reports reveal that audiences' active engagement is viewed as an indicator of productive consumption, not just motivating individual purchases but promoting brand recall and brand loyalty.

The turn to engagement in television has prompted two interrelated shifts: in the media industry, measurement companies are inventing new methods to quantify and analyze levels of audience engagement, and at the same time, networks are developing new types of multi-platform programming that engage viewers beyond the television screen into online and digital spaces. While engagement has become a defining characteristic of television in the post-network era, it has become increasingly important for all networks to foster viewer interactivity on television and web-based platforms to meet the standard of audience engagement that currently drives advertising prices. Because the television ratings and programming economy rely upon gender stereotypes to accrue value from female markets, the industry situates women as easily-swayed domestic consumers and impulsive shoppers. This gendered logic continues to position women as passive, emotionally-driven consumers and men as active, fact-driven consumers (Albiniak, 2011). The gender binary presents a problem for female-centered television networks because it situates women outside the active sphere of new media engagement. This problem plays out on two interrelated levels: First, new media users regularly engage in "second screen" viewing, where they are active on computers, tablets, and phones, while watching TV. The practice of "second screen" viewing is attractive to

advertisers because it creates twice as many opportunities to reach consumers with commercials. Second, interactive viewers are constructed by the media industry as being more educated and engaged than regular viewers, meaning they are more likely to recall advertisements and to develop brand loyalty. For these reasons, tech savvy audiences have become an increasingly important marketing segment for television networks.

While tech savvy audiences are gaining cultural currency and, at the same time, dominant cultural discourses position computer technologies as masculine, TV networks that target women are faced with the issue of how to recuperate the value to their female audience. In order to remain profitable, female-targeted networks like Bravo aim to appeal to female audiences while also bringing them into its' interactive multi-media brand environment. As I will show, Bravo's Affluencer campaign emerges in response to the television industry's turn to engagement, using feminized content to draw women into interactivity. In particular, Bravo's desire to combine the valuable qualities of the female audience with the interactive audience leads them to hail female viewers as new media users in the twenty-first century digital media landscape. In the following section, I track Bravo's brand strategies from 2003 to the present to highlight the channel's efforts to court advertisers by creating a salable female audience commodity.

Branding the Affluent Female Audience

Bravo was initially conceived as an upscale cable network focused on performing arts and film. Launched by the media company Cablevision in 1980, Bravo featured ad-free cultural programming like classical concerts, opera, ballet, plays, and foreign and independent films. For the next twenty years, Bravo retained its focus on the arts and

began producing original programming such as *Inside the Actors Studio.* During this time, Bravo persisted as a highbrow niche network despite relatively low ratings. In 2002, NBC purchased Bravo with the intent to maintain the "upmarket artsy schedule" while also "cross-pollinating TV shows" between NBC and Bravo (Amdur, 2002). The next year, Bravo produced its first reality show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy,* a breakout show about five gay men who makeover the life of a straight man. Since then NBC has spent millions promoting Bravo's programming, even airing episodes of *Queer Eye* on NBC after the Superbowl in 2003 (Ellin, 2004).

From its outset, *Queer Eye* was a great success for Bravo and ultimately transformed the network from a cultural arts network to a lifestyle reality TV brand. When the show premiered in 2003, it initially gained attention for its premise of taking style and beauty advice from five gay men, deemed the "fab five." At the time, *Queer Eye* episodes reached 3.3 million viewers, a high number for a niche cable channel (Stransky, 2015). The immense popularity of *Queer Eye* marked an important moment in Bravo's institutional history; due to the show's influence, NBC doubled Bravo's original programming and turned its attention to character-driven reality shows. Under the leadership of President Jeff Gaspin, Bravo shifted its focus to pop culture entertainment and stylized reality television to target a niche demographic of urban, trendy viewers. In Gaspin's own words, *Queer Eye* helped to situate Bravo as a "'hip and cool network for a young, hip crowd" (as cited in Ellin, 2004). Building on the success of *Queer Eye*, Bravo aimed to further solidify its burgeoning brand of trendy pop culture reality fare. Bravo's head of programming, Frances Berwick explains, "'Queer Eye' became the basis around

which we organized, developed and marketed the network" (as cited in Hendrickson, 2013). According to Berwick, the five areas of expertise represented by each of the gay men in *Queer Eye*— fashion, grooming, home design, food and entertaining and pop culture—"became our passion points and the affinity groups we still program to" (as cited in Hendrickson, 2013).

Bravo's experimentation with gay-themed programming in 2003 (first with *Queer Eye* and later with the reality dating series *Boy Meets Boy*) was designed to appeal mainly to heterosexual female consumers, particularly trendy, upscale women. Helmed by men, *Queer Eye* seems to subvert the makeover show format; however its focus— teaching men to invest in the traditionally feminine preoccupations of "their appearance, their emotional experience, and their relationships" (Sender, 2012)—indicates that the show was largely pitched to female audiences. By updating the makeover genre to feature gay men, Katherine Sender (2007) explains, the show effectively reached gay audiences who wanted to see people like themselves on TV and straight female audiences that were "attracted to the hip cachet of gay taste" (p. 305). While both of these audience groups are associated with disposable income and cultural capital (ideal markers of consumer value), only the trendy female audience is perceived as large enough to sell advertisers. Thus, rather than "dualcasting" to both gay men and straight women (Sender, 2007), I argue that Bravo's programming was designed explicitly to reach upscale, trendy women. When *Queer Eye* debuted, Bravo President Jeff Gaspin made it clear that gay-themed programming was not designed for gay audiences but rather women aged 18-49 because, "we don't sell a gay audience to advertisers" (as cited in Sender, 2007, p. 307). Gaspin's

claim that it is difficult, if not impossible, to sell a gay audience to advertisers, illustrates the industry imperative to design programming that will deliver a particular audience to advertisers. While gay-themed programming certainly attracted diverse audiences, Bravo's use of gay reality stars—especially gay men situated as the stereotypical "gay best friend"—was a targeted strategy used to attract female audiences and develop the network as a place for trendy straight women.

As Bravo continued to develop programming under its new female and gay-friendly brand identity, they experienced a stable uptick in ratings and ad revenue. However, a research study in 2007 revealed that media buyers were unclear about the Bravo audience profile and why "it was of premium value to them" (Advertising Research Foundation, 2009). As brand strategist Robert Sawyer notes, "They're all over the map… They don't have a position. Are they a reality network? An arts channel?" (as cited in Ellin, 2004). While advertisers recognized that Bravo remained focused on upscale viewers in the programming shift from performing arts and film to trendy reality fare, the specific attributes of these "high end" viewers remained ambiguous. To remedy this uncertainty, Bravo commissioned research studies that would capture the key characteristics of their target market and convey why this particular demographic had value. The initial study employed ethnographic and focus group studies, called "comprehensive segmentation analyses," to establish psychographic profiles of established and potential viewers (Advertising Research Foundation, 2009). Psychographic profiles are made up of detailed social and behavioral data about consumers including personality features, values, interests and lifestyle.

The emergence of psychographic profiling in the media industry indicates changing norms to determine the ratings-content-advertiser market. As Meehan (2012) argues, the market for commodity ratings and audiences is determined by the link between demand and price–in essence, larger audiences demanded higher prices from networks (p. 184). This institutional norm suggests that advertisers and networks have competing interests, and that ratings monopolists have leveraged these competing interests to pit corporations against media industries. In attempts to drive up the price of advertising, networks have repeatedly tried to restructure the ratings market by changing how audiences are measured. For example, in the 1960s, NBC and ABC worked together to persuade advertisers to demand new metrics that accounted for viewers aged 18-34—who were assumed to be better consumers—instead of total viewers (Meehan, 2012, p. 184-185). The current advertiser demand for more detailed psychographic data can is a similar effort to alter the audience measurement calculus that previously focused exclusively on demographic data. Because behavioral and attitudinal data is compiled by independent research companies instead of ratings monopolists, increasing emphasis on psychographic profiles gives networks more leeway in their construction of a fictional audience commodity. Since private research agencies' methods are proprietary, the veracity of the data is ambiguous at best. Still, networks use this information to craft psychographic profiles that advertising agencies rely upon to determine the value of the audience commodity. As we will see, Bravo employs ratings data, market measurement, and proprietary research studies as core tactics in creating a female, tech savvy audience commodity.

The shift from demographic to psychographic research played a crucial role in Bravo's efforts to discursively construct its audience as upscale, trendy and tech-savvy. As *Advertising Age* notes, Bravo President Lauren Zalaznick's goal was to "change the way advertisers and agencies buy media, shifting the mid-set from a demographic sell to a psychographic sell" with the goal to "market to women based on their purchasing and lifestyle behavior" (as cited in Copple Smith, 2012, p. 291). With the emphasis placed on audience behaviors, media companies claim to have more detailed information about the particular characteristics of their audiences including their levels of media engagement and consumption habits. To begin constructing a distinct audience with clear lifestyle features, Bravo conducted a study in 2007 with the private firm Lieberman Research Worldwide. The study set out with two central objectives: first, it segmented the cable audience aged 18-49 using lifestyle variables including "the role TV entertainment played in their lives, their cable entertainment preferences, their attitudes about and comfort with new media technologies, their living circumstances, and their psychographic profiles" (Advertising Research Foundation, 2009). Second, Lieberman profiled the key attitudinal segments that had the most potential for growing the Bravo brand, and crafted strategies to "transform the brand so that it becomes a vital part of these consumers' lives" (Advertising Research Foundation, 2009). Put simply, the study constructed psychographic descriptors to underscore valuable audience features and set out to design programming that would attract these particular groups. To condense audience features into an easily identifiable consumer group, the study fashioned three psychographic profiles: the "Wills & Graces," made up of single, trendy women and gay

men; "PTA Trendsetters," defined as suburban women with metropolitan aspiration, and "Metro Climbers," described as predominantly gay male, urban, professionals. The key commonalities between each group are that they are all brand and trend conscious with high levels of influence in their peer group, they all are professionals with disposable income and purchasing power, and, most importantly for this chapter, they are all tech savvy and use technology to "enhance and extend their personal social experience" (Advertising Research Foundation, 2009).

Once Bravo clearly defined the demographic and psychographic qualities of the Affluencers, it launched a business-to-business marketing strategy to convey the value of Affluencers to advertisers. The central goal of Bravo's "Meet the Affluencers" campaign was to "put a face on the new Bravo audience" and to "turn the Bravo audience into a brand unto itself" in order to encourage advertisers to increase investment in the Bravo brand (Advertising Research Foundation, 2009). By the end of 2007, the relevant features of the Affluencers were solidified through extensive reports in popular and trade presses, industry studies, and promotional literature. For instance, in a 2008 *New York Times* profile of Lauren Zalaznick, the NBC Universal executive in charge of Bravo's rebranding campaign, Affluencers are described as "the most educated and upscale" audience with "high-end taste and consumption"—in sum "a demographic that advertisers are desperate to try to reach" (Dominus, 2008). Creating an identifiable brand identity is imperative to the advertisement-supported financial model of cable TV because, as Lotz (2006) explains, the brand identity associated with the network conveys "the type of person likely to 'consume' it (or the type of person the network's advertisers

would like to consume the product)" (p. 38). By establishing a clear audience commodity, network brands promise to attract a regular viewership within specific niche markets and with identifiable characteristics that can be targeted by advertisers.

In 2008, as a part of Bravo's efforts to "put a face on" its target market, Bravo took their Affluencer campaign on the road. Representative of their marketing strategy to introduce Affluencers to advertisers, Bravo developed a travelling "interactive live road show" that "brought the Bravo Affluencers to life" (Advertising Research Foundation, 2009). The presentation was executed by actors portraying Bravo Affluencers and demonstrated to agencies "what kind of consumers they are and how they could benefit their brands" (Advertising Research Foundation, 2009). In order to communicate the premium value of their audience, Bravo used actors to provide "real life" examples of Affluencers consumption habits and brand loyalty. Since then, Bravo's efforts to reinforce the unique benefits of Affluencers to advertisers have included the Affluencer website and magazine, advertisements, and promotional events.

Bravo Digital and the Tech Savvy Audience

Queer Eye and Bravo' subsequent programming designed around the five "passion points" (including shows like *Project Runway*, *The Real Housewives*, and *Top Chef* undoubtedly contributed to Bravo's growing brand of affluent, lifestyle entertainment for women. Since then, Berwick explains, Bravo has added a sixth "passion point"– digital (as cited in Hendrickson, 2013). Under the stewardship of President Lauren Zalaznick, Bravo solidified its identity as a location for tech-savvy female viewers. Before she became President of Bravo, Zalaznick worked at Bravo's

parent network NBC Universal and was touted as one of the first television executives to recognize the importance of digital media for extending brand affinities and advertising opportunities (Littleton, 2013). By 2006, NBC Universal had instituted a 360-degree strategy that required all networks to extend programming into the digital realm to give viewers a more immersive media experience and to create new revenue streams from advertisers. Bravo took up this call by embedding what Zalaznick calls a "legitimate digital DNA" into each of their original programs (Lafayette, 2006). For instance, one of Bravo's earliest digital media franchises developed out of the competition show *Top Chef* with strategies as far ranging from online blog posts from the host and contestants, to a live interactive web-based after-show hosted by Bravo executive Andy Cohen. Bravo's programming and digital media strategy has proven lucrative; when Zalaznick became President in 2004, Bravo reported record earnings each year, with revenue up to $370 million by 2007 (Carter, 2008).

As previously discussed, the focus on engagement in the media industry is in part a response to the increasing difficulty of measuring audiences who are eliding traditional measurement by watching television online and on time-shifted schedules. Because of this, networks are focusing on measuring viewer interactivity to denote their implicit value to advertisers. This new industry standard relies upon the discursive construction of interactive audiences' as more engaged, more brand loyal, and more willing to spend money than other television audiences. This shift to engagement shows how mechanisms for audience measurement intersect with the interests of institutions and their mission to create an imaginary audience commodity. What is interesting about Bravo's digital media

strategy is that while it situates its target market as tech savvy consumers, it also has to work against the assumption that women are, by nature, less likely to engage with new media technologies. To address this concern while still maintaining its brand profile, Bravo created expansive interactive platforms with specific gendered appeals (discussed in depth in the following section) while affirming in trade discourses that Bravo viewers are "naturally" more engaged.

When asked about how Bravo has addressed the "problem of women in technology," Lauren Zalaznick is quick to retort:

> Women are loyal and they come back and back, and the big female-centric Web sites bear that out. If we are around 60% female on-air and have a big Web presence and huge interactive take rates, you have to believe it's not the male 40% of my viewership that is driving 80% to 90% of my alternative consumption. I think smart people, affluent and educated people in general, can afford to buy the devices to link their alternative content experience. They have faster connections, DVRs sooner, they can read and they are happy to read the blogs, and they can type and write and they take information and skew it back in the form of reader posts. This all goes along with the Bravo demo ("Q & A," 2007).

Zalaznick's response suggests that Bravo does not make great strides to reach women or to explicitly target women on new media platforms. Instead, Bravo seems to "naturally" appeal to tech-savvy female viewers. However, Zalaznick's interview indicates a key way that Bravo Affluencers are discursively constituted. Rather than taking her comments at face value, I examine the ways in which her comments shape the

construction of the Bravo audience. As Ang (1991) suggests, it is critical to contextualize "institutional discourses on the television audience so they are robbed of their naturalness" (p. ix). Following Hartley (1987) and Ang (1991), the remainder of this section analyzes Bravo's construction of its tech-savvy female audience in industry trade reports, exploring how interactivity is deployed to counteract the devalued features of femininity. In particular, this discourse emerges as a solution to the "problem of women in technology." I argue that Bravo's focus on engagement is a purposeful intervention in the dominant view that tech-savvy audiences are predominantly male.

As we will see, after Zalaznick struggles to address the "problem of women in technology" in the aforementioned interview from 2007, gender is surprisingly absent in Bravo's promotional materials. While Bravo claims to target a niche demographic of upscale, tech-savvy women, its industry discourses focus almost exclusively on the tech-savvy and trendy qualities of its audience in lieu of their feminine features, such as emotionality and their role as wives and mothers. Given that tech-savvy audiences are traditionally conceived as young, white, college-educated men (Jenkins, 2006, p. 23), the purposeful abstraction of gender in trade discourses post-2007 represents Bravo's effort to remove the devalued qualities of femininity (such as being passive and distracted) while still retaining the associations of women with feminine over-consumption.

While Bravo began integrating digital media into traditional television programming much earlier than other networks, its strategy remained somewhat ambiguous throughout 2007. In an interview with *TV Week*, Zalaznick describes Bravo's digital media strategy in very broad and somewhat confused terms. She says, "TV

remains at our core, but everyone here is imbued with the idea of delivering that content for people where they want it. From a business perspective, we were organized to capitalize on emerging marketplace trends. Our value comes from super-serving a niche of passionate consumers" (as cited in "Q & A," 2007). By 2008, however, Bravo utilized popular press coverage to solidify the brand message that it was the highest rated cable network in terms of levels of viewer engagement according to a study from the audience research firm IAG (Carter, 2008). For instance, Zalaznick is much more explicit about Bravo's digital media presence in 2008, explaining, "We know for a fact Bravo is the most engaged network — the most people who see a commercial on Bravo, of any other network, remember that ad and think more highly of a product! So think about that statistic! That statistic is true!" (as cited in Dominus, 2008). The statistic she refers to—that sixty-three percent of Bravo viewers recall advertised brands and twenty-six percent have an improved opinion of the products they see on Bravo—is added into the article without citation (Dominus, 2008). Not long after, Bravo released additional evidence that their fans were exceptionally tech-savvy. A press release from 2009 boasts that Bravo digital efforts are achieving record numbers, citing one billion website views in 2008, 2.27 million video streams, 10,000 page views garnered from live mobile chats, and a new "Make Me a Supermodel" video game and retouching tool that allows users to make their own photos "supermodel" ready ("Bravo's Mobile Initiatives," 2009).

Throughout 2008 and 2009, Bravo's digital media presence was primarily focused on interactivity through SMS messaging and the BravoTV.com website, but by 2010, Bravo began experimenting with its own digital media applications. Most notably, Bravo

piloted an interactive web-based feature called the Talk Bubble for viewers to talk with each other, and sometimes Bravo celebrities and producers, about Bravo content. In an article published by *Bloomberg Business*, Felix Gillette (2010) notes that Bravo was the first to monetize "two-screen" or "companion" viewing practices (viewers who are active online while watching TV) and explains how these viewers add value to the Bravo brand. In particular, he argues that dual-screen viewers give networks the chance to "sell their attention to advertisers twice—once on TV and again online." Even more important, two-screen viewers are more likely to watch programming live because it allows them to interact with other fans in real time (Gillette, 2010). Despite the relatively low numbers of viewers actually using Talk Bubble (only 13,000), Gillette maintains that the interactive platform was a success because digital media users are so highly coveted by advertisers. Gillette's assumptions are supported by an unnamed Bravo spokesperson who reported the Talk Bubble led to a fifty-three percent increase in digital revenue (as cited in Gillette, 2010). Interactive features like the Talk Bubble allow Bravo to contain live interactions on the brand website, making it easier to measure and monitor viewer activity. Localizing fan talk on one platform is advantageous for networks because it makes it easier to synthesize audience data into digestible demographic or psychographic information (Bermejo, 2009, p. 143). However, according to Gillette (2010) fans want to "one place to go to while they watch TV," like Twitter or Facebook, rather than a series of discrete network platforms. Ultimately, viewer desire for a centralized social media platform led to the demise of the Talk Bubble in 2012.

Bravo's next digital media platform, Play Live, was launched in 2012 as a companion technology to sustain viewer engagement during live and pre-taped programming. Bravo marketed the application to fans as a way to "play along" during episodes of Bravo shows and to allow viewers "to predict what will happen next or voice [their] opinion on the show's events" ("Play Live FAQ," n.d.). The single URL, web-based platform delivers content, questions, and polls that correspond with Bravo's real time television content. On air, the results of fan participation are broadcast live to reflect how audiences are reacting to the content of the show. Even though Bravo executives report that fans' "critiques of content go unnoticed" in (Kreisinger, 2012), its promotional materials promise that viewers' opinions have material effects on Bravo content. For example, the Play Live FAQ page on BravoTV.com points out that "for the first time ever, fans will get to select a scene they want to see air in the *Real Housewives of Atlanta Reunion*" ("Play Live FAQ," n.d.).

While viewer interaction appears to empower fans, a look at trade press coverage of the Play Live application reveals that Bravo's primary motive is to sell advertising time. In a 2012 press release Bravo announced the launch of Play Live, a "first of its kind" live on-screen experience that allows fans to interact with real-time Bravo content. While the press release claims that interactivity caters to Bravo's "passionate and engaged viewers," the release goes on to explain that "advertisers will be able to use Play Live's technology to create live interactive ads using anything from questions with poll-like functionality to providing access to e-coupon deals, across several of Bravo's high-traffic shows" (Bibel, 2012). To attract sponsors, Bravo markets the Play Live platform

as a customizable experience for advertisers that spans multiple devices like mobile phones, tablets, and televisions and opens up possibilities for live interactive advertising. A research study by the non-profit trade association Mobile Marketing Association (MMA) found that viewers who used Play Live while watching Bravo were more likely to tune in live and to watch for longer periods of time ("Bravo's Play Live Experience," 2013). Real-time viewership ensures that viewers are not using ad-zapping technologies like DVR to skip over commercial breaks. Further, the MMA study avers that viewers were nearly twice as likely to recall an advertisement during a Play Live episode than a standard thirty-second commercial. Even more appealing to advertisers is the reported twenty-four percent increase in advertising favorability among Play Live users ("Bravo's Play Live Experience," 2013). Bravo promotional materials explain the hip cachet of the Bravo brand will extend to advertiser brands by advertising on the channel.

While MMA demonstrates a significant advantage for advertising with Bravo, the firm does not explicate their research methods or findings so it is impossible to deduce further information about research questions, sample size, or audience demographics. Nevertheless, the industry logic is clear—opportunities for audience participation lead viewers to pay closer attention to programming, a level of engagement that is transferable to commercial content. Jay Donovan (2013), the manager of Digital Strategy for Alliance Data explains, "the hope is that once habits are in place for interacting with TV shows this way, extending interaction points to commercials will increase engagement there too…Bravo hopes that strategies like this could actually keep people from DVRing shows as actively because of the promise of interaction." In line with Bravo's previous

strategies, Play Live functions to reiterate Bravo audiences' high levels of digital engagement to denote their brand loyalty, purchasing power, and influence amongst peers.

Passion by Bravo

The post-2007 construction of Bravo Affluencers deemphasizes the gendered qualities of its primary viewers in favor of celebrating their tech savvy capabilities. However, it is crucial that the network retains the value of the stereotypical female audience as devoted domestic consumers motivated by their emotions. Bravo references its predominantly female audiences' emotionality through the coded language of "passion." Bravo's use of the term "passion" and "passionate" in its business-to-business marketing materials indicates that the stereotype of women as overly emotional, devoted consumers remains a key way that female audiences are valued by networks and advertisers. In Bravo's promotional materials after 2007 they replace the explicit use of "female" viewers with the coded language of "passionate" viewers. By adopting the term "passion" as a key descriptor of its Affluencers, Bravo designates its viewers as emotionally invested in convergent television and further yokes emotional investment to brand advancement and brand loyalty.

The traditional masculine/feminine, reason/emotion hierarchy is central to the ways the male audiences has been valued over the female audience. As Meehan (2012) explains, "The overvaluing of a male audience reflects the sexism of patriarchy" that position men as both the primary wage earners and household decision makers (p. 188). Nancy Duboc, President of A&E and Lifetime networks, explains how gendered logic

drives her programming; she says, “Men like the facts, women like high drama,” and “women watch for an emotional release, while men watch to get smarter” (as cited in Albiniak, 2011). This logic is an extension of the reason/emotion binary that aligns reason with masculinity and emotion with femininity. In the Western philosophical tradition, reason has historically been associated with maleness (Lloyd, 1993). Since rational thought has been central to democratic politics, and emotions are the opposite reason, it follows that emotions are gendered female and viewed as antithetical to rational critique. As Allison Jagger (2008) explains, reason has been linked to “the mental, the cultural, the universal, the public and the male,” whereas emotion has been coupled with “the irrational, the physical, the natural, the particular, the private and, of course, the female” (p. 378).

Rationality is defined as objective and universal, in contrast with emotion, relegated to the realm of irrational urges (Jagger, 2008, p. 379). Jagger (2008) finds that “the common way of referring to the emotions as the ‘passions’ emphasized that emotions happened to or were imposed upon an individual, something she suffered rather than something she did” (p. 379). The emphasis on emotions as irrational impositions suggests that women are not in control of their own actions. This logic can be traced back to the etymology of the word “passion” which shares the same root as the word “passive,” and translates in Latin to “suffering” (*passio)* (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 2). Sarah Ahmed (2004b) asserts that emotional passivity is a state of being acted upon, of being shaped by others, and of having one’s judgments affected (p. 2-3). Other affect theory scholars echo this characterization of passion as a passive emotional state. For instance,

Brennan (2004) investigates how early modern understandings of passion position it as a "passifying force" in contrast to direct action (p. 101) and Massumi defines passion as "an ability to affect and a susceptibility to be affected" (p. 61). It is this definition of "passion"—as a form of passive emotionality that opens viewers up to up to be impacted by outside influences and to influence others—that is central to Bravo's characterization of its female viewers as easily swayed by advertisements. Further, because emotions are associated with women, who, as Ahmed (2004b) notes "are represented as 'closer' to nature, ruled by appetite, and less able to transcend the body through thought, will and judgment," Bravo's construction of "passionate" consumers works to code them as feminine (p. 4).

The significance of the term "passion" in Bravo's industry discourse is most clearly evidenced in an online presentation called "Passion by Bravo," published in 2013 on Bravo's national ad sales website Affluencers.com. The psychographic audience data presented in the stylized, brightly colored promotional campaign comes from key insights developed from a "Passion Custom Study" of 2,200 people conducted by the research firm Insight Strategy Group (ISG). The purpose of the study was to quantify consumer passion to reiterate the value of passion for advertisers and to elaborate how passion can be cultivated in specific audiences (Bibel, 2014a). The term "passion" functions on several levels in the study; on one hand "passion" refers to audience engagement in the content and multi-screen platforms produced by Bravo, and on the other "passion" refers to the type of deep emotional connections viewers have with the Bravo brand. The report explains that the Bravo brand "touches every part of one's essence" including the heart,

(viewers feel "extremely loyal" to the network), the mind (viewers engage in "multiscreen engagement"), and the soul (the network is "a part of who I am") ("Affluencers: Loyalty study," n.d.). Bravo programming cultivates these deep investments through emotional stories about women with "extreme personalities" whose friendships are animated by ongoing narratives of "coming together and going apart" (Dominus, 2008). The melodramatic structure of the Bravo docu-soap solicits an emotional connection from viewers through sympathy (feeling what the reality stars are feeling) and identification (applying the stars' emotional state to understand their own lives). To become passionate about Bravo programming, viewers cultivate an affinity with the characters, series, and more broadly to the Bravo brand. As the historical and gendered associations of the term "passion" make clear, Bravo's passionate viewers are passive in their reception of brand messages and are thus likely to be shaped by advertising messages.

This logic is what Jenkins (2006) refers to as "affective economics," a marketing strategy that seeks to "expand consumers' emotional, social, and intellectual investments, with the goal of shaping consumption patterns" (p. 63). This strategy is meant to establish a long-term relationship by tapping into consumers' emotional attachments to brand content. The prevailing industry logic suggests that emotional attachments to the network produce loyal and engaged viewers that are more likely to buy products advertised on the channel (Jenkins, 2006, p. 63). The practice of affective economics developed out of a perceived breakdown in viewer loyalty in the post-network television era. Due to the explosion of media options, from new television channels, to Internet streaming services,

and other forms of online entertainment, audiences have become more fragmented and harder to track. To try and remedy audience fragmentation, distraction, and ad-zapping, the television industry has turned their focus to loyal consumers who have an emotional connection with the brand and who are actively engaged with its content (Jenkins, 2006, p. 67). I situate Bravo's construction of "passionate" consumers as a gendered manifestation of affective economics.

While Bravo relies upon the construction of the "passionate" viewer as a passive feminized consumer, it also reframes the "passionate" viewer as an active agent in terms of their social influence and purchasing power. For instance, the "Passion by Bravo" presentation states that passion fuels social interactions and that Bravo is able to "turn consumer passion into action" by increasing viewers' likelihood to influence others. This phrase indicates the way that "passion" is ascribed a passive emotional state that Bravo is able to activate and manipulate into the kind of "action" desired by advertisers. Action, in this sense, is defined as purchasing brand commodities and inspiring others to consume, and is supported by claims that forty-eight percent of Bravo viewers influence others to purchase products advertised on the network through face-to-face and digital interactions as well as posting on social media ("Passion by Bravo," 2013). Most important, Bravo claims that passionate viewers who have an emotional connection to the brand are the most valuable type of consumers because they are eighty-three more likely to "try related items," seventy-seven percent more likely to "spend freely," and more than twice as likely to "pay higher prices" ("Passion by Bravo," 2013). According to the "Passion Study," passion is linked to brand loyalty, a claim that is supported by evidence that

brand messages have a higher impact in a "passionate environment." The presentation reports that over half of respondents think more highly of brand and are more likely to buy products that are advertised on Bravo ("Passion by Bravo," 2013). Given the centrality of interactivity to Bravo's marketing strategies, passion is also closely linked to digital media engagement because audiences that are active on social media provide free social marketing and create viral media content. In fact, multi screen practices are viewed as one of the key indicators of viewer passion with supporting statistics that show sixty-five percent of Bravo viewers seek out additional content online ("Passion by Bravo," 2013). As the study suggests, Bravo's passion-driven environment is sold to advertisers as a way to advance their brand. Bravo's framing of ISG's statistics and qualitative data constructs its viewers as highly engaged, extremely susceptible to advertisements, and an influencer in their social circle. To be an Affluencer, viewers must have an emotional connection to the Bravo brand that drives their engagement, loyalty, and encourages them to bolster the Bravo brand.

The features of the Affluencer— as both a passive feminine consumer and an active technologically savvy user— are co-constituted by Bravo's "passionate" viewer discourse that relies upon the familiar cultural stereotype of women as overly emotional and submissive while, at the same time, redeploying the term to encompass dynamic forms of new media interactivity. This campaign does not so much reverse the gendered logic that codifies the reason/emotion binary, but rather leverages the association of women and emotionality to feminize digital media engagement. In this way, rational critique is disassociated from the Bravo consumer, indicating that she is more likely to

"go with the flow" and purchase products advertised on the network. The idealized figure of the "passionate viewer" is coded female in her emotionality, while simultaneously imbued with the qualities of the active digital media user. Most important, this fictional audience commodity ultimately promotes the idea that women's engagement online is driven by feminine feelings and emotional investments. It is this supposition that I analyze in detail in the following section.

Gendered Interactivity and Activating Female Fans

Bravo's promotional discourses overemphasize its audiences' digital expertise to resist the common association of men with technology and to resituate women as key players in the new media environment. For instance Lisa Hsia, head of Bravo Digital Media, constantly reiterates that her new media strategy is to "follow the users." In a professional profile for Comcast, Hsia reports that at Bravo "we've learned that our fans are usually way ahead of us, so we follow a fairly simple premise in pioneering new digital frontiers — follow the users" ("Lisa Hsia," n.d.). However, in a more candid interview with *Business Innovation Factory*, Hsia addresses some of the challenges of adapting television within the constantly changing world of digital media. Specifically, she reveals that she is constantly working to develop digital strategies that will encourage her target marketing segment of "PTA trendsetters"—the "soccer moms with killer apps on their iPhones"— to interact online. Hsia explains: "I always have the faces of the users in mind when we're building things…and everything is done with their experience in mind. What do they want to do? What do they get from the interaction?" ("Dispatches from the Digital Frontier," n.d.). In what follows, I explore how Bravo has attempted to

answer these questions by hailing its female audience through explicitly gendered interactive platforms.

My main contention is that Bravo engages female spectators on its digital platforms by utilizing the themes and conventions of the soap opera format. In this way, Bravo creates feminized forms of interactivity meant to appeal to upscale female viewers. This strategy represents Bravo's deliberate attempt to target women as new media users and to provide evidence for its claims in popular and professional outlets as the network with the "most engaged viewers." Along with Bravo's efforts to construct an ideal audience, the visibility of actual Bravo viewers is a key dimension of marketing the audience commodity. As Hartley (1897) explains, networks "are obligated not only to speak *about* an audience—crucially, for them—to talk *to* one as well: they need not only to represent audiences but to enter into relations with them" (p. 127). Following this reasoning, the ways in which media institutions enter into relations with the audience represents a deliberate attempt to manipulate and control audience behavior. More exactly, Ang (1991) reveals that networks attempt to "weave actual audiences into the mechanisms of their own reproduction" (p. 3). I argue that Bravo works to constitute its audience as affluent, tech savvy women by making their participation visible on digital interfaces.

In order to build this argument, I need to first situate Bravo docu-soaps as an extension of and update on the soap opera format. The majority of Bravo programs are docu-soaps, a reality television variation of the soap opera that shares the serialized format and ongoing and unresolved emotional narratives amongst intertwined characters

(Levine, 2006). Elena Levine (2006) explains that the key difference between the reality soap and the soap opera is that docu-soaps take place in "reality" and "emphasize the ongoing existence of their worlds, their independence from a manufactured premise." Bravo's most successful docu-soap franchise is *The Real Housewives* series set in various locales across the world from New York to Beverley Hills to Melbourne. On the show, a social circle of wealthy women are depicted throwing lavish parties, going on shopping sprees, and taking international excursions. Each series employs on a similar structure—individual "plots" are constructed around the trials and tribulations of each "housewife," and the narrative arc centers the interpersonal conflicts between the cast members. As Ang (2008) explains, within the soap opera format "personal life is the core problematic of the narrative," and shifts in personal relationships animate the conflicts and triumphs of the characters (p. 238). While soap operas emphasize shifts in personal relationships through marriage, divorce, births, and deaths, and extraordinary events such as comas, kidnappings, and illness (Ang, 2008, p. 238), the real-life limitations of docu-soaps often compel producers, editors, and cast members to dramatize more mundane acts and relationships such as disagreements, alliances, and rumors in order to construct sensational narratives that elicit an emotional response from viewers. The narratives that make up Bravo's docu-series are loosely held together by the confessional accounts of the reality stars as well as careful, stylized editing.

Bravo executive Andy Cohen explains how *The Real Housewives* franchise developed as an extension of the soap opera genre in memoir *Most Talkative*. As a long-time fan of network daytime soap operas, Cohen explains that his obsession with soaps

paid off during the production of the first *The Real Housewives* season. In 2005, when he first saw the demo tape for *Behind the Gates* (the show that would later become *The Real Housewives of Orange County*) he was enamored of the idea of developing the drama and contradictions inherent in the casts' "personal lives and ritzy lifestyles" (Cohen, 2012, p. 192). However, the initial cuts did not fulfill Cohen's expectations; he explains, "the women weren't going deeply into their emotions or being honest about what was happening with their friends" (Cohen, 2012, p. 102). Cohen finds that without detailed development of personal relationships and emotional involvement, the show lacks the key features of the soap format that sustains viewer enjoyment. Recognizing the potential of a real life soap opera "marked by drama both extraordinary and ordinary," Bravo decided to hire new producers, reshoot interviews and footage of their lives, and then re-edit the series (Cohen, 2012, p. 192-193). After the first season aired, Cohen noticed that viewers who "found the women repellent somehow became invested in their stories—which proved to be more universal than anybody initially thought" (p. 195). Just like soaps, *The Real Housewives* elicits frustration and aversion from viewers while at the same time evoking identification and sympathy around traditional women's work like relationship maintenance and raising a family. Like the soap, the docu-soaps produce what Ang (2008) deems a "tragic structure of feeling," marked by emotional ups and downs, providing viewers with simultaneous feelings of empathy, disappointment, and ire. Despite the pleasures of viewing, Ang (2008) finds that soap fans are more likely to feel "frustration, desperation, and anger rather than euphoria and cheerfulness" (p. 236).

But *The Real Housewives* franchise does not simply operate on a tragic register, the narrative structure can also be understood as campy and ironic, poking fun at the rich and semi-famous while chronicling the highs and lows of female friendship. As the affective undercurrent alternates between comedy and tragedy, viewers are provided with a range of affinities and disidentifications, and plenty of fodder for Bravo's interactive platforms. In both cases, the mobilization of highly charged emotions is central to the ways that melodramatic formats are designed for female audience. TLC executive Sharon O'Sullivan explains that women-oriented networks like Bravo attract female consumers through their emotions, appealing to "their passions" (as cited in in Thielman, 2014). The assumption underlying television industry discourses is that the primary way to reach female consumers is through their emotions. Because, the docu-soap audience, like the soap opera audience, is generally assumed to be female (Brunsdon, 1997, p. 13), the melodramatic structure of the shows is designed to elicit a highly charged emotional response from viewers.

Building an emotional connection and creating passionate viewers is a central strategy to attract female audiences, and to get them to interact with Bravo content. One way that Bravo generates online viewer participation is by mobilizing melodrama's potential for increased audience engagement. As a characteristic device of melodrama, dramatic shifts between passionate ups and downs are used to heighten audiences' emotional experience. Lynne Joyrich (1988) describes this affective rhythm as one of "exaggerated fluctuations" within constantly shifting emotional experiences that build to "dramatic moments of outbreak and collision" (p. 131). In his book *Most Talkative*, Andy

Cohen explains that an ideal episode of *The Real Housewives* includes real humor, conflict, emotion, heart, and something totally unexpected—let's say, a wig pull" (p. 195). This unstable emotional experience often manifests as excitement and outrage that incite audiences to intervene.

As I have suggested, Bravo's new media strategy engages female viewers on digital platforms by using the melodramatic conventions of the soap opera genre including dramatic fluctuations in relationship, ongoing storylines, fragmented and oscillating sites of identification, and the underlying emphasis on fashion and beauty standards. This gendered digital media approach intentionally cultivates emotional investments in the series in order to motivate viewers to post, tweet, blog, and participate in online discussions. By integrating new media technologies into the feminized docu-soap format, Bravo brings women into interactive spaces and encourages them to gain competency in digital media platforms and to extend their engagement with the network. In what follows, I examine three of Bravo's gendered digital media strategies that draw upon soap conventions to target women as social media users.

Invitation to intervene

In 2014, Bravo premiered the interactive reality show *The Singles Project*, a dating docu-series that follows five young, professional New Yorkers as they look for love. Each week, the show airs just days after filming in order to give viewers the opportunity to intervene in the dating decisions made by the cast. Through live chats, Twitter comments, and online polls, fans are given the chance to comment on who the cast members date, how they should act, and even what they should wear when they go

out. The real-time format makes viewers feel like they have a sizable influence on the outcomes of the show. When Kerry, the young blonde socialite meets two eligible bachelors in episode one, she asks viewers to vote on which guy she should go out with in the next episode ("First dates," 2014). The following week, when the votes are in, audiences get to see how Kerry's date unfolds while offering additional feedback on her dating decorum. When Joey, the White, gay eyebrow shaping specialist, breaks up with his short-term boyfriend, he tweets to fans to meet him at a gay bar in New York. On the show, we see viewers rush to the bar to try and meet Joey ("Virtually in love," 2014). Even Joey's ex-boyfriend shows up to secure a final bit of screen time by confronting him about their recent breakup. As these examples show, this interactive dating series is designed to engage viewers by giving them a stake in the romantic lives of the cast. In this context, viewers become active participants in the narratives and can ostensibly change the fate of reality stars. By inviting viewers to intervene in the love lives of the cast, Bravo deploys a common soap opera strategy, encouraging viewers' attempts to influence television storylines. With soap opera broadcasts, however viewers could not meaningfully interfere, entrenching women's sense of powerlessness (Modleski, 1997). But Bravo's implementation of live, interactive platforms harnesses women's past feelings of powerlessness to implore them to interact with the cast.

Along with the reality series, Bravo has developed extensive online ancillary content for *The Singles Project*, including an online hub that features summaries and highlights of the show, behind-the-scenes features, cast profiles, "social snaps" (photographs that are uploaded by the stars), a live question and answer portal where the

cast responds to fan tweets, and the Play Live feature where viewers answer questions embedded in the live broadcast and to see the results displayed on-air in real-time. The poll questions are primarily designed for viewers to help the contestants learn how to date and ultimately, to find love. Lisa Hsia explains that this show is a "great fit" for Bravo's "extremely engaged and socially savvy audience" because "fans can impact cast members and what's happening on air in a way that hasn't been done before…the possibilities are endless" (as cited in Bibel, 2014b). Of course, the possibilities are not endless. Rather they are highly circumscribed by the network by asking limited response poll questions and selecting which fan questions and promoted on social media and incorporated into the on-screen broadcast. The poll questions call upon viewers to give broad dating advice such as "Is it wrong to dump someone by text?" while other questions leave the fate of the daters in the viewers' hands ("Poll: Help Brian, Ericka and Lee Date This Week!," n.d.). For instance, after Erika goes out on a date with the smooth-talking Francesco she expresses fears that he might be a "player" and asks viewers for advice on whether or not she should go on a second date with him (sixty-two percent voted "yes" and she did go on the second date). As these examples make clear, Bravo's new media strategies explicitly address women as social media users by inviting them to intervene in romantic reality TV storylines.

The Singles Project is significant (although its underlying structure and themes are not unique) because it operates on the assumption that stories about young men and women who are struggling to find love will activate viewers' digital media engagement. Like soap operas, the central premise of Bravo docu-soaps is the complications that

emerge as individuals forge intimate relationships. As relationships develop, there are more and more obstacles between what the characters want and what they are able to have. It is not simply that soap operas disallow happiness, but rather that, as Modleski (1997) contends, "soap operas invest exquisite pleasure in the central condition of a woman's life: waiting" (p. 36). So the personal and romantic complexities of the soap and docu-soap are not insignificant, they are at the core problematic that makes the genre compelling to women. According to Modleski (1997) the ongoing turmoil of the soap opera produces for viewers a preferred subject position as a sort of "ideal mother" (p. 39). This figure is described as "a person who possesses greater wisdom than all her children, whose sympathy is large enough to encompass the conflicting claims of her family (she identifies with them all), and who has no demands or claims of her own (she identifies with no one character exclusively" (Modleski, 1997, p. 39). Similarly, docu-soaps provide viewers with an all-knowing perspective by screening each cast members' story inter-spliced with retroactive confessionals. Privy to multiple viewpoints, spectators are hailed through their assumed expertise in matters of love and domesticity and implored to offer advice to help eliminate others' suffering. This logic is reiterated in industry discourses that describe women's viewing experiences as an "emotional investment," a process that involves deep forms of identification made possible by framing television characters as "family and friends" (Albiniak, 2011). Thus, as Modleski (1997) avers, "soaps convince women that their highest goal is to see their families united and happy, while consoling them for their inability bring about familial harmony" (p. 39). Watching Bravo stars' love lives unfold on TV fosters this kind of intimacy and encourages viewers

to see the cast as friends or family members. In this context, Bravo's incorporation of digital platforms is specifically designed to foment open communication between viewers and the cast. Not only does this strategy rely upon female spectators' desire to alleviate the suffering of others, it actively encourages them to post their opinions online.

This is reinforced by Bravo's promotional campaign for *The Singles Project* that tells viewers: "Each week you engage, influence, and impact their search…Help them find the one" ("The Singles Project," n.d.). In this way, the "reality" of docu-soaps, alongside new mechanisms for digital participation, has drastically altered the relationships between fans, talent, and networks. Prior to the digital age, soap opera viewers could only hope to alter the fates of their favorite stars by making direct appeals to the network or writing letters to fictional characters. Women's attempts to intervene in soap operas were limited to letter writing campaigns that sought to prolong romances or to bring back characters that had been killed off, in order to assert some influence on the direction of the show. But, as Modleski (1997) presumes, this intervention was "ineffectual" and "feminine powerlessness is reinforced on yet another level" (p. 39). Bravo seemingly subverts this dynamic by facilitating discussions between fans and reality stars, fulfilling viewers' desire to offer sage advice. Not surprisingly, viewers have widely taken up the call for digital participation as *The Singles Project* was rated the "sixth most social cable reality program in primetime with 4,340 tweets" (Flomenbaum, 2014).

Through its interactive series, Bravo mobilizes viewers' desire to intervene through the constant turmoil that animates docu-soap narratives. Sensational storylines

position the spectator as a sympathetic "interfering mother" (Modleski, 1997). Because this viewing position is closely aligned with the devalued, feminized soap opera format, the process of "activating" her as a new media user helps Bravo to label her has "tech savvy" and valorize her participation. At the same time, Bravo claims another set of viewers that are already "tech savvy" and find pleasure in Bravo's ironic play on soap opera conventions. Bravo executive Andy Cohen dubs this ironic sensibility the "Bravo wink," an aesthetic that hails certain viewers as being in on the joke (Rosenblum, 2010). For instance, Cohen describes how editing contributes to the "Bravo wink" when a character might say "'I'm the healthiest person in the world' and then you see them ashing their cigarette" (Turner, 2009). While Bravo's construction of the ironic, tech savvy viewer is already understood as active on social media, the staging of over-the-top conflicts on docu-soaps especially drives viewers to assert their opinions online. As TV critic Matt Seitz (2011) writes, "Bravo's unscripted series offers that horror movie gimmick of showing you unlikable people doing ill-advised things that you can't prevent no matter how loudly you yell or curse at the screen." What Seitz describes as a horror convention is also a melodramatic device, what Ang (2008) calls the "tragic structure of feeling," designed to elicit pleasure in viewers through their ability to indirectly engage with on-screen conflicts, crises, and pain.

Even for savvy, ironic viewers, docu-soaps' heightened emotions can activate viewers' desire to "yell at the screen" in an attempt to change the fate of cast. In this way, Bravo's interactive platforms are designed as an outlet for viewers' opinions with the added promise of affecting the outcomes of reality stars' lives (Weprin, 2014). As Bravo

executive Frances Berwick explains, the Bravo "audience likes to comment on our programming right now…so this (interactive platforms) is a way they can … inform how that person then behaves" (as cited in Weprin, 2014). In shows like *The Singles Project*, Bravo's interactive features programming seemingly fulfills the desire for female fans to intervene in the love lives of TV celebrities while also getting them to engage with the network's social media campaigns on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr. Because of this, interactive docu-soaps help to construct Bravo's target market of technologically savvy and highly engaged female viewers.

Imperative to take sides

In season seven of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, a new cast member, Claudia Jordan accused the recently divorced Porsha Williams of sleeping with a married man. During a group trip to Puerto Rico, Claudia shouts at Porsha: "I know for a fact the man who bought you a car is an African married man!" ("Divide and Ki-Ki," 2015). Later, at a party for Dish Nation, the radio show where both "housewives" are employed, Claudia tries to make amends with Porsha who rebuffs her efforts. When Porsha revisits the Puerto Rico feud, Claudia gets defensive and calls Porsha a hypocrite, to which she responds: "There's nothing fake about Porsha Williams!" ("The countdown begins," 2015). Claudia quips back: "Honey, everything about you is fake…from your hair to your tits to your lifestyle." This argument is not unlike the myriad interpersonal fights that play out over the course of each of *The Real Housewives* series. While relationships between women are at the heart of Bravo docu-soaps, more often than not, conflict and competition are the basis of their interactions. Long-term feuds simmer over multiple

seasons, but the most dramatic moments of the show are made up of irrational outbursts, accusations, and "catfights," like the one between Claudia and Porsha.

These fights give viewers important insights into the values and motivations of reality stars. Through individual confessionals, multi-camera production, and editing Bravo docu-soaps show multiple viewpoints and thus provides viewers with various conflicting perspectives. Similar to the soap opera, Bravo's ensemble cast docu-soap format features the ups and downs of female relationships and asks viewers to identify with the struggles of two or more women who are at odds. Instead of identifying with a central protagonist, as is the norm in class male narrative genres (Mulvey, 1975), soap operas include more complicated plots and characters that rely upon constantly shifting points of view (Modleski, 1997). As Modleski (1997) explains, "a viewer might at one moment be asked to identify with a woman finally reunited with her lover, only to have that identification broken in a moment of intensity and attention focused on the sufferings of the woman's rival" (p. 37). When considering the feud between Porsha and Claudia on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, viewers are likely to feel sympathy for both women since Porsha recently went through a spiteful public divorce and Claudia has been picked on by her co-stars since her recent appearance on the show. In this case, the spectator is denied a clear source of identification and is put in the middle of the dispute to sort out the conflicting claims of both women.

This sense of being simultaneously linked to multiple perspectives is crucial to viewers' engagement with the shows. As Christine Gehaghty (1991) argues, "it is this multiple identification with a number of characters which is a strong element in a soap's

ability to engage us so powerfully" (p. 18). While audiences are asked to weigh in on emotional dilemmas through the content and structure of the show, Bravo adds an additional component to the deliberation by encouraging viewers to express their opinions online. After the fight between Porsha and Claudia aired, the details of their relationship were discussed on Bravo's live talk show *Watch What Happens Live* (*WWHL*). On this show, viewers call in and send social media messages to the host, Bravo executive Andy Cohen, to inquire further about tensions between the cast. At-home viewers are encouraged to participate by weighing in on the dispute. On Bravo's *WWHL* Twitter page posted the message: "POLL Q: Whose side are you on? @claudiajordan or @porsha4real? Text 27286! #RHOA #WWHL" (BravoWWHL, 2015). The results of the poll are then displayed at the end of the episode, which prompts further discussion on social media. This digital media strategy extends two of the key features of the soap opera genre—shifting identifications and emotional deliberation—into the digital sphere to prompt women's social media use.

The imperative to take sides then, requires that viewers take into account the various conflicting viewpoints of Bravo stars and to come up with potential motivations based on their extensive knowledge of the celebrity's backstory. This kind of intimate knowledge depends upon audiences' long-term engagement with the Bravo brand on both television and new media platforms. For instance, a dispute between long-time best friends Bethenny Frankel and Jill Zarin grounded the narrative of season three of *The Real Housewives of New York*. In order for viewers to be invested in this fight, they needed to know how close the two friends had been in the past (by watching the previous

two seasons), but they also had to know about real-life events that were taking place off-screen. According to popular reports and gossip columns, Bethenny was the star of the ensemble cast and was rumored to be negotiating a stand-alone spin-off show. Andy Cohen (2012) explains that when the fight started he "had a terrible feeling that the crack in this beloved friendship wouldn't resonate with our audience and that it would spell the end of the show…It turned out viewers were enthralled, and that fractious third season did better than the previous two. There was something weirdly relatable—or maybe cautionary—about two good friends calling it quits, possibly forever" (p. 200). For Bravo, the relatability of moral dilemmas (supported by continually shifting points of view) worked in its favor and leads to high ratings. Since then, Bravo has fine-tuned this narrative device and now regularly features dramatic feuds between docu-soap stars. What's more, Bravo has adapted this formula to increase engagement with transmedia platforms and to foster interactivity.

Feminine Expertise

Just as Bravo programming was developed around *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy's* five areas of expertise—food, fashion, beauty, home décor, and pop culture—Bravo's social media campaigns deploy these feminine "passion points" to draw in female users. Because Bravo stars are framed as aspirational—accomplished, real life people whom viewers can aspire to be—digital initiatives give viewers the chance to live online as their favorite celebrities. On *The Real Housewives* Facebook game, for example, players create a female avatar, pick their features and clothing and then practice becoming properly "social" by engaging in conversations about fashion and Bravo

gossip. Status is acquired in the game by gaining "buzz" and "attitude" points based on actions like choosing the correct clothing for a social event, changing outfits regularly, acquiring premium home decor items, and "charming" other players (Davison, 2012).

Bravo series encourage viewers to contribute their experiences and expertise in domestic duties like cooking and home design. For instance, Bravo's reality cooking show *Top Chef* asks viewers to contribute recipes, share cooking tips with contestants, comment on the cast blog, check in on the social media site Foursquare and review *Top Chef* restaurants, and join social conversations about the competition on Play Live and Twitter. These interactive endeavors offer participants what Annette Kuhn (1997) calls a "position of mastery" (p. 153) in terms of the culturally constructed skills of femininity. By calling upon women to participate in these ways, Bravo foregrounds women's work in the home (food preparation, home decorating) and their "feminine" skills (beauty, shopping and pop culture gossip), and thus constructs its viewers as competent in the five feminine areas that makes up Bravo programming.

Bravo's assumption that programming related to food, fashion, beauty, home décor, and pop culture will be popular with women operates on long-standing associations between women's genres and feminized forms of consumption. To situate Bravo's programming within this lineage of programming for women, a brief history of the soap opera as a marketing tool for domestic products in instructive. The name "soap opera" was originally developed to describe serialized radio stories that were produced and sponsored by soap manufacturers like Proctor & Cable. Soap operas integrated sales pitches into the female-centered family drama in order to attract women listeners and sell

household products (Brown, 1994, p. 44-46). In the 1950s, the genre evolved from fifteen minute radio spots to hour-long television programs with more characters and more convoluted plots (Brown, 1994, p. 46). Daytime soap operas were generally on the air for one-hour every afternoon during the week, a timeslot that was originally structured to align with women's domestic chores and family responsibilities. Throughout the 1990s, soap operas were extremely lucrative for networks because they were inexpensive to produce and garnered high revenue from advertisements. While the conventions of the soap have adapted over time to account for changing social norms (women are now shown in high profile careers, contemporary social issues are addressed, and men openly watch soap operas), soap opera advertisers continue to target the majority of their advertising toward the stereotypical housewife (Brown, 1994, p. 46-7). As Charlotte Brundson (1997) explains "the advertising that frames, and erupts within, the programme is quite clearly addressed to the feminine consumer—beauty aids, breakfast cereals, instant 'man-appeal' meals and cleaning products: the viewer as sexual, as mother, as wife, as housewife" (p. 14). Since the 2000s, daytime soap opera ratings have sharply declined, with only four programs remaining on network television. In its wake, reality TV docu soaps claim to captured the remaining soap audience, giving advertisers a new place to address the female consumer.

Bravo's promotional campaigns, centered on its five areas of interest, indicate that women remain its primary consumers. During Bravo docu-soaps, viewers are likely to see thirty-second advertisements for women's clothing, home decoration, weight loss aids, beauty products, travel destinations, and medication for women. These spots

primarily feature women and address viewers as feminine consumers who desire to be affluent, thin, beautiful, and stylish. While thirty-second advertisements point to Bravo's gendered marketing tactics, in the post-network era cable networks also employ new advertising models that include product placement, sponsorship, and digital ads to increase ad revenue. Amanda Lotz (2007) explains that this shift to multifaceted advertising is a response to "the challenges of an increasingly fragmented and polarized audience empowered with control devices that enabled them to avoid commercial messages in a variety of ways" (p. 155). Bravo situates itself as a network at the forefront of advertising innovation with wide-ranging sponsorships and digital media innovations that increase airtime and online engagement. As Executive Vice President of NBC Universal claims, "Bravo continues to be a game-changer in the marketplace, offering advertisers unique and innovative ways to engage consumers, while seamlessly weaving our programming with advertising partners' content across all screens" (as cited in Kondolojy, 2014). Sponsorships and integrated advertising for female-friendly products are an obvious fit with Bravo's program offerings; for instance on the fashion designer competition show *The Fashion Show* is partnered with *Harpers Bazaar* magazine and Tresemme hair products that are regularly featured in the show.

Bravo has also been experimenting with "branded entertainment," an advertising strategy that merges programming content and native advertising into original programming. On *WWHL*, for instance, Andy Cohen had the actor Anderson Davis on as a "guest bartender" and asked him questions about his role as "Zesty Guy" in the recent Kraft Foods commercial campaign. While some viewers might see Zesty Guy's

appearance on *WWHL* as an extension of Bravo's campy sensibility or more specifically, Cohen's personal interest in having "hot" men on the show, this type of branded entertainment is actually a part of a sponsorship deal between Kraft and Bravo (Elliott, 2013). Promoting brands on Bravo's interactive series (where viewers are already framed as involved in being deeply involved with and likely to circulate brand content online), is compelling for advertisers because it means they can more easily reach female consumers (who are still stereotypically in charge of preparing family meals) and, specifically, female consumers who are active online. As an NBC ad sales executive explains, "Content development is exciting to a lot of brands… because they're trying to find ways to populate social media sites and do social media outreach" (Elliott, 2013). In this context, NBCU positions Bravo as the ideal location for advertisers to reach a niche demographic of affluent women who are savvy social media users.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have traced how Bravo constructed a fictional audience called Affluencers. The Affluencers have two qualities that are valuable to both advertisers and the TV industry—they are upscale female consumers and technologically savvy. These traits are valuable in convergence culture because traditional media industry logic posits female viewers as domestic "spenders" and loyal consumers, while new media logic posits tech savvy viewers (usually imagined as male) as educated, trendy, and affluent. One of the ways Bravo manufactures its fictional Affluencer audience is by discursively producing its consumers through industry trade presses, research studies, popular newspaper articles, and business-to-business promotional materials. As Bravo

constructed its niche demographic, it simultaneously needed to provide evidence that actual viewers measured up to the desired features of the Affluencers. Bravo produces its ideal audience is by inciting digital participation around its feminized docu-soap programming.

Since Affluencers are defined as the most educated, upscale, and engaged female audience, Bravo must solicit and make visible audience participation to demonstrate the feminine qualities and upscale, tech savvy features of its target market. Bravo recognizes that, crucial to its construction of a tech savvy female audience is its ability to make women's participation visible on its interactive media platforms. Bravo needed to show advertisers that their female audience was both filled with loyal consumers who were active on digital and social media platforms. In order to draw women into interactivity, Bravo structured its participation around the conventions of the soap opera, inviting viewers to intervene in melodramatic storylines, take sides in disputes, and to discuss feminine areas of interest.

By mobilizing women's digital participation through the melodramatic structure of feeling and stereotypical "women's interests," Bravo creates a model of feminized convergence that installs dominant prescriptions for gendered behavior. By doing so, Bravo encourages women to perform the conventions of femininity as they interact with convergent media in order to commodify them as a female tech-savvy audience. But in defining and producing this audience demographic, Bravo builds a lucrative network brand that has mass appeal for advertisers. I continue this line of investigation in Chapter Two where I explore how Bravo's interactive talk show *Watch What Happens Live*

harnesses women's affective investments in women's mass media to draw viewers into its corporate-engineered fan community and develop deep affinities between viewers and the network brand.

Chapter 2

The Intimate Digital Public:

Gendering Interactivity on *Watch What Happens Live*

In 2009, Bravo premiered an interactive late-night talk show called *Watch What Happens Live (WWHL)* hosted by Andy Cohen, Bravo's Executive Vice President and Head of Programming. While the show attends to certain conventions of the late-night talk show—including celebrity interviews and comedy sketches —it also significantly revises the format by focusing on the intimate lives of Bravo docu-soap stars and integrating audience participation into the broadcast. *WWHL* airs live five nights per week at 11 pm (EST), directly after an episode of pre-recorded reality TV program like *The Real Housewives*. Most often, the Bravo celebrity (or, as Cohen calls them, the "Bravolebrity") that is most embroiled in the preceding episode's drama, will appear to discuss the televised events and keep viewers tuned in to the network. During the live broadcast, viewers send in questions for the guests via social media, text message, and phone to inquire further about the unfolding melodramatic narratives. By integrating live and digitally-enabled audience participation into the talk show, *WWHL* operates as an intimate site for fans to congregate and discuss female-centered reality TV.

This chapter situates *WWHL* as an updated, interactive version of the "intimate public sphere" that has long flourished around women's media. According to Lauren Berlant (2008), mass-produced, women-centered cultural texts have historically created an imaginary intimacy among consumers who seem to share the same feminine feelings.

Consumers of women's culture were (and are) inculcated into the imagined community by identifying with the gendered interests and desires generated by the texts. By participating in the intimate public and adopting its normative feminine ideals, female consumers receive recognition and the affective benefits of belonging. In *The Female Complaint*, Berlant analyzes the social and ideological effects of the intimate public surrounding twentieth century literary and film texts marketed to women. Picking up where Berlant left off, I explore the new implications of the intimate public sphere as it is manifesting in the era of media convergence.

In the twenty-first century, the advent of digital technologies has significantly altered the intimate public sphere, eliminating the spatial and temporal boundaries that have historically separated viewers and texts. Whereas the consumption of women's media in the twentieth century could only provide the "promise of belonging" (Berlant, 2008, p. viii), the digitally-mediated intimate public forges *actual* connections between participants. *WWHL* offers a compelling case study of the new intimate public because it invites viewers to partake in live, web-based participation, and in doing so creates intimate links between female consumers, docu-soaps, and the Bravo brand. In this chapter, I update Berlant's conceptualization of the intimate public to account for this new cultural formation that has emerged within feminized convergence, what I call the "intimate digital public."

The intimate digital public diverges from Berlant's conception it two key ways: First, the intimate digital public invites digitally-mediated interactions on social media, mobile applications, and the web. The integration of digital interactivity fosters direct

forms of contact between audiences, producers, and celebrities, assimilating viewers into the intimate community (rather than producing an imagined sense of belonging). Thus, interactivity works to intensify the relationship between participants and the network brand. Whereas the intimate public exists as a site of negotiation over the shared experiences of living as a woman (Berlant, 2008, p. 4), the intimate digital public is a corporate-engineered entity that seeks to shape the norms and practices of the fan community to advance the network brand.

The second key distinction between the intimate public of women's culture and *WWHL*'s intimate digital public is the addition of an ironic, camp sensibility. By constructing over the top scenarios (poking fun at stars, playing silly games, asking outrageous questions) *WWHL* functions on a campy register, an aesthetic style of exaggerated, self-aware performance. While the intimate public is animated by women's genuine attachments to the melodramatic structure of feeling, the intimate digital public introduces an ironic viewing position that pokes fun at Bravolebrities' over-the-top performance and provides a critical distance from the melodramatic underpinnings of the show. In the intimate digital public, camp complicates the sentimental attachments that have long circulated within women's mass culture. This is not to say that camp supersedes or neutralizes melodrama, but rather that camp sits uncomfortably with the sentimental pleasures of the show. Bravo fosters this awkward relationship because it helps to produce and market both facets of its' niche audience demographic: on one hand, sentimental feelings signal that viewers are motivated by their emotions and thus easily

swayed (by advertisements), and on the other, ironic and tech-savvy sensibilities position viewers as upscale, educated, and engaged.

I begin this chapter with a discussion of Berlant's (2008) conceptualization of the intimate public and trace how *WWHL*'s broadcast program develops and harness feelings of intimacy and belonging to draw viewers into the corporate-engineered environment. Then, in the second half of the chapter, I update Berlant's theoretical framework to analyze the emergence of the intimate digital public within the context of feminized convergence. Throughout, I draw attention to two key implications of the intimate digital public: First, the intimate digital public is a corporate-engineered fan environment that utilizes women's affective investments in women's mass culture to prompt interactivity. From an industry perspective, women's active engagement serves the important purpose of (attempting to) develop deep affinities between viewers and the network brand and marketing those affinities to potential advertisers.

Second, in leveraging viewers' affective investments in women's mass media, Bravo activates a feminine form of interactivity. *WWHL* solicits digital interactions through the melodramatic form by asking viewers to weigh in on dramatic disputes, domestic concerns, and romantic woes. This call to interact hails viewers as experts of the melodramatic form, watching carefully to discern others' emotions and extending sympathy to each of the characters. The role of Bravo's feminized interactive user is similar to the "ideal mother" viewing position that Modleski (1997) identifies in soap spectatorship. The ideal mother is constantly engaged in a process of moral deliberation that hones her skills in empathizing, caring, and giving advice. This template for

interactivity not only activates women's socially-constructed feminine skills but also capitalizes on their enactment in the digital realm. I argue that Bravo seeks to harness viewers' emotional investments in the intimate public sphere to prompt unpaid emotional labor to advance the network brand.

Berlant's Theory of the Intimate Public of Femininity

In *The Female Complaint*, Lauren Berlant analyzes the "intimate public sphere" that emerged around women's mass media in the twentieth century United States. She explains, an intimate public "operates when a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people's particular core interests and desires" (Berlant, 2008, p. 5). The intimate public of femininity generates the feeling of shared intimacy through the mass production of women's interests and desires through woman's cultural texts such as the romance novel, the melodramatic film, and the soap opera.

At the heart of women's mass media is the view that women share common "pleasures, burdens, and virtues of emotional expertise and…the sacrifice of women's emotional labor" (Berlant, 2008, p. 2). Even though women's cultural texts have been continuously revitalized since the nineteenth century, the norms of femininity remain firmly entrenched in the intimate realm. The stories that circulate within the intimate public of femininity offer a fantasy in which attachments to heterosexual love, romance, domesticity, and social belonging will alleviate women's emotional suffering. The two genres of women's culture that animate the intimate public—sentimentality and

complaint— hold this potentiality in tension. Whereas sentimental texts promise the reproduction of the normative nuclear family will lead to a "good life" for those living in accordance to feminine norms, the female complaint genre provides an outlet for women's disappointment when those efforts have failed.

Both genres of women's culture are elaborated through intimate stories about women's lives. Narratives about women's experience with success and suffering capture the affective experience of femininity (facing "social antagonisms, exploitation, compromised intimacies") and establish an emotional generality among women (Berlant, 2008, p. 5). The common narratives of the intimate public, then, not only reproduce the conventions of femininity, they provide a community of like-minded women. Through the shared experiences and feelings elaborated within the intimate community, viewers develop a frame of reference through which they can analyze their own personal experiences. Thus, the circuits of recognition provide consumers with a sense of identification and belonging around the pleasures, attachments, and afflictions of femininity.

One of the central pleasures of participating in the intimate public is the reciprocal exchange of feelings. If women's core desire is to be "affectively recognized and emotionally important" (Berlant, 2008, p. 7), the intimate public enacts a symbolic reciprocity through the promise of social belonging. By consuming women's culture, Berlant explains, women come to view their own story "as part of something social" and "an experience understood by other women" (p. x). The pleasures of consumption come in the form of "self-confirmation" by enacting the dynamics of normative femininity

(Berlant, 2008, p. 14). Although the intimate public is a figurative space, the call for women's reciprocity is quite literal, as it has been conceived as the most important indicator of care (Berlant, 2008, p. 15). Thus, women feel most cared for when they are recognized as a part of the normative fantasy and, in turn, are fulfilling their femininity when recognizing the emotional experiences of others.

When women participate in the intimate public, they invest emotional labor into consuming, circulating, and discussing women-centered texts. This labor pays off for consumers through the pleasures of feeling connected to and cared for by the community. As Berlant explains, women "choose" to adopt the stereotypical feminine sociality of the intimate public because it claims to recognize their marginalized experience and promises to absorb them into an affective community. Therefore, participants' adherence to gender norms is not a result of disciplinary training, but rather a condition of belonging. Berlant's view that women's culture attracts consumers through the affective benefits of belonging provides a productive framework for analyzing *WWHL*. As we shall see, Bravo draws women in by staging the talk show as an intimate community space and then cultivates women's affective investments in the network.

My research adds a consideration of network branding to Berlant's intimate public sphere by exploring how Bravo attempts to capitalize on consumers' emotional investments in women's media. The gendered emotional labor of participating in the intimate public reproduces the norms of femininity that create cultural value for media brands. For instance, loyal viewers add value to the commodity by promoting the show amongst friends and family, and enhancing enjoyment through communal discussions. To

generate brand value, then, media companies hail women as attentive, devoted consumers that actively participate in the promotion of media brands (Campbell, 2011, p. 494). This type of media engagement reaffirms the gender division of labor that situates "women's work" as the caring and relational labor involved in reproducing the nuclear family. In the intimate public, I argue that women's emotional care work is channeled to produce value for the Bravo brand. To build this argument, I begin tracing how *WWHL* fosters an intimate, feminine community through its broadcast production.

Watch What Happens Live

The idea for *WWHL's* intimate, interactive TV show format developed out of a series of personal email correspondence between Bravo executive Andy Cohen and network President Lauren Zalaznick that detailed the behind-the-scenes gossip of Bravo's popular series. Zalaznick was so enthralled with his "dishy" emails she asked Cohen to start posting them on the BravoTV.com blog site. In 2006, Zalaznick gave Cohen the green light to host a live web-series that would "air" on BravoTV.com as an online companion show to its reality TV fare. Then, in July of 2009, *WWHL* moved to a small studio in SoHo New York to begin its twelve-week run as a live, televised talk show, airing one night per week at midnight. With an extremely low-budget, small staff, and built-in talent, the show immediately became a ratings success. By the end of 2009, Bravo promoted the show to a regular twice-a-week series that aired Sunday and Thursday at midnight. Due to its continued popularity *WWHL* was boosted to five-nights-per week in 2012, airing now at 11 p.m. Sunday through Thursday. Since then, the show

has achieved high ratings, with about 1.2 million (mostly female) viewers tuning in, making it more popular than other late-night cable talk shows such as the ones hosted by Conan O'Brien and Chelsea Handler (Van Buskirk, 2012).

WWHL's quirky pop-culture format focuses primarily on Bravolebrity gossip, giving viewers an insider perspective on its most popular female-centered shows. Unlike high-production value talk shows, *WWHL* is portrayed as a spontaneous "cocktail party" where everybody is invited (Moore, 2012). When *WWHL* made the jump from an informal and unrehearsed web series to a live broadcast program in 2008, Cohen (2012) explains, "I wanted to keep to format spontaneous, interactive, and simple; the only actual structural beats to hit would be a poll, three 'Here's What' items to discuss at the top, a game, and a Mazel and Jackhole of the Week" (p. 169). Throughout its six year run, this structure has remained intact. Each episode of *WWHL* opens with a set of invitations for viewers to participate. First, the "drinking game alert" notifies viewers of the nightly word that signifies when they should take a sip of their alcoholic drink. Then the "poll question" calls for viewers to weigh in on a particular controversy or argument that came up in the preceding episode of a Bravo docu-series. The following segment features Cohen's "Here's What" selections, made up of three things he wants to discuss that always serve to promote Bravo content.

After "Here's What," Cohen turns to viewers' comments, generally taking several questions on-air from at-home callers and reading questions from Facebook and Twitter, all before taking the first commercial break. When the show returns, Cohen again invites fan participation through phone calls and social media, telling viewers to "tweet me

@AndyCohen or call us." Next comes the nightly game, designed to elicit celebrity gossip such as the recurring "Plead the Fifth" game where guests answer two out of three unrehearsed personal questions. Often during "game time" viewers are encouraged to participate alongside guests, by playing at home or participating through digital media. After the game, there is another commercial break, a few more fan questions, and finally Andy Cohen's "Mazel" and "Jackhole" of the day where he praises and condemns some aspect of popular culture.

Each night, Andy Cohen facilitates a live conversations between celebrities and fans based on Bravo programming and the stories they tell about women's lives. Bravo's most popular and long-running series are *The Real Housewives* series of docu-soaps, a genre that documents the real lives of a subset of affluent women in a way that mirrors the conventions of soap opera storytelling. Bravo docu-soaps operate on the central premise of "hot women in an aspiration town living the high life, marked by drama both extraordinary and ordinary" (Cohen, 2012, p. 192). But what made the shows compelling, Cohen attests, is that Bravo stars' romantic lives, tumultuous friendships, and family struggles prove to be "universal" (p. 195). He elaborates: "What these women are living out on TV are just exaggerated versions of our own lives. Sure, many of them have money and houses with big closets stuffed with furs and jewels and shoes to-die-for, but in the end, the things they wrestle with are the same things we all wrestle with: love, family, friendship …betrayal" (p. 235). Even though female stars' stories are manipulated (if not entirely constructed) by the network, what locates these shows as exemplars of women's mass culture is that they offer up a depiction of how women negotiate the

conditions of femininity. Bravo's programming demonstrates Berlant's (2008) argument that the pleasure of women's mass cultural texts lies in foregrounding the shared emotional experience of feminine feelings and ways of being.

Working from the gendered conventions of women's culture, *WWHL* draws out the comic, tragic, and melodramatic moments documented in its female-centered reality programs such as *The Real Housewives* franchise and its plethora of spin-off series. Because the show is broadcast live, directly after an episode of a pre-recorded Bravo docu-soap, the interviews focus on stars' feelings about particular dramatic events. By re-telling and dissecting Bravo stars' subjective experiences, *WWHL* provides an intimate space to discuss the conditions of living as a woman. The level of detail stars offer about the ups and downs of female friendships, romantic relationships, and family life reinforces the sentimental fantasy of femininity, providing material that foments discussion about living as a woman. In doing so, the network constructs and imaginary intimate community where participants can connect.

It is important to note that while women's culture is attuned to matters of femininity and feminine affect, it does not only appeal to women. This is clearly evidenced by the fact that *WWHL* is hosted by a man, Bravo executive and self-professed "super fan" Andy Cohen. Andy Cohen positions his role on the show as that of a Bravo fan who is extremely invested in the networks' series and stars. When talking about Bravolebrities Cohen (2012) expresses, "I am crazy about them and the show. These women are funny, they are earnest about what's important to them" (p. 230). Cohen situates his role at Bravo as an outgrowth of his obsession with soaps and strong female

characters; he says: “like many a young gayling, I gravitated toward strong outsized female personalities” (p. 22). The association of gay men and women’s culture is not new, as Doty (1993) explains, many gay men have negotiated sexual desire through identification with strong female stars (p. 9). However Bravo’s primary market remains upscale women, even though its' programming is also designed to appeal to women’s “gay best friends” (Cohen, 2012, p. 200). No matter who is watching, Bravo hails its viewers through feminine sensibilities to promote a gendered affinity between its consumers.

Through its content and programmatic form, *WWHL* establishes an intimate relationship with its gendered audience by utilizing strategies that blur the boundaries between the network and viewers. In what follows, I argue that Bravo fosters intimacy to create a sense of belonging for viewers and, moreover, to locate that belonging within the commercially mediated space of the Bravo brand. In this way, Bravo attempts to create a loyal following of viewers who feel deep connections to the network. To build this argument I first examine how the textual strategies of liveness, set, framing, and mode of address accentuate the sense of co-temporality. Each of these features operates as a “technology of intimacy,” a term Kavka (2014) uses to denote the “ability to generate a sense of immediacy that is both temporal and spatial” (p. 468). Second, I discuss how the conventions of women’s culture, including the focus on women’s personal lives and the communicative codes of gossip culture, articulate a normative discourse of femininity. It is my contention that *WWHL*’s feminized content functions as a “technology of gender,”

that serves to "produce, promote, and 'implant' representations of gender" (de Lauretis, 1987, p. 18).

Technologies of Intimacy

Liveness

WWHL's live broadcast serves to establish an intimate relationship by breaking down the temporal distance between the host, guests, and viewers at home. Bravo leverages the historical association of live broadcast with authenticity, spontaneity, and unmediated connection to cultivate a more intimate environment for its niche female demographic. Jane Feuer (1983) explains that liveness is a historically specific industry practice that serves the ideological purpose of masking the extreme fragmentation of television programming. The myth that liveness functions as an immediate and spontaneous link to real events mitigates routine interruption by advertisements, location changes, instant replays, and other editing conventions. The structure and aesthetics of the live show position the audience as a part a shared community that in turn reinforces the dominant ideologies promoted by the show (Feuer, 1983). Live broadcasts also serve the important economic function of ensuring viewers' immediate and undivided attention, and sustaining that attention during commercial breaks (Lotz, 2007, p. 176-177). As viewers participate in real time, networks provide evidence that their viewers are tuned in during 30-second advertisements rather than watching on time-shifted schedules or illegally downloading content.

WWHL's utilizes the myth of liveness to draw audience into the intimate public through three key strategies. First, the show invites real time participation, in which case

the only way viewers' opinion will "count" is if it is occurs during the live broadcast. Second, *WWHL* includes impromptu programmatic decisions and mistakes made by the host, letting viewers in on the seemingly spontaneous and flexible creative process. Third, liveness is used to convey a sense of "being there" when the broadcast is taking place, inviting viewers into a social relationship with the host and stars.

On *WWHL*, viewers are brought into the intimate public through explicit calls for audience participation. This is most clearly evidenced when viewers call in and converse with the on-air participants. The liveness of the interaction is emphasized through references to unfolding events, most often diegetic docu-soap affairs but also real world happenings. For example, Andy Cohen often introduces important pop culture topics during the "Here's What" opening segment that viewers will respond to or inquire about when they call in. Of course, not all viewers get a chance to participate on air, but digital technologies open up occasions for all viewers to participate in the live broadcast. The nightly poll, for instance, asks viewers a question about Bravo docu-soaps (Who do you side with? Who do you think is best dressed? What did you think of …?) to incorporate each viewers' opinions into the conversation. The pleasures of interacting with TV content are amplified in a live on-air environment because there is a possibility of recognition and reciprocity typically unavailable in digital environments. For Bravo, live interactivity provides the illusion that fans play active role in shaping the show. Even though live interactions are highly controlled by TV producers (Kelly, 2012), the myth that live television is unmediated and authentic helps to promote fan engagement.

Liveness is central to the ways in which Andy Cohen frames the appeal of *WWHL* as a spontaneous space where anything can happen. When describing his show, Andy Cohen explains, "It'll be me and a couple Bravo-lebrities and maybe a real 'lebrity taking phone calls and e-mails and tweets from Bravo fanatics live" (Sicha, 2009). Cohen's description of *WWHL's* laid-back atmosphere is evidenced in the show—Cohen's uninhibited questioning and his ability to involve celebrities and viewers in eccentric games (such as "Andy Loves Crotchy" where guests have to identify a famous person by only looking a close-up of their crotch) make the show appear unstructured and unrestricted. The combination of reality stars, A-list celebrities, fan interaction, outlandish games and alcohol makes the show unlike anything else that is currently on television. Cohen maintains that the only question he asks guests before the live broadcast is "What do you want to drink?" (as cited in Fallon, 2014). Replacing the pre-interview with booze, guests are more likely to off script and divulge details about their sex lives, feuds, and other celebrity gossip. The unrehearsed and confessional nature of *WWHL* stands in stark contrast to other late night shows with carefully orchestrated interviews and pre-approved questions. As Cohen explains it, "I really view this show as an authentic, no-bullshit experience" (as cited in Gordinier, 2014). This discourse of spontaneity is reiterated in almost every industry profile or pop culture interview related to the show and it has clearly been orchestrated as a central part of the show's brand of entertainment.

The unpredictability of the live show is reinforced in Cohen's excitable "super fan" identity that motivates him to change course on a whim. Cohen celebrates how the

live format gives him a chance to express his unfiltered thoughts, which in turn makes the show appear to be fun, unpredictable, and authentic. Cohen offers an example of the unrehearsed characteristic of the show: "If I have a crush on Cristiano Ronaldos, or I think it would be cool if Levi Johnston got naked…, then I'm going to say it, just as I would to my friends" (as cited in Rosenblum, 2010). Here, Cohen summarizes his spontaneous approach to interacting with celebrities and positions the audiences as his friends along for the ride. Cohen also regularly makes mistakes like misreading the teleprompter or running out of time, errors that add to the feeling of spontaneity. When things go wrong, Cohen seems amused instead of embarrassed, and incorporates the blunders into his extemporaneous performance. In these scenarios, viewers are made to feel like insiders to the inner workings of the television broadcast. As "insiders" in the intimate public, viewers are more like to identify with the modes of belonging established by the network.

WWHL's live broadcast conveys intimacy by constructing a close proximity between the host, guest, and viewers. Historically, liveness has functioned as an industry strategy to drive viewership by cultivating a sense of "being there" as a televised event takes place. The myth of liveness constitutes communities through a shared sense of presence that obscures spatial and temporal differences. Because live television suggests an immediate connection to real events, it works to connect viewers to a set of shared intimate sociability and constitutes them as a representative social group (Couldry, 2004, p. 355-356). Liveness then conveys a sense of immediate and close affiliation that

reinforces the norms of women's culture while building an intimate and long-lasting relationship with the network.

Set

Affectionately called the "clubhouse," the set of *WWHL* is a well-lit, vibrant and cozy space designed as a replica of host Andy Cohen's own New York living room. To design the set, Cohen invited art director Kenny Cahill to his apartment to model his distinct pop culture aesthetic. As Cohen explains, "the show is so much a result of my mind and sensibility, that it just seemed like it would be more comfortable if it sort of looked like me too" (as cited in Van Buskirk, 2012). Elsewhere, Cohen says about the set: "I feel like I'm in my home, like we're doing the show for party guests at my apartment… I still don't feel like I'm on TV" (as cited in Riley, 2013). If there was any question about how "at home" Cohen feels on the set, the regular presence of his dog "Wacha"—who always seems to wonder on-screen toward the end of the broadcast to chew on a Bravo t-shirt or nudge up against a guest—seems to bolster the shows' intimate and authentic presence.

With just enough room for three chairs and a small bar offstage, the tiny set appears cramped but inviting, set up like the kind of place you would want to "hang out." As reporter Samantha Kelly (2012) aptly notes, "Bravo's *Watch What Happens Live* wants viewers to feel as if they are a part of the show itself. It's this mantra that runs through every aspect of the show's operations, from sending in questions via Twitter in real time to encouraging home viewers to play drinking games along with the guests. Every night is a party and you're invited." *WWHL* is produced live from a small studio in

SoHo Manhattan. So small, in fact, only eighteen people can fit in the audience. Co-executive producer Deirdre Connolly explains, "our audience is basically next to our camera guys, who are right next to our guests so it's like this tiny little room where everyone is mingling and our audience is essentially apart of the set" (as cited in Stanhope, 2010). The cozy set clearly invites in-studio and at-home viewers into the space by making it appear "homey" and informal.

Unlike other late-night shows that have an expansive set, live bands, and large studio audience, Bravo is marketed as a "small little cocktail party" (Stanhope, 2010). This dichotomy mirrors assumptions about the male public sphere and the female private sphere. Whereas late night talk shows are dominated by male hosts, sidekicks, and bands and are conceived for a national audience, *WWHL* is constructed as an intimate sphere governed by women's interests. *WWHL's* construction of a public interactive forum to discuss the private, interpersonal lives of semi-famous women suggests interplay between masculine and feminine spheres. But this does not mean that the show transgresses the culturally dominant codes of masculinity and femininity; rather, it brings women's intimacy, attachments, and consumption into the public realm.

The intimacy of the show is reinforced by the abundance of colorful, kitschy, personal items that explode from the set. Elaborate shelving covers the entire back wall of the *WWHL* set and hold an array of pop culture tchotchkes, a direct reproduction of Cohen's own bookcases. In the paraphernalia that lines the shelves, Daniel Riley (2013) suggests, "you can read a history of the show." Many of the items on display came directly from Cohen's residence including his childhood encyclopedias, blue human head

sculptures, Snoopy figurines, a large bedazzled Pez dispenser, and a psychedelic Edward Fields rug (Van Buskirk, 2012). Gifts from celebrity guests, such as an old breast implant and a picture of a pet dog from *The Real Housewives* cast, are prominently displayed. Other objects mark who has been on the show—things like Julie Andrews tea bag, Lindsay Lohan's cigarette butt, and Lady Gaga's pee in a perfume bottle—and function as an inside joke for dedicated viewers. The clutter of pop culture tokens serves as the backdrop of *WWHL*, making the show appear both approachable and intimate—a "clubhouse" where everyone is welcome but only those "in the know" can appreciate all it has to offer.

The physical space of the set integrates viewers into a constructed domesticity, a comfortable space for women's talk. Cohen explains that the intimate set is crucial to the spontaneous and informal nature of his show: "The size of the studio is one of the reasons the guests feel so comfortable and are willing to be so open" (Moore, 2012). Being "open" is essential to fostering the kind of illicit gossip *WWHL* trades in, but openness also conveys an emotional connection between viewers and celebrities. The set, then, functions as a space of intimate, feminine sociability in which viewers are explicitly expected to take part.

Framing

This intimate spatial relationship between the host, guests, and viewers is further ingrained through camera framing. At the very beginning of each show, the camera zooms in for a close-up shot on Andy Cohen and then, as Cohen introduces each guest, the camera introduces them as will with a similar zoom-in to close-up. This technique

draws the viewer into the talk show world by literally bringing them closer to the action. Throughout the broadcast, the camera stays focused on close-up shots, with a series of cross-shots from the host to the guest speaking. This is sometimes offset with a two-shot, a very close shot of the two guests, and less frequently, a wider (but still very tight) shot of the entire set. The extreme and long-lasting close-ups utilized on *WWHL* are quite different from other talk shows that frame the host and guests in a medium shot.

Bravo's camerawork is reminiscent of soap opera style that lingers on actors' faces to allow the viewer to guess what they are thinking. One type of close-up is an "egg" shot, defined as "the shot at the end of many daytime soap scenes in which an actor holds an expression for several beats until the scene fades out" (Levine, 2006). This shot is effective because viewers spend so much time with soap characters that they learn to read their faces. Similarly, *WWHL* viewers develop a close relationship with Andy Cohen and learn to read his very animated gestures and facial expressions—like his infamous "head cock" indicating that he things a guest is lying (Cohen, 2012, p. 167), his furrowed brow with mouth agape when he is in disbelief, or his snarky frown that says "you got what you deserved!"

The shot sequence further positions the viewer in proximity to the live show. Since the show is set up as an extended interview between Andy Cohen and two celebrity guests, the talent and camera positioning establishes an intimate familiarity between viewer, talent, and host. The set is staged so that Cohen and the two guests are seated in a semicircle in chairs so close they are nearly touching. The set is open to the viewer to imagine herself seated from the perspective of the wide camera angle—thus completing

the circle. The typical sequence of shots throughout the show follows the standard shot/reverse-shot pattern between Cohen and whichever guest he is currently addressing. This allows viewers to see the speaking subject from the other's point of view, which has the effect of "'suturing' our own subjectivity into the text" (Feuer, 1983, p. 18). Feuer (1983) suggests that quick cuts between close ups from different cameras collapses the distinction between "'live' (in the sense of in the same space, 'being there') and 'live at a second remove' (same time, different spaces)" (Feuer, 1983, p. 18). While Feuer refers to the elimination of a spatial distinction between interviewer and interviewees shot in different locations, the incorporation of medium point-of-view shots from the audiences' perspective serves a similar purpose to create a temporal illusion of shared space. Scattered between the shot/reverse-shot sequences are wide-angle medium shots that show all three guests from the perspective of the live audience. These shots create a close relationship between the on-screen subjects and position the viewer as the fourth, off-screen guest. This illusion is created simultaneously by the live broadcast and shot sequence, extending the presence and immediacy of the show to the viewer and placing the subject in the deficient space in the live studio.

Mode of Address

The gendered intimacy of the talk show genre is further instituted by the mode of address. By directly addressing the audience as "you," Andy Cohen invites viewers into the discourse of the show and encourages active participation. The host involves at-home spectators by looking straight at the camera and asking the viewer to answer questions and play games alongside guests on the show. This strategy is most explicit in the

opening of each episode, where Cohen first welcomes the audience into the "clubhouse" and then introduces the guests. For instance, when Cohen introduces Eileen Davidson, a former soap star turned housewife, he says: " First, *you* know her as Ashley on *The Young and The Restless* and Kristen on *Days of Our Lives*. Now *we* are getting to know her, the real her, in her third job as the newest housewife in *The Housewives of Beverley Hills*, please welcome to the clubhouse for the very first time, Eileen Davidson" (Eileen Davidson & Whitney Cummings, 2014). This introduction highlights how Andy Cohen establishes a relationship with viewers through a direct mode of address, referring to audience members as "you" and reinforcing the fan community by using "we." Further, this introduction assumes that audiences have a shared knowledge of soap and docu-soap series, echoing the importance of women's culture to the construction of intimacy.

The direct mode of address simulates face-to-face communication styles that draw viewers into a shared intimate sociality. This occurs when Andy Cohen asks viewers a poll question that is framed as a direct question: Who do *you* think is best dressed? What did *you* think of the episode? By asking viewers a direct question, Andy Cohen invites viewers to more deeply consider the docu-soap events and to become involved in the discussion that will take place on air. Wood (2009) explains, this strategy engages viewers in a para-social relationship with the host and implies a "sense of belonging within the discourse as another member of the audience made present through the broadcast medium" (p. 60). The affective aspects of televisual intimacy produce a feeling of "being there" that tethers viewers more closely to the "reality" of the text (Skeggs & Woods, 2011, p. 40).

Technologies of Gender

Women's Lives

The content of *WWHL* is organized around the melodramatic worlds of female reality stars. Emphasizing the most personal aspects of Bravolebrities' lives, including their romantic relationships, families, and appearance, *WWHL* speaks to the tensions of the feminine fantasy. Berlant (2008) explains, "the gender-marked texts of women's popular culture cultivate fantasies of vague belonging as an alleviating of what is hard to manage in the lived real—social antagonisms, exploitation, compromised intimacies, the attrition of life" (p. 5). When guests appear on *WWHL*, they often divulge intimate stories about their lives including things like the loss of a friendship, a cheating spouse, a child moving away from home, or a failed business venture. The expression of these stories confirms there is something common about living as a woman, a shared world of feelings that unites women in the intimate public. By focusing the show on the most intimate details of women's intimate lives, *WWHL* enjoins an emotional intimacy between strangers.

WWHL employs three key strategies to uncover personal details about its stars' lives. The first strategy is that the show does not pre-interview guests. Instead of the typical pre-approved narratives characteristic of talk shows, Bravo does not notify guests about the questions they will be asked or the games they will play on air. Cohen explains, "On our show, literally the only question we ask guests beforehand, 'What do you want to drink?" (as cited in Fallon, 2014). This brings up the second key strategy, giving guests alcohol, which functions to produce uninhibited responses from guests. The third strategy

Cohen uses to get guests to open up is integrating viewers' questions into the interview. When viewers ask pointed questions about a recent break up or a dispute on the live broadcast, it appears to be spontaneous and thus guests are more likely to respond openly.

What make *WWHL* distinct from other late-night talk shows then, is its focus on women's lives and its insistence that women share their most intimate feelings in the public forum. This structure works to foster intimacy in two key ways. The first way is by inviting stars' to share their subjective account of the melodramatic events recently aired on Bravo docu-soaps. Gaining access to intimate personal details, such as those typically reserved for close friends, viewers feel emotionally connected to the experiences and struggles of reality stars. To produce this form of intimacy, *WWHL's* prevailing techniques is to invite docu-soap star on the talk show when their docu-soap narrative becomes particularly tumultuous. For instance, after a *The Real Housewives of New York* episode aired with Carole Radziwell dating a much younger man (who had previously dated her co-star's niece), she was featured as a guest on *WWHL* to discuss the details of her budding romance and the her co-stars reactions. What makes *WWHL* particularly compelling for viewers is that while the docu-soap episode had been taped months in advance, *WWHL* is broadcast live, giving viewers an updated and ostensibly unmediated perspective on female stars thoughts and emotions. By providing stars an opportunity to report directly to fans, *WWHL* is structured is an intimate space for women to publicly share their feelings.

Second, by focusing on shocking and unpredictable aspects of women's lives, Bravo cultivates a sense of immediacy that binds viewers through the shared surprise.

Docu-soap producers not only create the conditions for melodrama, they edit footage to trump up often mundane events in order to maximize engagement. *WWHL* heightens the element of surprise in several ways—a caller might ask an unexpected question, Andy Cohen may expose hidden information, or a cast-mate will call in to divulge a secret or cast an accusation. One way the element of surprise is kept intact is by eliminating the typical talk show pre-interview. The night Carole was on *WWHL*, her fellow housewife LuAnn called in to reveal that Carole's young boyfriend was currently on vacation with her niece, implying that he was cheating on Carole. Watching guests' affective reactions to immediate situations is a characteristic device of melodrama that is used to engender a feeling of shared presence (Gledhill, 1987). By structuring *WWHL* around spontaneous exchanges, Bravo produces a melodramatic spectacle whereby viewers ostensibly gain access to female stars' inner thoughts and feelings. This strategy elicits stars' emotional reactions to generate a shared, intimate sociality that encourages women's talk.

Women's Talk

The gendered nature of talk is central to the operation of the intimate public. Whereas men's discourse is framed as debating and philosophizing, women's talk is characterized as trivial discussions about family matters and personal relationships (Wood, 2009, p. 15-16). The gendered appeal of the talk shows results from the disclosure of intimate feelings integral to the feminized speech genre of "gossip." Gossip is defined as "a way of talking between women in their roles as women, intimate in style, personal and domestic in topic and setting, a female cultural event which springs from and perpetuates the restrictions of the female role but also gives the comfort of

validation" (Jones quoted in Brown 1994, p. 30). Within the intimate public, women's talk produces a collective sociality around discussions of what is personal (Berlant, 2008). Thus, women's "gossip" functions as a way of developing relationships between one another that establishes a scene of collective belonging.

One of the functions of gossip is to produce scandal (Jones, 1980). Scandal not only has entertainment value, it also satisfies women's interests in each other lives. As Jones (1980) explains, scandal provides a "cultural medium which reflects female reality, and a connection between the lives of women who have otherwise been isolated from each other" (as cited in Brown, 1994, p. 31). *WWHL* main strategy for producing scandal is by asking stars tough questions in rapid-fire secession. This strategy is unique in the sense that most talk shows tend to avoid defamatory personal questions and Cohen asks questions so quickly that viewers (who are drinking) often get caught up and accidentally disclose a kernel of truth. Often these questions are framed as a part of a game, such as the recurring skit "Plead the Fifth." In this game, Andy Cohen asks the guest three controversial questions and they can only skip or "plead the fifth" to one. This segment regularly produces scandalous gossip about Hollywood breakups, rivalries, and celebrity culture. As Riley (2013) explains, "this is the part of the show that generates news. No pre-interview, no editing—gotta answer it live or suffer the antagonism of host and audience." The production of juicy gossip on *WWHL* is one of its key marketing devices and it serves the important purpose of constituting intimate knowledge that women can convene to discuss. By discussing other women's affairs, members of the intimate public

are valued for women's socially constructed area of expertise in domestic morality (Jones, 1980).

Another way *WWHL* espouses the codes of women's talk is through the non-verbal cues associated with the feminine genre of gossip. Although the host, and the biggest gossip on the show, is a man, he closely follows the codes of feminine gossip. For instance, non-verbal responses such as the raised eyebrow, the sigh, and silence— are central to articulating a common understanding in women's conversations (Brown 1994, p. 31). One of Andy Cohen's signature moves is the eyebrow raise, used to show solidarity with other skeptical viewers without directly confronting his guests. This tactic highlights the importance of both the verbal and non-verbal codes of women's gossip culture that conveys intimacy through women's shared understandings.

The intimate public legitimates women's talk in a mediascape that otherwise discards women's voices. Helen Wood (2009) explains that "the devaluation of women's talk as 'gossip' assists in containing women's voices within the private sphere, since their conversations are not deemed serious enough for rational and critical debate within the public sphere" (p. 16). The intimate public challenges this framing by valuing talk about women's lives and experiences. *WWHL* creates a space where women's stories are the primary topic of conversation, and they are collectively discussed and dissected in the public realm.

As viewers are drawn into Bravo's intimate public, they are implicated in the interactive relations between the audience and text. Thus, the incitement to participate is a result of the intimate social relationships developed through the televisual illusion of

immediacy and proximity and the conventions of women's culture. This section has provided the framework for understanding Bravo's deliberate construction of *WWHL* an intimate public sphere, a framework I update in the following section to account for the ways in which digital interactivity and camp sensibilities alter the social configuration.

Intimate Digital Public

In terms of structure and content, *WWHL*'s enactment of the intimate public fits within Berlant's (2008) detailed history of the social sphere developed around twentieth century women's mass culture. Where *WWHL* diverges is that it now functions as a digitally-networked platform. In addition, *WWHL* alters the genre conventions of the intimate public by layering an ironic camp sensibility over the sentimental pleasures of femininity. These changes have significantly altered the intimate public sphere, giving media firms new ways to engineer, capture, and exploit the norms of femininity and emotional attachments that circulate within the social setting. To make sense of these changes and their broader social significance, I update Berlant's concept for the convergence era, using the term "intimate digital public" to explore how new media has shifted the terms of intimate belonging.

I use the term intimate digital public to recapitulate what is similar to and different from earlier forms of women's culture. Like the intimate public, the intimate digital public is organized around the fantasies and pleasures of women's lives. What makes the digital intimate public distinct, however, is that in introducing of new media technologies into the intimate realm, the norms of femininity are reworked to incorporate

interactive media skills and technological expertise is conjoined to the norms of "women's work."

Within Bravo's intimate digital public, women's new media proficiency is of critical importance because it makes visible the defining features of its target market—upscale, trendy, tech-savvy women (Dominus, 2008). *WWHL*'s interactive framework puts women's technological capabilities prominently on display to construct their audience as tech-savvy (with the associated qualities of being educated, trendy, and affluent), and to debunk the dominant position of white middle-class men as the leaders of new media technologies (Parks, 2004, p. 141). Interactive tools help to produce the fictional audience commodity by enabling "the relationship between viewer, internet and televisual environment to form a visible nexus at the *centre* of the series, creating a situation in which the relationship between audience and text is constantly staged and invoked," as Holmes (2004) explains (p. 216). By inviting viewer participation through polls, games, social media activities, and mediated contact, *WWHL* persistently places its interactive feminine viewer at the helm of the show.

To constitute a feminine interactive audience, *WWHL* guides viewers to perform a stereotypical set of feminine skills, including empathy, intuition, and care, as they interact with the show. Feminized interactivity not only hails women through their emotions, but reproduces stereotypical forms of "women's work—whereby women are chiefly responsible for unpaid reproductive and emotional labor—within the digital realm. Despite hopes that interactivity will "democratize the media" (Jenkins, 2006), women remain "the default managers of the intimate" (Berlant, 2008, p. xi)

Given its corporate ownership, Bravo offers a useful case study for exploring how feminized interactivity constitutes value for media companies. While the intimate public has always been a capitalist construction (Berlant, 2008), *WWHL*'s corporate-engineered fan community leverages the power of women's intimate attachments to drive interactivity and develop emotional connections to the network brand. The persistent revitalization of the intimate public of women's culture underscores the continued salience of feminine genres and emotional engagement within the era of media convergence. The convergent television industry, in particular, has made use of women's sentimental attachments to the female-oriented melodramatic form. As feminist media scholars have suggested, women are attracted to melodrama's heightened portrayal of emotions because it provides an "emotional release" (Baym, 2000) and rewards women's socially constructed expertise in emotional awareness (Blumenthal, 1997). While women have long been portrayed as easily swayed by their emotions, media convergence branding experts are spouting emotional connections as they key to reaching female consumers. For instance, marketing guru Marc Gobé (2001) advises companies to develop brand identities for women that target their emotions "because they value and are highly sensitive to…emotions!" (p. 47). According to the gendered logic of media convergence, the formation of intimate publics around women's culture is an ideal location to market to female consumers. Thus, *WWHL*'s design as an intimate public can be seen as an explicit effort to attract female consumers and show their high levels of engagement to advertisers.

As a part of this effort, interactivity on *WWHL* is structured to appear similar to independent online fan communities that convene on websites, blogs, message boards, and social media to dissect television content. Jessica Fowler (2012) asserts that host Andy Cohen "has seamlessly placed *WWHL* into this type of online fandom by structuring the show as a sort of 'on-air chat room' in which die-hard fans are able to interact with their favorite Bravo stars, as well as each other, in order to speculate about the direction and content of future episodes." This type of community-based fandom has a long history in the context of the soap opera. Much of the research on soap opera fan communities contends that a central appeal of the genre is the opportunity to create interpersonal connections with other viewers (Hobson, 1989; Blumenthal, 1997). In fact, scholars have found many people begin to watch soaps in order to participate in fan communities (Hobson, 1989; Brown, 1994). Bravo exploits women's desire for emotional connection and belonging to draw them into the commercial community where they can co-opt and commodify feminized interactive labor.

Interactivity

Synchronizing the live broadcast with digital content, Bravo was one of the first cable networks to take advantage of the fact that between 75 and 85 percent of TV viewers are using smartphones, laptops, and/or tablets while watching television (Dredge, 2012). On *WWHL*, new media interactions are woven into the broadcast through social media polls, online games, text message voting, and email comments. Viewers can participate with the show in real time through "second screen" web applications like "Play Live" that coordinate live broadcast polls, contests, and graphics with interactive

online content This means that viewers will see a poll such as "Who's the hottest New York City Housewife?" on screen and the results will update live based on audiences online response (Kafka, 2012). Throughout the broadcast, viewers' questions and comments, sent in via Facebook, Twitter, email, and live phone calls, are prominently featured. In a typical thirty-minute episode with two guests, nearly half of the airtime is dedicated to viewer questions, engaging viewers in a live conversation about Bravo content.

WWHL's combination of a live broadcast and fan interaction is what Sharon Ross (2008) calls an "overt" invitation to participate—"a situation in which writers' and producers' intent to activate viewer participation is easily discernible within the texts of the series" (p. 8). *WWHL*'s overt invitation for participation encourages viewers to get involved in communal fan discourse and brings viewers into the Bravo brand community. The emphasis on real-time interactivity represents a substantial departure from earlier forms of women's culture that transmitted content using a broadcast model from the television, cinema, or page to viewers (Morrison, 2011). While there have been efforts to include viewers' experiences and opinions in mass cultural texts, through women's participation talk show for instance, opportunities for involvement were limited to telephone calls, studio audiences, and letters (Cassidy, 2005). The advent of digital media opened up this practice to any viewers with Internet access. In what follows, I begin mapping *WWHL*'s digital media platforms beginning with the three central digital media tactics— interactive participation, online voting, and digital feedback loops—used to draw women in through the promise of reciprocity, recognition, and affective intensities.

Interactive Reciprocity

One feature that marks the digital intimate public as distinct from the twentieth century intimate sphere is its insistence on a new reciprocal relationship between producers and consumers. Unlike the intimate public that could only promise a sense of recognition through the shared feelings and experience of living as a woman, the intimate digital public not only recognizes its viewers thoughts and feelings, it prominently features them on the broadcast. Bravo's model of "Participation TV" allows fans to seemingly influence the outcome of the show as it is broadcast.

The promise of participating in convergence culture is that active consumers are "newly empowered" to control and change the media (Jenkins, 2006, p. 19). By inviting participation and granting (pre-selected) fans the power to drive live interviews, *WWHL* appears to give power to its active viewers. The deliberate construction of fan "empowerment" is one of Bravo's core strategies for activate fan labor in the intimate digital public. As Senior Vice President of Emerging Media Aimee Viles makes clear, Bravo is keenly aware of the value of recognizing active fans. Fans flock to *WWHL*, she explains, because they "know they can participate in the conversation" and "they want to see some reflection of themselves on air" (as cited in Garun, 2013). In recognizing fans, Viles reports, viewers feel "a sense of increased ownership over the content they consume" (as cited in Casserely, 2013). The illusion of consumer power is a key strategy Bravo uses to align viewers with the content and values of the network brand.

However, opportunities for viewers to alter the trajectory of the show are fairly limited because audience questions and comments are closely managed by a team of

researchers, telephone operators, and producers (Kelly, 2012). Deemed "social media managers," these Bravo employees select a handful of viewer questions and print them out throughout the broadcast and pass them along to host Andy Cohen, who then, live on air decides which questions he will interject (Ross, 2014). Even though viewers' interactions with the show are highly controlled, the promise that interactivity will recognize fan contributions and open up the channels of communication between producers and consumers remains intact.

Fans reiterate the value of live recognition even when it only occurs online by other fans. As one dedicated viewer writes, "I felt more connected to other viewers when we talk about the show on Twitter" (Garun, 2013). *WWHL*'s robust social media discourses give fans an outlet to talk about the show with each other online using the #WWHL hashtag and even engaging with Bravolebrities on their public accounts. These platforms are in line with Bravo's overarching digital media strategy described by Ellen Stone, Bravo's Senior Vice President of Marketing, as: "making women feel like they are apart of conversation" [sic] (as cited in Kreisinger, 2012). According to Stone, bringing women into the intimate community is the first step, but knowing what women want to talk about is the key to engaging women in interactivity. She explains, "most of the engagement with female audiences tends to be 'candy'. These conversations revolve around who said what on the Real Housewives." (Stone, as cited in Kreisinger, 2012). As Stone avers, the interactive components of the *WWHL* talk show, after show, and social media extensions were developed as platforms for intimate discussions around the gossip cycles of Bravo docu-soaps. These technological features help *WWHL* appear to be a

participatory fan space with a reciprocal relationship between producers and consumers, while also making fans' emotional investments in Bravo's brand of women's culture visible on live television. The deliberate structure of the intimate digital public as a participatory space for women's talk illuminates how the network attempts to draw women into the communal space in an effort to capture and commodify their emotional investments.

What makes *WWHL*'s fan community unique is that it mediates actual interactions between the show and its viewers around the conventions of women's culture. These interactions are the core element of interactivity as digital technologies enable real-time feedback between viewers and producers (Holmes, 2004, p. 218). In the terminology of the intimate public, digital feedback amplifies feelings of reciprocity. Berlant (2008) argues that reciprocity is the main affective register in the intimate public whereby pleasure is produced through a mutual exchange of experiences and feelings of living as a woman. On *WWHL* reciprocity is intensified by the opening up of two-way communication between producers and consumers made possible on a large-scale through the integration of digital technologies. The affordance of digital media allow for a large majority of viewers to be involved in the live conversation by voting in the poll via SMS messaging, posting questions on Facebook, retweeting or commenting on Twitter. Even viewers whose questions do not appear on the live broadcast are included in the community by engaging in online conversations with other fans. The reciprocal nature of digital conversations cultivates a strong feeling of belonging and emotional engagement within the intimate community.

Digital Recognition

Recognition, another key tenant of the intimate public, provides a sense of social belonging by acknowledging and making visible women's voices. In recording women's lives and opinions, the intimate public "legitimates qualities, ways of being, and entire lives that have otherwise been deemed puny or discarded" (Berlant, 2008, p. 3). *WWHL*'s intimate digital public magnifies women's thoughts and experiences by broadcasting them on live TV. Because countless viewers can participate on digital platforms, interactivity open up myriad opportunities for fans to be recognized as important members of in the intimate community. As Bravo executive Viles expresses, "Fans…want to see some reflection of themselves on air. When Andy reads their tweet or question fans submit … it becomes their 15 seconds of fame moment" (as cited in Garun, 2013). Here it is evident that Bravo realizes the value of recognizing fans' opinions on air. By utilizing digital technologies to recognize its viewers, *WWHL* draws them into the intimate digital public and motivates participation.

On a larger scale, *WWHL* is able to recognize its viewers by inviting them to cast a vote in a popular Bravo reality series debate. At the beginning of each episode, Andy Cohen introduces the poll question that viewers can respond to using Internet or mobile phone. Most often, the nightly poll question engage viewers by asking them to pick a side in the fight that is unfolding on the proceeding docu-soap episode. For instance, after a fight between sisters Kyle and Kim Richards (about a dog biting incident) on *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* Season Five Reunion "Part 1," the official *WWHL* Twitter page posted: "POLL Q: Whose side are you on? Kim or Kyle? Text 27286! #WWHL

#RHOBH" (Bravo WWHL, 2015a); and later revealed that 66% of viewers sided with Kyle (Bravo WWHL, 2015b). By inviting opinions through the voting mechanism, *WWHL* acknowledges the digital activity of its viewers. Viewers, in turn, are rewarded with a visual television and online representation of their views, as well as the pleasure of being actively involved in the live broadcast.

Another way *WWHL* recognizes fans is by explicitly inviting viewer feedback. In a submission for the Shorty Awards, honoring brands' use of social media, Bravo executives explain how the network utilizes social media to recognize passionate fans. An Instagram initiative, for example, is described thusly: "Each week, @BravoTV would share a call-to-action image inviting fans to share their reactions to that evening's Housewives episode using #RHONJ, our favorites were then included on-air on Real Housewives of New Jersey Social Editions, encore presentations enhanced with social media conversations about the show" ("Bravo's @BravoTV," n.d.). These social media "stunts" have proven successful, Bravo reports over 129 percent increase in Instagram followers ("Bravo's @BravoTV," n.d.) In Bravo's words: "We leverage the visual nature of Instagram to promote our OMG moments, promote tune-in, and engage with our most loyal fans" ("Bravo's @BravoTV," n.d.). By asking a question in a social media post, or specifically asking viewers to weigh in, *WWHL* prompts consumer feedback to provide a sense of recognition for fans, while making visible fans investments in brand content. These efforts not only promote audience participation, they also work to underscore fans' affective investments in the Bravo network and thus assist in building the Bravo brand.

Affective Networks

The intimate community around *WWHL* is not just on on-air construction; it is co-constituted through multiple, intersecting online platforms. The televised talk show is only one component of *WWHL's* expansive digital media presence spread out over sites such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, Foursquare, and Periscope. Each platform contributes unique content to the talk show universe. For instance, on the *WWHL* YouTube "after-show" Andy Cohen extends the televised interviews in the web-only forum. The online after-show is more informal than the live show; Andy Cohen has long-form discussions with guests and callers, and indulges even more bizarre requests. As Riley (2013) explains, "Andy asks more textured questions that would feel out of place in the snap-snap of the live show." *WWHL*'s after-show serves to move viewers from the TV channel to its official YouTube channel, the *Watch What Happens Live Clubhouse*, that features ancillary content including episode clips, original skits, behind the scenes footage, flip cam recordings from celebrity guests, and footage of Andy Cohen's rehearsal. At the top of the YouTube page, are links to the *WWHL*'s social network sites on Google Plus, Facebook, and Twitter that fans can "like" or "follow" to receive constant updates on WWHL guests, Bravolebrity news, and other promotional material. From links posted on social network pages, fans are funneled back to the *WWHL* website on BravoTV.com, the Tumblr page, and Bravolebrity Instagram accounts, to name just a few.

By cycling viewers through various online platforms, *WWHL*'s intimate digital public is operating as what Berlant (2008) calls a "culture of circulation" (p. 5). Within the intimate public of "women's culture," Berlant explains, the texts that circulate appear

to express women's core interests and desires. When consumers participate in the intimate public, women's interests and desires are confirmed as key markers of one's identity. The culture of circulation thus distributes ideas about a common core of femininity and strategies for living as a woman. The process of traversing multi-media platforms to track down more content intensifies consumers' attachments to the core interests and desires of women's culture. Further, *WWHL*'s culture of circulation motivates the kind of digital activity that is celebrated by Bravo's converging media platforms, evidencing how viewers' feminine interests and digital engagement.

Users' involvement in the digital culture of circulation also has an affective dimension. As I have described, *WWHL*'s social media posts are a part of a larger feedback loop that encourages movement from one platform to another. As viewers get caught up investigating feedback loops, affective intensities accrue. As Jodi Dean (2010) explains:

> Blogs, social networks, Twitter, YouTube: they produce and circulate affect as a binding technique. Affect…is what accrues from…the endless circular movement of commenting, adding notes and links, bringing in new friends and followers, layering and interconnecting myriad communications platforms and devices. Every little tweet or comment, every forwarded image or petition, accrues a tiny affective nugget, a little surplus enjoyment, a smidgen of attention that attaches to it, making it stand out from the larger flow before it blends back in (Dean, 2010, p. 95).

Dean's assessment of affective online interactions illuminates the central logic of Bravo's social media strategy: as viewers participate online, they will develop strong affective links to the *WWHL* community and more broadly the Bravo brand. The surplus enjoyment that accumulates through digital interactions motivates viewers to become more actively involved.

Gendered Interactivity

As I have shown, *WWHL* deploys a wide range of television and new media "technologies of intimacy" that blur the boundaries between producers and consumers and draw viewers into Bravo's brand community through the conventions of the intimate public. Against this backdrop, *WWHL'*s interactive features function as "technologies of gender" that produce norms around women's digital media use. In this section, I explore how *WWHL*'s participation is structured around melodrama, the primary commercial genres of "women's culture." As we will see, Bravo encourages viewers' new media engagement through the conventions of the feminized genre, and in doing so, embeds the norms of women's culture and the concomitant expectation of "women's work" into the digital sphere.

The melodramatic form is characterized by sensational storylines about interpersonal conflict meant to provoke strong emotions in audiences. Peter Brooks (1979) defines melodrama as a descriptive term for a mode of expression that employs narrative and stylistic express to present questions about morality. Jenkins (2007) further explains, "Peter Brooks tells us that melodrama externalizes emotions. It takes what the characters are feeling and projects it onto the universe. So that the character's emotional

lives gets mapped onto physical objects and artifacts, gets mirror backed to them through other characters, gets articulated through gestures and physical movements." While melodrama is a style of storytelling spans genres that appeal to both men and women, it is widely used in women's mass culture. The majority of mass cultural texts designed for women fall into the genre of melodrama, and this narrative form is predominantly aimed at female audiences (Kuhn, 2008).

One of the defining features of melodrama as a "textual system," Kuhn (1984) explains, is "its construction of narratives motivated by female desire and processes of spectator identification governed by female point of view" (p. 225). With women as protagonists and emotions as the driving force of the narrative, it is no surprise that this format has appealed to women since the nineteenth century (Modleski, 1997). The stereotype that women are primarily motivated by their emotions continues to dictate programming for female audiences. As recently as 2014, television industry discourses suggest that women-oriented networks like Bravo primarily appeal to female consumers through their emotions (Thielman, 2014). Because, the docu-soap audience, like other melodramatic genres, is generally assumed to be female (Brunsdon, 1997; Kuhn, 2008), the melodramatic structure of the shows is designed to elicit a highly charged emotional response from viewers.

By structuring interactivity through its' melodramatic programming, *WWHL* leverages melodrama's potential for extreme emotional engagement around questions of morality to prompt viewers active engagement. Through predetermined participatory modes, viewers are similarly guided to externalize their heightened emotions and

adoration for the show. For instance, when viewers call into the show, it is expected that they exude over-the-top excitement as they interface with Andy Cohen and his guests on live TV. As a part of the convention, at-home callers begin their exchange with a profession of devotion: "I love you Andy!" or "*The Real Housewives* is my favorite show!" The level of excitement and emotional engagement that fans show through their interactions suggests that Bravo fans are deeply passionate about the network brand. The types of fandom made visible by these guided exchanges (viewers are prepped by producers to create "dynamic and memorable moments" (Kelly, 2012)) bolster the networks claims to having the most engaged, loyal, and passionate fans on TV. Moreover, these qualities importantly link Bravo consumers to high levels of consumption. According to a Nielsen study commissioned by Bravo, "high loyal" and "high passion" networks like Bravo "attract the heaviest consumer spenders" who "respond more favorably to advertising seen on these networks" (Bibel, 2014). In this sense, Bravo's brand identity depends upon the interactive and emotional labor of consumers.

As a characteristic device of melodrama, dramatic fluctuations between passionate ups and downs are used to heighten audiences' emotional experience. Lynne Joyrich (1988) describes this affective rhythm as one of "exaggerated fluctuations" within constantly shifting emotional experiences that build to "dramatic moments of outbreak and collision" (p. 131). This unstable emotional experience often manifests as excitement and outrage that incite audiences' desire to tune in and actively participate with Bravolebrities on *WWHL*. Building an emotional connection through sensational

outbursts is a central strategy *WWHL* uses to attract female audiences and to get them to interact online. In this way, Bravo generates online viewer participation by mobilizing melodrama's potential for increased audience engagement.

WWHL's informal, alcohol-fueled format is designed to produces emotionally intense moments to prompt user interactivity. For instance Brandy Glanville, from *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills,* is a regular guest on the show because she is particularly known for her unpredictable and confrontational behavior. A striking example of her melodramatic performance occurred when she burst into tears during the live program and refused to participate in the final minutes of the broadcast. At the beginning of the episode, another Bravolebrity, Jeff Lewis made a flippant comment about contracting a sexually transmitted infection if Brady ran her fingers through his hair (as a caller had requested). While Brandy appears content through the rest of the episode, in the final minutes of the broadcast, Brandy recalls the joke and, while doing so, throws a drink in Jeff's face and exclaims "Now, no STDs…Alcohol kills everything!" ("Brandi Glanville & Jeff Lewis," 2015). Jeff and Andy appear confounded; what appeared to be a lighthearted moment quickly becomes tense and Brady begins to choke up and turns her chair around as she breaks down in tears.

This emotionally fraught moment works to promote a gendered form of interactivity on two levels. On one hand, it encourages viewers to navigate *WWHL*'s ancillary platforms to unravel what triggered the painful outburst. Because Brady timed her expression to interrupt the end of the program, viewers are more likely to tune into the online after-show and to explore *WWHL* social media sites to discern more details

about Brandy's breakdown. On the other hand, Brady's breakdown plays on viewers' expectations of melodrama to produce tension and suffering. In this way, it is an example of "feminine undoing," a central condition of femininity (Berlant, 2008, p. 18). Berlant writes, "performances of feminine fraying align with the reader's capacity to make the sense the narrator can no longer surround, mentally or emotionally" (p. 18). This viewing position is what Modleski (1997) deems the "ideal mother," a spectator who "is made to see 'the larger picture' and extend her sympathy to both the sinner and the victim" (p. 39). By enabling viewers to see what the guests cannot (in part by navigating ancillary *WWHL* platforms), the show gives viewers agency and empowers them to intervene. The sympathy latent in the ideal mother position encourages viewers to become involved and to interact with the talk show.

The constitution of digital literacy through the frames of melodrama promotes a gendered form of interactivity that is routed through women's emotions and capacity to care for others. Viewer participation requires a keen emotional literacy in the conventions of melodrama; viewers must learn, for instance, that the melodrama is marked by constant shifts in perspectives that ask women to calibrate their emotions to maximize their sympathies. To be involved in the melodramatic aspects of the intimate digital public, viewers hone their capacity for empathy, perception, and care.

In this way, *WWHL* guides participants to portray compassion, a form of emotional labor that has historically been associated with women (Hochschild, 1983). Within *WWHL's* carefully curated fan environment, care work is highly valued. *Salon* writer Willa Paskin (2012) calls *WWHL* is a "safe space" for fans who religiously

watcher their favorite Bravo shows, who "analyze, obsess and care," and who are "unironically invested in the Real Housewives." Paskin's (2012) observation that *WWHL* is a "safe space" for genuine emotional investment in reality docu-soaps suggests that Bravo guides fans to perform the kinds of emotional work that women have historically managed. In its constant rehearsal of emotional attachments, care work, and genuine feelings, *WWHL* emphasizes what Brundson (1997) calls the "culturally constructed skills of femininity" that include "sensitivity, perception, intuition, and the necessary privileging of the concerns of personal life" (p. 17). By addressing its predominantly female audience through these emotional literacies, Bravo makes visible its audiences' feminine qualities (what makes them appear to be loyal consumers) while reproducing women's role as care workers in the digital realm.

What is significant about how feminine agency is constructed in the intimate digital public is that it centers on women's emotional labor. As Berlant (2008) explains, "the emotional labor of women places them at the center of the *story* of what counts as life…: the conjuncture of family and romance so structures the emergence of modern sexuality, with the conflation of sexual and emotional truths, and in that nexus femininity marks the scene of the reproduction of life as its project" (19-20). In much the same way, emotional labor places viewers at the center of *WWHL*'s intimate digital public, and in doing so encourages digital media participation. Active participants, therefore learn digital literacy through the frames of melodrama, orienting viewers to a mode of interaction that reinforces women's emotional labor online.

The Bravo Wink: Irony and Camp in the Intimate Digital Public

While melodrama is certainly at the heart of *WWHL*'s interactive platform, the show also operates on another register, cultivating an ironic, skeptical type of viewing through what Cohen refers to as the "Bravo wink." Cohen explains: "We do something with the editing that's called the "Bravo wink" … [a character might say] 'I'm the healthiest person in the world' and then you see them ashing their cigarette" (as cited in Turner, 2009). Berlant (2008) explains that cultivating this type of savvy critique is the opposite of melodrama; whereas melodrama cultivates empathy, *WWHL*'s ironic, campy sensibility distances viewers from the melodramatic representation. The prominent use of camp is an update of the traditional intimate public sphere and requires a new theorization of its effects.

On *WWHL*, the Bravo wink is manifested through the Cohen's embodiment of gay camp. Susan Sontag (1982) defines camp as a "mode of aestheticism" defined by "artifice," "stylization," and "exaggeration (p. 182). Cohen's media presence is definitively "campy"—his theatrical performance mixes genuine excitement with a playful frivolity that celebrates the ridiculousness of Bravo's melodramatic programming. Cohen's over-the-top fandom evidences the dualism of camp, finding pleasure in mass women's culture while simultaneously mocking it. This juxtaposition is most clearly visible on his face. As Dominus (2011) explains, "His smiling face, as he watches a housewife introduce a new song, plays it just safe enough that the woman, watching later, would readily see his enjoyment, but the viewer could read into that smile a more complicated kind of appreciation, a wicked delight in the absurdity of the moment." Cohen uses his facial expressions alongside his running commentary to draw attention to

his enjoyment of the reality TV performance even as he reveals in its absurdity. This "incongruous juxtaposition," Newton (2000) explains, is at the heart of the camp aesthetic, generally pointed out or devised by "the homosexual" (as cited in Berry, and Adams, 2015, p. 180). Cohen's sexuality is important to his portrayal of camp because of its historical association with gay men (Richardson, 2006).

The genuine/ironic dualism of Bravo camp asks viewers to find pleasure in the melodramatic structure of the docu-soap while, at the same time, showing their ability to mock the feminine feelings it elicits. As Zalaznick explains, Bravo programming is "layered," meaning that viewers can identify with and poke fun at Bravolebrities; She says: "You want to be a little bit like one of them? Here's a guidebook. You want to laugh at them? Go ahead" (Dominus, 2008). The expectation that viewers both identify with and laugh at Bravolebrities requires that women to distance themselves from the identification and belonging that animate the intimate public. One of the core features of camp is it establishes an "immediate critical distance" from the characters (Richardson, 2006). If the key draw of the intimate public is to experience "one's story as a part of something social" (p. x), the inclusion of camp in the intimate public undermines the pleasure of feminine identification and the feeling of being included in an intimate community.

The introduction of camp and critical distance within the intimate public is new and notable for several reasons. First, camp reconfigures the experience of social belonging that makes the intimate public a site of affective investment (Berlant, 2008, p. xi). Rather than sharing in feminine fantasies, participants are brought together through a

shared critical distance. As Berry and Adams (2015) explain, camp provides a new way of relating and a basis for community around the conventions of camp (p. 178). The adoption of a critical distance does not mean, however that the conventions of the femininity are dismissed. Rather, as Halperin (2012) explains, camp "exploits the most abject, exaggerated, and undignified version of femininity that a misogynistic culture can devise" (as cited in Berry and Adams, 2015, p. 183). While some scholars argue that camp subverts gender norms through their heightened performance (Richardson, 2006), Cohen's continual praise of female stars performance of melodramatic emotions, extreme beauty regimens, and upkeep up the heterosexual, nuclear family unit (even with the added Bravo wink) places value on the embodiment of conventional femininity.

The second distinction that camp introduces to the intimate public is viewer's divestment from empathetic identification. Instead of identifying with the female characters on screen, and thus with each other, camp enjoins viewers to identify with the "insiders"—those producing the text. As Andrejevic (2007) explains, the savvy viewer celebrates their "insiders perspective" making them a part of a smaller community of knowing viewers (p. 40). The significance of this shift is that female identification has been theorized as the primary source of women's pleasure and the most promising political potential. On one hand, mass cultural texts provide women with "emotional representatives" through which they can express and understand their own feelings (Geraghty, 1991, p. 29). Mass women's texts and the intimate public have historically offered a universal female fantasy that validates women's skills in the personal sphere and cuts across age, race, and class barriers (Berlant, 2008). As Ang (2007) explains,

female fans love female-centered melodramatic texts because of their "identification with its melodramatic imagination, that is, by adopting a viewing position that affirms the emotional realism of a 'tragic structure of feeling' represented by the soap opera: these viewers enjoyed being 'swept away' by the heightened, if not exaggerated, emotional highs and lows of the narrative" (p. 5). The integration of camp into contemporary women's culture requires that women are self-conscious of their identification with characters and, more broadly, the culturally denigrated pleasures of women's mass media. Further, the erasure of feminine identification subverts the radical potential of empathy. According to Berlant (2008), the political potential of sentimental women's texts lies in the forging of effective linkages between marginalized subjects (p. 40). While these "feeling politics" may not lead to direct material change, they do demand compassion and understanding for other women's experiences.

Rather than rewarding empathy and concern, the camp sensibility invites ridicule. The ambiguity of the "Bravo wink" asks viewers to pay close attention in order to make their own judgments about Bravo stars. As Cohen says, "We may linger on a shot or we may let something play out longer, but we leave it to you" (as cited in Rosenblum, 2010). This viewing position imbues viewers with the capacity to judge. For instance, when Brady Glanville collapsed into a fit of tears on *WWHL* Cohen initially expresses his concern and attempts comfort, but very quickly bounces back to his fast-paced, energetic, persona to close the show. After the show aired, Brandy revealed on Twitter that her emotional breakdown was just a "joke" to get a rise out of Cohen. Viewers who judged or disbelieved her performance were rewarded for being "in on the joke" while viewers who

empathized with her distress were seemingly duped. In this way, *WWHL* engages fans in a process of moral deliberation where they must assess and judge reality stars authenticity. While distinct from the sentimental soap viewer who identifies with all characters, the savvy viewer withholds the feminine skill of wisdom and intuition characteristic of the "ideal mother" position cultivated by the soap opera (Modleski, 1997). As Andy Cohen invites viewers to make judgments about reality TV stars, he recognizes the value of women's perspectives and affirms their natural skills of intuition, perception, and compassion.

By layering the camp sensibility on top of the sentimental pleasures of women's culture, the intimate digital public adds another facet to feminine interactivity. Not simply sharing in the emotional experience of the stars, viewers are now required to critique those emotions and distance themselves from the casts' personal experiences. In this way, the "feeling rules" and emotional labor involved in interactivity have significantly changed in the context of the intimate digital public. These "feeling rules" ask women to perform the emotional labor of care and compassion alongside a knowing and intuitive camp sensibility. This combination of genuine and savvy spectatorship engages viewer in endless and contradictory forms of emotional labor including identifying with Bravo stars, investing in their personal lives, and experiencing familiar feminine emotions, as well as distancing ourselves from Bravo stars, laughing at their lifestyle, and deriding their melodramatic feelings.

These guidelines shape the ways that viewers interact with Bravo content, evidenced in the performance of over-the-top emotions as self-conscious savvyness. The

highly controlled fan environment of *WWHL* further compels this type of performance by rewarding viewers who perform a savvy, yet emotional fandom with praise from Andy Cohen and other guests. This type of emotional labor works to build brand value for Bravo through the chain of associations from emotional investment to passion for the network to high levels of viewer loyalty to brand loyalty for products advertised on the network, funneled back into network profits. At the same time, the emphasis on irony and camp allows Bravo to situate viewers as media savvy, educated, and upscale, distancing their audience from the denigrated mass female audience. But for viewers, this masochistic viewing position can be harmful as emotions must be carefully managed and attuned to Bravo's unique genuine/savvy register. In this sense, emotions are actively commodified, with viewers' unpaid emotional labor building brand value for media companies.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that *WWHL* functions as an intimate digital public that activates female users through technologies of intimacy and technologies of gender. By introducing digital participation and camp into the intimate public of femininity, Bravo encourages feminine forms of interactivity that make visible viewers' feminine traits and savvy new media aptitudes for advertisers. In doing so, Bravo has merged the socially constructed skills of femininity with digital media, a strategy that extends "women's work" to the digital realm. Through the feminine genre conventions of melodrama, *WWHL* provides templates for interactivity that are rooted in women's perceived emotional expertise and care work. At the same time, *WWHL*'s camp

sensibility engages women in the emotional labor of exhibiting critical distance and intuition. In this way, the socially-constructed skills of femininity are entrenched as women's most fundamental and valuable asset.

What is significant, then, about the gendered interactivity fostered through *WWHL* is that it engages its predominantly female audience in a form of emotional labor that re-entrenches the gender division of labor online. Feminists have long identified women's unpaid reproductive labor (including care work, housework, child rearing, relationship maintenance, and intimacy) as a key source of capitalist accumulation (Federici, 2008). However, the uptake of women's work in the digital realm has not yet been fully explored. By tracing *WWHL*'s use of interactivity and women's culture to guide modes of fandom, I hope to have made visible that ways in which emotional labor is a key parameter of women's social media engagement. In Chapter Three, I expand this framework to analyze the ways in which Bravo activates and manages the emotional labor of its reality stars.

Chapter 3

Affective Enterprising: Transmedia Branding and Emotional Labor

The convergence of television and new media has altered the way television stories are told, ushering in new narrative codes, industrial labor practices, and modes of distribution. A single television story can now extend across multiple, intersecting platforms from websites, blogs, and social media sites, to podcasts, video games, and books. The digital media landscape has expanded the scope of narrative television from a highly controlled medium to a sprawling series of interrelated texts that are co-created and circulated by producers, cast members, and fans. This practice is referred to as transmedia storytelling and involves the creation of ongoing narratives dispersed across multiple media platforms that each contributes a unique part to an unfolding story. In the commercial television industry, the ubiquity of transmedia storytelling reflects increasing efforts to develop strong affinities between the audience and the network brand.

Media scholars have explored transmedia stories as "ongoing sites of narrative expansion" (Mittell, 2015, p. 293) that work to sustain viewer engagement and motivate further consumption (Jenkins, 2006). However, there has been a tendency in transmedia studies to foreground fictional "quality" television—auteur-driven texts that employ cinematic mise-en-scene and complex plots and are chiefly targeted at upscale male audiences (Imre, 2009)—leaving female-centered texts like the reality TV docu-soap less examined. The lack of scholarly attention to reality TV transmedia platforms reifies gendered hierarchies that celebrate "masculine" visual and narrative aesthetics while

deriding the traditionally feminine genre of melodrama and reality TV. This chapter aims to remedy this gap by analyzing the transmedia extensions constructed around Bravo's female-centered, docu-soap series *The Real Housewives*.

As we shall see, reality TV is a key site of transmedia development. Across networks, reality shows have created companion web-series, online live-streaming events, mobile applications, and digital games. The narrative world of *The Real Housewives* franchise is a particularly apt example of reality TV transmedia storytelling with cast members producing unique content on the Bravo website, YouTube channel, podcasts, and social media sites. From the cast blogs where stars document their views on each episode, Instagram accounts where stars upload photos of their personal lives, and Twitter pages where stars offer real-time commentary during episode broadcasts, *The Real Housewives* has a dynamic transmedia presence. What makes reality TV transmedia stories distinct from "quality" fictional texts is that their expansive storyworlds are primarily produced by reality TV stars. Unlike "quality" series where producers create transmedia fictional worlds, reality transmedia platforms rely upon participants to construct compelling narratives on-screen and online. I argue that Bravo's strategy is to elicit and exploit stars' emotional expressions across media sites to promote transmedia engagement and incite viewers to "interact."

This chapter situates Bravo celebrities' emotional expressions as a form of gendered emotional labor, and shows how the network's transmedia strategy depends upon stars' performance of extreme emotions. In the reality TV "emotion economy" stars are guided to perform dramatic and highly condensed emotions such as crying and

screaming (Grindstaff and Murray, 2015). These practices require the skills of emotion management, whereby feelings are commodified in circuits of capitalist exchange (Hochschild, 1983). As Hochschild explains, "emotional labor" refers to the "management of feeling" in accordance with workplace guidelines. This type of labor is gendered because it has historically been tasked to women in the role of primary caregivers. On reality TV docu-soaps like *The Real Housewives*, heightened emotions are the central commodity and must be carefully managed to maximize "drama." As Grindstaff and Murray (2015) explain, "dramatic potential must be deliberately orchestrated and managed, driven by reactions to moments of interpersonal conflict and communication breakdown, as well as deliberately taken up and elaborated upon by participants themselves" (p. 117-18). Thus, the principal "job" of reality stars is to manage and perform their emotions.

As reality programs expand across media platforms, the imperative for stars to display heightened emotions is increasing in terms of both intensity and scope. To extend transmedia worlds, Bravo depends upon stars' emotional performance on TV as well as on social media, blogs, and web-series. The more intense the emotions, the farther they will travel across media sites. I argue that Bravo's transmedia strategy is explicitly linked to the context of "feminized convergence," where converged television and new media platforms are designed for and marketed to women. In the preceding chapters, I have explained how Bravo constructs interactive engagement around the melodramatic docu-soap format to encourage women's digital participation. In this chapter, I explore how Bravo stars' emotional labor is integral to producing the stories that create intimacy and

melodrama to draw fans into transmedia interactivity. Tracing Bravo transmedia strategies and the employment conditions used to maximize melodramatic performance, the first half of the chapter shows how Bravo attempts to harness its stars' emotional labor.

The second half of the chapter examines how reality stars negotiate Bravo's precarious working conditions and the imperative to perform extreme emotions. Through a close analysis of *The Real Housewives of New York's* transmedia presence, including television episodes, blog entries, and social media posts, I argue that Bravolebrities leverage their emotional labor to develop their reality personas into "branded selves" (Hearn, 2006). The branded self is a promotional commodity, a cohesive and saleable version of the self, developed to attract attention and accrue profit. Hearn (2014) explains that reality TV is "ground zero" for the production of monetizable self-brands because stars can parlay television visibility into endorsement deals, branded products, and other entrepreneurial ventures (p. 446). Bravo stars' efforts to promote their selves through emotional expression is a new marketing strategy that I call "affective enterprising." I use the term to describe the process of creating affective scenes to promote a reality TV persona and her related commodities. As we will see, many of the Bravo celebrities (Bravolebrities) have successfully translated their emotion work into bankable commodities including alcoholic beverages, clothing lines, books, paid appearances, workout videos, hit songs jewelry, wigs, and beauty products.

Transmedia Branding

Bravo executive Lisa Hsia (2011) explains that transmedia platforms are designed to "flow content from platform to platform and to bring in the fans along the way — both the diehard and the casual." While this strategy is not new (non-digital extra-textual content has long circulated around popular media texts) the proliferation of digital media platforms has dramatically increased opportunities for transmedia offerings. As Hsia (2011) avers, "This is something that has not been possible until the scaled adoption of smartphones, tablets, social networks and gamification tools."

In the post-network television industry, the proliferation of media outlets and new media technologies has produced a "crisis" over the fragmentation of media audiences. As Jenkins (2006) suggests, "the American viewing public is becoming harder and harder to impress" and thus, the television industry is seeking out ways to court consumers who "have a prolonged relationship and active engagement with media content, who show a willingness to track down that content" (p. 67). The upsurge in transmedia storytelling is a key industry strategy used to maximize consumer engagement by offering an array of ancillary texts. Today, most television programs are not bounded texts; they are one part of a storyworld that includes social media content, in-depth website portals, blog posts, web series, hidden digital artifacts, video games, novels, comic books, and online applications. As Jenkins (2006) explains, "a transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (p. 97-98). Details about the narrative are elaborated and distributed across platforms so that viewers must track down and reconstruct the story in order to deepen understanding.

The industry logic that supports transmedia engagement views extra-textual content as a vehicle for extending consumer interest in the media brand**.** Jenkins (2006) explains that the most effective transmedia franchises have self-contained content that all offer unique points of entry into the storyworld. Once invested in the content, viewers are compelled to move across media platforms to gather further insight into the story. These practices, Jenkins (2006) explains, "sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption" (p. 98). Each extension generates revenue, whether in the form of direct payment, advertising profit, or emotional payoff. For serialized television, the proliferation of transmedia texts seeks to keep viewers engaged in between broadcasts and to develop an emotional connection between viewers and brand content that will drive them to return to the network and recommend the brand to others.

Much of the research on transmedia storytelling focuses on fictional, serialized texts. For instance, Jenkins' (2006) analysis of transmedia stories is centered on the *Matrix* trilogy, a science fiction film series so convoluted viewers' turn to extra-textual resources to make sense of the complex characters and mythical world. The popular television program *Lost* produced a similarly intricate narrative web spread out over alternate reality games, book series, tie-in websites, and online videos (Mittell, 2015). Mysterious, layered fictional texts lend themselves to what Mittell (2015) calls the "expansionist approach," a form of transmedia storytelling with narratives so complex they involve extra-textual clues and background details scattered across alternate platforms. Expansionist texts involve "a mode of forensic fandom that spurs viewers to

dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of a story and its telling" (Mittell, as cited in in Jenkins, 2013).

While "quality" fictional texts spawn transmedia engagement through elaborate "drillable" storyworlds (Mittell, 2015), Jenkins (2013) argues that mass media marketed to women generate transmedia platforms through volume and duration. Jenkins (2013) notes that the complexity of soap opera stories "comes through a heightened form of accretion, through story worlds based on a much larger universe of characters than a typical 'drillable' story, with installments that come more frequently and have much longer durations" (137). Jenkins' description of feminized media as sprawling yet shallow and masculine texts like the sci-fi action film series *The Matrix* as narratively complex and "drillable" reifies the cultural hierarchies between masculine and feminine media. Despite Jenkins (2006) distinction, soap opera extensions build extensive storyworlds in much the same ways as film and "quality" television programs. Elana Levine's (2011) research shows that many long-running network soap operas developed transmedia content that detailed character backstories and offered personal insights about the cast over blogs, social media, video, podcasts, and websites "written" by fictional characters (p. 204-205). While soap opera transmedia features provide details about nuanced characters and layered storyworlds in much the same way as quality television and film texts, women's mass media has primarily been overlooked in transmedia scholarship. The abundance of research on "quality" fictional texts (Jenkins, 2006, 2013; Mittell 2015), and the relatively few studies of soap opera, reality TV, and other

feminized genres reinforces the view that women's media is superfluous, emotional and inferior (Huyssen, 1986).

The devaluation of women's media, as well as the feminized medium of television, has long been embedded in United States mass culture. When television was first introduced to American families during the post-war era, Spigel (1992) argues, women were positioned as its primary target. The television set was constructed as a domestic appliance for women to maintain and a feminized medium for women's amusement. Similar to Huyssen's (1986) contention that mass culture is feminized and devalued, Joyrich (1988) points out that television is viewed as a feminine medium, particularly through its association with feminine forms of consumption. She avers, television "threatens to draw all viewer-consumers into the vacuum of mass culture—the irrational and diffuse space coded as feminine" (Joyrich, 1988, p. 146). The historically low cultural value of television is directly correlated to its feminized content and the aesthetic of the mass culture medium.

The turn to "quality" television reflects industry efforts to legitimate the denigrated television medium. The new "quality" identity for TV emerged out of the transformation to a post-network niche cable environment and with it, new forms of production, distribution, branding, and digital media integration. "Quality" TV is distinguished from the feminized television medium through cinematic aesthetics, high production value, multiple overlapping storylines, social and cultural commentary, and digital interactivity (Imre, 2009). The cultural elevation of certain types of television helped to distance the medium from its long-standing association with female and "low-

class" consumers. In the era of media convergence, Newman and Levine (2012) point out, discourses that legitimate quality TV promote a "progress narrative that naturalizes classed and gendered hierarchies with its assumption that moving forward means a shift away from the feminized past and toward a more masculinized future" (p. 11). As a result, "masculine" programs like *Lost* and *24* are heralded as "quality" TV even as the employ the melodramatic form (Imre, 2009).

The relative absence of female-centered programming in transmedia scholarship suggests that elaborate and complex storyworlds are the domain of high brow masculine television. To recall Jenkins et al.'s (2013) distinction, "quality" transmedia texts become "drillable" by adding both breadth and depth to the narrative while women's genres like the soap opera only offer transmedia engagement through the expansiveness of the story. By constructing this dichotomy, Jenkins et al. miss the ways in which soap opera transmedia extensions are character-driven, allowing viewers to spend more time with the characters they have grown close to over the span of many years. While this may not qualify as narrative "drillability," it does provide depth to the story through intersecting media platforms. It is this same investment in and connection to characters that drives Bravo's transmedia strategies around *The Real Housewives* franchise. Cross-platform reality TV texts may seem like a departure from the kind of creative storytelling meticulously crafted around quality programming, but as I will show, reality TV's digital platforms utilize the same logics of transmedia storytelling—disseminating information across platforms to expand the depth and breadth of the constructed story and to intensify fans' relationship to the brand.

While reality TV transmedia stories deploy many of the same strategies as "quality" transmedia texts, there are two key distinctions between "real" and fictional transmedia praxis. The first difference is that fictional transmedia texts require planned content distributed across platforms while reality TV transmedia stories depend upon channeling and narrativizing the lives reality stars already lead. Whereas fictional accounts are finite and constructed, reality paratexts seem to emerge organically out of the ongoing, daily experiences of the cast. The other key distinction is that fictional transmedia stories are created by producers and reality TV storylines are constantly reproduced through the ongoing lives of real people. The narratives visible on reality series are only a small cross-selection of the stars' complex lives. As *The Real Housewives* executive producer Andy Cohen (2012) explains, for each 44-minute episode, they shoot 1,270 hours of footage (p. 195). Reality stars have lives that are not shown on TV, thus it stands to reason that Bravolebrities' social media accounts are simply a leisure activity taken up outside the confines of work. However, this view obscures the intense labor stars put into curating their social media presence to extend reality TV stories.

As we will see, reality extensions are as carefully fashioned and controlled as their fictional counterparts. Just as fictional transmedia workers have to coordinate cross-platform interactions, reality producers and stars have to navigate the messy process attuning multiple, intersecting social media accounts to tell a compelling transmedia story. But unlike fictional stories played by actors, reality series represent real people who are deeply invested in the ways they are represented. What makes the process of

transmedia storytelling more complex, then, is that reality TV producers have to coordinate and negotiate with reality stars that have a stake in the what stories are told as well as some degree of control over their social media accounts. Whereas fictional storyworlds are built according to producers' creative design, reality stars work from a much looser set of guidelines with prompts like "tweet about your life" or "blog to tell your side of the story." Thus, reality stars appear to be in control of their own image even as they are beholden to the desires of network executives and legally bound to their contract. Further, reality stars are largely unpaid for the extra time they spend time blogging, posting on social media, and appearing on talk shows. Each stage of reality TV transmedia production is fraught with tensions between the network and its stars, official narratives and individual perspectives, and the franchise brand and each stars' branded persona.

In order to understand how transmedia strategies are operationalized in the context of reality TV, it is imperative to examine how reality stars are implicated in the process of extending television storyworlds. By detailing their private lives, reality TV stars generate economic and cultural value for the network brand. Even so, reality stars digital labor is not easily identifiable as "work" because it ostensibly emerges from their daily lives. Reality stars' digital labor is further complicated by the expectations of the melodramatic docu-soap genre and the reality TV emotion economy. Docu-soaps utilize the storytelling techniques of the soap opera by creating character-driven stories that revolve around derivative narratives marked by emotional upheaval. Thus, transmedia extensions require stars' willingness to divulge their emotions and details about their

private lives online (as well as on TV) to provide texture to the narratives developed on the show. Thus, the docu-soap disproportionately depends upon the emotional labor of its female stars to engender a melodramatic structure of feeling. The reality TV emotion economy trades in outrageous personalities and interpersonal drama, and so stars' ability to elevate their emotions to dramatic spectacle determines of their success on the show.

Reality transmedia imperatives rely upon female reality stars' ability to perform their feelings in such a way that generates conflict and intrigue in order to push viewers to new platforms where they can discuss, dissect, and seek out further information. Not only does this industry strategy cut down on labor costs (there is no need for transmedia content developers since the stars create their own paratexts), it relies upon the unpaid labor of female reality TV participants. In the following sections, I situate this trend as exploitative of women's emotional labor. But first, I offer a more detailed exploration of the intensification of emotional display and the commercial use of emotions in the transmedia extensions around Bravo's *The Real Housewives* franchise.

Transmedia *Housewives* & the Digital Money Shot

The first season of *The Real Housewives of Orange County* (*RHOC*) aired in 2006, documenting the lives of five wealthy women from a gated California community. Executive Producer Andy Cohen (2012) describes Bravo's formula for the ensemble drama as a "perfect storm" of "real humor, conflict, emotion, heart, and something totally unexpected—let's say, a wig pull" (p. 195). The unscripted reality series mixes the melodrama of the soap opera with a stylized sheen of the Bravo brand, offering an insider look at the lives of ritzy housewives. While early episodes of *RHOC* were not an

immediate success, by the end of the first season ratings were solid and Bravo found that "viewers who'd begun watching only to confirm that they found the women repellent somehow became invested in their stories—which proved to be more universal than anybody initially thought" (Cohen, 2012, p. 195). As *RHOC* grew in popularity, Bravo hoped to extend its brand success to another series in development about Manhattan socialites. With the same stylized presentation and melodramatic themes, Bravo premiered *The Real Housewives of New York City* (*RHONY*) in 2008. Over the next seven years, Bravo extended the franchise to six additional cities and over a dozen spin-off series.

Bravo's *The Real Housewives* franchise is one of the most extensive and successful examples of a reality TV transmedia platform. With a slue of spinoff docu-soaps, an interactive talk show, web series, YouTube channel, website, blogs, web applications, online games, and an active social media presence, *The Real Housewives'* stories unfold across multiple intersecting platforms. On the BravoTV.com website, visitors can click on full-body icons of each *The Real Housewives* star to glean more information about her personal life including a biography, links to photos, news stories, career endeavors, and blog posts. For instance, on *RHONY* star Bethenny Frankel's page, her biography focuses on her self-made "Skinnygirl" business, and her run of spin-off shows documenting her engagement, wedding ceremony, child birth, and eventual divorce. Bethenny's page links to photographs of Bethenny "out on the town," a news story about a television cooking series she is producing, a video clip reading from her recent book, an advice columns for single moms, and episode recaps from her cast blog.

Each series page on BravoTV.com exists as a hub of information about Bravo stars with extra-textual material—photos give users a glimpse into their personal lives, ancillary narratives fill in their backstory, blog recaps add texture to episodic narratives, and social media sites extend docu-soap storylines across media platforms. On Bravo's website, *The Real Housewives* brand merchandise, advertisements, and product placements are integrated into news stories, blog posts, and digital promotions, indicating how transmedia provides additional revenue streams for the network.

Also housed on BravoTV.com are *The Real Housewives* blogs, written weekly by members of the cast and posted shortly after an episode airs. The blogs provide a write up of the cast members' personal insights on the events depicted on the show. For instance, when Bethenny Frankel returned to *RHONY* after a three season hiatus, she did not want to participate in the manufactured drama characteristic of the show. She is constantly shown rebuking cast members' attempts to invent feuds and, in one instance, she pretends to fall asleep when her co-star Heather tries to conjure up drama about Bethenny's birthday party guest list. On Bethenny's blog, she offers the following context to temper her "harsh" representation: "I find that on the Housewives shows, being invited or not invited to something tends to be blown out of proportion, dragged out, and takes on a life of itself. This concept is exhausting to me, and I knew exactly where Heather was going. It felt manufactured to stir up drama" (Frankel, 2015). The blogs provide a place for the housewives to document their feelings and reframe how they are represented, adding context and a defense to the stories that play out on the show. The cast blogs show that Bravo's transmedia content is not a matter of producers developing narratives on

alternative platforms, but rather depends upon reality stars intimate feelings and personal disclosures. This emotional labor is used to draw viewers to the blogs and to construct an emotional connection that motivates them to track down additional information across media platforms.

Another significant dimension of *The Real Housewives* transmedia strategy is reality stars' robust social media presence. At the top of the BravoTV.com homepage is a link to "follow" stars on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. On social media sites, Bravolebrities share details about their personal lives and to draw attention to their business ventures. Kandi Burruss from *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* is one of the most popular Housewives on social media with over three million Facebook followers, two million Instagram followers, and 1.5 million Twitter followers. She (or more likely her assistant) posts unique content on each platform multiple times each day with updates and photos on her daily life. In April 2015, Kandi posted 146 photographs and videos to her Instagram account, many of which recounted time spent with her friends and family and many others that promoted her ventures (a photo of Kandi brand sex toys captioned: "Go to BedroomKandi.com & get you some goodies or book a #BedroomKandi party!"). Through social media, stars can elaborate on the "characters" they aim to construct on TV (e.g., Kandi's accounts reinforce her persona as a friendly, family-focused, sexually adventurous entrepreneur). This practice requires stars to mine and document the details of their private life to produce digital artifacts that can be consumed by fans.

Bravo developed its transmedia strategy to deliver more content to its already engaged fans. Bravo executive Aimee Viles explains that the network delivers transmedia

content to viewers that exhibit interactive behavior such as "using not just one but two or even three devices while watching TV" to search for "additional companion content" and to extend the "fan experience" (as cited in Campbell, 2014). Lisa Hsia, Bravo's head of digital media, suggests that transmedia helps to cure what she calls "empty box syndrome," "a problem affecting the millions of Bravo TV fans who like to keep up with their favorite reality-show stars on social media but need something to fill that space" (as cited in Hampp, 2011). Bravo's transmedia extensions attempt to "fill the space" by offering an ever increasing array of content about *The Real Housewives*. According to Viles, Bravo's transmedia content is "bringing fans closer to the programming" (as cited in Campbell, 2014). This logic is in line with the industrial aims of transmedia storytelling to engage fans across platforms in order to increase their investment in the networks' offerings. Networks with loyal, long-term transmedia viewers are particularly desirable to advertisers because strong emotional attachments are viewed as the key to affecting consumer behavior.

But simply offering more content on more platforms does not fully explain Bravo's transmedia strategy. I argue that the success of Bravo's transmedia platforms depends on the housewives performance of what Laura Grindstaff (2002) calls the "money shot" across new media platforms. Writing about the emotional breakdowns characteristic of daytime talk shows, Grindstaff (2002) explains, "Like the orgasmic cum shot of pornographic films, the money shot of talk shows makes visible the precise moment of letting go, of losing control, of surrendering to the body and its 'animal' emotions" (p. 20). Of course, what appears to be a "letting go" of emotions is actually a

carefully calibrated performance, since emotional outbursts are used to produce melodramatic storylines. On *The Real Housewives*, stars regularly dramatize their emotions—collapsing into a fit of tears, screaming at co-stars, throwing drinks, and overturning tables—to conjure up a marketable "money shot," a climactic moment that will be replayed in promos and recaps throughout the season. Reality TV producers design the format to maximize drama by typecasting participants who are likely to butt heads and manipulating the environment to provoke conflict (Grindstaff and Murray, 2015). However, it is stars' emotional labor that engenders the money shot. As Grindstaff and Murray (2015) explain, "dramatic potential must be deliberately orchestrated and managed, driven by reactions to moments of interpersonal conflict and communication breakdown, as well as deliberately taken up and elaborated upon by participants" (p. 118). The imperative to perform the money shot, to calibrate one's feelings to produce the right kind of emotional expressiveness, engages stars in endless emotional labor.

Emotional labor includes the calculated exhibition of feelings through bodily registers, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and appearance, in accordance with workplace guidelines (Hochschild, 1983). Online, emotional labor looks quite different; instead of an affective corporeal performance emotion work is carried out through the textual and visual staging of feelings. Thus, the conventions of the televisual money shot (screaming and crying) are reconfigured into, what I am calling, a "digital money shot" as written attacks and confrontations. In both cases, emotions are carefully administered in relation to feeling rules that are established by the work environment. Since reality television trades in extreme vacillating emotions, the emotional labor that goes into the

production of the money shot positions actors as attention seeking, emotionally volatile women. It is notable here that all of Bravo docu-soap stars are women and that emotional labor has historically been the domain of women. The conflation of women and emotion work in the context of reality TV entrenches the stereotype of women as the primary managers of emotions on one hand, and as weepy, unpredictable, and emotionally imbalanced on the other.

In her account of emotional labor, Hochschild (1983) distinguishes between private and commercial uses of feeling, coining the term "transmutation" to describe the translation of private emotions into a profit-driven economy. The recurrent process of transmutation binds the private to the public in such a way that private feelings are constituted in line with the values and needs of the market. Hochschild (1983) postulates that although private emotions have historically been managed in relation to social codes, now more than ever emotions are engineered by corporations. In exchange for managing emotions, laborers gain "use value," or collect monetary wages in capitalist modes of exchange. Within the reality TV emotion economy, outrageous, melodramatic feelings hold the highest value; thus, the most successful reality stars are those who perform unpredictable, over-the-top emotions. The mutual constitution of the reality TV emotion economy and the television ratings economy function to motivate stars to perform extreme emotions in order to propel the network brand.

As docu-soap narratives are extended into the digital realm, networks and stars are experimenting with ways to translate the money shot online. Because the money shot functions as reality TV's most effective promotional device, it stands to reason that the

money shot would similarly entice fans to navigate transmedia platforms. Digital incarnations of the money shot include posting mean tweets about a co-star, uploading a scantily clad photos to Instagram with a not-so-subtly coded message to an ex, engaging in a social media war, or proclaiming one's love or new relationship of Facebook. The digital performance of heightened emotions is a key signifier of the reality TV emotion economy, but more importantly, this practice points to the ways women's emotional labor is extended into the digital realm. In what follows, I explore a significant manifestation of the digital money shot—the Twitter war—to underscore how reality stars are performing emotions online.

On Bravo docu-soaps, the money shot is generally produced through conflict and confrontation. Grindstaff and Murray (2015) explain that the docu-soap genre is the most difficult to produce because narratives are not (entirely) predetermined and it lacks a structural money shot moment such as a big reveal, a physical transformation, or an elaborate hoax (p. 117). Instead, docu-soap stars have to manufacture the money shot out of mundane, quotidian life events. The most pronounced strategy used by docu-soaps stars is to create a money shot moment through interpersonal conflict. On every season of *The Real Housewives*, one or more cast members starts a fight with another, and then over the course of many episodes, conversations and retrospective confessionals are dedicated to sussing out the details of the dispute. As Scott Dunlop, the creator of the series explains, "Conflict has to exist to drive the story forward" (as cited in Day, 2014). Each conflict culminates in a raucous confrontation: the ultimate money shot moment. The confrontation is an intense argument, often involving multiple cast members in a

screaming match of insults and accusations that almost always ending in a physical altercation whether it be a slap, a hair pull, a tossed drink, or on one particularly memorable occasion, a prosthetic leg thrown across the dinner table.

On transmedia platforms, the housewives carry on this tradition by engaging in digital confrontations. One particularly clear example of the confrontational digital money shot is the Twitter war. A Twitter war takes place when one reality star attacks another star on the micro-blogging platform. Provocative tweets are sometimes "disguised" as general commentary, a way of saying something negative without articulating who exactly is being addressed. This practice is called "subtweeting," short for subliminal tweeting, meaning that the post contains a hidden message. But most often, the housewives' post rude tweets that directly address their co-stars by linking to their Twitter handle (@username). Not surprisingly, the housewives' Twitter wars usually correspond with episode broadcasts. When an episode of *The Real Housewives* airs, the stars are almost always online live-tweeting commentary about the show—pointing out important moments, musing about their (mis)representation, and attacking their cast mates. Once a housewife posts an aggressive tweet, whether it is a subtle dig or an explicit attack, the respondent fires back quickly, sparking a real time Twitter feud. Twitter wars are particularly compelling for fans not only because they extend on-screen drama, but also because they are unfolding live on an open social media site. Unlike the televised dispute, fans can take part in the feud, posting their own views and tagging the involved reality stars in their tweets. In the midst of a Twitter war, reality stars will often

recognize their sympathizers by retweeting their comments or liking their posts, and take on their attackers by responding to their tweets.

As a part of the Twitter war exchange, feelings such as rage, shock, and distress, are produced through carefully crafted tweets. Here, it is important to keep in mind the temporal lapse between filming the fight and the distillation of those feelings on Twitter months later. For example, when *RHONY* star LuAnn de Lesseps finds out that her fifty-one year old co-star, Carole Radziwill, started dating Adam, LuAnn's 20-something-year-old personal chef, her on screen response falls flat ("The art of being a cougar," 2015). LuAnn claims to be hurt that Carole waited so long to tell her about the burgeoning romance, but does not express the kind of real emotion that commands a money shot. LuAnn's reaction is very much "on brand" for her, she plays the role of the "hurt divorcee" who is passive aggressively polite (Havrilesky, 2010). However, this persona has not fared well over the past few seasons as she was recently demoted to a "friend" role rather than a full-fledged "Real Housewife." LuAnn's wounded reaction does not translate well in the reality TV emotion economy where the performance of excessive feelings and conflict provide the raw material of the money shot. Even though LuAnn misses out on her televised money shot, when the episode airs, months later, LuAnn is outspoken about Carole's "new" boyfriend on social media. The tweet that started the war stated: "You're a disgrace and embarssing to women our age @CaroleRadziwill @BravoWWHL @Andy" [sic] (de Lesseps, 2015b). Notably, LuAnn tags Bravo executive Andy Cohen and his live talk show *Watch What Happens Live (WWHL)* in her tweets to ensure maximum visibility for her attack. On the night *The Real*

Housewives of New York aired LuAnn posted over two-dozen accusatory tweets to coincide with the pre-taped broadcast and Carole's live interview on *WWHL*. Because *WWHL* airs live, directly after the *RHONY* episode, host Andy Cohen integrated LuAnn's tweets into the broadcast and later, took a phone call from Luann where she continued her attack on air.

LuAnn's Twitter war functions as a digital money shot, a climactic moment that galvanizes audience attention across different media platforms. This strategy creates a feedback loop between stars posting on social media, Bravolebrity blog posts, docu-soap series, and Bravo's live interactive talk show, encouraging fans to ping back and forth between platforms to stay current on all the drama. What makes LuAnn's social media strategy particularly successful is her use of two central money shot techniques. First, she ignites an argument through a direct confrontation. By calling out Carole and linking to @WWHL's Twitter account, LuAnn quickly escalated a seemingly minor dispute. Second, LuAnn utilizes the surprise reveal, a long-standing strategy used to elicit intense emotional reactions. As Gridstaff and Murray (2015) explain "the moment of the reveal is the climactic payoff, the laying bare of raw, real emotion for all to see. It is the reveal that audiences both anticipate and take pleasure in evaluating" (p. 113). On Twitter, LuAnn discloses that Carole's boyfriend Adam recently broken up with LuAnn's niece and they are "still seeing each other and were planning a trip together" (de Lesseps, 2015a). This revelation, read on-air by *WWHL* host Andy Cohen is mean to provoke a dramatic response from Carole, creating another money shot moment. Unfortunately, Carole

claims to know about the upcoming vacation and fails to produce the kind of jealous, vengeful response intended.

Through the Twitter war, we can see how the digital money shot is used as a central component of Bravo's transmedia strategy. By extending docu-soap drama onto social media, stars motivate viewers to traverse online platforms to uncover more details about the interpersonal conflicts that play out on the show. The openness and liveness of social media platforms seems to give viewers unfettered access to stars' "real" thoughts about events as they are unfolding on reality television. Twitter, in particular, functions as an outlet for the housewives pent up anger about fights that have taken place or the ways the are represented, making it an ideal platform for the digital money shot. The Twitter War is exemplary of the emotional labor the goes into creating a digital money shot, showing how stars express melodramatic spectacles online by carefully crafting emotions and distributing them across converged TV and new media sites.

Given the value of the money shot for attracting attention in the reality TV emotion economy, I argue that Bravo encourages docu-soap stars to take part in Twitter wars to draw attention to its docu-soap series, and more broadly to the network brand. However, Twitter wars also serve to publicize the stars' reality TV persona. After a reduced contract and a position as a "friend" rather than a bonafide Housewife in season six, LuAnn attempts to resituate herself as a lynchpin in season seven's drama to secure a future spot on the show. Instead of her usual hurt divorcee and "Miss Manners" persona, LuAnn rebrands herself as a dramatic and outspoken antagonist. While Carole seems to be the "victim" of the Twitter war, LuAnn's attack occurred on the same night Carole

launched her branded jewelry line and announced its release on *WWHL*. Thus, the circulation of the digital money shot not only helps to promote the network, it also helps reality stars secure ongoing employment with Bravo and create a branded self.

Precarious Work in Reality TV

The housewives enactment of the money shot on social media underscores the emotional labor involved in extending reality TV storylines. The success of the digital money shot hinges on Bravolebrities' ability to generate drama through online interactions. Consequently, this format puts pressure on reality stars to perform emotions like anger, distress, and hurt on social media to extend audience interest in their programs. I argue that Bravo uses precarious working conditions to motivate its stars to produce memorable television and digital money shots. Bravo's employment conditions are unstable (yearly contracts are ambiguously determined by ratings and fan "likability" (Cohen, 2012)), unprotected (Bravo contracts explain stars' "appearance, depiction, and portrayal… may be disparaging, defamatory, embarrassing… and may expose [them] to public ridicule, humiliation or condemnation, and may portray [them] in a false light" (Day, 2014)), informal (stars agree to "agree to the recording of telephone conversations in 'areas in which a person under other circumstances might have a reasonable expectation of privacy'" (Day, 2014)) and exploitative (Bravo footage can be exploited throughout the universe at any time, in perpetuity… without any compensation to [stars] whatsoever." ("We Can Fictionalize The Footage!," n.d.)). Bravo's tenuous employment conditions maximize the potential for drama by premising employment on the successful performance of the money shot.

To extend Bravo content onto digital platforms, reality producers have developed a range of experimental strategies such as live chats, blogs, social media posts, online applications, and digital games. Bravo incentivizes talent to be active on social media by placing them in competition with one another and with other *The Real Housewives* series. Lisa Hsia, Bravo Executive Vice President of digital media explains, Bravo's earliest transmedia strategy was to teach stars' how to be active on social media sites. Hsia explains, "With *The Real Housewives*, when we first started…most of them didn't know how to tweet, so I just decided we should just put the leaderboard at the bottom with all five of them and how many followers they had, and that incented them to tweet more" (as cited in Dredge, 2012a). As Hsia notes, Bravo does not pay its stars to tweet, but rather incentives online activity by pitting stars against each other for innumerable rewards from bragging rights to higher salaries to attention for the self-brand.

Bravo utilizes the contest model to encourage more intimate disclosures and dramatic conflicts on screen as well as online. The logic behind the competition model is that as stars vie to be the most outrageous the occurrence and intensity of the money shot will increase. This strategy has proven successful, Twitter wars and other social media confrontations are becoming the norm. As a transmedia device, the money shot works to motivate viewers to traverse across multiple platforms not just to find out more information but to become involved in the social media spectacle. Thus, Bravolebrities perform outrageous emotions to engage fans and garner higher ratings, giving them more power to negotiate a higher salary. Indicators like social media followers and fan sentiment help to secure stars future spot on the show, evidenced by the fact that three

members of the New York cast were fired based on negative social media feedback from fans (Baskin, 2012).

Bravo executive and TV personality Andy Cohen (2012) is in charge of negotiating the housewives' contracts each season, a process he calls "tense and fraught with emotion" (p. 202). Usually the details of contract negotiations remain behind closed doors, but there have been several publicized instances that illuminate the negotiation process. In his memoir, Cohen (2012) describes the *RHONY* casts first attempt at collective bargaining: "In the early, uncharted territory days, the New York women used Bethenny to do their collective bidding—they fancied themselves akin to the cast of Friends. She once called me from Jill Zarin's closet to demand more money on behalf of the group in exchange for…something I can't even remember now…" (p. 202-203). Cohen's condescending account underscores the network's view of collective contract negotiation—Bravo holds all of the power and reality stars are expendable. To drive this point home, the network intensifies precarious employment conditions.

The precariazation of work refers to the increasing insecurity and informality of working conditions within the contemporary post-Fordist capitalist economy. Gill and Pratt (2008) explain, "While capitalist labour has always been characterized by intermittency for lower-paid and lower-skilled workers, the recent departure is the addition of well-paid and high-status workers into this group of 'precarious workers'" (p. 2). Cultural industries in particular depend upon workers willingness to produce creative work under precarious conditions including long hours, intermittent and insecure employment, eroding boundaries between work and play, and informal work

environments (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 33). Working under these conditions, cultural workers have been hailed as "model entrepreneurs" as they appear to successful merge creative labor with entrepreneurial values (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 14). Despite the ascendance of cultural workers as "model entrepreneurs," creative labor is often marked by fierce competition, exhaustion, fear of getting left behind, and the stress of socializing and networking to find future work. Moreover, Gill and Pratt (2008) aver, cultural workers experience "the anxiety, insecurity and individualized shame that are endemic features of fields in which you are judged on what you produce, 'you are only as good as your last job', and your whole life and sense of self is bound up with your work" (p. 16). While reality stars may seem unlikely cultural workers, their working conditions are strikingly similar to those in the "creative class." Reality stardom is determined by one's ability to produce shocking yet relatable narratives while working conditions are marred by long hours, flexibility, competition, irregular circumstances, contingent contracts, anxiety, and the complete erasure of boundaries between work and home life (Hearn, 2014, p. 483). Given Bravo's precarious work conditions, it is no surprise that contract disputes often work out in favor of network interests and increasingly rely upon the housewives emotional labor and entrepreneurial zeal to producer higher ratings.

At the end of season five, *RHONY* housewives again attempted to form an all cast-union. The Hollywood entertainment site, *The Wrap* reports, "According to an individual close to the cast, Bravo tried to squash any group bargaining by the women from the very beginning by dividing and conquering them – a method we are told they're using currently on the Beverly Hills ladies, as well" (Nededog, 2013a). Instead of

simultaneously handing out cast contracts, Bravo began to stager its offers in order to dissuade the cast from discussing the terms. *The Wrap's* source notes the Bravo holds the contracts of the "hardest negotiators" until the last minute so that "not only will they have less time to negotiate, it will also instill fear that they aren't going to be asked back" (Nededog, 2013a). When the New York housewives found out their salaries varied from $175,000 to 500,000 they refused to finalize their contract and halted production on season six (Nededog, 2013a). During the stand off, New York housewife Carole Radziwill (2013) tweeted about her job offer: "I still haven't decided. Payscale is ridix + it irks me to be given ultimatums.Just ask my last 5 boyfriends.:) What about you? Irksome?" [sic]. When a fan inquires about the pay, Radziwill responds that she was paid more as an associate producer at ABC in the 1990s. Later in the thread Radziwill notes that Bravo's parent company Comcast had earnings of 1.4 billion dollars this quarter, implying that reality stars wages were unfair given the media conglomerates sizable profits. In the end, each cast member signed the original contract when Bravo threated to recast the entire series. According to a network "insider," "If it came down to it they would probably do it for free over losing out on the platform. They need the platform to stay relevant and to make money" (Nededog, 2013a). As this "insider" points out, the housewives relatively low pay (in relation to professional actors, not reality participants who often receive little to no salary) is rationalized as a base salary, with the real value of reality stardom being widespread visibility.

As a result of this visibility, Andy Cohen (2012) explains, "The Housewives can also make serious money, especially when they use the show—with Bravo's blessing—to

brand themselves, the way Bethenny did with her Skinnygirl margarita empire or Teresa with her Italian cookbooks" (p. 204). Augmenting their reality TV salary, stars use airtime to construct themselves as branded commodities that they can leverage toward merchandise sales, publicity appearances, and other promotional ventures. However, as Andy Cohen (2012) notes, the Housewives self-branding efforts are mediated by Bravo and thus must fit into preapproved storylines or risk getting cut from the broadcast. As Allison Hearn (2014) explains:

> The branded selves that emerge from most reality television…are not freely chosen or expressed but are strictly controlled by show producers, both in the editing room, where personas and storylines are constructed, and via binding contracts, which effectively strip the participant of any legal control over their person-character (p. 447).

To mitigate Bravo's heavy-handed editing, the housewives have devised their own strategy— integrating branded products into high-drama money shot situations, a practice I call "affective enterprising." Reality stars know that emotionally-charged money shots marked by crying, yelling, and even physical altercations will almost certainly make it on the show. Thus the most successful and long-running housewives have become experts in merging self-branding with emotional performances such as maudlin tear-filled confessions and raucous hair-pulling catfights.

Affective Enterprising

While Bravo's precarious working conditions and tenuous contracts oblige reality stars to perform emotional labor or risk being fired, the housewives have developed a

strategy to parlay intense emotional spectacles to promote their persona and branded products. This section traces the emergence of "affective enterprising" in *The Real Housewives of New York,* and show how this strategy is embedded within neoliberal imperative to become an "entrepreneur of the self" (Foucault, 2010) and transform the self into a brand.

Allison Hearn (2008) defines the "branded self" as a "commodity sign; it is a body that works and, at the same time, points to itself working, striving to embody the values of its corporate working environment" (p. 497). The trend to brand the self emerges out of neoliberal market discourses that divest the state of fiscal responsibility for its citizens and instead downloads the principles of free-market capitalism onto the individual (Foucault, 2010; Ouellette & Hay, 2008). In this context, individual workers are responsible for developing skills to transform themselves into human capital, or a branded self. For reality stars, the process of "taking responsibility for oneself" through self-branding requires performing within the reality TV emotion economy that demands stars perform extreme emotions to render everyday life entertainment. Thus, the branded self is codified as a way of life through relentless attention seeking and ongoing self-promotion (Hearn, 2008).

At the same time, self-branding requires developing a compelling persona or character type that is easily identified. The presentation of the self as brand must include a compelling narrative made saleable through the production of affect and image (Hearn, 2008, p. 214). In order to become successful, reality stars need a promotional skin that is easily discernible within the reality TV economy. For instance, the *RHONY* stars

encapsulate different character types: Bethenny Frankel as the sharp-witted businesswoman, Ramona Singer as the confrontational party girl, Jill Zarin as the manipulative socialite, and LuAnn de Lesseps as the well-mannered divorcee. Touting specific branded-selves, the housewives then engineer their emotional reactions to reinforce their persona. As emotional labor is enmeshed within the norms of brand culture, the housewives' contrived performances index the importance of managing one's feelings in order to project a coherent brand identity.

Within Bravo docu-soaps, reality stars design their emotional performance to define their branded self and then leverage the performance to draw attention to their branded commodities. Bethenny Frankel, *RHONY's* single, career-minded "housewife," was the first to enact this strategy by integrating her burgeoning Skinnygirl brand into the emotionally fraught narratives promoted by the show. Beginning in season one, Bethenny's persona is developed in contrast to the other housewives; they are wealthy socialites with an unlimited disposable income, Bethenny is as an ambitious entrepreneur with a hapless romantic life—thriving in business but unlucky in love. Initially, Bethenny's storylines played up the tension of balancing her nascent romantic relationships and business ventures, a familiar prescription for women who aspire to domestic and entrepreneurial success. These tensions culminate in episode four when Bethenny decides to ask her new boyfriend to cohabitate. As she prepares for the proposal, Bethenny invites a girlfriend over for specialty martinis. While they express their apprehension about his level of commitment, the cocktails repeatedly appear—in conversation described as drinks that will "blow your socks off," framed in close-up on

the table, and again, as the women sip from their glasses ("Social wife," 2008). In this revealing scene, Bethenny introduces viewers to her signature Skinnygirl cocktails by integrating them into the emotionally charged scene.

It is in these intimate melodramatic moments where Bethenny most effectively promotes her Skinnygirl brand through "affective enterprising." By performing emotional excess, the housewives construct compelling narratives as platforms to market their carefully constructed personas and their branded merchandise. While melodramatic money shot moments ensure ratings for *The Real Housewives* franchise and the Bravo network, I argue that the calculated convergence of emotional spectacle and branding occasions operates as a particularly gendered strategy whereby female stars channel their emotional labor to promote themselves. Harnessing the power of emotional appeals, affective enterprising reconfigures women's private affects into modes of capital accumulation. In this way, Bethenny operates within the emotional economy of the show by leveraging her romantic woes to garner visibility for her new brand of alcohol.

After season one aired, the other five *RHONY* Housewives adopt Bethenny's entrepreneurial model—using the show as a platform to advertise branded commodities. In season two, Jill Zarin plans a marketing event for a new line of ecofriendly fabrics sold by her husband's store Zarin Fabrics ("Wife in the fast lane," 2009). During the segment, Jill uses her individual interview to explain her marketing strategy—by hosting a cocktail party at the showroom she can introduce new products and "get customers to come down to the store." More specifically, Jill invites the other Housewives and engages them in various disputes to guarantee more airtime for her business. When Ramona and her

husband Mario arrive, Jill greets them with a reproachful comment about discrepancies over a friendly tennis match, provoking a heated discussion over the fairness of the game. Since *RHONY* producers had constructed this disagreement as a significant plot point in the show, Mario's animated summary of the match compels prolonged exposure of Jill's marketing event. Throughout the night, Jill manages to stir up drama by pointing out her gay friend's attraction to another Housewife's date and by gossiping with Bethenny about Ramona's imprudent dating advice. As Jill circulates the party, reams of Zarin fabric and housewares are visible in nearly every frame. Jill's purposeful integration of gossip into her branding event highlights the double labor of affective enterprising—while she markets her new line of products, she simultaneously instigates drama to ensure prolonged airplay.

As *The Real Housewives* franchise developed, affective enterprising became a widespread practice. Nearly every successful housewife has a marketable persona that has been used to promote branded commodities including spin-off series, clothing, jewelry, gyms, shoes, beauty products, diet foods, books, songs, and sex toys. However, Bravo executives have not been thrilled with this strategy as it sidesteps their editorial control; by performing the money shot at brand events, the housewives force Bravo's hand to include the promotional scenes. Fans too expressed frustration at this blatant marketing ploy. With the rise of transmedia storytelling, the housewives affective enterprising strategies evolved and moved online.

Transmedia Self-Branding

Bravolebrities' uptake of digital media—writing blogs, posting on social media, and interacting with fans—suggests that they are not simply extensions of Bravo's transmedia strategy, but also self-enterprising subjects. While Bravolebrities work within the reality television emotion economy, they strategically blur the lines between network promotion and self-promotion. In this way, the housewives actively negotiate the imperative to produce the digital money shot by channeling their emotion performance into self-promotional projects.

Throughout the first season of *RHONY*, Bethenny uses her blog posts to promote her new brand "BethennyBakes" and her first book *Naturally Thin*. Because her burgeoning relationship with Jason was made a clear point of interest on the show, Bethenny plays up the tensions between maintaining a relationship and building a brand. She writes: "My life is a struggle between the importance of building BethennyBakes and balancing that with the knowledge of my age and somewhat narrowing of options" (Frankel, 2008). Initially, Bethenny is vague about her relationship and spends the majority of her blog posts promoting her upcoming diet book. But by the second season she revises her strategy to more carefully integrates her brand of dieting into her own personal history. One year later she begins a blog post, "Growing up in an extremely dysfunctional and toxic series of households bred me for an obsession with food and diet and weight. I was in an obesity clinic in third grade because I was slightly chubby. I was on every single diet known to man from that age until about 33 years of age" (Frankel, 2009). This opening sets the tone of her long history of unhealthy eating and exercising, an account that promises readers a renewed relationship with food if they just "buy the

book" (Frankel, 2009). Importantly, this backstory is in line with Bethenny's branded self; her personal history of childhood neglect and romantic failure comes together to form a tragic persona that positions Bethenny as an underdog who fans can both relate to and root for throughout the series.

As each season progresses, the housewives learn new strategies for integrating their brands into emotional narratives on the series and in more detail on their blogs. In season two, the New York housewives seem to register Bethenny's emotional self-branding tactics and reengineer their own branded selves. Like Bethenny, several housewives secure book contracts to disseminate their own version of branded self-help. LuAnn de Lesseps, a countess by marriage (and later divorce), spends season two working on her book *Class with the Countess*, a biographical instruction guide for proper etiquette. In order to bolster her claims to elite decorum, LuAnn manages to provoke disputes amongst the Housewives while critiquing their bad manners for engaging in arguments. At a charity event, LuAnn attempts to rouse Bethenny by suggesting that the photographs from her recent magazine shoot require "retouching" ("Nothing nice to say…," 2009). When Bethenny fails to react, LuAnn shifts her focus to Ramona by disparaging her aggressive approach to dating that, according to LuAnn, will "build a bad reputation." Ramona does not resist the provocation and snaps back: "You got married at twenty-two to a man twice your age!" Of course, LuAnn acts offended and a heated argument ensues over dating decorum and marriage. When LuAnn finally storms off, she yells back at Ramona "you have no manners, for God's sake!" By frequently using words like "class" and "manners," LuAnn reframes *RHONY* conflicts within the branded

terminology of her new book and generates a cohesive persona linked to marketable commodities.

On her BravoTV.com blog, LuAnn de Lesseps (2009) provides more details about the confrontation, explaining why she asked Bethenny about the magazine retouching (she was just trying to help) and why she critiqued Ramona's dating strategy (she is old fashioned). While manufacturing dramatic disputes is a common strategy on *The Real Housewives*, what is new and notable is that LuAnn uses her blog posts to draw explicit links between her co-stars bad behavior (that she elicited) and her brand of self-help. She writes:

> I was inspired to write my book Class with the Countess because people are always asking my advice on everything from what to wear to knowing what to say, from table manners to how to radiate self confidence. It became obvious to me that people are confused about what is appropriate in a world in where anything goes. I think people are tired of being treated badly and seeing people behave badly (de Lesseps, 2009).

Although LuAnn's in-air provocation provides her with an example of people behaving badly and gave her a platform to promote her book on the blog, it also opened her up to attack. In her blog, LuAnn confesses that she was really angry and hurt when Ramona brought up the age disparity in her marriage. Here we can see one of the personal costs of emotion work: the use of private feelings in commercial contexts can lead to unexpected and painful results.

As Hochschild (1983) explains, the cost of emotional labor is the likelihood of estrangement from one's sense of self. In order to properly manage one's emotions, workers must mentally detach themselves from their labor and reengage through what Hochschild (1983) calls "deep acting." Similarly, Barry King (2007) suggests, one of the constraints of affective immaterial labor is that "the exercise of 'personality' is closer to the fulfillment of a task specification than a process of expression (as cited in Hearn, 2010, p. 68). The performance of the branded self is designed to be functional within the context of Bravo's reality TV economy that privileges dramatic conflict, emotional breakdowns, and consumer aesthetics. In order to be a successful reality star, LuAnn must modulate her feelings to TV standards and audience approval. So while it is impossible to tell whether LuAnn's emotions are put-on for TV or sincere expressions, it is clear that her hurt feelings are operationalized to maximize her self-brand. In this promotional context, "genuine" feelings are nearly impossible to deliver and LuAnn comes off as insincere. Despite her best efforts, LuAnn's attempt to brand herself as a modern "Miss Manners," does not appeal to viewers; instead of being classy, she appears phony and condescending.

In practice, the housewives' attempts at converging affective enterprising across media platforms have had unintended effects such as fan disapproval, failed products, and lost sponsorships. Even as they work to create provocative yet likable brand personas, the housewives' promotion of branded products has the attendant connotation of insincerity and superficiality. In particular, the housewives seem to grapple with how to integrate feelings into their sales pitch. When the Bravo blogs launched, the housewives seem

unsure what to write on the platform, using it primarily as a marketing platform for their products. In one post *RHONY* star Ramona, writes: "All jewelry I wear on the show is from my special designs www.truefaithjewelry.com and now www.hsn.com under Ramona Singer" (Singer, 2009). But this type of blatant marketing did not over well with Bravo executives or fans. Andy Cohen explains, "We don't love the product shilling," but notes that "if it's good for the story, it needs to be covered" (Baskin, 2012). Fans' were similarly annoyed with Bravolebrity brand promotion; during the audience question segment of the *RHONY* season two special, Andy Cohen tells the housewives that he "got a lot of emails from fans complaining that you all were shilling your products this season" ("Reunion part one," 2009). For fans, the lack of emotional connection to the branded events made them feel more like product placement than a genuine reflection of the women's lives. Ramona responds first by explaining that "this is a reality show and our life is our business," but goes on to say that "I'm doing my true faith jewelry, I'm doing my HSN, my skincare" to which Cohen responds "plug, plug, plug," implying that Ramona is only interested in advertising her brands. Then, Bethenny states, "I have no boyfriend, I have no husband, I have no kids, I have no friends… I work…There is nothing else that I do but work." While the other housewives appear to be pushing their products, Bethenny's claim rings true: her branded enterprise is so closely intertwined with her emotional life that they appear to be one in the same.

One of the most extreme examples of the housewives cross-platform affective enterprising was during the *RHONY* season three feud between Jill and Bethenny. It started when Bethenny's closest friend and fellow housewife, Jill Zarin fabricated a rift

by accusing Bethenny of neglecting their friendship for her new romance and growing Skinnygirl brand. As the season unfolds, the feud endures, fueled primarily by Jill's refusal to mend their minor disputes. To propel this narrative, the other housewives work constantly to talk about Bethenny, and to center the conflict as they scream at each other, cry over hurt feelings, and express their concerns on social media.

As a part of this feud, the housewives took to their blogs to flesh out the details of the dispute. At first, the *RHONY* cast seems to side with Jill: Luann (2010) writes on her blog: "The message Bethenny left for Jill was nasty and mean-spirited. It shows Bethenny's cruel and insecure side." Even housewives from other series weighed in on the blog; Teresa Guidice (2010) from *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* dedicated a full blog post to the dispute ultimately dedicating her allegiance to "Team Jill" and Vicki Gunvalson (2010) from *The Real Housewives of Orange County* writes of Jill, "I hate to see her in the middle of so many uncomfortable situations. It's definitely toxic and hard to watch." What makes the digital platforms unique is that stars from other franchises can insert themselves in the drama and generate attention for their own series and self brand. As the blogs became a salient marketing vehicle, more and more Bravolebrities began to cross-promote their branded selves online.

As the housewives invest their emotional labor into the Bethenny-Jill plot, the fight becomes the anchoring storyline for the season. By the time Jill attempts to make amends with Bethenny, their friendship is irrecoverable. Although Jill secures a significant amount of airtime by administering the fight, the narrative does not fare well with fans and Jill's persona becomes situated as *RHONY*'s "mean girl." Jill responds to

this backlash in an interview with executive producer Andy Cohen on Bravo's late-night talk show *Watch What Happens Live.* During the interview Jill finally admits that she intentionally engineered the conflict and recalls telling Andy that "Bethenny and I are going to have this big fight, it's going to be great television, and then we're going to make up" ("Jill Zarin," 2012). However, Jill did not inform Bethenny of her plan, so on *RHONY* Bethenny appears confused and hurt by the fabricated rift. Jill tells Andy that ultimately she had "miscalculated" their friendship, claiming that her friendship with Bethenny was more like a "business relationship." Jill's understanding of her on-screen friendship as a "business relationship" draws attention to the financial underpinnings of their affective bonds. In this scenario, successful self-branding requires that emotional ties be reframed into modes of capital accumulation. By jeopardizing her "real" friendship for higher ratings, Jill highlights the significance of affective excess and melodramatic narratives to the franchise as well as their highly contingent results.

Even though the housewives emotional labor suggests ambivalent self-branding outcomes, the feud between Jill and Bethenny demonstrates how emotional labor translates to ratings success and transmedia engagement. The New York housewives blogs saw heavy traffic during the fight as did their social media pages. Fans were eager to know more about the rift and to offer their own advice and experience. More than other storylines on the show, the fight between best friends seemed to profoundly resonate with viewers. Jill's appearance on *Watch What Happens Live* garnered over two million viewers, an all time record for the show. Most significantly, the blog entries, social media posts, talk show appearances extend the on-screen world, which promotes

the series by offering more points of entry, extended backstory, and detailed opinions on the cast. Through their emotional labor, the housewives become more interesting and accessible to fans, encouraging further cross-media engagement. In order to find out more about the episode, viewers flock to the blog to hear individual insights and backstory, which in turn directs them to each stars' social media sites where fans can get regular updates on their stars activities and opinions (Facebook and Twitter) see personal pictures (Instagram), see the locations they frequent (FourSquare), and even watch live, streaming footage of their lives (Periscope).

Facing increasing pressure to produce marketable money shot moments, Bravolebrities' have sought to retain the value of their emotional labor by channeling it back into their self-brand and related commodities. This strategy represents a compelling point of resistance to Bravo's precarious labor conditions and its reliance on stars' emotional labor to extend transmedia stories. The open architecture of the Internet gives stars some degree of control over their persona and the ability to refute how they are represented by the show. Beverly Hills housewife Brandi Glanville explains that if the cast is upset with the way they are presented on the show they can "take to social media," although it might get [you] in trouble with your bosses" (as cited in Bazilian, 2014). Throughout season five of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, Brandi used her Twitter account to resist the narrative constructed by producers that she has a drinking problem. While each episode seemed to draw attention to her alcohol consumption Brandi repeatedly resisted this depiction, posting on Twitter "I'm sober this episode" (Glanville, 2015a) and "You only see what they show that's it !" (Glanville, 2015a). While Brandi's

outbursts do not change the trajectory of the docu-soap, it does provide her with another avenue to capitalize on her emotional labor. By performing her outrage on Twitter, Brandi offers another example of the convergence of the digital money shot (amplifying her unfiltered, aggressive persona) and affective enterprising (simultaneously tweeting to promote her new line of white wine called "Unfiltered").

Although the housewives affective enterprising does challenge the one-way flow of value generation for the sole benefit of networks and advertisers, it also reinforces women's stereotypical role as managers of emotion. While each housewife had become proficient at performing her emotions to deliver high ratings and garner attention for her branded self, the explosion of digital media platforms has intensified the requirement for when, how, and where women should convey their feelings.

Expressing emotions on the show is no longer sufficient, reality stars must distribute related but unique feelings across social media platforms to tell an ongoing story about their branded self. At the same time, the housewives have to be careful not to give too much away, to slowly reveal new information to sustain intrigue. These are the requirements of transmedia storytelling in convergence culture. As Jenkins (2011) explains, "Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get *dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels* for the purpose of creating *a unified and coordinated entertainment experience.* Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story." However, when these duties are tasked to reality stars rather than a creative team, the norms and expectations of the capitalist media industry are downloaded onto predominantly female casts.

Conclusion

The Real Housewives transmedia strategy has been effective at engaging viewers because it extends the melodramatic pleasures of docu-soap narratives across media platforms. As I have shown, this model of transmedia storytelling depends upon its female stars' emotional labor to increase engagement and promote further consumption. To maximize its stars' extreme emotional performance, Bravo has instituted precarious working conditions that generate insecurity and vulnerability. I argue that these industrial practices commodify women's emotional labor, extending a "second shift" of emotional work into the digital realm. Feminists have theorized the gender division of labor in the home and the ongoing prominence of women's role as domestic laborer and caregiver as the "second shift" (Hochschild & Machung, 2003). The second shift refers to the double burden of paid labor in the capitalist economy and unpaid reproductive and care work in the home. The conditions of transmedia labor merges these expectations, requiring, on one hand, that reality stars manufacture emotions as a part of their paid employment with the network, and on the other, that reality stars do the unpaid labor of distributing emotions across media platforms to garner a loyal fan base and to promote the network in order to secure next years contract. By placing women's stereotypical emotions at the center of the network brand, I argue that Bravo capitalizes on women's emotional labor to attract viewers, brand the channel, and ensure advertising revenue.

While the reality TV emotion economy imparts economic and cultural value on women's emotional labor, it also reproduces stereotypes about women's over-emotionality and "natural" expertise in manipulating emotions. Bravo docu-soaps steer

women to perform heightened emotions, and in doing so, locates women's economic success in their ability to manage their emotions. Further, Bravolebrities' model of affective enterprising develops women's entrepreneurialism around their emotional faculties rather than their financial expertise. In order to market their branded personas, the housewives must use their emotions to craft melodramatic story lines, plan money shot scenes, promote them across media platforms, and then carefully and imperceptibly weave in self-promotional plugs. In this way, the gendered practice of affective enterprising alters the conventions of self-branding that foster rational entrepreneurial business practices by placing emotions at the center of building a brand. While this strategy may be financially lucrative, it does not recuperate emotional labor as a legitimate mode of exchange but rather advances the stereotype of women as irrational, emotion-driven consumers.

Conclusion

The Gender Politics of Convergence

In the preceding chapters, I have made the case that Bravo's industrial discourses, programming conventions, and interactive platforms demonstrate how convergent TV and new media platforms are being designed for women. As we have seen, the traditional feminine genre of melodrama and the forms of spectatorship it engenders have been the predominant ways in which Bravo constitutes women as new media users. This way of defining and addressing women as tech-savvy consumers underscores the need for media scholars to reconsider foundational frameworks for studying media convergence. Thus far, two central lines of inquiry have been developed to theorize convergence culture and the implications of increased user interactivity. First, scholars conceive digital interactivity as a mode of user empowerment where consumers help to co-create and distribute media content in ways that reconfigure the hierarchical power relations of the media industry. Second, scholars view digitally-mediated productivity as a new method for consumer exploitation, channeling users labor power back to media corporations. While these two streams of research are instructive, scholars have predominantly overlooked the role of gender in media convergence. This oversight is particularly glaring because gender disparities remain firmly entrenched within "dominant ideologies that naturalize white middle-class men's position at the helm of information technologies and intelligence" (Parks, 2004, p. 141). This project offers a critical reexamination of the relationship between gender, labor, and media convergence. Taking Bravo as a case

study, it contributes an analysis of how convergent media are organized around and addressed to women.

This dissertation offers a theory of feminized convergence that conceptualizes how media convergence overlaps with the politics of gender. Feminized convergence refers to the ways in which converged TV and new media platforms are attuned to female consumers through the conventions of mass women's culture. The process of feminizing convergence has meant carefully organizing interactive programming, web portals, mobile applications, and social media engagement around a structure of feeling traditionally associated with femininity. The emotional highs and lows of nuanced female friendships, heterosexual romance, and family dynamics are heightened in Bravo docu-soaps, regularly featuring raucous catfights, backstabbing, and teary makeups. Viewers are drawn into a shared intimacy around this melodramatic structure of feeling and inspired to interact in the ways women have long engaged popular women's texts—creating fan communities to share their views, contacting producers to make narrative adjustments, and intervening with advice to actor/characters. But Bravo does not simply indulge the gendered emotions and pleasures that inspire these encounters, it uses women's feelings to manufacture digital encounters, constituting women as an interactive commodity audience to produce brand value for the Bravo network. To conclude this project, I trace connections between chapters, showing how the features of women's mass culture, convergence culture, and brand culture come together under feminized convergence. I contend that the nexus of feminized media, interactivity, and network

branding illuminating a new set of stakes around the commodification of women's emotional labor.

Women's Culture

One of the central aims of this dissertation has been to demonstrate a continuity between the ways in which women-centered media has been organized in the past and Bravo's convergent TV programming. Bravo's docu-soap series owe its central premise to the melodramatic soap opera format, from its open-ended serial nature, to its repetitive narratives pushed forward by women's gossip, to its social realist storylines about personal relationships, emotional conflicts, and family discord. The docu-soap, too offers the gendered pleasures as soap spectatorship, of being "swept up" in the exaggerated emotional highs and lows of the narrative. Social critic Camille Paglia points out that as the network soap declined in popularity throughout the 2000's, the docu-soap emerged, emphasizing the narrative and emotional excesses that were beloved by soap viewers. In a think piece published on Bravo's site, Paglia suggests that the network soap opera waned due to the cultural "distain" for the genre that led daytime producers to strive for relevance by diluting the heightened melodramatic form. When soaps had lost their "soap soul," Paglia found Bravo docu-soaps provided her with the melodrama she desired. Of the pleasures of docu-soap viewership, Paglia writes:

> The Real Housewives franchise isn't entertainment to me—it's a lifestyle…I can see the same Real Housewives episode multiple times with equal enjoyment. I love the frank display of emotion, the intricate interrelationships, and the sharp-elbows jockeying for power and visibility. I appreciate every snippet—the rapid

> scene set-ups, dynamic camera work, and crisp editing, with its enchanting glimpses of fine houses and restaurants and its glowing appreciation of beautiful objects, from flowers and tableware to jewelry and couture. And I applaud the Real Housewives master theme of the infectious hilarity and truth-telling delirium induced by copious alcohol, that ancient Dionysian elixir! (Get off those boring, flattening anti-depressants, America!) (Paglia, as cited in O'Donnell, 2014).

Paglia's description of *The Real Housewives* illuminates the underlying soap structure of Bravo programming that is designed to appeal to a subset of upscale women with attachments to the melodramatic structure of feeling.

Another way Bravo's programming demonstrates an affinity with the traditions of women's mass media culture is through its construction of the intimate public. My analysis of the talk show *Watch What Happens Live* in chapter Two shows how Bravo's construction of a televised, interactive fan forum capitalizes on the intimate communities that have long flourished around women's mass media culture. I situate *WWHL* within this lineage of the intimate public of femininity, tracing how the live format produces a temporal and proximate closeness through "technologies of intimacy" (Kavka, 2015), and circulates the gendered pleasures of mass women's culture through "technologies of gender" (De Lauretis, 1987). Chapter Two illustrates how the intimate public realm promises female viewers a scene of reciprocity, recognition, and affective belonging in a mediascape that often elides their desires. By offering a platform for women to come together to discuss other women's lives, *WWHL* forges an imaged solidarity between viewers.

Chapter Three examines how reality stars produce the melodramatic structure of feeling by creating extreme emotional moments, what Grindstaff (2002) calls the "money shot." Grindstaff traces this trend in daytime talk shows targeting where guests are trained to perform in a particular way by delivering the "money shot," defined as the "joy, sorrow, rage or remorse expressed in visible bodily terms" (Grindstaff, 2002, p. 19). Like the talk show, the money shot is a key device of reality TV narratives, producing moments of seemingly raw emotion to foment viewer interest. Bravo stars' embodiment of extreme emotional outbursts provides one of the central pleasures of the soap opera form—watching characters react to events. As reality series manufacture stress and produce conflict, they replicate the suspense-inducing narrative structure of serialized soaps. The feminized narrative structure and content of Bravo's programming is stereotypically designed to attract an upscale female audience and to draw them to converged TV platforms.

Convergence Culture

Bravo's feminized praxis, in terms of industry discourses, viewer engagement, and transmedia production, points to the merging aims of attracting an upscale female audience and engaging a tech-savvy audience. In the television industry, women have historically been valued for their role as domestic "spenders" making the purchasing decisions for the nuclear family (Meehan, 2012). Later, when women entered the workforce they become even more desirable due to their new discretionary income. But as media convergence caused a "crisis" in the cable TV industry, the value of female audience came into question. The most desirable audiences in the convergence era are

active and engaged "early adopters" who are on the cutting edge of new media development. In contrast female audiences are viewed as passive, emotional, and easily swayed, and outside the realm of technology. Bravo's efforts to target upscale women who were also tech-savvy represents one of the most prominent examples of the revaluing of the denigrated mass female audience. Thus, another aim of this dissertation has been to trace the changing fate of the female audience in the age of media convergence.

With the explosion of TV channels, new media outlets, and ad skipping technologies, television networks are trying to maintain their dominance over an increasingly fragmented, dispersed, and transitory audiences. To capture and sustain the attention of the ever-illusive audience, networks are integrating new media technologies into the broadcast medium, developing interactive spaces for viewers to engage with network content via social media, SMS messaging, and web portals, and creating transmedia content such as cast blogs and podcasts, web-series, and social media pages. Against this backdrop, it became increasingly important to not simply attract women with feminized content but to address them as new media users.

Chapter One traces the re-branding of the Bravo network from a premium arts and culture channel to a female-targeted pop culture network, crystalized through the advent of its target market, deemed Affluencers. This niche demographic was discursively constructed to position Bravo viewers as upscale, urban, educated, trendy women and gay men. As a central part of the Affluencer campaign, Bravo positioned its viewers as tech savvy, a significant departure from traditional constructions of the female audience

around "women's interests" such as interpersonal drama, heterosexual romance, and domestic life.

The value of the tech-savvy female niche is multifold. Tech-savvy consumers are assumed to be more actively engaged with television content and thus more likely to pay close attention to advertisements and become loyal consumers; and tech-savvy women are a particularly promising demographic because they combine the stereotypical features of feminine hyper-consumption with the added bonus of brand loyalty. Further, as tech-savvy consumers interact with transmedia content, networks can digitally mine their personal tastes, habits, and interests to more carefully tailor programming and advertisements to its target market. Bravo's fictional construction of Affluencers was an effort to revalue the denigrated genre of mass women's media by situating it in the context of convergence culture, using the familiar association of women and emotionality to feminize digital media engagement, while using new media to legitimate melodramatic television content.

In Chapter Two, I explore how the intimate public sphere around women's culture was updated for the digital age. Building on Berlant's (2008) theorization of the intimate public—an imagined community of like-minded consumers that identify with the pleasures of mass women's culture—I show how new media technologies are utilized in the feminine realm, creating what I call the "intimate digital public." The distinguishing feature of the intimate digital public is that it mediates direct contact between consumers and media outlets, intensifying feelings of reciprocity, recognition, and belonging. By introducing interactivity in the intimate public sphere *WWHL* mobilize viewers'

emotional attachments to the norms of femininity and activates a feminine form of new media participation.

According to Berlant (2008) mass cultural women's texts function as "gendering machines" that produce the norms of femininity (p. 35). As the intimate digital public positions digital participation as an empowering new component of the intimate public, the desirable traits of the feminine ideal are shifting to encompass a mastery of new media. Introducing interactivity into the intimate public, *WWHL* contributes to an expansion of the work of femininity (blogging, tweeting, reposting) while reinforcing the stereotypical traits of living as a woman (empathy, sentimentality, and care work). Merging these two facets of digital labor, *WWHL* engenders a feminized form of participation that requires the double burden of interactivity and the performance of femininity.

Similarly, Bravo stars enact the double burden of gender performance and digital labor in the expansion of Bravo narratives across transmedia platforms. Whereas the "money shot" exacts carefully calibrated emotional performances on screen, the "digital money shot" extends this convention to online sites, social media, and web-series. Based on the popularity of the emotional money shot for attracting female audiences, Bravo compels its' stars to strategically manufacture emotions in the digital realm—blogging about their feelings, posting pictures of their reactions, and tweeting confrontations. This strategy updates the melodramatic form to tailor transmedia storytelling for female audiences. Within convergence culture, transmedia storytelling is valued for its ability to provoke deeper and prolonged engagement with a series. Bravo's gendered manifestation

of transmedia storytelling creates unique melodramatic moments across media sites to capture the attention of female viewers.

Brand Culture

While Bravo's brand of female-centered interactivity could be understood simply as a marketing strategy to draw in female viewers, I argue that Bravo's new media strategy utilizes women's digital labor to develop a lucrative brand identity for the network. Bravo's strategy is to elicit participation to cultivate deeper connections with viewers that provide evidence of loyalty and engagement and shows advertisers that Bravo attracts a desirable audience demographic. Highlighting Bravo's efforts to capitalize on and brand women's interactivity, this project contributes an analysis of gender to the new (and old) branding strategies that are taken up within convergence culture.

Bravo's brand strategy is indicative of neoliberal brand culture, a term Banet-Weiser (2012) uses to describe "the way in which…brand relationships have increasingly become cultural contexts for everyday living, individual identity, and affective relationship" (p. 4). Corporate brands seek to foster emotional connections with viewers not only to motivate consumption but also to bring viewers' identity and lifestyle choices into alignment with the brand. Crucially, brand value is produced by consumers who attribute cultural value to a brand in surplus to the commodity being sold (Arvidsson, 2006). For television networks, creating brand value is a process of motivating consumers to express their affinity to the brand. Within convergence culture, audience productivity

is largely channeled through interactive platforms where viewers are guided to express their devotion to the network.

More than evidencing consumer excitement, networks also have to showcase the value of their unique consumer demographic. As Lotz (2006) explains, "Cable networks…establish brands to attract certain audiences to their programming; advertisers then inundate thee audiences with appeals for goods and services. This system works most efficiently when programming attracts audiences with specific characteristics that networks can sell to advertisers" (p. 38). As I show in Chapters One and Two, viewer interactivity is utilized to produce and discipline the Affluencer demographic. Through Bravo's interactive platforms, viewers' level of engagement and devotion to the network are made visible. More exactly, Bravo motivates digital interactions to depict a virtual community of consumers with the psychographic qualities of its Affluencers—they are "passionate" about Bravo content, "super consumers" in fashion, beauty, and household items, and the "over-index substantially for adopting new technology" ("Bravo Reaching the Affluencers," 2012).

Bravo's brand culture is implicitly and explicitly gendered, extracting brand value by generating feminized forms of engagement. In Chapter One, I discuss how Bravo leverages the spectator position of the soap opera to inspire viewers to intervene in the interpersonal struggles of the cast, evidencing women's emotional connection to the program. At the same time, Bravo encourages interaction around the traditionally feminine realm of fashion, beauty, and pop culture, making visible viewers traditionally feminine consumption. Chapter Two explores the circumscription of viewer interactions

fostered in the intimate public of *WWHL* where viewers are simultaneously drawn into the fan community through an affective sense of belonging and guided to enact that belonging by, for instance, professing their love for the network. The hope is that communal engagement will have a direct effect on channel loyalty that can be produced through interactions with the talk show. Bravolebrities' emotional expressions, too, produce Brand value for the network by encouraging transmedia engagement and involving viewers in real time reality TV drama such as the Twitter war.

Bravo's primary objective is to generate brand value, and its two central methods have been to create female-targeted content and to develop interactive platforms. Within feminized convergence, networks hope to showcase their audiences' high levels of engagement with new media and feminized content to construct a consumer demographic with specific habits and desires that can be exploited by advertisers. While network branding is a common industry practice, and interactivity is increasingly integral to that practice, Bravo's brand of feminized interactivity points to a different set of stakes. Rather than simply being empowered or exploited with the converged TV context, I argue that Bravo's model of feminized convergence relies upon women's digital *and* emotional labor to produce brand value.

Emotional Labor

Bravo's model of feminized convergence sheds light on how women's emotional labor has been channeled to maximize profit for Bravo and its advertisers. As we have seen, the network produces gendered television and new media content that hail women as emotional beings and produce affective rewards for participants. The labor of

feminized convergence bears a striking resemblance to traditional forms of "women's work"—the caring and relational labor involved in reproducing the heterosexual nuclear family. While women's work is integral to the maintenance of capitalism, it has historically been relegated to the private sphere and been unwaged, making it appear less "material" than other forms of work (Gregg, 2009). Given the abundance of feminist research on the devaluation of women's work and the gender division of labor (Federici, 2008 Gregg, 2009; Weeks, 2011), it is surprising that media scholarship often overlooks the gendered dimensions of digital labor. This dissertation has drawn connections between traditional conceptualizations of women's work and the way women are guided to interact online.

Chapter One foregrounds how Bravo addresses viewers through the culturally constructed skills of femininity and the "ideal mother" spectator position (Modleski, 1997). The incitement for digital media participation is channeled through viewers' empathy for reality stars, their ability to offer advice on relationships and their mastery over domestic duties like shopping, cooking, decorating, and beauty routines. Chapter Two expands on this framework, showing how interactivity is activated around the ideal mother role, engaging viewers in a process of moral deliberation that hones their skills in emotional and relational labor. Through the labor of sentimental ideal mother viewer, Bravo harnesses women's unpaid emotional labor that fuels participation within its intimate digital public sphere. Even for savvy viewers who enjoy the campy excesses of the intimate digital public, participation is premised upon viewers' self-conscious performance that is similarly commodified by the network. By introducing new media

technologies into the intimate realm, Bravo revises the norms of femininity to conjoin incorporate interactive skills and the norms of "women's work."

Chapter Three argues that the digital emotional labor of women reality stars is similarly commodified to bolster the Bravo network. The dramatic performance of emotions on reality docu-soap series is a form of emotional labor because the network capitalizes on stars' emotional capacities. Precarious working conditions in the reality TV environment induce stars' to extend their emotional labor into the digital realm to develop dynamic transmedia platforms. Bravolebrities' emotional labor is used to draw consumers to Bravo websites and social media pages not only to motivate further consumption, but to develop a brand affinity that encourages viewer loyalty and shapes future consumption habits. Even though Bravo stars leverage their emotional labor, to support their branded selves, the emotional excess remains captured by the network. Stars' melodramatic emotional expressions reaffirm stereotypies of women as overly emotional and naturalize women's emotional labor. While this type of work is not "essentially" feminine, it has disproportionately been tasked to women. The expectation that women take up the relational and caring aspects of online labor reasserts stereotypical expectations about the gender division of labor. By situating women's online productivity within the realm of women's work, Bravo effectively marginalizes female audiences through their unpaid and devalued emotional labor, while profiting immensely from that brand value it provides.

Feminized convergence highlights the ways in which digital media is deeply connected to the gendered expectation that women perform emotional and relational

labor. Both viewers and stars are guided to perform heightened emotions on Bravo's transmedia platforms to add value to the network brand. As Terranova (2000) explains, digital labor "has been not simply appropriated, but voluntarily *channeled* and controversially *structured* within capitalist business practices" (p. 39). For women, then, we can conclude that digital emotional labor is not simply appropriated, but channeled and structured through capitalist branding practices.

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