

“Money Talks, Wealth Whispers”

***Real Housewives’* Legacy: Class Ambivalence and Emotional Camping**

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DISSERTATION

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This dissertation is dedicated to my father, without whom it would have never been accomplished.

This work is about more than *Real Housewives*. It's about social class; how it's performed and understood in daily life, and how it's constructed across media platforms. If anything, this research demonstrates that our individual understanding of social class is messy. It's difficult to unpack for many reasons. One being that we have been conditioned to rationalize our successes or failures without considering class position and structural inequality. Yet class is essential to the identity we perform. Research has shown that our social origins, the class based position we were born into, will play a fundamental role in the opportunities we can pursue, the money we'll make, and where we'll end up later in life.

I couldn't write this dissertation without unpacking my own class privilege. Sure, I worked hard on this project. Still, I personally cannot separate the success of finishing a PhD from my class based position. I am a white woman who carries a lot of privilege in this world. That privilege comes from the color of my skin and it comes from the socio-economic position I was born into. I attempted this dissertation because I had the opportunity to pursue higher education – over the last ten years of my life – without financial distress. For me, it was an easy decision. For so many, it's not this easy.

This is something not often talked about in academia and that has to change. One way we can begin to change an unequal system and make more opportunity available is to talk about the reality of privilege. I want to be clear that I write this without smugness. My only intention is to acknowledge that I did nothing to deserve my position, and my position in this world has everything to do with why I was able to pursue this goal. The cost of higher education is crippling for most people in the U.S. I have hope that this will change some day. I will do my part to vote in candidates that can change this. I will make it a point throughout my future career to do research that can better support tangible change for a system run amok. I was able to do this because my father not only instilled in me the importance of education, but because he could make it happen for me. I want to help change the way this works for people who weren't born with the privilege I was.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

IG	Instagram
IRB	Internal Review Board
RH	Real Housewives
RHNYC	Real Housewives of New York City
RHOA	Real Housewives of Atlanta
RHOBH	Real Housewives of Beverly Hills
RHOC	Real Housewives of Orange County
RHOD	Real Housewives of Dallas
RHONJ	Real Housewives of New Jersey
RHOP	Real Housewives of Potomac
RTV	Reality Television
WWHL	Watch What Happens Live!

SUMMARY

Real Housewives (Bravo TV) is a global reality television franchise comprised of seven series in the United States. The series presents as a reality docusoap and celebrates materialism by following (conspicuously) wealthy women in different cities across the country. The women who participate on *Real Housewives* (*RH*) have achieved status, fame, and notoriety outside of the series across multiple social media platforms, where they simultaneously self-brand and act as mini-brand extensions of the Bravo TV network (Curnutt, 2011). Dedicated to showcasing highly-feminized women, wealth, and materialism, the series gained prominence throughout the Great Recession. It is because this series reached phenomenal status in popular culture at a time of economic insecurity and intense class resentment, that I wondered exactly what the series might be communicating about class, status, and social mobility in the U.S.

I argue throughout that *RH* has been culturally successful because: (i) the show frames the women to align with people's ambivalent ideas about social class, (ii) the confluence of media frames employed at the level of production work to resolve viewers to the status quo, and (iii) the stars of *RH* represent a postfeminist mediatized ideal, emphasizing an ideology of upward social mobility by way of self-branding proficiencies on social media. This argument is explored using a three-pronged approach to media that includes textual analysis of media content, a discussion of media production, and audience reception (Kellner, 2011).

To fulfill this three-pronged approach I conducted interviews with reality television insiders and producers to understand production of this series. I also conducted a comprehensive frame analysis of each of the seven *RH* series in the U.S. The frame analysis was guided by information from the interviews with reality show producers and insiders. The media framing covered each of the seven series across time, from the first season to the most recent season.

SUMMARY (continued)

In addition to media framing, I conducted a discourse analysis of select women's Instagram accounts to study agency and resistance to the image presented on the series. I also interviewed eight former main cast members of *RH*, which supports triangulation of findings from the framing, discourse, and interview analysis of producers. Finally, I interviewed 26 fans of the series from across the U.S. to study audience reception.

On the whole, this work reveals the usefulness of media framing and the promotion of class ambivalence. Class ambivalence here refers to the varied terms used by people to understand class in the context of daily life. In the social sciences, social class is used to describe inequality (Tyler, 2015; Skeggs, 2015). In daily life, class is considered ambivalently by people, in ways that are convenient for their individual position in the social hierarchy, or ignored completely (Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst, 2001; Payne and Grew, 2005). This research demonstrates that media framing of class works to obfuscate the reality of social origins and hierarchical order, disassociating class from inequality. Audience analysis shows the ramifications of these media frames, demonstrating that individuals have issues taking class into consideration, and use media frames and outside knowledge to make sense of issues like class and feminism. Audience analysis also reveals the pleasures gleaned from viewing *RH* are associated with emotional realism and subsequent perceptions of authenticity. Interviews with reality show insiders and the women from *RH* demonstrate how participants are exploited. Analysis reveals how participants make sense of their exploitation and conduct the labor of emotional camping to self-exploit for personal gain.

This research is innovative for a host of reasons. First, it offers the most comprehensive analysis of *RH* to date because it includes voices at every level of this phenomenon, from

SUMMARY (continued)

production, to fans, to the participants of the series. This research introduces an inventive strategy for studying reality television by looking across platforms at media content, factoring in changes over time. This work also names an impactful form of digital labor, referred to here as emotional camping. Conceptualized as guile for the postmodern digital age, emotional camping can be conducted by reality stars, regular people attempting to self-brand, and other media figures looking to garner exposure and/or evoke distraction through surplus media attention. In sum, this work is representative of one of the first long-term studies of the cultural imprint of reality television. This is also one of the first works to analyze the long-term impact of the subversive class-based ideologies in ordinary personas, which have proliferated media platforms since the turn of the millennium.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 About 'Real Housewives'

Fourteen years ago, a film crew passed through the gates of Coto de Caza, a private guard-gated community in Orange County, California to film a new reality docusoap¹ that would follow the daily activities of a group of friends. This group consisted of affluent white women who were married with kids; some stayed at home and some went to work. The series, “Behind the Gates,” capitalized on the success of two then-popular scripted dramas, *Desperate Housewives* (ABC) and *The OC* (FOX), by combining actual housewives and an Orange County setting. Viewers watched the women spend money on clothing, vacations, and plastic surgery, while navigating the travails of home repossessions, divorce, and knock-down, drag-out fights with each other. In the months leading up to the series premier producers decided to expand the series to include other cities and felt the title was limiting. “Behind the Gates” became *Real Housewives of Orange County* (Bravo).

The title itself, named by the man who created the series, Scott Dunlap, is both representative of the postfeminist discourse dominating mainstream media today and deliberately anti-feminist. Postfeminist discourse is derived by a “double-entanglement” with feminism. Feminism is “taken into account” but undermined by anti-feminist ideas, making it seem as though feminism is unnecessary in the present and part of a past we can finally joke about (McRobbie, 2009, p. 12). These ideas are often seen on *Real Housewives* when the women discuss the “choice” to stay home or go to work and defer decisions to their husbands.

¹ Reality-docusoaps are, according to Andrejevic’s (2005) widely-cited definition, “based not on the documentation of exceptional moments but on the surveillance of the rhythm of day-to-day life” (p.102). They also “impose on real events the conventions of soap opera, including editing techniques or parallel montage, character-focused narrative structure, and basis in a single geographical space and community,” (Bignell, 2014, p. 101).

Today *Real Housewives* is a global pop culture phenomenon. The cultural significance of *Real Housewives* is visualized by its longevity, global reach, and the countless imitation women-oriented docusoaps scattered across cable TV. Women no longer have to be married, stay-at-home-mothers, or even friends with the other women on the series to be considered for the cast. Instead, *Real Housewives* is hugely responsible for branding a new type of woman seen across mediated platforms. This type of woman adheres to a mediatized ideal, grounded by a postfeminist neoliberal mentality. She is more than a mother and/or wife – she embodies an entrepreneurial spirit, is cutthroat in business, outspoken, if not confrontational in daily interactions, dedicated to looking good, and open to having emotional breakdowns on camera. What makes *Real Housewives*’ most interesting is the time period in which it achieved this phenomenal status in pop culture.

In the U.S. the *Real Housewives* increased in popularity throughout the Great Recession. Economists, sociologists, and other experts pinpoint the Great Recession alongside the mortgage crisis to December 2007 (Keister, 2014; Kaplan and Rauh, 2013; Noah, 2012). *Orange County* premiered less than two years *before* the impending Great Recession. The series was both an economic and ratings success for Bravo that the network added two more series in 2008 (*New York* and *Atlanta*), and another in 2009 (*New Jersey*). Then post-recession, throughout a slow economic recovery Bravo added *Beverly Hills* in 2010. That same year Bravo also added a series set in Washington D.C., and in 2011 they added one set in Miami. Both of these shows were cancelled early on. However, in 2016 Bravo added *Potomac* and *Dallas*. The franchise has also attempted to globally expand to Greece, England, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Israel, France, Thailand, and South Africa.

The English, Canadian, and Australian spinoffs are the only foreign versions that have thrived. The Israeli version was cancelled after one season and the South African version was filmed, but never aired. Greece's *Real Housewives of Athens* premiered in 2011 around the apex of Greece's debt crisis and was taken off the air mid-season. Analogously, this voyeuristic celebration of wealthy women has achieved unparalleled success in the U.S. Bottom line, the national and global expansion of the *Real Housewives* over the last decade is evidence of the fact that TV shows celebrating the (conspicuously) wealthy have gained popularity in the U.S. during a "new gilded age," characterized by staggering economic inequality, political polarization, and stagnant social mobility (Noah, 2012; Gilens, 2012; Bartels, 2009).

1.2 **Social Significance: Class Ambivalence and Resentment**

It is because the franchise has succeeded in certain locales despite the global recession that I explore a cultural explanation for the series' success in the U.S for my dissertation. This reality TV franchise and the women it features communicate explicit ideas about people's perceptions of class, status, and social mobility at a time when insecurities about class mobility and status are exacerbated in American culture. The economic gap between the rich and poor and the subsequent disintegration and indignation of the middle class was one of the most salient issues of the 2016 presidential election. I am most interested in exploring why a franchise like *Real Housewives*, a show that celebrates ostensibly wealthy people, continues to succeed when Americans are hyper-aware of economic inequality and increasingly fed up with the one percent. The short answer to this problem, as I explore here, is that *Real Housewives* trades on two socially significant and connected issues: class ambivalence and resentment.

Class ambivalence here refers to the varied and uncertain terms Americans use to constitute class. As a social science concept, social class addresses socio-economic position in a

quantifiable way. Often fractured off in terms of occupational groupings based on individual's working conditions and labor market resources, social class is also generically siphoned off into upper, middle, and lower divisions (Weber, 1922; Torche, 2015; Cramer, 2016). There is no uniformly applied definition for class in the context of everyday life. Class is not a tangible concept that people readily grasp in the same way as other identifying social concepts like gender or race. This means that there is a schism between class as a social science concept and how people perceive class. People's perceptions of class vary in ways that are usually convenient for their own position. When people discuss class, they tend to view themselves outside the confines of the social concept (Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst, 2001).

Via surveys and in-depth interviews, Savage and his colleagues found a division between people who had the cultural capital to be reflexive about ideas of class, and that those who lacked these resources were threatened by the implications of relating class to their own personal identities (2001). For those who did not have the reflexive skills necessary, they established an identity based on "ordinariness." The authors saw this ordinary identity as a defense mechanism to avoid the politics of being labelled in classist terms, or a way around social fixing. However, they also argued that to establish the self as ordinary required one to contrast the self with other states of identity, which actually re-introduces class in an implicit way (Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst, 2001). Payne and Grew (2005) showed that people's understanding of class is guided by their own interpretations of the concept. This means that class as a concept outside of the social sciences is defined differently by people. Class ambivalence, they argued, works on a continuum: there are those who see society as classless and those who see but remove themselves from a classed self-identity. They even concluded that it was possible for people in either group to talk about class without ever mentioning the word.

What the above studies point to is that class is not explicitly referenced in daily life. Bourdieu (1984) and Fussell (1986) argued that people reveal their classed position in the myriad ways they communicate. Those in the upper class for instance display class in terms of behavior, while those in the lower class view it in the most logical terms of money and economic status. Those in the middle tend to communicate class by acquiring material goods. This loose example still effectively demonstrates the varied ways people in different groups tend to identify the concept. There is a schism between social class as a social science concept and how people view class. This schism subverts class in the U.S. by fostering culturally ambivalent definitions and ideas about class. As I argue throughout, class ambivalence breeds *resentment* between people who define the concept differently and likely occupy different positions in the class hierarchy.

At the root of resentment is difference. Cramer's (2016) ethnography of the rural/urban divide in Wisconsin examined the concept of resentment. Cramer wanted to understand why people in rural Wisconsin voted against their own interests to elect Scott Walker as Governor. I am also interested in ironic outcomes, i.e., reality TV shows celebrating the rich when our distaste for the rich is seemingly at an all-time high. Cramer goes beyond typical arguments made in media and everyday conversations between people who connect this voting behavior to ignorance. Instead, her work shows that this behavior is deeply influenced by the resentment between people who view themselves as fundamentally different from others.

Cramer showed that people in Wisconsin voted for Scott Walker and against their own interests because class is subverted in politics, arguably in the same way it is subverted in reality TV. She found specifically that people living in rural areas of Wisconsin viewed politics through a lens of "rural consciousness." This is comprised of three things: (i) belief that rural areas are ignored by decision makers, (ii) perception that rural areas do not receive a fair share of

resources, and (iii) the sense that rural people's values and lifestyles are misunderstood by people in cities. Cramer argued that people in rural areas and Americans in general are aware social class relates to politics by driving the haves and have nots. This however does not matter, she showed, because the major political parties subvert class and make ideological beliefs (like that of the American dream) more salient. These beliefs, according to Cramer, become so powerful because they are hinged on resentment towards other's beliefs.

Resentment operates in similar ways on *Real Housewives*. *Real Housewives* thrived throughout the Great Recession because of the way it depicted rich people in a time of resentment towards the wealthy. The top one percent has hoarded the country's wealth for decades, stagnating social mobility for the middle and working class (Saez, 2016; Hout, 2015; Beller and Hout, 2006). To say people resent the rich today is an understatement, yet, people vote in candidates that will do nothing to appease the presence of the super-rich and the economic gap. Some scholars say this is due to ideology (Bartels, 2009; Gilens, 2012), some point to the middle class and their fear of falling (Ehrenreich, 1989), and most recently Cramer (2016) has attributed it to resentment against liberals. The answer is comprised of pieces of all of these arguments, but it also has to do with the way we talk about class in the United States. Moreover, the way class as a concept is subverted – in politics, daily life, media platforms, and our outward projections of identity. The subversion of class is apparent in the way the women of *Real Housewives* are framed by producers.

The *Real Housewives* franchise showcases two types of women: 1) those who are wealthy and 2) those who have been enterprising enough to transcend their economic and social origins. Women of the second type purport a new ideology of the American dream across media platforms. Deery (2015) argues that shows based on wealth voyeurism, like *Real Housewives*,

showcase class. I argue instead that these explicit displays of wealth do not bring awareness to class, but rather subvert class in two ways. One, by celebrating the women who have transcended their social class via the series. This makes it appear as though class is transitory and something one can upwardly ascend effortlessly via self-branding opportunities. The reality is that some women do this better than others and it depends on existing capital, media enterprising skills, and the ability to translate that into an ordinary branded persona (Turner, 2006; Hearn, 2016). Two, by trading on resentment. This works by casting women of varied social origins to clash over different (ambivalent) ideas about class. These clashes enable producers and editors to deride the women by making them look like idiots or morally corrupt hypocrites.

Research on *Real Housewives* has shown that producers intentionally present the women as objects for cultural derision for viewers to laugh at (Lee and Moscovitz, 2013). Producers and editors do so through the “ironic” frame. They show the women doing or saying one thing in a scene and then immediately in the next frame doing the exact opposite. This is a technique Andy Cohen, an executive producer of the franchise, calls “the Bravo wink.” It is intended to diminish, at least on a moral level, the rich women the series showcases by portraying them as deficient in other areas to make the audience feel better about their own position. More specifically, these women are framed as being fundamentally different on a moral level from the people watching. Overall, the reality of the class hierarchy is subverted by these producer techniques and the narratives of the American dream celebrated on the show. As this dissertation shows, this is one reason *Real Housewives* thrived during the Great Recession.

A politics of resentment reinforces political differences that have become personal. Simple differences in opinion then are treated as fundamental differences in who we are as human beings (Cramer, 2016, p. 211). Resentment, as Cramer argued, makes people feel less

sympathetic for others and enables people to more quickly believe that other groups are undeserving of the assistance they have received. In short, resentment plays a role in shaping the way people view things like opportunity and inequality. These are two sides of the same coin – the way you view one plays into the way you view the other. A politics of resentment trades on dividing people, and *Real Housewives* in its own way exploits resentment of the rich by deriding women who are at moments framed to look ignorant, like idiots, hypocrites, or just plain undeserving of their social position.

1.3 **Argument**

With this, I argue that *Real Housewives* succeeds in American culture for three reasons: 1) the women are framed on the show in line with the public's ambivalent attitudes about class, 2) the show aims to reconcile the audience to their own status using a mix of techniques evoking resentment, irony, and schadenfreude, 3) the women featured are representative of a postfeminist ideal. This ideal reinforces the belief in upward social mobility via self-branding entrepreneurial skills displayed across platforms, like reality television and social media applications, like Instagram. Put simply, I want to know what *Real Housewives* and the branded women who are a part of it communicate about class, status, and social mobility in the U.S. throughout this specific moment of political and social inequality. This will foster a greater understanding of both media and audience perceptions of class, inequality, and opportunity – all concepts that play into political decision making (Gilens, 2012; Bartels, 2009).

1.4 **Theoretical Approach and Social Significance of Research**

I interrogate this problem using a three-pronged cultural approach to media that discusses the franchise's production, studies its reception, and engages with textual analysis (Kellner, 2011). This research is socially significant for a number of reasons. First, this research explores

how class is presented in media. Second, it unpacks how people talk about class. Third it expands knowledge about how different ideas about class, status, and social mobility are presented across platforms, which allows for larger connections to be made to these portrayals and people's understanding of class based inequality.

It is important to understand how class is presented in media, or rather how media frame class. Kendall (2005) argued that we consider class as the media frames it because this serves as a form of reality construction and maintenance. Her research showed that media framing of class fosters an ideology that can affect how individuals think about inequality and their personal identity within the class structure (2005, p. 15). She specifically analyzed the way the wealthy are framed in U.S. media. Her findings revealed that media more often framed the rich positively and that this framing worked to justify the upper-middle and upper classes' privileged positions (2005, p. 11). I revisit some of these ideas and discern other media frames of the wealthy today. I also offer up an explanation of the social and political moments in which positive and negative media frames are invoked.

This research unpacks how people talk about class; this includes how the women of *Real Housewives* talk about class on the series and how members of the audience talk about class. I interviewed former producers of *Real Housewives*, show insiders, and other experts on reality TV to understand how these ideas are produced. I conducted an extensive frame analysis of the entire franchise that depicts how the women are packaged for the audience. I conducted in-depth interviews with fans of the series asking questions that directly relate to the media frames. I analyzed the women's own performances of class on Instagram. Finally, I interviewed former cast members of *Real Housewives* to gain clarification about the work that goes into these shows. In so doing, a comprehensive picture of how media frames work and how viewers make sense of

media frames has been gained. By revisiting foundational ideas about class, this research demonstrates how those ideas and associated media frames permeate intricate layers of culture and are used in individual's public performances of identity.

This work shows how class-based ideologies work in media and are implicated in daily life experiences. This research, therefore, follows both the tradition of critical media studies and cultural studies research. It acknowledges that the concepts of class-consciousness and resentment in media were first laid out by foundational theorists Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Theodore Adorno, and Max Horkheimer. This research also foregrounds the *ordinary* to unpack assumptions about the ideologies that inform larger social structures and influences. This is representative of early cultural studies research.

Lastly, this dissertation is socially significant because it expands knowledge about the branded-self and how different ideas about class, status, and social mobility are presented across platforms. Increasingly reality television and social media platforms offer spaces for ordinary individuals to self-brand and upwardly transcend their social origins. Moreover, reality television stars must nurture the branded-self produced on reality television on an array of social media platforms to remain relevant and maintain their brand. The women of *Real Housewives* are framed by producers in specific ways, so the branded self on reality television might evoke different ideas of class than the branded self they portray on social media. Looking across these platforms enables a more complex understanding of the similarities and differences in representations of class and these branded personas.

1.5 **Contributions of Research to the Field of Communication**

This research enhances the field of communication and media studies in a number of ways. First, it contributes to a host of literature by exploring the intersections of media framing,

reality TV, self-branding, social media, and performances of class. Second, it demonstrates the importance of a multiperspectival approach to media by utilizing mixed-methods.

This research interrogates multiple levels of media framing by exploring how producers frame the women on the show, how the women frame themselves on social media, and how viewers make sense of the frames. This research crosses the platforms of reality TV and social media by exploring how story and the branded-self develop on this reality show, a series where characters have the ability to exhibit agency over their own stories and subsequently the construction of the branded-self through social media. This deep exploration of how these stories intersect and how class is communicated across platforms formulates a broader understanding of the franchise's success. This research introduces a new model for reality TV studies because it shows how participants use public forums to shape their stories and identities outside the confines of production.

Finally, this research demonstrates the importance of using mixed methods in studies of media and communication. The methodology is organized around Kellner's (2011) three-pronged approach to media. This is a "multiperspectival" approach that consists of (i) a discussion of production, (ii) engagement with textual analysis, and (iii) audience reception. Textual analysis in this research came by way of a frame analysis conducted on the series and a discourse analysis of the women's Instagram accounts. In-depth interviews with fans of *Real Housewives* were also conducted to study audience reception. This comprehensive and effective methodological approach provided a checks and balances within each major area of inquiry.

1.6 **Summary and Outline of Dissertation**

In summary, this research merits attention because it reveals a more nuanced understanding of both media and audience perceptions of class, which plays into political

decision making (Gilens, 2012; Bartels, 2009). Broadly, this research provides findings and analysis that contribute to knowledge of today's political, economic, and social climate. This research expands literature on the branded-self, social media, and reality television by analyzing the women of *Real Housewives* across platforms. Finally, this research interrogates the ideologies purported in this media, while maintaining the voices and integrity of the audience.

This dissertation is situated within the interpretive space of force and resistance. On a theoretical level, this research is inspired by critical media scholars from the Frankfurt school. Early critical media research focused on class-based critiques of power, capitalist modes of production, consumer culture, and a "mass" commodified audience (Marx and Engels, 1970; Gramsci, 1971; Benjamin, 1936; Herzog, 1941; Adorno, 1945; Macdonald, 1953; Debord, 1968). This research focuses on class-based ideologies embedded in the representations of the women of *Real Housewives*. This dissertation however also focuses on resistance to these ideologies by giving voice to the audience and by examining the women's agency on social media. Overall, this dissertation demonstrates how a specific piece of popular culture trades on class ambivalence and resentment, issues that permeate mediated life today, and highlights the consequences of popular media in other facets of ordinary life.

The next chapter reviews the major strands of literature that this dissertation straddles and moves towards the theoretical framework of this research. After the review of literature, the research questions guiding the study are introduced and lead to an explication of the methodology used for accomplishing this research. After this, an analysis of the research is presented, followed by deep discussion of those findings. Finally, this dissertation will close with concluding remarks and future research trajectories.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the major strands of literature that situate this dissertation, (e.g., reality TV, self-branding, the postfeminist sensibility, performances of class, and framing), which facilitates my own theoretical view of the problem. First, the broader concepts of reality television, self-branding, and the subsequent terms derived from those concepts are clarified (i.e., celestoids, microcelebrity, and the branded-self). These overviews expound on particular lines of thought in this research by demonstrating the importance of analyzing the branded-women of *Real Housewives* across platforms.

From there, the literature undergirding my theoretical framework is provided. Reviewed first is literature on postfeminist media texts, since *Real Housewives* presents the women on these shows through the lens of a postfeminist sensibility. The review of literature then moves to discuss how the women themselves present their identity according to Bourdieusian concepts of class, an assortment of ideas garnered from this postfeminist sensibility, their own personal experience, and producer ideas. Finally, media framing literature is reviewed to highlight the approaches that apply to my own research objectives. After the review of literature, the research questions guiding this study are presented, followed by an explication of the data and methods used to conduct this research. From there follows the analysis, discussion of findings, and the concluding remarks of this dissertation.

2.1 **Reality Television**

2.1.1 **Origins and Definitions**

The most cited definition of the umbrella term “reality television” reads as, “programs that film real people as they live out events (contrived or otherwise) in their lives, as these events occur” (Nabi et al., 2003, p. 304). It is nearly impossible to define this genre of programming and

scholars have suggested it be viewed ontologically instead, as a transaction between the camera, the participants, and the viewers (Deery, 2015, p. 3). This is a useful way to understand the basic composition of what could be classified as reality TV.

Reality TV is so thoroughly intertwined with the ordinary that scholars have traced its origins back to the earliest experimental films of the brothers Lumière in the early 20th century (Andrejevic, 2004). Aside from the reality-based entertainment of the instructional gardening, cooking, and home repair shows of the forties and fifties, scholars have positioned two shows as the basis for the type of reality TV we see now: 1) *Candid Camera* (1948) and 2) *An American Family* (1973). *Candid Camera* originated on the radio as *Candid Microphone* and captured people's reactions to practical jokes. *An American Family* was a PBS documentary special that depicted critical private moments in the life of the Loud family. Today reality TV is a global phenomenon. Two of the most popular programming formats in the U.S. at the moment are reality-competition shows and docusoaps.

Reality-competition shows follow a weekly elimination format usually based on viewer, contestant, or judges' votes. Participants tend to be ordinary people who are placed in contrived settings (i.e., a set, an island, a communal house, or on a stage) and in extra-ordinary circumstances where they demonstrate talent or ability by competing for prizes, sometimes in front of a panel of judges (Psarras, 2017). Reality-docusoaps, like *Real Housewives* capture people and surveil them in the rhythm of day-to-day life (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 102). These shows film participants doing mundane activities, often in their natural settings. Sometimes however participants are placed in contrived settings (i.e., communal homes) for extra-ordinary experiences. Other subgenres of reality TV include: reality legal programs, makeover/renovation shows, financial and appraisal transactions, social experiments, and hidden camera shows.

Shows like *Cops* (1988), *America's Funniest Home Videos* (1989), and *Real World* characterized reality TV from the late eighties to the mid-nineties. In 1997 *Big Brother* and *Survivor* premiered in the Netherlands and Sweden. By 2000 both shows were adapted to U.S. audiences. They are still two of the most successful reality franchises in the world and responsible for ushering in a wave of participatory audience driven reality TV. The *Real Housewives of Orange County* (2006) premiere on Bravo marked the rise of the American luxury docusoap and spawned countless women-oriented reality shows that are ubiquitous across cable channels today. Shortly thereafter, *Ice Road Truckers* premiered, originating the equally ubiquitous form of masculine driven reality TV shows on cable (Deery, 2015).

2.1.2 Early Research on Reality TV

This brief historical overview shows that there was an explosion of reality TV at the turn of the millennium. Its ubiquitous presence in the media has interested scholars for decades, and literature on it can generally be divided into two camps: 1) Media Effects and 2) Uses and Gratifications. Early Uses and Gratifications research arguably holds the key to understanding reality TV as a phenomenon, its historical evolution, and place in the media at present.

Uses and Gratifications research is shaped by the perspective that individuals are actively engaged in selecting media content as a means to fulfill certain needs (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, 1974). Early studies of reality TV in this tradition found that people watched for the vicarious experience (Nabi et al., 2003), therapeutic reasons (Andrejevic, 2004), because it nurtured the types of feelings viewers intrinsically valued (Reiss and Wiltz, 2004), for “humilitainment” (Waite and Booker, 2005), and social affiliation needs (Papacharissi and Mendelson, 2007). A common thread holding all of this research together is reality TV’s connection to voyeurism.

Voyeurism here is conceptualized in the colloquial, harmless, people-watching sense. In one of the foremost studies of reality TV as we understand it today, Nabi and her colleagues (2003) hypothesized that it was popular because it appealed to the voyeuristic nature of viewers in the U.S. Based on survey and questionnaire responses, the authors found people watched reality TV because they enjoyed seeing other people's interactions and that their motivations for viewing were based on self-awareness, which is actually contradictory to a voyeur's motives. The authors concluded that this self-aware viewership was based on a certain interest or curiosity in other people that promotes self-reflection and empathy (2003, p. 325). Put simply, this self-aware notion of voyeurism is a way of saying that reality TV helps us make sense of the self.

2.1.3 **The Thematic Evolution of Reality TV: Issues of Self and Identity**

The self and issues of identity have always been the underlying themes of reality TV. It is a platform that allows viewers to forge, question, accept, or reject aspects of the self. This is evidenced in the immense number of branded-personas we see in media today. To understand these branded-personas, or the branded-self, we must go back to the early themes in the evolution of reality TV. They include reality TV as: (i) a site of the real, (ii) a platform for self-transformation, (iii) a technology of surveillance, (iv) a technology of neoliberalism, and (v) a platform for the branded-self.

Reality TV as a site of the real

In the nineties reality TV was a site of the "real" (i.e., the first few seasons of *Real World* and *Big Brother*). To clarify – "real" refers to what Goffman (1959) calls the "backstage," or that space where people go to relax from performing fronts in communicative acts. Reality TV participants expose their backstage self to the public, revealing their fears and all of the secrets we would once perhaps only share, as Simmel (1971) would argue, with strangers. The social

type of the stranger could be re-imagined as the reality TV participant. These are people who are close enough, ordinarily like us enough, that we might feel we know them and understand their experiences. They are also remote from us so their behavior does not have to affect us, but it can inform our own ways of doing things. In short, people enjoy watching other people in backstage, private, “real” moments because those moments help us understand what we want to share and keep private. Reality TV has now commodified the real/backstage that was so significant in the nineties. As it moved into the millennium it evolved into a vehicle for self-expression, individual growth, and transformative change.

Reality TV as a platform for self-transformation

How to transform into our best self is most overtly taught to us in makeover reality TV. Exemplified in a diverse range of shows like *Extreme Home Makeover* (ABC) and *What Not to Wear* (TLC), and the recently rebooted *Queer Eye* (Netflix), contestants have been contextualized within a “makeover nation” (Weber, 2009, Marwick, 2010). “Makeover Nation” is based on a mix of normative notions of the American dream (i.e., having a traditional family and owning your own home), and postmodern notions of the American dream, which include issues of identity. These issues of identity revolve around affective entitlements, wider values of visibility, charisma, confidence and an overall “celebrated selfhood” (Weber, 2009, p. 39). These types of shows depict the idea that people can completely transform their lives by simply making the appropriate consumer choices. To determine what positive self-transformation looks like, we must look to the larger social, political, and economic arrangements that inform these ideas.

Reality TV as a technology of surveillance

Critical scholars of reality TV evincing a Foucauldian view of governmentality argue that reality TV played a powerful role in positively reshaping people’s attitudes towards surveillance

(Andrejevic, 2004; Jenkins, 2006; Ouellette, 2008; Dubrofsky, 2011). Reality TV's fundamental purpose, according to this line of research, was to de-emphasize privacy and re-frame self-exposure as a form of empowerment. Reality TV was television's reaction to the digital revolution and convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006; Andrejevic, 2004). The goal of convergence culture, Andrejevic (2004) argued, was mass customization. Mass customization requires aggressive market research and that consumers be complacent to surveillance. The participatory nature of reality TV required viewers to subject themselves to types of interactivity that monitored their behavior, and viewers did so willingly because these types of interactivity were laced with the promise of creative self-expression (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 2-3). This is what Andrejevic called the "work of being watched," which results in people's "vital statistics being plugged into a marketing algorithm" (2004, p. 111). In sum, reality TV has played a big role in shaping people's ideas of privacy and surveillance.

Reality TV as a technology of neoliberalism

More than an economic ideology and set of policy initiatives in favor of deregulation, privatization, and a free market, Neoliberalism has formulated the base of the ideal self in reality TV. The ideal neoliberal individual is enterprising, independent, and accepts no public assistance (Ouellette, 2008). Recent research depicts the ideal neoliberal self in terms of "ideal whiteness" (Rennels, 2015). In her analysis of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, a once popular reality series centered on a child beauty queen and her family of self-described "rednecks," Rennels found Honey's family did not live up to ideal whiteness. Ideal whiteness is based on basic tenants of neoliberalism, (i.e., personal responsibility, self-control, being wealthy, and rational). The humor in the series is girded by the fact that the family fails to conform to ideal whiteness and an upper middle-class lifestyle. This tactic demonstrates how some people of reality TV are framed as

“horrific others” (Haynes, 2014). The “horrific other” is a strategy employed by producers to create losers of neoliberalism for the audience’s viewing pleasure. Put simply, these shows depict the tenants of neoliberalism as the ideal standard by which to align yourself.

Reality TV as a platform for the branded-self

The branded-self is the successful outcome of self-branding, a process that requires individuals to “craft a distinctive public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital” (Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2016, p. 2). The branded-self follows the neoliberal-self in reality TV’s thematic evolution because “self-branding” is an offshoot of the neoliberal ideology that self-promotion yields market rewards. An extension of the idea behind commercial brand products, the term “self-branding” originated in the late nineties in an article for *Fast Company* proclaiming that individuals needed to become “the CEO of Me, Inc.” (Peters, 1997). This concept will be discussed in its own section more extensively, for now, it will suffice to say that the branded-self is where the thematic evolution of reality TV stands at present.

The other themes discussed here are still present in reality TV, each one however appears to subsume the one that came before, and they have now culminated in this concept of “the branded-self.” Next, reality TV’s place in media today will be discussed extensively to introduce the celestoid, an important concept in populist society today that lies at the intersections of reality TV, self-branding, and the women of *Real Housewives* specifically.

2.1.4 Celestoids: A Demotic, Not Democratic Shift in Media

The reality TV that exploded in the new millennium was TV’s response to the digital revolution, a surveillance economy, neoliberal political arrangements, and an emerging participatory culture. With all of these changes it looked like the media would be democratized, but two decades later, this has yet to happen. The explosion of reality TV in the early 2000s was

representative of a bigger shift occurring in contemporary media (Turner, 2006). Assigning media a level of power aligned with the state, Turner suggested that media generate behaviors and cultural patterns that reinforce its own commercial power and cultural centrality (2006, p. 159-162). Other scholars, i.e., (Couldry, 2005; Silverstone, 2005) have countered this line of thinking, however, much of Turner's argument is evident today.

One way media generates ideas that enforce its commercial power and cultural centrality is through the production of *celetoids* (Turner, 2006). The term celetoid was coined by Rojek (2001), founder of the sociology of celebrity studies. A celetoid is both a requirement for participation in and an outcome of reality TV formats. Celetoids originally were considered to be ordinary people who achieved some level of fame based on their personality or an achievement grounded in planned obsolescence (i.e., lottery winners, every day type heroes). Celetoid status is form of attributed celebrity based on sensational "pseudo-events" and concocted by cultural intermediaries who consistently talk about these people in media (Rojek, 2001; Boorstin, 1961).

Revisiting this term a decade later, Rojek noted that celetoids now have a short-life or long-life. Long-life celetoids exist thanks to reality TV spinoff series, social media, and docusoap-type reality shows that feature a recurring cast. These individuals view the self as entitled to media attention and achieve durable types of fame by curating a consistent persona across a variety of platforms (Rojek, 2011, p. 165). Exemplifying this type are members of the Kardashian family or women on the *Real Housewives*. Vicki Gunvalson, for instance, the "O.G. of the OC" is the longest running housewife in the franchise and arguably the luckiest woman to ever be on reality TV. Gunvalson has starred on Orange County since it premiered in 2006, since the show began, she has owned and operated a successful life insurance company. This part of her persona has remained consistent in the thirteen years she has been on the show. Given the

success of the series, Vicki, a completely ordinary woman, has been in the spotlight for a decade longer than anyone would have thought at the premier date. In this sense, the women of *Real Housewives* personify the long-life celestoid. As Gunvalson says in the introduction credits of the twelfth season, “I go big, or go home, and I’m not going home,” despite co-stars’ and viewers’ wishes that she would.

Performing Ordinariness

This type of ordinariness, or this performance of ordinariness, fixes the supply-side of the heightened demand for celebrity. This demand was in part created by reality TV, a changing economy, and convergence culture, and it no doubt contributed to the rise of populism in the U.S. Performing ordinariness has become a legitimate type of labor that lends itself to new content for networks (Turner, 2006, p. 158). Long-life celestoids, who do this successfully, reinforce the traditional boundaries of the celebrity hierarchy by making achieved “talented” celebrities look good, and tease the precariousness of this hierarchy at the same time.

In order for traditional media in the early 2000s to make money they needed to generate new content that would uphold the tenants of this interactive/participatory culture; the most economical way of doing this was to get content that was easy to replicate and cheap to produce. Enter reality TV. With reality TV came the need for “home grown” type celebrities who were just like the medium they worked in – easy, replicable, and cheap (many are still paid by a promise of fame and exposure). The increased use of regular people for media entertainment could arguably point to the democratization of media and celebrity. However, this shift is actually more *demotic* than democratic because this form of celebrity is only open to those with a specific skillset. Such a shift illustrates how reality TV reproduces the stratification of celebrity culture and how it has become increasingly essential for the continuance of late-capitalism.

This demotic turn to the ordinary refers to a shift in the early 2000s that is reflected by 1) the increasing focus on a celebrity's ordinary, backstage moments 2) the proliferation ofceletoids in media (Turner, 2006). This shift necessitates that celebrities, reality TV stars, and now microcelebrities perform the ordinary either on camera, online, or IRL when paparazzi are present. Performing the ordinary is part of the work of being watched and part of the construction of the branded-self on reality TV.

This type of labor first requires an awareness of or the assumption that one is being watched (Andrejevic, 2004; Dubrofsky, 2011). Second, I argue that this performance requires the individual to conduct themselves in such a way that their behavior and appearance confirm their interpretation of the modal-self of the time. Third, this performance must also service the goals and values of the brand first. In all, performing the ordinary is “a complex form of labor” designed to show how ordinariness can be a continual economic resource for the participant and discretely for larger media institutions (Curnutt, 2011). The Bravo TV network has a specific name for the reality stars who serve as mini-brand extensions of the network: *Bravolebrities*. Bravolebrities are the women of *Real Housewives*, and other ordinary people who are employed by the network to perform on their reality shows. Bravo is the only cable network yet to name theceletoids that further the network's brand.

Scholars have warned that the demotic turn in media has impacted some of the most personal elements of daily life, contributing to regular people's increasing willingness to offer up private parts of the self and the fear that perhaps an unwatched life is insufficient (Gamson, 2011, p. 1068). If regular people cannot access or choose to forego a reality TV career, they can use social media to validate and construct the branded self. Reality TV has played a huge role in the construction of the ordinary branded personas so prevalent in media today (see the

President of the United States), but this demotic turn in media and celestoid-celebrity also underlines the formulation of online celebrity.

Microcelebrity and Self Branding

Teri Senft coined the term “microcelebrity” in the early 2000s while she was studying the camgirls who were internet famous for broadcasting their lives on webcams. She defined microcelebrity as “a new style of online performance that involves people ‘amping up’ their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites” (2008, p. 25). This definition builds on traditional notions of celebrity, but Senft points out that the only major similarity is that both must “brand or die” (2008, p. 26). Senft more recently updated the definition to specifically include the terminology of the time. She defines microcelebrity now as “the commitment to deploying and maintaining one’s online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same” (2013, p. 1).

Marwick’s (2013) ethnographic study of Silicon Valley during the bursting of the dot.com bubble and through the apex of the web 2.0 relaunch captured the scene of the entrepreneurs, microcelebrities, and journalists of the tech world. Here she described microcelebrity as “a type of internet-enabled visibility” that refers to both “the state of being famous to a niche group of people” but also a behavior “that presents the self as a celebrity regardless of who might be paying attention” (p. 114-115). Her ethnographic research verified the failure of web 2.0 to deliver a democratizing revolution. Instead, Marwick’s critical analysis of Silicon Valley showed 1) that web 2.0 brought forth a generation of users who are mainly complacent in tech companies’ violations of privacy and 2) the self-branding strategies upheld by web 2.0 actually reproduce existing inequalities. These findings confirm a *demotic* – not democratic – shift.

The argument Turner put forth, that the media generates ideas that enforce its commercial power and cultural centrality through the production of *celetoids* is visualized by *Real Housewives*. At the time of writing, producers recently hired their 100th housewife. The long running *Bachelor* franchise boasts a thousand former contestants, a number so great, they refer to this available pool of participants as “Bachelor Nation.” Bottom line, there are so many willing participants in reality TV that we can, at this point, de-emphasize the power given to media institutions in this discussion of the demotic turn.

People have agency and play a huge role in shaping media, and we also have a tremendous capacity to adapt to the environment we find ourselves in. In other words, the way we use media matters. As Silverstone would argue, media technologies are “doubly articulated” into the social, meaning they have a place in both institutional life and personal life but also convey certain social values and inform us of how to be social (2005). The way we understand the self today can be mediated by media. This does not mean media have all the power. It just means reality TV’s place in media at present is to mediate the ways we understand the self. I agree that reality TV does so through the production of *celetoids*; they are the embodiment of the branded-self, informing us of ways to present the self and perform the type of ordinariness necessary to be appropriate citizens.

Our need to adapt, reorient, transform, and reflect on the self will never change, unless macro social, cultural, political and economic spheres of life stay the same. If using media gives us a secure sense of identity in a time of increasing insecurity and uncertainty, then I would argue we are doing the best we can with what is at our disposal. Reality TV’s longevity and impressive status in media today is not only because it is brilliantly aligned with the rules of

capitalism, but because we enjoy using it to play with issues of identity – just as the earliest research on the uses and gratifications of the genre suggested.

2.2 **The Branded-Self**

At this point, it is necessary to redirect attention back to the concept of the branded-self, which is the current ideal-self presented on reality TV. The previous section discussed how celestoids are specific to the platform of reality TV and how microcelebrities are specific to the internet and social media platforms. Both celestoids and microcelebrities are branded, but the dynamics of this concept of the branded-self change depending on the platform. Because platforms are “performative infrastructures,” or mediators that shape our performance of social interactions (Beer, 2009; Gillespie, 2010; van Dijck, 2012), it is important to analyze the branded-self across platforms, since performances will vary based on the nature of the platform. The distinctions between the branded-self on reality TV and the branded-self on Instagram are discussed next.

Scholars are researching the branded-self more than ever today because reality TV and social media have brought self-branding out of the business crowd and to the forefront of public consciousness (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Senft, 2013; Marwick, 2013; Nayar, 2015; Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2016; Hearn, 2016). Even in the age of social media influencers, reality TV is still, “ground zero for the production of lucrative branded selves” (Hearn, 2016, p. 10). Hearn defines this concept as the “self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of the self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries” (2008, p. 164).

2.2.1 **The Branded-Self and Reality Television**

Hearn’s work specifically references reality TV’s role in producing the branded-self.

Using autonomist Marxist theory, she argues that reality TV enforces the “corporate colonization of the *real*,” by turning celebrity, economic aspirations, and visibility on reality TV into cultural values. This subsequently produces “branded-selves.” In short, she argues that self-branding is the realization of Giddens’ (2013) “reflexive self” as the definitive form of labor in post-fordist capitalism (Hearn, 2011, p. 317).

Self-branding as a form of labor is a popular topic for scholars now (Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2013; Nayar, 2015; Leonard and Negra, 2015). Nayar’s analysis of fan forums dedicated to *Real Housewives of New York City*’s Bethenny Frankel, shows how she used the show as a platform to launch her branded identity (2015). Frankel is a special example embodying all of the themes of reality TV; she is comfortable with surveillance as evidenced by the number of reality shows she has appeared on, she embodies an entrepreneurial neoliberal spirit, and is comfortable sharing her worst and most “real” backstage moments because – as she acknowledges – that is how she grows. Frankel was cast on *Housewives* in 2008, three years after she began constructing her brand on *Martha Stewart Apprentice*. In her initial two years with the series, Frankel published multiple lifestyle books and founded a company. She sold that company, Skinnygirl Cocktails, to Jim Beam in 2011 for \$120 million.

There are issues with the unique, autonomous individual the branded-self aims to produce on reality TV. The branded-self is a concept that places the individual responsible for the product, but they are firstly laborers for the networks that own the series. The producers and story editors therefore determine these branded-personas and the networks obtain a majority of the financial return (Hearn, 2016, p. 175). In other words, the branded selves enhanced by reality TV shows create a brand in and for the network, whereby the individual is a kind of promotional object. Hearn’s argument however, excludes any notion of agency on behalf of the participant.

For instance, Frankel left *Housewives* after she sold her company in 2012. She returned to the series in 2016, arguably because her brand needed the show and the show needed her brand. Hearn's (2016) argument diminishes the upside of constructing a branded-self on reality TV. Khamis, Ang, and Welling's (2016) recent study of microcelebrities, or those who have achieved the branded-self online, rather than reality TV, found that in order for one to successfully self-brand, the meta-image and meta-narrative aligned with the brand have to be consistent. Their research showed however that it is incredibly difficult to sustain a consistent image simply because people are prone to error (2016, p. 21). Point being, those who have successfully branded themselves online, have only their individual skills to depend on for a consistent brand image, (at least before they achieve the ability to afford cultural intermediaries to help them). In contrast, a branded individual on a reality show has the chance to create and maintain good relations with the network, producers, and editors. If they go off-brand they can restore their image with the help of network producers and show appearances that will drive new narratives.

While social media allows individuals to produce the branded-self, reality TV is still an important platform for producing the branded-self because it offers two important affordances: 1) unique but precarious brand-protection in the form of series' producers, 2) a large ready-made large audience. Reality TV has been around long enough now that new participants are "performing performance" to start a brand (Grindstaff, 2014). This is reflected in contestants' hyperawareness of the types of behavior that will get them more screen time or a favorable edit. The more skilled participants will use reality TV to do both. While reality TV affords people select advantages, social media applications, like Instagram, have their own unique affordances.

2.2.2 **The Branded-Self and Instagram**

Women-centered reality television shows like *Real Housewives* have a close relationship with social media. Bravo started airing “social editions” of each *Housewives* series in 2012. It is a programming initiative that enables fans, producers, bloggers and the *Housewives* themselves to comment, react, and interact with each other via Twitter and Facebook while the latest episode airs. The best, usually most popular comments will then appear at the bottom of people’s television screens during the re-run episode, now the “social edition,” that airs before the newer episode of *Housewives* that week. The women however, are also active and arguably more vocal in certain instances on Instagram.

Instagram is a mobile photo and video sharing application that was created in 2010 by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger. Both entrepreneurs stepped down from IG in 2018. The platform is now headed by Adam Mosseri, former president of product for Facebook. IG was acquired by Facebook in 2012 for \$1 billion. As of 2015 Instagram boasted 300 million active users and business analysts foresee a potential valuation of \$30 to \$37 billion based on revenue and user comparisons to Facebook and Twitter (Kosoff, 2015). In the most recent Pew survey of social media use, women continue to utilize platforms like Instagram more than men; and Instagram is most popular among young adults 18-29 in urban areas (Pew, 2015). Based on its newness, demographics, and value Instagram is of increasing interest to scholars.

Looking to what celestoids do on social media is a way forward in exploring the limitations and affordances different platforms have for successfully branded celestoids. Reality TV and the celestoids it produces have a strong relationship to social media. In the section on the branded-self it was discussed that reality celestoids have a certain level of protection because they are a product of the television network. Certain questions arise from here: how much of their

self-presentation is controlled by production? What about those celestoids to whom the network has discarded, how do they preserve the branded-self?

Answers to such questions can be found on their social media, which is a space used by celestoids to extend, protect, and reject ideas about their ordinary branded persona on reality TV. It is necessary to move away from the narrowed focus of reality TV and the self it purports towards other forms of media that are more explicitly oriented around the self to understand the myriad components of identity construction. Looking at celestoids across platforms is a way to get at newer ideas of the self, not only the branded self, but maybe even the networked self (Papacharissi, 2010), the exhibitional self, (Hogan, 2010) and the anticipatory, speculative self (Hearn, 2017).

Social network sites afford us the opportunity to negotiate and claim agency over our identity (boyd, 2014). How we negotiate and present our identity in online networked environments is crucial. This speaks to performing the networked self, which requires one to conduct a range of “mini-performances” that cohere in a self-presentation that makes sense to various audiences, all the while upholding consistency and continuity (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 307). Much of this idea is evoked in the branded self as well and can be applied to reality celestoids. Other scholars would argue this evokes an exhibitional self, which is the self we think of that is mediated and comes through mediated objects (Hogan, 2010). Some researchers are positing a move away from the branded self to the anticipatory, speculative self, which describes a “verified” branded-self marked by the Twitter checkmark (Hearn, 2017). This is a concept of self-hood in the time of big data.

Looking across platforms is also a way to peel back the layers of self-presentation and the process of identity-construction regular people sort through, who happen to have also

successfully branded themselves in the attention economy. In fact, long life celestoids are here, perhaps not permanently, but for longer than we know. They model successful branding strategies based on their performance of the ordinary that regular people look to, so it is imperative we talk about them.

The social media application of Instagram is an interesting space to begin this cross-platform analysis. Research has already shown this is a new space to launch a more specific version of microcelebrity, some call “Instafame” (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2014). In her textual and visual analysis of Instagram users with 10,000 plus followers, Marwick described Instagram as another site of cultural convergence girded by “mania for digital documentation, the proliferation of celebrity and microcelebrity, and conspicuous consumption” (2015, p. 139). She found that those who achieved Instafame did so by mimicking celebrity culture, subsequently reproducing the dominant status hierarchies associated with celebrity and luxury.

Abidin’s ethnographic research on lifestyle bloggers in Singapore focused on how they have monetized Instagram as advertising space by crafting personas with such calculated performativity that it can be considered their lifestyle (2014, p. 122). She found that congruent personas (on the blog and Instagram), hegemonic beauty, and depictions of upper middle-class lifestyles garner more followers and advertisers. Once a blogger reaches this level of success on Instagram, their private lives have already become “a tool for selling products and services” (p. 122). This is a reality that has been discussed at length in research on reality TV personas (see Hearn, 2008, 2011, 2016; Nayar, 2015; Leonard and Negra, 2015).

This research on Instagram parallels early talk of reality TV as a site of the real with many scholars placing authenticity at the forefront of discussion (Abidin, 2014; Duffy, 2015; Marwick, 2015). Other similarities lie in the fact that Instagram is already being considered a

medium through which popular and successfully branded personas are subjugated to the advertisers and higher ups of the platform. Some research however has been more empowering.

Abidin's recent ethnographic study of Instagram's famous "selfie-producers" found that these social media influencers achieve an empowered level of "subversive frivolity" (2016). This she defined as "the under-visibilized and under-estimated generative power of an object or practice arising from its (populist) discursive framing as marginal, inconsequential, and unproductive" (Abidin, 2016, p. 2). In other words, dismissing these influencers and what they do for money as exploitation and nonsense has motivated them to come up with creative strategies to regain agency within the platform. They do so by using selfies as a way "to subvert rumors, followers' perceptions, and the overt commercialism of the Influencer industry," (2016, p. 16). Particular reality TV celestoids, like the women of *Real Housewives* have found their own ways to regain agency over their portrayal on the show via Instagram, which is what I explore in this dissertation.

Research on Instagram is not all celebrity focused. Manovich's discussion of "instagrammism" centers on regular people and artists' use of the platform (2016). This is a specific type of photography shaped by users that evokes a particular ambience and aesthetic vision. Manovich shows regular users of Instagrammism have power in the sense that they own the means of cultural production – they have the skills, they know the rules and create the strategies that make popular feeds, and apply them in practice. He also drives home that selling these skills to capitalists is a choice users make and which does not have to occur (2016, p. 4). The same cannot be said for branded reality TV personas. Manovich's research is useful here because it really gets at the details of how the platform affords users agency and these affordances appear open to reality personas. Other research on Instagram is also attempting to

lay the foundation for developing types of approaches that will help researchers get at the visual aspects of social media, which Highfield and Levar (2016) argue is essential to get at authenticity, agency, and social media use.

2.2.3 **Summary**

In summary, analyzing celestoids' self-presentation across platforms will introduce a new model for reality TV studies that highlights how participants can use public forums to shape their stories and identities outside the confines of production. Looking at the branded-self across platforms will deepen understanding of celebrity and self-hood today, and provides an interesting way to bridge our understanding of the power individuals have, and the power larger institutions have, in shaping our identities, sense of self, and ideas about larger social and political issues. The review of literature thus far effectively shows how identities are mediated. It is time now to turn attention to the postfeminist sensibility, a line of research that traces more specifically how women's identities have been constructed within and among media.

2.3 **The Theoretical Emergence of a Postfeminist Sensibility**

The postfeminist sensibility is reminiscent of critical and cultural studies analysis of media and emerged out of the broad context of feminist media and consumer cultural studies. Theoretically speaking, critical media studies look at issues of force. Foundational texts influenced by Marx and Engels (1970) and Gramsci (1971) focused on class-based critiques of power, capitalist modes of production, the rise of consumer culture, media manipulations of high and low culture, and the emergence of the mass commodified audience (Benjamin, 1936; Herzog, 1941; Adorno, 1945; Macdonald, 1953; Debord, 1968).

Early critical scholars out of the Frankfurt School (i.e., Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Lowenthal) studied new media technologies and their

relation to propaganda post World War II. They formulated the culture industry thesis, which viewed popular culture as an “opiate of the masses” or some factory-like production chain responsible for these homogenized goods intended to simultaneously pacify the audience and create in them a limitless desire for consumer products. This work spurred debates about mass culture. In sum, these works were interested in ideology and other forces of influence.

The Frankfurt School ushered in early models of cultural studies (Kellner, 2002). Theoretically speaking, early British cultural studies have ties to the beginning of Post-Fordist capitalism. These studies are more inclusive in that they are interested in both force and resistance, and looked to the audience and consumer practices. Concerned with making sense of the relationship between culture and capitalism, cultural studies accounts for a variety of social phenomena (i.e., race, class, gender, structures of power, etc.) in researching media and its relationship to people and the larger social world.

Many early cultural studies scholars evoked Marxist criticisms. Williams (1958) for instance agreed with Marx that culture should be viewed in relation to its underlying system of production but saw the limitations in only looking at hegemonic forces (p. 95). Other early British cultural studies scholars out of the Birmingham school (i.e., Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall) were particularly concerned with rejecting the conceptions of the ignorant working class “masses” and the elitism inherent in critical critiques. They instead posited that working-class culture stood apart from mass culture. Williams (1958) argued that culture was ordinary, describing it as a ‘structure of feeling’ that was not always tangible, but that could describe how people view and experience the world. In other words, culture depends on experience and is meaningful in a host of ways for different people.

A common debate in cultural studies centers on agency and structure (Hall, 1980; Bourdieu, 1984; Rojek, 2007). According to Hall (1980) culture is not just a practice or the descriptive sum of the values and traditions of society, it is something that is threaded thru all social practices; and is the sum of their inter-relationship (p. 60). Cultural studies are now broadly about emancipation. Scholars argue it should be politically oriented to enable people to fight inequality and make salient the issues that can actually be fixed (Rojek, 2007, p. 29).

This highlights why feminist media studies fit so well within this paradigm, as feminist media studies aim for political and social change in regard to gender equality. As more women entered academia in the seventies and eighties, feminist media studies developed, shifting focus towards women and representations of women in media. This early feminist media research focused on capitalism, patriarchy, and the connection to women's oppression (McRobbie, 1982, p. 48). Later a postfeminist discourse emerged as a significant theoretical way to understand contemporary media within the broad context of feminist media studies and consumer culture.

2.3.1 **Postfeminist Sensibility**

A handful of communication and media scholars have begun studying the *Housewives* franchise, using (implicitly or explicitly) a postfeminist framework to understand the gendered performances materialized on these shows (Cox and Proffitt, 2012; Lee and Moscovitz, 2013; Nayar, 2015; Leonard and Negra, 2015). To clarify, there are four ways this postfeminist framework (or postfeminism) has been discussed: (i) as an epistemological shift, (ii) as a historical transformation, (iii) as anti-feminist backlash, and (iv) as a sensibility (Gill, 2007). Postfeminism as an epistemological shift references transformative change, with the “post” in postfeminism being similar to the “posts” in postmodernism or poststructuralism. Viewed as a historical shift, postfeminism has been classified as third wave feminism, with the “post”

representing linear historic progression (Press, 2011; Munford and Waters, 2013). Feminist texts noting a distinction between now and “second wave” feminism signal some break between earlier feminists and feminists today.

The third “post” in postfeminism references a type of anti-feminism. This type of anti-feminism includes reactionary statements against feminism; it can be described more specifically as a discursive phenomenon that embodies dominant neoliberal ideologies, and an uncritical stance towards capitalism (Gill, 2016). Exemplifying this is the idea that women can now choose to do as they want, including to disregard feminism. McRobbie’s (2009) historical analysis of feminism shows how from the beginning of feminism’s second wave, there has always been anti-feminist discourse which simultaneously evokes conservative ideologies (p. 31). For decades, this has been the main way feminism has been portrayed in major media.

Regardless of the historic roots of the term, postfeminism is considered in this dissertation as a *sensibility*, with postfeminist media culture being a critical object for study (Gill, 2007, p. 255). Here postfeminism is considered an analytical tool or conceptual frame for understanding the dominant ideologies presented in media. A postfeminist sensibility is the conceptual frame employed by producers of *Real Housewives* and even the women themselves on social media. In this way, the postfeminist sensibility informs the branded-self.

2.3.2 **A Postfeminist Sensibility and the Branded-Self**

As discussed in early sections of this chapter, the women of *Real Housewives* are *Bravolebrities* – or mini brand extensions of the Bravo TV network. On the whole, the *Real Housewives* series has branded these women in specific ways. These specifics are aligned with a postfeminist neoliberal mentality; these women are celebrated as being more than mothers and wives. They are entrepreneurial, cutthroat business-women, who are outspoken, confrontational,

dedicated to keeping a glamorous aesthetic, and open to showing their worst, most emotional breakdowns on reality TV. The women of this franchise fit within these general parameters on their own, but in order for them to truly become a *Real Housewife* (i.e., gain fan favor, network favor, and renew their contract for a second season), they must relinquish themselves to the edit they get on camera. This means that producers and story editors present the women in certain ways, and often present them using a postfeminist lens.

This postfeminist conceptual lens then informs the women's personas on other platforms since they have to use aspects of their persona from the show to curate a branded image on social media. Remember, the meta-image and meta-narrative of the branded-self has to be consistent in order to succeed and be perceived as authentic (Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2016). In short, the postfeminist sensibility informs these women's personas on reality TV. To remain as consistent as possible, that sensibility is translated to social media by the women as a means to evoke an authentically branded-self.

2.3.3 **Postfeminist Media and Intersectional Feminism**

The aim of the postfeminist sensibility is to identify how gender is articulated in media at present. McRobbie calls this "the new gender regime" (2009). The new gender regime involves a "double-entanglement" with feminism, whereby feminism is "taken into account," but undermined (McRobbie, 2009, p. 12). This is visualized in postfeminist media texts through the evocation of women who uphold neoliberal values, middle-class consumer habits, whiteness, and aesthetics of ultra-femininity. The new gender regime is also invoked in media through the use of words and phrases like "choice," "empowerment" and "having it all."

This sensibility has been pinpointed to the mid-eighties when a "vaguely feminist, pro-woman, and not 'angry'," *New York Times* article was published calling for a full endorsement of

sexual difference (McRobbie, 2009). This article, McRobbie argued, made difference feminism, which asserted fundamental differences between women and men, more salient in media throughout that time. This sensibility really gained traction in the nineties, alongside the rise of neoliberalism. As Gill (2007) describes it, the postfeminist sensibility is enacted by a “grammar of individualism that fits perfectly with a neoliberal ideology” (p. 270). Postfeminist media accomplish this by way of narratives that depict women picking themselves up and choosing all the right (most lucrative) choices to make the best life possible. These narratives make it look like equality has been achieved, and that feminism is no longer needed because women have legitimate consumer power on their own.

The character of Bridget Jones for example does exactly this (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). Bridget Jones, as McRobbie argued, embodies a man’s definition of the perfect woman, and therefore is representative of this feminist “double entanglement.” The character is both economically independent and yet desperate to be with a man. She upholds conservative ideals in terms of gender and family, while embracing liberal freedoms related to sex, choice, and a diversity of relationships. The women on *Sex and the City* were also representative of this postfeminist ideal; they were sexually assertive, ambitious, and enacted choice and empowerment through excessive displays of conspicuous consumption (Gill, 2007).

Sex and the City also promoted a specific type of homosociality, where female bonding was presented with a male view of femininity (Gill, 2007; Storr, 2016). The male view of femininity of course works to promote male interests (Gill, 2007, p. 244). Storr (2016) studied female bonding at sex toy parties and argued that this view of femininity works in men’s interest because it is structured around openness to sex as something good in its own right, and not as something that could be a bridge to equality. In this way, these “double entanglements” work to

dismantle feminist politics. Especially since postfeminist media move feminism to the right by aligning it with larger neoliberal ideas and consumer capitalist culture.

Other scholars have gone farther, speculating that a postfeminist sensibility has done more than just dismantle feminist politics, but might be responsible for the “death of feminism” in media (Munford and Waters, 2014; Gill, 2016). Munford and Waters (2014) argue that feminism exists in media as an ontology or in Derridean terms, a hauntology. Which is a way of being that is shaped by anxieties of the past, concern for the future, and uncertainty about current status and ability (Munford and Waters, 2014, p. 20). The authors are critical of postfeminist media, but argue that the postfeminist mystique actually indicates that feminism is not dead, and that because it is evoked as this sort of revenant in media, the issue of feminism will keep coming back until it is fully acknowledged.

Dubrofsky (2011) argued that particular women on *The Bachelor* were presented in a state of “postfeminist nirvana.” Postfeminist nirvana, another way to describe the new gender regime, is a contrived, peaceful state where women look perfect and are entirely fulfilled in both career and personal life. Postfeminist nirvana on *The Bachelor* was constructed through the evocation of traditional notions of femininity and discourses about choice, which included talk about the women subjecting themselves to the male gaze as empowerment (Dubrofsky, 2011).

Dubrofsky also found that race played a key role in how *Bachelor* producers constructed postfeminist nirvana. She noted that whiteness played a big role in authenticating the women’s performances on the show. “Authentic” women received positive edits, were viewed as being ready for love, and offered the lead role on the spinoff, *The Bachelorette*. The display of intense emotions equals authenticity on *The Bachelor*, and arguably other reality shows. White women who displayed intense emotions were depicted as authentic, while the women of color who

displayed intense emotions were depicted as emotional messes. This is one way media, Dubrofsky argued, re-center whiteness as an ideal.

Postfeminist media are representative of a particular idea of feminism that only works for some people – mainly white, middle-class, women – who have the power and autonomy to choose this brand of feminism. People who might align with this brand of feminism get to choose to go to work or stay at home, they can choose to participate in political processes, and importantly have the luxury and autonomy to opt-out of their choices as well. Postfeminist media do not factor in the intersectional components of identity or account for the ways race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, education, religion, age, and ability affects the types of choices people get to choose from, and the level of autonomy people have in exercising choices. As a result, the postfeminist sensibility elides the manifold components of intersectional feminism.

bell hooks' (2000) critique of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, questioned if Friedan ever wondered if the plight of white, college-educated, housewives was the best starting point to interrogate sexist oppression in the U.S. (p.3). The postfeminist sensibility in media deserves the same criticism. Did producers, story editors, screenwriters, and other cultural intermediaries ever think about whether or not the best way to depict feminism would be to celebrate white women with consumer power? The answer is no, because most of these positions are dominated by white men. Intersectional feminism aims for inclusivity. It aims to listen to different people, different types of feminists, and all types of feminism, not just the kind that works for privileged white women and men.

The main idea behind intersectional feminism is that different forms of stratification affect people's experiences with discrimination and opportunity. Crenshaw (1989) was the first to use the term *intersectionality* to describe identities and experiences when discussing feminism.

In her widely cited work on Black women and discrimination she wrote, “because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (p. 140). Put simply, she showed how race and gender are not separate, but experiences that inform each other, both playing a role in how discrimination and opportunity are meted out. Today it is of utmost importance to consider a multitude of layers of identity when advocating for equal rights, feminism, policy, and social and cultural change. Bottom line, a postfeminist sensibility in media obscures intersectional layers of identity. Following next is a discussion of how this sensibility is performed.

2.3.4 **Camp and Performances of the Postfeminist Sensibility**

A postfeminist sensibility ignores intersectional identity because each woman is presented on *Real Housewives* as embodying similar postfeminist ideals. Research on *Real Housewives of New York City (RHNYC)* star, Bethenny Frankel, has argued that she made a career out of a self-branding style that capitalized on postfeminist trends (Leonard and Negra, 2015; Nayar, 2015). According to Nayar (2015) the postfeminist ideal of “having it all” looks like: financial security, familial belonging, and sustained intimacy (p. 14). Arguably, the postfeminist ideal on *Housewives* is a bit more than this.

For one, the series is premised on the traditional and gendered notion of “housewife,” but the women featured on the franchise are not always housewives or women who stay at home. Many of these women have careers and brands. Some women do not even have husbands or children, and do not fit the mold of a *housewife* in any way. A *Real* housewife on the Bravo TV network however, looks a certain way. Arguably to be a *Real* housewife you must present an aesthetic identity based on hegemonic/feminine beauty. This is one of the most important

components of the postfeminist ideal on *Real Housewives* and there is a lot of labor involved in curating this aesthetic identity.

The affluent women on the *Real Housewives* tend to look alike, aside from race and ethnicity, these women share the same doctors, trainers, and hair and make-up people. Before the franchise was a hit and the women were able to afford “glam squads,” they made themselves up on their own. Now, most women admit to using a glam squad, some women travel and are even filmed with their glam squad. Even more than this, the women are expected to conform to this ideal type. This ideal type is more than a beautifully put together woman, but one who also evokes other postfeminist ideals, i.e., having it all in terms of career and family. The women who cannot conform to this ideal type are either used as the fool to make the other women look better or are simply let out of their contract.

The women who succeed are those who successfully adopt a branded identity that upholds these standards. Doing this requires a form of labor that is highly gendered, based on a postfeminist sensibility, and not explicitly visible to viewers, followers, or critics. This sort of self-branding might be referred to as “aspirational labor.” This type of labor can come with social and economic capital gain, but it also comes with the risk of conforming to traditionally biased notions of gender and class (Duffy, 2015). This is something the women of *Real Housewives* do on the series and on social media. Duffy concluded that the type of labor fashion, beauty, and retail influencers do is insecure, flexible, invisible, and poorly paid. Her findings echo the experiences of new *Housewives* who come on the franchise. The women who are cast for one or two seasons are expected to film at all hours for barely any pay compared to the stars of the series, while veterans of the series negotiate impressive salaries.

Hearn (2016) argued that *Real Housewives* and reality TV in general, launches other kinds of “aspirational” labor and value creation in deeply gendered ways. She refers to this as ‘housewifization,’ which refers to the hidden, precarious, and unregulated labor behind reality TV. Hearn shows this labor trades on the denigration of women’s work, tracing similar phenomena back to early systems of capitalist expansion in the 16th and 17th centuries. Hearn (2016) argues that this series exploits women’s bodies, work, and their reputations.

This exploitation of the women on *Real Housewives* is most visible through the “ironic frame.” Looking at *RHNYC*, Lee and Moscovitz (2013) found that ironic framing was used to create a postfeminist drama about “rich women too crass to be classy, too superficial to be nurturing, and too self-obsessed to be caring” (p. 64). The ironic frame is what executive producer Andy Cohen refers to as the “Bravo wink,” which is something the editors do to highlight the hypocritical nature of the women’s actions. Irony like this is actually an essential component of media sexism (Gill, 2007, p. 254). Irony creates room to be playful about issues and is a way around saying sorry for exposing and then playing into (gender) injustices and stereotypes (Gill, 2007, p. 39).

Lee and Moscovitz (2013) quote from one of Andy Cohen’s books, where he admits, “we do something with the editing that is called the Bravo wink. We wink at the audience when someone says ‘I’m the healthiest person in the world’ and then you see them ashing their cigarette. We’re kind of letting the audience in on the fun” (p. 68). What makes the show fun then is watching the women mess up by saying one thing, and doing another. At this point in time, the women participating on each series know that this is the “fun” of the show. Some women play into this role better than others by intentionally performing this irony. That is by intentionally saying things or doing things that go against their self-presentation. In this way, the

women exaggerate the stereotypes the series trades on by playing into the ironic joke of the franchise so they can say feel they are in on the fun.

This performance strategy could be called “camping.” Camp is, according to Sontag (1964), described by its love of the unnatural, of artifice and exaggeration. She describes camp as a sensibility, which means camp and a postfeminist sensibility can neatly align. One could argue that the early seasons of *Real Housewives of Orange County (RHOC)* were pure camp. This is because pure camp “is always naïve” (Sontag, 1964). The women on season one of *RHOC* were naïve – of the ironic frame – and took themselves incredibly seriously. What the women of *RHNYC* were able to do as the second series in the franchise, was make their participation more of a fun in-joke. Now most women who participate on these shows, do exactly this. *Real Housewives* therefore is not pure camp. The women however, are “camping” by performing exaggerated versions of themselves, or characters, by playing with the stereotypes the show puts forth about women, (i.e., that they must always look good, balance career and family, and display intense emotions and hypocritical behavior to remain “authentic”).

2.3.5 Methodological Limitations of the Postfeminist Sensibility

The only major critique to utilizing a postfeminist sensibility as a methodological tool for analyzing media is that it is so focused on hegemonic forces that the conclusions drawn usually always point to the idea that media has killed off feminism. A way around this limitation is to go directly to the audience. Before getting to the audience however, a review situating a postfeminist sensibility within feminist methodological approaches, follows next.

Feminist media studies developed in the early seventies during the second wave of feminism, after more women started conducting research in cultural studies and communication. Feminist media scholars are hugely responsible for the shift in these disciplines towards the

everyday, a shift which brought about changes in methodological approaches (Hall, 1992). Traditionally, feminist media studies methodologically center on different types of textual analysis, quantitative content analysis, semiotics, or ideological critique (Mendes and Carter, 2011; Gill, 2007). Such methods are evoked in the use of a postfeminist sensibility.

Semiotics is useful for analyzing anything that communicates meaning. Early research using semiotics to study advertisements foregrounded interpretive flexibility and polysemy of messages to show how ads communicate the ideologies that formulate the basis of cultural identities (Barthes, 1967; Hall, 1974; Williamson, 1978). Hall's (1974) encoding/decoding showed how media messages are encoded by the media industry and decoded according to the social and cultural perspectives of the audience. These findings not only revealed the power of the audience in message reception, but also paved the way for future studies of female media audiences.

Ideological critique is rooted in critical Marxist scholarship and focuses on power relations and cultural representation. Early feminist media research in the seventies and early eighties employed ideological critique to study women and girls' magazines (McRobbie, 1977; Winship, 1978). Such research revealed how discourses of gender were constructed within these restricted ideologies that centered on romance, domesticity, and femininity. Van Zoonen (1994) however critiqued most semiotic and textual approaches, arguing that they utilized an outdated transmission view of communication, which limited conceptions of gender and communication. She argued that Carey's (1975) ritual view would offer a more interpretive framework for understanding gender as discourse and its relation to communication and media in terms of culture.

In the late eighties and nineties feminist scholars borrowed from poststructuralists like Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan, who put forth conceptual frameworks to investigate media. An example of the variance these frameworks provided for feminist media studies is Butler's (1993) *Bodies that Matter*. Here she conducted textual analysis of different media, one media text being the groundbreaking *Paris is Burning* documentary, to revisit her earlier argument of gender as a performance (Butler, 1990). Using Foucauldian discursive frameworks to analyze the argument for sexual difference, Butler demonstrated how gender is socially constructed, as well as sexual difference, which is also a part of the regulatory process that governs our bodies.

Feminist media scholars today are using similar methods to study postfeminist media. Importantly, analysts of postfeminist media have been looking at the same kinds of texts – *Sex and the City (SATC)*, *Bridget Jones*, and *Desperate Housewives* (see Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Munford and Waters, 2014). More recent texts have jumped to HBO's *Girls*, (Winch, 2013; Nash et al., 2017) and the Kardashian family (Leppert, 2015; Monteverde, 2016). These texts mainly feature predominately white women, particularly in lead roles. *Real Housewives* offers interesting textual territory because it features two series that focus primarily on African-American women.

Circling back, the critique of using a postfeminist sensibility as a methodological tool is that doing so focuses on power and unpacking the ideological messages of media. This is important research nonetheless, because the way feminist gains are depicted in media leave impressions on young women and girls (Keller, 2012; Press, 2011). In fact, Press (2011) argued that girls are left with an increased set of pressures, predominately related to the surplus of choice depicted in media. If everything is a choice, young women are getting the message that they better make the right ones, if not, they might internalize a bad choice as their own individual

failure. The way feminism is portrayed in postfeminist media creates an imbalance between how feminism is perceived by scholars and how it is perceived by the public. The solution to this disjuncture, argued Press (2011), is to incorporate more ethnographic research methods in feminist media studies (2011). In so doing, research would acquire more information on the actual experiences of the people most affected by these issues and the postfeminist sensibility. With this, it is important for analysts of postfeminist media to go to the audience.

2.3.6 **Consider the Audience**

Much of the research discussed up to this point using a postfeminist sensibility does not address the audience on an individual level. The aim of most feminist textual analysis is to look at the structures of influences at play in constructing ideas of feminism and gender in media, not to look at how the audience interpret these messages. This is why audience reception analysis is so important to media studies and why it is specifically important to studies of postfeminist discourse. This type of research responds to the problematic components of the above works mentioned that use some variety of textual analysis. Those types of works that use a postfeminist lens to analyze different media may draw textually deterministic conclusions. Audience studies can reveal how audiences use, make sense of, and enjoy these types of texts, even in spite of or because of their postfeminist messages (Katz and Liebes, 1990; Ang, 1985; Radway, 1984).

There are traditionally three types of audience research: (i) interpretations, (ii) pleasure, and (iii) uses of media (Gill, 2007). Feminist media studies looking at reception have historically foregrounded the role emotion and affect play in the experiences of pleasure viewers derive from media. Radway (1984) and Ang (1985) put forth two of the most well-known studies that highlight audience experience. Both works advanced feminist media research by revealing the social, political, and cultural limitations the audience makes do with. Radway's seminal work on

romance readers declared reading romance as an act of independence. The romance genre, she concluded, acts as a response to all the ways patriarchal culture fails to satisfy women.

Ang conducted her own textual analysis of Dutch fan letters about *Dallas*, the eighties prime time drama, but was particularly focused on the “pleasure” of viewing. She interrogated the available ideologies fans used to discuss the show and unpacked how the audience identified with the series’ “emotional realism” against the dramatic backdrop of *Dallas*’ take on real life. Ang concluded that watching *Dallas* does not mean a person is not a feminist. She urged feminist scholars to make these types of audience pleasures “politically productive,” suggesting they situate such pleasures in “a feminist plan of action” (1985, p. 132).

Gill (2007) argued that both Ang and Radway are doing exactly what feminist researchers should do, which is converse with each other and question whether or not their role is to respect women’s pleasures or criticize gender ideologies (p. 8). In this way, feminist media studies can do both – provide ideological critiques of media but also factor in pleasure by going to the audience. These two types of research methods can talk to each other; ideological critique can demonstrate to audience researchers how to critique pleasure, and audience work can demonstrate how audiences negotiate and resist mediated ideologies.

Future audience research however has to be multidisciplinary, open-minded and integrative. It should aim to conduct dual analysis of people’s social uses of media and the mediation of audience participation on a larger scale. This is important because audiences today are, “everywhere and nowhere” (Livingstone, 2012). The audience of *Real Housewives* is no different from the audiences Radway (1984) and Ang (1985) and countless other fan studies scholars explore – in that they are frowned upon. Most audiences or fan cultures that are studied

are often associated with the cultural tastes of the disempowered (Fisk, 1992, p. 30). *Housewives* fans are distinct however because they are not that disempowered.

Real Housewives airs on the Bravo cable network. Bravo boasts that they have the most educated and affluent viewers out of any cable TV channel. In fact, Bravo TV viewers are what advertisers call “affluencers.” An article from Adweek (2012) described “affluencers” as super-consumers, or people who are quick to adopt new technologies, lease new cars, and spend more money on personal care items. Demographic information supports this. Fifty-one percent of Bravo viewers have college degrees and 31 percent of viewers take in an annual income of around \$100,000 a year (Quantcast). This is representative of the professional upper and middle-class Bravo seeks out, which also happens to be primarily composed of 25-54-year-old white women (89%). This is a unique audience worthy of study.

2.3.7 Summary

In summary, the themes that characterize the postfeminist sensibility in media highlight choice, consumerism, hegemonic ideas of femininity, and self-surveillance (Gill, 2007, p. 255). In this section I have reviewed the larger framework of the postfeminist sensibility, which once again is a lens that gives credit to feminist gains made, but treats feminism as something that was only necessary way back when. I have discussed in detail how it emerged out of critical feminist and consumer cultural studies as a way to analyze how gender and feminism are presented in media today. I also reviewed feminist literature utilizing this lens to get at postfeminist media texts and discussed how the audience can be incorporated into this approach. Overall, the branded-self put forth by the women of *RH* is likely informed by a postfeminist sensibility given the fact that *RH* is representative of a postfeminist media text. The next section discusses performances of class embedded in a postfeminist sensibility and the branded-self.

2.4 **Performances of Class**

The last section reviewed literature on a postfeminist sensibility, which is an ideological framework through which media depict gender and feminism. It is representative of the way producers of *RH* present gender and likely informs the ways the women present the branded-self on the show and on social media. Performances of class on *RH* are therefore embedded within a postfeminist sensibility. This section shows that Bourdieu's field theory and his analysis of capital, positioning, and distinctions is highly relevant for understanding how *RH* trades on class ambivalence, and subsequently how class ambivalence informs performances of the branded-self on *RH*. After this section, I will discuss media framing and then finally present the research questions guiding this study.

2.4.1 **The Field of Real Housewives**

As argued in the introduction to this research, *RH* trades on class ambivalence by casting women of different backgrounds, who will likely have conflicting ideas on class. These different ideas might drive drama and resentment among the women. To contextualize this argument *RH* must be explicated as a field. The *RH* franchise is situated at the intersection of two fields: (i) the field of cultural production, which includes the capitals and players involved in producing the show (and thus also encompasses the next field within a postfeminist sensibility), and (ii) the field of represented "real life" which is comprised of the participants, the women, their capital and what is represented about them on the show. The drama and other interactions between the women depict the times that the two fields meet. This view of the series enables an explication of how this reality show mediates the cultural logic of real life and performances of class in a postfeminist media text.

A *field* is an ever-evolving setting in which people are socialized according to their positions (Bourdieu, 1990). The main idea is that the structure of the field influences people's interactions. In his own words, "it is the structure of the relations constitutive of the space of the field which determines the forms that can be assumed by the visible relations of interaction and the very content of the experience that agents may have of them" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 192). Here, Bourdieu views structure and agency as corresponding forces, meaning that the players in the field also have the agency to act independently of the structure of the field. This quote emphasizes that people's relationships are prompted by their position in the field (i.e., one's class or location in stratified society), and people's experiences with others are guided by certain expectations they come to have of these positions as they are further socialized into the field. When those expectations are not met, the field and the shape of relations change. This is a perfect description of what happens each season between the women of *RH*, who will fight over social expectations, demonstrating that struggles for power are constant, which will keep their relationships and the boundaries of those relationships evolving, thus changing the shape of the field (and the dynamics of the women), for the next season.

Hilgerz and Mangez (2015) clarify that each field in the social space has its own relational space that is dedicated to a particular activity that "responds to rules of functioning and institutions that are specific to it and which define the relations among the agents" (p. 5). *RH* is dedicated to a particular activity (dramatic entertainment), complete with its own structure that is partially created by producers. The women's relations in this field are influenced by their position, their experiences with each other, and also by the manipulated structure imposed by production. When their experiences are positive, their expectations have been met (rather the "rules of functioning" have been upheld). When interactions are negative (and dramatic) it is

usually because someone has transgressed the rules or the expectations of the exchange. Field theory in Bourdieusian terms, is useful for exploring the spaces where people struggle for resources and negotiate power. Therefore, theorizing *RH* as a field is useful for exploring how RTV depicts “real life” ideas about class relations and inequality.

Fields are also “semi-autonomous” and “governed by their own ‘rules of the game’” (Benson, 1998, p. 464). Benson argued that fields have their own system of reward and exchange, with basic oppositions that parallel each other. These basic oppositions illuminate social class divisions, which fields are structured around. The most defined social class division lies between the cultural and economic poles. A field’s location to these poles determines the kind of capital valued within that field. *RH* as a field is structured the same way, in that the women cast tend to be equipped with different types of capital that play into their position among each other.

RH can be theorized here as a larger field that encapsulates all current series in the U.S. This larger field however, can be further divided into smaller sub-fields based on each series. For instance, *RHNYC* and *RHOA* are separate and distinct fields with their “own rules of the game,” but both are situated within the larger field of the entire *Housewives* phenomenon. The placement of these subfields within the overarching field of *RH* likely depends on ratings and popularity.

Theorizing *RH* as a field is an abstract process. Field theory views social reality as fundamentally relational, which means that, “the relationships among the elements (not the elements themselves) need to be the heart of the analysis,” (Hilgers and Mangez, 2015, p. 2). The heart of my own analysis of the women’s relationships and performances of class in this field will be guided by Bourdieu’s theoretical understanding of habitus, capital, positioning, and

distinctions. This will be elaborated on in the analysis section, however, it is necessary to briefly note here that the women's relationships on the series are determined by power and position, both of which are often visualized through the women's displays of capital and when they make verbal distinctions. Capital plays into the drama on the series, as the women are cast as individuals with different kinds of capital to clash over positions of power. Power can be maintained in the field by making distinctions, which are markers of class that reveal more about one's position in the field of power and subsequent capital than they reveal about the actual value of the thing that is being judged. In other words, distinctions reference implicit class boundaries by focusing on differences between classes. *RH* as a franchise highlights these class boundaries by making visible on the show these implicit divisions that are present in the larger social space.

There is great power associated with making implicit social divisions visible. In his own words:

A class...begins to exist as such...only when it is distinguished...from other groups...through knowledge and recognition. The struggle over classifications is a fundamental dimension of class struggle. The power to impose and to inculcate a vision of divisions, that is the power to make visible and explicit social divisions that are implicit, is political power par excellence," (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 23).

Distinctions, or acts of social positioning that legitimate position, are a hallmark of *RH*. Making implicit social divisions explicit by way of distinctions, as the women of *RH* tend to do, helps define a class boundary and distinguishes those who are inferior, keeping outsiders on the outside. This also works to make those outsiders aspire to be a part of the higher status in-group. This barrier making process by way of distinctions is how *RH* trades on class ambivalence. Distinctions legitimate class in a country that needs to keep class boundaries hidden. Explicit

boundaries would conflict with the ideology of equality undergirding the American dream and the idea of upward social mobility. By elevating distinctions, and by casting women of different backgrounds (who likely have conflicting ideas about class), to clash over positions of power is how *RH* as a franchise legitimates class ambivalence.

2.4.2 **Class Ambivalence**

Bourdieu's field theory, habitus, and analysis of capital, positioning, and distinctions is relevant for understanding class ambivalence. Class ambivalence refers to the varied and uncertain terms Americans use to constitute class. As a social science concept, social class is one's socio-economic position quantified by occupational groupings and based on an individual's labor market resources and their working conditions (Weber, 1922; Torche, 2015; Cramer, 2016). In daily life people do not easily identify with class or talk about it practically. Instead, according to Bourdieu (1984), it is displayed in our practices, perceptions, and behaviors. Arguably, our ambivalence to class keeps the illusion alive that there is equality of opportunity, even though Americans know there is a stratified social order usually broken into three groups: the rich or the upper class, the middle, and lower-working class.

Scholars have shown that individuals in each of these groups will define class differently based on position (Bourdieu, 1984; Savage, Bagnall, & Longhurst, 2001; Payne and Grew, 2005). Therefore, there is a schism between social class as a social science concept and how people perceive class in reality. This disconnect arguably subverts class in the U.S. because it enables these culturally ambivalent ideas about class to flourish. This ambivalence is also seen in how different people define class. As sociologists and historians have shown, those in the upper class might define it in terms of behavior, while those in the lower classes define it more logically by looking at money and economic status, and then those in the middle define it

through insecure displays of materialism (Currid-Halkett, 2017; Ehrenreich, 1989; Fussell, 1986; Bourdieu, 1984; Goffman, 1959). Put simply, there is no unified understanding of class in the U.S. because people's perceptions of class vary by position. This makes class a complex issue to communicate in the identity work involved in curating a branded-self.

2.4.3 **Bourdieu and the Branded-Self**

This section theorizes how the women of *RH* perform class by displaying capital, fighting over positions, and by making distinctions to differentiate themselves from other women. These performances of class are notably highly gendered given the postfeminist sensibility, and based on producer ideas as much as the women's own personal background, or habitus. The way these women perform class, gender, race, and other aspects of their identity is related to their disposition towards the world. Bourdieu (1984) wrote, "the habitus is necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices" (p. 170). With this, the field of *RH* has arguably socialized the women into performing a branded-self based on a postfeminist sensibility and ambivalent projections of social class. The women themselves have also arguably impacted the field with their own habitus.

What needs to be highlighted here is that class ambivalence, or the varied ways we define class in the U.S., is embedded within the habitus of individuals and their overarching perception of class in daily life. These women might curate a branded-self online by capitalizing on the stereotypes about women put forth by the post-feminist sensibility. Doing so creates a branded persona online that aligns with the meta-image and meta-narrative of the branded persona from reality TV. This would lead to greater generation of capital on social media and more economic gains outside of the show. A successful branded-self can therefore bring about upward social mobility. This means the women will bring their ingrained class-based dispositions to their

newer higher status position, blurring the boundaries of class further. In other words, the branded-self is informed by ambivalent ideas of class, thus further contributing to class ambivalence.

2.4.4 **Summary**

Overall, this section embeds the women's performances of class and the branded-self in a postfeminist sensibility. This led to a discussion of social class, and how the women display ambivalent ideas about class. Finally, it showed that Bourdieu's field theory, habitus, and analysis of capital, positioning, and distinctions is highly relevant for understanding class ambivalence, which also informs the performances of class that go into curating a branded-self. But still, what do these performances say about the women on the series? What is the intended meaning of these displays? and does the audience accept these performances at face value? Following next is a discussion of framing and how it will apply to answering these questions.

2.5 **Framing: Origins and Definitions**

Research utilizing frame analysis is scattered across a multitude of disciplines. Scholars can invoke different framing models and definitions to guide research and analysis. Some scholars have attempted to conceptualize framing uniformly (Entman, 1993) while others have severed frames in terms of the type and frame effect (see Scheufele, 2000; Druckman, 2001). In spite of varied approaches and classifications of framing, frame analysis should first be understood simply as a framework for understanding how ways of thinking develop into people's common sense understanding of the world. After this framing is a research methodology that unpacks how people think about problems, situations, interactions, or events.

One of the first scholars to use the term *frame* was Gregory Bateson (1972) an anthropologist who viewed framing as a way to categorize and interpret messages in interaction.

Schutz (1973) called this a *typification*, which is a socially constructed ideal type based on standard assumptions. Typifications help us make sense of whatever is going on around us and play a large role in the social construction of knowledge, but they also limit our knowledge, he argued, because frames comprise only those parts of reality that are relevant to us in daily life (Schutz, 1973, p. 5). This general idea formulates the underlying importance of framing.

To better understand this and the intersections between the organization of experience, reality, and framing it is important to look to the man who literally wrote the book on frame analysis (or the longest book on frame analysis). Wonderfully preoccupied with how people worked to construct an understanding of reality in the smallest most common encounters, Goffman (1974) asked, what is it that's going on here? He defined framing as "the examination of the organization of individual experiences," and examined the minutiae of micro-level face to face interaction (p. 11).

Goffman effectively demonstrated that the way we make sense of even the smallest encounters is informed by the larger organizational structures that regulate our lives. In the opening of *Frame Analysis*, he argued that we personally negotiate elements of the arrangements under which we live, but once these arrangements have been negotiated we often, "continue on mechanically as though the matter had always been settled" (1974, p. 2). This means that there is little room for us to see things outside the realm of the reality we make, which can limit progress, understanding, and the human experience. Framing is thus not only a way to evaluate what is really going on – how we make sense of things and why we think certain ways – but a means to open up possibilities for new ways of thinking, learning, and growing. With this, Goffman initiated a host of work across an array of disciplines.

Today framing is not guided by one single definition, one method, or even one level of analysis. These early works on framing look at how individuals understand a given situation face to face. The types of frames they are discussing could be classified as “frames in thought,” which refer to what individuals view as relevant to understand a situation (Druckman, 2001).

Interaction that includes communicative texts like media, references, “frames in communication.” These frames reference the style of a speaker, or words, phrases, and images used (Druckman, 2001). Studying frames in communication is essential for understanding the role communicative texts play in the construction of reality, particularly in a time when knowledge, information, and our entire lives are mediated. Frames in communication can also be called media frames, which Gamson and Modigliani (1987) define in terms of “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events” (p. 376).

Due to the multiplicity of definitions and the array of disciplines using framing Entman (1993) argued that what was missing from the literature was a general framing theory showing how frames become embedded in text. Entman sought to address this problem by demonstrating across disciplines that framing involves communication. Entman supported this by showing frames exist in both the minds of the communicator and the receiver, the text itself, and the culture (1993, p. 52). According to Entman’s definition, in a communicative text, frames:

Define problems – determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; *diagnose causes* – identify the forces creating the problem; *make moral judgments* – evaluate causal agents and their effects; and *suggest remedies* – offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects (p. 52).

Entman's definition assumes that frames are not neutral because they are derived by a salient aspect of a perceived reality, which means that frames *promote* particular problems, and subsequently the interpretations, evaluations, and suggested remedies for those problems (1993, p. 52). This means that how we think about a problem is tied to the decisions we make about what could be done to rectify the problem.

This is supported in earlier work by Iyengar (1991), who argued that, "people are exquisitely sensitive to contextual cues when they make decisions, formulate judgments, or express opinions" (p. 11). In his examination of how television news framed political issues, he aligned frames with "contextual cues" and theorized that how problems are framed can influence decision outcomes. Iyengar (1991) concluded that frames ultimately tell us *how* to think about problems.

This distinction is important because scholars like Scheufele (1999) have pointed out that framing is often considered as "second-level agenda setting" (see McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver, 1997). When in fact it is distinct from agenda-setting and priming. These approaches are based on the theoretical premise of salience. Framing, Scheufele argued, is premised on attribution, which is defined by the link between an observed behavior and the individual responsible for the action. The simplest way to understand this distinction is to view agenda setting as telling people what to think about, priming as what makes people receptive to frames, and framing as telling us how to think about problems.

How we think about problems is informed by the larger culture. Bird and Dardenne (1988) argued that culture was embedded with narrative forms that offer people a schema for viewing the world at large. Schudson's (1989) analysis of culture echoes this idea. He argued that culture has a unique impact on the ways people think and act; it does not impose ideas but it

is composed of sets of ideas and symbols that are available for use that have the capacity to foster a particular point of view. Given the ambiguity in communication people tend to read into messages however they please, selecting the meanings they need for particular purposes and occasions (Schudson, 1989, p. 155).

In sum, framing has a long and diverse history. This introduction only briefly touches upon the main definitions and ideas. The biggest point here is that frames exist “in thought” in the minds of the communicator and receiver, and “in communication” in the text itself and the culture at large. This research is primarily interested in media frames, or frames in communication. Following next is an explication of sociological and cultural approaches to framing that get at media frames.

2.5.1 Sociological and Cultural Approaches to Framing

This section will review the approaches to framing that focus on frames in communication. Studies that focus on frames in thought tend to incorporate psychological approaches to framing to get at what is in the mind of the individual. This dissertation research is most interested in how reality TV producers and editors frame the women on *Real Housewives* and how the women frame themselves on social media for an audience. Therefore, this dissertation is concerned with frames in communication, which can also be referred to as media frames or collective frames.

Research focusing on collective frames is concerned with how media frames certain issues. Media framing literature is often conducted by sociologists and political communication scholars interested in how media framing shapes political discourse, public policy, and social movements (Gamson and Lasch, 1983; Schneider and Ingram, 1993; Entman, 2004; Peck, 2014).

Political communication research utilizes both sociological and psychological approaches to framing, the sociological approaches are discussed first.

The foundations of media framing are traced back to social constructivist approaches. Blumer's (1970) research on social problems embodied this approach. He argued that social problems were collectively defined and determined by society rather than objectively arranged in the way sociologists viewed them. Blumer showed that researchers must first understand how problems come to be framed in order to effectively solve them. Sociologists and political communication scholars have been using framing since then to understand how people think about social problems (see Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Kendall, 2005; Rose and Baumgartner, 2013) and how frames influence mobilization of social movements that could potentially fix social problems (Nathanson, 1999; Benford and Snow, 2000).

Rose and Baumgartner (2013) traced the evolution of both public policy towards the poor and media discussion of poverty from 1960 to 2008. They concluded public policy that concerned the poor was driven by how the poor were portrayed (as either deserving or lazy) in the media. This research supports Gilens (1996) earlier work about people's attitudes towards the poor. Examining the relationship between news media portrayals of poverty and public images of poverty, he found that media used a disproportionate number of images of African Americans in negative stories about poverty and welfare. Gilens concluded that news media was implicitly identifying poverty with race, thus perpetuating stereotypes that worked against the poor and African Americans (1996, p. 538). In other work referencing this research, Gilens unpacked American's negative attitudes about welfare by illustrating a reciprocal relationship between media framing and people's responses to the topic (2009). This work not only showed that media

distorted welfare policy, but that when people were asked about welfare their responses often evoked media distortions, which affected people's support for welfare policy.

Moving away from media's negative framing of the poor, Kendall's (2005) research showed that media framing of the rich is mostly positive. Kendall defined media framing as a collective process by which the media packages information before presenting it to an audience. This process includes, "the exposure given to a story, its placement in media, the positive or negative tone it conveys, and the nature of any accompanying headlines, photographs, or other visual and auditory effects" (p. 17). Kendall details the "sour-grapes" frame which is one of two ways the wealthy are depicted negatively in the media. The sour-grapes frame shows the rich as being unhappy and dysfunctional. Importantly, this frame, she argued, caters to ambivalent feelings among viewers. Viewers can experience pleasure looking at the expensive luxuries the rich have but at the same time become more aware of "the problems associated with having wealth, luxuries, and social prominence" (2005, p. 70). Kendall's work demonstrated that media framing enables an ideology of class that has the power to influence how individuals think about inequality and their personal identity within the class structure (2005, p. 15).

Studies like this, which foreground collective media frames support the idea that elites set the frame (Pfhol, 1977; Nathanson, 1999; Kendall 2005; Gilens, 2009; Rose and Baumgartner, 2013; Peck, 2014). This formulates the basis of Entman's (2004) cascade model of activation, which aimed to demonstrate how framing works on a macro-level. Drawing on individual level approaches to framing, Entman was able to highlight the similarities between how information spread from the White House to major networks, and how information flows through people's long-term memory. His framing model shows that political party control of the White House matters to the frame. The times we see competing frames in an administration, or a break in the

chain of cascading activation, is when there is elite dissent. Overall, Entman's model and other studies focusing on collective media frames tend to point towards some form of hegemonic control.

This however, does not mean that sociologists and political communication scholars do not care about individual frames. Some scholars, have made concerted efforts to look at collective frames with special attention to the individual. Gamson and Modigliani's (1987, 1989) early framing research depicts a rich way of doing frame analysis. The authors take the individual into account even though they look at collective frames. Using a constructivist approach, Gamson and Modigliani introduced a unique framing model to explore discourse on both nuclear power (1989) and affirmative action (1987).

Their framing approach is culturally based in the sense that it includes the concept of *issue cultures*. According to the authors every issue has its own culture – or special language consisting of phrases, characteristic arguments, and metaphors. When those issues arise, commentary about those issues draw on culturally available idea elements and symbols, which make up a *cultural catalogue*. The ideas composing these *cultural catalogues* are then organized and clustered into *packages*. At the core of each package, the authors argued, was the *frame* (p. 376). The authors in both studies are careful not to suggest that changes in media discourse cause changes in public opinion. Rather, they view mediated discourse as only part of the way that individuals construct meaning, and as part of the way journalists and other media people create meaning in that discourse. Their findings show that interviews with individuals might benefit frame analysis. In sum, the authors recognize collective frames have a reciprocal relationship with individual frames and give power to the audience to frame these issues apart from media.

Benford and Snow's (1988) discussion of "frame alignment" evokes a similar stance. In the author's other review of framing literature and social movement dynamics, they reiterate that framing processes are critical to the desired outcomes of social movements. Here, they define frames as "action-oriented sets of beliefs" which both "inspire" and "legitimate" social movement campaigns, (2000, p. 614). Prior to this work, Nathanson's (1999) comprehensive comparative analysis of the tobacco and gun control movements provided empirical grounding for Benford and Snow's (2000) argument. Nathanson showed that social movements girded by perceived threats to public health act as catalysts for changes in health policy and behavior. Successful social movements, Nathanson argued, require ideologies that are (i) credibly articulated socially and scientifically as threats to public health, (ii) have the ability to mobilize varied organizational groups, and (iii) merge political opportunities with targeted vulnerable populations. All three of these requirements inherently depend on framing. Overall, this research demonstrates that social movement mobilization is tied to the way the movement is framed.

The frames in communication studies discussed so far center on what a speaker or text says. As Entman (1993) noted, frames are also located in the culture itself. So how we think about problems is connected to larger cultural ideas. The foundation of cultural ideas are comprised of narrative forms that evoke our moral foundations (Bird and Dardenne, 1988; Clifford and Jerit, 2013). Clifford and Jerit (2013) found that people's opinions about policy could be more accurately predicted by a moral foundation rather than a political ideology. Clifford and Jerit argued that this showed collective frames have to be accepted first by the individual and this only happens if the frames are aligned with the ideas already in place in the individual's mind.

2.5.2 **Summary**

The *Real Housewives* franchise might contain meaningful clues about people's perceptions of class, wealth, status, and economic inequality at a time when insecurities about these very things are exacerbated in the larger culture. The underlying assumption here is that *Housewives* is a way to understand how both viewers and media make sense of the issues of class, status and social mobility, and how these views may have changed over the decade in which this franchise has been relevant. Put simply, I am interested in what *Housewives* communicates about these issues in the U.S., if anything has changed since its premiere, and framing provides a way to get at these interests.

These interests necessitate the use of a framing model that takes both culture and time into account. Gamson and Modigliani's (1987;1989) framing model is most useful for these research aims because their model reflects both time and culture. In a basic sense, I will use their model as a guide to explore how the women on *Real Housewives* are framed by producers, and how they frame themselves on social media, as a means to understand whether and to what extent these frames prompt viewer's ideas about the rich. This research will explore how producers collectively frame the wealthy women on select series at different times. Then it will look at how the women of the franchise frame themselves on social media. It is imperative to view the women both on the series and within online platforms because they likely have more agency in shaping the branded-self online than on the show. Looking across platforms will put together a brighter picture of the branded-self. Overall, this research looks at how the women are framed across platforms to gain a better sense of how the branded-self is enacted, and how ideas about gender, class, status, and social mobility within the branded-self are produced in media.

2.5.3 **Research Questions**

The literature review discussed the broader platforms of reality television and Instagram, and consequent terms like celestoids, microcelebrity, and the branded-self as a means to demonstrate the importance of analyzing the branded-women of *Real Housewives* across platforms. The postfeminist sensibility employed by producers and the women on social media was discussed as means to describe how the women are presented. Then the performance of social class was discussed on a more micro level within this postfeminist media text as a means to demonstrate how social class is presented, performed, and subverted on the series and within the branded-self. Lastly, media framing literature was reviewed in order to describe the approach to analyzing what is going on with these women across platforms. Overall, this literature review demonstrated that *Real Housewives* caters to two problems in the U.S.: class ambivalence and resentment. Larger connections to how these issues might play into political decision making were also drawn. It is at this point that the research questions can be introduced.

As discussed in detail, the women of this franchise are presented in such a way that enables the series to trade on class ambivalence and resentment. With this, the first research question guiding this proposal is:

RQ 1: *How are the women of Real Housewives framed on the series?*

This question is concerned with how the women are framed by producers in such a way that aligns with this postfeminist ideology and particular ideas about class. While it is argued here that the series trades on class resentment and ambivalence, interrogating the nuances behind how the women are framed by producers will allow for a more expansive understanding of how these issues operate. While the women are presented according to these larger ideas, they have the agency to express different ideas about the image being presented on the show via social media. This introduces the second research question guiding this study:

RQ 2: *How do the women of Real Housewives frame the branded-self on Instagram?*

This question concerns how the women transgress, reproduce, counter, and/or reconcile the frames imposed by production on social media. Different platforms afford reality television personas other ways of presenting the self. Social media applications like Instagram enable construction of the branded-self and at the same time give individuals space to negotiate and claim agency over their identity (boyd 2014; Abidin, 2014; Marwick, 2015). This study will focus on critiquing the ideologies purported by producers, the women themselves, and media in general. This research will also get at how the audience interprets these frames, which leads to the third and final research question:

RQ 3: *Does the audience recognize these frames?*

Just because the producers present the women one way, does not mean that viewers passively observe the frames and the ideas they put forth. Going directly to the audience is the only way to understand how they view the series' displays of wealth and class, the frames being employed, and the overall enjoyment gleaned from a typically derided media text.

At this point the major strands of literature that situate this proposal, (e.g., reality TV, self-branding, framing, a postfeminist sensibility, and performances of class) have been reviewed. Within this overview, framing emerged as the primary theoretical view of the focused problem. Finally, the research questions guiding this proposal were introduced at the beginning of this section. Following next is the chapter on methods, which will lay out how these research questions are approached, the data that was collected, and how it was analyzed.

3. METHODS

Real Housewives (RH) is a voyeuristic celebration of (conspicuously) wealthy women. The now global franchise has achieved unparalleled success in the U.S. throughout a “new gilded age,” characterized by economic inequality, stagnating social mobility, and increasingly polarized politics (Noah, 2012; Gilens, 2012; Bartels, 2009). The franchise and the women it features communicate explicit ideas about class, status, and social mobility at a time when insecurities about class mobility and resentment are salient. This dissertation explored a cultural understanding of the series’ popularity in the U.S. throughout this particular time. As argued here, *RH* has done so well in American culture for three reasons: 1) the women are framed on the show in line with the public’s ambivalent attitudes about class, 2) the show reconciles the audience to their own status using a mix of techniques designed to evoke resentment and schadenfreude, 3) the women themselves explicitly represent a postfeminist neoliberal ideal, which reinforces the belief in upward social mobility via the self-branding entrepreneurial skills displayed on social media.

This argument was focused by an overarching research question: what does *RH* communicate about class, status, and social mobility in the U.S.? In order to comprehensively answer this question, using framing as a theoretical approach, I broke this question down into three sub-questions. The objective of this study was to understand how the franchise itself portrays class, status, and social mobility. The first question then is how do producers frame the women on the series? It was also important to look at how the women themselves communicated or performed the branded-self. The second question then is how do the women frame the branded-self on social media? I looked at how producers frame the women on the show because producers and story editors are the ones crafting these women’s stories for entertainment. I

looked at the women on social media to gauge how they framed themselves outside the confines of production. Lastly, the approach I use requires audience analysis. The final question is, does the audience recognize these frames? Asking these three questions revealed media representations of class, individual representations of class, and the audience's interpretation of these representations. This has enabled me to piece together a picture of what this franchise is communicating on the whole.

In summary, these research questions aimed to unpack how ideas about class, status, and social mobility are produced across platforms and will piece together connections to people's understanding of class. This research also explored how viewers think about the wealthy, and critically assessed whether their underlying assumptions about these issues appear in *RH*. This research has the potential to reveal a more nuanced understanding of both media and audience perceptions of class, wealth, inequality, and opportunity, which are all concepts that play into political decision making (Gilens, 2012; Bartels, 2009).

3.1 **Kellner's Three-Pronged Approach**

Kellner's (2011) three-pronged "multiperspectival" approach to media is used to interrogate these questions. This approach emphasizes the importance of engaging in textual analysis, of discussing media production, and media reception. It is a comprehensive and effective approach that offers a checks and balances within each major area of inquiry. The postfeminist sensibility is used as a theoretical lens to guide each of the three methods of analysis: frame analysis, discourse analysis, and audience analysis. Overall, using this perspective makes sense because *RH* is situated within a postfeminist media text.

Textual analysis tends to look at the ideologies, narratives and discourses that the media artifact communicates about race, class, and gender. The critique offered by textual analysis is

often guided by semiotic content or discourse analysis. Textual analysis was conducted in two ways: 1) frame analysis and 2) discourse analysis. The frame analysis focuses on the women as they interact on different series in the franchise. Discourse analysis was used to analyze the women on IG (factoring in both the text and accompanying visual images). Textual analysis has limitations. Kellner (2011) showed that textual analysis tends to focus on only one issue (i.e., race, gender, class) and usually represents the interpretation of the researcher. For this research, discussion of representations of class inherently necessitates discussion of the portrayals of gender, race, and other aspects of identity. There will be discussion of the intersections of race, class, and gender in the findings sections that discuss textual analysis. In regard to the second limitation, audience reception is studied to balance the interpretative nature of the textual analysis.

The audience analysis includes interviews with fans of *RH*. Audience research on *RH* is limited to textual analysis of the series and fan comments. In this way, this research makes necessary contributions to audience reception literature on this franchise by bringing voice to a range of fans. The rest of this section will detail how each question was answered from a methodological standpoint. Next follows a detailed description of the approach to each question, the method of analysis, and a summary of the process of data collection in response to each research question.

3.2 **RQ 1: How are the women of *Real Housewives* framed on the series?**

Explanation of Approach

The underlying assumption of this research is that *RH* is a way to understand how viewers and media make sense of class. This dissertation is acutely interested in what *RH* communicates about class in the U.S. and if anything has changed over time since its premiere.

These interests necessitated the use of a framing model that takes both culture and time into account.

Gamson and Modigliani's culturally based framing model was most useful for conducting a frame analysis of the women on the show. This model is based on *issue cultures*. According to Gamson and Modigliani (1987), every issue has its own characteristics related to language, phrases, arguments, and metaphors. When issues arise, commentary about them draws on culturally available idea elements and symbols that make up a *cultural catalogue*. The ideas composing these *cultural catalogues* are organized and clustered into *packages*, and in the core of every package is its *frame* (1987, p. 376). For this frame analysis, the initial packages and core frames employed in *RH* were interpretively pieced together by identifying culturally available ideas and symbols regarding class, gender, and other things known about the show.

The framing protocol illustrated in **Appendix A** not only used Gamson and Modigliani's model of issue cultures, but it was also designed using Chong and Druckman's (2010) four clear steps to identifying frames. **Appendix A** shows examples of potential phrases and visuals that invoke each frame. It should be noted that this is only an initial set of frames. It is also noted whether the frame invoked involves positioning the women as *deserving* or *undeserving* of their position. Understanding how the show positions the women will help identify if the frame plays into the assumptions people have about the rich. Thus, this protocol also utilized Chong and Druckman's (2010) three step process to get at the psychological mechanisms of the audience. Chong and Druckman's protocol design, coupled with Gamson and Modigliani's culturally based, constructivist framing approach, helps refine this frame analysis by substantiating the link between the audience and media frames.

The use of this model is justified because it recognizes that a multitude of packages can work for the same issue culture, meaning different visual components might depict the same frame on different shows. Finally, this framing model highlights attribution. Framing is premised on attribution, which is defined by the link between an observed behavior and the individual responsible for the action (Scheufele, 1999). In summary, this framing model enabled me to analyze how the individual women were framed. Some women were framed to align with other ideas of class, and these differences are discussed in the analysis section. Next is a more detailed description of the frames and my method of analysis.

Method of Analysis

To begin, *RH* is a postfeminist media text. Therefore, a postfeminist sensibility, which acknowledges feminist gains made, but treats feminism as a thing of the past, guides much of what we see on each series. The show title itself evokes a postfeminist idea or anti-feminist discourse. These are women who live without financial struggle, who are happily fulfilled in their work and personal lives. They are empowered women who have the opportunity to pursue whatever it takes to maintain their happiness, (i.e. plastic surgery, consumerism, hired help, new entrepreneurial ventures, and a surplus of choice). This makes up the overarching, meta-frame employed throughout each series. It is named “Postfeminist Nirvana,” after Dubrofsky’s (2011) work on the women of *The Bachelor*. This frame describes the main idea about the women cast in these shows – they simply have it all or are made to look this way. This frame gets at the major ideological idea employed by media today to depict gender and feminism. See **Appendix A** for more information on what might evoke this frame.

The next three frames more specifically focus on what the series communicates about class. It was established throughout the literature review that ideas about class in the U.S.

coalesce into class ambivalence. People of different social class backgrounds will view class differently and often view themselves separately from the class hierarchy. For instance, the rich might define class according to taste and behavior, while those in the middle class might see career, work ethic, and material possessions as markers of class. With those in a lower class viewing the concept most concretely by way of money.

A basic cultural catalogue of these ambivalent markers of class would include commentary, symbols, and ideas regarding how the wealthy display that they are wealthy. Displays of wealth include material goods, money, behavior, and a strong work ethic. Using this, I clustered these ideas and symbols into three different packages: (i) Material package, (ii) Behavior package, and (iii) Labor package. Each of these packages were broken down into core frames: *the bling frame*, *maybe we are white trash*, and *the hustler frame*. Each frame name is based on quotes and phrases used by the women of *RH*. See **Appendix A** for more detailed information on what images and words can evoke these three frames.

There is a fifth frame to discuss. Researchers and executive producer, Andy Cohen, emphasize that one comedic tactic of the show highlights the women saying one thing and doing another. Lee and Moscovitz (2013) call this the ironic frame, while Andy Cohen calls this the “Bravo wink.” This frame evinces *schadenfreude*. *Schadenfreude* means *harm joy* in German, and references the pleasure we feel when others suffer or act foolish. This social emotion undergirds most reality TV. *Schadenfreude* works best when we envy the person who is humiliated, and this will be further explored in the results section. See **Appendix A** for the ideas and symbols evincing *schadenfreude* that were interpretively clustered into the fifth and final package, called the (v) hypocrisy package, or the *you’re a hypocrite frame*.

Of course, throughout the coding of these frames, new frames began to emerge, such as the ‘charity frame.’ This is relatively new to the franchise and demonstrates how producers and editors have reshaped the way the women are framed according to their social media, a point that will be discussed in the analysis section. The five frames laid out here are not intended to read as the only frames at work on the series, but they are most essential for determining media representations of class. In summary, Gamson and Modigliani’s framing approach worked well here because it highlighted the evolution of the framing of class on *RH*, which will be discussed in the analysis section.

To further explicate on hegemonic production in structuring and defining the frames, I conducted interviews with four reality TV insiders. One insider worked in field production on *RHOC* and *RHOBH*. Another insider worked for *Watch What Happens Live*, a show on Bravo that hosts the women of *RH* nightly after each new episode. The series is hosted by Andy Cohen, an executive producer of the *RH* franchise. The two other interview subjects work in production on an array of RTV shows and have personally worked with different women from the *RH* franchise. Findings from these interviews are discussed in the analysis section.

These interviews enabled a comprehensive analysis. They also helped to further interrogate the processes of framing since the interviews could inform, confirm, and elaborate upon the media frames put forth in this frame analysis. It was important to take into consideration the processes of production to better understand the counter frames that emerged to contest or revise hegemonic forces. Much of this interview data contests the ideas about production put forth publicly by current producers for the Bravo network. These implications are discussed in the analysis section.

Processes of Data Collection and Sampling Procedures

In order to study the frames employed by producers across series, episodes had to be viewed and analyzed. The sample of episodes includes each of the seven series that are currently on rotation on the Bravo cable TV network. This means *RHOC*, *RHONJ*, *RHNYC*, *RHOA*, *RHOP*, *RHOD*, and *RHOBH* were all viewed attentively. It was important to look at each series on its own because they are located within a specific cultural context and cultural context plays a key role in the way people communicate class. Location also plays a role in the way the women are represented by producers and in how the women interact with each other on each series. The unit of analysis is the women of *RH*. Viewing each episode, what the women did on an individual level was the focus – how they communicated class, and how the show framed individual women to communicate certain ideas about class.

More specifically, the first and last season of each series was analyzed to enable a broader understanding of how the frames employed may have changed over time. Of the two seasons of each series, three episodes in each season were viewed. This makes for a total of 42 episodes. The episodes viewed were the season opener, the season finale, and an episode in between the beginning and end of each season. Most often, when possible, the episodes that featured the women on the cast trip were viewed. Season opener episodes were viewed because they usually offer an introduction to the women featured that season. Finale episodes were chosen specifically because they often center around a party, where all the women attend, and address grievances from their interactions earlier in the season. The cast trip episodes were viewed because they are often a high point for each season. These episodes feature the women together at a special location. The reunion episodes were discounted because they do not feature the women in their natural element.

A possible limitation here is that there would be gaps in analysis because only a few episodes a season, and only two seasons of each series, were viewed. I will attest that I have watched these shows from the beginning and am equipped to reference any highpoints in other seasons or episodes that may add to or deviate from these findings. Following next is a discussion of the methodological approach to the second research question.

3.3. **RQ 2: How do the women of *Real Housewives* frame the branded-self on Instagram?**

Explanation of Approach

As discussed at length in the literature review, the branded-self is the current ideal purported on reality TV. It has been defined as the “self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of the self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries” (Hearn, 2008, p. 164). In regard to the women of *RH*, the branded-self is likely informed by the frames discussed in the first research question, with the exclusion of the hypocrite frame, which is more of a producer tactic. The branded-self displayed on social media applications, like Instagram (IG), will of course borrow from the branded-self portrayed on RTV, because consistency across platforms is key to a successfully branded image (Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2016). The branded selves produced by reality TV shows create a brand in and for the network, so individual reality stars are network’s promotional objects. Nowhere is this more explicit, than on the Bravo TV network, where they have given an actual name to the people who appear on their shows: the *Bravolebrity*. Bravolebrities like the women of *RH* likely have a contractual obligation to promote the series on social media, so again, the branded image portrayed on social media will borrow from the image seen on RTV. However, the dynamics of the branded-self might change depending on the platform.

Platforms are “performative infrastructures” or mediators that shape the way we interact (Beer, 2009; Gillespie, 2010; van Dijck, 2012). Thus, different platforms enable different styles of communication. When discussed in literature, the branded-self as a concept tends to assume the individual is responsible for the output of the branded-self. This dissertation takes issue with the autonomous individual the branded-self aims to produce when it is done on reality TV. When branded-selves are first created by reality TV, that branded image is designed to work with the overarching goals of the producers and networks. I analyzed the branded-self across platforms to see how participants act with agency outside the confines of production on social media. Looking at the women of *RH* on IG enabled this research to unpack how IG affords the women different ways of communicating identity outside of the show.

To study the agency of the women on social media, select women’s IG accounts were analyzed using discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is an in-depth investigation of a text and is an appropriate analytical approach to get at how the women sort through the frames and subsequent discourses of those frames on another platform. Textual discourse analysis is a way to empirically demonstrate connections between critical social theory and observations we have about language (Fairclough, 2000). The postfeminist sensibility was used as an analytical lens to explore how elements of the branded-self and other frames are constructed and enacted by these women in their discourses on IG. The postfeminist sensibility was as an important guide for this textual analysis because it helped contextualize the women on this platform against a larger system of production (i.e., the series).

A social linguistic approach to discourse analysis was employed for answering this research question. This approach is constructivist and text based (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). The aim is to closely read the text for insight into how the women organize and construct the

branded-self online. Starks and Trinidad's (2007) objective approach to social linguistic discourse analysis includes an understanding of what people are doing with their language in a given situation (p. 1376). Therefore, the analytic processing of this data can be described as one of searching for textual evidence to show how the language and visuals used in these women's IG posts accomplished the branded-self, which is premised on class-based ideas of identity and a larger postfeminist sensibility. Following next is a more descriptive explanation of the method of discourse analysis used to answer this question.

Method of Analysis

Published texts, which would include IG posts, are open to diverse interpretations and can figure into various processes of meaning-making (Fairclough, 2003, p. 11). Fairclough specifies that this meaning-making depends not only on what is explicit in a text but also what is implicit, or what is assumed (2003, p. 11). According to Fairclough (2003), there are three types of text meaning: (i) action, (ii) representation, (iii) identification. These three text meanings have a dialectical relationship and link to a "multifunctional" view of texts. This view highlights the relationship of texts to events in the wider social world and to the people involved in those events (Fairclough, 2003, p.27). The women's IG posts were analyzed in accordance with these three aspects of meaning.

Action references the action behind the post, it asks the researcher to identify the meaning behind why the women posted that content to IG. For instance, most women were posting to IG to promote a product/the show, to directly call out people on the show, or defend themselves against a bad edit. *Representation* references different ways of representing – in this case – how the branded-self is being represented in the IG post. More specifically, because this dissertation is focused on class and gender, representation asks the researcher to analyze how class (i.e.

capital and class consciousness), and gender (within a postfeminist sensibility) are represented in each post. Capital, class consciousness, and traditional ideas of gender guided this discourse analysis. *Identification* references an evaluation or judgment made in the IG post.

Identification as a type of text meaning, according to Fairclough (2003), brings, “what Bourdieu calls the habitus of the persons involved in the event into consideration in text analysis, i.e. their embodied dispositions to see and act in certain ways based upon socialization and experience, which is partly dispositions to talk and write in certain ways” (p. 29). The judgments or distinctions (i.e. identifications) the women make in their IG posts are then based on the way they act and represent themselves. These women’s backgrounds (i.e. aspects of their intersectional identities and habitus) inform what they talk about, post about, and write about on IG. These women communicate ideas about class and gender on IG. This research is focused on highlighting those ideas, while also understanding that the postfeminist ideal and the bravelebrity brand component also shape the women’s IG aesthetic and overall branded image online.

Each post, which usually consisted of both a caption and a visual image, was analyzed according to these three types of text meaning. Multiple rounds of coding were conducted to ensure that the inferences drawn were valid. The first round of coding employed what Saldaña (2013) calls the “elemental method” of descriptive topic coding. Then multiple rounds of this deeper qualitative thematic pattern coding based on Fairclough’s (2003) “multi-functional” view of texts followed (p. 27). This view enabled me to theoretically analyze what each post was doing and the assorted meanings behind each post.

I took the visual images studied on IG seriously. The social conditions and effects of the visual components of each IG post were considered. I always reflexive about my own way of seeing these images. These three things are critical factors for studying visual images (Rose,

2012, p. 17). The image and text in an IG post are not totally reducible to their context. Each post can have their own effects that can differ from my interpretation.

By considering all of the above, and through conducting multiple rounds of qualitative thematic pattern coding, I categorized the women's IG posts into six categories. Across the women's accounts, most IG posts were coded into the following categories: 1) Interpersonal relationships 2) IG hustle 3) capital 4) charitable endeavors 5) empowerment advocacy. These categories are not exhaustive or exclusive. They will be elaborated on in the analysis section for this research question.

To further an understanding of agency and the women's social media use I also conducted interviews with women who have been on *RH*. I obtained IRB approval in August 2018 to amend my research protocol #2015-1239. IRB granted me permission to interview the women from the series. I contacted these women with the same IRB approved message explaining the study and my role as a researcher. Some women were contacted via email if it was shared on their public social media account. The others were contacted via IG Direct Message (DM).

Analysis will include interviews with eight former cast members of *RH*. Six of the interviews were conducted over the phone. One interview was conducted via email and one interview was conducted via IG DM. I specifically contacted women who were no longer under contract with Bravo, NBC Universal, or the various production companies of the series so they could participate more openly. I asked the women questions from the same IRB approved interview guide (see **Appendix D**). Some interviews were constrained by time or flowed differently, thus I do not have responses from all of the women for each specific question. Their responses and experiences with the series however, tend to corroborate more than they diverge.

The eight women I interviewed are all former, full-time cast members of *RH*. Together they represent five of the nine total *RH* series that have aired in the U.S. The names of these interview subjects have been redacted. Their voices will be quoted as *RH 1* through *RH 8*. (*RH* is for ‘real housewife.’) The numbers were randomly assigned. Also redacted are the names of the people they mention in the interviews and other identifying information (i.e., locations, storylines, other cast members’ names) that would give away the franchise and/or their identity.

In all, the interviews with these women offer a unique pathway to triangulation of each of the analysis sections. Their voices contribute to my analysis of production, media frames, the discourse analysis of their social media, and the fan interviews. Their voices are highlighted in the final section of the analysis chapter.

Processes of Data Collection and Sampling Procedures

Select women from *RH* were analyzed on IG, which is often a space used by these women to extend, protect, and contest ideas about the branded-self constructed on reality TV. The sample consisted of two women from each series. A total of 14 women’s accounts were analyzed. The women analyzed were: Siggy Flicker and Teresa Guidice (*RHONJ*); Luann de Lesseps and Sonja Morgan (*RHNYC*); Lisa Vanderpump and Lisa Rinna (*RHOBH*); Leanne Locken and Brandi Redmond (*RHOD*); Ashely Darby and Karen Huger (*RHOP*); Nene Leakes and Kenya Moore (*RHOA*); and Vicki Gunvalson and Shannon Beador (*RHOC*).

The rationale for choosing these women was based on two things. One is longevity. At least one of the women from each series analyzed on IG has been on their respective series since the first season through present day. Number two is story arch. The two women chosen from each series are representative of two character types. One woman chosen tends to be the alpha dog or unnamed star of the series, while the other woman analyzed tends to be either her nemesis

or a woman that does not often follow her lead. These two types of characters tend to create the most interesting story on the show, and therefore have an active, interesting IG presence.

Marwick's (2015) collection methods were used as a guide in collecting this data. Each woman's user account name, biography, and number of followers were recorded. As were the number of likes and comments each post received, along with the captions, hashtags, emoticons, and types of visuals that were incorporated into the posts. All "in-season" IG posts from each woman's public account were analyzed. "In-season" refers to the posts the women put up while their season is airing. Most women from *RH* post to IG more "in-season" than out of season. "In season" posts were also important to analyze because often times the women directly commented about the show as it aired in real time. I chose to pull posts from the air dates of the most recent season viewed for the frame analysis. This way the stories on the show and the stories the women responded to on social media aligned. Many women would reference scenarios, edits, and/or behind the scenes drama on IG, so it made sense to align the IG posts with the air dates of the episodes viewed for the frame analysis. Most women usually posted to IG the day a new episode aired, but sometimes other days of the week.

Women posted to IG throughout their respective seasons between 64 and 483 times. For instance, Lisa Vanderpump posted a total of 64 times to IG while season 7 of *RHOBH* (2017) was airing in real time. Nene Leakes posted a total of 483 times to IG while season 10 of *RHOA* (2018) was airing in real time. Vanderpump posted the least out of all of the *RH* women analyzed here, and Leakes posted the most out the women in this sample. A total of 2,657 IG posts were coded and analyzed into categories for this research. This sample is large enough for manual qualitative thematic pattern coding and representative enough of the women's IG aesthetic because I reached thematic redundancy. Regardless of aiming to conduct a rigorous discourse

analysis, often times, a limitation of textual analysis is that it is still interpretively determined by the researcher. To offset this interpretive analysis, I went to the audience to discuss their interpretation of the various frames at play on these shows and on social media.

3.4 **RQ 3: Does the audience recognize these frames?**

Explanation of Approach

In order to answer this question, I conducted in-depth interviews with viewers of *RH*. The interviews were primarily designed to unpack how the viewers make sense of the frames employed on the series and on social media. The larger idea here is that producers might present the women one way and the women might represent themselves differently on social media, but none of this means that viewers passively observe those frames and accept the ideas they put forth. Going directly to the audience is the only way to understand how the audience views the series' displays of wealth and class, the frames being employed, and the enjoyment gleaned from this media text.

Conducting in-depth interviews with members of specific communities is part of a long tradition in qualitative research (Malinowski, 1922; Weinstein, 1991; Jenkins, 1992; Bacon-Smith, 1992; Corell, 1995; Thompson, 1995; Baym, 2000). This method literally gives voice to the people who use this media in daily life. Media are not only vessels of information that can impact people; media are used and have meaning because people fit them into daily life. It is because of this that the dissertation wants to highlight fan's voices. In-depth interviews enable this dissertation to do so, and are designed so the researcher captures not only the words, but the perception of the informants (Johnson and Rowlands, 2012).

Overall, the interviews afforded this research a deeper understanding of how fans interpreted the explicitly classist messages put forth by producers and the women on the series.

Using in-depth interviews also adds to research on this series. Most studies analyzing *RH* have only conducted textual analysis of comment forums, blogs, and the content of the series (Nayar, 2015; Cox and Proffitt, 2012, Lee and Moscovitz, 2013). It was important to me to conduct in-depth interviews to add to this literature, but to also give voice to the audience to elaborate on their own ideas, rather than conduct another interpretively driven textual analysis.

Method of Analysis

The interview questions (see **Appendix B**) were intended to explore the five core frames defined in the first research question, as well as the viewer's perception of whether or not the women on the show appear deserving or undeserving of their position. I was granted an exemption from the UIC IRB (protocol number 2015-1239) to conduct these interviews. The interviews were conducted over the phone or skype. They were recorded with permission from the participants and transcribed to obtain accurate records of what was said. The participants were told that their names would not be used in the final write-up. Before each interview began, the principle investigator gave the interview subject a quick synopsis on the study and asked if it was acceptable to record the conversation. Prior to the phone call or skype conversation, each participant was given a detailed information sheet about the study, with additional contact information, approved by the UIC IRB.

After I was granted verbal permission to record, the interviews began with a soft opening question (see **Appendix B**). The questions became more personal towards the end of the interview. The interview instrument was designed this way so that participants could feel more comfortable to share information as the interview went on. Each participant was asked the same questions. The interviews took between 20 and 50 minutes to complete, which was dependent on how much the participant was willing to elaborate. After the interviews were conducted, they

were transcribed and sent back to the participant. I promised the participant's final say in what was transcribed, and wanted to give them the opportunity to elaborate on responses or change something that they did not feel comfortable sharing. Given that these interviews were about *RH*, and that names are not used, no participants felt the need to change or elaborate on their responses.

After the interviews were transcribed and sent out to participants, I began analysis using a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1978). I made a spreadsheet consisting of each question and all of the subsequent responses. Then I engaged in "pre-coding" by highlighting and bolding significant parts of responses or those "codable moments" worthy of attention (Layder, 1998; Boyatzis, 1998; Saldaña, 2013). After this, analysis of the interviews is based on multiple rounds of manual thematic pattern coding (Saldaña, 2013). For analysis of each question, I would ask what does this response say? How is this response similar or different to the other responses in the sample? Then I separated responses based on theme and position, (i.e. if it was a yes or no question, those yes or no responses would be further analyzed to gauge why the respondent answered yes or no). After this, each response to the questions were coded into themes, and I pulled out the best quotes that evoked that theme for the final write-up.

Processing of Data Collection and Sampling Procedures

In order to recruit participants for this study I did two things: 1) put up flyers at my university affiliation, 2) and tweeted about the study. Both methods of recruitment enabled participants to opt-in to the study. After a person contacted me, I would respond with information about the study, attach the IRB approved information sheet, and ask for times that the subject could be interviewed. If the person responded with an interview time, I would schedule the interview and go from there.

This research question is based on 26 interviews with fans of *RH*. The first question to address here is are these enough interviews? Most qualitative researchers would say that it depends (Baker, Edwards, and Doidge, 2012). I argue that 26 in-depth interviews are enough. This number of interviews yielded a saturation point. If I were to interview more people, the results would not significantly change. Overall, these in-depth interviews offer a rich, thick description of the audience, their enjoyment of the series and their ideas about wealth, class, status, social mobility, and gender.

The interview sample consists of 22 women and 4 men. Eighty-four percent of the interview analysis is based on women's voices and 16 percent is based on men's voices. The of participants ranged from 21 years old to 50 years old, with an average age of 32. Ninety-two percent of the respondents identified as white, with 4 percent identifying as African-American, and 4 percent Latinx. All participants were college educated, employed (many were employed in high ranking positions, representative of a middle to upper middle socio-economic position), and half of the participants had achieved graduate and/or professional degrees.

There are limitations to this sample, particularly in terms of gender and race. Therefore, these interviews are not generalizeable to a larger group of people and do not represent all voices effectively or equally. The sample is however representative of Bravo and *RH*'s target demographic of affluent, educated, women and men, 18-49 years of age. Bravo is known for having the most affluent, educated audience in cable and as of 2017 Bravo had the "most loyal female 18-49 audience in cable" (Comcast; Adweek, 2012; Quantcast).

Ethical Issues

Ethical considerations are important when dealing with human subjects. Per the IRB, this research was exempt because it is considered minimal risk. Minimal risk per the IRB exemption

form, “means that the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.” At most I offered anonymity to participants, most of whom were actually comfortable sharing their names. I have chosen not to identify any participant by name because not everyone agreed to using names.

The other ethical issue to consider is the women of *RH* and their IG accounts. It is important to note that I obtained IRB permission to study their public social media accounts. These women post pictures with captions to a wide audience, sometimes even to a million or more followers. The reason I viewed this type of research into their accounts as ethical is because IG affords users the opportunity to make accounts private, and the women analyzed have kept theirs open to public viewing.

Finally, the women of *RH* I interviewed all agreed to the interview because I promised anonymity. The promise of anonymity enabled the women to share things with me here that they do not normally get to share in interviews for public consumption. I have protected their identities here by anonymizing all quotes. Furthermore, I have redacted all identifying information, including other names discussed, series names, locations, and major plot lines. I decided against using aliases because I did not want to accidentally use a name that could remotely allow readers to identify the women in any way.

3.5 **Summary**

This research borrows from Kellner’s (2011) three-pronged approach to media, which includes textual analysis and discussion of production and reception. This comprehensive approach offers primarily interpretive analysis a checks and balances. This research is based on (i) interviews with RTV insiders, (ii) a frame analysis of each series of *RH*, (iii) a discourse

analysis of 14 women's accounts on IG, (iv) 26 interviews with fans of *RH*, and (v) eight interviews with former cast members of *RH*. The textual analysis aims to interrogate the ideological messages put forth in media, while the audience interviews aims to give voice to the fans, enabling this research to unpack how the audience makes sense of these messages. This chapter detailed the three research questions guiding this study by explicating the approach to each question, detailing the method of analysis for answering each question, and by describing the sampling procedures and data collection processes. The findings to each question will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. The analysis section begins with discussion of production and findings from the interviews with RTV insiders.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter discusses the findings related to the three main research questions guiding this study. This research is based on a three-pronged approach to media that discusses production, media content, and the audience, with additional interview data that is representative of the women of *RH*'s voices. The first section discusses production using interview data from select RTV and *RH* insiders. The second section answers research question one: how are the women of *RH* framed on the series? Findings from the frame analysis of each series in the franchise will follow from there. The third section answers research question two: how do the women of *RH* frame the branded-self on IG? Findings from the textual discourse analysis of select women's accounts will be presented for this question. The next section will answer research question three: does the audience recognize these frames? Analysis of the 26 in-depth interviews with fans of *RH* will be shared here. Finally, analysis will conclude with eight interviews with women from *RH*. Their voices enable triangulation among each of the analysis sections presented in this chapter. In sum, this section includes (i) discussion of production, (ii) a cross-platform analysis of the branded-self, (iii) an analysis of audience reception, (iv) and the women's voices from the series. After this chapter follows a discussion of the findings, and the concluding remarks of this dissertation.

4.1 **Production**

This section shows how stories are told on *RH* according to producers. How RTV participants and their personal stories are manipulated by production is also discussed, along with the reciprocal relationship between participant's performances and production aims. These discussions and the insider interview findings will formulate a better understanding of the frames at play on *RH*.

In the U.S. *RH* airs on the Bravo TV network, which is owned by NBC Universal. Each *RH* series is produced by a different production company. *RHOC* and *RHOBH* are produced by Evolution Media, which is currently owned by MGM, who has a stake in Bravo. *RHOA* and *RHOP* are produced by True Entertainment, which is owned by Endemol Media. *RHNYC* is produced by Ricochet, which is owned by Warner Brothers UK. *RHOD* is produced by Goodbye Pictures, and *RHONJ* is produced by Sirens Media. In spite of being produced by different companies, all series' personnel answer to the same Bravo network executives.

There are 18 executives, a handful of them more directly inform the *RH* franchise. Those executives are Ryan Pinette, senior vice president of production and operations for Bravo Media, and Shari Levine, who is executive vice president of current production for Bravo Media. Levine oversees West and East coast production teams. Both Pinette and Levine report to Jerry Leo, executive vice president of program strategy and the person responsible for maximizing the brand value of the network. He reports to Francis Berwick, president of lifestyle networks for NBC Universal. Berwick reports to the chairman, Bonnie Hammer. Of the 18 executive board members, half are women, with the four highest positions on this board occupied by women.

It is important to clarify the executive board because, as a RTV production manager told me, "it's the network executives who define the show and makes decisions about how the show's going to flow."² In other words, the network executives have ownership and control over the women of *RH*'s stories. The next section details how producers publicly discuss the creation of story on *RH*. In this discussion, I compare these public interviews to the interview data collected for this research with RTV show insiders.

4.1.1 **How story is made: Is it scripted?**

² Interview with Patrick, April, 2016. Patrick does not work on *RH*, but has worked on several E! RTV shows, E!, like Bravo, is part of NBC Universal, Lifestyle Networks.

In a 2015 interview with the Denver Post, Douglas Ross and Gregory Stewart, CEO and CFO respectively of Evolution Media, and the original producers of *RHOC*, claimed *RH* is unscripted, but did admit to selective casting “to pit aggressive, type-A personalities against one another.” They also admitted that Bravo will often send “notes with dialogue suggestions.” The producers say they decline these suggestions. Counter to this, a former field producer³ on *RHOC* and *RHOBH* told me in an interview that while they aim to “keep it as real as they can” there are still “a lot of pick-ups.”

Pick-ups and Frankenbiting: Manipulating scenes for network executives

Pick-ups, as defined by this former *RH* field producer, Jamie, are scenes that are shot after the season has been filmed, or in his own words, “later when they’re editing the show they realize they don’t have a scene.” Producers will reshoot a scene and edit it into the narrative of the season to appear as though, “it’s happening at that moment.” For example, in season nine of *RHOC*, there is a pivotal exchange between cast members Shannon Beador and Heather Dubrow. Shannon was having marital problems with her husband, David. Shannon thought Heather was spreading rumors about him having an affair, so she went to Heather’s home for a confrontation, but was sent away. The cameras follow Shannon out the door and cut to her in the car, where she calls David in a highly emotional state. In this scene, as Jamie tells me in our interview, “David’s like ‘just come home and we’ll talk,’ and he seems like this really nice, supportive husband at this time of crisis in her life.” But none of that ever happened, according to the interviewee, “that whole thing was fake, that was shot months later.”

The existence of “pick-ups” provides concrete evidence that these women are performing for the camera. “Pick-ups” also show how story is driven by producers. Jamie elaborated on this

³ Interview with Jamie, March, 2016. Jamie worked as a field producer for *RHOBH* and *RHOC*. Field producers set up scenes and work alongside the talent “in the field,” they do not edit the series or produce story.

when prodded about scripting. He shared that, “producers know what they need out of a scene and out of a conversation, and so there is a direction that they push [the women] in.” Knowing this, it seems unlikely that Douglas Ross and Gregory Stewart, the executive producers of *RHOC* and *RHOBH*, would not take those dialogue notes from Bravo.

This is supported by another interview with a RTV story producer, who shared with me that if “the network doesn’t like [what they see] and they say we want [participants] to be more amped-up or bitchy, we actually have to go back in post and manipulate the scene. So maybe we’re pulling reaction shots of this character from other scenes and putting it in this other scene to get what the network wants” (Interview with Molly, March 2018).⁴ One way to do this is through “frankenbiting.” The process of frankenbiting often begins because network executives have told production that they want a participant to say something that the participant did not actually verbalize. As Molly shared, “you take whatever the network wants them to say and *you make them say it*...you’re literally going through [footage] and looking for the word ‘the’ and the word ‘trash’ and you’re pulling it from different times they say it to frankenbite them saying ‘the people are trash.’” Bottom line, the women’s stories and words are being edited and manipulated for network executives, by story editors and producers to present a specific image.

Douglass Ross adamantly denies “scripting” in media interviews. He was quoted in the Denver Post interview saying “I’m proud that both shows are really real” but admits that “we curate the stories” and try to “figure out how to tell them so they make sense to the viewers.” This is a basic part of working in the entertainment industry, however, in the case of the Shannon Beador “pick-up,” it is hard to make the case that it helped her story “make sense to the viewers.” Especially because the next season of *RHOC* showed that David was having an affair,

⁴ Molly is not a story producer for *RH* specifically, but has worked for dozens of RTV shows, a few of which have starred women from *RH*.

and Heather's rumor was true. Framing the curation of story "for the viewer" is interesting, when it sounds like production is actually framing the story to favor certain cast members over others.

Shannon's pick-up scene with David being shown as a caring husband was to not only benefit Shannon's marital storyline, but was designed to make Heather look like she was lying about the affair. Evidence for this is provided by the interview with Jamie, where he also shared that production had fought with Heather during the filming of season nine when this "pick up" happened. The fight was because she wanted to create "*her own* stories." Elaborating on this, Jamie shared with me that after the Shannon and Heather confrontation was filmed, "for weeks after [Heather] had been telling everyone in the cast 'oh Shannon just showed up at our house and we asked her to leave'." This was, according to Jamie, "all B.S. because they have call sheets...they knew Shannon was coming over," and "[Heather] was just trying to make Shannon look bad." Then at the next party (set up by production), with cameras rolling, Heather continued to spread the story about being ambushed by Shannon. Shannon refused to film the scene.

According to Jamie, "what you didn't see on camera was that the showrunner completely freaked out...He stormed out on camera and was like '[The Dubrows]' are lying, you can't do this'...And they got in this giant screaming argument like the housewives do and he's a producer on the show! It was very out of line and inappropriate but he just got so fed up with [the Dubrows] lying that he just called them out in front of everyone."

Given this insider information, Heather received a negative edit that season because she attempted to create a different story. This upset production. Shannon's story was amplified by the "pick-up" scene to make it look like she was the victim of Heather's rumor. This is one example of the lengths producers will go to frame the women according their agenda.

When cast members, like Heather, try to create their own storylines, Jamie said, “it never really ends up working, they just kind of screw themselves.” By “screw themselves” he means that they wind up on the receiving end of a negative edit. I asked him if the women did have any say over story, and he shared that before filming begins, the women “have a sit-down meeting where they go over their schedules and ... the big milestones are that are happening...because [production] has to permit all those [events] well in advance to make sure they can get [the locations on camera].” This however only refers to individual storylines.

In order to ensure that the women interact throughout the season, production plans “pseudo-events” for the women to meet (Boorstin, 1961). For instance, “the producers plan [that] Kyle and Erika are going to go to lunch that day, but what happens at that lunch is pretty much up to the cast.” Therefore, the women “have control [over story] in the sense that they’re the ones on camera and they can do and say what they want. But it’s not like they’re meeting with producers and planning out story.” Thus, all of the situations in which we see the women interacting are planned in advance by producers. The only “reality” is what happens among the women in those scenarios, which will get edited according to network executive’s aims.

Filming story: From hot-sheets and string-outs to the final cut

Story takes shape in the duration of filming. According to Molly, field producers will produce “hot sheets,” which are field notes and summaries of things that are happening during filming. Those hot sheets are sent to network executives so they “know what’s going on in the field” during production. After all of the footage is shot, story editors and producers watch the footage, take additional notes, and do a “string-out” of the show. String-outs are “first drafts” where “scene by scene we go through the raw footage” and piece “together the story” (Molly, 2018). A finishing editor will then edit the rough draft. After this there is an “internal screening”

with executive producers “on the inside” who give “rough cut notes.” Those producers ‘on the inside’ are members of the executive board at Bravo. Once those notes are addressed in postproduction, the executive producers watch and send “fine cut notes.” This back and forth happens until executives approve a “lock cut” and then soon after the show will air.

These insider interviews demonstrate how story happens on RTV, from filming, to editing, to the final cut. They also highlight who is in charge of the final images we see on RTV. Questions of exploitation come into focus once story production is clarified. For instance, where does this leave participants?

4.1.2 **Is this exploitation?**

In the more experimental days of RTV in the early nineties participants had little idea of what went into being on a RTV show. The incentive for many RTV contestants at the time was simply fame. There was, for the most part, little financial incentive promised to contests for their appearances on certain shows. Contestants were often paid in the form of “dream fulfillment” (Jian and Liu, 2009). As RTV became integral to network’s financial gains and programming schedules, RTV participants went from being ephemeral low-paid public personas to more “durable participants” (Curnutt, 2011). This meant networks had to start paying them for their time and talent. Participation on RTV today is a legitimate and often lucrative form of labor.

The women of *RH* specifically command high salaries. For instance, *RHNYC* star Bethenny Frankel, has shared that she was paid \$7,250 for season one of *RHNYC*. By season eight she was rumored to have made \$1.5 million for the season. With that kind of salary, can this be called exploitation?

Yes, in fact, RTV participants are exploited at every level. Beginning with preproduction participants are exploited via deliberate negative typecasting, one-sided contracts, and mis-

informed consent. This refers to program makers distorting or concealing information that would perhaps dissuade people from participating in these shows (Mast, 2016). RTV participants are also exploited, according to Mast (2016), throughout production because they are constantly surveilled, surreptitiously recorded, and stripped of privacy, even in their own homes. From the interview data discussed in the previous section, participants are also exploited in postproduction by way of selective editing, (i.e., frankenbiting and pick-up shots).

There is little discussion in research about the things participant's might do to work around this exploitation. This dissertation fosters such discussion by foregrounding agency. Agency is examined by way of the women's performances of identity.

4.1.3 **Emotional Camping: Aligning performance with production's aims**

RH has been on the air for over a decade. Veteran cast members like Nene Leakes and Bethenny Frankel, have managed to remain central to their respective series despite the precariousness of their positions as RTV participants. This means that they are doing something the network likes. That something is related to their performances on the show. These women know how to successfully perform and how to align themselves with the aims and goals of the network to remain relevant and central to the series they play a part on.

Success on RTV requires "successful emotional identity performance" (Dubrofsky, 2011). A successful emotional identity performance is part of the "work of being watched" and references a type of labor that requires a person to first be aware of the fact that they are being filmed (Andrejevic, 2004; Dubrofsky, 2011). After this, the women of *RH* specifically, are hired to *perform ordinariness*. This is actually a complex form of labor, and an economic resource for both participants and the media institutions producing these shows (Curnutt, 2011).

Women of *RH* like Nene Leakes and Bethenny Frankel have longevity on RTV because of their ability to portray a successful emotional identity performance, or to now “perform performance” (Grindstaff, 2014). The women of *RH* have learned over the years how to maintain relevancy on the series by giving production what it wants. Many of these women conduct an emotional identity performance that will not just be modified in editing by production, but conduct performances that are *intentionally performed with production aims in mind*. These performances require the women to then contour their actions to emphasize the overarching brand of the network. These women therefore perform the branded-self according to Bravo’s aims.

Evidence of this is given in an insider interview with Sam, who worked for a number of years on *Watch What Happens Live!*, a Bravo show hosted by *RH* executive producer, Andy Cohen. In this interview, Sam discussed how some women in the franchise perform better than others. For instance, she shared, “the New York ladies, they know when the cameras are on and do what they’re supposed to do.” ‘What they are supposed to do’ is not something a woman learns overnight. It takes time, experience, and watching the show to know that in order to be successful, participants must play to the frames and give producers what they need.

In all, the women’s stories on *RH* and their individual personas are edited according to network executive aims. The women as long-time cast members have learned how to orient themselves on the show and perform according to producer aims. They know they are being filmed and know producers will use the worst footage of them for ratings. In this way, the women must learn how to exploit themselves by performing as if at their worst, in order to remain on the cast and gain some sense of agency. The women are not presenting their true self, but an amplified, highly-emotional, self-exploited version. They are performing the branded-self

through the labor of, what I call here: *emotional camping*. This form of labor will be elaborated on throughout the rest of this dissertation. It is a type of labor that originated out of producers' need to make a show that satisfies network executives. Whether and to what extent emotional camping empowers the women will be discussed later on in greater detail in the analysis of the second research question.

4.1.4 **Summary**

This section has covered how story develops on *RH*, discusses exploitation, and the women's performances of identity. The section also makes suggestions for how the women enact agency in an exploitative environment via self-exploitation or emotional camping. The interviews with these RTV show insiders demonstrate the forces behind the framing of these women and how the women relinquish themselves to editing for longevity. This section nicely segues into the analysis of the frames at play on the series. The next section analyzes how the women of *RH* are framed. From there, analysis of how class, gender, and race are communicated on the series is shared, along with an analysis of positioning and power, and how the frames have changed over time.

4.2 **RQ 1: How are the women of *Real Housewives* framed on the series?**

To answer research question one, I conducted a frame analysis of each of the seven *RH* series in the U.S. The frame analysis aimed to identify not only how the women are framed on each series, but to identify media representations of class and other intersectional components of identity, like race and gender. This frame analysis revealed that the women are presented in this media primarily by way of five overlapping frames, some of which are named after key moments across series throughout *RH* history: 1) Postfeminist Nirvana, 2) The Bling Frame, 3) The Hustler Frame, 4) The "Maybe we are white trash" Frame, and 5) The "You're a hypocrite"

Frame. All five of these frames work together (often overlapping) to create a multi-dimensional character who is simultaneously materialistic, aesthetically inclined, business savvy, family focused, highly emotional, crass, and deeply flawed. Each woman is treated throughout the season to a combination of these framing techniques, with some frames evoked more or less depending on the individual.

The next few sections will detail each of the five frames. Afterwards, follows analysis of how class (and race and gender) is communicated on each series. Guiding this analysis is Bourdieu's field theory and analysis of capital, positioning, and distinctions. This theoretical base is necessary for understanding how *RH* trades on class ambivalence, and subsequently how class ambivalence informs positioning and power in the field of *RH*, as well as the women's individual level performances of the branded-self. Analysis of how these frames evolved over time is shared at the end of this section.

4.2.1 **The Meta-Frame: Postfeminist Nirvana**

As confirmed by Jamie, the former field producer for *RHOBH* and *RHOC*, producers “always try to edit out [the women's] physical flaws,” because they want them to look good on camera. For example, during production, Jamie shared, they might, “film above the waist line when they're in a bathing suit.” In this way, this frame is representative of the postfeminist sensibility and the overarching way in which the women are portrayed on the series. This frame gets at the major ideological idea employed by media today to depict gender and feminism (i.e., women have the ability to choose lives where they can maintain a highly feminized aesthetic, while balancing work in and out of the home).

This frame gets its name from Dubrofsky's (2011) analysis of the women on the RTV series *The Bachelor* (ABC). It describes a contrived, peaceful state where women look perfect

and are balancing both fulfilling careers and personal lives. The frame is elevated to prominence on the show in a few ways. First, by conjuring up traditional notions of femininity. Often times the frame will be evoked when the women talk about being wives and mothers, but also when they discuss beauty, fashion, shopping, and consumerism as empowerment. Second, through discourse that evokes the idea of ‘having it all’ by way of smart, individualized choices. Most often this is evoked when the women discuss the “choice” to stay home or go to work, or when they talk about “finding balance.” Third, this frame is also evoked visually when the work that goes into keeping up their appearance is shown on screen. For instance, when the women are shown getting their make-up done by “glam squads,” are fitted for outfits, or getting plastic surgery.

Since the beginning, there has been a dichotomous message underlying the meta-frame of postfeminist nirvana on *RH*. In one way, this frame evoked the idea that women could be taken care of by men, in spite of feminist progress. In the first episode of season one of *RHOC* (2006), “Meet the wives,” viewers are introduced to Jo de la Rosa. Jo was in her early twenties at the time of this episode. Viewers are introduced to her for the first time roaming around her mansion “behind the gates” in a sexy-maid costume waiting for her partner, Slade Smiley, to come home from work. Jo shares in her interview segment that she’s “become a lady of leisure” and that “it gets kind of lonely around here” since she does not work outside the home. Then we meet Slade, who has this to say about Jo, “she’s driving an expensive car, living in a 5,000 square-foot house, she has pretty much everything she needs.” Jo admits, “he’s pretty much keeping me.”

To offset this anti-feminist portrayal of women in Orange County is Vicki Gunvalson. Vicki is from the Chicago suburbs, and noted “O.G.”⁵ of *RH*. In season one, Vicki is married,

⁵ “Original Gangster.”

has two teenagers, and runs Coto Financial, a life insurance agency based in Irvine, California that she founded before the show. Viewers learn right away that Vicki loves to talk about work and is the breadwinner of her family. In spite of this, Vicki shares in episode one of season one, that “no matter how hard I work, how much money I make, being a mother is the most important thing in my life.” The dichotomy here is that women like Vicki, choose to work and love it, while women like Jo, have no choice, defer to the man, and are unhappily kept.

Jo’s portrayal conjures up the traditional idea that women were once supposed to be kept and supposed to be in relationships where men are the breadwinners. Her portrayal also is designed to show how deficient she is as a woman who is unmarried and without a job. By the end of season one, Jo gets a job, defying Slade, and proclaims, “Finally! I get to choose what I want because I’ll be making the money.” This statement encapsulates the main idea of postfeminist nirvana – or this “double entanglement” with feminism (McRobbie, 2009), that today women can be kept, but ‘choose’ to go to work, and will be empowered solely by a capitalist system based on consumerism. Overall, Vicki was framed more positively via the postfeminist nirvana frame than Jo, because she worked outside the home.

Other women who receive positive postfeminist nirvana edits, like Bethenny Frankel, are those that discuss a desire to achieve “having it all.” In season one of *RHNYC*, we meet Bethenny who is not married, not a mother, but struggling to promote a food brand. While she could have been framed as deficient in some way, like Jo was, she articulates throughout season one how much she wants marriage and motherhood. Bethenny shared in the first episode of season one of *RHNYC* “Meet the wives” (2008), “I want to be married to Jason, with one child...I think what I do for a living really lends itself to being a mother.” This quote

demonstrates that she is career focused, but also striving for the traditional ideal about womanhood. Or it shows that she knew how to play into the postfeminist sensibility.

Other women, like Countess Luann De Lesseps were not as celebrated. In season one Luann, was married to a count and explained in an interview, “if you marry a count, you become a countess, there’s an echelon of the aristocracy.” Luann does not work outside of the home, but does share that she “runs the operations,” of the home, and that it is Rosanna, her housekeeper, who “runs the manual labor.” Luann was framed as the villain of *RHNYC*, shown often as caring too much about titles, living a life of luxury, and not working. Most of her scenes included Bethenny calling her out for being pretentious. These two types of women here: the ones who do not work outside the home, who are depicted more overtly as anti-feminist; and women like Bethenny, who may not yet have it all, but are aspiring to postfeminist nirvana.

Postfeminist nirvana on *RH* shows these women are first and foremost wives and mothers, but have choices at their disposal to work or not work, have access to beauty maintenance, and are empowered by making their own money. Postfeminist nirvana is evoked in a multitude of ways, and it often depends on the woman behind the frame. The women who work, have children, and manage to maintain their looks, are who the other women are compared to. The women who fail to embody the major components of postfeminist nirvana are presented as deficient. This is one way the women are positioned against each other. Positioning and changes in this frame will be discussed in another section more thoroughly after the other four frames at play are analyzed.

4.2.2 **The Bling Frame: Material Package**

The bling frame concerns how these women display that they are wealthy. In my interview with Jamie, he explained that during pre-production, casting producers were “all about

finding the richest people,” in fact, “when they cast the show *they cast the house before they cast the housewife*” (emphasis mine). He affirmed that “really, what [production’s] going for is money.” This introduces the bling frame. This frame is elevated to prominence when a *RH* makes mention of or is filmed: on vacation, in their walk-in closet, in their mansion, on a private jet/other luxury vehicle, shopping, and/or getting plastic surgery. Shopping, plastic surgery, and cosmetic/beauty maintenance are cross listed with postfeminist nirvana. These things can simultaneously evoke both frames, because they depict how the women curate a highly feminized aesthetic and also show how the women spend money. In short, these women are cast because they portray a certain outward aesthetic, but first and foremost because they have the ability to display materialism, (sometimes materialism is displayed on their bodies).

Often times in viewing the show, there will be a box in the lower right corner of the screen with the price of the item shown. This is standard protocol on any *RH* series when a woman is shown making a big purchase. Editing cues like this evoke the bling frame. Most times however, the women put their wealth and material possessions on display by where they are being filmed (home, restaurants, stores), the clothes/accessories they wear, and their methods of travel. Wealth and materialism are displayed in many of the same ways across series, however, distinctions about what is displayed become apparent on certain series, like *RHOBH* for instance.

RHOBH brings a different kind of materialism to the forefront. In season one, episode one of *RHOBH*, “Life, liberty and the pursuit of wealthiness” (2010), viewers are introduced to Adrienne Maloof, the only daughter of a billionaire entrepreneur, who warns, “growing up in extreme wealth, you have to be careful [of who you let in your life].” In one of the first outings where all the cast is present, Adrienne chartered a private jet to fly them from Los Angeles to Sacramento. She did this because she wanted to take the women to watch her NBA team play

(Sacramento Kings). “We’re just going up for the day, so I chartered a private jet,” she reasoned in an interview. Adrienne however is not the only one in Beverly Hills who flies private. Three other women on the cast discuss in episode one how they prefer to fly private. Camille Grammar – then wife of actor, Kelsey Grammar, tells the camera in an interview, “this is going to sound so obnoxious, but Kelsey and I, we’ve flown private for years, now we fly commercial to go *green*.” By season seven (2017) this type of materialism is amplified. New cast member, Erika Girardi is married to a man who owns two private planes. The women of Beverly Hills display materialism differently than the women on other series.

The women in New Jersey provide an example of the contrast of the bling frame across series. No one has ever flown private in an episode of *RHONJ*. In season one, episode one, “Thicker than water,” (2009) viewers meet Teresa Guidice. A lifelong, self-professed Jersey-girl, with the thick accent and big hair to prove it. Everything about Teresa is larger than life. From the hair on her head, to the jewelry she wears, to the enormous McMansion she’s buying furniture for in the first episode. “I hear the economy is crashin’, that’s why I pay cash,” Teresa tells the camera. Then we see Teresa shopping in a furniture store for an ornate, gold, tudor-style couch. She spends \$120,000 at the furniture store, and pays in 100 dollar bills. In 2014 *RHONJ* went on a two-year hiatus because Teresa Guidice went to prison for bank, mail, wire, and bankruptcy fraud. The series returned for season seven in 2017. Cameras were there to document Teresa as she embraced her children for the first time in eleven months.

The bling frame is the most overt frame on the series. Materialism however can connote actual wealth in different ways across series. These distinctions will be discussed later on in the sections that focus on class and regional differences.

4.2.3 **The Hustler Frame: Labor Package**

The hustler frame demonstrates the women's work ethic, or lack of a work ethic. This frame can be invoked by the *RH*'s discussing how hard they work or when they are shown at work. This is also the frame that most relates to the way social mobility is portrayed on the series as viewers have seen the women build brands and businesses throughout the seasons. This frame can, depending on the woman, demonstrate that a hard work ethic pays off. The women who tend to receive more favorable edits are women who work.

This frame was named for Lisa Rinna, an actress and veteran soap opera star on *RHOBH*. The opening credits of an *RH* series feature a short introduction of each woman, glammed up and reciting a tagline – which is a short saying written by producers that encapsulates both the women's persona and foreshadows their storyline for the season. In the opening credits of *RHOBH* season seven (2017), Rinna's tagline reads: "My advice to you: don't hustle the hustler." Rinna characterizes herself on the series as "a hustler," who will, "do anything for a check." This includes anything from a soap opera, her QVC fashion line, and adult diaper commercials. According to Rinna, there is not a job in Hollywood she has turned down. She may often be blamed for much of the drama on *RHOBH*, but she is never portrayed as lazy or undeserving of her position because she embodies the idea of hustle/hard work.

There are two women who have from the beginning embodied the hustler frame. From episode one, season one of *RHOC*, viewers learn this about Vicki: "I wasn't college educated, I had to take care of my kids after my first divorce, and I went from being an average housewife, to being one of the biggest insurance agents, living in one of the most affluent communities." Vicki embodies this idea that hard work allows you to transcend your social origins.

Bethenny from *RHNYC* magnifies this frame, perhaps more than any housewife. She is shown season one struggling to get people to try her food at grocery stores. Flash forward to the

first episode of season eight, “Start spreading the news” (2016), viewers see Bethenny sitting in her huge new office, addressing her staff, saying, “we have to figure out how to make this brand fun again.” The brand she is referring to is her SkinnyGirl cocktail company that she built in her time on the show. She sold part of the company to Jim Beam in 2011 for 120 million dollars. Every scene that featured Bethenny in season eight also displayed her products. Frankel’s ability to use the RTV platform illuminates a new way to achieve upward social mobility. Hard work pays off, as does the RTV platform. Bethenny was able to build her company up because of effective branding and the status she gained from being a *RH*. It is the series itself that played a huge role in elevating her power in business. She has also managed to negotiate a contract with Bravo that allows her to showcase SkinnyGirl products in every episode for which she appears.

Not every woman is a Bethenny or Vicki. Sometimes, women who come on the show regardless of whether they work or not, can change or enter a new career trajectory because the show gives them a platform for celebrity. Nene Leakes from *RHOA* is currently the highest paid housewife. In season one of *RHOA* she is described as a philanthropist and founder of the Twisted Hearts Foundation for domestic violence survivors. Before her tenure on *RHOA* began, Nene was trying to be an actress. Before this, the single-mom danced in strip clubs in Atlanta. After gaining exposure on *RHOA*, Nene was able to reinvigorate her acting career, and has simultaneously been starring on the series and appearing in recurring roles on popular shows like *Glee*, and performing on Broadway in shows like *Chicago* and *Cinderella*. In so doing, Leakes has shown that some RTV stars can transcend the celebrity hierarchy. Since 2013 Leakes has built up a television production company, Nene Leakes Entertainment and acts as an executive producer on select Bravo shows. Last year, she went on a stand-up comedy tour and started a fashion line.

Since *RH* has been so successful at launching branded-women, some women now come on the series and try to sell their product from the first episode, which can be off-putting to viewers. Cameron Westcott from *RHOD*, the newest *RH* installment, is an example of this. She married into a prominent family in Dallas society and her husband is a venture capitalist. Cameron's storyline on the second season of the series (2017) is focused on her trying to break out from his shadow with "Sparkle Dog Food," a brand that so far consists of a line of pink dog food products. Cameron provides evidence for the fact RTV cannot just make a brand happen overnight, the idea behind the product is still important, as is your tenure on the series.

In summary, this frame is invoked every time a woman talks about work or is shown working. The women who work outside of the home and talk about work the most are often framed as more deserving of the material possessions they display. However, it is also important to note, that women on *RH* do not have to work in order to be liked by viewers. Some women, have done an excellent job of performing certain behaviors on these shows, that they create personas viewers love to watch or love to hate-watch.

4.2.4 **The "maybe we are white trash" Frame: Behavior Package**

The "maybe we are white trash" frame concerns the women's behavior. This frame is invoked by the conduct of a *RH* in their interactions with the other women on the show. It can more specifically be evoked when one *RH* references or evaluates the conduct of another *RH*. The wealthy are often conceived of as exhibiting decorous behavior. The women of *RH* ironically tend to exhibit the opposite of decorous behavior. The behavior package therefore is elevated to prominence when these women behave badly. Tables have been flipped, wigs pulled, and the women have slapped, shoved, and tossed drinks in each other's faces. When they are not resorting to aggressive physical conduct they are verbally rebuking each other and/or making

moral judgments/critiques about each other. The behavior package is thoroughly intertwined with the schadenfreude package, because often times the women's actions do not align with their own ideas about proper conduct.

A hallmark of *RH* across series is women calling other women “trash.” The women who call others “trash” have likely been called “trash” themselves. This frame gets its name from an iconic scene in *RH* history. This scene was not viewed specifically for analysis but is a memorable one for viewers of *RH*. In season five of *RHNYC* (2012), Aviva Drescher joined the cast. Aviva was the first “born and bred” New Yorker to be cast on the show and has both a Master's and Juris Doctor degree. On the show, she lived on the Upper East Side with her husband, an investment banker, and their four kids. Aviva is also known for being an amputee. At six years old, she was involved in a farming accident that resulted in the loss of her left leg.

Flash-forward to her first season on *RHNYC* (2012) where she meets Ramona Singer and Sonja Morgan, two cast members known for outrageous behavior. In the episode, “Slutty Island” they go on a cast trip to St. Barts. Here, the women exchange words. Aviva, an anxious flyer, brought her husband on the trip with her so she did not have to fly alone. Ramona and Sonja did not like that her husband would be on this “girls trip,” and were devising ways to get him to leave. Aviva finds out they were not welcoming of her husband and confronts the women. The confrontation included Ramona shouting multiple times in Aviva's face, “take a Xanax!” Shortly thereafter, Aviva yelled, “you're both white trash, quite frankly.”

The famous scene is actually the footage of the aftermath, the day after this confrontation. Ramona and Sonja sit in the kitchen of their rented home in St. Barts and discuss – in front of amused house staff – what “white trash” means. Both are adamant that they have never heard the phrase. “What exactly is white trash? I know it's a bad word, but I don't know what it means,”

Ramona pretends. Sonja responds, “I don’t know, *maybe we are white trash*, but who cares – don’t call me that!” Ramona keeps going, “we grew up in beautiful homes, we’re self-made, we’re independent, we’re not trashy!” Sonja interjects - “we *act* trashy.” The women decide to google “white trash.” They find that it refers to “poor white people” and Ramona objects – “but I was never poor!” Point being, the women rarely acknowledge their bad behavior and some, like Ramona and other long-running cast members, lack or feign general self-awareness as a means to excuse themselves from owning up to their actions. Women on *RH* have deflected and even refused to acknowledge their terrible behavior for so many years, that the phrase “own it!” has become a recurrent statement on *RH* reunion shows and a favorite *RH* phrase to use in fan culture online.

Ironically, in the last scene Aviva ever filmed for *RHNYC*, she is shown throwing her prosthetic leg across the dinner table at the women on the other side. Aviva was derided by the other women for this calculated move, even though she did this to align her behavior with other women on the show. The leg toss failed because it was outside the realm of her behavior.

Causing scenes in public places is a hallmark of *RH*. The scene that put Teresa Guidice on the map was the season one finale of *RHONJ*, “Last Supper” (2009). In the episode, the cast and their families meet for dinner at a restaurant. Danielle Staub, the noted outsider of the *RHONJ* cast showed up – as invited – with her daughters. Danielle and Teresa fight when Danielle tells Teresa to “pay attention” to what she’s trying to say. This caused Teresa to lose control and pick her side of the dining table up off the ground. She yelled, “pay attention?! You prostitution whore!” After the scene calmed down, Teresa asked others present in the restaurant, “did I look classy?” Producers cut to an interview with Danielle’s twelve-year-old daughter who said, “what Teresa did was the opposite of what a lady should look like.” Arguably, this table flip

changed the trajectory of the *RH* franchise. Prior to this, there were very few physically aggressive acts on these shows. Since then, each season of every series has featured some act of physical aggression among cast members.

The loud, physically aggressive fights only get worse with time. In the episode “Meltdown in Milan” from season eight of *RHONJ*, (2017/18), the women of New Jersey cause such a scene in a quiet restaurant on the cast trip to Italy, that they are asked to leave. (It is rare for the women to be asked to leave public places, even during scenes like this, because production has paid and received a permit to be at the location). This fight in particular was difficult to understand because so many of the women were fighting with each other throughout the season. On the whole, this incident occurred because cast member Siggy Flicker began yelling at Danielle Staub: ‘you’re fucked up, you’re a fucking hypocrite and a liar!’ Danielle yelled back, “you fucking whore.” Siggy’s ironic response was, “act like a lady.” Put simply, the behavior exhibited on *RH* across series appears to have gotten worse over time. These changes over time will be discussed shortly, however, it is important to discuss the final frame because it will further explicate on the irony of the women’s bad behavior.

4.2.5 **The “you’re a hypocrite” Frame: Schadenfreude Package**

The “you’re a hypocrite” frame is essentially the “Bravo wink.” In an interview for *Nightline* (2009) Cohen explained the bravo wink: “it’s a cutaway, it’s a reaction to what someone’s saying...It’s maybe someone saying something and then you see them doing something maybe a little different from what they’re saying. But it’s a definite editorial point of view that also makes it okay to watch the show, because we’re all in on it together.” It is not clarified who the “we” is in “we’re all in on it together,” but I would argue *we* refers to production and the audience, not always the women themselves. Especially because in the same

Nightline interview, Cohen characterized *RH* as a “sociology of the affluent” and stated “we don’t talk down to our audience.” In this way, he is confirming that the audience is in on the joke of the franchise, but what is the joke?

The joke is the women, specifically their behavior and taste. In Cohen’s *Nightline* interview he stressed that there are no judgments being made, and simplifies that people “are fascinated by the idea of taste...or lack of taste...So it’s always interesting to say, ‘wow, she spent *that* on *that*?!’” But there is a deeper layer to this quote. Here, he acknowledges that the *RH* franchise aims to depict the women spending money and the crass behaviors associated with it. He claims that displaying this type of behavior is only to “reflect a certain slice of life” and that they leave it up to the audience to “decide whether this is fun, offensive, hilarious, aspirational or what. We leave it to you, there’s no judgment.” The bravo wink however, is an intentional framing tactic and therefore designed to lead to judgments.

In my interview with former field producer, Jamie, we talk about how production wants the women to look. I mention the bravo wink and the “ironic frame” (Lee and Moscovitz, 2013). Jamie responded, “when they do that, I mean they’re trying to make them look bad obviously. Which we know some of them are sensitive to, like Vicki was always yelling about being a hypocrite.” I ask him to elaborate, and he responded, “they always try to edit out their physical flaws...they try to make them look good physically but they just don’t make them look good personality wise. *They’re always trying to catch them in a lie or a moment.*”

This interview data demonstrates that production is intentionally trying to frame the women as deficient in some aspect of their personality. The women are intentionally shown in hypocritical moments to look bad. This frame is elevated to prominence through editing that shows the women looking stupid or saying something and then in the next scene doing the

opposite. This frame is also elevated to prominence by the women themselves in interactions with each other. Specifically, it is invoked when women call each other out for being hypocrites, wrong, corrupt, or stupid. Following is an example based on editing technique and then one based on the women's own dialogue.

In season one, episode seven of *RHOA*, "Best of Enemies" (2008), viewers witness Kim Zolciak singing. Kim was shown smoking cigarettes in each scene on camera. Her storyline that season involved her attempt at a singing career. The cameras show Kim in rehearsal, raspy-voiced and singing out of tune, with Atlanta producer Dallas Austin. He asked her if she cut out drinking and smoking. Kim replied, yes. Editors' jump cut from this scene to Kim sitting at her kitchen table earlier that day smoking a cigarette. This editing technique is a hallmark of *RH* and often provides the comedy in each series.

The women of *RHOA* are especially gifted at calling each other out. For instance, in a season 10 episode, "A mad tea party" of *RHOA*, veteran cast members, Nene Leakes and Sheree Whitfield have an argument over Sheree's boyfriend who is serving time in prison. Nene knew Sheree's boyfriend years previous to his arrest and assured the other women that Sheree was being "conned" by a "con artist." When Sheree found out, she confronted Nene, saying, "you got a problem with Tyrone? Let's be clear – you got mugshots too!" Nene's response is that her situation is not the same as Tyrone "getting ten to twenty years, ok?"

Most women will call each other out on their hypocrisy and editing will amplify their call outs by showing footage from previous seasons to back up a woman's point. These call outs are one way that the women try to maintain their position and assert authority on the show. No housewife is safe from the hypocrisy package. In the beginning, this was just an editing technique. Since the show has progressed over time, the women seem to understand that being

called out on conflicting behavior is part of the show. Now it appears the women are quicker to call each other out and evoke this frame themselves, perhaps to get ahead of their own edit. This will be elaborated on in the following sections.

4.2.6 **How class (and gender and race) is communicated on each series**

This section analyzes the frames and what is communicated about class, and subsequently gender and race, by discussing regional differences and similarities across series. In so doing, this section provides evidence to the main argument of this dissertation: that *RH* trades on class ambivalence (and resentment) by framing the women on the show in line with the public's ambivalent attitudes about class. The frames arguably work to reconcile the audience to their own status through a mix of techniques designed to evoke resentment, irony, and schadenfreude.

Bourdieu's field theory and relevant components (i.e., habitus, capital, positioning, and distinctions) undergird this argument by enabling an analytical understanding of class ambivalence. Theorizing *RH* as a field demonstrates how *RH* depicts "real life" ideas about class relations and inequality, both of which foster class ambivalence. Field theory offers a macro view of positioning and power, which affects the women's relationships on the series as well as their own individual performances of class. Performances of class are visualized by the women's displays of capital and the verbal distinctions they make. Performing class is complex and intrinsically connected to the identity work involved in curating a branded-self.

The frames discussed in the above section demonstrate how producers frame the women on the series. The images and branded-personas informed by the framing techniques are intertwined with social class. *The bling frame* (materialism), *the hustler frame* (labor), *the 'maybe we are white trash' frame* (behavior), evoke ideas about class. These frames are

embedded within a postfeminist sensibility, or specifically here, informed by the meta-frame of *Postfeminist Nirvana*. These frames, and this media's representation of class are not separate from other aspects of the intersectionality of these women's image-based personas.

These frames also play into media representations of race and gender. *Postfeminist nirvana*, or the meta-frame employed on *RH* amplifies popular ideas about feminism, and at the same time evokes traditional ideas about gender, by crafting the women's personas in accordance with a highly-feminized aesthetic. The frames and the resulting ultra-feminized, class-based media representations of these women obscure race as a key facet of some of the women's identities. The women's individual performances of the branded-self by way of *emotional camping*, are classist, highly gendered given the postfeminist sensibility, and based on producer ideas as much as the women's own personal disposition, or habitus. Following next is analysis of regional differences and (the performances of) class we see on each series, which demonstrates how the franchise trades on class ambivalence.

Regional Differences and Class

The franchise communicates these women's social class via the same frames – the *bling frame* (materialism), the “*maybe we are white trash*” *frame* (behavior), and the *hustler frame* (labor). However, on a more detailed level, each of these frames are elevated to prominence in distinct ways that are related to 1) the location of the series, and 2) the women's personal capital. First, the frame analysis of each *RH* series reveals the major role cultural context plays in the way class is communicated. Cultural context refers to the region of the U.S. each series takes place in. Regional distinctions are highlighted first by geographic location, (i.e., if the franchise takes place on the East coast (*RHNYC*, *RHONJ*, *RHOP*), in the south (*RHOA*, *RHOD*) or on the West coast (*RHOC* and *RHOBH*). Regional distinctions are also found between series that take

place in cities versus suburbs. For example, in spite of being on the same coast, *RHNYC* and *RHONJ* communicate class distinctively from each other.

Second, the women cast on the series possess certain types of capital: *economic* (money), *cultural* (speech, dress, appearance, taste, education) or *social* (connections). Bourdieu's concepts of capital, positioning, and distinctions enable analysis of the women's performances of class on each series. Bourdieu's concepts are also relevant for understanding class ambivalence and *RH*.

Capital

As evidenced by the interview with Jamie, a former field producer of *RHOC* and *RHOBH*, and by the sheer prevalence of the *bling frame* on *RH*, the women are cast primarily because of the amount of economic capital they *appear* to possess. Certain kinds of capital however work differently on each series depending on cultural context. For instance, economic capital is more important than other types of capital on *RHOC*. On *RHOBH* and *RHOA*, symbolic or celebrity capital appears more valuable than other kinds. *RHNYC* balances between economic, cultural, and social capital. Social capital reigns supreme on *RHOP*, *RHOD*, and *RHONJ*. Regardless of the different values of capital across each series, the women who are able to translate their capital on the series into economic and social media gains often have a better chance of staying on the show and negotiating a higher salary for the next season. In order to do so, these women must perform capital (i.e., class) in ways that align with the ironic aim of the series and the postfeminist sensibility.

Possession of economic capital is visualized by the size and location of their home and other material possessions like the cars they drive, the clothing and accessories they wear, personal staff, and by how much money they spend on camera. The *bling frame* is evoked

similarly but looks a bit different in terms of the aesthetics of the women's homes and other material possessions across series. For instance, Teresa Guidice's home on *RHONJ* is a ten thousand square foot mansion decorated with fountains and gilded furniture. *RHOBH* star, Erika Girardi, lives in an even larger, 17,000 square-foot home, complete with its own chapel and library. Then there's women like Ramona Singer on *RHNYC*, who lives in 2,500 square feet on the Upper East Side. Size is not as important as location on *RHNYC* because of space. On *RHNYC*, money is in the details. For example, some women, like Dorinda Medley, a season eight (2016) cast member, decorate their homes by paying attention to fine fabrics, prints, and art, rather than the typical gilded furniture and loud labels seen on *RHONJ*. Even Dorinda's closets are wallpapered, which, as fellow cast member Carol Radziwell stated, is "a marker of a truly wealthy person." Put simply, markers of wealth or how the *bling frame* looks, differ across cultural contexts.

However, just because the women have material possessions does not mean they are actually wealthy. Many of the women have been filmed going through bankruptcy and eviction. The first episode of season one of *RHOC* (2006) opens with voiceovers from all five women who, as the camera pans over the Orange County coast line, tell viewers: "life is different in a gated community," "when you're not behind the gates, you don't know what you're missing," and "it isn't just a place to live, it's a lifestyle." This show and these women immediately emphasized the exclusivity of their location to communicate to viewers that this was a peek inside the lifestyles of some elite group. Once behind the gates, viewers saw these women were not necessarily elite.

None of these women were actually born "behind the gates" or with money, they were what you might call nouveau riche, or *new money*. All of the women were shown spending

money, and for some, doing so was beyond their means. By season five, cast member Lynn Curtin's daughter was famously filmed being served eviction papers on camera. When Lynn found out, she confronted her husband, who admitted on camera that the family had been living beyond their means and that he had failed to pay the ten-thousand-dollar deposit for their rented home. Renting larger homes to uphold the series' emphasis on the *bling frame* is a common practice among many women across *RH* series. This speaks to the fact that these women have to perform economic capital in order to keep up the image for the series. The irony of this, or the disconnect between appearing to possess economic capital and actual wealth, contributes to class ambivalence; it shows how we trick people into looking like we have something we do not.

The women are also cast based on social capital. Women will give producers names of people in their social network who might be interesting to film. On *RHOC* some of the women were cast because they lived in the same subdivision. In contrast, the women of *RHNYC*, knew each other from "New York society." From the premiere episode of *RHNYC* (2008) viewers learned: "to a certain group of people in New York, status is everything," and that these women view New York City as "a playground" and "run with fabulous circles of people." Status comes by way of social capital – more specifically with titles and powerful connections. These quotes are from the women's opening taglines featured in season one of *RHNYC*: Alex McCord, Bethenny Frankel, and Jill Zarin, respectively.

Much like *RHOC*, three of the original five *RHNYC* cast members were successful business women. One woman who did not work outside the home was married to a count and proud to have the title of Countess. Another woman, who did not work outside the home, was Alex McCord. In episode one, season one Alex makes it clear that her goal is to social climb: "I love meeting interesting, exciting people who move in higher and higher circles of society, bring

it on!” Alex and her husband spend season one social climbing through the city by attending parties, charities, auctions, the theater, and shopping for expensive designer clothes they can hardly afford, admitting, “it takes an insane amount of money to live in the elite part of society.” In the finale of season one, episode seven, “Second Chances,” Alex and Simon attend a party at Jill Zarin’s and commit a social faux pas by bringing their young children to the dinner party. This action revealed Alex and Simon as New York society outsiders. Women like Ramona and Bethenny were shown on camera looking appalled at the children’s behavior, saying, respectively, “I was shocked, it was a formal event, I’ve never seen that before in my life!” and “I would expect the children to be more disciplined considering how they say they raise them.” Committing social faux pas are one way cast members reveal their social origins. Social origin is an important factor contributing to class ambivalence. If someone is not born into the upper class, those who are will remind them that they are not. Outsider’s behaviors and social transgressions, like Alex and Simon’s, convey their limitations because they are not familiar with the rules.

On other series, like *RHOP*, *RHOD*, and *RHONJ*, family connections are everything. For instance, *RHONJ* premiered in 2009, (the same year MTV’s *Jersey Shore* did, another RTV show that foregrounded Italian-Americans). To trade on cultural stereotypes about Italians being family oriented, *RHONJ* featured women who were related by blood or through marriage. Season one of *RHONJ* featured sisters, Caroline and Dina Manzo, their sister-in-law Jacqueline Laurita, friend Teresa Guidice, and “outsider” Danielle Staub. Danielle was a new friend of Jacqueline’s. The entire season revolved around Jacqueline, Caroline, and Dina arguing over Danielle’s friendship with Jacqueline. Danielle was an “outsider,” and “couldn’t be trusted” according to Caroline. In the season one finale, “Last Supper,” Danielle meets the women and

their families for dinner, (the same episode where Teresa flips the table). Danielle inquires why the women hate her. Caroline responds that she divided the family, saying in a heavy New Jersey/Italian-American accent: “let me tell you a-somethin’ about my fam-bly – we’re as thick as thieves and we protect each other ‘til the end.” To this point, *RHNYC* and *RHOC* featured predominately white women. *RHONJ* came on the air as distinctive from those women because this group was cast to represent an ethnic stereotype. To this day, *RHONJ* emphasizes familial connections. In its ninth season (2018), *RHONJ* features Teresa Guidice and her sister-in-law Melissa Gorga as central characters.

Familial connections present a bit differently on *RHOP* and *RHOD*. On these newer *RH* series, family legacy or name is of the utmost importance. For instance, season two of *RHOD* added two characters to the series. Cameron Westcott and D’Andra Simmons have family money and are a part of ‘Dallas society.’ In the reunion for season three (2018), Cameron and D’Andra discuss the perils of having to keep up with the expectations of Dallas society. The conversation could have bonded the women, but D’Andra made the distinction that Cameron *married* “into a legacy family name.” This was a positional move for D’Andra to assert herself as higher in status because she was *born* into “a legacy family name.” Emphasizing social origins like this points to the idea that class is a way of being that one is born with, rather than something one acquires. This nature versus nurture distinction is designed to belittle those who earned their way to a higher social class, and one way the wealthy women on the series attempt to separate themselves from the other women. It is also a way producers pit women against each other. They cast Simmons and Westcott because season one only featured women who came into money.

This family legacy tension is also present on the new *RH* series set in Potomac. In season one of *RHOP* viewers learn about how exclusive life in Potomac is: “if you haven’t heard of

Potomac, that's fine. That means we've done a great job keeping it a nice little secret," Karen Huger shares. Potomac is so exclusive she says, "only legacy or large cash flow gets you in." Another cast member, Katie Rost, a philanthropist, introduces herself in the opening credits this way: "I'm a ball and gala girl. It's my legacy and my calling." Bottom line, legacy and family name is everything on the two newer *RH* series.

Some *RH* series, like *RHOBH* and *RHOA* value existing celebrity capital above anything. Celebrity capital is related to symbolic capital or renown (Bourdieu, 1991). Different types of symbolic capital have worked for different women on these shows. *RHOBH* and *RHOA* series may not have women with titles like *RHNYC*, but they are primarily composed of women who are celebrities.

RHOBH often features Hollywood actresses, while *RHOA* features actresses, R&B singers, and fashion models. Casting celebrities on a RTV series that is intended to follow the lives of ordinary, rich women is a good move from a production standpoint. Hollywood celebrities have built-in audiences, and are thought to attract more viewers given their stature. Part of *RH*'s allure is to watch Hollywood celebrities in private moments. Their celebrity capital works well in the arena of RTV. Celebrity capital can work across an array of social fields, which is different from field-specific symbolic capital (Driessens, 2013). Celebrity capital benefits the women who have it in the field of *RH* because it influences their interactions with the other women on the series, (examples of the power of celebrity capital will be given in the section on positioning).

Celebrity capital is most highly regarded on *RHOBH* since the series takes place in the same bubble of Hollywood. The first season of *RHOA* did not feature women who were celebrities. Season one did feature women: Lisa Wu, Sheree Whitfield, and DeShawn Snow, who

were married to professional athletes. Season one, episode one, “Welcome one, welcome ATL” (2008) taught viewers right away that Atlanta “is a mecca of wealthy African Americans,” and “the Black Hollywood.” Most importantly, we learned from DeShawn, former wife of NBA player Eric Snow, that “Atlanta is all *new* money.”

The women of *RHOA* do not engage in the same types of arguments over who has new money versus old money. “Legacy family name” is something only talked about in Potomac or Dallas. The fact that all of the women cast come from “new money” levels the playing field. In this way, it makes sense that by season two, in order to introduce women with higher positions, producers began hiring celebrities, beginning with Kandi Bureess, a successful singer, songwriter, and music producer. More recently *RHOA* has featured Kim Fields, the actress from the *Facts of Life* and *Living Single*, and models Claudia Jordan and Cynthia Bailey. Their celebrity capital allows them to position themselves better on the series in contrast with the women who married professional athletes.

The types of capital these women possess and perform also play into “*the hustler frame*.” The women of *RHOBH* and *RHOA* perform similar types of “hustle,” in that they work primarily in the entertainment industry. Actresses like Lisa Rinna, and singers like Erika Jayne and Kandi Burrell will be shown on set or in the studio. In contrast, most of the women on *RHOC* work in business/office settings and are shown at work at a desk. Women on *RHOP* and *RHOD* tend to be more heavily involved in the charity world, and are often shown “at work” fundraising, and throwing charity balls. There are similarities too. A majority of these women, as time goes on, are shown building their branded image and promoting products, doing book signings, and hosting events. This form of social mobility and the labor frame will be discussed in the section on the changes in the frames over time.

The last type of capital the women must perform is cultural capital, which evinces the habitus of the individual, or what these women *know*. Cultural capital is performed by way of the behaviors they exhibit, their hobbies, and viewpoints. The franchise thrives on clashes over cultural capital. These clashes are usually seen when someone breaks the rules of social etiquette. For example, the major storyline of the last season of *RHOBH* centered on a fight over the fact that one woman served another champagne in a wine glass. This type of fight would only be featured on *RHOBH*. On other series like *RHOA*, women have champagne in red solo cups.

Cultural capital is ultimately demonstrated via the “*maybe we are white trash*” frame (behavior). All of the women in their own ways exhibit terrible behavior and this varies by region as well. On the whole, the women of *RHNYC* are the most confrontational. The minute they hear someone said something about them they address it with that person. These women are direct, aggressive, and keep on topic. The women of the Westcoast installments *RHOBH* or *RHOC*, tend to be more passive aggressive. Lisa Vanderpump and Vicki Gunvalson from *RHOBH* and *RHOC* respectively, have made avoiding cast members during filming an art form, as a means to not deal with the repercussions of their actions. These installments have slow-moving dramatic storylines because the women are so passive aggressive. *RHNYC* and *RHOA* however are often lauded by fans because of the constantly evolving storyline. These women will confront each other and move on, fight, confront each other and then move on. Lastly, the series primarily built on new money, *RHOA*, *RHONJ*, and *RHOC* have featured the most physically aggressive behavior in contrast to other series. Part of this may have to do with the type of drama production is demanding from these women, part of this might be habitus and ingrained behavior.

Performing cultural capital is essential to the franchise, so much so, the conversation will be picked up more specifically by way of distinctions and how this plays into positioning and power. First, we need to discuss regional differences and gender and race, and then similarities. At this point though it should be clear that the women are cast because they possess particular types of capital. They must perform capital (i.e. class) in order to remain on the series. These performances of capital factor into the ways the women are framed, via *the bling frame*, *the hustler frame*, and *the maybe we are white trash frame*. These performances are also embedded within a postfeminist sensibility, as discussed next, and performing capital according to these frames leads to greater generation of capital outside the series. This will be discussed in the findings of the second research question. In sum, this section shows how cultural context and capital matter in how we see the women framed and how the women perform class. It also shows class is communicated differently by location, social origins, connections, hustle, and behavior.

Regional Differences and Gender

Other studies of *RH* have positioned the women analytically on the show as gendered inhabitants of their respective cities (Johnson and Trelease, 2018). This work does the same since the three frames concerning class: *the bling frame*, *the hustler frame*, and *the maybe we are white trash frame* operate within the meta-frame of *postfeminist nirvana*. Therefore, these representations of class are highly gendered. *Postfeminist nirvana*, as discussed in previous sections, promotes popular ideas about feminism as “choice” and also celebrates a traditional, highly-feminized aesthetic. Each *RH* series is presented through the lens of this larger postfeminist sensibility that evokes a “double entanglement” with feminism (McRobbie, 2009). This media promotes the idea that women can balance being entrepreneurial and wives/moms,

and still maintain a perfect self-presentation. *Postfeminist nirvana* gets at the major ideological idea employed by media today to depict gender and feminism.

On the whole, the women are framed via *postfeminist nirvana* in similar ways. For instance, most of the women are shown talking about “finding balance” and making things work both at their place of work and at home. However, the differences lie in the distinctions in the ideal look of the women across series. Each woman looks like she belongs on her respective series, and might look slightly out of place on another. Women of *RH* across series tend to look similar on the surface level, but each series in its own way is representative of an ideal aesthetic in that location.

In early installments of *RH*, viewers watched as the women did their own hair and makeup, and dressed themselves with what was in their own wardrobe. Now that the franchise has become a pop culture phenomenon, the women look much more polished and much more uniform across series. This is likely because they themselves have more money from the show, production has a bigger budget, they have hired hair and makeup people for filming, and they have the same brands reaching out to them to wear their designs. There is also a transition period for each new housewife. When they begin filming they use the tools they have at their disposal. By the time filming for the reunion has commenced, they have more access to the stylists at Bravo and they have watched themselves on RTV, and can make adjustments to their liking. A new cast member knows if she’s made it if Andy Cohen tells her at the reunion – “you look like a housewife now.” This means her glammed up appearance aligns with the overall housewives’ aesthetic. Once a woman embodies the aesthetic ideal, they become a *real housewife*.

Viewing seasons over time the first thing to notice is that the women’s personal style has evolved to be more glamorous, the second thing to notice is that the women’s faces and bodies

have changed to meet the housewives' aesthetic. This aesthetic includes looking thin, white or as white as one can look, wearing hair extensions that are sleek, beach waved, or in a high pony, glossy makeup, extreme face highlighting and contouring, fake lashes, and formal evening gowns and/or jumpsuits. It does not matter if the woman is in her fifties, thirties, blonde, brunette, black, white. This is the high gloss housewives' aesthetic. The amount of pressure the women feel to uphold this aesthetic has not been studied. However, the pressure can be gaged by perusing the seasons and cast photos over time. The evolution Vicki Gunvalson's face demonstrates the extreme pressure women feel to uphold this aesthetic. Vicki, the longest running housewife in franchise history has had so much facial plastic surgery, she is hardly recognizable from her season one cast photo. Andy Cohen had her on his show to play an overtly demeaning game that tasked Vicki with matching pictures of her face with the correct *RHOC* season. There were thirteen seasons and thirteen faces. The show exploits Vicki's obsession with plastic surgery, but takes zero responsibility for the invisible pressure behind her decision to consistently go under the knife.

While there is an overall housewives' aesthetic, the ideal look of the women varies by location. The ideal look varies if she lives in Orange County or New York City. The women who star on *RHOC* tend to be blonde white-women with tans, (with the exception of four women over thirteen seasons who have been brunette, two of whom had Latinx roots). In the early seasons, every woman featured on *RHOC* wore a "sky top:" a tightly fitted sleeveless shirt, often cleavage baring, with a large jewel encrusted emblem nestled underneath their breasts. The women of *RHNYC* would not be seen in this fashion.

On *RHOBH* diversity is shown by casting brunettes, among a cast of mostly rich, blonde, white women. While these women are also open about getting nipped and tucked, they do so in

the off-season, away from the cameras. The women of *RHNYC* also receive most of their plastic surgery off camera. Sometimes the women are open, other times they refuse to share. For instance, each new season of *RHOBH* Lisa Vanderpump, Kyle Richards, and Lisa Rinna appear to have a new face and new teeth. The distinction is, women on *RHOBH* and *RHNYC* care to hide their procedures, while women on *RHOC*, *RHONJ*, *RHOA*, do not, and often undergo their surgeries on camera. The underlying idea here is that perhaps the series based on new money are open, and the ones that feature older money, are more private about their procedures.

The women of *RHONJ* are unabashed about plastic surgery on camera. For instance, Siggie Flicker, a one-season housewife who appeared in season nine (2017) of *RHONJ*, was shown for the first time on camera meeting the women for lunch with facial bandages from a recent facelift. This is in keeping with season one of *RHONJ* which featured the prominent storyline of Teresa Guidice “getting her bubbies,” or a breast augmentation. In addition to breast implants and facial plastic surgery, the women in New Jersey tend to be spray-tanned brunettes, with big hair, and loud style consisting of an assortment of animal print, furs, and rhinestones. This is different from the New York women who are shown each season attending New York Fashion week, often wearing higher-end designer clothes, and minimal makeup. As for the women in Dallas, everything really is bigger in Texas. The women of *RHOD* have big hair, loud clothing, and wear the most obvious make-up in the franchise.

The two series that feature mostly Black women, *RHOA* and *RHOP* highlight slightly different aesthetics. The women of *RHOP* are a bit more understated, while the women of *RHOA* change wigs almost every interview session. One woman on *RHOP* wears her hair naturally, while every other woman of color featured on these two series straightens their hair or wears a wig. Overall, there are regional differences among the women’s aesthetic across series. These

aesthetics, however work to create a gestalt image of the ideal woman – a “real housewife” – who looks perfectly put together, glamorous, and ultra-feminine. These distinctions vary the most by ethnicity and race.

Regional Differences and Race

As demonstrated in the above sections, these women are cast on *RH* to perform certain types of capital that convey gendered ideas about class. These performances are embedded in a postfeminist media text. Postfeminist media evoke this sensibility that is enacted by a “grammar of individualism that fits perfectly with a neoliberal ideology” (Gill, 2007, p. 270). This is accomplished through narratives that show the women of *RH* picking themselves up, balancing effectively, and choosing the right (i.e., most lucrative) choices to get ahead. Not all women have access to the same choices, however. *Postfeminist nirvana* in *RH* is representative of a particular idea of womanhood today that only works for some – mainly white, middle-class, women – who have the power and autonomy to choose to enact these ideas. The meta-frame *postfeminist nirvana* does not factor in how race and ethnicity affect the types of choices people can choose from or the level of agency people have in choosing choice. *Postfeminist nirvana* provides a lens through which viewers can unpack the idealized notion of the white, upper middle-class housewife, therefore eliding the experiences of the Black women in this franchise.

The *postfeminist nirvana* frame whitewashes the women’s experiences at the level of production, and instead focuses on a particular gendered way to present all the women. It is the women themselves, on an individual level, who bring attention to race on the series. While the women of *RH* must perform according to production’s gendered, classist frames, women of color who participate on *RH* must additionally perform according to racial expectations that the white women of the franchise do not have to contend with.

RHOA and *RHOP* feature casts that are predominately African-American women. Research on the women of *RHOA* specifically is divided over whether these women are catering to a multitude of stereotypes or reshaping media representations about Black women (see Bunai, 2014; Hawley, 2014). Throughout history, roles for Black women in media have been extremely limited, and the roles that are available cater to a number of stereotypes. From the asexual *Mammy*, to the overtly sexualized *Jezebel*, to the loud/dramatic/bossy *Sapphire*, to the *Magical Negro*, and then to the *Angry Black Woman* (ABW) often seen in RTV (Gay, 2014; Bunai, 2014). The ABW is an “updated version” of the *Sapphire*, and a ubiquitous stereotype seen on RTV, and also sometimes referred to as the “diva with attitude” (Bunai, 2014). The “diva with attitude” is the role that a majority of women on *RHOA* and *RHOP* must conform to.

The “diva with attitude” is evoked in media representations by showing Black women as loud, hostile, aggressive, rude, albeit strong, yet lazy, and is usually used in contrast with popular characterizations of white women who are portrayed as quiet, reserved, and passive (Bunai, 2014, p. 15). These popular characterizations of white women that Bunai writes about are intertwined with media representations of “housewives” throughout history, which have depicted (white) women looking quiet, reserved, and passive, but great at being consumers. The *RH* franchise amplifies this contrast because the *RH* series are not diversified. Even though *RHOA* and *RHOP* feature Black women, every other franchise features mostly white women. The franchise keeps Black and white women separate. I argue here that this provides a convenient excuse for producers to never actually diversify the casts, (i.e., production might think, why bother hiring Black women for *RHNYC* or *RHOD*, if *RHOA* and *RHOP* are centrally focused on Black women?) Actual inclusion would mean Black and white women on the same series.

Kim Zolciak is white and on *RHOA*, making her an interesting case. Kim plays to more stereotypes about Black women than the Black women on the series. She plays to the Mammy, as she is mom to six children. She plays to the Jezebel by constantly discussing her attraction to her husband. She plays to the Sapphire/ “diva with attitude” by starting much of the drama on *RHOA*. She also tends to be favored by production. Her being favored is evident in the fact that network executives have continually renewed *Don’t Be Tardy*, Kim’s spinoff show on Bravo. Multiple women of *RHOA* have starred in Bravo spinoffs that focus on their individual lives, but Kim’s spinoff has been renewed six times, outlasting them all, and barely features the other women of *RHOA*. In the last reunion special for *RHOA* (2018) Kim made several underhanded racist remarks about being on a show with Black women. This will be discussed in the findings of the second research question about the women’s social media use because race is much more salient on the women’s own social media than it is on the series. Shortly after Kim made these remarks, *Don’t Be Tardy* was renewed again, and Kim and her daughter received a pay-raise.

Kim *chooses* (she’s white and upper-middle class, she can choose) to embody these stereotypes about Black women. The other women on the cast, do not have that choice. This is because Black women who have personalities that evoke ideas related to white women will be deemed “inauthentic” to viewers (Boylorn, 2008, p. 418). Authenticity is so central to RTV. The labor of performing authenticity re-centers whiteness, which makes being white an indicator of authenticity (Dubrofsky, 2014). This means that Black women will only appear authentic if they enact stereotypical actions of other types of Black women who are identified as “ghetto” or low-class (Bunai, 2014, p. 8). The only way the Black women on *RHOA* and *RHOP* can maintain their status on the show is to play to these stereotypes.

Black stereotypes have been modernized through RTV to be less noticeable, and their invisibility on RTV makes these stereotypes more acceptable (Bunai, 2014, p. 20). Bunai's analysis of the women's mannerisms revealed that the women of *RHOA* enact a combination of historical and contemporary stereotypes of black women, depending on the situation. This in itself is not completely different from what all of the women on *RH* have to do to keep producers happy. Bunai however, argues that the women of *RHOA*, and I would add *RHOP* here, engage in this code-switching between stereotypes to protect themselves. There is no choice. These women must draw on multiple stereotypes in order to refute dominant/historical stereotypes about Black women for survival. To keep their job, they have to play into more stereotypes across time, race, gender, and class not only to acquiesce production, but viewers too, who hold them responsible for these stereotypes as well responsible for breaking those stereotypes.

Other research on the women of *RHOA* has argued that the series provides "complex representations of African American women that are rarely seen on television," (Hawley, 2014, p. 1). Using soap opera theory, Hawley conducted a close reading of *RHOA*, and found the women's multilayered performances to be empowering and therapeutic for the women on the program as well as for viewers at home. Regardless of the conclusions drawn from researchers about *RH*'s representations of Black women, the common thread in research is that *RH* frames black femininity through the lens of a white perspective. The meta-frame of *postfeminist nirvana* laid out here in this frame analysis, elides race simply because *postfeminist nirvana* speaks to a mediated ideal of white women with social and economic privilege. Other research has established that framing Black femininity through a white perspective (like the *postfeminist nirvana* frame) enables white audiences to "not see race" (Dominguez, 2015, p. 171). The women of *RHOA* and *RHOP* are framed similarly to the white women in other series, this means,

from a production standpoint, the series does not attempt to highlight different women's experiences, and treats everyone to the same meta-frame. It is the women themselves who must bring race to the forefront.

Throughout *RHOA* the women making proclamations about being “strong Black women” has only become more salient as the series has continued. This foregrounding of the trope of the “strong Black woman” leaves little room for the women on *RHOA* or *RHOP* to show vulnerability. In season one (2008) race is hardly talked about as an issue or as an integral component of their experience. On seasons one (2016) and two (2017) of *RHOP*, which notably premiered about a decade after *RHOA*, race is much more prominent within the women's storylines. In season one, Katie Rost, who identifies as bi-racial, clashes with another cast member Gizelle Bryant, who has also been labeled bi-racial, but does not identify as such. Gizelle at one point shares with the other women that “when Katie calls me biracial, I take offense” because “[I] have always identified as a Black woman.” In another interaction with all of the women, Gizelle antagonizes Katie, asking, “what are you, black or white today?” In this way, Gizelle does not let Katie enact the performance she might feel most comfortable with. By calling Katie out for not being black or white enough, Gizelle is demeaning Katie for her inability to trade on traditional stereotypes. Later Katie says flatly into the camera, “they talk a lot about race in this group.” Cut to Gizelle then complaining to the camera in an interview that, “Katie tries to fit in with white people, but guess what boo, they don't like you!” Gizelle tries later in the season to give Katie “a Black history lesson” which results in a fight between the two women. The issue is never fully resolved, but Gizelle attests that her only problem is that Katie acts like “it's a problem to be Black.” There is no evidence of this on the show, except that Katie's behavior aligns with ideas about white women.

Gizelle's position and treatment of Katie calls up the stereotypes these women have to play to, and thereby helps confirm people's beliefs in those stereotypes. Such dynamics, according to Dominguez (2015) "yield pleasure for white viewers, who can participate in the activation and deferral" of particular stereotypes. White viewers get to ignore the racial implications, and can instead find comfort in the confirmation of these black stereotypes (Dominguez, 2015, p. 177). This is likely amplified when Black women themselves shame other Black women for not acting according to those stereotypes, like Gizelle did on *RHOP*.

RHOA is the most watched series in the entire U.S. based franchise. It often garners double the viewers of any other series. But who are these viewers? From what is known about Bravo viewers, they are affluent, educated, mostly white women and gay men. I cannot find demographic information on *RHOA* specifically, and cannot speak to whether the audience is predominately Black or white. But if Bravo's target audience, white women and gay men, are tuning into *RHOA* in droves, what do they enjoy about it? This is a question to consider.

This section discussed regional differences across series. These frames and the resulting ultra-feminized, class-based media representations of these women obscure race as a key facet of some of the women's identities. The common thread is that the women perform according to societal and production's expectations, and those performances vary by cultural context, race, class, and gender. There is still one frame however that does not vary across series or women. *Similarities – I'm not a hypocrite, you're a hypocrite*

Across all series, one frame is evoked consistently the same way. The *you're a hypocrite* frame is what producers call the "Bravo wink." This has been described as a comedic element of the series, whereby viewers are "let in on the joke," and can watch as the women contradict themselves, get caught in a lie, and/or get called out for being hypocritical. The *you're a*

hypocrite frame offers more insight into what has been called the “ironic frame” by other scholars (Lee and Moscovitz, 2013). Lee and Moscovitz discuss the ironic frame as the way through which the series primes the audience to judge the women’s extravagances, ultimately depicting the women (of *RHNYC*, the series the authors focus on) as too crass to be classy and too self-obsessed to care about anyone else (p. 64). In sum, the authors find that the use of irony invites viewers to make judgments. However, the authors do not connect irony to *schadenfreude*, which is a German word that translates as “harm-joy” and refers to the positive feelings people experience when they witness other people fall on hard times. *Schadenfreude* undergirds a majority of docusoaps and RTV competition style programs (Psarras, 2017).

The feeling of *schadenfreude* is connected to envy. Smith’s (1996) research found that *schadenfreude* happened when an *envied* person experienced a misfortune. In a later study, Smith (2013) conducted a content analysis of ten issues of *The National Enquirer* and found that the higher a celebrity’s status was, the likelier the article about them discussed a misfortune. This is significant because it points to celebrities as prominent examples of the types of people we enjoy watching suffer. Given the wealth, status and newly acquired fame of the women on *RH*, this further corroborates with Lee and Moscovitz’s (2013) findings that the women on *RH* are framed ironically to make the audience laugh in judgment, which is, in essence, *schadenfreude*.

The authors never mention the social emotion of *schadenfreude*, or envy as being associated with the ironic frame or the judgments elicited by the frame. I label this frame *hypocrisy* because that is what is at the root of the ironic frame. Producers have one thing in mind, which is to depict the women “saying one thing and then doing another” or as *hypocrites*. Research has shown it is more enjoyable to witness the suffering of hypocrites because their behavior reveals a schism between what they say and do (Smith, 2013, p. 75). That schism often

centers around moral behavior. Hypocrites, Smith explained, tend to exude moral superiority, as if they are deserving of the wealth, success, and status they have because of their strong morals. The inconsistent behavior associated with hypocrisy is viewed as unappealing because people read it as deceptive or a violation of trust. When a hypocrite is exposed then, people can feel justified in judging them as being undeserving of their position or achievements (Smith, 2013).

The feeling of *schadenfreude* obtained when someone is revealed as a hypocrite is valuable in America. This country was built on strong moral beliefs of right and wrong, which affect everything from the way we raise our children to political decision-making (Clifford & Jerit, 2013). When someone is revealed to be a hypocrite on a moral level, the pleasure people feel is justified.

Envy and *schadenfreude* are companion emotions to resentment. The Oxford English dictionary defines envy as: “a feeling of discontented or *resentful* longing aroused by someone else’s possessions, qualities, or luck.” Being resentful is problematic in its own way, but trading on resentment, as *RH* does via the *you’re a hypocrite frame* is worse. Resentment makes people feel less sympathetic for others. When a politics of resentment is evoked in political discourse it enables people to more quickly believe that other groups are undeserving of the assistance they receive (see Cramer, 2016). I would argue, Cramer’s argument holds up in this case as well. *RH* producers have been trading on people’s resentment towards the conspicuously wealthy at the most opportune economic time (throughout the recession, recovery, and now at the cusp of perhaps another recession). The goal then from a production standpoint is to provide viewers with someone to blame. Whether this happens, is a different story that will be discussed in the findings of the third research question. Overall, showing hypocrisy is tied to marking people as undeserving on *RH*.

Showing the women of *RH* as undeserving, or engaging with the feeling of schadenfreude arguably also renders people ambivalent to class in this particular instance. Smith (2013), a psychologist, argued that schadenfreude serves a positive socially adaptive function, and encouraged people to freely engage with the emotion because it helps to undermine those who are perceived to be higher in status. Schadenfreude by way of the *you're a hypocrite frame* can enable people to more comfortably come to terms with their own place in the social hierarchy. For instance, viewers can watch, laugh, and feel better about their own lives because these women, while higher in status, are morally bankrupt, stupid, and/or undeserving.

In summary, *RH* frames the women according to a multitude of definitions relating to social class. Producers employ the meta-frame of postfeminist nirvana to embed the women within a traditionally gendered context. The women align their performances with the demands of these frames, which depict women ironically – as badly behaved, yet hardworking, and obsessed with materialism. Since these frames evince multiple ideas about class, they cater to class ambivalence. The series breeds resentment between the women by casting women with different types of capital to clash over positions of power, which is elaborated on next.

4.2.7 Positioning and the Power of Distinctions

RH has been accused of pitting women against each other by critics and former cast members. This begins in the casting process, when producers look for women who have different types of capital. The possession of different types of capital creates envy and/or resentment among those who are lacking certain capital. Each *RH* series in the U.S. franchise follows the same role template for casting. This frame analysis revealed that each series has women who can fulfill five roles. These roles are negotiable, the women can test their boundaries, but for the most part, women are cast to fulfill a different role based on capital that represents something

bigger than them. These roles are representative of different positions within the American class hierarchy. Each woman represents a different idea of social class, which caters to class ambivalence.

On every *RH* series, there is an Alpha. The Alpha is an “OG Housewife” or a woman who has been on the series since season one (i.e., Vicki Gunvalson, Bethenny Frankel, Lisa Vanderpump, Nene Leakes). Alphas are often respected by viewers for their dedication to hard work. These are the women who have transcended their social origins because they chose the right choices, and worked outside of the home. They represent the American Dream and upward social mobility. The alphas are framed positively via *the bling frame* and *the hustler frame*, which shows them as more deserving of the things they have because they work for them. This positions the women who are work focused outside of the home better than the women who are rich and leisurely. This is one way framing and production works to pit women against each other. Even though the women can “choose” to work or stay home, those who work are still framed more positively.

Second, there is always a “Rich Bitch,” who often provides enjoyable aspirational viewing because she can display wealth better than anyone (i.e., Heather Dubrow, Kyle Richards, Dorinda Medley, D’andra Simmons, Katie Rost). These are the “old money” women who represent the ruling class. Third, there is always one woman who is more level-headed and restrained than the others (i.e., Melissa Gorga, Meghan King Edmonds, Carol Radziwell, Cynthia Bailey). These peacemakers are often accused of being boring or lacking story, but I argue these characters play essential roles in maintaining the women’s bonds by providing impartial perspective for the women and viewers on the drama at hand. Fourth, there is always a woman who calls up Bhaktin’s carnival by embodying the crassness of new money (Kim Zolciak, Teresa

Guidice, Ramona Singer, LeeAnn Locken, Brandi Glanville, Kelly Dodd). These women might actually be representative of pure camp⁶ (Sontag, 1964). Their role is to attempt to take the Alpha or the Rich Bitch down a peg, in the end they play the fool. This is such an important role that in the newest installment of *RHOD*, producers cast LeeAnn Locken, who actually grew up in the carnival.

Finally, the last character is not intentionally cast but tends to be revealed as the series moves forward. This is the role of the Con, (i.e., Phaedra Parks, Teresa Guidice, Vicki Gunvalson, LuAnn DeLesseps, Taylor Armstrong, Karen Huger). These women have legal trouble, may have a mugshot or two, and a sordid past perhaps not yet revealed. They represent the coarser side of capitalism; conniving desperation and the dishonest practices people engage in throughout the struggle to move up. The same woman can fulfill multiple roles, and multiple women can be cast for the same role.

The Alpha is the star of the series. Much of the drama on *RH* revolves around how the women struggle to protect their position or advance their position by violating other women's positions. The Alphas tend to have more agency in shaping the patterns of interaction on the show. While there are women with less capital and less power who can make waves, like the carnival characters, they can only go as far as the overarching structure of the field allows. This refers to the network's bottom line. If the woman has a popular fan and social media following, she is likely to be more protected by the network. The women with less or the wrong kind of capital are more replaceable. The dirty work they perform on the series can upset viewers over time; they have to be careful of who they go after and how they go after them, because their job is on the line. Also, their role is to lose, while the role of the Alpha is to win.

⁶ Pure camp "is always naïve," "unintentional," and "dead serious." (Sontag, 1964).

Here is an example of how position operates on *RHOBH*, where money and celebrity capital reign supreme. Lisa Vanderpump, an eccentric, wealthy, hard-working restaurateur, has played the Alpha since season one. Eileen Davidson is an actress with celebrity capital, and played the peacemaker on seasons five and six (2014 and 2015). Brandi Glanville, the scorned ex-wife of a C-list actor, played the tragic carnival-esque character on seasons three through five (2012-2014). Lisa also stars in the spinoff, *Vanderpump Rules* (Bravo), of which she is an executive producer. Her position in the field is based on the fact that she was able to translate her cultural capital into successful business/economic capital. She is framed positively and more often than the other women via the *Hustler frame*. Her popularity and value to the show is evidenced by the 2.2 million followers she has on Instagram. In the nine years the show has been on, only two women (Brandi and Eileen) have been brave enough to challenge her position.

Brandi was cast only because she knew Lisa. Brandi did not have any capital. Brandi was married to actor Eddie Cibrian for nearly a decade. They divorced. Coming on the show offered her a legitimate form of income and the opportunity to transcend her social status. Brandi's claim to fame was that Cibrian cheated on her publicly with one of Lisa's restaurant employees and the singer, Leanne Rimes. Brandi revitalized *RHOBH* with her crass behavior, drinking, and money problems. Lisa brought Brandi on *RH* because she thought it was a charitable act, figuring that Brandi would be her ally and never threaten her position on the show. This was the case for a while, until Brandi realized that Lisa was using her as a mouthpiece for gossip that would help Lisa maintain her position over the other women. Lisa needed to keep above the position of Kyle Richards, who is cut from the same capital as Lisa, and therefore on equal ground. To maintain position, Lisa had Brandi spread rumors about Kyle's business and her husband's fidelity. Eventually, Brandi confronted Lisa. The other women agreed with Brandi about Lisa's

manipulations, but publicly and in front of Lisa, the other women refused to back Brandi up. She was left undefended because she had zero capital to position herself fairly in the field. No Housewife was going to go against Lisa. The other women knew their place on the show depended on their relationship to her. In the end, Brandi was right, but played the fool, looking ridiculous and crass in the way she went about her takedown of Lisa. When it came time to negotiate contracts for the next season, Lisa stated publicly that she would not return if Brandi did. Fans and Lisa herself called for Brandi's termination, and won.

Eileen was cast on *RHOBH* because of her celebrity capital (the best kind of capital on *RHOBH*). As an Emmy winner and member of SAGAFTRA, Eileen could command a higher salary than Lisa. She also brought new viewers to the series because she has an existing pool of soap fans who followed her to *RHOBH*. Behind the scenes, Eileen's higher salary threatened Lisa's position in the field. On the series, Lisa made it her job to diminish Eileen's credibility each time they were on camera together. Lisa's attempt failed however because of Eileen's celebrity capital. The combination of economic, social, and celebrity capital Eileen had, gave her an edge on Lisa. At the end of season six, Lisa again threatened to quit the show if Bravo hired back Eileen. Bravo sided with Eileen and renewed her contract. Lisa lost ground for the first time in six seasons.

In analyzing these three women's positions in the field of Beverly Hills issues of power and agency come in to play. Women like Eileen and Lisa have more agency in shaping the relations and patterns of interaction on the show. Women with less capital and therefore less power, like Brandi, have the ability to make waves, but only as far as the overarching structure of the field allows. At the end of the day these women's interactions with each other are influenced by producers' decisions, and their decision to fire Brandi is a clear message of what happens

when you have little power and capital in the field of *RH*. This makes *RH* as a field an interesting subject to study because it shows how struggles for power and agency play out in this microcosm of capitalist society. The struggle for power and the struggle to maintain power is a recurring process. These clashes over positions of power reveal implicit boundaries between social classes. These implicit boundaries contribute to class ambivalence, which will make more sense next when we discuss distinctions.

Power can be maintained in the field by making distinctions. Distinctions legitimate social differences and one's position within a group (Bourdieu, 1984). Distinctions tend to reference one's cultural capital. An example of *Housewives* making distinctions is from season one of *RHOBH*. Season one featured Dana Wilkey, who was a friend of the women. Attempting to fit in, Dana showed up to a party wearing a pair of \$25,000 sunglasses. Upon her arrival at the party, one woman commented, "look at those beautiful glasses!" to which Dana replied, "they were \$25,000. They're like four carats of diamonds, and then they're gold python, and they're made of gold." The women had fun with this admission, saying (behind Dana's back), that if Dana really had money she would never say how much the sunglasses cost.

Price-dropping or talking about how much money one has is a marker of insecurity that illuminates one's position. People who do this on the show are attempting to align themselves, as Dana was, with a higher status group. People in higher positions also make distinctions, in this case, i.e., "if you have money, you do not talk about it," to distinguish themselves from those who are perceived as inferior to them. Once normalized these distinctions become an implicit expectation among in-groups and make it easy to distinguish people who are on the outside, because outsiders, like Dana, will transgress these norms. Distinctions like this abound on *RH* and the implications of this will be discussed in the Discussion chapter.

4.2.8 **Changes in the frames over time**

This frame analysis not only analyzed each of the seven series in the U.S. based franchise, but it also analyzed each season over time, by viewing episodes from the first and most recent season of each series. The frame analysis covers episodes over an eleven-year period. This would include the time right before, throughout, and after the Great Recession (which is earmarked from December 2007 to June 2009⁷). This next section will briefly cover changes in the frames over time, and reflect on the period in which these changes occurred. The changes elaborated on here are important to note so we can better understand how cultural arrangements inform media representations of class.

The *Bling Frame*, representative of wealth and materialism on *RH*, has remained the most prevalent frame at play on each series. *RH* has always been and will continue to be, a show about (ostensibly) wealthy and privileged women. The look of the *Bling Frame* however has changed over time. Today minimalist design, clean lines, neutral colors and décor has for the most part superseded the gilded home decor and loud fashion labels that were seen on *RH* during the recession. For instance, season one of *RHOA* (2008) aired at the height of the Great Recession. In the season one finale of *RHOA* “Best of Enemies” (2008) Kim and Nene show up to Sheree’s birthday party an hour late, and miss Sheree blowing the candles out on a cake in the shape of a Louis Vuitton bag. Flash forward to season 10 (2018), viewers watch Nene Leakes walk through her new walk-in closet, which is all white, cleans lines, and minimalist in design.

The series that premiered in the first decade of the millennium: *RHOC*, *RHOA*, *RHNYC*, and *RHONJ* all depicted the women living large and looking ridiculous by way of ostentatious materialism. These series gave viewers the chance to watch ordinary women spend exorbitantly

⁷ See Keister, 2014; Kaplan and Rauh, 2013; Noah, 2012

and tastelessly out of their means. In other words, *RH* gave viewers someone to blame for the recession. As these early series moved into second, third, and fourth seasons, throughout the recession, producers could not hide the real-world consequences of the women's problematic spending. The ultimate schadenfreude came when cameras followed the women through: (i) eviction (Lynne Curtin, *RHOC*; Nene Leakes, *RHOA*), and (ii) bankruptcy and foreclosure (Teresa Guidice, Jaqueline Laurita, *RHONJ*); Tamra Barney, Alexis Bellino, Tammy Knickerbocker, *RHOC*); Lisa Wu, *RHOA*; Sonja Morgan, *RHNYC*).

Then post-recession, Bravo debuted *RHOBH*. After the recession, it was apparently time to celebrate money again – and this time, “real” money. *RHOP* and *RHOD* came six years after *RHOBH* in 2016. These newer series are so focused on family legacy and old money traditions likely because we are farther removed from the Great Recession, and producers may think it appropriate to celebrate ‘real’ money again. Perhaps at the precipice of another recession, given the current administration, some journalists and culture critics are pointing to the fact that because of this, we are again, as the economic climate shifts, turning back towards a more ostentatious style reminiscent of the pre-recession time period.⁸ It does in fact look as though loud labels are slowly making a comeback with certain women, i.e. Erika Jayne on *RHOBH*.

Today, there are of course women who are still going through money problems. For instance, Margaret Josephs' home is currently in foreclosure (she joined *RHONJ* last season in 2018). Teresa Guidice, of the same series, spent most of 2015 in prison for bankruptcy fraud, among other financial crimes. At one point her and husband were 11 million dollars in debt. Importantly, in spite of their money issues, there is something that enables these women to not only pay off certain debts, but to also keep living lavishly – and that is their salary from *RH*.

⁸ Eliza Brook, [Vox article](#), December 27, 2018.

Being a “real housewife” for Bravo is a lucrative deal for these women – both for the women who worked before and throughout their time on the series, and for the women who did not work outside the home. Little is known about the women’s contracts and salaries. But Bethenny Frankel has stated on more than one occasion that she was paid around 7,250 dollars for season one of *RHNYC*. For filming season 11, she reportedly received 1.5 million dollars for the season. It pays to stay on *RH*. The rumor is that women receive little pay for their first season as a housewife. The money comes after she is offered a contract for a second season. Salaries, per various internet sources range anywhere from 100,000 to 1.5 million dollars a season, which likely depends on tenure and screen time. Regardless, a six-figure salary (coupled with the powerful platform of RTV) can be life changing for the women, particularly the ones who are divorced and never worked outside the home. As *RH* increased in popularity, viewers have witnessed the women start businesses, capitalize on fame and new opportunities for making money, brand and rebrand themselves. The show itself has become a primary vehicle for keeping up appearances and even upward social mobility.

This means that the *Hustler Frame* has changed over time in accordance with the women’s life trajectories, which have been informed by their personal success as “Housewives” and by the success of the franchise itself. The biggest change in the *Hustler Frame* over time is that in the beginning women were positioned more overtly against each other depending on if they had careers outside of being wives and mothers. Today, every woman on *RH* is a mini-brand extension of Bravo, but also an individual brand composed of various promotional deals, i.e., books, wines, liquors, perfumes, clothing, accessories, fitness, etc. All of which came their way because of the platform of RTV. The *Hustler Frame* and what it truly entails is even more overt on social media, which will be discussed in the findings section of the next research

question. Today, the *Hustler Frame* mainly positions women against each other in terms of who has successfully branded themselves, and who is struggling to do so.

The meta-frame of *Postfeminist Nirvana* has also shifted to align with the women's life trajectories over time. This meta-frame in the earlier seasons was designed to set the women up for failure. The idea behind the frame is to present the women as "having it all." The use of the *Hypocrite Frame* however, has always contoured the meta-frame and ideal image. By catching the women in lies or hypocritical behavior, the "you're a hypocrite frame" has always clashed with the postfeminist ideal producers have held the women against. Over time, the women have learned that they will always be caught on camera doing or saying something that does not match with the ideal image they are trying to live up to. In this way, the women's life trajectories and experience on the show have forced the meta-frame to evolve.

The women for the most part no longer attempt to abide by the meta-frame, and no longer wait for cameras to catch them slipping up. The women themselves have cracked the *Postfeminist Nirvana* frame. More women on these shows are now divorced and single than married. These women have over time documented their divorces, struggles with addiction, suicide attempts, estranged relationships with children, and jail time on camera. They unabashedly project an image now that is counter to what "having it all" meant way back in 2006. Today, "having it all" can actually mean having some sort of business, and a successfully branded image, and nothing else. Having it all has been exposed as a farce by the women themselves, and producers have aligned this frame to be more representative of the women's actual lives. Often times, these women are celebrated for being older, single, and career focused. I would argue, the series was more anti-feminist in the early seasons, than it is now – only in that

the series on the whole allows the women to show their own idea of empowerment without (always) using irony.

While the idea of “balance” will always be a topic, the women appear to have stopped playing to the *Postfeminist Nirvana* frame and instead “own” the idea that they are who they are. “Own it” has become over time one of the most overused catchphrases on *RH*, across series. Instead of pretending to have it all, the women now attempt to “own” their actions, and “own” their life situations, which means admitting they are flawed and do not have it all.

“Owning it” includes owning your worst behavior. The “*Maybe we are white trash*” *Frame* has evolved over time to be even worse than before. The fighting, the name calling, the wine tossing, hair pulling, table flipping, public meltdowns have increased significantly over time. This can be attributed to two things: 1) production demanding more drama and 2) the women engaging in confrontations for camera time, but mostly to fulfill contractual obligation/producer demands. The season six *RHOA* (2014) reunion featured intense physical aggression between Kenya Moore and Porsha Williams. Kenya brought a bullhorn to the reunion and antagonized Porsha. Each woman was throwing insults at the other. Kenya said into the bullhorn “you’re a dumb ho.” Reacting impulsively, Porsha got up, pulled Kenya by her hair off the couch, and dragged her down onto the floor. Andy Cohen and crew attempted to split them up. After the altercation, Porsha was consoled by Nene. Kenya walked off set, with no support from production or the women. To say this was a low-point in the franchise is an understatement. What is almost on par with this behavior was Andy Cohen’s inability to control or seemingly care for the women throughout this situation. The cameras caught it, the act of physical aggression eventually aired, and the altercation itself was used in promos on Bravo.

The *Hypocrite Frame* has increased over time as well. This frame has become a hallmark of all Bravo reality programming, and still primarily revolves around showing the women as liars, idiots, and hypocrites. The only difference is that now the women are so privy to this frame that they themselves will often call out the hypocrisy of each other – driving story in their favor. The *Hypocrite Frame*, like the *Behavior Frame* has evolved according to production demands and therefore, has become more contrived.

One frame in particular emerged over time to depict the women more positively, and that is the *Charity Frame*. Since season one, it could be argued that charity was always present on *RH*. However, this frame analysis shows that it was not present in the way it is today. For instance, season one of *RHNYC* featured the women attending charity events, but really only to network and be ‘in the scene’. Season one of *RHOA* featured the tragic charitable endeavors of DeShawn Snow. DeShawn was the wife of an NBA player, who wanted to throw a charity auction for the Snow Foundation to benefit public schools. She invited everyone in Atlanta, and set a one-million-dollar goal. The problem was, DeShawn did not charge an entrance fee or require attendees to make a minimum bid. People came, ate the food, and did not participate in the auction. Her charitable endeavors were undermined by the ironic framing that presented DeShawn as the biggest idiot on *RHOA*. Charity has become much more prevalent and depicted in its own terms without irony today.

The women themselves have publicly advocated for showing their charitable endeavors in a positive light. In press interviews for season six, Lisa Vanderpump in particular, said she had threatened to quit *RHOBH* unless producers paid attention to her animal activism.⁹ They listened, and from season six on, her animal activism has become more central to her storyline on the

⁹ Sam Lansky, 2016, [Time Article](#)

series. Additional evidence of this frame emerging is highlighted by the fact that *RHOD* was initially intended to be a show about women involved in the Dallas charity world. At the last minute, producers decided to make it an *RH* series. This charity frame comes at a time when the wealthy can again be praised and shown more positively.

Overall this analysis showed how the ebbs and flow of social, political, economic, and cultural life might inform different frames of the wealthy throughout different periods. This is not to say that culture predicts media messages or that media messages always represent the time, I am arguing here that culture and media have a reciprocal and mutual relationship. Understanding how media frame class is essential to understanding how people make sense of class in a culture that is ambivalent about the issue. How media frame class helps to both inform and confirm people's ideas of the concept (Kendall, 2005). Kendall's (2005) analysis of the media's framing of the wealthy revealed that the wealthy are mostly framed positively. This works to justify the upper-middle and upper classes' privileged positions, but also works to foster an ideology about class that affects how people think about things like inequality and their own personal identity in the class hierarchy (p. 11-15). Kendall's argument that the rich are framed positively overall, was written in 2005, before the Great Recession. This frame analysis demonstrates that *RH*, airing at the height of the Great Recession, intentionally made aspects of the women's lives more salient than others. Essentially showing these women in a negative light, as over-spending, tasteless, idiots who could be easily blamed for the direction of the economy.

Kendall identified four positive media frames of the wealthy: (1) *the consensus frame*, which depicts wealthy people 'just like us'; (2) *the admiration frame*, which shows the wealthy are generous and caring people; (3) *the emulation frame*, which depicts the wealthy as personifying the American Dream; and (4) *the price-tag frame*, which shows the wealthy believe

in the gospel of materialism. The frames put forth in this dissertation evoke Kendall's (2005) frames, and they also evoke the negative framing devices that she found in media's portrayals of the upper class. The *sour grapes frame* depicts the wealthy as unhappy and dysfunctional, and the *bad-apple frame*, which depicts the wealthy as criminals. These negative frames are problematic in themselves, Kendall argued, because they focus on individual people, and do not address the structural problems associated with having a class of extremely wealthy people. What makes this frame analysis distinct, is that I offer up an explanation of the moments in which positive and negative media frames are invoked.

The *Charity Frame* prevalent on *RH* today invokes Kendall's *admiration frame*, and demonstrates that these women are being framed in more positive ways today than during the recession. Her *emulation frame* can be the overarching ideal evoked by the *Hustler Frame* on *RH*. The *price tag frame* is what I call the *Bling Frame*, and again, my analysis demonstrates how the *Bling Frame* looks over time. Kendall's negative frames for the wealthy are also present in ways on *RH*. For instance, the *sour grapes frame* can be shown via the *Hypocrite Frame*, and the *bad apple frame* is definitely underlying some of the women's storylines on *RH*. This frame analysis however goes more in-depth on the use of irony and *schadenfreude*, and how these techniques call up envy and resentment.

In sum, the frames have changed over time. The *Hypocrite Frame* and the *Behavior Frame* have been amplified according to production demands. The *Meta-Frame* and the *Hustler Frame* have shifted to align with the life trajectories of the women. It is imperative to understand not only how media portray class, but also how media representations of class shift over time. As Kendall (2005) argued before me, we use these frames as mental shortcuts for when we think about the wealthy, which is connected to bigger issues about inequality and social stratification.

She argued that, media messages about the rich, such as “the wealthy are more powerful and somehow better than other people” influence people’s views about the wealthy and also more importantly, about the poor (Kendall, 2005, p. 59). These frames help us think about these things, and can involuntarily or voluntarily inform our (in)action with these issues. All of this generates an ideological message behind the media frames at play on *RH*, which will be addressed in the Discussion chapter.

4.2.9 **RQ 1: Summary**

This section answered research question one: how are the women of *RH* framed on the series? I conducted a frame analysis that focused on a postfeminist sensibility and subsequent ideas of class. The frame analysis studied each of the seven *RH* series in the U.S. over time and identifies media representations of class and other intersectional components of identity, like race and gender. The frame analysis shows the women are framed five ways: 1) Postfeminist Nirvana, 2) The Bling Frame, 3) The Hustler Frame, 4) The “Maybe we are white trash” Frame, and 5) The “You’re a hypocrite” Frame. Each woman is framed according to a combination of these techniques, with some frames evoked more or less depending on the individual. Each frame is defined through examples from the analysis. Then I moved to discussion of how class (and race and gender) is communicated on each *RH* series. There I noted regional differences and similarities across series, finding the frames and the resulting ultra-feminized, class-based media representations of these women obscure race as an important aspect of some women’s identities.

From there I analyzed positioning and the power of distinctions using Bourdieusian concepts related to field theory and capital. I was able to take the frames and analyze how each individual woman is framed to fill one of five general roles: 1) the alpha 2) the rich bitch 3) the peacemaker 4) The tragic carnival-esque character and 5) the con. These roles represent different

ideas about people's position in the American class hierarchy, catering to class ambivalence. The frame analysis gives evidence to the main argument of this dissertation, that *RH* trades on class ambivalence and resentment by framing the women on the show in line with the public's ambivalent attitudes about class, and attempts to reconcile the audience to their own status through the use of irony, resentment, and schadenfreude.

From this section, I moved to discuss how the frames have changed over an eleven-year period. Here I showed how the prevalence of the *Bling Frame* remained consistent, how the *Hustler Frame* and the meta-frame of *Postfeminist Nirvana* have adjusted to the life trajectories of the women themselves, and how the behavior frame, *maybe we are white trash* and the *Hypocrite Frame*, have been amplified with dramatic incantations over time and become more contrived. I also discuss how newer frames have emerged, like the *Charitable Frame*, as an attempt to depict the women more positively. Noting changes over time revealed how these frames can be invoked over different social, cultural, and political moments, enabling a better understanding of how cultural arrangements inform media representations of class.

Finally, through each section, it is shown that producers frame the women to emphasize certain aspects of their lives and deemphasize other aspects. However, over time a reciprocal relationship has occurred where the women themselves have learned to modify their performances according to producer tactics, but also the frames themselves have evolved according to the women's lives. The frame analysis of *RH* reveals that the branded-self on RTV is comprised primarily of producer framing techniques, but also concocted by the women playing to production's frames. This means the women are being particular about what they present about the self. This presentation is based on an amplified, highly-emotional, self-exploited performance of the branded-self formulated through producer framing tactics. This presentation

of self, as it is argued next, leads to greater generation of capital outside of the series, and is representative of a specific type of labor I call *emotional camping*. Emotional camping will make more sense in the next section, which will answer research question two: how do the women frame the branded-self on IG? The analysis will note distinctions between the branded-self on RTV and the branded-self on social media.

4.3 **RQ 2: How do the Women of *RH* Frame the Branded-Self on Instagram?**

To answer research question two, I conducted a discourse analysis of select women's IG accounts. Using a social linguistic approach, this discourse analysis aimed to show how the women's use of language and visuals on IG accomplished the branded-self. Methodologically speaking, this textual discourse analysis enabled an understanding of the ideologies, narratives, and discourses put forth by the women on this media and what they communicate about class, (and gender and race). This discourse analysis reveals an overall aesthetic of the branded-self online, which is curated on IG through a variety of posts that depict the women's: 1) *interpersonal relationships*, 2) *IG hustle*, 3) *charitable endeavors*, 4) *empowerment advocacy*, and 5) displays of *capital*.

As argued throughout this dissertation, the dynamics of the branded-self change depending on the platform. As demonstrated in the findings from research question one, the branded-self curated on RTV serves as a mini-brand extension of the network, with the individual "branded-self" acting as a promotional object for the network. The women of *RH* on the series are edited and perform according to production aims. This section reveals what happens if, when, and how the women enact agency in identity work on social media.

Following next is a rationale of the select women and the IG accounts studied for this question. From there, I explicate on Fairclough's (2003) multi-functional view of texts (*action*,

representation, and *identification*) used for coding the women's IG posts. There I analyze the *action* behind the IG posts, then I analyze *representations* of class, gender, and race in the branded-self on IG. After that, I analyze the posts in terms of *identification* using Bourdieu to show how the women enact agency on IG. This analysis segues into the last section which discusses self-exploitation and emotional camping as pathways to agency.

4.3.1 **Select *RH* Women on Instagram**

RH and the Bravo TV network have a close relationship with social media. Research on *RH* has shown that social media engagement between fans and the women of *RH* is integral to viewership (Henshell, 2011). The Bravo TV network capitalizes on this fact; in 2012 Bravo started airing “social editions” of its RTV programs. “Social editions” come together when fans and the women of *RH* themselves comment and interact with each other via Twitter and Facebook as the episode airs. The best, most popular comments will then appear at the bottom of people's viewing screens during the “social edition,” which will air before the newer episode of *RH* that week. Facebook and Twitter are not the only avenues through which fans engage with *RH* and the women specifically. Snapchat and Instagram are fast becoming the mediums through which fans formulate para-social relationships with cast members. This means Bravo has an extended reach to fans of different demographics who can participate via their preferred social media platforms. The symbiotic relationship between viewing the series and participating on a multitude of social media platforms is part of the “Bravo experience.” This “experience” includes programming content, but also importantly, online participation that keeps viewers engaged with Bravo and “bravolebrities” after the program has ended (Cox, 2015).

Cast members or “bravolebrities” often participate across various social media platforms. As a fan of *RH* and as someone who participates online, the women's use of IG appears to be

eclipsing their use of Twitter. Among personal posts, the women often promote the series, the network itself, and projects affiliated with NBC Universal. Some women have curated an impressive social media following and online branded image. Since the women are obligated to participate on social media, the branded image portrayed online likely borrows from the image seen on RTV. However, as argued here, the dynamics of the branded-self can change depending on the platform if platforms are viewed as “performative infrastructures” that shape the way we communicate identity (Beer, 2009; Gillespie, 2010; van Dijck, 2012). It is imperative to analyze the branded-self across platforms to see if/how/when the women enact agency in identity construction outside the confines of RTV producers.

Select women from *RH* were analyzed on IG, a space often used by celebrities because of its visual orientation. Two women from each series were selected for the IG analysis, for a total of 14 accounts. The women were chosen primarily because they have a strong following. Other women were chosen because they have tenure on their respective series, and some because they had a polarizing storyline. This often presses the women to speak out on social media.

These women’s IG accounts are similar to each other in that they post about their respective series, products related to their own branding endeavors, use specific hashtags unique to their persona, and of course post ads for products specific to the IG platform (which is part of the women’s *IG hustle*). Where they become distinct is in the types of capital displayed online and the personas they display. There appears to be a neat divide between the women who are more interactive with fans than others. These same women tend to be more playful on social media, and often present as *walking GIFs*. The other half, mostly those who occupy the role of the *alpha*, appear to be business oriented. These distinctions and similarities will be discussed shortly.

The women analyzed for this research were: Siggy Flicker and Teresa Guidice (*RHONJ*); Luann de Lesseps and Sonja Morgan (*RHNYC*); Lisa Vanderpump and Lisa Rinna (*RHOBH*); Leanne Locken and Brandi Redmond (*RHOD*); Ashely Darby and Karen Huger (*RHOP*); Nene Leakes and Kenya Moore (*RHOA*); and Vicki Gunvalson and Shannon Beador (*RHOC*). See **Appendix B** for additional information on the women's accounts, including bios, followers, and the time frame of the "in-season" posts analyzed here. Following next is a more detailed analysis of the five categories determined in this analysis that compose the gestalt image of the women's online branded personas.

4.3.2 **Action: Behind the IG Posts**

Published texts, like IG posts, are open to diverse interpretations and can figure into various processes of meaning-making (Fairclough, 2003, p. 11). Fairclough specifies that this meaning-making depends not only on what is explicit in a text but also what is implicit, or what is assumed (2003, p. 11). According to Fairclough, there are three types of text meaning: *action*, *representation*, and *identification*. These three meanings have a dialectical relationship and the women's IG posts were analyzed in accordance with these three aspects of meaning.

Action references the action behind the post, it asks the researcher to identify the meaning behind why the women posted that content to IG. Most of the women of *RH* post to IG to promote a product, the show itself, to directly call out people on the show, to defend themselves against a bad edit, and to display connections and capital. This should sound familiar, because in analyzing the action behind each post, I was able to sort each post into the following categories: *interpersonal relationships*, *IG hustle*, *charitable endeavors*, *empowerment advocacy*, and *capital*.

Posts categorized into *interpersonal relationships* show the women with friends, family, and significant others. *Charitable endeavors* feature posts that depict the charity work the women participate in. Posts categorized into *empowerment advocacy* are those that purport popular ideas related to feminism mostly in the form of motivational quotes. Posts categorized under *capital* display the different kinds of economic, social, and cultural capital of the women. Most posts sorted into *capital* explicitly discuss travel, location, depict the women with famous friends, or emulate the *bling frame*.

Finally, posts categorized into *IG hustle* are posts that depict the women promoting a product. This category was further siphoned off into three categories: (i) *explicit branding*, which are posts that relate directly to the women's own business/brand endeavors. If a woman posted about her book, her wine, clothing line, or perfume, that would be categorized under *explicit branding*. Secondly, these women use IG not only to promote themselves and the series, but to make additional income by posting about products they have sponsorship deals with. *IG hustle* is also composed of sponsored content or (ii) *other product endorsements*, which can be any product or business these women promote on IG. I prefer the phrase *other product endorsements* to sponsored content because the women are not always explicit about what is actual #sponcon and what is free publicity (in spite of IG's rules). The third component of IG hustle include network promotions for Bravo and/or NBC Universal. (iii) *Bravo promotions* are posts that are intended to promote the latest episode of *RH* or some other Bravo product. In all, *IG hustle* recognizes the *action* of promoting, and encapsulates all of these different types of promotions (i) *explicit branding*, (ii) *other product endorsements*, and (iii) *Bravo promotions*.

Explicit branding is the most essential component of *IG hustle* because it plays a huge role in the overall gestalt branded-image of these women online. *Bravo promotions* and *other*

product endorsements are prevalent on the women's accounts but are part and parcel of being a reality star on IG. These categories are not, I argue, a part of the singular image of the branded-self of each woman on IG, they are simply a reality of the labor involved in participating on this platform for economic gain. Overall, these five main categories represent the primary *action* behind the essential posts that compose the branded-self on IG. The next two types of text meaning require deeper analysis of the women's IG posts.

Representation references different ways of representing the branded-self on IG. The branded-self on IG, as revealed here, represents specific ideas about class, gender, and race. Capital, class consciousness, and traditional ideas of gender guided the discourse analysis of the representation of the branded-self. How gender, race, and class are represented in the branded-selves on IG will be discussed in the next section, at length.

Identification refers to evaluations or judgments made in an IG post. Identification as a type of text meaning brings, "what Bourdieu calls the habitus of the persons involved in the event into consideration in text analysis, i.e. their embodied dispositions to see and act in certain ways based upon socialization and experience, which is partly dispositions to talk and write in certain ways" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 29). The judgments, distinctions, or identifications the women make in their IG posts are based on the way they act and represent themselves.

The analysis shows that these women's backgrounds, (i.e. aspects of their intersectional identities and habitus) inform what they talk about, post about, and write about on IG. This also means that the things they post on IG can allude to the power and agency they have on social media. For instance, some women posted what I call here, "call outs" which are posts that directly address editing and/or issues with the other women. Some of these women appear to have more room to post call outs, while others, Siggy Flicker and Kenya Moore in particular,

two women who were very vocal on IG with *call outs*, were let go after their respective season aired. This will be discussed at length in the section dedicated to *identification*.

In all, analyzing the women's IG presence in terms of *action*, *representation*, and *identification* enables me to talk about not only what they post and communicate on IG, but why they might be posting, and how they represent the branded-self when they have more control over its image. These women communicate a branded-self on IG that is similar yet distinct from the branded-self purported by producers on the series. This analysis is focused on highlighting those distinctions while also understanding that the postfeminist ideal and the Bravolebrity brand component shape the women's IG aesthetic and overall branded image online. Adhering to the *Postfeminist Nirvana* frame and Bravolebrity identity enables greater generation of capital for the women outside the series.

4.3.3 **Representation: Class, Gender, Race and the Branded-Self on IG**

As discussed in the previous section, this discourse analysis of the women's IG accounts revealed that the *action* behind the women's posts can be generally sorted into the following categories: 1) *interpersonal relationships*, 2) *IG hustle*, 3) *charitable endeavors*, 4) *empowerment advocacy*, 5) *displays of capital*. On the whole, this is how the women of *RH* curate and represent the branded-self on IG. These categories are not exhaustive or exclusive, and purport a gestalt branded-image that depicts the multidimensionality of these women's lives. Above anything, the branded-self on IG is framed to show that they are good mothers/wives/friends/daughters/sisters who work hard, lift other women up, and use their capital for good. In other words, the branded-self on IG is similar to the women on the series, but distinct in that *charitable endeavors* and *empowerment advocacy* are amplified, without the irony to depict them as idiots, hypocrites, or liars. IG is a space where these women can set their own frame, earn

additional income via *IG hustle*, and where they acknowledge how #blessed they are. This section analyzes representations of class (and gender and race) in the branded-self on IG and shows examples of IG posts that align with each category.

Representations of Gender and the Branded-Self on IG

The women of *RH* on IG purport a highly feminized aesthetic which in turn works to confirm ideal standards of beauty, dominant ideas about gender, and also promotes popular ideas about feminism (or post-feminist ideas). With this, *Postfeminist Nirvana*, or the meta-frame used by producers and editors of *RH*, is fully present on the IG platform and informs much of what followers see of the women on IG. *Postfeminist Nirvana* on IG is usually evoked by the women in posts that depict their *interpersonal relationships*, *empowerment advocacy*, *product endorsements*, *capital*, and culminates most completely in posts that are captioned “#Blessed.”

Figure 1 features Teresa Guidice from *RHONJ* and her four daughters. This is an example of a picture that could be categorized into *interpersonal relationships*. Keep in mind, these categories are not exhaustive or exclusive, they simply represent the most basic *Action* behind the post. Here we have Guidice depicting her familial connections, showing her dedication to motherhood. The visual image is representative of a highly feminized gendered aesthetic. Guidice and her daughters are dressed in tight, feminine clothing, designed to accentuate particular body features. They are all glamorized by makeup, and Guidice herself with hair extensions to amplify traditionally feminine ideals of beauty, (i.e. long hair, long legs, long lashes, form fitted clothing.).

Figure 1

Teresa Guidice (*RHONJ*) with her four daughters, *interpersonal relationships*.



Figure 2 features Kenya Moore (*RHOA*). Moore has been a long-time villain of *RHOA*, and for much of her tenure on the series has been a single woman. The visual elements of this picture depict a smiling Moore with her new husband, showing her as a ‘happy wife.’ The caption extends this idea, saying that Moore now feels not only a sense of completeness, but a sense that she has it all because there is a man in her life. Moore wears the title of wife proudly in the form of “Mrs. Daly”, as depicted by the use of the hashtag #ThatsMrsDalyToYou at the end of the post. She is no longer defined by herself, but by her relationship with her husband.

Figure 2

Kenya Moore (*RHOA*), with her husband, *interpersonal relationships*.



Figure 3 is an example of *empowerment advocacy* posted by LeeAnne Locken from *RHOD*. The empowerment quote is a popular fixture of social media, and here it is used in accordance with hashtags that are associated with daily motivational trajectories, (i.e. #MondayMotivation). A simple example of platform capitalism, this type of post generates exposure in the attention economy of IG. The hashtags garner huge views and play into popular narratives about self-help, transformation, and popular feminism. This post advocates variations

of “choice” four times, either in the post itself, in the caption, or the use of hashtags. “Choice” is an essential component of a postfeminist sensibility, aligning neatly with neoliberal political arrangements and an “empowered” ideal-self (Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2009).

Figure 3

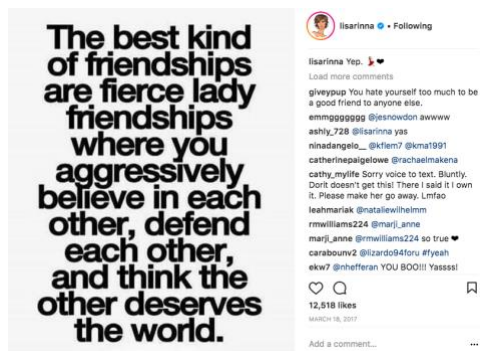
Leeanne Locken (RHOD) *empowerment advocacy* post



Figure 4 is another example of *empowerment advocacy*. Here Lisa Rinna from *RHOBH* posts a quote about “fierce lady friendships” where women “believe in each other” and “defend each other.” Women defending women tends to be subverted on *RH* given the amplification of drama between them. This is one way Rinna changes the frame, by advocating for women to work together.

Figure 4

Lisa Rinna (RHOBH) *empowerment advocacy* post



Other ways that gender is represented on the women’s IG accounts is through posts that depict their love of fashion. *Figure 5* features Sonja Morgan (*RHNYC*). In this post, she has

added text to the selfie image that reads, “Oscar de la Renta,” letting fans know explicitly, without having to click on the tag, that her outfit is by the famous designer. The up-shot angle of the selfie also depicts Sonja as “above” her audience. *Figure 6* shows a look inside LuAnn de Lesseps’s (*RHNYC*) closet. The caption reveals that this post is likely part of a sponsorship deal de Lessep’s has with professional home organizing company, Done and Done Home, and the luxury consignment shop, The Real Real. These posts are both cross-listed with *other product endorsements* and *capital* because they not only promote companies, but also demonstrate that the women have the economic capital necessary to purchase designer goods. This in turn promotes a popular feminized ideal: women are empowered by the acquisition of consumer goods and access to high fashion.

Figure 5

Sonja Morgan (*RHNYC*) *capital* post



Figure 6

LuAnn de Lesseps (*RHNYC*) *capital* post



Gender is also communicated on IG via other types of product endorsements and sponsorships. Once a woman becomes a *RH* she will soon endorse products like Diff Eyewear and Sneaky Vaunt bras, or weight loss products like Flat Tummy Tea, Teami Tea, 310 Nutrition Shakes, Leaner Creamer, and subscription boxes of products like Fab Fit Fun. These types of *other product endorsements* refer to retail and fitness promotional sponsorships that are seemingly specific to the IG platform. Not only is this a way for the women of *RH* to make additional income, but these products also contribute to an overall gendered message put forth on IG. These diet products and retail subscriptions promote a traditionally feminine idea about what it means to be women – that women are to diet and aspire to a slim ideal body-type and glean not only enjoyment, but empowerment through these types of products. *Figure 7* is an example of these types of posts. These types of posts also reference the women’s “IG-hustle” or the other avenue through which they achieve greater generation of economic capital apart from the series.

Figure 7

Karen Huger (RHOP), showing her IG Hustle, *other product endorsements*.



Finally, *Figure 8* (and *Figure 1*) depict women using the hashtag *#blessed*. The use of this hashtag becomes gendered in the field of *RH*. Posts captioned *#blessed* often include pictures of *interpersonal relationships* or a sunset on a vacation with captions that express gratitude for perfect and ‘blessed’ lives. I argue here that is one way the women acknowledge that they “have it all.” In communicating how blessed they are, the women are acknowledging the *postfeminist nirvana* frame from the series, or this idea that they “have it all,” which makes them “blessed.”

Figure 8

Sonja Morgan (RHNYC), *#Blessed*



Overall, representations of gender in the branded-self on IG communicate a gestalt image characterized by a highly feminized *Housewives* aesthetic, which confirms ideal standards of beauty and dominant ideas about gender. This image also promotes popular post-feminist ideas, (i.e., that these women are empowered by choice, IG hustle, and through relationships with men as much as with women). *Postfeminist Nirvana*, or the meta-frame evoked on the *RH* series, informs much of what followers see of the women on IG. This gendered ideal is evoked in a variety of posts depicting the women’s *interpersonal relationships*, *empowerment advocacy*, their IG Hustle, *capital*, and again culminates most completely in posts that are captioned “*#Blessed*.” A hashtag that seemingly acknowledges that these women have it all.

Representations of Race and the Branded-Self on IG

Race becomes a more talked about component of the women's identity work on IG as opposed to the series. As discussed above, gender is represented through the branded-self on IG by borrowing ideas informed by *postfeminist nirvana*. This frame is representative of a particular idea of womanhood that works for some – i.e., white, middle-class, women – who have the power and autonomy to choose to enact all of the choices that will empower them economically and socially. This meta-frame obfuscates how race and ethnicity affect the types of choices people get to choose from or the level of agency people have in choosing their choices. This elides many of the experiences of the Black women in this franchise. As discussed in the frame analysis section, the women of *RHOA* and *RHOP* are framed similarly to the white women in other series, which from a production standpoint means the series does not highlight different women's experiences and treats everyone to the same meta-frame. It is the women themselves who call up race on the series.

Given this, race becomes a more celebrated component of certain women's identities online because social media is where people tend to negotiate and express agency in their own identity construction (boyd, 2014). On IG, the women's Black identity is explicitly celebrated through particular hashtags (#BlackExcellence, #BlackGirlMagic, #TheYoungBlackSuccessful). *Figures 9, 10, and 11* are some examples depicting the use of these hashtags.

Figure 9

Nene Leakes (*RHOA*) with her husband, showing social *capital* at Diddy's NYE party.



Figure 10

Kenya Moore (*RHOA*), Bravo promotions.



Figure 11

Karen Huger (*RHOP*) displaying social capital.



Another way the women's Black identity is emphasized on IG is with posts celebrating prominent Black figures. *Figures 12 and 13* are celebratory posts by *RHOA* stars Nene and Kenya, dedicated to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Maya Angelou. *Figure 14* is a MLK post from *RHNYC* star, LuAnn de Lesseps, who like many of the *RH* women on MLK day, posted a faceless image celebrating the day with little in the caption. Arguably these types of posts obliterate the racist history behind MLK Jr's call to action by focusing on quotes that do not concretely discuss the actual meaning of the day. The innocuous quote, "the time is always right to do what is right" captioned in LuAnn's post, coupled with the image that does not depict the race of the man who said it, makes this a safe way for LuAnn to be political. Given the comment from a

Trump supporter (see *Figure 14*), perhaps LuAnn feels pressure from her followers to be apolitical.

In contrast, the *RHOA* women directly address the immediate impact of the day on their identity, showing an image of his face. There are no comments from Trump supporters on Nene or Kenya's posts, like LuAnn's. This can be analyzed in a multitude of ways, but it is arguably likely that people who follow *RHOA* would not bring Trump, a president with many white supremacist friends, into the comment forum. Overall, the women of *RHOA* and *RHOP* can use IG to celebrate their Black identity in ways the series does not.

Figure 12

Nene Leakes (*RHOA*) celebratory Maya Angelou post.



Figure 13

Kenya Moore (*RHOA*) celebrating MLK day.



Figure 14

LuAnn de Lesseps (*RHNYC*) celebrating MLK day.



The implications of the women's racial identity are highlighted by the types of charities the women support across series on IG. For instance, the charities the women of *RHOA* and *RHOP* advocate for call up important issues in the Black community. *Figures 16* and *17* depict the *charitable endeavors* of Kenya and Ashley Darby (*RHOP*), advocating against domestic violence and gun violence, respectively.

Established feminist scholarship has shown that domestic violence can be attributed to socially constructed gender inequity that has been culturally approved (Yllo, 1993; Sokoloff and Dupont, 2005). However, intersectional analysis is necessary for studying how domestic violence impacts women. Such analysis removes gender from the center of understanding domestic violence, and aims to make room for the nuanced ways race, class, and place impact marginalized women who have been abused (Sokoloff and Dupont, 2005). At the time of writing, one in three women in the U.S. have experienced a form of intimate partner violence.¹⁰ While domestic violence happens to women of diverse backgrounds, a disproportionate number of Black women have been abused by intimate partners.

Figure 15 is a post from Kenya's IG and features her with the entire season 10 cast of *RHOA*. Each woman participated in Kenya's domestic violence public service announcement because they could speak from experience. The filming of the PSA was captured for *RHOA*

¹⁰ Statistic from the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, [NCADV](https://www.ncadv.org/), 2019.

cameras and interwoven into Kenya's story for the season. The PSA, and this post demonstrate the struggles these women have faced. They also give their stories both a sense of commonality within *RHOA*, but also uniqueness to the *RH* franchise. Ashley's charity-centered IG post (*Figure 16*) for her work with Pride Fund to end gun violence calls up a similar trajectory. While gun violence is a fast-growing epidemic in the U.S., in 2015, the NAACP reported that roughly 50% of gun related deaths in the U.S. were African American men. Gun violence and domestic violence affect people of all backgrounds, but they affect a disproportionate number of African American people. These women's *charitable endeavors* reflect how race has intersected with their personal experiences.

In contrast, Lisa Vanderpump's (*RHOBH*) IG consisted of posts that could be categorized into *charitable endeavors* more than any other woman on *RH*. While Lisa supports the LGBTQ community, as do many of the other women (see *Figure 17*), most of her charity work centers on finding homes for stray dogs (see *Figure 18*). Her animal advocacy is impressive and admirable. However, there is a sense of privilege that comes with the types of charities certain women can choose to devote their time. Domestic violence and gun violence may be more immediate and urgent for the women of color in this franchise than the white women. Due to that immediacy, these women do not have another choice, but rather feel called on to support these types of charities. In short, Lisa's charitable endeavors point to a privileged background.

Figure 15

Kenya Moore (*RHOA*) *charitable endeavors* post.



Figure 16

Ashley Boalch Darby (*RHOP*) charitable endeavors post.



Figure 17

LeeAnne Locken (*RHOD*) charitable endeavors post.



Figure 18

Lisa Vanderpump (*RHOBH*) charitable endeavors post.



Lastly, all of the women can use IG to redirect their narrative. IG gives women like Nene a platform to set her story straight by highlighting the struggles she faced in her early life. *Figure 18* does not overtly discuss race, but it does call up certain experiences that impact a disproportionate number of African-American women. On IG, Nene can share her framed experiences (as opposed to being subject to production's frames). *Figure 19* features an image of Nene in Swag Boutique, her retail shop, posed casually in front of a camera, wearing a shirt that is for sale at Swag. The shirt has Nene's mugshot on the front. The caption is implicitly about the time she was arrested at 25 years old for "theft of services." In the caption, she discusses how she grew up without parents, and is not defined by her past behavior or circumstances. At 25, Nene was a single mom and exotic dancer. She was arrested for not paying her phone bill and three times after that for violating probation. These facts came out about Nene circa season 6 of *RHOA* (2014). She had never addressed them on the series, but *Us Weekly* outed her and Nene was forced to address it, albeit briefly on the series. Nene's past is shaped by a host of things, race being one of them, single motherhood being another. IG is used here as a means to reshape her story and also capitalize on the mugshot by selling it on a t-shirt. This is a prime example of *explicit branding*, and one that foregrounds her unique (to *RH*) intersectional experience as a poor, young, Black, single mom.

Figure 19

Nene Leaks (*RHOA*), *explicit branding*.



Overall, race is a more salient and celebrated component of the women's identity work on IG than on the series. Representations of race are depicted through the use of celebratory hashtags and posts dedicated to African American figures in society, the women's charitable endeavors, and the stories shared and re-shaped by the women themselves on IG. Race relations on *RHOA* will be discussed in detail in the section on *call outs* and agency. Following next is the analysis of representations of class on IG.

Representations of Class and the Branded-Self on IG

On IG, the women of *RH* post images and captions that depict their economic, social, and cultural capital. Often the women will post pictures that show them enjoying leisure time, travelling, and attending events. Their use of location tags with certain posts also emphasize the different intersections of their capital. In the frame analysis section, three frames (the *Bling Frame*, the *Behavior* frame, and the *Hustler* frame) are discussed in relation to the series' depiction of social class. On IG, each of these frames are present as well. Aside from the *Bling Frame*, these frames are evoked by the women in distinct ways apart from the series. The *Bling Frame* is present, sometimes even amplified on the women's IG, usually in posts that show the women's recent purchases, home and closet interiors, accessories, travel and transportation modes. *Figures 20 - 23* provide varied examples of this.

Figure 20 features Sonja Morgan from *RHNYC* after a night out in St. Tropez with friends. In the picture, she is posed purposefully with Chanel purse in plain sight, using

#SouthofFrance to caption the post. This is an example of the intersections of her social, cultural, and economic capital. *Figures 21, 22, 23* are other examples of the “bling frame” as overtly depicted on IG; *Figure 21* features an image of Karen Huger’s (*RHOP*) couture pieces arranged at her vanity, and *Figure 22* features Vicki Gunvalson’s (*RHOC*) jewel encrusted boots. *Figure 23* featuring Lisa Rinna (*RHOBH*) ironically pays direct homage to the *Bling Frame*.

Figure 24 is an example of how the women convey capital via location tags on IG. The women of *RHNYC* and *RHOBH* utilized location tags more than women from other franchises. These women live in cities on the coasts, in well-known, affluent areas, where location matters and signals ideas about status, position, and capital. *Figure 24* features an understated image of LuAnn and her family, with a caption explaining that she’s celebrating Mother’s Day. This is an example of both *interpersonal relations* and *capital*, due to the use of the location tag that signals to followers LuAnn is at her Mom’s on the Upper East Side of New York City.

In addition to using location tags to signal capital, the women of *RHNYC* tend to display capital differently on the whole from the other women. For instance, in the examples below, it should be noted that Sonja and LuAnn (*RHNYC*) depict capital by way of location, travel/leisure, while Karen (*RHOP*) and Vicki (*RHOC*) evoke the money shot – or the *Bling Frame* on their IG. Rinna’s post is ironic in that she is amplifying her image to correspond directly to the *Bling frame*. This is not to say that the women in NYC do not evoke the *Bling frame*, it is only that they do so less conspicuously than the other women. Vicki and Karen happen to be the *Alphas* of their respective series and therefore the “hard-workers.” They would be more likely to depict wealth via material goods rather than cultural location or travel or leisure, like Sonja and LuAnn, both of whom play variations of the old-money, wealthy *Rich Bitch* on *RHNYC*.

Figure 20

Sonja Morgan (*RHNYC*), intersections of social, cultural, economic *capital*.



Figure 21

Karen Huger (*RHOP*) depiction of *capital* via material goods.



Figure 22

Vicki Gunvalson (*RHOC*) depiction of *capital* via material goods.



Figure 23

Lisa Rinna (*RHOBH*), *capital*, overt homage to the series' *Bling Frame*.



Figure 24

LuAnn de Lesseps (*RHNYC*) capital and interpersonal relationships.



Another way the women display capital differently is in the connections they display on IG. The women can display connections more conspicuously on social media than on the series because when they are filming they often are only shown on screen with other cast members. While important connections can be shown on the series, the women have more freedom to display important people in their lives, outside of the show, on IG. Some of the connections (capital) they display are separate from *interpersonal relationships*, or could be cross listed into both categories.

For instance, *Figure 25* of Rinna (*RHOBH*) and rapper Nicki Minaj displays Rinna's social and celebrity capital. This image represents her access to celebrity culture living in Beverly Hills. *Figure 26* features Sonja Morgan's (*RHNYC*) former boyfriend, "Frenchie" with the President of France, Emmanuel Macron. This post enables Sonja to display distant political connections. The women of *RHNYC* have infamously discussed their political connections, and

posts like this signal much about their status and place in New York society and beyond. In this way, IG enhances the Beverly Hills women's celebrity connections and the New York women's politically oriented connections. In other cities, like Dallas, the women display connections that they have within the *RH* franchise as a means to promote their own social capital. *Figure 27* shows *RHOD* star, Brandi Redmond with a fellow Bravolebrity from *RHONJ*. This was the highest status social connection displayed on IG among the women of *RHOD*, and demonstrates differences in displays of social capital among women who live in particular cities.

Figure 25

Lisa Rinna (RHOBH), with Nicki Minaj, *social capital*.



Figure 26

Sonja Morgan's (RHNYC) friend with President Macron, *social capital*.



Figure 27

Brandi Redmond (RHOD), with Bravolebrity, *social capital*.



In terms of labor and class, the *Hustler frame* on the series was evoked when the women were shown at work or talking about work. On IG, the *Hustler frame* is viewed through the women's "IG hustle" which consists of their own *explicit branding* posts but also other *product endorsement* posts for retail and fitness sponsorships that appear to be specific to the IG platform. Both types depict work/labor performed by the women on IG. Some women post to IG about their brand or post sponsored content (#sponcon) more than others. This could be a tell-tale sign of the women who have to work harder to keep up appearances versus those who do not. In this way, *IG hustle* becomes another way to keep up appearances on the show. This form of labor specific to the IG platform is a way some of these women can transcend their social class and maintain their status for the series. Women who do so, are likely in more precarious positions both on the series and in real life.

For example, aside from *interpersonal relationships*, Teresa Guidice's (*RHONJ*) IG image is primarily curated through posts that depict her *IG hustle*, as most of her posts were categorized into *explicit branding* and *other product endorsements*. It is no secret that Teresa is in financial trouble. At the time of data collection, season eight of *RHONJ* was airing (January 2018), which showed Teresa getting home and re-adjusting to life after her time in prison for financial crimes. She posted 375 pictures throughout the season and a majority of these posts could be categorized to show her IG hustle. *Figures 28 and 29* are examples of her *explicit branding*, (a promotion for the book she published about her time in prison), and her other

product endorsements for brands specific to the IG platform. Most people on IG get paid a flat fee for each sponsored post. Reality stars reportedly can command up to 10,000 dollars for a single sponsored post.¹¹ The Kardashians are in a class themselves, but women of *RH* would likely fall in line with contestants from *The Bachelor* who receive anywhere from one thousand to ten thousand dollars a post, depending on follower count.

Figure 28

Teresa Giudice (RHONJ) explicit branding, book promotion.



Figure 29

Teresa Giudice's (RHONJ) IG Hustle and *other product endorsements*.



The women's *IG hustle* conjures up not only an idea about the women's actual economic standing (based on some women having to *hustle* harder than others) but also, importantly, their

¹¹ Amy Kaufman, 2018, "Bachelor Nation."

IG hustle conjures up ideas about the women’s classed backgrounds. For instance, LuAnn de Lesseps is known on *RHNYC* for being a countess who values social etiquette. In 2010 LuAnn released a pop song, titled “money can’t you buy class,” with the lyrics “elegance is learned” repeating throughout the chorus. LuAnn’s IG featured more posts coded into *capital* and *Bravo* *promotions* than Teresa’s, which featured more posts coded into *explicit branding* and *other product endorsements* over any other type of post.

Analytically speaking this means Teresa, in obvious financial distress, must promote on IG and promote other products more than LuAnn, who can at her leisure promote products associated with the *RH* image. *Figure 30* is a post that depicts a sponsorship deal LuAnn has with VIP Swag, a branding and promotions company that aims to get people and brands more exposure. LuAnn’s *explicit branding* is more focused on ironic class-based distinctions, which offers a reading into her own personal background that she is overtly capitalizing on for the series and her own economic standing. This type of class-based branding is not something Teresa could do, given her own background.

Figure 30

LuAnn de Lesseps (RHNYC) *explicit branding*.



Finally, it should be noted that the other class-based frame from the series, the *Behavior frame* is evoked in a multitude of ways that relate to the *action* behind the post, and the ways the

women represent aspects of their identity. However, this frame becomes more salient or understandable in the *call out* posts that will be analyzed in the next section. These posts do not necessarily compose the gestalt branded image of the women online, rather they reference a woman's position on the series, which plays into representations of class. Therefore, the discussion of class on IG will be continued next. For now, class is *represented* on IG via the depiction of the women's economic, social, and cultural capital. These displays of capital vary by individual women, their location, and position. This means representations of class on IG are presented in a multitude of ways, playing into ambivalent ideas about social class. On the whole, the branded-self on IG is built on class ambivalence.

Moreover, these women have curated a similar image of the branded-self on IG. This means their representations of race, gender, and class matter for the overall online persona of *RH*. In fact, social media sites produce representations of certain practices and personas (Lingel, 2017, p. 107). Meaning that the women of *RH* might very well model their brand on an existing archetype, based on the branded-self we see on RTV, but also on the veteran *Housewives*' IGs. I would imagine, newer housewives use the veteran cast members' IG as a template for creating the branded-self on IG. Overall, these representations of class, gender, and race, show the women how to represent themselves. The women are also likely connecting across series on IG to share information. This is likely why these representations looked similar on a meta-level, and these ideas will likely be reproduced by future housewives' online.

In conclusion, the branded-self on IG evokes gendered and class-based representations of identity. The women curate the branded-self on IG by posting images and captions that play into traditional ideas about gender, purporting a highly feminized aesthetic. Embedded within the branded-self are varied class-based ideas of identity that come through in posts that depict 1) the

women's varied *capital* and 2) their *IG hustle*. There is more room on IG to play up certain parts of their identity that are not seen on the show as much. The women of *RHOA* and *RHOP* can celebrate their Black identity on social media and all of the women can emphasize their dedication to women's empowerment and charitable endeavors, which frames them more positively than the series' frames allow for.

4.3.4 **Identification: Power, Agency, Bourdieu and the Branded-Self on IG**

This section is dedicated to Fairclough's third type of text meaning: *identification*, which refers to an evaluation or judgment made in an IG post. Identification brings "the habitus of the persons involved in the event into consideration in text analysis;" this refers to the women's "embodied dispositions to see and act in certain ways based upon socialization and experience, which is partly dispositions to talk and write in certain ways" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 29). The judgments or identifications the women make on IG are therefore, according to Fairclough, based on the way they act out and represent the branded-self.

The branded-self is again, the "self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of the self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries" (Hearn, 2008, p. 164). The last section analyzed *representations* of class, race, and gender in the branded-self on IG. Depictions of capital, class consciousness, and traditional ideas of gender from the series organically guided the discourse analysis of the branded-self online. As the definition of branded-self puts forth, these women's personas are shaped by producers, so it makes sense that what we see of the women online is informed by production's framing of the branded-self.

As discussed in the literature review, in spite of the increasing influx of social media influencers, RTV is still considered "ground zero" for reproducing a branded-self online (Hearn,

2016, p. 10). This means that the representations of class on IG are highly gendered, working in accordance with the postfeminist sensibility evoked on the series, and with producer ideas as much as the women's own personal background, or habitus. Curating a branded-self on IG that aligns with the meta-image and meta-narrative of their branded persona on RTV is smart. This leads to greater generation of capital on social media and more economic gains for these women outside of the show.

First, the women who stay true to their brand on RTV gain an increasing number of followers each season. Secondly, those who acquire increasing followers will also receive more opportunities for *other product endorsements*/ sponsored content and *explicit branding*, which leads to more economic capital. This is likely why we see a similar ideal branded-self across women of *RH* on IG. A successful branded-self on IG brings about economic rewards that serve upward social mobility. However, this also means that the women themselves, as they move up the economic and social ladder, bring their ingrained, class-based dispositions to their newly acquired, higher status position on IG, blurring the boundaries of class further.

The way these women perform class, gender, race, and other aspects of their identity on *RH* and IG relates to their habitus, or disposition towards the world. The habitus is “necessity internalized” and then “converted into a disposition” which engenders “meaningful practices” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170). What the previous section on representation showed is that the field of *RH* has socialized the women into performing a branded-self that is informed by a postfeminist sensibility and ambivalent projections of social class. This is not all because of the field of *RH*, but also due to the women's classed backgrounds, which plays a role in how class is represented on IG. The women's personal displays of economic, social, and cultural capital vary by their location and position, both in their social world and in the field of *RH*. Representations of class

on IG are therefore variegated and play into our culturally ambivalent ideas about social class (i.e., that class is taste, class is displays of materialism, class is behavior, or class is origins). On the whole, the branded-self on IG is comprised of these uneven projections of social class – or class ambivalence – because of the women’s positions and habitus.

This section’s analysis shows that these women’s backgrounds, (i.e. aspects of their intersectional identities and habitus) inform what they talk about, post about, and write about on IG. The previous section’s analysis of *representations* of class on IG enables deeper analysis of the women’s positions (on the series and in the greater field of *RH*), because the things they post on IG can allude to the power and agency they have on social media. Power, agency, and positioning will be discussed in terms of which women have been successful at curating identities online that diverge from production and those that have been successful at aligning with production on IG. First is analysis of the women’s IG’s that have diverged from production. Afterwards, is an analysis of successful women on IG, (i.e., those who position themselves powerfully as “walking GIFs”). That section will segue into the final section of the discourse analysis of IG – which will discuss how to powerfully position the self on IG and the series by way of “emotional camping.”

4.3.5 **The identity work involved in diverging from production**

Women of *RH* take to social media to share their opinions on the episodes as they air. Many will live Tweet the episodes. Many more will take to IG because the platform affords the women more space to talk about the details of whatever incident they wish to address. Throughout the data collection for this discourse analysis, certain types of posts began to emerge that are not necessarily a part of the women’s overall branded-image, but rather a peak into their thought processes and position on the show. All women posted *Bravo promotions* or pictures that

hype up a new episode, the network, or some other related project for NBC Universal, but certain women posted what I call here, “call outs.” *Call outs* are posts that in/directly addressed production and editing or the women’s issues with the other women from the series.

With Fairclough’s (2003) textual discourse analysis, I was able to go beyond just a judgment and identify important aspects of the women’s position in the field of *RH*. These *call out* posts give away the women’s position and addresses things like agency and power, who has it, who does not, and who cares. Once more, *identification* refers to an evaluation or judgment made in an IG post and brings “the habitus of the persons involved in the event into consideration in text analysis” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 29). *Call outs* are the women’s way of offering their own evaluation or judgment on the episode/situation. This section will highlight three examples of IG *call out* scenarios that happened “in-season,” which feature the following women: Kenya Moore, Nene Leakes, and Kim Zolciak (*RHOA*) and Siggy Flicker (*RHONJ*).

The first scenario involving Kenya Moore details what happens when a woman refuses to show production (and viewers) a part of her life. The labor involved in being a part of *RH* is that these women must show it all to the cameras. When they fail to do so, serious repercussions, like being let of your contract, occur. This happened to Kenya Moore after season 10 of *RHOA* (November 5, 2017 to April 22, 2018). Kenya was a full-time main cast member of *RHOA* for seven seasons, from 2012 to 2018. Kenya had issues with a majority of the other women on the show. During filming for season 10, Kenya got married, but refused to let cameras film. Kenya married Marc, who had never appeared on the series. He became a comedic punchline on *RHOA* because the women did not believe he existed since he never appeared on camera. Season 10 premiered on November 5, 2017, and on the premier date Kenya posted this to her IG:

Figure 31

Kenya Moore (*RHOA*) *call out*.



The image in *Figure 31* is blurred because it is a video. The video is of her dancing at her wedding. The caption – as in most *call out* posts – has a lot of text. First, she writes, “my wedding was incredibly beautiful, intimate, and PRIVATE...that’s what we wanted. I married for love not for cameras.” This post was an attempt at two things: 1) to directly address confused viewers and 2) to appease production. First, this post acknowledges the questions raised to Kenya about getting secretly married in the first episode from the women and by producers in her interview segments. It was on IG that people were able to understand the details. Here Kenya is maintaining that her wedding was intimate and she did not want to let just anyone see it. (The irony of sharing videos from the event is a thing in itself). What is interesting here is that in her tenure on this RTV series, part of her story line has revolved around her talking about finding love and getting married. For her to not allow cameras at this big event is a huge statement, and one that upset production. In pre-production, the women will sit down with producers to discuss any upcoming events that might be good for story.¹² Knowing this, and knowing that Kenya did not allow cameras, means that she interfered with production’s creation of story. Remember, as discussed in the first section of the analysis of this dissertation, my interview with former field

¹² Per my interview with Jamie, March 2016, former field producer for Evolution Media (*RHOBH* and *RHOC*).

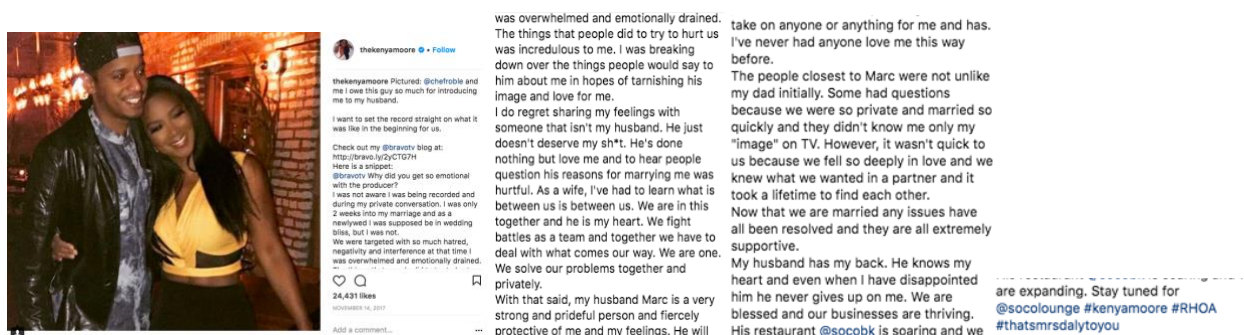
producer for *RHOC* and *RHOBH*, revealed that women who attempt to curate their own storylines “screw themselves” into receiving a bad edit.

Secondly, analytically speaking, her position was in jeopardy at the time of this IG post. Later in the caption she writes about how her and Marc want “to have a bigger wedding in June. I love my father...he will walk me down the aisle.” Arguably this statement reveals that this is Kenya’s way of letting producers know that in June, (during filming for the next *RHOA* season) she would have another ceremony. The subtext there is that this ceremony could be filmed. Given the timing of the post, her precarious relationship with producers, and the fact that the second ceremony would be during the filming of the next season, it was arguably intended to appease production.

To demonstrate further that Kenya was being punished with a bad edit is the following *call out* post in regard to another episode “in-season” on IG:

Figure 32

Kenya Moore (*RHOA*) *call out*.



It is important to note here that *call outs* can sometimes be indicated by the length of the post. In *Figure 32*, Kenya has posted a picture with the friend who introduced her to her husband. In this post, Kenya is addressing what viewers witnessed in an early episode of season 10. Kenya was faced with a barrage of criticism from the other women when they found out she got married

secretly. Kenya, at a breaking point, had an emotional talk with her producer on camera about her marriage. She wanted to protect Marc's privacy and she did not "want to get divorced." The scene frames Kenya's marriage as troubled. She took to IG to set the record straight. This public post, again, makes reference to the fact that the couple "solve[s] our problems together and privately." It also explains how she was "overwhelmed and emotionally drained." To combat the negative edit of her marriage, this post boasts about how "we are blessed and our businesses are thriving" and that as a couple they are "soaring and expanding." Defensive language like this helps characterize this post as a *call out*. Such language reframes the relationship positively to counter the damage of the negative edit from the series. This post is from November, when season ten was just beginning. The next figure shows that as time went on, Kenya became more upset and open about disliking the edit she was receiving on the show.

Figure 33

Kenya Moore (*RHOA*) *call out*.



In January 2018 Kenya's attitude shifted from being on the defense to being openly confrontational with production. In this post, Kenya addresses her behavior at a Habitat for Humanity gathering. In the companion episode, she was rude to cast member Shamea Morton. In that episode, Kenya was shown leaving a dinner scene and arguing with producers. There have only been a handful of times that production will "break the fourth wall" and show camera men on screen. The fact that they aired (and sliced together Kenya's confrontation with field

producers) speaks volumes about Kenya's relationship with production at that time. In this IG post, Kenya clarifies that she was really reacting to "the nonsense at the table you didn't see or hear," which was ultimately Shamea and the other women, "forcing a reaction and a scene for camera time." Kenya directly suggesting that the other women were plotting for storyline is a call-out of production. Producers framed the scene to favor Shamea, which made Kenya look erratic and upset about a non-issue.

Overall, Kenya had always been in a weaker position than other women on *RHOA*. She was never the *alpha*, she was never the *rich bitch*, she was there to play the fool. It did not help her position in the field of *RH* to deny cameras entry to her wedding. In the end, she was terminated. This move and these *call outs* likely jeopardized her contract. In fact, in an interview I conducted with Sam who worked for *Watch What Happens Live!* (WWHL), I received additional information about what happens when women attempt to secure their privacy.

In this interview from January 29, 2016, Sam said this about former *RHONJ* star Caroline Manzo: "producers started to dig deeper into their lives and they saw some stuff that the Manzo's probably didn't want them to know about their marriage. And I think that Caroline said if you release any of that information or talk about it for negative storylines, we're out of here..." I asked if that was the way the women negotiated their privacy, and Sam's response was:

Yes. Well there's a couple reasons why someone would leave. One is they're boring and they have no storyline. Or two, they have so much of a storyline that it comes too close to home and they don't want to do it anymore because they don't want these reveals happening. They don't want their skeletons coming out of the closet. So polar opposites. It's not like 'eh she has a good storyline, people like her, but we just want someone new.' Never that. It's either, you're boring, you're tired, no one wants you anymore. Like a

Kim Fields. Or something like Caroline where it's like they're digging, and they hit a nerve and she's pulling all her cards leaving. And then that's how they negotiate; 'well if you want me on the show, people like me, people are going to miss me, so I'll do it for x amount dollars but in return you can't talk about this story.'

Caroline left the show, which actually shows that she was not able to negotiate. It looks like the women of *RH* have little power over negotiations in general, but also specifically regarding affairs they would like to keep private. The scenario featuring Kenya provides a look into what happens when a cast member outsmarts production (as she did by getting married under the radar) and then is found out. They used footage of her, but showed her marriage in a mostly negative light and then let her go at the end of the season.

Other women, like Nene Leakes and Kim Zolciak of *RHOA* have a bit more room to enact agency with call-outs, and stay on the show.¹³ Nene and Kim have a sordid history on *RHOA*. They started season one as the best of friends but over ten seasons have become bitter enemies. To reiterate briefly what was discussed in the frame analysis section on *regional differences and race*, Kim is the only white woman to have been featured in a major role on *RHOA*. In that section I discussed how Kim (according to the other women of *RHOA*) tends to be favored by production. This favoritism is identified by the fact that network executives keep renewing her spinoff show *Don't Be Tardy*. Again, multiple women of *RHOA* have had Bravo spinoffs focusing on their individual lives, but Kim's is the only one that has lasted seven seasons (over half the time *RHOA* has been on the air).

¹³ At the time of writing, (March 2019) Nene developed a YouTube channel "Life of Nene" dedicated to giving her side of each story. Each video touches on issues with story and what viewers see and do not see on the show. She is the only housewife to use YouTube as a platform dedicated to *call outs*.

Women having spinoffs may be a sore spot for many women in this franchise because a spinoff means more exposure, more money, and yes, more power in the field of *RH*. If a woman can hold down her own series it speaks volumes about who the audience loves and generates additional content for Bravo TV. Lisa Vanderpump (*RHOBH*) has a spinoff *Vanderpump Rules*, which is set in one of her restaurants. Vanderpump has a lot of power in the field of *RH* because she offers production so many filming locations. At this time of writing in fact, Vanderpump is in talks to produce with Bravo executives another spinoff on the network. This is actually the current central storyline causing a rift between women on season nine of *RHOBH* (2019)¹⁴. This background sets up the situation to be discussed next.

In the last reunion special for *RHOA* (2018) Kim claimed throughout the reunion and on her social media during season 10 that the women were jealous of the fact that she has a successful spinoff. This, Kim argued, was why the women came after her on the series in season 10 and also at the reunion. What Kim is leaving out of her story is that she too came after the women during season ten, making several underhanded ignorant remarks about being on a show with Black women. Even after the highly contentious reunion episode, Kim's spinoff, *Don't Be Tardy* was renewed again, with Kim reportedly receiving a salary upgrade.

At the reunion for season 10, Kim, who was not a full-time housewife at the time, appeared at the end. Throughout the season her and her daughter had portrayed Nene and her home in a negative light. Brielle, Kim's daughter, shared a video on social media of bugs moving around in Nene's bathroom. The snapchat video was picked up by gossip blog, *The Shade Room*, which suggested Nene was living in a roach filled house. The women tried to explain on the series and at the reunion that Kim and Brielle's behavior contributed to a negative representation

¹⁴ Lisa Rinna and cast at war with Vanderpump for [Vanderpump dogs spinoff show](#).

of Nene. The image of living in a “roach infested” home, as Nene and Kandi Buress explained, plays into racist stereotypes about the living conditions of people who are poor and African-American. Kim explained that her actions could not be racist because she “doesn’t see color.”

Using a color-blind ideology as a defense evinces racist tendencies and denies the experience of inequality faced by people of color (Carr, 1997; Gallagher 2003). At one point during the reunion, Kim, who was fighting with Kenya, Kandi, and Nene, got up off the reunion couch and went backstage, believing she was being attacked. It was backstage that she and the host of the reunion, Andy Cohen, talked candidly for 45 minutes. Here Kim said: “no other *white woman* would be crazy enough to sit on that stage.” Kim argued that the women of *RHOA* needed to place themselves in *her position*, and see what it was like for her “going up against *five African-American women*.” She told Andy that the argument was ridiculous because “racism didn’t exist ten years ago, and is only exaggerated by the internet.” She paused and reiterated then that she cannot be racist because she “doesn’t see color.”

Kim’s husband, former NFL player Kroy Biermann, posted this to Twitter in response to the last reunion episode and Kim’s edit:

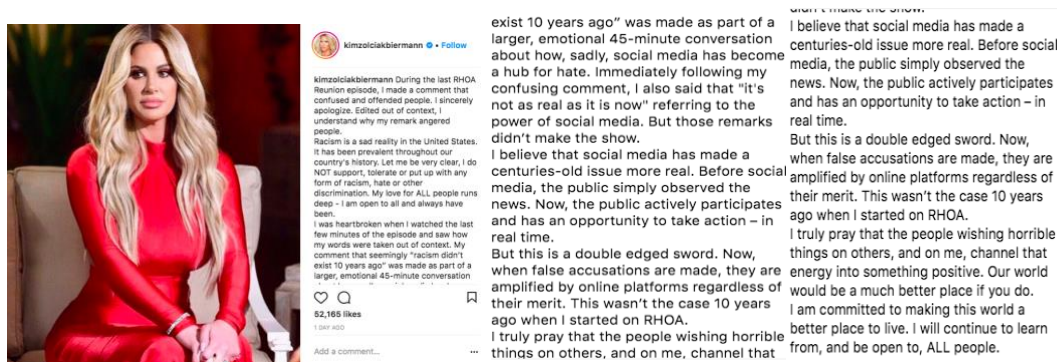
Figure 34



Figure 35 is Kim’s response to the final reunion episode edit, where she says she “was heartbroken” that her “words were taken out of context.” She claimed that her comment, “racism didn’t exist 10 years ago” was “made as part of a larger, emotional 45-minute conversation about

how sadly social media has become a hub for hate.” She clarified her “belief” that “social media has made a centuries old issue more real” and that “this wasn’t the case 10 years ago when [she] started *RHOA*.” She concluded by saying “I will continue to learn from, and be open, to ALL people.” It should be noted that her saying “racism didn’t exist ten years ago” on camera was shown in one single shot, meaning it was likely not edited.

Figure 35



The aim of this analysis is not to show who is a racist and who is not, it is to demonstrate which women have the power to *call out* producers. Kim’s apology IG post, which calls out editing, falls flat on its own, given her use of language. “ALL people” evokes the same color-blind ideology she used to defend herself on the episode. “ALL people” references a belief and understanding that every person, regardless of the color of their skin, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, are treated the same. “ALL people” evokes the same stance as the reactionary movement for “All Lives Matter.” If anything, this statement shows Kim’s ignorance and her difficulty unpacking her privilege, racial biases and stereotypes. It shows she does not have the tools necessary or the general foresight to speak about race, which is entirely the problem for many white people of privilege. The correct response would be an apology that acknowledged Nene’s feelings about #roachgate and the fact that Kim should never argue about the nonexistence of racism, ever again.

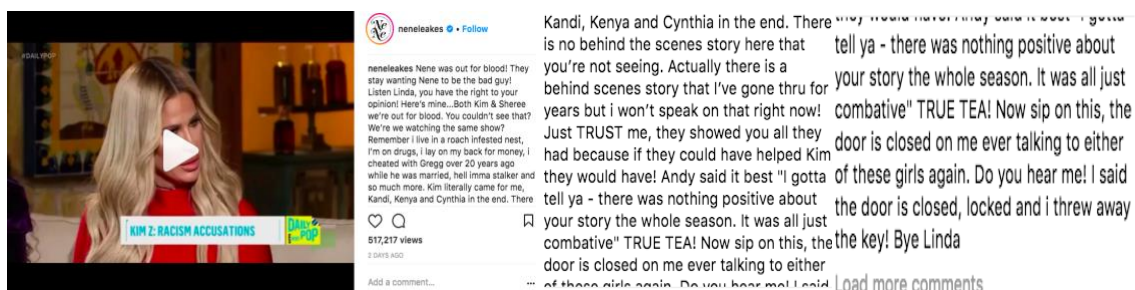
Figure 36 is from Nene's IG, calling out editing as being both truthful but also still in favor of Kim. Here Nene shared that "I knew working with her would be a mess and I've said it over & over & over again to ALL of my higher ups but what happens, I get reprimanded!" Then she continues, "I wish I could speak so much more freely but it's best not too [sic]." This is a reference to calling out production and demonstrates how Nene is sharp enough to toe the line and never cross it. She ends the IG *call out* to Kim, with "Thankful for YOU, they have editing #privilegedpieceofshit." This implies that producers made Kim look better than she was behaving in actuality.

Figure 36



Figure 37 is from Nene's IG the week the final episode of the reunion aired. The *E!* network covered news from the reunion and sided with Kim. (Kim's daughter has guest hosted *E! News*). Figure 37 is Nene's response to that coverage:

Figure 37



Here Nene is responding to *E!* correspondents saying she was "out for blood" with Kim. Nene writes, "Just TRUST me, they showed you all they had because if they could have helped Kim,

they would have!” which refers again to the work producers and editors do to shape the women’s personas. This statement also makes reference to favoritism in production for Kim. She concluded by quoting Andy Cohen, who told Kim at the reunion that she was so negative the entire season they could not help her look better. “Do you hear me! I said the door is closed, locked and I threw away the key!” This is Nene’s way of telling followers that she is refusing to work with Kim again on *RHOA*.

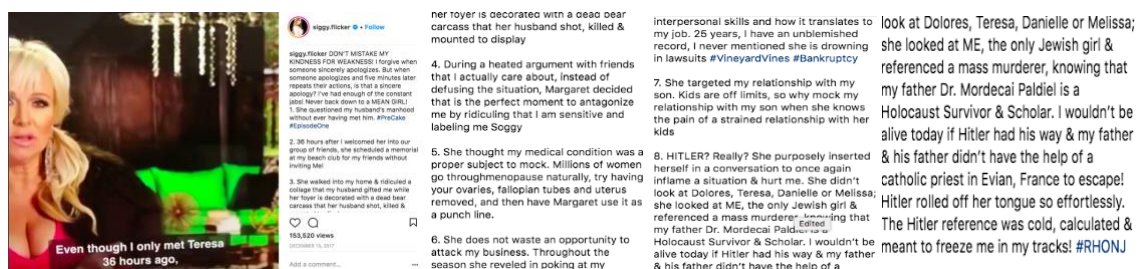
In the end, Kim’s spinoff was renewed, but she was not asked to return to *RHOA*, even in a “friend of the Housewives” role. Nene’s contract was renewed for season 11. It was rumored that her salary for season 11, along with the other women of *RHOA* was generously increased due to Kenya Moore being fired.¹⁵ Overall, Nene, as the Alpha of *RHOA* posted nearly as many *call outs* to Bravo production as Kenya did, but Kenya was let go, given her weaker position in the field and her decision to keep her marriage private. Nene might call out production but she also has double the followers on social media (3 million on IG) than Kenya does (1.5 million). Nene also stays within the lines, sharing as much about editing as she can, but protects producers along the way. Nene enacted agency by telling her side of the story and editor’s roles in it, but tempered this with respect for production. Nene managed to “balance” the drama and *call outs* on IG. Kenya did not. A woman’s inability to “balance” or play to the ideal of balance in the field of *RH* is apparently unacceptable. Producers seem only to care that Kim and Nene stayed in their lanes production-wise and delivered major drama on IG and on the series. Producers have chosen to keep them on separate shows, but women like Kenya leave with nothing – but maybe privacy.

¹⁵ [Nene's raise](#) is apparently based on another Housewife with less power being let go.

Other women, like Siggy Flicker from *RHONJ*, posted numerous *call outs* to IG throughout season eight (2018) which were directed at fellow cast member Margaret Josephs, and subsequently about editing. Siggy's IG is unique in the sample of accounts I studied for this analysis. Mostly in that there were 16 episodes of season 8 of *RHONJ*, and Siggy posted *call outs* to the other women and particularly Margaret Josephs for each episode. In short, Siggy posted more *call outs* than anyone in this sample. She is an example of a women who enacted agency on IG and other social media platforms to try and set her story straight.

The short version of Siggy's issues with Margaret in season eight stem from the fact that Margaret used a Hitler analogy in conversation with Siggy, who is Jewish. Siggy was participating in a fashion show hosted by Teresa Guidice's nemesis Kim D. Siggy said she was supporting Kim D. because she had never treated Siggy badly. To that defense, Margaret said, "But Siggy, Hitler would have not killed me, does that make him a good person?" Siggy took the comment personally and called Margaret an anti-Semite. From that point on, drama constantly ensued during every scene that featured these two women. Each episode, Siggy would take to IG to share her side, call out Margaret, and one-sided editing. *Figure 38* is only one example of the lengthy IG posts Siggy shared weekly after each episode.

Figure 38



In this post, Siggy is taking followers through her side of the interactions she had with Margaret Josephs. It should be noted that Siggy is defending herself to such a thorough degree because, as

she claimed on numerous blogs, she was getting a “bad edit”¹⁶ because producers only showed her reactions, and not what she was actually reacting to. She took to her personal blog (a platform not controlled by production) to state:

We are almost half way through the season and all I can say is the episodes are as surprising to me as they are to you. I wish you had been there to see what was actually said that caused my reactions. I don't react without reason...

In the end, Siggy called out the women more than the other women called her out. Her defensive posts on IG acknowledge her problem with production and editing. Siggy posted her resignation from *RHONJ* to her personal blog, and parts of it to IG. “I am writing to let you know that after discussing this with my family, it is crystal clear that I am unable to continue on *RHONJ*,” Flicker began. She then turns this resignation letter into a final *call out* of production:

I cannot comprehend why Sirens Production felt the need to distort the truth to the point it is no longer true. False narratives have no place in Reality TV...I ...wish to be far removed from the hostile work environment that Sirens Production created & manipulated. It was evident throughout the season and confirmed at the reunion when Margaret blurted out on camera that Sirens told her that I sucked & she was to continue targeting me. Producers immediately stopped filming so they could talk to Margaret & do damage control by telling her to go back & retract her statement & apologize for what she said. When filming resumed Margaret withdrew her statements about production. It was sickening and enlightening.¹⁷

¹⁶ [Siggy Flicker Blames Editing](#) on her [personal blog](#).

¹⁷ Siggy's full resignation letter can be read [here](#).

In summary, the women with the least power on the show or in the field of *RH* on their respective series, use *call outs* more than those in power to enact agency and share their side of the story. For some women, like Kenya, doing so can get you fired. For others, like Siggy doing so can improve your own narrative, but the cost is that you have to be willing to walk away from *RH*. IG is a space to exercise agency and call out production because you can include video, multiple images, and lots of text. Women with more power and higher status positions, like Nene appear to get away with more, but really these women are more adept at tempering their *call outs* to work within the constraints of production. There is a definite relationship between the *alphas* and what they are willing to expose on IG. Put simply, the women who enact agency over their story on IG are indirectly or directly calling out production, and they face the consequences. Following next is analysis of the women who have used IG to align with production.

4.3.6 **Walking GIFs: The identity work of aligning with production**

As the previous section showed, these women's backgrounds, (i.e. intersectional parts of their identity and habitus) inform what they talk about, post about, and write about on IG. Thus far I have analyzed media representations of class on *RH* and on IG. This analysis further enables deeper analysis of the women's positions (on the series and in the greater field of *RH*). The things they post on IG reveal their position both in the field of *RH* on their respective series and in the larger social world. The *call out* posts reveal how the women negotiate power and agency over their position and story on social media. Other women, particularly those who do not fulfill the role of the *Alpha*, have found ways to capitalize on their image from the show and successfully reposition themselves as "walking GIFs" on IG into a position of power. These women and examples from their accounts follow next.

While the women's IG accounts share an overall gestalt image that is comprised of posts that depict their *interpersonal relationships, capital, charitable endeavors, empowerment advocacy, explicit branding* and general *IG hustle*, each woman's IG is representative of the distinctive branded-self they put forth. For the most part, successful performances of the branded-self align with particular producer frames that evoke the character type the women are positioned to play. For instance, the *Alphas* analyzed here, i.e. Nene Leakes, Vicki Gunvalson, Lisa Vanderpump, and Teresa Guidice all primarily play to the *Hustler frame* as most of the content on these women's IG accounts have to do with their brand and their work. Keep in mind, the *Alphas*, as discussed in the frame analysis section, are intended to represent the ideology behind the (new) American dream – that people can transcend their socio-economic position by way of hard work and successful deployment of self-branding enterprising skills on RTV and other media platforms. These are the women framed most positively in accordance with the *Hustler Frame* on *RH* series. *Figures 39, 40, and 41* are representative of the dominant types of posts seen on the *Alpha's* IG accounts.

Figure 39

Nene Leakes (*RHOA*) *explicit branding* for her boutique, Swag.



Figure 40

Vicki Gunvalson (*RHOC*) *explicit branding* for insurance business.



Figure 41

Lisa Vanderpump (*RHOBH*) explicit branding for Vanderpump Dogs food line.



Apart from the *Alphas*, seemingly every other woman analyzed on IG presents the self as a *walking GIF*. A “walking GIF” is a woman who plays up her character text from the series on IG, essentially aligning her image with production. *Walking GIFs* not only post GIFs of themselves, but use creative hashtags that are associated with their image from the show. These women curate a persona on IG that plays with the best, worst, and most hilarious components of their image on the series. Most importantly, women who present as *walking GIFs* on IG post pictures that at least appear to be instantaneous, authentic, and posted by them. In contrast, the *alphas*’ posts are so brand-centric that most of the pictures posted to their IGs appear to be professional pictures uploaded by social media managers.

Non-*alphas* – or women like Luann de Lesseps, will amplify other aspects of their identity that are central to their character on the show. De Lesseps tends to occupy the role of the *rich bitch* on *RHONYC*, so she plays up the *Bling frame* online and posts a host of images that

display various kinds of capital to keep in line with her image on the series. However, non-alphas appear to have more fun on IG and amplify their image online via humorous hashtags, GIFs, and memes that represent their characters. *Figure 42* is a post of LuAnn de Lesseps' that is a meme of John Goodman from the film, *The Big Lebowski*. This is LuAnn's humorous attempt to diffuse talk about her divorce. It is rare to see a *housewife* post an image that does not feature them. It is even rarer to see a post making a joke about the mistakes they make – in this case de Lesseps is commenting on the preposterousness of her quickie marriage and divorce.

Figure 42

LuAnn de Lesseps (*RHNYC*).



The women who cross casting roles and move positions from season to season or embody multitudes of frames, present as *walking GIFs* the best. I argue here that this is how these women negotiate power. Women like Sonja Morgan and Lisa Rinna particularly know their position varies by season. Sometimes these women will embody positive character traits associated with hard-work or peacemaking between the women. Other seasons these women have presented as fools, or carnivalesque characters, and other times they play the role of villain. These women are important to their respective *RH* series because they represent dynamism in the group, however, because they do not always fulfill a prominent position (such as the *Alpha* or even the main *Rich Bitch*) they have to be malleable and play to different roles and edits. I argue here that these

women combat this precariousness on the show by playing up the multitudes of their characters on IG – and by presenting as *walking GIFs*.

Put simply, women like Lisa Rinna and Sonja Morgan are fun to follow on IG. These women do not post only about their brands, but rather post an assortment of images with captions that represent all the facets of their identities. These women can therefore enact agency over their image by posting *charitable endeavors* and women *empowerment* quotes, however they are also not afraid to embrace the idiosyncrasies associated with their persona. In other words – they embrace the crazy. *Figure 43* is a post from *RHNYC* star, Sonja Morgan, which boasts “crazy women on the loose” in the caption. The accompanying image is a Gifshare of Morgan from the show.

Figure 43

Sonja Morgan (*RHNYC*) *Bravo* promotion.



To demonstrate that *Walking GIF* status does not only mean a woman posts GIFs is *Figure 44*, which is a screen shot of Morgan’s bio on IG. Note the hashtag, #SonjaIsms. This shows her embracing creative hashtags associated with her likeness from the series. #Sonjaisms is a treasure trove of the best quotes and GIFs featuring Morgan. The fact that she has embraced this hashtag as part of her branded-identity on IG shows her sense of humor and willingness to play along with the image presented on RTV.

Figure 44

Screenshot of Sonja Morgan's IG bio.



Lisa Rinna is another solid example of how these women can present as “walking GIFs.” *Figure 45* depicts an image of text that refers to someone who makes “inappropriate comments” for a living. Rinna has embraced the fact that this is part of her job on *RHOBH*. She also uses the hashtag #Rinnainappropriate in the caption. This hashtag is used on a few of the sampled posts from her IG. Again, this specific hashtag is used to compile posts that embody her persona on the series. This hashtag shows her humor and awareness of her conduct, and therefore becomes part of her branded identity. *Figure 46* depicts a GIF of her shaking her pill bag on the show. Rinna’s pill bag was used as part of a storyline intended to harm her reputation. Here on IG she makes light of the situation with humor, as a means to gain power over the story.

Figure 45

Lisa Rinna (*RHOBH*) *explicit branding*.



Figure 46

Lisa Rinna (*RHOBH*) *explicit branding*.

GIFs enables these women to successfully capitalize on being branded a *real housewife*. In other words, these women amplify the multifaceted image produced by RTV producers on IG – which means they have perfected the art behind the labor of *emotional camping*.

4.3.7 **Emotional Camping: Self-exploitation as a path to agency**

The point the analysis makes in the previous section is that some women enact agency differently than others. On the whole, all of the women’s IG accounts studied diverged from the media frames of the series in that they showed a more charitable side, and advocated for women’s empowerment more on social media than viewers see on the series. While the women’s IG accounts boast a similar branded-image, some women “go rogue” and diverge from production with *call out* posts that detail editing techniques or issues left out of their narratives on the show. If you’re an *alpha*, like Nene Leakes, you have more room to call out production than women in more precarious positions, like Siggy Flicker or Kenya Moore. Bottom line, if you want to truly diverge from production, and enact agency through *call outs*, you have to be willing to risk everything on IG and might wind up being let out of your contract. These women enact agency over their identity by sharing other sides of the story that production keeps hidden. It is a dangerous move, as the analysis from previous sections show. This, however, is not the only way women can enact agency in their identity construction outside of the series on IG.

Other women present as *walking GIFs* and use IG as a means to amplify their personas from the show. I argue here that this is another, perhaps more effective way to enact agency over their own identity work. This section will demonstrate how the digital labor of *emotional camping* presents the women with a path to agency.

Emotional camping, a hybrid form of labor conducted across mediated platforms, gets its name from two concepts: (i) Hochschild’s (1983) *emotional labor* and (ii) Sontag’s (1967)

camping. Emotional labor refers to the work people get paid to do, which includes conveying the proper emotions and feelings appropriate for the job. An example would be a waitress evoking a positive, service-oriented smile or a doctor showing the appropriate type of bedside manner depending on the gravity of the situation. Emotional labor involves evincing certain emotions, while suppressing others; it is a type of balancing act within your role for carrying out the job. Key to this concept is the fact that emotional labor is work you do for compensation, it is representative of the “commercialization of feeling” (Hochschild, 1983).

The women of *RH* are paid to perform on a RTV series where they are positioned into planned scenarios and edited to enact certain roles. The women of *RH* and other RTV stars are essentially responsible for carrying out the “work of being watched” – on multiple platforms – in this case RTV and IG. Part of the “work of being watched” is conducting a successful emotional identity performance, which refers to the labor of being aware of the fact that one is being filmed and then acting as though they are not being filmed (Andrejevic, 2004; Dubrofsky, 2011).

Women of *RH* like Nene Leakes and Bethenny Frankel have longevity on RTV because of their ability to perform successfully an emotional identity performance that aligns with network aims and production’s wants. *RH* has been on the air for 13 years, at this point these women are “perform[ing] performance” (Grindstaff, 2014). These performances specifically call for them to perform certain ideas about class, (and gender, race, and a host of other aspects related to their identity and position in the *RH* field) that align with the media frames evoked in the series.

The women of *RH* have learned throughout time what they need to do in these performances to remain relevant to their respective series. They know how to give production what it wants and conduct the emotional labor necessary to fulfill this job. They conduct performances that are intentionally performed with production aims in mind – meaning they will

(over)react when necessary, yell, or throw wine in someone's face when the scene calls for it.

The emotions required for these performances are contoured to emphasize their role and position on the show, and the overarching brand of the network.

To reiterate, the interview with Sam from Bravo's *WWHL* discussed the women's performances as *Housewives*. "The New York ladies, they know when the cameras are on and do what they're supposed to do," Sam shared. *What they are supposed to do* is play to the frames and amplify their interactions. The women have learned over time on the series how to conduct themselves on the show and essentially manage their emotions. In a normal job, management of emotions would call for a person to be perhaps less reactive and dramatic, but the job of a Bravo housewife is to present an amplified, highly emotional and reactive version of the self. The emotions it takes to present the image and the behavior they exhibit is what these women are paid to do, hence this is the "emotional labor" required of the women of *RH*. The actual management of their emotions that enables them to get this job done comes through *camping*.

Camping is intentional or "camp which knows itself to be camp" (Sontag, 1967). Camp is dead serious and at its core is a "love of the unnatural" of "artiface and exaggeration" (Sontag, 1967). *RH* is a celebration of unnatural depictions of women, real life, emotions, relationships – and a celebration of insincere, exaggerated personalities, images, and conduct. In the beginning, *RHOC* was pure camp. In 2006 there were no RTV shows that focused on one particular group of rich women friends. *RHOC* was a form of experimental programming; these women had no template before them with which to model themselves. While many of them obviously played for the cameras, they took themselves quite seriously, and did not yet understand that the underlying sensibility of the show was that they were put on display to be judged and laughed at by the audience. As time moved forward and the series gained traction, the *Bravo wink* became more

apparent, and a hallmark of the network. After season one, the women's performances, I argue, can be characterized as *camping*. The things they do and the emotions they display are much more deliberate and devoid of innocence.

Emotional camping is the type of labor the women conduct on the series, but it is more readily apparent on their social media, particularly among the women who present as walking GIFs. The women who joke around on social media and play to the ironic frames of the Bravo wink, let you know they are in on the joke. They cannot do this on the series, or producers would edit it out. The labor of emotional camping the women do on the show presents as more of a sensibility. Viewers pick up a sense of which women are more intentional or playful with the frames. The women cannot be explicit about this as they are at the mercy of production. It would ruin the show by impeding the suspension of disbelief necessary for viewing. It is on social media, IG specifically, that the labor of *emotional camping* becomes more visible.

IG gives the women more freedom to present aspects of the self that viewers do not see on RTV. The platform also affords the women space to amplify aspects of their identity visible on the series. Often the women do so by posting memes and GIFs of themselves. Doing this is a celebration and acknowledgment of the branded-persona they work hard to produce. This is also an acknowledgement of self-exploitation. The act of posting GIFs and memes associated with one's persona reveals a potential reason behind the women's performances on the show.

For instance, the women may deliberately give production explicit soundbites to produce a moment on RTV that will become a GIF they can proliferate on social media. This is one way the women themselves can work to embed their branded identity into the fabric of media culture. To capitalize on GIF culture is to let the audience know they are in on the joke, and subsequently acknowledges self-exploitation. This form of self-exploitation leads to capital gains for the

women outside of the series (via IG hustle opportunities, other media appearances, and general relevancy in pop culture). This however begs the question, is self-exploitation actually a form of agency or is it simply an admission of an exploitative system? In the next few paragraphs I will argue that contextually speaking, in the field of *RH*, emotional camping presents the women with a path to agency over their identity construction.

Humphrey's (2018) analysis of the everyday identity work conducted on social media includes discussion of the work of van Zoonen and Turner (2014), who argued that the identity work done in media production today is moving away from identity expression and to identity management. The distinction these authors make between identity expression and identity management is agency. Identity management is usually conducted for commercial interactions and therefore is less empowering than the practice of identity expression, which is a practice of storytelling (p. 68). Emotional camping requires *management* of emotions and is done for commercial gain and interaction. However, emotional camping is not necessarily devoid of empowerment.

The women of *RH* are performing in ways that empower them financially for sure, but importantly, emotional camping as a form of identity management demonstrates agency –which can imply empowerment. These women perform identity in ways that emphasize parts of the self they are comfortable with showing. Intentionally aligning with production's frames or managing one's emotions to represent network aims is one way these women enact agency, and I argue here is also a way these women (ironically) negotiate privacy.

Doing identity work that plays up what producers want might be the best way for these women to keep other aspects of their identity private. "Showing it all" on RTV, then reproducing and amplifying that "all" on social media, curates a supremely public branded-persona or guise

that protects the more personal parts of the self. This means emotional camping provides a path to agency in the construction of their identity by affording these women the ability to play up parts of the self they are willing to showcase. This subsequently downplays the parts they wish to keep to themselves. Much of this argument will be revisited in the final analysis section of this dissertation, which includes data from my interviews with the women of *RH*.

4.3.8 **RQ 2: Summary**

This section presented an analysis of findings for research question two: *how do the Women of RH Frame the Branded-Self on IG?* To answer this question, I conducted a discourse analysis of 14 women's IG accounts. Analysis revealed how IG affords the women agency in identity work outside the confines of production. This discourse analysis pieced together a comprehensive image of the ideologies, narratives, and discourses put forth by the women from *RH* and unpacked what they communicate about class, gender and race on IG. Importantly, this discourse analysis revealed more than the representations of these women's class-based identities; it also revealed their position in the field of *RH* by identifying paths to agency.

First, I discussed the rationale behind the women's accounts studied for this discourse analysis. Second, I discussed Fairclough's (2003) multi-functional view of texts and showed how I analyzed the women's IG posts by constantly considering (i) the *action* behind the post, (ii) *representations* of class (and gender and race), and (iii) the *identifications* made in the posts. In terms of *action* – I found that the women curate a similar gestalt image of the branded-self on IG by posting pictures that depict the women engaged in: 1) *interpersonal relationships*, 2) *IG hustle*, 3) *charitable endeavors*, 4) *empowerment advocacy*, and 5) displays of *capital*. These categories represent the primary *action* behind the essential posts that compose the image of the branded-self on IG. Above anything, the branded-self on IG is framed to show that they are good

mothers/wives/friends/daughters/sisters who work hard, lift other women up, and use their capital for good. In other words, the branded-self on IG is similar to the women on the series, but distinct in that *charitable endeavors* and *empowerment advocacy* are amplified. Irony is evoked online a means to present as a *walking GIF*, not to depict the women as idiots and hypocrites. Put simply, the women are in on the joke online. On the series, the joke is subject to producers.

Third, I analyzed representations of class, gender, and race and the branded-self on IG and found on this platform the branded-self evokes similar gendered and class-based representations of identity. The women of *RH* curate the branded-self on IG by posting images and captions that amplify traditional ideas about gender and a highly feminized aesthetic. Embedded within these representations are other class-based ideas of identity that come through in posts that depict 1) the women's *capital* and 2) *IG hustle*. There is more room however to play up other parts of their identity on IG that are not seen as much on *RH*. For instance, the women of *RHOA* and *RHOP* are afforded the space to celebrate their Black identity on social media via hashtags and personal posts. All of the women show their dedication to women's *empowerment* and *charitable endeavors* on IG, which frames them more positively on IG than on the series.

Fourth, the analysis of research question two went deep into issues related to positioning, power, and agency when discussing Fairclough's third type of text meaning, *identification*. Analysis of *identification* revealed that these women's backgrounds, (i.e. aspects of their intersectional identities and habitus) informed what they talked about, posted about, and wrote about on IG. Power, agency, and positioning of the women became evident in the analysis of Bravo *call out* posts – which illuminated which women could “go rouge” and diverge from production. Analysis also revealed how other women could ironically enact agency by presenting as *walking GIFs*. These women align their online branded image with production's version as a

means to reposition themselves more powerfully in the field of *RH* as the ultimate *real housewife*. This section on *walking GIFs* segued into the fifth and final section of the discourse analysis of IG that discussed the theoretical concept of *emotional camping*.

Emotional camping is a hybrid style of labor conducted by the women of *RH* across media platforms that presents the women with a path to agency. Emotional camping is named in part from the concepts of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) and camping (Sontag, 1967). Emotional camping implies recognition of self-exploitation. In the context of *RH*, self-exploitation is a form of empowerment that provides the women with a path to agency over their own identity work. Emotional camping is the work the women are paid to do on the series, but comes through most clearly on IG where we see these women perform identity in ways that emphasize parts of the self they are comfortable with and that intentionally align with production's frames. This is a way these women (ironically) negotiate privacy. Conducting identity work that amplifies what producers want, I argue, is the best way for these women to keep other aspects of their identity private.

Overall, the branded-self on IG is informed by the branded-self we see on RTV in that it is informed by a postfeminist sensibility and ambivalent displays of social class. IG however does afford the women more space to play up aspects of their identity that the show subverts and also offers the women spaces for privacy by way of emotional camping. This theoretical concept will be discussed again in the final analysis section that discusses my interviews with women from *RH*.

One thing that is necessary to point out in this conclusion is that the previous frame analysis section discussed the frames employed by producers to present the women on RTV. Of those frames, three explicitly evoke representations of class – the *Bling frame* (which represents

materialism), the *Hustler frame* (which represents one's work ethic and social mobility), and the 'Maybe we are white trash' frame which represents the irony of these conspicuously wealthy women's conduct.

On IG, I analyzed how the women frame themselves. As discussed at length, RTV stars branded-images are pre-designed in a lot of ways by RTV producers, therefore many of these frames are also present on IG. For instance, the meta-frame of *Postfeminist Nirvana* informs much of what we see on IG, specifically when the women post images that reinforce dominant gender roles, highly-feminized ideals of beauty, and use the hashtag #blessed as an acknowledgement of "having it all." The *Bling frame* is most readily apparent in posts that display the women's capital – for instance pictures of their luxury vacations, material goods, or famous friends. The *Hustler frame* from the series lives on IG explicitly as *IG hustle*. It is on social media that followers really see the women performing for compensation, attempting to maintain or move up the economic ladder by posting *endorsements*, *explicit branding*, or *Bravo promotions*, all of which work in the women's economic favor. We even see incantations of the women's ironic behavior online (a mix of the *Maybe we are white trash* and *You're a hypocrite frames*) with posts that *call out* production or other women and with posts that present the women as *walking GIFs*. Both of these trajectories note the agency of the women and thus reveal the behavioral conduct and position of the women in the field of *RH*. The only major divergences from the series' frames on IG is that the women will sometimes *call out* production, and usually amplify their *charitable endeavors* and *empowerment advocacy*.

The frame analysis of the *RH* franchise and the discourse analysis of the women's IG accounts reveal similar media representations of these women's class based identities. Thus far, it appears that social class is represented ironically in media by way of materialism and work

ethic. In other words, media representations of class in regards to *RH* come through via the *Bling frame*, the *Hustler frame*, and the irony of the behavior frame *Maybe we are white trash*. Irony is essential to displays of class across platforms – it is a tactic used in order to remove or get around one’s class based identity. Presenting as a *walking GIF* is an acknowledgement of bad behavior, it’s the women’s way of “owning” the image presented to the audience. Who cares if they look like they behave badly – they own it – that is their persona. The *Hustler frame* depicts a hard work ethic and a deservingness associated with the displays of materialism (the *Bling frame*) prevalent across platforms. These representations evoke a message that says it does not matter where they came from or how they act; they work hard and can celebrate with material goods.

In summary, this message represents an ambivalent attitude towards all factors associated with social class. It is an attempt to negate social origins, behavior, habitus, and actual economic capital (wealth), but the irony is that doing so reveals the intersectionality of class in these women’s identity work. People cannot escape class-based issues of identity – but they can certainly attempt to muddy them up with ambivalent projections. The only way to understand the significance of these representations and to further unpack these representations of class, is to go to the audience. The next section of the analysis of this dissertation focuses on the interviews conducted with fans of *RH*.

4.4 **RQ 3: Does the audience recognize these frames?**

To answer research question three, I conducted 26 in-depth interviews with viewers of *RH*.¹⁸ This dissertation has shown thus far how producers frame the women of *RH* and how the women of *RH* contour those frames on social media to emphasize their brand. These frames and

¹⁸ Names of interview subjects have been changed to protect their anonymity.

their subsequent representations do not go one way; because these women are represented across platforms in certain ways does not mean that fans passively observe those frames and accept the ideas, messages, and images they put forth. These in-depth interviews reveal: (i) why viewers watch *RH*, (ii) what messages they take away, (iii) how they glean pleasure from viewing, and finally, (iv) how viewers talk about social class and how they make sense of these frames and their own class-based identities.

This section presents analysis of the major research findings for research question three. First, I discuss the Bravo audience and how this interview sample is representative of that audience. Second, I show how these respondents collectively recognize each of the frames presented in this dissertation. Third, I analyze gendered pleasures and feminist understandings of *RH* and then move towards a deeper analysis of the subsequent pleasures gleaned from watching a show that frames women to depict certain ideas about class, wealth, and status. To do this I detail analysis of the questions asked in the interview to indicate (i) why viewers watch, (ii) how viewers glean pleasure from *RH*, and (ii) how viewers define class in their own lives and in regard to *RH*. Lastly, I analyze the messages viewers take away from watching *RH* and consider the implications of both aligning with and contesting production's preferred ideological message.

4.4.1 **The Audience**

Bravo boasts having the most affluent, educated audience. In 2017 Bravo had the “most loyal female 18-49 audience in cable” (Comcast; Adweek, 2012; Quantcast). This interview sample is representative of this demographic. Women comprised the majority of interviewees. Eighty-four percent of the respondents identified as women and the remaining percentage identified as men. The average age of respondents was 32, with ages ranging from 21 to 50. A small percentage of participants identified as either African-American or Latinx, while the

majority were white. All participants were college educated and half of this sample had achieved graduate and/or professional degrees. All subjects were employed, with many holding high ranking positions in finance, law, academia, research policy and other lines of work that might be representative of an upper or middle socio-economic position. While the sample is limited in terms of race and gender, these in-depth interviews offer a multiplicity of voices that are representative of *RH*'s overall target demographic (i.e., affluent, educated, women and (gay) men, 18-49 years of age.)

Bravo TV viewers are what advertisers call “affluencers,” or super-consumers who are eager to buy new technologies, spend more than others on personal care items, and lease new cars (*Adweek*, 2012). Fifty-one percent of Bravo “affluences” have college degrees and a decent percentage of them (31) bring in an annual income of around \$100,000 a year (Quantcast). This is representative of the professional upper and middle-class Bravo aims to appeal to. This audience is also further comprised of mainly 25-54-year-old white women.

“Affluencers” however is not only a term used to describe the audience of Bravo. It is also a campaign initiative on the part of Bravo and NBC-Universal to “turn the audience into a product unto itself,” which works by inviting women, “to participate in their own commodification and the commodification of others” (Cox, 2015, p. 466). Bravo’s Affluencer campaign is designed as the “Bravo experience” which includes aspirational and stylized programming content, but also and importantly, a lot of online interaction designed to keep viewers “tuned in, during and after the program has ended,” (Cox, 2015, p. 469) Quoting Bravo Media executive, E. Stone, Cox (2015) found that the Bravo Affluencer campaign initiative is almost entirely responsible for driving “the dialog between fans and talent” and “create[s] buzz around our shows” (p. 469). What are the costs of such deep engagement?

Using feminist political economy, Cox (2015) argued that audience's constant connection to Bravo through online participation is problematic because Bravo tracks their consumption patterns by collecting private information on social media. That information is then sold back to audiences to satisfy the network's commercial goals. Bravo's Affluencer campaign, Cox (2015) showed, adheres to Dallas Smythe's (1981/2006) canonical "commodity audience" argument by turning the Bravo audience into its own brand. The idea is that Bravo is not selling a product, in this case *RH*, but rather buying and selling access to viewer's attention (Cox, 2015, p. 478).

Cox's critical analysis would benefit from the addition of viewer's voices. A fan studies perspective would add to this discussion because it would understand that viewer's may be aware of their own commodification and not care, since the media product is meaningful in other ways. This dissertation and this section in particular aims to emulate seminal studies that highlight audience experiences. Both Radway (1984) and Ang (1985) studied seemingly anti-feminist media and uncovered how other, likely commodified audiences, got around the social, political, and cultural limitations of the very media they used. *RH* viewers' voices will be highlighted in the remainder of this section. First, I will answer research question three: does the audience recognize these frames?

4.4.2 **Yes, the audience recognizes these frames**

The audience recognized each of the five frames put forth in this dissertation. These frames: (i) the *Bling Frame*, (ii) the *Hustler Frame*, (iii) the '*Maybe we are white trash*' Frame, (iv) the '*You're a hypocrite*' Frame, and (v) *Postfeminist Nirvana* are all called up by the audience using similar language, symbols, idea elements, and codes from the series. The interview questions are attached as **Appendix C**. The questions were asked to each participant in the same order. Names of respondents have been changed to protect their anonymity.

The *Bling Frame* was primarily evoked in responses to question five and the series of probes within that question, what indicates to you that these women are wealthy? The *Hustler Frame* is mainly evoked in responses to question six, how did the women achieve their wealth? The ‘*Maybe we are white trash*’ *Frame* and the ‘*You’re a hypocrite*’ *Frame* were mainly evoked in responses to question nine, how would you describe the way the women treat each other? And question ten, do the women ever contradict themselves? The meta-frame of *Postfeminist Nirvana* was evoked in responses to the first few questions about favorite series and favorite women from the series, as well as question eight, would you say some people might look up to these women? Following next are examples from the interviews that demonstrate viewers call up these frames from the series to rationalize what they see.

The Bling Frame

When asked about indicators of the women’s wealth, participants’ replies mostly conjured up materialistic objects, evidence of conspicuous consumption, and varied forms of capital. Take for instance the following responses about indicators of wealth:

*“On Dallas, they’ve really got some **high-fashion** on that show. It’s appearing like a lot of the cast members are quite wealthy.” – Diana*

*“[Wealth is indicated] when your creative director and your **makeup artist** and **hair person fly** with you to Tokyo.” – Lynn*

*“Lisa VanderPump’s **closet**. I mean we all wish we had that. What’s interesting, especially in the last season of all the other franchises, you see a lot of remodels trying to emulate that **closet** – but they are the Ikea version.” – Elaina*

*“The Beverly Hills housewives are always going out into the world, on **private planes** and **endless vacations**. The other ones are not as much.” – John*

*“The women of New York are notable for being immersed in more of a New York/Manhattan/East Coast **culture of social climbing**. It’s about belonging to the right **clubs**, and participating in the correct **charities**.” – Anna*

Wealth is not only indicated to viewers by way of conspicuous consumption; it is also indicated by the women's behavior. Particularly in how they talk about money, spend money, treat people, and present themselves:

*"It's also in how they **behave**. Not with each other, but **with staff**. Like when you see them go **on trips** and we see them interacting with **the people who work for them**. That's a big indicator of who has money." – Elaina*

*"There are definitely times when **they will explicitly talk about money**. Nene, one of my favorite quotes from her is: '**I'm rich bitch!**' They will explicitly say **I have money** or **they will dress** in ways that are proving that they have money, but it is often **gaudy** and looks **ridiculous**." – Mia*

What these responses show is that viewers evoke the *Bling Frame* by using the symbols, available idea elements, language, and codes embedded in its framing package to talk about wealth, who has money, and who does not.

The Hustler Frame

The labor package or the *Hustler Frame*, includes words, phrases, and visuals that demonstrate the women's work ethic. Often times this frame is evoked on the series when the women are shown at work or shown talking about (how much they) work. When asked how the women achieved their wealth and standing, viewers evoked ideas that indicate the *Hustler Frame* and used the essence of the frames from the show to make sense of the work the women do. These women, according to viewers, all work in regard to the show. But they also make distinctions between those who work outside of the home and/or those women who built their achievement, with those who married or inherited wealth. The following responses demonstrate these types of distinctions:

*"The three main themes are **rich family**, **married rich**, or **soap opera actress**." – Ashley*

*"I think there's kind of a small group of **self-mades**." – Jenny*

*“I think you **marry into it** or you **build it**. Remember when Bethenny first started she had this tiny little apartment, this relationship that was going nowhere and she had no money or anything like that? **Then she built a massive multimillion dollar empire for herself**. To watch that, **that’s the American dream, right?**” – Paula*

*“Vicki, **she works really hard and they show that**. Some are really **career-driven** and have **their own success**, like Vicki, Ramona, and Bethenny. But there a lot who seem to have **married rich**, like Tamra.” – Wendy*

There are responses that evoke a keen awareness about the show being its own platform to leverage success. Responses like this demonstrate how aware the audience is of the series itself being an avenue through which the women achieve social and economic mobility:

*“I think a majority of them **used the platform to elevate their wealth**.” – Mark*

*“Look at Vicki. Her story is very much ‘**I built this business from the ground up**, I’m going to give it to my kids.’ As much of a monster as she is, **you have to hand it to her**. At the same time I do think a lot about this while I’m watching these shows, **like how much of this is their actual money and how much of this is Bravo money? A lot of what they are and the way that they’re getting it is because of a show, and you can’t acknowledge the apparatus of the show [on reality TV]**.” – Laura*

Furthermore, respondents call up the aim of the *Hustler Frame*, which is to position the women against each other by designating which women work outside the home and which live a life of leisure:

*“This is very sweeping but I think it’s true for a lot of them, **a lot of them married into it**. That’s a **choice** and a lot of them also married goblins, and that’s a **choice too**. Then there are those that did make their own money. It’s a really **interesting badge of honor for the ones that scream that pride of having made their own money**.” – Elaina*

A response like this one even uses words like “choice” to describe women who work and those who do not, which demonstrates how multiple frames work to evoke certain ideas about the women at the same time. “Choice” calls up not only the *Hustler Frame* but also the meta-frame of *Postfeminist Nirvana*. Earlier responses specify certain alphas, like Vicki Gunvalson, as hard workers because producers and editors highlight their work ethic on the show via the *Hustler Frame*. Vicki’s character is one that is tied to the positive use of symbols and ideas that evoke

the labor package each time she is on screen. In all, when making sense of the women's achievements, viewers invoke the *Hustler Frame*.

The 'Maybe we are white trash' Frame

The '*Maybe we are white trash*' Frame concerns the women's (ironic) behavior. The behavior package is elevated to prominence when these women behave badly, either by using physical aggression or verbal rebukes. This frame is often intertwined with the '*You're a hypocrite*' frame, because often times the women's actions do not align with their own ideas and self-awareness about proper conduct. When asked, how would you describe the way the women treat each other? a majority of subjects indicated negative behaviors:

*"Oh my god, **deplorable**, but that's what makes it good, right?" – Paula*

*"I would say typically they're **self-serving**." – Helena*

*"I think they play it up for ratings, but they are **very catty**." – Stacy*

*"Pretty **manipulative** in general." – Eva*

*"They can be really loving and supportive, but then they can be really **quick to attack** and get real **defensive** and **aggressive** as well." – Joanna*

For this question, I used the probe, "would you describe their behavior as classy" for all respondents because many answered the question with a clipped response. I asked this question not as a means to get them to acknowledge a particular frame, but to pay attention to how they would subsequently define "classy" behavior. It was in responses to this question that ideas about class, wealth, and the women's ironic behavior became clear. Here are some responses:

*"No. **Money cannot buy you class!**" – Mia*

*"I think a lot of them have the capability to be classy. But with the **alcohol involved** that goes out the window. **The ones that are inherently classy are the ones I believe have actual money.**" – Elaina*

*“I think it depends on who's definition you have... Classy is really socially determined and that goes back to **that old versus new money thing**... The people I see as **new money** are the ones at parties that **make big scenes**.” – Brittany*

*“No, I think someone with **true class** wouldn't get into a **screaming cat fight** in a public place and wouldn't do half the things that some of these women do pretty much for the sake of the cameras. I think that **someone with true class and grace and style probably also wouldn't be on a reality show in the first place**... You know that there are plenty of people who have less money but far more of things like **class and grace and elegance**.” – Katie*

*“I think everyone has been guilty of saying something or doing something **drunk** on the show that would **not be considered classy**.” – Stacy*

*“Oh **the opposite of class**. They're just really **wealthy women who drink a lot and do stupid shit in public**. There are some that are classy, you know I would say Vanderpump is really classy. But I do not believe most of these women are **innately classy**. Like if you would say they're new money or **old money - they're new money**.” – Monica*

*As a whole, no. At least in terms of the women interacting with each other. On the show, they're not on their **best behavior**.” – Wendy*

All of these responses call up the irony of their bad behavior and seemingly high-status positions.

There is also an awareness in responses that these women are putting on a show, which enables fans to make these distinctions between what classy is and is not a bit easier.

These responses indicate that “classy” is *innate*, involving being private, restrained, not drinking to excess, and having ‘old money.’ All of this will be discussed in detail in the coming sections. The point here is that these women’s behavior is considered ironic. It is easily characterized by viewers through the invocation of the ‘*Maybe we are white trash*’ Frame, which is intended to depict the women as one respondent said, as: “the opposite of classy.”

The ‘You’re a hypocrite’ Frame

Hypocrisy is recognized immediately. The ‘Bravo wink’ is alive, highlighting contradictory behavior and the ‘*You’re a hypocrite*’ Frame to viewers. When asked if the women

ever contradict themselves, everyone said yes and could point directly to examples of times the women said one thing and did something else:

*“Constantly, but that’s what’s so great about it. Regular TV shows have a bible, it’s like, ‘this character would never do this.’ **In real life, everybody contradicts themselves all the time. That’s what is great about this, the different standard that they set.**”*
– Elaina

*“Oh all the time. There’s **too many examples** to mention, but many of them are **hypocrites and contradict themselves in their actions**. The most recent example is when Dorit got all upset because Camille gave her a ball gag from an S&M shop and she got really offended. Meanwhile she was the one who had given Erika the underwear [last season]. **Dorit is great at giving it, but she can’t take it.** I also think **Luann is a total hypocrite**. She is constantly saying one thing and doing the complete opposite. **She talked so much about having class and being elegant and she does the least classy and elegant things seen on that show.**”* – Katie

*“Definitely. **I like how the editors show that.** They will go back and show **like a black and white clip of things they said in the past and now they’re saying they never said that** or that never happened.”* – Wendy

*“Yes. Always. **They will be extremely petty about one thing they were subjected to and then they’ll be like you know she needs to forgive so-and-so.** So, they do it all the time, but like I said, **is that any different than the rest of us? Probably not.**”* – Chris

Many described the “Bravo wink” and some even discussed their preference for the editing technique. An overt enthusiasm was notable in people’s responses, which also could demonstrate that this tactic is one of the draws to watching *RH*. Like Andy Cohen has said, showing the hypocrisy of the women’s actions lets the audience in on the fun. This positions the audience above these women, who scholars have argued, are at the same time presented as economically and socially better than viewers (Johnson and Trelease, 2018). According to this analysis however, the ‘*You’re a hypocrite*’ Frame actually repositions viewers as better than the women of *RH* because this frame plays to viewer’s humorous intellectual capacity and cultural capital.

The meta-frame: Postfeminist nirvana

This frame represents a postfeminist *sensibility* and acts as a meta-frame to all of the frames at play on *RH*; it is the overarching way in which the women are presented. *Postfeminist Nirvana* is invoked by highly feminized and traditional depictions of gender, discourses that mention “balancing,” “having it all,” and the ‘past incident’ of feminism. It is invoked in discussions about women having endless freedom to choose all the best most tailored choices in life. It is also invoked when the women are shown spending (their own) money, getting plastic surgery, or their makeup done by professional glam squads. This frame gets at the bigger ideological idea in by media today about gender, feminism, and ‘empowered’ women. This is a sample of responses from subjects to the question: who is your favorite housewife?

*“If I had to pick one it would be **Lisa Vanderpump**. I love that she’s British and she’s always very cool and collected, very much **in charge**. I like the **strong woman, boss-lady** aspects of her personality...and she’s probably **the wealthiest** of all of them. The thing is if I’m going to watch decadent rich people, I want to see real rich people.” – Carey*

*“**Bethenny** for sure. She’s my favorite, I think just **because she actually works**... she’s a **businesswoman**, she’s smart, she’s savvy...I like that she is a **mogul**.” – Paula*

*“I really like **Bethenny Frankel**....She’s not living off some guy, she’s not a trophy wife, **she hustles**.” – Lynn*

*“I think **Bethenny** is the most **real** of all of the women. She’s very flawed and she has her own issues and she’s like ‘**I’m looking for love, I want a baby**’...she’s a go-getter and kind of intense.” – Wendy*

RHNYC star, Bethenny Frankel was most people’s favorite housewife, followed by Lisa Vanderpump from *RHOBH*. Both women are the alphas of their respective series. They work outside the home, are wives and/or mothers, and have an identity that is separate from men and connected to their ability to make money. They are representative of the ideal of *Postfeminist Nirvana*. These women have made the best choices in life and business and “have it all.”

The meta-frame is also highlighted and used to determine which women people would choose to aspire to. When asked if people might look up to these women, certain responses used this frame as a means to explain which women would be acceptable to look up to:

*“Absolutely. **Erika Jayne** has a huge gay following and I know she’s an **advocate** for LGBT rights and does **wonderful work** with that. **Lisa [Vanderpump]** with the dogs in China and then opening up the shelter in L.A. **Kyle’s a great mother**, I think she brings something to the table with that. **Bethenny**...her **business sense** is well admired. **I think there’s women who contribute a lot and you can learn a lot from. Then there’s the ones like the Brandi’s and Kim**, the ones who are **more tragic** but they bring something different to the table...**they keep it real and don’t fall for the nonsense and speak their mind.**” – Mark*

This response is informed by a postfeminist lens. It depicts admiration for the work the women do, their charity, advocacy, and business sense. It also makes the distinction between the alphas or the women who embody *postfeminist nirvana* and those who are positioned as deficient in some way to the other women because they do not embody these qualities. What is important is that this respondent finds admirable qualities in all of the women, including the “tragic” women. This depicts a meaningful admiration for these characters and demonstrates that the *postfeminist nirvana* frame works by showing some women as better than others, but also that it does not always take away from the admiration viewers have for these women, even in spite of the frame’s intentions.

This section shows that yes, the audience recognizes these frames. The audience invokes these frames on their own as a means to rationalize how they view the women and the series itself. Next, I present deeper analysis. In the next few sections, I detail analysis of the questions asked in the interview to indicate (i) why viewers watch, (ii) how viewers glean pleasure from *RH*, and (iii) how viewers define class in their own lives and in regard to *RH*.

4.4.3 **“Because they’re real”: Why respondents watch *RH***

As discussed in the literature review, on a meta-level most research that interrogates RTV

can be divided two ways. One way focuses on effects and the other focuses on appeal. Much of the research that deals with the platform's appeal would fall under uses and gratifications research, which is based on the idea that people actively engage with media in order to fulfill certain needs (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, 1974). Early research found that part of RTV's appeal was that it offered a vicarious experience (Nabi et al., 2003), therapeutic qualities (Andrejevic, 2004), "humilitainment" (Waite and Booker, 2005), and that it fulfilled social affiliation needs (Papacharissi and Mendelson, 2007). The underlying thread of this research is RTV's connection to voyeurism.

The earliest study on RTV's connection to voyeurism found that RTV was appealing because viewers enjoyed seeing other 'real' people interact (Nabi et al., 2003). Viewer's motivations for watching were based on self-awareness and an interest in other people that promoted self-reflection and empathy (Nabi, 2003, p. 325). This type of voyeurism references how RTV can be used to make sense of the self. All of these findings, and this self-aware type of voyeurism in particular are echoed in this interview analysis.

The majority of interview subjects were long-time viewers and started watching early seasons of *RHOC* or *RHNYC* – the first two series in the franchise – and admit to being 'hooked' from the beginning. They watch for a variety of reasons, including, but not limited to the fact that they found the content compelling, enjoy the escapism and aspirational qualities the series provide, and enjoy watching for the voyeuristic reasons early research brought forth.

To begin, a lot of people mentioned that they started watching *RH* because the series capitalized on the success of popular scripted television of the time:

*"I think it was right around the time when **The OC the show** was on. You know it was kind of a spin-off of that. So, that's why I started watching the original O.C. housewives." – Eva*

*"I was really into **Gossip Girl**. I had read the books and the TV show was around that time. New York City television was interesting to me because I knew people who grew up around New York City, but I hadn't spent that much time there. **It was interesting to see New York and like see people's lives in New York City.**" – Stacy*

From there, people explicitly discuss how they were already RTV viewers, and would tend to gravitate to this type of content. If they were Bravo TV viewers, the network itself acted as a sort of gateway into this universe:

*"We **were already Top Chef** viewers, so I think that was part of our **Bravo gateway.**" – Elaina*

*"I've **always enjoyed reality television** and even at that time **I was watching The Hills and other reality TV shows.** I started watching New York and then I just kept watching them through high school, college, and now I'm in my early twenties and I like to watch pretty religiously." – Francis*

"I don't watch much other TV except for like Bravo or HGTV." – Monica

*"I've **always been a reality TV head.** I grew up watching Real World and Road Rules. When OC started, I was living in New York and my roommate and I watched The Hills all the time and we were also really into Laguna Beach. So, **when The Real Housewives of O.C. came on, it just was sort of a natural outgrowth.**" – Laura*

*"I wasn't drawn to the show particularly because it was about housewives itself but more so **just because it was on Bravo.** You know I liked that network and would keep it on while I was doing household chores." – Harry*

Other reasons for originally tuning in to *RH* were due to social connections. Some mentioned their friends watching, others, women in particular mentioned their partners enjoying *RH*. Many mentioned the bonding experience viewing enabled with their mothers:

*"I started watching it because my **mom was really into it.**" – Ashley*

*"I started watching because I'd heard about them from an **ex-boyfriend**... I recall him saying it was entertaining. I started watching it because of that and I got hooked." – Carey*

*"My **mom** really liked reality TV. It was a fun thing that we would do and I would also watch it with my **grandma.** When I would go to her house we would lay in her bed and watch Real Housewives and eat snacks, so it was always this **cozy relaxing** thing for me and it was always just really fun for me." – Helena*

*"It was just kind of like a **bonding time** for me and my mom."* – Mia

Of course, people also mentioned escapism and aspirational motivations for viewing:

*"[I'm] intrigued by you know the kind of **aspirational** aspect of the show."* – Harry

*"What got me was the first season of Beverly Hills. It was **pure escapism**. I think that Beverly hills was that first season where they truly stepped up the **glamour** and the **excess**."* – Chris

*"When people ask me why I watch Housewives in general, it's really because it's a **mind break** ... Part of why I watch is because it's something I **don't have to think** about it's not something that I have to analyze."* – Janice

The most thoughtful responses to the early questions however each discuss the voyeuristic appeal of the series. These responses also evince the kind of voyeurism that is based on self-awareness and interest in using RTV to learn about the self and others:

*"I hate to say it, but it's like an **anthropological study**."* – Laura

*"It has in a sense evolved more into this show about people being on a show and watching how they react under this pressure cooker that, as they realize, could send them to some next level of income or fame or whatever. It's become something else, **it's become more than just a petty drama but it's an interesting study of people**."* – John

*"There is just something so addicting about it and interesting **because they're real**."* – Helena

"It is definitely so interesting that this is the way some people choose to live their lives." – Brittany

*"There's also, I don't want to say an appeal, but **there's that fascination with watching people behaving badly**"* – Katie

The voyeuristic component becomes more salient and personal when I asked if *RH* was similar or different to their own lives. Many respondents answered that the series was similar to their own lives, which notably was part of the draw. Of course, similar in certain regards, like for the human experience, not necessarily in terms of income, background, or lifestyle.

*"I think in any sort of show with human beings its similar, like **we're all small and petty in ways and have stupid fights and do silly things**, but not constantly for dramatic effect."* – Pamela

*"It's like even though they're so out there and they don't match who I am on any level, **it doesn't mean that they can't go through the things that I go through**. Maybe the way it manifests is different between myself and what their situation is, but fundamentally **we're all human beings**, we all **experience similar phenomena in our lives**. So I can't imagine that just because maybe the specific context is different that we're responding to, **even though we're different, we can identify with each other** in some way."* – Janice

*"It is similar and different. I mean obviously the women are on a way different pay scale from me. But I think that **there's a lot of similarities in terms of how women relate to each other**, and how women can try to compete with each other, even when it's not necessary. **I see a lot of my friends in some of those female dynamics**."* – Jessica

*"I don't think that I'm that dramatic or in your face about certain things, but I do catch myself - **we always joke that there's certain things that you're saying that are like 'oh my god this is something that people would say on Housewives'**."* – Mark

*"Both. I'm a middle-aged woman. **Like most of them, I'm suffering from empty nest syndrome. I'm divorced and re-partnered** and have step children and spouses from previous relationships, **just like them. I'm getting older** and thinking about being an older person and thinking about my physical appearance **just like them**. So in some ways **I'm similar to them, in ways that I find satisfying. I can definitely relate to these middle aged American women**."* – Anna

*"I think there's certain things you can relate to like some of **the dynamics within the relationships**, but clearly the lifestyle is not happening for me."* – Paula

*"I think it's similar to my life in **that I saw a lot of women that clearly had their own opinions about things and were very vocal about those opinions and also unapologetically themselves**. Even if I didn't necessarily like who they were being, I kind of respected them for just saying what they thought... **I've always been an outspoken person, so I enjoy watching that**."* – Brittany

Some responses highlighted only differences. Yet, the similarities were most apparent and occurred in a majority of responses. Viewers made distinctions between themselves and the women of *RH*, but in the end, a huge part of the appeal of *RH* is the fact that these shows enable us to watch other 'real' people in action. We learn from, experience, and feel in ways that are

similar to these women, which makes *RH* feel more similar than different to our own lives. In the next section, I discuss more explicitly the pleasures gleaned from viewing *RH*.

4.4.4 **To be politically productive, remove the “guilty” from pleasure**

Watching RTV is most often viewed in public discourse and scholarly research alike as a “guilty pleasure” (McCoy and Scarborough, 2014; Baruh, 2010; Pozner, 2010; Albertini, 2003). The turn to the audience and pleasure in the eighties signified a shift in scholarly understanding of feminized popular culture fandoms. In spite of the fact that Ang concluded her seminal work on audience pleasure with: “women fortunately no longer need to feel ashamed or guilty if they watch *Dallas*...” (1985, p. 132), there is still a heavy stigma associated with fandom of feminized media texts (Gerrard, 2017). This stigma is highly gendered and alludes to the idea that media about women and for (mostly) women audiences is lesser than other types of media. Many fans here referred to *RH* as a “guilty” pleasure, however, in conducting deeper readings of their responses, *guilt* was absent, while pleasurable and meaningful experiences were present.

Feminized media is often dismissed as a lowly form of popular culture because it calls up gendered pleasures. Radway (1984) and Ang (1985) foregrounded pleasure and unraveled the political and socio-cultural controls embedded within certain media. Ang showed that watching *Dallas* did not mean viewers were anti-feminist. Fans, she argued, made their viewing “politically productive” by situating their pleasure within “a feminist plan of action” (1985, p. 132). That feminist plan of action allowed viewers to make sense of the mundanities of daily life, and was tangible in the meaning viewers derived from the series’ “emotional realism.”

The interview analysis shows that viewers remove the guilty conscious from their pleasure in viewing *RH*. Fans of *RH* do this by making their pleasures politically productive through resistance of the dominant intentions of the media frames at play and read the women of

RH in powerful and personally meaningful ways. This is the type of feminist plan of action Ang (1985) advocated for. These fans, as it will be shown, find other ways to read media representations of these women and take away powerful messages that they use in productive ways in their own lives. This analysis demonstrates that viewers might enjoy watching these women fall down, but more importantly fans glean the most pleasure out of *RH* because they are witness to powerful women who are resilient in spirit and authentic in action.

The Best Housewives are Authentic and Resilient

When asked who their favorite *Housewife* was, fans picked more than one. Many made favorites distinctions between women they loved to watch for RTV purposes and those they favored on a personal level. Below is an example of how many responses started off:

*“In terms of personality and the Housewife I’d get along with most, it would be Dorinda. **There are Housewives that I find indispensable**, like Kyle and Bethenny. Both of them are such central characters, Kyle especially is such a foundational character, she’s the matriarch and such a constant. Bethenny is as well. She’s old school. She is who she is and is always interesting to watch, because she’s very direct, very honest.”*
– Helena

Most fans, like the one above, named a variety of women from *RH* as their favorite. While they were not all talking about the same woman, fans did call up similar attributes in their responses to describe why these women were representative of their favorite characters. Fans’ favorite *Housewives* tend to be the women they relate to, and those whom they could see themselves as being friends with in real life:

*“Gosh, Kyle Richards is my favorite. I’m just happy for these to be **flawed and complicated women**... Kyle’s made her mistakes over the years, but for the most part I think she’s a pretty, kind, good-hearted woman. And you know projecting onto her **I can imagine her being my friend, I really like her.**”* – Anna

*“Bethenny for sure. She’s my favorite... I like the honesty and shenanigans. I just think she’s really funny and I would **definitely try to be friends with her if I had the means to do so.**”* – Paula

More than general relatability, a majority of fans shared that the best *Housewives* are *authentic*. Authenticity on *RH*, as defined through analysis of fan responses, is demonstrated by the women who are open to sharing their flaws, lows, and breakdowns, whether they be personal or professional. The key is, these women are always working on something and taking risks in life and business. Authentic *Housewives* make no apologies for who they are, often mess up, but own it, and laugh at themselves. Above anything, the best *Housewives* fall down – and get back up – which viewers not only respect, but find pleasure in watching. Responses demonstrating all of this are shared below:

*“They are very **authentic** in that they’re willing to **put a lot of themselves out there** for the viewer. They’ve all gone through, to some extent, a **relatable struggle**. Whether it’s a breakup or Shannon with the weight gain, I think they all just kind of project a **real authenticity** out there that makes them enjoyable to watch, while also bringing entertainment value into it.” – Jenny*

*“Erika Jayne **knows who she is, she doesn’t apologize for it**... She seems relatively **authentic** for being on that show.” – Monica*

*“I really like Teresa Guidice. I really like how she’s been **knocked over so many times and she’s been pushed through all kinds of mud**. And her and her family have been dragged through the mud; they’ve gone **through such hard troubles** and yet she’s still around and she’s **still come out the other side**. She’s figured out **how to learn from her mistakes**.” – Janice*

*“I root for the **underdogs**.” – Wendy*

*“Kyle Richards is a **real person**... She’s been on for many years and **she’s been open about her difficulties**.” – Brittany*

*“I really like Bethany Frankel. I know a lot of people can’t stand her. I think she’s hilarious. I **can relate to her better** than other people who are probably living off some trust fund or something... To me Bethenny... is just like this is my life... I think we have similar senses of humor and **sometimes I wish I could I be as honest and forthright as she is**. I mean she goes too far, **but I sort of envy her because I definitely do not say what I’m thinking when I probably should sometimes**.” – Lynn*

*On New York..., nine seasons later you have women who are firmly in middle age, who are not married anymore, who are in a place to reinvent themselves. **They had all these things that they struggled for**, for so long, but they lost a lot of other things. **Now they’re***

having to reinvent themselves. All of them, Bethenny, Carrol, Dorinda, they're all reinventing themselves in a way that's really interesting. It's kind of an interesting character study in what it means to be a middle-aged woman and also a middle-aged person in this country and how you can reinvent yourself at any age." – Chris

Authenticity, according to fans, means women who show it all – the good, the bad, and the ugly. This definition and use of the word 'authenticity' does not mean that fans view authenticity as fact. It is simply a descriptive term for the women who do the labor of *emotional camping*. In fact, as fan responses show, one of the outcomes of *emotional camping* is authenticity. Fans are at the same time, admiring of the women's authenticity, and also aware of the fact that these women are crafting images. Those images as they understand, are planned and therefore anything but authentic in the true sense of the word:

*"Obviously this is not who they really are. This is a **media image**, right? **This is a television show and creation similar to our president.** You know **it's not really who that person is at all**, but I mean I'd have to say if I had to pick [a favorite] it would be Lisa Vanderpump."* – Carey

*"Like Bethenny, I know that her brand is very important, and **she's definitely thought of that, and she knows she's going to say [certain things] ahead of time.**"* – Mia

*"[My favorite] in terms of just great TV, really **understands the medium that she's playing with**, for better or worse, I would say Leanne Locken is up there. Since she came in so late to a cannon, she was able to be like, 'okay this is what I'm doing, this is my character.' I feel like **she was very developed as a housewife from the beginning.** That being said **there was a decade of precedent there, she did her research clearly.**"* – Chris

The last quote is inadvertently referencing emotional camping and the type of labor the women do for the show. The template for emotional camping has been laid out by previous women on the series. New housewives, as this fan notes, come on the show understanding how to perform this type of authenticity.

The first response above is very critically aware. This subject related the women's image creation to Donald Trump and then referenced Lisa Vanderpump (*RHOBH*) as her favorite; Vanderpump has been referred to by her cast mates as, "Lisa VanderTrump." The media image

and the creation of authentic personalities is known and acknowledged by fans; yet it does not seem to take away from their pleasure or support of certain women who have successfully worked with production to craft a “real” and “authentic” image. They are aware of the medium of RTV and the fact that these women are curating images of themselves. Simultaneously they still glean pleasure from the production of these images, and also relate to and admire the “authentic” outcomes of these images.

What this means is that fans are able to separate the image from the actual woman. Yes, fans are aware of the fact that this is a RTV show and that this is an image. These images are based on ordinary women going through actual situations. It is that complicated aspect of the *real*; the blurring of ‘reality’ with television that enables a deeper pleasure for those who watch. Take for instance this fan, who shared with me intimate parts of her life, and why watching Dorinda Medley, a widow from *RHNYC*, was so pleasurable:

*“One thing I do want to tell you... will explain why Dorinda is my favorite. **My husband passed away four years ago when he was 37 and I was 36. This is important information because this kind of colors how I talk about them so intimately.** He was in the hospital and we were watching Beverly Hills and his goal was to be out of the hospital by the time New York started, and unfortunately, he didn't make it. I think New York started like two weeks after he passed away. That was **Dorinda's first season and I didn't have friends who were widowed.** [This is] one of the reasons why I'm so passionate about them. **They have legitimately gotten me through the worst thing that could ever happen in my life...** For me, when Dorinda and Carol took the trip to get Carol's husband's ashes, I was home visiting my family that Christmas and I made my mom watch it. I said [to her] ‘this is the most accurate representation of everything that I've been going through.’ They spoke so tenderly and so candidly. What got me is when they talk about the night he died, that's the first night you sleep. **I mean so many people gave me grief books and memoirs and self-help shit and it's just like no this is what it actually is. It's not about ‘oh time makes it better and all that.’ It was just seeing that kind of rawness and that bond that those two have just from going through that.** Whenever I talk about those two, Dorinda and Carol, I always say I love the widow pals. **It's my favorite thing when they're spending time together just because I really relate to seeing the connection that they have.**” – Elaina*

This long quote demonstrates how RTV takes the concept of “emotional realism” further. The meaning of Dorinda as a character and the pleasure behind viewing *RHNYC* for this fan is apparent. Meaning here transcends the level of image, because Dorinda and Carol have actually experienced the same loss as this fan. Fans can see beyond the image and to the person via their shared experiences.

“Emotional realism” refers to the emotional substance that fans identify in curated media texts and images. Ang explained emotional realism as “what fans recognize as realistic” in “fictional worlds” (1985, p. 43). All of these fan responses designate understanding that *RH* is a construction and even more so that the women’s images are constructions. Yet, viewers can pinpoint what is real in the character traits and emotional encounters that resonate with their own human experience. Fans can read what is behind the image and find “authenticity.”

The “emotional realism” of *RH* is even more “real” than the “emotional realism” played to in a scripted soap, like *Dallas*. *RH* offers a heightened sense of emotional realism that humanizes the women on the show and offers viewers a pathway to pleasure by celebrating real women as they navigate tragic and mundane types of human experiences. The pleasure viewers glean from this series is found in the emotional realism of watching truly ordinary women live life. Notably, there was no guilt coming through in responses about relatability and shared experiences. *RH* and its contribution to a heightened sense of emotional realism will be elaborated on next when I analyze the importance of resistance.

Resisting dominant messages

The “*You’re a hypocrite*” *Frame* actually adds to the emotional realism of *RH*, which is a surprising finding given the fact that this framing technique is intended to depict the women negatively. As discussed at length in earlier sections, the “*You’re a hypocrite*” *Frame* is known

across Bravo TV shows as the “Bravo wink.” According to Andy Cohen, it is an “editorial point of view that also makes it okay to watch the show, because we’re all in on it together” (Nightline, 2009). What we are in on together is the joke of the franchise, or the irony of the women themselves. Irony, according to Ang, allows viewers to create distance between themselves and these “bad objects” of popular culture (1985, p. 99). This frame is intended to show the women as idiots, liars, or hypocrites. Jamie, former field producer, explained the Bravo Wink in this way: “when they do that, I mean they’re trying to make them look bad obviously... they try to make them look good physically but they just don’t make them look good personality wise. They’re always trying to catch them in a lie or a moment.” Doing so demonstrates irony by making these rich, privileged women look bad. The intended result of framing the women this way is to make the audience feel better about themselves; which is *schadenfreude* at work.

The use of irony on *RH* however is at moments playful, but often used to depict the hypocrisy of the women’s actions. When one is exposed as a hypocrite, people often feel justified in their judgments of them as being undeserving of their status, achievements, or possessions (Smith, 2013). This frame is therefore intended to lead people to think of these women as undeserving or deficient, which can enable people to feel better about their own status and achievements. When I asked people if the women contradict themselves on *RH*, everyone said yes. When I probed that question further by asking if witnessing this hypocrisy affected their view of the women, it got interesting, particularly because some fans were resistant to the preferred meanings of the frames from production.

The use of irony in the “*You’re a hypocrite*” Frame enabled some viewers to take the “guilty” out their pleasure. Irony is intended here to distance viewers from the women, and for most viewers, irony works in the way it is supposed to, by enabling audience members to feel

justified in viewing the series. Some respondents said yes, the hypocritical actions of the women effected their view of them as people:

“Yeah, because it makes you think, ‘oh she is a hypocrite, she’s contradicting herself, she’s not someone I would trust or want to be friends with...’ It does affect how I view the women. It’s why those women aren’t my favorites on the show and other women who are less hypocritical and less contradictory tend to be more of my favorites.”
– Katie

*“Yeah, I think that, for lack of a better word, **I think that they’re dumber**...For instance, I enjoy the New York franchise or Lisa Vanderpump so much because they are so cunning and calculated.... So **when they contradict themselves it makes me feel like oh you’re so dumb.**”* – Francis

*“Yeah absolutely. Luanne is so pretentious and into being Ms. De Lesseps, and call me Countess, wrote a book on it, right, Class with the Countess? And then she’s drunk in Mexico sneaking one night stands into her condo and then not wanting to get caught on camera about it. **And it’s like, yeah that’s classy keep that up. I think that exists everywhere in that world of having a ton of money or celebrity.** Your public persona, and what they do behind closed doors is so different. **I think sometimes that show kind of shows you that. And it can be absolutely hypocritical.**”* – Paula

These respondents clearly view the women and their actions through the hypocrisy framing package and call up the implications of the frame by noting how the women are hypocrites or “dumb.” There can be pleasure in viewing people at an ironic distance who are seemingly beneath you. Others, noted how they liked certain women one season and disliked them the next:

*“yeah it definitely does because I would say my tendency as a viewer is to get personally invested in what’s going on. If someone’s being attacked I would say I get offended on their behalf. And **that can change depending on who is the underdog because I always kind of feel for the underdog....I have a dislike for housewives at various times and that can change from season to season like I’ve been really liking Lisa Vanderpump this season but last season I really disliked her antics.** But yeah it just depends on how they’re behaving onscreen really.”* – Diana

*“It does [affect my view of them]. **Across the franchises, it’s easy to like somebody one season and to really dislike them another and then go back to liking them again, based on whatever they decided to put out there or how they treated somebody else.**”*
– Jenny

What these fans do not acknowledge is the editing associated with their preference changes. Who is the underdog on a season is determined by producers and the framing packages they will designate to the women. In this way, showing certain women as hypocrites, liars, or idiots is a way to change viewer's perceptions of the women from season to season. In short, there are real implications to framing the women certain ways. Often, there are, as demonstrated here, intended readings from these frames. Viewers confirmed here that yes, they view the women differently and in the ways the frames intend them to be viewed.

However, most importantly, many other respondents shared that watching the women contradict themselves did not negatively impact their view of the women. These fans, resist the preferred messages of producer framing techniques and instead see through the use of irony to the emotional realism at play here. Take for instance these responses:

*"No [it doesn't affect my view of the women]. You know **these women are complex, and they aren't perfect, and that's what makes it really interesting.**" – Joanna*

*"Not really. I mean I think **what I appreciate a lot about the Housewives is that you see a lot of the faults or frailty or the imperfections of these women as they relate to each other.**" – Harry*

*"No. I mean **at some point or another we all contradict ourselves.** That's just natural." – Carey*

"No it makes me love them more." – Mark

*"Not really. [Contradicting oneself] **seems to be really human.** They just happen to have cameras capturing all of their little moments and little asides, and **I'm sure if we all had that happening to us we would have a lot of those critical moments reveal themselves.**" – John*

*"No, I don't think so. I think **I sort of empathize with that.**" – Laura*

*"No, I think **it's really human actually.** I think that **we're all hypocrites in some way shape or form.** And I don't think it's a bad thing. I think it's just human." – Lynn*

Many fans, as indicated above, did not read the “*You’re a hypocrite*” *Frame* in the way it was intended to be read. Instead, these fans viewed the framing of these women as hypocrites as a way of humanizing the women. These fans, whether they understand the editing technique of the Bravo wink or not, saw through the curation of the hypocritical image and use of irony to the emotional realism of being a person who sometimes contradicts themselves. Put simply, the schadenfreude implied in the hypocrisy package did work to make these fans feel better, but to feel better for being human, and not better than or above anyone on the show.

In sum, fans either confirm or reject intended readings of the framing techniques used to present the women. Fans appear to glean different kinds of pleasurable experiences from watching these women contradict themselves. Viewers have nuanced interpretations of the “*You’re a hypocrite*” *Framing* package, and therefore find other ways to take pleasure in viewing these shows at an ironic distance. Fans can make their pleasures politically productive by resisting the preferred meanings associated with certain frames and by creating their own readings of those frames. The next section analyzes whether or not fans view these women as feminists, and further untangles how fans make their pleasures politically productive by resisting dominant media frames.

Resisting Anti-Feminist Frames

The frames used to present the women on *RH* are anti-feminist in that they are employed at specific times to position different women against each other. From a production standpoint *RH*, as argued here, presents deliberately anti-feminist messages and capitalizes on derogatory stereotypes about women, (i.e. women are catty, against each other, or materialistic). It was important to ask viewers about their thoughts on the feminist stance of these women who participate on a show that deliberately positions them against each other. I asked this question

because I was interested in how fans reconciled the anti-feminist frames at play on the show, but mostly to gauge whether and to what extent the frames at play here significantly shape the way viewers see the women from a feminist point of view.

Answers to the question, *would you say these women are feminists?* varied. I want to begin with a quote from one fan who brought up two important components to this question:

“There's two parts here, one is, are the women themselves feminists? Do they stand for a feminist ideology and to that I would say, Carol would, Bethenny would, maybe Lisa Vanderpump would...I think the other question is whether the show is feminist or not...I think that's a complicated question... Gloria Steinem said it was like doing a minstrel show with women. But I think in some ways it is a really powerful way to show how complex women are. It's a way to show women in their thirties, forties, fifties, and sixties with really complicated personal lives, businesses, marriages, children, and doing all of those things in the public eye, and letting them be celebrated in the spotlight. There's not many opportunities in popular culture where we see that happen.”
– Joanna

The insight in this answer demonstrates viewers' awareness of the fact that from a structural level, production of this type of show is not a feminist act. The women themselves however can be feminists and still participate in a show that is rooted in patriarchal ideas about women. Fans may use certain idea elements from these media frames to make sense of issues like feminism here, but they are also making sense of these issues using experience and other knowledge. Examples of this come in responses from fans who answered that yes, these women are feminists. The following responses even evince elements of the postfeminist sensibility to describe their understanding of feminism:

“I think they are feminists because if they want to do something they're going to do it and they feel like they deserve an equal right to do it as their husbands do it. There are a lot of feminist undertones in the housewives because they have options. If they choose to rely on their husbands that's fine, if they choose to open up their own businesses, that's fine.” – Janice

“I think it's the women who are saying I'm choosing to have a career or I'm choosing to be a stay at home mom, but regardless this is my choice. I do think that is

feminist, but I don't know if all of them would identify as feminists. I think the people I like do. I don't think all of them are feminists unfortunately." – Mia

These subjects used words like "choice" and "options," which evokes the meta-frame of *Postfeminist Nirvana*. This shows that some fans use media frames to make sense of issues like feminism. Other fans recognize explicitly the role production plays in being anti-feminist, but acknowledge that the women and representations of these women can be interpreted as feminist:

*"I think that **the larger idea of them can be feminist**. You don't often see older women on TV, working, being sexual, having agency, dating, and having a sort of rich nuanced characterization. **I don't know if it's overtly feminist but I do feel it's covertly feminist** in the sense that they're not defined by their relationships with men. They're defined by their relationships with other women and they're defined by the way that they exist in the world. **Bravo is exploiting them** or kind of making fun of them. I just feel like you don't ever see women of a certain age on TV having these rich problems in their complicated lives and retaining their own agency and sexuality... I do think that there is something worthy there in terms of representations of women."* – Laura

Some fans however clarified that these women might be feminists but likely do not identify that way:

*"**I don't know that all of all of them would self-describe as feminist, but I think they are feminists**. I think they are showing different lives and different experiences of what it means to be a woman and to be a successful woman at that end."* – Chris

*"I think that more of them display behavior that is feminist than would call themselves feminist. **They stand up for themselves, the choices they make for themselves, but would never acknowledge it if it involved catching a new husband or pile of money.**"* – Elaina

Many respondents also said that some women would be feminists, while others would not be.

The next few responses show how some fans consider the women as completely in charge of their own media representation, instead of production:

*"It's hard to say. Carol Radziwell, of course. They keep it so unpolitical that it is kind of hard to tell. Like who would be, who thinks what. **I don't even know if half the ladies would know what feminism really means.**"* – Monica

*"I sometimes see **them replicating stereotypes of women, replicating patriarchal views of women**. That does seem very non-feminist, not necessarily anti-feminist, but there does seem to be a certain amount of internalized patriarchy and internalized misogyny*

in the way that some of these women think about themselves and talk about each other in the way that they act within the show. I don't think it's as simple as are they are or aren't they. I think some women are more than others ...which is why from a feminist perspective the show is interesting because you can see the women kind of negotiating that to a certain extent." – Katie

"Some of them are. I mean you have to ask them how they perceive themselves. But I do think that some of them are much stronger and show more feminist tendencies than others and some of them would be like don't call me that." – Carey

These responses consider the women as individuals, in spite of the fact that production is choosing what to show about them. This demonstrates that producer framing tactics play into how feminist the women appear to be. Other respondents said no, these women are not feminists based on their behavior and in participating on the series to begin with:

"The show didn't start this way, but it's evolved to this point where they pit women against each other and they just fight, it's constant arguments. So I don't consider the show at all to be feminist, and I would be surprised if they believe themselves to be feminists. You have to be somewhat cynical to be on the show and make money from it." – Lynn

"I don't want to label a woman as a feminist or not a feminist, but I think that a lot of these women do engage in dangerous behavior that we all for some reason are watching...I consider myself a feminist. You know they put down other women instead of collaborating they compete, all this stuff, that's what humans do. some of the women could be more feminist and could help raise their friends and women up." – Francis

"Oh no. Many of them have very complicated relationships with gender and gender equality agendas...Most of the women do not display a feminist consciousness. They do not have really an equality consciousness. You know they are focused on the individual and individual success in society. And I don't see them display a lot of empathy or political recognition of some of the big complex issues facing societies in terms of equality, racism, sexism, poverty, homelessness, you name it. It's not their bag." – Anna

The major difference between those who said yes and those who said no, these women are not feminists, is that those who said yes, tend to see the anti-feminist frames from production at play and believe the women to be feminists on an individual level. Those who said no, see participation in this series as anti-feminist in itself. This suggests a general incongruity in understandings of feminism as an issue. Those who say yes are perhaps showing that their idea

of feminism has been shaped by a postfeminist sensibility. Those who do not, comprehend feminism using knowledge outside of mediated depictions. The divide makes sense considering there are constant battles in feminist scholarship and discourse over what can constitute as feminism and what might not.

The intention of the question again, was not to determine if the series or the women are feminist, but rather to see if and how people use these media frames to make sense of an issue like feminism within the context of a show that is at times deliberately anti-feminist. This analysis points to the fact that all fans used the frames at play in different ways to discuss the issue of feminism. Some said yes, the women are feminists and directly called up the postfeminist sensibility employed on *RH*. Some said no because they viewed the women's actions as anti-feminist – but those actions are presented to us and embedded within deliberate anti-feminist frames. This demonstrates the importance of media framing in telling people how to think about issues, in this case, feminism.

Importantly, you can hear fans working through the anti-feminist frames at play on the series and sorting through how they are able to reconcile that with being feminists themselves. The fact that fans do this on their own demonstrates critical awareness of their viewing *RH*, which is in itself a politically productive process. These fans are not passive observers, they are active, critical viewers and derive deep interpretations about the images they see. Audience responses are nuanced and varied. Just because producers present the women in non-feminist ways, does not mean that viewers confirm those preferred readings. Audiences can glean pleasure because they view these women as empowered feminists or because they do not. Fans see other messages through the cracks of the social, political, and cultural limitations of production. It is not about whether the women are feminists, but rather if fans can see through

the frames to the emotional realism of the women's experiences. They process their own "feminist plan of action" by pinpointing their pleasures in the heightened emotional realism at play on *RH*.

Now that audience pleasure has been contextualized by a heightened sense of emotional realism, I move from gendered pleasures and feminist understandings of *RH*, towards a deeper analysis of the subsequent pleasures gleaned from watching a show that frames women to depict certain ideas about class, wealth, and status. The next section demonstrates that *RH* enables fans to make distinctions that are central to our individual and collective understanding of social class. Using class distinctions to describe what they see is not only useful, but also arguably, a pleasurable part of viewing *RH*. Following next is analysis of how viewers talk about class.

4.4.5 **How viewers talk about class**

RH foregrounds materialism. If viewed as a cultural artifact, *RH* reveals two things: 1) how class is presented in media and 2) how people talk about class. Unpacking these things would make for a better understanding of media and audience ideas about class. *RH* as a cultural phenomenon is one avenue through which we can decipher how class is communicated across mediated contexts and in personal dialogue. This is important because people's understanding of social class and position is tied to the way they view things like inequality and opportunity; concepts that play into political decision making (Gilens, 2012; Bartels, 2009).

Shared next are responses from the third interview question: which series is your favorite? When asked this question, it became clear that talking about *RH* means talking about issues related to social class. It appears that part of the pleasure in viewing the series is that it enables the audience to make class distinctions. This is especially apparent among subject's who favored *RHNYC* or *RHOBH*.

“New York and Beverly Hills [are my favorite] because they’re the ones where the people have real money. They’re not desperate like a lot of the other ones who seem desperate to ... use their role on the show to increase their income stream... Whereas in New York or Beverly Hills it’s more about the fabulous lifestyles and their trips.”
– John

*“The ones that **I tend to like the best are the ones where they have the most money** and it’s the complete opposite of my real life. It’s kind of fun to watch all that **conspicuous consumption** and just see the ridiculous things that these people do.”*
– Monica

*“I feel like **New York and Beverly Hills have stayed true to the premise of the fantasy life** that you can see these people living.”* – Lynn

*“Beverly Hills. **They have the most money.** It’s like watching a fantasy life I wish I was able to have. Since it’s reality it’s not that far away. It’s not like watching a movie where this can’t happen, but when you’re watching the reality show it’s like this could happen if I had money for that lifestyle.”* – Ashley

*“Beverly Hills, **you can definitely tell the women are wealthy.** All of them just have **ridiculous amounts of money.** It all seems a lot more - **not high class** – but you can tell there’s **a lot of wealth there** and with that **affluence** comes a lot more interesting dynamics between the women.”* – Eva

*“I like Beverly Hills and New York the best. I mean **they’re all tacky but they’re probably the least tacky.**”* – Pamela

*“I’m from the East coast so maybe I never really liked the whole “I’m the hottest housewife in Orange County thing.” It all seemed so superficial – it’s all superficial – **but it seems more superficial** to me. Every woman was blonde and everyone had fake boobs and everyone wore the same clothes and everyone was tan and wore bikinis all the time and it was just... **I don’t want to say trashy**, but it seems like **they just want to be flaunting their wealth.** With New York they’re definitely flaunting their wealth and they’ve all definitely had work done, but I don’t know, **they seem more dignified.**”* – Mia

Making sense of which franchise has the most women with “real” money or which franchise is the least “tacky” or “trashy” happens by way of class-based evaluations. Viewing one series as having a cast that is “more dignified” than others implies class-based ideas about behavior.

The responses shared above are to the question *which series is your favorite?* This question was not prompting class distinctions in the purposeful way later questions did. Point being, fans make class distinctions on their own when making sense of their favorite series and

why they glean pleasure from certain shows over others. This points to the idea that *RH* enables fans to make class distinctions, and those distinctions are central to our understanding of social class and even part of the pleasure of viewing *RH*. Following next, I analyze responses that more explicitly detail how viewers talk about class in the context of *RH*. This was helped by the fact that as we moved deeper into the interview guide I asked fans to directly consider class. Most fans defined class in terms of behavior, privacy, and money (old versus new).

Class as best behavior

As a probe into how the women treat each other on the show, I asked respondents if they would define the women's behavior as classy. With the exception of one subject who replied, "sure, why not?" every other person replied no. The following responses demonstrated how fans consider classy behavior.

*"In general, I would say no, but I would also say it varies from franchise to franchise. I think the Beverly Hills, and I guess New York casts would be the most classy... When Beverly Hills started it seemed like the women were **very proper**. That was their thing. And when someone like Brandi came on the scene they were over-the-top horrified by her cursing and if she would talk about sex. And when she accused Kim Richards of doing meth they said they didn't even know what meth was or what it looked like. It was so strange." – Diana*

*"A countess would not be **picking up a man in a bar and taking him home and you know having sex** with him with her girl friends' room conjoined or whatever she's doing... I would think **more appropriate behavior** would be just going on that trip, having a nice time with your girlfriends, and going home and going to sleep..." – Paula*

*"I'm thinking of Countess LuAnn specifically acting like she is so much better and has so much more class and grace and style and whatnot, and then she gets arrested for **being drunk and disorderly**. You know that **there are plenty of people who have less money but far more of things like class and grace and elegance**." – Katie*

*"Lisa VanderPump is **classy in how she talks to people, how she presents herself and how she handles herself in an argument**. Whereas classless people on the show throw their drinks in someone's face, are saying rude comments in public places and creating a scene. I don't think that's classy because if you're going to be classy, it has to be all day. It can't be only until you have drinks." – Ashley*

*“Heather Dubrow tends to **keep her emotions in check** ...she I think is the best example of someone who **doesn't scream and yell** and doesn't throw drinks...she doesn't yell at people, she will speak firmly with them. But I think she's **also pretty thoughtful in how she speaks to them** rather than some people who are rather than talking about the situation they're attacking the person.” – Janice*

*“Not all of them...I think the ones that are tend to **keep their composure in high intensity situations**... They are able to talk **rationally** about what happens from both sides.” – Eva*

Classy behavior is reserved, composed, and rational. It is also having the ability to remain calm in the face of drama. Classy behavior means also not drinking to excess, which is something producers have been accused of exacerbating.¹⁹

Class as privacy

Another idea about classy behavior is that of privacy. According to respondents, privacy is considered in two ways. The first is that truly classy people would not conduct themselves with anything but decorum in a public place. The implication is that arguments and emotional situations that threaten one's public face need to take place in private settings. The second notion of privacy is that people of a certain class would not want the attention of a RTV show in the first place.

*“No, I think someone with **true class** wouldn't get into a screaming cat fight in a public place...I think that someone with true class and grace and style probably also **wouldn't be on a reality show** in the first place.” – Katie*

*“I don't think anybody who is truly old wealth would be likely to go on a show like that because they'd be private... I think they're desperately trying to climb into it. I think overall wealth in America has changed greatly... when I think of wealth I do think of old waspy **quiet money** that just isn't ostentatious, and even though the world's changed, you know **you still wouldn't go on that kind of show**.” – Pamela*

There were other responses similar to this, but they began calling up another major idea about classy behavior, which began to be defined in terms of ‘old money’ and ‘new money.’

¹⁹ [New York Post](#) article claims the *RH* producers “keep the booze flowing.”

Class as money: Old versus new

Old money is referred to as generational wealth or “real” money here. Old money is quiet, and demonstrates the private, reserved behaviors the fans have been discussing. New money is a type of insult. The behaviors exhibited by ‘new money’ people reference a lower-class background. Old money conduct is considered innate, rather than learned, which will be discussed alongside authenticity.

“The ones that are inherently classy are the ones I believe have actual money.” – Elaina

*“I think it depends on who's definition you have. But I would say some people yes, some people no. I think classy is really **socially determined** and that goes back to the **old versus new money thing**...in terms of these social norms and accepted behaviors people fall pretty evenly one or the other to me. The people I see as **new money are the ones at parties that make big scenes**.” – Brittany*

*“I do not believe most of these women are **innately classy**. If you would say they're **new money or old money - they're new money**.” – Monica*

When asked directly if they thought class was displayed differently in certain series or among certain women, the distinction between old money and new money became more explicit.

*“I think they might use the term **new money or old money** at times... In a place like OC new money is the given there, so you're not going to criticize somebody who became rich in their life. Whereas with Dallas there's this trope [of] **not being born into wealth**.” – Diana*

*“**Old Money is a great-grandfather or great-great-great grandfather** who was a steel magnate or something, a **Vanderbilt or a Carnegie**. I've known people that had money in their family for generations. And they're the opposite of any of this. They're not pretentious or and they're trained to be more down to earth and they're not ostentatious like this. These shows should be called “**new Money housewives**”... and that's why they're so fun to watch, because they're ridiculous.” – Carey*

*“In New England, a big idea is **old money versus new money**...if you see somebody in a **flashy car** that means they're new money and that's **looked down upon**. If you have money you don't need to tell anybody you have money. You show money by having maybe a house in Nantucket **that you go to very quietly** for two months of the year or you live in a small house and it's really nicely decorated and you live a really modest life. **But then when you go to college your Dad paid all four years with one check**. I think you can tell [the difference] based on how [people] talk about how expensive things are.”*

– Brittany

*“Nouveau riche ...is spending on things that are **very in vogue** to have right now. **Tamra and Kyle will buy new handbags all the time, but Luann won't make a big scene** whenever she has a new handbag.” – Francis*

*“I’m sure they do this purposefully when they recruit them; they don't want people to come from old money. **Old money would be boring. I’ve known people with old money and they're pretty boring.**” – Carey*

Many associated classy-behavior with old money, and because it was connected to old money it was *innate*. Innate implies authenticity. One fan made an interesting point about class and authenticity, shared below in full is his response to the question, would you describe their behavior as classy?

Class vs. authenticity

*“No, I would not describe [their behavior] as classy. **I would describe it as more authentic than classy.** I mean I think they behave in ways that a lot of people behave in their social circles, right? I don't know. And some of that is highlighted or fueled maybe by the inclusion of alcohol or you know producers that are framing certain narratives. But I don't know that it's necessarily classy, but I do think that it's more authentic than not.” – Harry*

In talking this through with the respondent and others, classy behavior and authenticity clash because to be authentic means showing emotions, and expressing them honestly. To conduct oneself with class means monitoring behavior, and to be authentic means to let go of any self-monitoring. The women’s non-classy behavior is part of what makes them appear to be presenting their true authentic personalities to viewers. On the other hand, it demonstrates that classy behavior – when wrapped up in old money, is anything but innate.

Take for instance what one respondent said above about old money in New England: how the rich are “*trained to be* more down to earth and they're not ostentatious like this.” This point is evidenced in all of the other responses. The implication is that new money types are conspicuous while old money types are not, because they have nothing to prove. The denigration of new

money types is interesting because new money types, like the Alphas on *RH*, those women who are known and celebrated for being entrepreneurial, show that upward class, status, and social mobility are possible in the U.S. Yet, people make the distinction that these types are new money. They made it, but they were not born into it, and show their social origins through behavior and conspicuous consumption.

There is no denigration of the old money types. Their behavior is viewed as innate, even though it is just as put upon as new money types. Their performance of class, as shown in the interviews, is to downplay conspicuous consumption and bad behavior. The complexities associated with talking about social class become more apparent when we discuss deservingness and luck.

Deservingness and Luck

To probe viewers further, after I asked about how the women achieved their wealth and status I asked, “would you say the women are deserving of their wealth?” Across the board this question made people uncomfortable. A few people were aghast that I would ask such a question. “Wow! I’m not sure what to make of that question,” “I’m not going to make a value judgment,” “In general, that is a ridiculous question, I don’t like to do that.” Those are just a few of the responses I received to asking this question, but everyone answered, and they varied.

Some were completely supportive:

“Absolutely. In a capitalist society if you want to play that game and you want to go for it and you want to get into real estate and the stock market and all of these opportunities available for people who want to participate in those dimensions of the economy and the capitalist system, then sure. Those are not my aspirations. I don't think I really have any friends like that. But I'm perfectly happy to watch them and hold them in very positive regard for the people they are.” – Anna

Many responses were middle of the road however, and those responses evoked the idea of the *Hustler Frame* to make sense of deservingness.

*“I mean **I don't know** that ...it's up to me to say that someone is more deserving than someone else. But I think **I relate better to people who work hard for it**, versus someone like Erica who just married into it.” – Lynn*

*“**Yes and no**. Obviously **when I see someone who doesn't work** and it's very obvious that they are able to do everything in their life because of someone else's **money, it doesn't seem as deserving**. Then **when one of them is talking about what they're doing in their career**, and how they've been working all these jobs, **then I think it's, it's not more deserving it's more like I think she owns that money**, has more control in her life than the other woman.” – Ashley*

*“I would say [Bethenny] is more deserving of wealth **than someone who hasn't worked as hard for it**.” – Helena*

*“The ones that have **established their own** wealth and are not relying on their husband's wealth – **as long as it's not just a woman that's wealthy because her husband is wealthy, I think they deserve it**.” – Eva*

Other respondents were comfortable saying no, the women did not deserve it. This could be confirmation of the preferred meaning of the frames at play on *RH*. However, it appears more so that fans who say the women do not deserve their wealth are actually making a larger critique about capitalism:

*“Well in **the current state of the world today I have a hard time saying any woman is deserving of their wealth...** I don't begrudge people being wealthy. **I just wish that they didn't hoard it**.” – Pamela*

*“**I don't know if there's anyone who deserves a certain amount of wealth**. I don't think any of them really deserve the amount of wealth that they have. Bethenny, like I said, she's worked really hard for it, **but the money she made is from selling a low calorie alcoholic beverage**. **I don't know if that's deserving of all of the wealth she has**. I don't think any of them really deserve the wealth that they have. **I don't really see how selling products helps society as a whole**. I guess maybe I have a little chip on my shoulder, but **I just don't think that any of them deserve the amount of wealth that they have**.” – Mia*

Other people note the *Charity Frame*, which became more apparent as the franchise aged. It is not always salient on *RH*, but used to frame certain women in a positive light. The following response shows how important that frame is.

*“Some of the women are very proactive and they're very aware that they are privileged and they **try to give back**. Some of the Atlanta women they had this camp for the kids who*

*were affected by the Flint water crisis. Or Lisa Vanderpump, she does her Animal Rescue stuff. And there are definitely situations where I think that **even if they didn't earn it... they're at least doing something positive with their money....** For me, it's partly how they got their money, but more importantly, what they do with their money.*” – Janice

Not every respondent called up the *Hustler frame* or the *Charity Frame* to make sense of deservingness. This shows that audience members’ understanding of class, wealth, and deservingness is nuanced and varied. Respondents rationalize that the idea of hard work is tied to deservingness, but also factor in the importance of charity and giving back. Those who say no, they do not deserve their wealth, and do not call up these frames, see capitalism as the problem, not the women themselves on *RH*. This means they have a different reading of the women on the series.

Interview responses also demonstrate that people may have felt uncomfortable talking about deservingness when considering (conspicuously) rich women, but no one felt uncomfortable discussing luck. When asked if they thought some of women on the show got lucky, a majority of interviewees said yes. Here is a sample of the overwhelming majority of responses that say yes:

*“It's a crap shoot. Yes. **Luck is not a bad way to describe it.**”* – Anna

“Yes. But a lot of that luck went hand in hand with youth and genetics.” – Elaina

*“The first thing that comes to mind is **they're all attractive people so they had a leg up** advantage wise on **marrying wealthy**, multiple times. And maintaining that wealth and maybe even on their **own merit** they probably were more advantaged just being attractive.”* – Stacy

*“Yes. **they got a really cool opportunity** that worked for them and in that sense, yes. But on **the other hand**, **luck indicates in some ways that anyone can do it.** But being a good housewife is a skill. Whether or not you value that skill is a personal choice, but being a housewife is a skill and not everyone could do it and not everyone could maintain audience attention for you know 10 years on this kind of a show.”* – Joanna

*“Oh yeah for sure. I think that Bethany Frankel is a really good example of that because when she came back on the show after she had sworn off *Housewives*, she did this*

interview with Andy Cohen and she cried, 'now I'm a rich bitch.' And she began to thank Andy; this is all because of you. [She] acknowledged that without the Housewives, Skinny Girl Margarita would have been fine and available at Target. But I don't think that we would have had Skinny Girl popcorn etc. That is luck. She took advantage of the opportunity. You know if you notice she is hustling hard... She's lucky because she got that exposure." – Francis

"Oh sure. Isn't that almost everybody who is super wealthy? There is a huge dose of luck." – John

"I think Erica Jane got lucky. But I also don't think that that luck is wasted on her. I think you can be lucky and have it be a positive thing. I feel sometimes when you say oh they're so lucky it has a negative connotation because it means they didn't work for it." – Janice

"Yes. I think some of them fell into this. Nene Leakes, she's awesome and a great personality but if she was not on this TV show, I don't know how she would have got all the things she got. I mean she's had some roles on Glee, on Broadway, but because she was on RH. I don't think she was just given it, I think she lucked out. She'd never have that if not for RH. RH really helped grow careers and businesses on the show." – Mia

"Yes I think implicitly at some point if you have great success at some point you got lucky." – Pamela

"Absolutely. Yeah that's not a dig or a negative thing. Absolutely. I think many of them just got lucky. They had friend who had a friend who was looking for people to do the show or just happened to live in the right neighborhood at the right time." – Chris

Most fans view luck in terms of opportunity and clarified that luck is not a negative since it can work alongside hard-work. Overall, it was easier for fans to discuss luck than deservingness, which is something that will be discussed in the Discussion chapter. Next, I analyze fan responses about their own social class.

Personal Conceptions of Class

All interview subjects for this research categorized themselves in the *middle class*. Thirty-eight percent said they identify as part of the *upper-middle class*, with the same percentage identifying as being firmly in the *middle of the middle class*, with 19 percent identifying as part of the *lower middle class*. On the whole, the people who identified as strictly

in the middle of the middle class were the most confident talking about their class position, but no one was completely comfortable in detailing their answer. Subjects also classified themselves in one of these three tiers on their own, without prompting. Following next are responses from people identifying as being strictly middle:

"I am straight up middle class. I did grow up in Chicago. My mom is a teacher and I grew up in a pretty average suburb. A lot of people in my family are college educated, I went to a pretty good college, I work in a pretty decent corporate type of job which I've had since I graduated. So maybe there are parts of things that I've experienced that are a little more upper class, but I would say for the most part I have a pretty solid middle-class existence." – Jenny

"I'm certainly middle class.... I have a graduate degree and I'm working on a second. Fully employed, have a middle income, especially for my age group. I have access to opportunities and I have to pay taxes this year which is a huge bummer. I would say that I have access to privilege, but I'm also not super wealthy, I have student loans that sort of thing." – Chris

"Middle. I am straight middle class. My parents and I grew up probably upper middle class. But again, I don't know I mean in the past 40 years our demographics have shifted so much that it's hard, it's a weird comparison." – Pamela

"I was brought up in a lower middle-class family in terms of income...my Father was a librarian working for the state and my mother was a librarian working for the city. They both went to university, first people in their family to go to university and were highly educated. We had lots of cultural capital in the family. And my siblings, my brother and my sister we continued that, we all went to university. My sister has a master's. I have a Ph.D. We all have professional jobs. And I'm solidly middle class." – Anna

Words like *certainly*, *solidly*, *straight up* are used to define their position in the middle. These respondents use education, occupation, location, and tax status to determine position. Other people will discuss a disparity in how they view their position versus other people:

"I feel differently about it than my parents feel about it, then probably people around me feel about it. I feel like I grew up poor. My parents would say we grew up lower middle class and that they were always striving for middle class. My metric [for being poor] is that food stamps were always a possibility, there were payday loans, things like that. That's my metric. We didn't have a lot growing up, by the government's standards my parent's income was not high. I would say now, even though I make more than the

*average American, I would say **I'm still middle class**, like middle of the road, **but I aspire to be like aspirational towards a wealthier class.***" – Stacy

*"**I know that most people ascribe themselves to the middle class** even though many are lower middle class. I would be middle class, possibly on a lower end of the middle class, definitely not on the higher end of the middle class. I base that on **my job and salary.**"*
– Diana

Next are some responses that illuminate how people unpack being a part of the upper-middle class:

*"**Just looking at my financial records I'd probably be lower middle class.** I come from what I would say is upper middle class, even slightly low low low upper class. Growing up my **dad was in the military** and we moved around a lot. I grew up **fairly cultured.** The military gave us **access to travel**, and I lived overseas for several years. So comparing myself to other kids in my American high school, once my dad retired, I did almost feel like **I was definitely towards the upper end of the socioeconomic spectrum of my high school, even if I didn't have the newest technology or drive the newest car.** Growing up I always had everything I needed and most of what I wanted. I always felt like I was definitely fairly economically privileged. **I would still consider myself to be in that status now, even if my bank account might reflect otherwise,** just because that is the kind of wealth culture that I grew up in. **I had access, I had privilege. I can still emulate a lot those kind of status symbols and have saved up and spent my money wisely to continue projecting that my life kind of fits there** rather than somewhere else. So that is kind of **roughly where I see myself.**"* – Katie

*"I would say upper middle. I think it's just your **family life, where you grow up,** where you **go to school, the people you surround yourself with.** The college you decide, the **job** you take. **I think it all sets itself up or just based on relationships from your roots.**"*
– Mark

*"I guess I would say **upper middle class...** I'm a **lawyer** and everyone I know and work with and **interact with socially** is usually someone with a **professional degree** and at minimum with a college degree. And I recognize that alone is rarified. Because my parents never went to college and I think it's the majority of Americans don't have a college degree. **The fact that my peers, everyone I know does signals to me that I'm a little disconnected from some part of the country.**"* – John

For those who identify as being a part of the upper middle class, social class becomes less about income and economic capital and more about social capital, and access and privileges that are experienced in daily life. Other respondents pointed to a feeling of never having to worry, parental support, no need for financial aid, and material things like vacations:

*"I would say **upper middle class**. I went to a **private school** for grammar and middle school... **I don't have student loan debt**...I think one of the defining things is how you're forced to spend your money." – Francis*

*"I would say I grew up **upper middle class**. I never worried about money as a child." – Helena*

*"I think **upper middle**...[that is based on] **things I'm able to purchase, vacations I'm able to go on, schools that I attend and I don't need financial aid**. It's just a **relationship with money, I can ask my parents for help, that's how I know**." – Ashley*

Following next are responses from those who identified as being a part of the lower-middle. For those who identified as being a part of the lower-middle class, social class is more explicitly transitory, situational, and relative to other people. It describes a feeling of not having everything you want.

*"I definitely **grew up lower middle class**. But I would say culturally that wasn't the case **it was more situational**... My dad... **never went to college**... I always had a house, I never had to worry about food, but **I kind of grew up in a very middle class to upper middle-class community**. **I couldn't play soccer because we didn't have money.... comparing myself to others, I felt like I didn't really have the things I wanted... Culturally I feel like I grew up learning manners** and like all my relatives were Ph.D. 's from Ivy league schools and we had a lot of antiques and things like that. I learned the value of things even though like the reason we had them was like **accumulated wealth verses new money**." – Brittany*

*"That's a tough question I think about this all the time. **I'm in grad school so I have little money and I work three jobs and I have to take out loans** and I think about **how I shop at discount** grocery stores. **The people I shop with are definitely in a lower class**. Especially where I live the people I see are struggling to pay their bills and I definitely feel that strain economically, **but I also know that I have the gift of an education which will pay off at some point**. **Right now I'm really struggling. But in a couple years from now, I'll hopefully not be struggling as much**...I think my education level – it doesn't prevent me from being in a lower class economically but it does raise my socioeconomic status a bit. **I think I'm lower middle class right now.... But I see upward mobility... I think some people in a similar economic boat don't have that option of upward mobility**." – Mia*

*"**I'm not sure because I feel like I grew up upper middle class**. But I feel like I stepped back a little bit because of education; there I feel like I'm way ahead of the curve. But also, that kind of stunted my professional growth in the sense that if I had gone a different career I could have been way more advanced financially than I am now. **So financially I***

think I'm probably lower middle class but a lot of other factors kind of play into who I am, I think they bump me up a couple notches.” – Janice

“I’m probably in the lower middle class although that might be generous to myself. I like to think of myself in the class of artists, because I’m an artist and I like to give myself some slack. But I certainly don’t make a lot of money. I’m definitely budgeting everything.” – Jessica

For those who identified explicitly as being a part of the lower middle class, cultural capital such as education, taste and belongings, learned manners become more important as an indicator of one’s position. Finally, lower middle class is associated most often with a feeling of insecurity in comparison to other people. Take for instance this respondent:

“I make low six figures. I own a house in Los Angeles. and I feel financially comfortable particularly compared to the rest of the county. In Los Angeles, I feel very lower middle class.” – Elaina

This interview subject, a single woman, according to Pew would be classified as part of the upper class. It is interesting she would classify herself as beneath that but also not surprising given the economic insecurity most people tend to feel at this moment. She notes that she feels as though she is a part of the lower middle because of how she is positioned relative to her neighbors. Therefore, social class for many is determined by who is relatively near to you.

Responses show that class is viewed as transitory, precarious, and that it is easiest to identify with being in the middle. This is evidenced by the fact that interview subjects, without being prompted, categorized themselves into upper, middle, and lower divisions of the middle class. Making such divisions in itself references a general insecurity among those in the middle class because we feel the need to further stratify the middle, in an already stratified society.

Social class identification here is mostly tied to cultural capital and income. But it is social connection, or how one feels in comparison to other people that appears to drive people’s understanding of their own position. Economic capital is an important designation for class

position, but it was the least talked about in terms of people's personal categorization here. This might be key to understanding people's feeling of economic security.

Economic insecurity

I asked, *in ten years do you think we'll see a stronger economy or not?* after asking viewers to work through their class identity because I wanted to gauge simply if they felt confident about their position. Responses to this question were interesting. Thirty-four percent of responses were classified as yes, the economy would be better in 10 years. Forty-six percent of subjects said no, and fifteen percent did not want to say yes or no because they understand the economy fluctuates. A majority of responses that said no to this question also mentioned another recession:

*"Ten years I would expect continued periods of fluctuation, and God forbid but not unlikely a **recession**."* – Anna

*"from what I've read and I'm pretty politically active, **we are headed towards a recession probably**. I actually think in 10 years we'll be about where we are now; **we'll have gone through a recession and will be just about out of it**. So I don't think it's going to be significantly better because I think there's something coming similar to the dot com bubble and the housing bubble."* – Lynn

*"I'm predicting another Great Recession which is why I'm going back into **industry**... I'm really a pessimist with society right now. I think it's going to get a lot worse before it gets better. So I don't think we're going to have a stronger economy in ten years. **I think it's going to be much much weaker**."* – Brittany

*"No I think **we'll see a worse economy... I think we're going to see a recession**."* – Francis

Even most of the responses that said "I don't know" are really saying *no*. These next two even mention engaging with certain content when the economy is bad:

*"I don't know. I work in finance so I tend to think that **we're probably headed towards another recession**. Seeing as it's been so long since the last one, which means maybe we're in for a dip, another 10 years from now we could be on the recovery. So the economy could be stronger... **When things are so uncertain financially there's comfort in just watching people that have a lot of money spend it. Or it could disgust***

you. Or you could be like, ‘oh I remember those times! I want to get back to those times’.” – Monica

*“I would say yes and there's a part of me that says yes I think so, **but I think that there will be some burst bubbles and recessions in between then and now.** And on the other hand, who the hell knows? The world is a little out of control right now in terms of economics so I don't know what it will be like in 10 years. **Isn't it during bad economic times that people start looking for escapism?**”* – Pamela

To answer the last respondent, why not? *RH* and other media depicting lives of excess in a bad economic time gives people someone to blame or something to use for escapism from the reality of a hard time. These respondents put this together without prompting from me. Each fan is very aware of the series, many of its implications, and go deep in their own understanding of why they might be viewing and enjoying this content.

Only two people who identified as being a part of the upper middle class said yes to the economy being stronger in ten years. This might indicate a “fear of falling” among those who tentatively placed themselves as part of the upper middle class. Half of those who identified as part of the upper middle class said no to seeing a stronger economy in ten years, and the others said ‘I don’t know,’ which really read as a negative response to the question. In contrast, a majority of those who expressed confidently that they were solidly in the middle of the middle class, said yes, the economy will be better in ten years. This indicates that those who feel more steadfast in their perceived position are more confident about their economic security.

In sum, those who are confidently in the middle, express more security in a strengthening of the economy over the next a decade. Those who were unsure of their place in the upper middle said that they did not believe the economy would be better in ten years. There is more precariousness and insecurity in the upper middle-class individuals’ responses. These findings will be discussed in the Discussion chapter.

4.4.6 **The messages of *RH***

To conclude each interview, I asked viewers, what do you think the overall message of the show is? I asked this question to gauge how viewers interpreted the frames on an overarching level. Responses varied, which demonstrates that the frames at play on *RH* work to conjure up multiple messages that are in turn interpreted in various ways by fans. The three main messages that fans identified are: 1) the rich are just like us because they have problems too, 2) that women and their relationships with each other are complicated, and 3) there is no message other than pure entertainment. There were also three other interpretations from fans that were not as popular among respondents, but they will be discussed here. Following next, in fans own words, are their interpretations of the messages of *RH* and subsequent analysis.

The rich are just like us (because they have problems too)

Nine of the 26 respondents explained the message of the series (in so many words) as ‘the rich are just like us’. This is, as argued in the framing section, one of the preferred readings of the series at the level of production. Here are some of their voices:

“[RH] reminds me of the page in US Weekly, when they go ‘stars, they’re just like us.’ I think what they’re trying to do is humanize rich people, and show they’re just like us.”
– Ashley

*“I definitely wouldn’t say it’s about empowering women or anything to that effect... Just because she’s got a huge shoe closet **does not mean that she can’t have problems** with her kids or husband or job or her aspirations... **It’s about finding some kind of common touch points with women of different economic levels. There are some problems that are common to all women.**”* – Carey

*“The all-encompassing message is that **it doesn’t matter what you have, where you go, what you do. Everyone is going to have problems.** You have to be purposeful in your actions and your words regardless of your status, your wealth, your marital status because everybody deals with it. **I think seeing people who are ‘social leaders’ in some respects, go through that kind of stuff, and maybe it makes it more normal for when you go through something like that. It’s fine because even rich people go through it.**”*
– Janice

*“The message of the show is presenting these extremely wealthy people and all their flaws and foibles at the same time... **You know just because you have a lot of money doesn’t mean you don’t have problems.**” – Laura*

Showing wealthy people as regular individuals with problems too humanizes them. The significance of this reading will be revisited in the Discussion chapter.

Women, and their relationships with each other, are complicated

Six of the 26 viewers interviewed here said that the message which resonated the most with them was that women are complicated, and so are their relationships. Here are some of their voices:

*“I think the overall message of the show is that **people live complicated lives and people have complicated relationships.** I think you can read into that, it’s about things of excess, all of this, but I think ultimately at the core of it, it’s **that people are complicated.**” – Chris*

*“The show is set up to see the interactions between the group of people in that season, and see how adult women act together. And **that’s really complicated... The inter-weavings of personal relationships between adults is very complicated.**” – Stacy*

*“The overall message of the show is to give **an aspirational view of the lives of complicated women.** The stories of their interwoven relationships are something that I think people want to see.” – Harry*

During my first round of analysis I did not view this as an actual message, but rather a trope often used to discuss the series. Now however, I find this to be a strong take away message because a lot of the respondents who shared this message are drawn to watching a series that shows women three-dimensionally. The frames at play on *RH* can present the women as complicated; they show the women’s softer side, charitable side, work ethic, but also all of their mistakes and worst moments. The message that women are complicated is a positive, feminist reading of *RH* because it evinces the idea that women are many-sided, which has been buried in media depictions of women. This might not be, from an analytical stance, the deepest reading of the series, but it is apparently a very meaningful message pulled out by fans. If this is their

reading of the show and they find meaning in watching people navigate complicated lives as they navigate their own complicated trajectories, then they are creating a useful interpretation of a series that brings them pleasure.

There is no message, other than pure entertainment

Six of the 26 respondents said that there was not a message purported on *RH*. This is the other preferred reading of the series from a production level, along with the rich are just like us.

Here are some viewer's responses that confirm there is no message to be gleaned from *RH*:

"To me this is very exploratory programming and I don't feel like it has a message necessarily." – Brittany

*"For the most part, **it's just fluff. It's just funny to watch.** I think the message is not you too can be like this, but the message is, **this is what it's like to be rich.** I don't know that it's necessarily aspirational." – Lynn*

*"That no matter the geography there's always going to be a bunch of rich women doing stupid things and saying stupid things to each other. **I don't think there's a message I just think it's entertainment.**" – Monica*

*"**I don't really think it has one.** Maybe it's because of the reality genre that I look at that and think it's **not supposed to have a message, it's supposed to be silly fun.**" – Pamela*

RH is entertaining – at least to fans. The message that there is no message other than pure entertainment references the "mindlessness" often associated with viewing RTV. People rationalize that they watch these shows to "tune out" because they do not demand thinking. Not thinking about media we consume might be a bigger issue. This will be revisited in the Discussion chapter.

Outlier messages

There were three outlier messages shared by a handful of fans. The first, is that *RH* is intended to make you "feel better than these people on TV" (Eva). The second, is that *RH* represents the "building of the American dream" (Diana). The third, is that you "can do whatever

you want, as long as you're willing to own your shit" (Elaina). All of these messages can clearly come through in the framing of the women on the series. The first two outlier messages evoke the intended outcomes of the *You're a hypocrite frame* and the *Hustler frame* respectively. The third outlier message echoed by three fans, is representative of a hardcore viewer theme. Fans who gage this as the message hold these women accountable, and view the women who "own their shit" as being accountable. This is a positive reading of the series, and one that can only be taken away if you have been paying attention as a fan for a long time. Some women on *RH* have deflected and made careers out of refusing to acknowledge their bad behavior. "Owning it" has become the new outcome of real transformation on RTV, and it is most often discussed in fan culture online, which shows that these fans are deeply engaged with *RH*.

Some of the take away messages, (i.e. women are complicated and you have to own your shit) are meaningful conclusions drawn by longtime fans of *RH*. The other messages are aligned with the preferred readings of the series from the level of production. There is nothing wrong with reading the series as a whole in these ways because production has led viewers to these conclusions. What is more important is that fans can break down the frames and think outside of these frames in responses to other questions. When looking at the series as a whole, many viewers confirmed the preferred messages of the media frames at play. However, each fan had their own insightful, empowering ways of interpreting the messages put forth on the series and were thoughtful about the content they engaged with.

One thing however that was not addressed in responses to this question in particular, but was alluded to in other fan responses, is that *RH* celebrates certain types of wealthy women (with problems). To quote multiple respondents, this certain type happens to be "new money." No one said outright that *RH* makes one type of rich person the scapegoat for economic issues, but this

answer is there in each person's response to multiple questions from the interview. I argue here that this is the predominant aim of the confluence of frames and variegated messages coming through on the series.

4.4.7 **RQ3: Summary**

This section answered research question three, (does the audience recognize these frames?) by analyzing 26 in-depth interviews with fans of *RH*. Analysis showed that yes, viewers recognize and evoke these frames when discussing *RH*, the individual women, and class. Analysis also showed that even though these women are presented in certain ways does not mean that fans passively observe those frames and accept the ideas, messages, and images put forth. For instance, analysis of fan responses showed that fans use ideas from the framing packages to discuss issues related to social class and feminism but also factor in their own relative experiences, positions, and background to make sense of how these issues pertain to the series. This confirms Entman and Rojecki's argument that people have two paths to social information: 1) mediated communication and 2) personal experiences informed by education, socialization, and interpersonal dialogue (2001, p. 48). Overall, this analysis revealed (i) why viewers watch *RH*, (ii) how they glean pleasure from viewing, (iii) how viewers talk about social class and how they make sense of these frames and their own class-based identities, and finally, (iv) the messages they take away.

First, I analyzed the Bravo audience and showed how the interview sample here is representative of that audience. Then I analyzed responses to each question asked in the interview guide, showing how fans collectively recognize each of the frames presented in this dissertation. Analysis also unpacked gendered pleasures and feminist understandings of *RH*. For the most part, viewers glean pleasure from watching *RH* because it enables a heightened sense of

emotional realism. This heightened emotional realism allows us to watch, learn from, experience, and feel in ways that are similar to these women. The interview analysis also showed that viewers find no guilt in viewing *RH* and even make their pleasures politically productive by resisting many of the dominant intentions of the media frames at play. Fans find other ways to read media representations of these women and create their own powerful takeaways about these women that are helpful to them in their own lives. Viewers love *RH* because they love to watch powerful women demonstrate resilience and authentic action. Moreover, authenticity on *RH* is used by fans to ultimately describe the successful outcome of the labor of emotional camping the women perform on the series. In sum, fans are active, critical viewers and derive interesting interpretations and deep meanings about the images they see. In fact, fans find other messages through the cracks of the social, political, and cultural limitations of producer framing techniques.

I also analyzed the subsequent pleasures associated with watching a show that frames women to depict certain ideas about class, wealth, and status. Analysis showed that *RH* enables fans to make class distinctions, and that those distinctions are central to our understanding of social class and even part of the pleasure of viewing *RH*. When fans were asked to directly consider class they defined it in terms of behavior, privacy, and money (old versus new). In terms of analyzing personal conceptions of social class, every respondent classified themselves as being a part of the middle class. Social class identification, according to these responses, is tied to cultural capital and income, but social connection, or how one feels in comparison to other people appears to be the primary indicator of fans' understanding of their own position. This is another reason why watching *RH* can be pleasurable. These women are positioned as

economically superior to viewers, but culturally, are positioned beneath fans. Overall, when it comes to talking about class, our understanding changes in relation to how we view other people.

Finally, I analyzed fans' overall understanding of the message of *RH* as a series. Some fans processed their own larger takeaways of the series and drew their own individualized meaningful conclusions. A majority of fans however took away messages that align with production's preferred readings of the series. This section adds to the argument that fans of feminized media can also be feminists who take pleasure in media that is personally meaningful. In sum, this dissertation thus far has covered immense ground. I have analyzed *RH* as a media phenomenon across mediated platforms, from the level of production to fans. The only thing missing are the voices of the women who have defined this franchise.

4.5 **The voices of the women of *Real Housewives***

As stated in the introduction, the aim of this dissertation is to offer a comprehensive overview of the *RH* media phenomenon. This work analyzes this phenomenon by discussing production, audience reception, and by studying the actual media content. This includes a frame analysis of each series in the franchise and a discourse analysis of the women's performance on social media. This dissertation moves from production, to various content, all the way through to the audience. The only major element missing from this research is the voices of the women who have been a part of this series. The final section of analysis highlights the women's voices from the series and effectively adds to the triangulation of each of the previous analysis sections.

This final section of analysis foregrounds, in the women's own words, issues with production and editing, contract negotiations, positioning and power among the women, and social media use. Analysis of their responses reveals (i) exploitative practices during filming and editing, (ii) how the women negotiate agency and power, (iii) the role of social media, and (iv)

analysis confirms the labor of what I term here *emotional camping*. After this section, follows the discussion and conclusion of this dissertation.

4.5.1 **Being a ‘real housewife’**

These interviews reveal first that in order to become a “real housewife” women have to make an impression during casting. The first inquiry I had for the women was about how they found their way onto the show. Some women applied to a call for casting, while most women were approached to do the show via media intermediaries, including their managers, connections in public relations, and casting producers. If producers are interested, they will have a woman audition for the series. One woman shared this about her audition:

*“I decided to play it to win so to speak. For my casting tape, **I did a couple of kooky things and I was very gossipy** because I knew that the show was about being dramatic and gossipy. **The next thing I know, they gave me a contract.**” - RH 2*

While some women played up the gossip and amplified their personalities, others went into the series a bit more reserved, and somewhat naïve about production of RTV. For instance, this former housewife shared with me that:

*“You know like everyone else **I thought that I would be able to control the editing or control myself or whatever I would say or wouldn’t say.** You know I figured, garbage in garbage out. **If I don’t say it they can’t manipulate it to make it sound like something else.... So, I said why not? Let’s do it.**” - RH 1*

After the audition, if women are asked to be a part of an *RH* series they are sent a contract. Some of the women said, per their contract, they were not allowed to discuss negotiations. RTV contracts tend to be iron-clad, barely researched, and completely hidden from public view. Other women however were less reserved in their response and what they shared with me. On the whole, the contract was described as “standard,” but analysis quickly reveals that “standard” means “one-sided” and “unfair.”

A huge example of the unfairness of the contract is what has happened to certain women and series after contracts have been signed, and they have filmed an entire show. This former cast member shared that her and the other women were not informed they were even filming a *RH* series at all, until after the fact.

“We were originally going to be the first U.S. iteration of ‘Ladies of London.’ [We were shooting] ‘Ladies of [city redacted].’ A few months after filming was completed, I got a joint conference call from the executive producer and another producer, saying that Bravo decided to make us Real Housewives of [redacted].” - RH 3

Filming a show, changing its name and/or the overall concept has occurred before on the Bravo network. For instance, *RHNYC* is known as originally being a show called “Manhattan Moms.”

A fan I interviewed in 2016 for another project shared a story with me. The story is about when she went to a former *RHNYC* housewife’s book signing. This is what she shared:

“I went to a book review with Alex and Simon. In 2011 maybe. The way RHNYC was put together, Alex and Simon were told there was a production company wanting to do a show on urban moms. Moms who were raising their kids in private schools around the city, and could they follow them. Those two of course would allow it. The producers were like we like you, but we’re not putting you on the show. Then they came around a few months later again and wanted to film more. First season of New York, they got this cast together and told them they were filming this show about women in New York who were kind of well off, who raised their children in an urban environment. The last episode of that season culminates in like a steak dinner scene. They’re in this private room. According to Alex and Simon this is when producers revealed to them that they were actually taping them on the basis of being Real Housewives’ women. So, they all walked in that episode into the room, and there was so much tension.” - Fan interview, 2016

This story has been confirmed by women from *RH* in popular press.²⁰ An example of exploitation is that these women can film an entire show, sign a contract and still not know the show they will be featured on. This in itself shows the lack of power the women have overall in negotiations, and the extreme power of the network. Additional examples are shared next.

²⁰ *RHNYC* was slated to be "[Manhattan Moms](#)" until the last minute. The women were informed of the change while filming what would be the last episode of season one of *RHNYC*.

“One would have to be desperate, stupid, or hungry for fame to sign a contract like this.”-RH 4

The first season of *RH*, women have little to no power in negotiating their contract. It does however sound like if a woman has some celebrity before the show, they will have more room to negotiate. For instance, this former housewife shared:

*“You can negotiate but it's pretty standard. And when you come in, **in the first year if you're being too difficult, unless you're coming in as someone who already has a huge amount of celebrity** and you have a lot of businesses, then **they're more apt to deal with you.** But if you're someone who hasn't started a business and you're going to make a business off of the show, then no it's pretty standard.” – RH 8*

This quote solidifies earlier discussion in the frame analysis section about positioning and power among the women in the field of *RH*. Most of the women with some celebrity are actresses who happen to be members of SAG-AFTRA. Since they have union protection and a more powerful audience those women appear to be given more room to negotiate.

Some women come on the show with businesses and brands already in place. For those women, it appears they can negotiate “carve-outs.” A carve-out is when the primary owner or parent company sells a part of the company but maintains everything else. It is not explicitly understood here if in negotiating carve-outs that Bravo would become the minority shareholder in that carve-out. For instance, this former housewife shared that she could not promote her brand on the show. She had an existing brand before she joined *RH* and was not allowed to promote it, perhaps because Bravo did not own even a minority percentage:

*“First of all, **[Bravo] did not let me promote my brand. That was in the agreement. I wasn't allowed to do that.** But the fact that people got to know me, they dug a little deeper and whatever I had to sell, **I had a carve-out for those things.** Most people do. But **[Bravo] also won't do like what they did with Bethenny [Frankel]. [Bravo] did a lot for her to build her Skinny Girl brand** and she sold it for \$140,000,000 and Bravo got nothing.” - RH 1*

It is rare for Bravo to not take a percentage of any business or branding that is connected to appearing on the series since RTV stars tend to operate as mini-brand extensions of the network.

It makes sense that if this former housewife did not give Bravo a percentage, that they would stop her from promoting her business on the series. Bottom line, Bravo takes a percentage:

“Bravo gets a percentage. Any business that starts up while the show is filming, Bravo gets a percentage of. So, in essence if [something affects] the Housewives’ business, it’s also affecting what Bravo gets.” – RH 8

This same housewife elaborated:

“the way it works out is if the business was in place when you came to the network, it’s a smaller percentage they take. But then once you submit the paperwork, and then based on the uptick from the show, there’s percentages kind of grated on that. It’s a science.” – RH 8

Ultimately, if someone comes on the series with something to promote they have to be willing to sell Bravo a piece of the action, and if they do not, they will not be promoting that product. If someone comes on the show to use it as a platform to launch a brand/product/business endeavor, they will not be the sole owner since they are indebted first and always to the network.

Celebrities are granted a bit more room to negotiate. Bravo, as a minority partner in a woman’s brand, offers protection of that brand since it will benefit the network if the brand is successful.

These women will not be considered autonomous owners of their own proposed work.

This is not the best set-up in terms of business for the women who leave the series. One former housewife had much to say about the exploitative nature of the contract with Bravo:

“When my attorney tried to negotiate the contract, it was always red flagged. That means no way. It’s our way or nothing. If you don’t want to do the show, there are enough suckers out there that would do it. Nobody has any rights on the show. Also, any type of business venture that you establish, Bravo takes a percentage. The power is with Bravo and the production company. And that’s not just Bravo. It was the same deal I signed with [other cable network]. It’s the same deal with all cable networks.” – RH 4

Other women voiced their thoughts on the exploitative, one-sided contract as well. These women alluded to the fact that it is better to be exploited given the opportunities the show provides for them, rather than walk away:

*“Very often it seems like **Bravo is willing to walk away when you push too hard...** Ultimately, **everybody wants to stay on the show** because even if you were making nothing, there are opportunities that make money on the side of the show. So, it's hard to let go.” - RH 1*

I pressed this former cast member about pushing back against production and other forces. Her response elucidates on the agency RTV participants have in negotiating, as well as the mentality required to sign a contract as such:

*“You don’t fight with the networks ever. I don’t fight with Bravo. I don’t fight with [other cable] network. **You suck it up and you take it. And you realize that they’re a means to an end to build your brand.**” - RH 1*

That brand of course is always partially owned by Bravo. Contracts not only discuss business and branding, but also what production is allowed to do in terms of filming and editing. In terms of filming and editing, one former housewife shared:

*“Our contract said something like they’re allowed to basically film whatever they want, whenever they want. **You sign away all of your privacy**, but at the same time they know we’re all humans....so they’re still going to respect those human qualities.” – RH 5*

Her experience with production was different from this former housewife:

*“The contract was one sided. It was bad. It basically stated that **production is allowed to manipulate the edit anyway they want**. They are allowed to do whatever they want. **I could be talking to you and they could take that footage and make it look like I'm talking to somebody else. They're allowed to put hidden cameras in your house. They are basically allowed to do anything they want and you sign your life away.** My husband was shocked that I would even consider this but there was no getting through to me. **One would have to be desperate, stupid or hungry for fame to sign a contract like this.** Yes, I am calling myself all those names, especially stupid! I am taking full accountability for doing this.” – RH 4*

These responses are similar in what they say about the contract, but they become distinct in terms of the women’s personal experiences. This highlights the fact that some women had better experiences than others on the series. Much of this has to do with their relationship with production. Those relationships are usually positive when the women are more favored. The

next section will discuss the women's experiences in filming, their thoughts on editing, relationships with producers and co-stars, and favoritism.

"When you're being filmed, you're in jail" – RH 2

The third question I asked participants was what was the worst part about being a 'real housewife?' Responses varied in three directions. The women's worst experiences were either with (i) production, (ii) the other women, or (iii) social media. To reiterate what was discussed in the first section of this analysis on the production of *RH*, the interviews with RTV insiders revealed that things like pick-up shots, frankenbiting, string-outs, and emergency scenes happen to produce the show. Stories are not scripted, say producers and network executives, only "curated." Scenes and events are set up well in advance, meaning everything is staged, aside from, as producers say, what the women say in their interactions. This housewife elaborates however that producers give them "notes to hit":

*"For example, on Monday you'll get your call sheet. And they'll say, 'ok you'll be filming Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. Tuesday is lunch with [name redacted] and a party at [name redacted]. Thursday is a walk in the park with this one and hanging out at [this cast mates' house], ' whatever it is. And right before you enter the scene they send you a car service to take you to the scene. And then **while you're in the car the producer - a person will mike you up. And the producer will give you notes to hit. They'll tell you like talk about this, talk about this. At that time, they might say, 'OK we're going to have you make a phone call to this person' and the phone calls are always on speaker for everybody to hear everything.**" – RH 2*

Each *RH* series is produced by a different company, and those companies might do things differently. For instance, another housewife echoed what my interviews with RTV insiders said:

*"They didn't make me privy to any scripting... it sounded like, '**OK well you're going to have this party.**' And they put you in situations that you wouldn't ordinarily be in. And they could wait a long time for you to just go crazy. And [the show] relies on these women who are the wives of somebody rich or famous who want the camera guy to go over here. The camera guys are there and wherever the action is happening that's where they went. And **most of those women will do anything for those camera guys to run to them** [The network's] biggest thing is whether or not something is scripted. And*

frankly I didn't feel like our show was superscripted, it was just kind of like what are we doing today? How do we get these women together so they argue about silly things?"
– RH 1

Getting “notes to hit” might also depend on whether or not producers are getting the content they need to deliver the story they are curating. Sometimes they may need something specific, other times they may wait and let the women deliver on their own. Most of the time however, in any scenario, there are producers there guiding the women in particular directions. For instance, a hallmark of *RH* is the dinner scene. Every season there are dinners where the women meet to hash out previous arguments or catch up on gossip. This housewife shared with me:

*“when we have dinner, we have our cell phones, and we'll get the little vibrations. **It's the producer saying the dinner is boring and someone needs to do something.**”* – RH 8

Aside from curating story in the field, during filming like this, story is also driven in the editing of the series, and of course through the use of confessionals. Confessionals are a staple of RTV and are often shot months after an incident happens. On *RH*, a confessional is filmed in front a green screen that will later show the woman's living room. The women are glammed up and interviewed about their thoughts on a scene that will be shown on the show. This is where a woman can share her opinions or feelings on the matter, however, often times the women do not remember everything that went down months previously:

*“A lot of the confessionals, you talk about it like it's just happening right now, and the truth of the matter is that **you're talking about it sometimes two months after the thing happened.** I remember saying once you have to refresh my memory, **I don't even remember that, I don't remember what I said.** [Producers] have a storyline that they're trying to steer and they're like, ‘Well did you remember that you felt you know such and such?’ **And it's literally like Jon Lovitz from SNL, like ‘yeah, yeah that's what I felt!’**”* – RH 8

This is the *Bravo wink* in motion. Often times the *Bravo wink*, or the “you're a hypocrite frame” will begin by showing a woman saying something in a confessional and then editors will flashback to a scene where she is doing the exact opposite. A long running theme of *RH* across

series is that the women are prone to “amnesia” and forget things they say and do. The filming of the confessionals cannot happen until filming is almost complete. Asking someone to remember a specific thought, feeling, or incident from months prior is unfair. This way producers can manipulate the image of the women by taking advantage of the time that has passed from filming in the field to filming confessionals. The filming schedule seemingly enables hypocrisy.

The other way producers curate story is by literally pitting women against each other. Almost all of the women interviewed here told me that “*quote unquote, I was told to ‘get in there and pick a side’*” (RH 2). This echoes other women’s experiences. Another woman elucidated:

*“The worst part was how the **producers and network play women against each other. The fighting is a key element of the franchise** and it literally made me ill. The toxicity of the gossip between cast members - on and off camera was exhausting! **The producers knew which girls really didn’t like each other and would push them to ‘go after them’ or confront.**” – RH 3*

What happened if they decided to stay neutral? One former housewife put it bluntly:

*“**The devil in the game is the production company.** And if you don’t kiss ass to the production company, and **you don’t follow what they want to do**, to make their jobs easier, to hand in a show so everybody can collect their paycheck, **you’re dead meat.**” – RH 4*

If a woman does not commit to doing what production wants, they are threatened with termination, like this other former cast member:

*“**I immediately got a lot of heat from members of the production team because other women around me were arguing and I wasn’t getting involved.** And I got a lot of heat from production to get involved and **to take a side** and to get into the muckety muck... **I realized that if I didn’t get into it I was going to be let go.** And the last thing that I wanted to do was do one season of the ‘Real Housewives,’ because there is nothing more loser-ish than that. So, I got to it.... **It’s a job and I wanted to keep the job. Every year you’re on it, your salary goes up. It doubles practically.** If not more. And your opportunities increase. And so, I really wanted to be back on, so **I increased and increased my drama**, my storyline, and as I did that **when the show aired I became less and less likable.**” – RH 2*

This woman is open about the precariousness of her work in this quote. Here she is describing her first season of *RH*, and as previously discussed in the analysis section, first season ‘housewives’ barely make any money. The first season a woman is on is ultimately a trial run to see if she is a good addition to the cast, but really to see if fans take to her and if she will work with production. Another former cast member confirms this:

*“When you do **your first season**, it’s like fifty thousand dollars, I mean honestly, it’s zero money. So, **you’re really just a trial just to see how it’s going to go and they’re really waiting to see what you’re going to give them. And if they edit you out to barely any scenes, that is what it is. So, you have zero power at that stage of the game unless you come in as a celebrity who already has a big enough following that you could socially say things or do a little damage.**” – RH 8*

Many of these women however are not celebrities, and coming on the show provides them with ample social and economic opportunities. Women often come on the show and quickly get divorced, and many of them have no job or economic support other than their husbands. The show is many of these women’s livelihood. If they need the money and the opportunities that come with it, they have no choice but to do as production wants.

Some of these women learned this the hard way. For instance, one former cast member shared what happened when she decided to put her health above filming. She was ill, her doctor advised her to not go on the cast trip, and she was contacted by multiple people through the production chain all the way to Andy Cohen, who threatened her with termination.

*“I do have [this condition] and that was very real. **I couldn’t get control of it. And the doctor was like you really can’t go to [this location for cast trip].** And he was like look I can pump you up with lots of steroids. But I knew that then if I went – and I’ll tell you a secret, the most that any of us really care about is how we look on TV – and I knew that I’d be blown up and just you know completely out of it. So, when I couldn’t go **and I explained to Bravo and I had a legitimate doctor’s note and all of it, instead of being treated with compassion and kindness and solutions, I was given threats I’m not a person to whine about anything...it was just the worst that they were treating me like that and threatening to fire me.**” – RH 2*

I probed this story and asked specifically who was threatening to fire her.

*“There’s a **show runner**, the person in charge...she’s the one who delivered the message. [The message] was from [this **production company**] and also **Andy**. [The show runner] is who delivered the message that **if you don’t go on this trip you will not be back on the show**. And in my opinion, I was like you know what this show is not ruining my health.”*
– RH 2

This woman was not asked to renew her contract at the end of the season.

Women are punished by production before being terminated outright. For instance, this other former cast member shared that she was downgraded to “friend of the housewives” during filming for her second (and last) season of *RH*:

*“I remember speaking to [production company]... **They hate me, there’s many reasons why.... The producers say to me the girls are going to go to [location], you’re going to go in the hot tub, and the girls are going to take their tops off. And I was like, no, there’s no way I am going to do that... That’s what happened in the second season I was on where I was taken on as an actual housewife and I was downgraded. I was also downgraded because they wanted one of my daughters in particular to be much more involved [in the show].”** - RH 1*

If a woman ignores production’s demands, they will retaliate with their own forms of punishment. One form is termination, but other warning types of punishment include threats to “downgrade” women’s roles on the show to being “friends” of the full time cast members. This leads into the other form of punishment whereby producers limit the amount of camera time certain women get on the show. This can include editing out women completely, or manipulating scenes to just show certain women as being present. This housewife continued, explaining how production limited her camera time as a form of punishment:

*“The other reason that the producers really didn’t like me was when they were doing everything for [name redacted] wedding, **which they did not invite me to**. This was strange because I had a good relationship with [name redacted] and still do, and she was really upset about that. **That part I could tell you definitely was a punishment because I had already been asked to cohost [this morning talk show] during the time they were filming the show and I wasn’t going to go [on this trip]**. There was some trip they were going to do and I said listen they asked me to host [this morning show]. That’s more important than going to some party. **So [producers] weren’t happy and they tried to stop me from going on [that show]. They went to Andy, but nothing in my contract***

said that I couldn't do it. After that I cohosted two more times. So that's what they didn't like about me. They thought that I felt like I was too good for the show or something. And that's not the case at all." – RH 1

In sum, this former cast member was dis-invited to big events documented on the show to limit her camera time. This also downgraded her status on the show, all because she did not curtail her actions to fit production's needs.

Producers have to deliver a show to the network, and these interviews reveal that production will do whatever it takes to curate the story the network wants. As one former cast member explained below, each woman is really just a means to an end. That end is the story producers and the network want to see. Another woman echoed her sentiments, adding that production takes advantage of the fact that some women become dependent on the income from the show:

"[Producers] really just do whatever they have to do to get what they're after. They will use you in every way shape and form they can to get a scene, and they really ultimately don't care about anybody. Believe you me... if the majority of people were asking for [a certain housewife's] head on a platter, they'd served her up." – RH 8

"Production is so used to having control with some of these cast mates, that when they don't get what they want, they threaten that the show will be cancelled, which then makes some of the really desperate ones do some over the top desperate things. Because at the end of the day they have nothing to lose!" – RH 4

Some women, given the above two quotes, are easier to exploit than others. In fact, favoritism is rampant across series. It takes a certain type of woman to garner favorite status. Next, analysis will reveal how favoritism impacts the women's working environment, their relationships with each other, and the edit they receive on the series.

"Production plays favorites. It's that simple." – RH 4

Interview analysis reveals that production plays favorites. Producer favorites, as clarified by the women in these interviews, tend to be the women who bend to production's demands.

Those women also tend to be the ones who need the show for the income. Favoritism also has ramifications for the edit women get and also for the relationships the women have with each other. One former cast member explained it this way:

“Production plays favorites. It’s that simple. If they like you, you can say and do anything but you will get a great edit. If you give them a difficult time and don’t kiss their ass, you are doomed. I will never forget how unprofessional production was even in meetings. The head producer would start the meeting and take a jab at me every single time saying, ‘I know that certain people don’t need the money.’ Singling me out every single time... The production company is used to working with guinea pigs and when you have a lioness that comes in, it’s like oh, that’s not what we’re used to – we’re used to working with people that kiss our ass. This one is not going to kiss our ass, so she’s going to be a problem and we are going to make her pay dearly. I saw it coming a mile away.” - RH 4

This particular housewife came onto *RH* already successful in her own right, and as she told me, she did not need the income from the series in the same way her cast mates did:

“Most of the cast mates don’t have any money. They are broke and desperate to stay on the series because they live off the income of the show.” – RH 4

This demonstrates that when a woman is more dependent on the show for economic support, she will likely play to production’s wants. Being a “real housewife” certainly pays, after the first season that is. Participating on the show is a lucrative endeavor for all women involved, regardless of their economic position apart from the franchise. Once a woman reaches her second season, as a former housewife said in a quote above, her salary “doubles practically, if not more.” As women start to reap the rewards of the show, they are more willing to play along with production, as this former cast member shared:

“It’s different when money comes into play. You know everyone starts to feel good, like oh my god they’re paying me x amount of dollars, I could buy myself a pair of Manolos. I could get myself a nice handbag, and I can feel good about myself because I can get a nicer apartment and I could have some kind of life. Most of these women before, didn’t have money.” – RH 7

Every woman said that production played favorites, however some women have different ideas on how favoritism plays out. One former cast member shared that favoritism is based on women who are connected to insiders at the network and higher up in production:

“I think that there are women who are absolutely protected. I think that there are women who are very close to Andy Cohen, maybe one or two, and maybe one who is close to [the head of the production company for the series]... I definitely 100 percent believe for example that [name redacted] is very very old friends with Andy. She gets away with just sitting there, looking stylish, and doing absolutely nothing because she needs the job and needs the paycheck. Whereby somebody like me who hasn’t known him for ten years and hasn’t been smoking pot – actually it’s probably longer you know – I’m not hanging out with him and Kelly Ripa or whatever. I don’t get that oversight. I will be told by production to get in there and take a side.” - RH 2

Other women point out that it is not only dependent on who women know at the network, or how much they need the paycheck. Rather, favoritism also operates on what women can help production cut costs during filming. This specific cast member shared:

“I think some Housewives have more negotiating power than others.... Remember [production] get[s] a certain amount of money from Bravo, and the less money they spend on production, the more they get to keep at the end of the day. So [name redacted] tried to make everything easy for them. A lot of it was self-serving to show her gala or this or that.” - RH 1

Another former cast member echoed this:

“There’s definitely favoritism. I think a lot of it comes down to what someone’s willing to spend to make a scene. You know whether it’s throwing a huge party or a wedding, how much someone’s willing to spend.” – RH 8

This demonstrates how producer’s exploit the women’s resources and subsequently place other women, who cannot afford to compete by having lavish parties with the same frequency as other women, at a disadvantage. The women who are not as well off must play up to producer’s aims in other ways, like creating drama or “going after” other women. The women who can spend more on the show are giving production a financial break.

Finally, this woman added another layer to production favoritism by bringing up the larger forces at play:

“I think that it’s in the favor of the network and the production team to make certain people look better or like not as crazy. Like [name redacted] for instance. I think she was really protected. She was really psychotic her first year, really bad, and I think they had to edit her to make her not look – she was good TV, but I think that the audience really would have hated her.” – RH 5

This interview participant brings up a really good point about who production casts.

Increasingly, many women cast have a host of problems, either financial or personal. This woman is ultimately saying that the network has to protect themselves and the decisions they make (which includes casting certain people). Some people cast arguably should not be given a huge platform. It is in the best interests of the network to gloss over certain issues/personalities/traits so as to avoid culpability in giving certain people a large platform.

Favoritism, when coupled with producers who are tasked with pitting the cast members against each other, will for the most part lead to contentious relationships among the women. Half of the women interviewed, when asked about the worst part of working on *RH*, shared that it was having to work alongside certain women:

“The worst part was having to interact on a regular basis with people I didn’t like or respect. That was very emotionally and mentally draining because in my life I do not surround myself with people I don’t like... I’m not a glutton for punishment. That’s what it was like having to deal with these assholes... when you’re around these women all the time you’re working a full-time job and you’re dealing with these people. You get to know them really well and so that was unfortunate for the people I didn’t like and didn’t respect, but it was good for the other people I knew.” – RH 5

This quote attests to the fact that *RH* is not an actual documentary style show that innocently observes women and their real-life relationships. Casting changes over the years has affected the dynamics of the women, along with producer favoritism. At the end of the day, many of these women are not seeing each other off-camera. This former housewife shared:

*“They pretend to be friends with certain housewives and as soon as the camera is off, they run and show their true colors. If you see two housewives out to dinner, 99% of the time it is fake. It is set up. **None of the housewives are truly friends off camera.**” – RH 4*

Part of this is because the women are not in each other’s daily lives, the other part is because producers have done a fine job of forcing the women to compete for camera time with storylines.

When I spoke to these women about their negative experiences with the others however, they did not initially attribute the negative relationships to production, but rather to the individual women. A lot of their responses however illustrate behavior among the women that would not happen if production was not telling the women to get in and take a side or start something for camera time. For instance, this former cast member shared her side of an iconic falling out on *RH*. A cast member went after her family and their business in real life, which impacted her livelihood. That housewife was reacting to a rumor this particular cast member brought up on the show:

*“when ... a cast mate went after somebody in my family and addressed my livelihood, [that] was very upsetting and I’m assuming that she felt that I must have threatened her livelihood by saying that she had [redacted], which certainly was not my intention at all. My intention was the opposite and **this viciousness was one of the worst experiences.**”
– RH 2*

These “vicious” retaliations are on the women who carry them out. However, as this former cast member shared more information with me, certain things are brought on camera. These things are not always intended to be malicious, but rather because the women simply need to get their screen time (i.e., paycheck). Here this same cast member explained to me how certain things come to be brought up on camera:

*“**Sometimes I’ll have an idea or [producers] have an idea or the girls will come up with ideas [for story] together.** In fact, [this storyline], [name redacted] really had that idea. I was talking to [name redacted] off camera, and I was like you know telling her off camera, ‘[this woman’s] being such a bitch lately and I don’t know why she’s so hoity toity about her [redacted]. Everybody knows she [redacted].’ I told [name redacted] how my publisher told me that she had a [redacted]. And she was like ‘oh my god you have*

to bring that on camera, we need storylines!’ So I did. It was really me and [name redacted] idea. And I brought it on and I didn’t realize that [name redacted] would be so upset. The fans got so mad at me. She was much more popular than me, so I ended up being like a real loser.” – RH 2

This former cast member is admitting to bringing up something hurtful on camera as a means to garner a storyline for herself. That in turn, got her camera time and earned her a paycheck. The maliciousness is not intentional, but a ramification of what happens when these women are placed in an environment that requires them to compete with other women for stories, camera time, and an income. A lot of the “viciousness” and competition among the women would alleviate if they were not working in this type of environment, spurred on by production.

Another woman shared with me her own story of dealing with this type of retaliation.

This woman, from a different *RH* series, talked about how a former co-star has continually ruined business opportunities for her, even though she has not been on *RH* for a number of years:

“[name redacted] has tried very hard to get things – you know I had a recall on one of my products because of the font. You know something that contains soy, soy is an allergen so you have to put ‘contains soy’ in nine-point font. [On my product] it was in eight-point font and it got recalled all over the country because randomly some person, who then we discovered was friends with [name redacted], worked for the Department of Agriculture. And you know it cost me sixty thousand dollars. So, anything that’s ever happened, she does whatever she can to undermine me. Still to this day. If she sees me doing well, let’s say something that I’m doing that I’m going to announce soon or whatever, she’ll find a way to contact people and say ‘don’t do that with her, she’s terrible, she’s crazy,’ whatever.” – RH 1

The sheer fact that any such retaliating happens speaks to the women’s working environment.

This type of working environment is not normal or healthy. One woman shared that she had both positive and negative relationships with the women on the series:

“[There were] some good, some horrible [relationships]. My problem is that usually if someone hurts me, but asks me for forgiveness, I forgive and forget. That’s great in life, but not in a show where the women are very conniving.” – RH 6

This quote adds to ideas about this working environment; it is an environment where people get hurt and have to deal with co-workers who are coerced into plotting for their own camera time at the expense of other women.

One cast member, who shared that her worst experience on the show was dealing with retaliations from a co-star, shared an entirely different answer with me in another question. When I asked directly what her relationships were like with the other women on the series she responded:

“I really liked all the women, I thought they were all terrific.... You know everybody was really nice but then we're all obligated to get into the muckety-muck to make a good show. And when that became real, which it often did, you really had animosity with some cast mates that was very unpleasant for me. I didn't like it at all. But it was you know the cost of doing business.” – RH 2

Saying that this is “the cost of doing business” is telling. This negative environment that celebrates competition among women and fosters “conniving” behavior is what they have to accept if they want to be a part of the show.

The question arises then if there is anything the women can do to make this environment better. The answer is yes, the women can unite and develop deals with each other, unbeknownst to production. A former cast member shared this:

“It was really transparent as far as being on the show and what [the women] were doing. We would have conversations off camera about what they were going to do or how far they were willing to go. We share privately. And when something big happens, if someone's really upset or someone's really done something, we'll reach out to each other, and say, ‘Hey sorry about that’ and apologize. But once the season starts airing and you're watching the show for yourself and you see the way some of the other women are talking about you behind your back or you know what's going on, it is surprising. But a lot of that is really kind of forced by production.” – RH 8

As a means to change their working environment and relationships with each other, women will “share privately” about the things they will say and do and also not say and do to each other on camera. As long as these guidelines are respected it appears they can get along and still create a

show based on storylines the women agree to bring on the show. These types of codes are discussed by audience members interviewed for this dissertation and within fan cultures online. Viewers and the women themselves are therefore aware that there are ways to work within this environment and survive, keeping professional relationships intact. This cast member added:

“I mean we literally had a handshake to not go after each other. And because we would see each other in our personal life settings and if it ever does get ugly, you just don't want that... So, we just kind of did a handshake, like ‘I'll never come after you and you never come after me and we're good’.” – RH 8

This is an example of feminist action within a misogynistic working environment. Binding together to create certain storylines that ensure co-stars security is one way these women can effectively beat the system and maintain their relationships with each other. There is however, one thing they have no control over, and that is the editing of the series. No matter what deal they made with production or with the other women, anything goes when it comes to editing. This show is only released once it is tailored to network approval.

“You made me look like an idiot!” – RH 5

Every woman had her own story about being edited to look a certain way. Each participant also talked about how the editing of certain scenes did not accurately reflect the way the scene actually went down. This former cast member put it best:

“Everything is based on the storyline that they're creating and the direction that they want to go, and what they want to show.” – RH 8

She also shared her most upsetting experience with the editing of the series:

“There was one scene for me where it was so poorly edited, they actually even called me before. We get the weekly show [in advance] and before they sent it to me, one of the top people there actually called me and said, ‘have a glass of wine before you watch it. Everything's going to be fine. We're going to totally fix it later in the season.’ They were literally preparing me for the poor edit I was going to get I thought when they first called me up, what does that mean? How bad is it? And that episode... was so poorly edited. They made it look like I was drinking. They edited the whole context of the

conversation in a completely different way. They took things that I said and put it in different places. It was really unfair.” – RH 8

Other housewives echo this experience. For instance, other women shared the following about watching their scenes back:

“Many scenes were edited to make a situation seem completely different than it was in actuality. This was infuriating!” – RH 3

“My personal narrative was controlled by the actual editing process.” – RH 7

*“Everything felt **more amplified and more dramatic**. I assume that’s the way they sliced it up. A **two-hour scene is cut down to five minutes**. So, the way it’s edited, **they’re extracting the most dramatic part**.” – RH 2*

Producers have a story to curate and therefore editors must take the footage, story notes, and create that story the best way they can. This means they have to edit certain scenes, conversations, and individual women to those ends. Each of the five frames discussed in the second section of the analysis chapter here are representative of some of those ends. The “you’re a hypocrite” frame or the Bravo wink are some of the most important ends. The comedy of the series operates primarily by showing the hypocrisy of the women or by catching people in certain moments. This housewife describes the feeling of being on the receiving end of this edit as well as its intended outcome:

*“Let’s say somebody would say something offensive to me or whatever and I responded. But instead on TV you’re just going to see like a shot to my face, and I’m basically looking dumbfounded and I don’t say anything and then they move on. It’s like, I defended myself. **You made me look like an idiot!**” – RH 5*

Editing, as analysis reveals here, can be so upsetting to the women that some will quit. Other times, the editing can create such polarization along fandom lines that certain women will lose their jobs. As a means to alleviate some of the pressures associated with dealing with such negative edits, I also found that most women agreed producers and editors have a rotation for

giving women positive and negative edits, season to season. Following next are stories that show all of these ramifications.

One former housewife had such a negative experience with editing, she wound up walking away from the show after two seasons. She shared these sentiments about editing:

*“It's very very stressful to film for four months and then you watch it for four months unfold and you're saying, ‘wait that's not the way it happened!’ **When you don't show what gets somebody to react that way, to me it's an unfair edit. Show both sides. Show me going crazy and getting upset, but show why!**” – RH 4*

It should be noted here that in spite of unfair editing, a majority of the women said for the most part that they were portrayed accurately on *RH*. They were portrayed accurately in the sense that only certain little moments are shown on *RH*, while most is left on the cutting room floor.

Following next are some of their responses to me asking if they were portrayed accurately on the series:

*“I think that I was portrayed accurately on the show... **the things I said at the reunion, they came out of my mouth but they did not come out in that order. They did not come out as – we were sitting there for 12 hours. And they narrow it down to an hour or 3 hours or whatever, so it looked like it was one dig after another after another. That was not the case. But am I capable of saying those things? Yes, and I did say them.**” – RH 1*

*“Not in some scenes. But at the end of the day, **I think the audience isn't dumb and sees through it all and can realize the true characters of everyone.** There was one particular scene that really upset me because they made it seem as if I was taking about [redacted] out of the blue. When the fact was everyone was talking about it, and I was the only one silent until one of the girls insisted I gave an answer to why I wouldn't consider doing [redacted].” – RH 6*

*“For the most part, yes [I was portrayed accurately] because I was intentional about staying true to myself and my husband. But unfortunately, **the drama does override anything else, so many of our fun scenes ended up on the cutting room floor, and I was made to look like [name redacted]'s crutch.** The other cast members didn't know me well yet and saw me as a doormat to [name redacted] when I was actually the stronger one in the group. **I was made to look weak. I hated that!**” – RH 3*

Thus far, analysis shows that women can be made to look any way story producers need the women to look. Words, sentences, reaction shots can be sliced and diced in whatever way to

show what the scene needs for story purposes. Most of the women classify a bad edit as not being shown in the proper context. Another former cast member explained that the biggest problem with editing is that viewers do not see *prior interactions*. The only thing we see are the reactions to what is happening. This is because reactions are dramatic, but also because showing only dramatic reactions works to frame the women as crazy. In her own words, a former cast member explains what happened to her story arc over two seasons:

“I was portrayed accurately in both seasons. Here’s what happened in season two – in season one, what they try to do is they try to build somebody up, they try to be very fair to the person that’s coming on. In season two, what happened to me was, production had already got the idea, ‘[she] is going to be a difficult one because we cannot control her.’ When you can’t control somebody, it makes your job harder. Then you become labeled as a little bit difficult. So, when you say no to them for certain things, and other people are so eager, like ‘I’ll do it!’ So, what happened in season two is very very simple. You didn’t see the prior-interactions.” – RH 4

This cast member is describing what seemingly happens to every newcomer on *RH*. First season housewives, as previously discussed, get a great edit because the network is backing up their casting decision and also testing how these women play out with fans and production. By the second season, things can change. Women become part of the character rotation, which is discussed in the frame analysis section of this chapter. To keep story moving, season to season some women will receive different edits that might show them as more (or less) hard-working or better (or worse) behaved. Another former cast member confirms this rotation editing. Here she shared how her role on *RH* was to play against the alpha of the series:

“They needed a villain. When they brought me on they really wanted me to go after [name redacted]. They literally said, ‘you know you’re going into her house, but just remember you can say whatever is on your mind. Just because you’re with someone in their home doesn’t mean you can’t go after them.’ I remember thinking, huh, what are you trying to say? Literally they were leading me to find something wrong [name redacted]. Truthfully, I really liked her.” – RH 8

I pressed this cast member about why she was brought on specifically to play against the alpha. Her response illuminates the existence of a rotation schedule story producers place the women on:

*“They were trying to take [her] down. It’s every three years. It’s no coincidence that they’re going after [name redacted] again. **Every two years it’s coming your way. They have to circulate it because if it’s one person that’s always getting beat up season after season, they’re not going to come back. They won’t stay on the show.**” – RH 8*

The alpha character discussed here did in fact quit *RH* after her series’ most recent season, and did partially attribute her departure to the edit. The women ultimately are a means to an end of a particular story. Giving women different edits each year creates a perpetual illusion that there is change and growth each season. In reality, this change and character growth is fleeting, and only intended to last for that one season. RTV does not enable character growth given the nature of the stories that circulate every couple of years. All of this means that ahead of filming, producers know which general direction they will take the women’s stories. One former housewife confirmed this when I asked if story ever happened organically:

*“**There is nothing organic about it. It is always planned!** It starts out naturally and then they tell us what to talk about. Do you think I wanted to talk about the stupid [redacted] over and over and over again? It always starts out ‘organically.’ **They get us in a room and have us go at each other,** and may ask somebody how you feel about this or that. But **the minute somebody reacts, producers talk to you.** They try to get to see where your mind is going and then they run with it. So, **if I say, Evie made a comment about my husband but she never really met him and I was really offended by that - every moment after that is about the husband comment.**” – RH 4*

To reiterate, the ramifications of editing on RTV can be so bad, that some women will leave the series. Story editors alleviate this problem by circulating the women they give negative edits to each season. A former cast member shared the following with me about the editing process and the toll it took on her personal life. This woman also explained earlier how producers want to give women a good edit their first season of *RH*. Things went south for her

after her first season, particularly because producers cast another woman to play against her.

That woman was therefore treated to a first-season positive edit, and was production's preferred cast member at the time. This former housewife elaborated:

***"My whole beef was favoritism within the production company and that equated to false narratives and false editing. And when I say editing I will go back to your first statement, everything you saw in season [redacted], I stand by everything that I did, but in the next season, you didn't see prior interactions. They just cut it and showed these over the top reactions. The other person was just you know sitting there egging me on for four hours straight. And then you get that one minute clip where you saw my reaction. To me that's a false narrative. So, I didn't blame anybody when they said [to me], what happened? You said last season all you wanted was peace and love. All I wanted was peace and love."** - RH 4*

She continued sharing her experiences on the fall out of receiving the negative edit:

***"... It turned into such a toxic situation being on the show. It was such a hostile work environment, that I came home one day and I just remember you know my kids were all around and saying, 'mom you know you lost your spunk, you're no longer smiling.' And I'm like 'do you see what's going on?' I mean what do I do? Do I just let them create this false narrative? It's so heartbreaking. And I remember my dad coming over and my mom coming over and them saying, 'we don't want any part of this, we don't enjoy it, we don't want it. You're always stressed out. It's not a wonderful process. And you're happy go lucky. But now you're just not happy and you are making us do it and we don't want to do it.' And I'm like, boy I never forced it. But they were like, we don't want anything to do with it. I looked and I said wow, and you realize, how important is this? What's your goal? Because I already have the lottery ticket. A lottery ticket of a beautiful healthy life. My husband said, 'I know you love to inspire others and make others laugh, you're an entertainer... But it's almost like you're putting your fans and these people that you don't even know before us.' And when he said that to me I was like, wow."** - RH 4*

This long quote illustrates how being on RTV, and everything that comes with it, the negative edits included, impact not only the women, but everyone in their life. This woman was one of the luckier cast members because she exited the show on her own accord, (which will be discussed later). Other women however, do not leave on their own accord.

Editing the women to meet particular story aims can be upsetting for the women that they leave the series. Other times, the editing can create intense polarization among the women and among fans. This former housewife was upfront about why she not asked back to *RH*:

*“[Name redacted] got pregnant and they put a lot of money into her in that show, and they needed to make me look bad to make her look better. And that was that in a nutshell. It wasn’t like, oh [production] hated me, they didn’t like me. **They needed to get rid of me and put me down to make her look better, period... They needed to just show whatever her lifestyle was going to be and they needed to show how polar opposite it was of mine.... I realized that they were pinning us against each other.... She’s like this, I’m like that.**” – RH 7*

This former cast member understands her departure from the show as just being about the business of making a RTV show. This woman was also positioned against an alpha of a *RH* series. This is one of the hardest positions to be placed in because the alphas have devoted fans. The edit she was given was to increase polarization between the two women. The ramification however is that this polarization meant that fandom for the alpha increased, while her own audience appeal took a negative turn.

It is also necessary to note here that this particular cast member also refused to play production’s game, which is likely why it was easier for producers to create this polarization between her and the alpha. This woman told me that she was portrayed accurately by production because she was “authentic in every moment,” (RH 7). Authenticity here means that women respond to producer’s questions with how they actually feel, not how producers want them to respond. For instance, she shared this with me:

“When they would say to me, ‘what do you think of this person,’ I would say I don’t know and they would say what do you mean you don’t know? I would say I haven’t spent any time with them...I’m not going to decide or make a decision on a person based on a coffee and that’s not what they wanted.” – RH 7

Ultimately, this woman was not going to give producers the reactions they wanted. She was ultimately, “too authentic” for RTV. This means that on RTV, “authenticity” is the desired

outcome of the persona created. It is therefore a completely put-upon performance, curated further by producers. This leads into other analysis of the interviews, which demonstrates the necessity of performance. This will also confirm the labor of emotional camping that is required to be successful on *RH*.

4.5.2 **Emotional camping: “It’s a combination of authenticity and complete fabrication”**

Emotional camping is the name I give to the form of labor that is conducted by women of *RH* across media platforms. The name borrows from two concepts, Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) *emotional labor* and Susan Sontag’s (1967) *camping*. Emotional labor is the work people are paid for. Part of that work requires one to channel the proper emotions and feelings necessary to complete the job. *Camping* is intentional and a type of labor in itself that celebrates insincere, exaggerated personalities, images, and conduct. The women are paid to portray emotions that present the right image and behavior. Camping describes how the women manage their emotions and maintain employment. The work of a Bravo housewife calls for the women to successfully present an exaggerated, super emotional, highly-reactive self.

All women interviewed, with the exception of one (which will be addressed later on), are no longer a part of *RH*. These women, as demonstrated in the previous section, did not play to production’s wants, and in one way or another, parted with the series. In their own words, they back up the argument I make throughout this dissertation about emotional camping as a form of labor that enables certain women longevity on the series, and the general ability to work on the show. The women of *RH* who are still a part of the series have learned how to perform in order to remain relevant to their respective series. They perform intentionally to please production and contour their image and actions to emphasize the role they play. All of this leads to greater

generation of capital in the field of *RH* and suits the overarching brand of the network. Following next, women from *RH* describe appearances of authenticity on *RH*.

All of the women interviewed here shared with me that the women who are on the series are different on camera than they are in real life. This debunks any readings of the women's images as being truly authentic. In fact, some women argue that it takes a certain personality type to succeed on the show. Here is what this former cast member shared:

*“There is definitely a little bit of a manipulation of personalities. **People turn it up for television.** Several of the housewives that I knew, **it really wasn't what I expected for them to act like, because it's not what they are in person, when it's not on camera.**”*
– RH 8

I asked this interview subject if it takes a certain personality type. She gave me an example of the perfect housewife and the not-so-perfect housewife. She described them this way:

*“[Name redacted] is the perfect example. **That woman literally spits bullets. I mean she can dish it out and she can take it and she lets it roll off her back.** [Name redacted] can dish it out in kind of a cheeky way, but she cannot take it. And if anyone says anything to her... That woman is not that strong.”* - RH 8

These women have to be able to let things roll, however that is nearly impossible if we are dealing with real life. The “viciousness” that happens on the series and behind the scenes gets personal. Letting this roll might be impossible for some – unless they treat being a ‘real housewife’ as a job, manage their persona in accordance with production, and honor the handshake deals they make with the other women on the series. Emotional camping affords the women the ability to not take anything personally, which elides authentic reactions. Instead they’re putting on a show. Other women shared with me this:

*“**Now it's a job. [These women are] making serious bank. You know they go in, they do their stuff, and then leave.** Then we weren't making a lot money. I mean I would make more money working at Wendy's than I did working on *Housewives*. Literally we made really bad money. I wouldn't even be able to live in middle income housing. It was so bad. So, it's different. I think **now they're vying for screen time.** You know that big screen time was like really, really, really attractive to a lot of these women who were just*

normal everyday women living their lives. And then all of a sudden someone was like you know you can be a star.... [name redacted] is very good, you know [name redacted] had worked on television in [redacted]... She's very, very good at turning on and turning off. So, she's great in scenes and then she's like, 'great, let's go get a drink.' [She's] very good at really being in it and then leaving. She's a good actress. A really good actress." –RH 7

"As far as I'm concerned there's two people that were right for that show... [name redacted] is textbook. She's like body by nautilus, brain by Mattel. The other one is [name redacted]. There's a lot of things about her story that they didn't want to get into... Even [name redacted] was good. Anybody you can parody easily and imitate, those are your best housewives." –RH 1

To make it as a housewife might appear to mean bending to production's aims. But these women show that when women treat their on-camera time like a job, separate themselves and their lives from the production of RTV, and create characters – worthy of parody - they can make it work. One former housewife even advocated for women on the series to create "mickey mouse" versions of themselves for cameras in order to deal with the repercussions of being on the series. When I asked this former cast member if she had any advice for women who would consider doing the series, she shared this:

*"I called the two new housewives of [redacted]. I gave them advice, because I wish somebody would have done that for me. So, that's why I did it. **I told them to think of themselves as a television character and then try to separate their personal life... Mickey Mouse is this fake character, right? You never expect to see him in real life, but you will see a person on a reality show in real life. You can talk shit on Mickey Mouse because he's a fake character. But you talk shit on a reality star and it hurts because it's real. So, I told them to think of yourself as Mickey Mouse. Remove yourself, they're not talking that shit on you. They're talking shit on the Mickey Mouse version of you. It's hard to think of yourself as a kind of out of body character, but that's really what this is.**"* – RH 5

If women create a character and play to it, not only can they perform the way production wants, but they can handle the criticism that comes with being a RTV star. This revealing quote demonstrates that creating this persona – or as I would argue, engaging with the labor of emotional camping – is an example of how self-exploitation provides a path to agency. This is

also a way these women might (ironically) negotiate privacy. Conducting this type of identity work, which plays to what producers want could be a way for these women to maintain some privacy. These women are expected to “show it all” on RTV. They also reproduce this image, as shown in earlier sections of this analysis, on social media. Across platforms, these women construct a very public brand that appears ‘real’ or as ‘authentically’ them. At the same time, all of that public-ness could work to keep the more private parts of the self, hidden. Emotional camping affords these women the chance to amplify the parts of the self they want highlighted, which subsequently works to downplay the parts they wish to keep private. This woman, who advises other cast members to construct a “mickey mouse persona,” has figured out how to temper herself and a public RTV persona. Evidence for this is in the fact that she is now back on *RH*. The other women admit here that RTV was not for them. These women did not want to play the game or engage in the labor required to be in the game in the first place.

The personas constructed by producers and the women themselves are not authentic. In fact, the “work of being watched” requires one to be anything but authentic. Some women interviewed here even stated that they were “too authentic” for RTV. For instance, this woman shared:

“I am too authentic to be a housewife. I don’t know any other way to be! I didn’t care about the paycheck as much as I cared about the truth!” – RH 4

She has a point. To be authentic means responding and interacting honestly with how one might actually feel in the moment. RTV does not create conditions in which this type of response is celebrated. Also, the labor of emotional camping is done so women can get paid. If women do not care about the pay, there is no reason to engage in this type of labor.

Another former cast member shared with me that the environment itself, what we see in a scene and the women’s performances, are not authentic representations:

“It’s not really authentic. The drinking is far worse in reality and that’s authentic. The things that happen in real life that get captured, you know I think that when [name redacted] went after [name redacted] about [her partner] cheating, that was real. But [name redacted] chose to bring that on camera. So that was a choice. I probably wouldn’t do that... You’re talking about a whole relationship and a marriage you know. But that’s me. Everybody chooses what they’re comfortable with to bring on camera. It’s like this weird alternate universe. It’s a combination of authenticity and complete fabrication.” – RH 2

Personas and individual stories are designed to align with network aims. In this way, they are fabricated. The process of fabrication, if successful, will yield a seemingly authentic feel.

The authentic outcome is demonstrated in the fact that people tend to view these RTV stars as “authentic” and consider them as being the same person in real life as on television. This same woman shared:

“It’s sliced and diced to portray everybody in a more dramatic fashion. Anybody and everybody who meets me, who has watched the show and didn’t know me before, is shocked by how different I am. I think [my image] was actually a combination of me putting on a certain character and also a combination with production and also a combination of editing.” – RH 2

Another woman echoes this sentiment. She shared that the worst part about being connected to this franchise was the public’s misconceptions about her as a person:

“The worst part of being a real housewife is the misconception of being who you are. Basically, on reality TV you can be anyone you want. If you’re a normal person in real life and you want to play the villain, you can play the villain. If you’re a crazy person in real life, and you want people to feel like you’re an angel, you can do that too. You can really be any persona you want to because there’s no fact checking I wish that the fan base had seen how solid I really am. That’s the one regret that I have.” – RH 7

Bottom line, these women confirm the housewives have to construct an image that works with production demands. Those images are anything but authentic representations of them as individuals. Image curation by way of emotional camping represents a different kind of self. This self helps to shield the women from the criticism of being associated with the show, and the negative repercussions of fandom. At the end of the day, every housewife interviewed here was

incredibly self-aware about why they were portrayed certain ways. One housewife even shared this about her image and why she was portrayed certain ways on the show:

“America and the world wants to watch TV today and say, ‘wow my life is not that bad – look at these idiots!’” - RH 4

These women are not idiots. They are completely self-aware about their actions on the show, and apart from the show. They recognize how they were used by producers to create story on *RH* and they also recognize their own agency. The environment is exploitative. If women are unwilling to find ways to get around the exploitation, the best thing to do is bow out. The following long quote reveals much about the outcome of perceived authenticity, and how powerful these images can be. This former cast member also warns people viewing these ‘authentic’ images from buying into them:

“I remember saying to one of the Housewives, ‘oh I can't get over how people are talking to each other, to me, what they're saying about all this is crazy. Don't they know that this is all just kind of a fake, dramatized show and it's not real? And she said, ‘darling, don't worry about it. No one is going to say anything to your face. No matter what they say on Instagram, celebrity trumps everything.’ And she really is right. I've never had one person come up to me and say something negative to my face, not one. Everyone, no matter how much they may hate you while they're watching the show, if they see you in person, they want a photo... People assume they know you, because they're in your home and they know your dog and they know your husband and your closet. And for the most part, it's not who these people really are.” - RH 8

4.5.3 **Social media is “imperative” but also, “the worst”**

Like most people who use social media, the women of *RH* interviewed here, view social media in extremes. Social media was described by many women as the “worst part” about being on *RH* and also described by some women as “imperative.” Anyone who uses social media has experienced a barrage of negativity. For these women, social media was particularly difficult to navigate. This woman shares why:

“Social media is the worst. You could be Angelina Jolie and be absolutely perfect and spend your whole life helping other people. But if you look at the comments under

Angelina Jolie, people are so nasty. So, take a regular schmo, who becomes famous overnight by a reality show and you can only imagine the kind of vitriol that gets slammed against you on social media. You have to really have your shit together.”
- RH 2

RTV stars are organized towards the bottom of the celebrity hierarchy. They are real people “playing themselves” on a television show specifically edited to position women against each other and thus increase polarization along fan lines. What we see on these shows is therefore more easily understood as ‘real.’ This, coupled with the fact that people view these women as alike or even beneath themselves, can lower the inhibitions of the people who follow these women online. For instance, when an episode of *RH* airs, Twitter and Instagram are ablaze with comments from fans; a lot of these comments are hateful. Here are quotes from other women on social media:

“Ignore the haters and understand that it is part of this culture. Drama breeds drama so the social media is fueled by hate. That’s one of the ugliest parts of the franchise.” TH

*“The worst part was the trolling people on social media and the way they would come after me or the other housewives, and the way they’d go after each other. I thought it was so negative and unhealthy. I really did not want to be a part of that at all. **I think it’s damaging.**” – RH 8*

Two of my last interviews were with women who spoke more about social media. In those conversations, I asked specifically if they were contractually obligated to use social media for the show. I did not ask this to the other women, although I should have. The question did not come up in my earlier interviews because I (wrongly) made the assumption that the women have to participate on social media. These last two interviews came up with different responses to this question. The first woman I asked, said this:

*“No, it’s not in the contract. But when you do a show like this and you need the money badly, you endorse products. **Bravo does not make you do it. You do it if you need the money.**” – RH 4*

This woman is also talking about using social media in terms of “IG hustle” i.e., product endorsements and promotions. The other woman shared that women are in fact, contractually obligated to use social media. I asked her this directly, and she said:

*“Yes. At one point, my **Instagram account got so ugly with the fans going after each other and the things they were saying, that I took it down** because I couldn't bear to hear the way they were being. With the language. I'm just really kind of conservative about that. And **I was called by the network telling me I had to put it back up.**” – RH 8*

I probed this response. I asked if she was at least allowed to disable comments. She shared this with me:

*“Yes. **At that stage in the game I hired someone to handle it for me. I just hired someone to do my social media for me. I didn't want to see it. Most of [the housewives] will tell you that they – privately they'll tell you that they have someone that handles their social media, and they do calendars, what they're going to release. And then a lot of them publicly will say, ‘no it's all me, I do my own social media.’ I think it's a mixture.**” – RH 8*

Most celebrities and people in the public eye hire social media managers. In fact, one of my points of contact was a social media manager for two of the women of *RH*. This former cast member is likely correct when she says “it’s a mixture” of social media management and the women posting themselves. The next few responses will show why.

First, the women who told me that social media use was not in the contract, did share with me that production controls what the women post about the show. Therefore, those posts have to be approved and are likely uploaded by social media managers. Here is what she said when I asked whether production had a say in what the women did on social media:

*“Oh, yes they can tell you what to post about. **They can't tell you your endorsements.** Yes, yes... The production company has full power of what goes on and they report to Bravo daily. So, if you're on a show and the production team doesn't like you, Bravo is going to get daily reports, ‘Evie's been a pain in the ass today.’ Whatever it is, **your social media, what you post about the show, is controlled by the production company and Bravo. For good reason. They don't want to ruin what's coming out.** So, you can't say, ‘Oh my God we went to Puerto Rico,’ or something like that.” – RH 4*

To clarify, I said it sounds like women cannot spoil the show or divulge secrets of production. She responded with, “yes.” As long as their posts do not spoil the show or give away information that would ‘break the fourth wall’ (i.e., spill secrets about editing and production) they can do as they please. Analysis will show later on that women are specifically not allowed to do this. Thus far we know that Bravo gets to control, to a degree, what women say about the show. I would argue that perhaps for women who did not use social media before the show, like the one respondent above, would be contractually obligated to use it once she becomes a housewife. Perhaps, there is no language in the contract for women who already have a social media presence that tells them to use social media.

I also asked women if they are offered any advice or training on dealing with social media hate. I asked this because doing so appears to be part of the job. This woman responded with this:

“No, the network doesn’t give a shit, they don’t do anything. I do not care. It does not bother me. I have some crazy shield nothing can penetrate, because it doesn’t bother me. The only time I have ever deleted mean messages on Instagram is if they are offensive to someone I love. I do not care.” – RH 5

This quote shows that women’s social media can be controlled to a degree, but also that they are ultimately left on their own to navigate these digital cultures. For some who are new to using these platforms on such a public scale, it can be daunting. Why use social media other than to promote for Bravo, then? Most housewives, as the third analysis section of this dissertation shows, use social media because it offers lucrative opportunities for them to brand themselves and endorse products. The other reason, I found, confirms what I argue in the analysis section that covers the women’s Instagram use. These women use social media because it gives them the power to convey other aspects of their identity that the show does not highlight. This woman shared the following about using social media:

“You use your social media to explain to your fans who love and follow you, the truth of what happened. Social media is imperative but nobody pressures any housewife to use social media.” – RH 4

I asked if women felt social media gave them agency over their own identity construction and enabled them to share parts of the self that producers were not showing. All of the women I asked this question to said yes. Here are some of their responses:

“Yes, definitely. I felt that [social media] was my way – between the weekly blog that we posted – I used the blog probably the most – to get my opinion across with regard to what they weren't showing. And honestly in hindsight if I had known then... I would have handled it totally different. I would have really made sure that I shared what I felt was not correct. I noticed that the OG's, when they feel like something is unfair or they are not being portrayed properly, they voice that opinion [on social media].” – RH 8

“Yeah. My third year on the show I was a new mom, and I was really surprised at how little they showed of me being a new mom. I thought that was a whole new side of me that showed a lot of vulnerability and the ability for others to relate. I just felt like I was super boring on the show that third season. I think it's b/c they didn't really show me in my home life. So, I felt like I was slighted in that regard. I think they missed the mark on that. There's a younger viewership that they could have pulled in, but they didn't... With my social media, I'm able to show all that.” – RH 5

These responses show that yes, the women use social media to portray aspects of the self that are often left on the cutting room floor of production. In this way, social media affords the women agency in constructing the branded-self, which makes part of the branded-self separate from production. This could mean that the women do post things to their social media on their own. It could also mean they give social media managers access to specific parts of their lives to share with their followers. Either way, the point is that these women use social media as an outlet to curate a branded-self that is connected to, but also distinct from the series.

The other important note in these quotes is what the first woman says about noticing the “OGs,” (the women who have the most power on the series) voicing their concerns louder and more frequently on social media. The third analysis section of this dissertation explores positioning and power in the field of *RH*, specifically within the context of Instagram. That

analysis revealed that women take to social media to call out production. Those with less power who are loud on IG, tend to not come back for another season. One woman, interviewed here, used her social media more than other women on her series to call out production. She shared this with me about her social media use:

“I ruined it for a lot of the housewives shows because I exposed so much. I was not going to let production get away with what they were trying to do to me. I was never scared of the threats and basically did what I needed to do to get the truth out there. I had nothing to lose. There was no amount of money. Nothing. I was never going back so I didn't really care. I've spent my whole life helping people. I've got my whole life, I'm doing good. And now you want to take that and you want to destroy it in one season, and have some idiot try and destroy me? And you want me to keep quiet? I don't think so. You've got the wrong girl. Not me.” – RH 4

I had to probe because it was not clear to me yet if this woman was fired for what she exposed on IG about editing and production. I asked if she went into that season knowing that she was done, and if that empowered her to say what she wanted on social media, regardless of production's rules. Her response:

“Yes. I'm not going to talk about other housewives but there are **other housewives from other franchises who have called me up and said, ‘good for you! Oh my god, you are a warrior!’** They can't say it on camera because they don't want to lose their jobs, but they can't stand certain producers. And they talk about them and cast mates when they are not filming or in that toxic environment.” – RH 4

In sum, negative commentary on social media is one of the most difficult aspects the women have to deal with while on the show. At the same time, social media is what affords the women the chance to emphasize the parts of themselves that production chooses to deemphasize. Some women in particular used social media to share with people the pitfalls of working in RTV. One woman “exposed so much” of the things she was told not to expose and did not return for another season. This woman made the conscious decision to expose those things because she knew she was not going to sign another contract with Bravo. I surmise in the previous analysis

section of the women's IG accounts that these women are fired for violating the terms of their contract. This is confirmed here.

4.5.4 On not being a 'real housewife'

These women all found themselves off the series for a host of reasons. Some reasons are clearer than others. Only one woman admitted to being let go. Three women say specifically that they walked away. The four remaining women did not explicitly state if they were let out of their contract or left willingly. Many current cast members like to circulate talk about how women do not willingly leave the franchise.²¹ The implication is that they are fired for not being cut out for this type of work. Of the women who told me plainly that they left on their own accord, I believe them. Their experiences and opinions speak for themselves. Their responses to one of the final questions of the interview also speak volumes about their outlook on the series. I asked every woman interviewed here if she would go back to *RH*. A majority ultimately said yes, they would. Here are some of their responses:

*"I would go back because it's a **great financial opportunity** ... I would go back on for the **business opportunities** for sure." – RH 2*

*"**I don't regret doing it.** Now that it's over and knowing what I know now, **I would still do it.** So much of what I'm doing today has to do with [RH]. **It is because I'm a former Housewife that [I] get people's attention** ... The fans from RH, they don't forget. Everywhere you go they still recognize you." – RH 1*

*"**I would.** I mean I never say never ... I really enjoyed being on the show. **Now it would be totally different because it's a job.** So, you just hop on hop off." – RH 7*

I did not have to ask this question to one former cast member. This cast member told me that she left the show on her own accord to raise her children. She really did leave the series amicably. In the middle of the interview she shared this with me:

²¹ Bethenny Frankel [implied on social media](#) that women are fired from *RH* and that no one walks away.

*“I do feel like taking a year off was good for me. **I asked them to be a friend this year, so we’ll see if that happens next season.** I’ve gotten time away and perspective and I think I could deal with [my cast mates].” –RH 5*

She is now confirmed to be returning to the upcoming season of her series. The women here who shared that they would gladly return to *RH*, say this because they want the opportunities (financial and otherwise) that come with being a ‘real housewife. These are the same things that nearly every respondent listed as being the best part about being a ‘real housewife.’ These women would also go back because they understand now how the game works. For three women though, the business opportunities, exposure, fame, and playing the game is not enough. In their own words, here is what two of the women shared:

*“I’m going to say this over and over again – **I will never do a reality show again. It’s not for me.** Bravo was extremely, extremely good to me. Andy Cohen was really kind and good to me. I’ve **got not one negative thing to say about Bravo** or anything like that. **My whole beef was favoritism within the production company that equated to false narratives and false editing.**” – RH 4*

*“**No. No way.** I’ll tell you why. I think in hindsight **I feel like it’s actually a bad thing. I feel like the bar that we’re setting for people watching the show, in the way that the women go after each other, talk about each other, and tear each other down, I really think it’s damaging.** I think that when it’s all said and done, **it’s nothing to be proud of.** The way you act and the way you talk on that show, I don’t want to be responsible for some young girl walking up to another girl and commenting on the price of her bag, or her makeup, or calling her a bitch. I don’t like that. **It’s a message that I don’t want to be a part of.**” – RH 8*

I probed this last interview respondent. I asked if she thought the show would ever improve in its depiction of women. She said no. She surmised that people would not watch the series. She then shared a moment of epiphany she had while filming a reunion:

*“**I remember sitting on that sofa and [name redacted] came out, who’s an alcoholic, and had been arrested and all of these things. I remember thinking, we’re not even going to talk about what’s really real in our lives. What we really could do to make a difference. I thought that that was a very big missed opportunity to do some good.** And they didn’t want to talk about that. [The network and production] **don’t want to talk about how many women on the show really truly do have a drinking problem. Or have been arrested for drunk driving. The fact that they don’t acknowledge any of this stuff or***

don't make enough of it, I think it's so negligent. I really do. I do think that the show has some part of responsibility in it because I do think it is a lot of pressure that they put on people. I do think that the majority of these women are not necessarily the strongest people. There's a reason why they're on the show, because they're so thirsty for something that's missing in their lives." – RH 8

Some women, the eight I interviewed here, do leave the series and take time to reflect. Others stay on the show. The women who stay, as this former housewife articulates, are “thirsty for something that’s missing.” Many of these women may be searching for a type of fulfillment in the show. I would argue, however, that there are just as many women who are looking to fulfill an abstract desire, as there are women who have learned how to engage with the labor of emotional camping.

These interviews demonstrate the fact that some women do engage in this type of labor. The women who leave the series either do so because they were “too real” and did not put on the proper performance for production. Or they realized the skills required to be a ‘real housewife’ and decided against honing those skills. These divergent outcomes push back against the post-feminist notions presented in the series and will be revisited in the discussion that follows after this chapter.

4.5.5 Summary

This final analysis section highlights former full-time ‘real housewives’ voices. The analysis of these interviews traces the women’s experiences with *RH* from auditions, to contract negotiations, to filming. These interviews also reveal the women’s perspectives on the editing of the series and the role of social media in *RH*. Analysis of these responses contributes to triangulation of each of the sections of analysis that make up this work. These interviews reveal the nature of the labor I describe throughout this dissertation as *emotional camping*. Overall, this

section details the exploitative nature of filming and editing, the ways women negotiate agency via social media, and the labor of *emotional camping*.

The goal of this research is to provide a comprehensive overview of *RH* as a media phenomenon. This long analysis chapter takes readers through the production of RTV, audience reception, and provides a cross platform analysis of *RH* media content. This last section gave voice to the women who have been a part of this series. The analysis section has broadly and effectively detailed each level of this phenomenon. The highpoints from this analysis will be discussed next. Finally, after the discussion, follows the conclusion of this dissertation.

5. DISCUSSION

This dissertation offers a cultural explanation of the *RH*'s success over the last decade by exploring how ideas about class are presented in media, perpetuated across platforms, and used to make sense of individual's self-identification. Multi-faceted analysis shows that *RH* has succeeded in American culture because one, the women are framed on the show in line with the public's ambivalent attitudes about class. Two, the frames aim to reconcile the audience to their own status using a mix of ironic techniques designed to evoke resentment and schadenfreude. Three, the women's self-presentation is representative of a mediatized branded-ideal, grounded in a gendered and classist neoliberalism, which works to reinforce beliefs in class advancement via the labor of emotional camping.

This research was grounded by a simple research question: what does *RH* communicate about class, status, and social mobility in the U.S. at a time of exacerbated class resentment? For a comprehensive understanding the question was broken into three sub-questions addressing various levels of the phenomenon: 1) how are the women of *RH* framed on the series? 2) how do the women of *RH* frame the branded-self on IG? 3) does the audience recognize these frames? Key findings discussed here include *RH*'s framing of class and audience perceptions of those frames. Other key findings include the usefulness of media's deployment of class ambivalence, how it manifests across platforms, permeates public consciousness, and the role it plays in understanding inequality and political decision making. Finally, the significance of emotional camping, a form of labor that simultaneously performs, yet evades social class, will be discussed.

5.1 Media framing and class

Findings show that women who can be easily packaged to represent gendered and classist ideas make for the best 'real housewives.' Interviews with RTV insiders revealed that the women

of *RH* are cast foremost for their outward personal appearance and ability to display materialism. Things like pick-ups and Frankenbiting are conducted by RTV field-producers and story-editors, who are employed to curate mini-brand extensions that satisfy Bravo TV network executives. These interviews guided a frame analysis of each of the seven *RH* series in the U.S. franchise.

Frame analysis shows that the women are presented to the audience by way of five overlapping frames: 1) Postfeminist Nirvana, 2) the Bling Frame, 3) the Hustler Frame, 4) “Maybe we are white trash” Frame, and 5) the Hypocrite Frame. The Bling, Hustler, and “Maybe we are white trash” Frames represent ambivalent ideas about social class – that it is materialism, labor and work-ethic, and behavior. Each are embedded within a postfeminist sensibility, making these class-based frames highly gendered. Women are treated to the same frames, but some frames are evoked more than others in the packaging of individual women. This is done to create competition among characters who display different modes of capital and will clash over positions of power. This breeds resentment between women on the series who occupy a different status in the class hierarchy. These frames cohere to produce a particular ideological message.

5.1.1 **The ideological message behind the class-based media frames of *RH***

These frames are typically used on *RH* to prominently position three types of women: 1) the “rich bitch” or those who have family money, 2) the “alpha” or those who have been enterprising enough to transcend their socio-economic origins, and 3) the tragic “new money” housewife. The first type is aspirational. The second type embodies the new American dream – that anyone can have success if they know how to capitalize on the self-branding opportunities afforded by RTV and new media platforms. This character type demonstrates that class is transitory and social origins can be easily overcome. The “new money” woman tends to be flashy, unreserved, and there for comedic purposes.

While the second and third character types can receive positive labor edits, it is their behavior that gives away their social origin. As *RHNYC* star, Countess Luann De Lesseps says, “money can’t buy you class,” meaning that no matter how hard someone works, or how much they move up in terms of income, social origins are made visible by things like taste and behavior. “Money can’t buy you class” is a distinction that elevates a dominate ideology that enables the truly wealthy to maintain power. These characters types are intentionally produced to play against each other. The first type enables people to see how the rich live, which includes showing the wealthy dealing with problems, while the second type enables people to visualize social mobility. The alphas show the audience that ordinary women can seamlessly move upwards. The “rich bitch” shows us that rich people have problems too. Both show that *rich people are just like us*. The third type is intended to reconcile us, showing that it is better to be who we are than to pretend to be something else. The “tragic” new money type plays the fool and in turn elevates the position of those from wealthier social origins.

RH’s ability to foster class ambivalence is key to its success. These different definitions of class are comprised of people’s insecurities about status, their aspirations to be rich, beliefs about hard work and the presence of opportunity. The ideas and feelings associated with trying to unpack social class in daily life render people ambivalent to the concept which can create apathy towards issues related to inequality (Bartels, 2009; Gilens, 2012; Fraser, 2015). Put simply, social class is not viewed in concrete terms in the U.S. Instead ambivalent ideas about class are deployed to envision class boundaries as illusory, whereby people can transcend them easily via equal opportunities and effort. Class ambivalence undergirds the ideology of the American Dream, which ignores a multitude of factors associated with race, gender, education, ability, income, and the fact that opportunities are meted out according to these characteristics. This is

also a motivating belief system that promises hard work and determination pay off. When hard work fails, entertainment, humor, and social comparisons help reconcile a loss of hope, restore faith, and provide comfort. This is where the usefulness of *schadenfreude* comes in, which is part of the pro-social adaptive function Smith (2013) theorized about. *Schadenfreude* is grounded by companion emotions envy and resentment, which breeds polarization. *RH* works by creating polarizing character types and operates in the same way a politics of resentment does (Cramer, 2016). That is by positioning women against each other, as though they are fundamentally different, to create drama that forces the audience to take sides and make judgments.

Schadenfreude or the “You’re a hypocrite” Frame is related to Kendall’s (2005) sour-grapes framing of the wealthy that shows rich people disillusioned with life. This elicits ambivalent feelings in viewers because they can take pleasure in watching people purchase expensive items and residing in luxe spaces, but also gain awareness of the problems that come with status and wealth (Kendall, 2005, p. 70). Viewing *RH* does not make viewers apathetic to inequality or excessive wealth, but class ambivalence can. Especially when competition and resentment are manufactured to distract audiences from pinpointing those issues.

All frames create multi-dimensional characters who are seemingly rich, beautiful, business savvy, family focused, emotionally unstable, morally flawed and/or lacking intelligence. Fans who are socio-economically inferior to the women on screen are thus repositioned as culturally superior. Audiences can therefore look up to and deride these women at the same time.

RH showcases wealthy women, but does not showcase women in the top one percent. The truly wealthy are islands, and the public knows little about them because they have the means to buy privacy and retreat from public life. In sum, the ideological message of production

– that the rich are just like us, albeit unhappy, stupid and/or morally bankrupt – helps the truly wealthy remain invisible by making “new money” types a foil, pushing them to the forefront of public consciousness to be derided in bad economic times.

The classist messages emanating from these frames are important to people’s sense-making and political decision-making processes. Media’s framing of class makes a difference in how we think about other people and how we spend our money (Kendall, 2005). Audience analysis here adds to this, showing how *RH* frames class plays into the way viewers think about the rich, their own class and status, and ideas about luck and deservingness. Other scholars have shown that the way we view all of these things impacts a person’s decision about how to vote (Bartels, 2009; Gilens, 2012; Lefgren, Simms, & Stoddard, 2016; Gee, Migueis, & Parsa, 2017). Importantly, the media frames of *RH* point to class ambivalence and *schadenfreude*, psychological mechanisms which aim to enable the audience to rationalize away their own position in the class hierarchy.

The way these women are framed matters. They are framed deliberately to promote gendered class ambivalence and stir resentment. As shown by the audience analysis, these frames and subsequent ideas and feelings they evoke are used by individuals to make sense of concepts like feminism, social class, luck, and deservingness. Each of which formulate people’s worldviews and decision-making processes. Following next is in depth discussion of these issues and audience perceptions.

5.2 **The messages the audience takes away**

Foundational cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1980) demonstrated that media messages are encoded with a preferred reading but decoded by individual audience members differently. This dissertation attests that audience members can resist dominant messages

presented, and yet at the same time, other hegemonic ideas in media can inform their sense-making about certain issues. The last question asked to fans of *RH* was about the overall message of the series. Responses were nuanced and varied, yet the two main messages deciphered by fans are hegemonic readings.

The first major message takeaway from fans of *RH* actually confirms production's preferred reading that 'the rich are just like us, because they have problems too.' Showing the wealthy as regular people with problems humanizes them. This message is a positive way to frame the wealthy in media. Kendall (2005) calls this framing tactic *the consensus frame*. The consensus frame obscures class-based inequalities by de-emphasizing major distinctions between the rich and poor, and through emphasizing that the rich are similar to everyone across the economic spectrum. This tactic makes the concept of social class seem outdated, as though the disparities between classes can be explained via small degrees of wealth (Kendall, 2005). The aim of this framing device is in its name, which is to show that the rich and not-so-rich should really agree on "pressing issues or social problems," (2005, p. 30). Why should the have-nots vote against the decisions made by the wealthy and powerful if wealthy people are actually just like everyone else?

This reading of *RH* is interesting because it evokes a positive framing of the wealthy, while simultaneously evoking the *sour grapes frame*, the negative framing device discussed earlier. All of the fans interviewed at some point mentioned the problems of the rich. The aim of the *sour grapes frame* is to reconcile people to the status quo. Both messages of these framing devices come into focus in fan interviews. This combination of positive and negative frames, coupled with the fact that these are "ordinary" women, reinforce the idea that the rich really are just like everyone else. This reading even appears to foster a particular immediacy or an overt

sense of emotional realism between the viewer and women on the series. Taken all together this reading evinces a potent ideological message that not only humanizes the (conspicuously) wealthy, but also makes us empathize with their situation.

The second major takeaway message from fans is that *RH* has no message. This surface level interpretation of the series is perhaps more problematic than the first reading of *RH*. It is likely that fans who answered this way were only thinking about why they watch *RH*. Many articulated that they tune into *RH* to tune out life. It was also the last question of the interview, so some respondents could have been tired of critically assessing questions. There were other more meaningful interpretations of the series' messages, however this one warrants discussion since many fans concluded this was the overall message.

From a cultural studies perspective, television specifically, always has an ideological message under the surface level idea that TV and media are just for entertainment. This is a catch-all rationalization for not engaging as a viewer and it is also a catch all excuse for producers of television content. "It's just entertainment" absolves content creators of any responsibility for the social repercussions of these messages. The message that there is no message other than pure entertainment, references the "mindlessness" associated with viewing RTV. People in RTV and viewers alike rationalize that these shows are harmless and watch to "tune out" because they do not demand thinking. All of this can be true, and at the same time there is still an ideological function behind the message of "pure entertainment."

These media frames that confirm "pure entertainment" are, as demonstrated here, laced with hegemonic representations and ideas about society and individuals' place in society. This reading of the series is not wrong. It is however an impediment to critical engagement with media. The message is deeper than entertainment because somewhere along the line these ideas

wind up informing how people think about certain concepts. Evidence for this is shown through the audience analysis of this research. Fans called up the idea elements and symbols associated with these frames to talk about concepts such as social class, feminism, luck, and deservingness.

5.2.1 **Fans and feminism through anti-feminist frames**

The fact that the five frames are embedded within a postfeminist sensibility and deployed to position women against each other does not mean that fans view the series or the women themselves as anti-feminist. When fans were asked whether the women of *RH* were feminists, answers varied. The intent behind this question was to gauge if and how people use these media frames to make sense of issues like feminism within the context of a show that is often deliberately anti-feminist. Findings revealed that fans use experiences and other knowledge, along with these media frames to make sense of this issue. Framing tactics also played into how feminist certain women appeared to be.

Fans were able to make distinctions between structural components of the series and the women as individuals, as well as distinctions between women on the series. Interestingly, many fans called out the confluence of frames as anti-feminist, and still viewed the women on an individual level as feminists. On the surface, it would appear that fans resist the dominant anti-feminist messages of *RH*. Still, most respondents who said these women were feminists called up the idea elements and symbols of *Postfeminist Nirvana* to explain their rationale. This suggests that the meta-frame or postfeminist sensibility is working the way it is supposed to work. What these responses speak to is Gill's (2017) recent argument reflecting on the regulatory power of the postfeminist sensibility over the last decade. A postfeminist sensibility is no longer just a term used to characterize cultural life. It is now harder to pinpoint because it has become hegemonic, permeating not only media and macro-elements of culture, but our own individual

affective and psychic life. Put simply, interview analysis showed that a significant number of fans made sense of feminism using terms and ideas representative of postfeminist rhetoric.

Those who said no, these women are not feminists, often clarified that the women's actions were anti-feminist. The women's actions however are presented to us and embedded within deliberately anti-feminist frames. In summary, both responses demonstrate that media framing informs people about how to think about certain issues, like feminism. The concept of feminism cannot be separated from intersectional aspects of identity. Historically speaking, one of the central contentions within feminism is that it has often evaded class privilege.

5.2.2 **Framing class and the audience**

Deservingness and luck

Fans were uncomfortable, even openly offended to answer if the women on the series deserved their wealth. The question was asked because media framing is designed to tell people how to think about issues and people, or to make judgment calls. The five frames are evoked different ways and encoded with intended meanings. One of the intended meanings is to note deservingness. Deservingness is often the outcome/preferred reading of the *Hustler Frame*; if a woman is framed as a hard worker she is positioned as being more deserving than those who do not. Responses to this question rationalized deservingness in terms of "hard work" and also factored in the importance of charity. This shows the idea elements and symbols related to the *Hustler Frame* worked to help the audience formulate judgments about deservingness. Whether they admit to making those judgments or not is a different topic.

A few respondents were comfortable saying no, the women did not deserve their wealth. At face value, this may confirm a preferred meaning of the frames at play on *RH*. However, deeper analysis of fan responses showed that the fans who were not offended by the question and

said the women do not deserve their wealth, were actually making a larger critique about capitalism and economic inequality. This demonstrates that fan readings of the frames are nuanced, distinct, and informed by other knowledge and ideas about pressing social issues.

This question was also posed because deservingness is not only tied to ideas about hard work, but it is also a concept wrapped up in class privilege. Answers to this question therefore help unpack how people make sense of class privilege when considering wealth. The relationship between class privilege and deservingness make more sense when we talk about the working poor.

People who work two or three jobs for low wages given a host of reasons, (i.e., race, gender, social origins, skills, education level and other variables that play into discrimination) are working hard, yet still fail to transcend the class hierarchy and are often times viewed as undeserving anyway (Rose and Baumgartner, 2013; Gilens, 1996). Rose and Baumgartner (2013) found that media framing of the poor as either deserving or lazy has real life implications like affecting policy that could help those living in poverty. Deservingness and media framing are thus key to understanding how we view class privilege. In the case of *RH*, it appears fans did not want to judge the deservingness of wealthy people, meanwhile other research has shown people are quicker to make deservingness judgments about the working poor.

RH fans were responding to the *Hustler Frame* when asked about deservingness, which demonstrates that if someone calls up how hard they work, or are shown working, people tend to believe it. Often times people do not see mediated depictions of people of lesser economic standing working, and therefore do not believe it happens. The women on *RH* also have access to larger platforms to tell people about their “hustle.” Whereas the working poor do not have that access, and might even be too busy or too tired to talk about work the way these women do. This

is where class privilege and conceptions about work ethic collide. People of a certain social status have the platforms to talk about how hard they work and perform deservingness, while others do not. The analysis of the women's IG accounts demonstrates the importance of a 'real housewife's' *hustle*. Embedded within access to those platforms and their ability to perform 'hustle,' is class privilege.

The discomfort people felt with answering this question might also be tied to the fact that audience members would have to confront their own class privilege to answer the question. The recent college admissions scandal²² illuminated the satirical root of *meritocracy*, coined by sociologist Michael Young (1958). Young imagined a world where social class was erased (much like it has been in the U.S. via class ambivalence), and was replaced by a new hierarchical order based on talent and ability. The new order wound up reintroducing the old class system. This is because separating merit or success from class is practically impossible. Bottom line, we cannot get around social class, even if we want to. This shows in the ways we understand – or deliberately avoid – confronting class privilege.

In contrast to Rose and Baumgartner's (2013) research, the audience analysis here demonstrates that people felt entirely uncomfortable talking about deservingness when considering (conspicuously) rich women. Yet, no one felt uncomfortable about discussing luck. When asked if they thought women on the show got lucky, a majority of interviewees said yes. Most respondents viewed luck in terms of opportunities. Many clarified that luck is not a negative description, and that it works alongside hard-work. The fact that it was easier for fans to discuss luck than deservingness is interesting. Deservingness refers to being earned, while luck is

²² [Meritocracy is not what people think it is.](#)

viewed as something for nothing, an opportunity given without being connected to a particular individual's standing. When we talk about deservingness we are essentially talking about how opportunities *should* be meted out. When we discuss luck, we are talking about "fate." Leaving things to fate makes it easier to evade social responsibility.

Class privilege itself is luck. It is not deserved or earned. It is a gift. Who can say who deserves anything if luck plays such a role in what we have? The fact that luck is so easy to discuss however says a lot about how we rationalize away our inability to think about class privilege. Why think deeply about inequality or opportunity if it is meted out according to luck? How can we care about what we can tangibly do to even things out, if luck is a salient factor?

The ability to talk freely about luck demonstrates from an analytical perspective here that people are comfortable using luck to describe position, and are not comfortable using deservingness. Luck implies a happy accident, and therefore there is nothing we can do to change it. Deservingness implies that we can work harder. To consider deservingness means we have to confront certain realities, like perhaps we did not achieve something entirely out of work ethic or talent, but rather our achievements were supported by an existing privilege. The difficulties associated with talking about deservingness in this research make sense when we look at how viewers discussed social class – on the series and in their own lives.

Social class on RH is viewed through distinctions

Viewed as a cultural artifact, *RH* reveals two things about class: how it is portrayed and how people – the women on the show and viewers – talk about class. The discussion thus far points to how class is portrayed and how those portrayals can inform the way people talk about related concepts. In the frame analysis section, the class position of the women on the show is analyzed using field theory and other Bourdieusian concepts like capital, positioning, and

distinctions. The women are framed to display different capital for drama, which is centered on clashes over positions of power. Power is often negotiated on *RH* through distinctions.

Distinctions are acts of social positioning that function to legitimate social differences or one's position within a social group (Bourdieu, 1984). They are markers of class that reveal more about one's position in the field of power and subsequent capital than they reveal about the actual value of the thing that is being judged. Distinctions are most honestly realized on the series when women reference cultural capital, or what they know. This is displayed via verbal distinctions and taste preferences.

Fussell (1986) argued people in the middle class would say, "they live in a lovely five-hundred-thousand-dollar home," whereas people in the upper class would say, "they live in a lovely house" (p. 155). Price-dropping is a distinction used by people in the middle who need to mark status and diminish insecurities that people in the upper-class do not experience.

Distinctions like this are a hallmark of *RH* and play into the pleasure gleaned from viewing the series. Without prompting, fans made class distinctions to discuss their favorite series and characters. This demonstrates that part of the pleasure of viewing *RH* is in the distinctions people get to make.

As fan interviews shifted from talking about pleasure to talking about class, distinctions became *more distinct*. Class was described by viewers in three primary ways: (i) as best behavior, (ii) as privacy, and as (iii) new or old money. Money, both old and new, became the guiding distinction for viewers when discussing the women and social class. Old money is "real" money or generational wealth passed down through families over time. According to fans, old money is distinguished by reserved behavior and being private. Put simply, old money has a quiet presence that "whispers."

New money “talks” – loudly – and was used by fans to denigrate the women. New money refers to ostentatiousness, conspicuous consumption, attention-seeking, and “trashy” behaviors associated with a lower-class background. Old money, according to interviews, is better than new money for the simple fact that it has lasted over time. New money was derisively discussed as fleeting. Old money was spoken of aspirationally. This is ironic because that aspiration cannot be realized unless one was born into generational wealth. The only place people with these aspirations might find themselves is on the coarser, new money side of this distinction.

Therein lies the power of making distinctions. They define class boundaries, keeping certain people safe and others on the outside left to aspire to something just out of reach. This distinction makes seemingly implicit social divisions explicit by highlighting differences between classes. Those differences can foster resentment between people on the outside and those who are positioned safely in the upper class (Cramer, 2016). Distinctions are also part of the process through which the upper class maintains control of the social order. The upper class “sets the limits,” either mental or structural, around which the lower classes reside. It is within these limits that lower-classes make sense of their place. The aspirations these limits create work in the favor of the upper class (Hall, 1977, p. 333).

RH as a franchise makes visible on the show these implicit divisions that are present in the larger social space. In Bourdieu’s own words, “the power to impose and to inculcate a vision of divisions, that is the power to make visible and explicit social divisions that are implicit, is political power par excellence,” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 23). Distinctions accomplish this because they actually let us talk about class in a culture that subverts the realities of social class boundaries. Explicit class boundaries conflict with the idea of equality undergirding the American dream and upward social mobility. By elevating distinctions, *RH* as a franchise

legitimizes class as a central facet of identification – albeit these distinctions are based on ambivalent ideas about class that benefit different groups, in different ways.

Understanding class through distinctions like “old”/“new money” foster never-to-be-realized aspirations that might formulate abstract understanding of the way things are. For example, people, particularly in the disappearing middle-class, who have been severely affected by bad economic policies, might not view their diminishing position or economic inequality as issues that can be fixed by a higher minimum wage or other tangible policy initiatives. Instead, these issues are viewed through beliefs based on ideographs about “hard work” and “opportunity.” Viewed abstractly, abstract solutions – like “making America great again” might appear to be the best solution to their problems. The irony of voting against one’s interests is a popular topic for political economists and sociologists (Bartels, 2009; Gilens, 2012; Cramer, 2016). Ironic outcomes are interesting because we least expect them – and the deliberate use of irony offers interesting results in terms of fans of *RH*.

The complexity of schadenfreude and class understanding

Audience analysis shows the “You’re a hypocrite” Frame is read two ways. The first reading confirms production’s preferred reading. Many interviewees confirmed that watching the women contradict themselves was part of the pleasure of viewing the series and made them view the women as hypocrites, stupid, or beneath them. A significant number of interview subjects however shared that the use of irony humanized the women. They reconciled the ironic distance between them and the women by pinpointing the emotional realism of being someone who sometimes contradicts themselves. Both responses however, demonstrate that the schadenfreude deployed in the hypocrisy package did make fans feel better about themselves. Either because

the frame comforted people or because it made people feel at least superior to the women on a moral or cultural level.

Irony is evoked deliberately, admits Andy Cohen, executive producer of each series, as an “editorial point of view,” which “makes it okay to watch the show, because we’re all in on it together” (Nightline, 2009). Irony is used to create distance between viewers and these “bad objects” of popular culture (Ang, 1985, p. 99). Regardless of fan readings, the ironic framing tactics used in the “You’re a Hypocrite” Frame enables the audience to humanize the women. This works with the overall ideological message of the franchise that “the rich are just like us.” This can also work to create a “safe distance” between viewers and “particular sentiments or beliefs” (Gill, 2007, p. 266).

Irony is referred to by producers as the “Bravo wink.” This cute packaging of irony exploits audience members’ beliefs that they are “knowing,” cultured consumers of this series, too intelligent to fall prey to manipulation or an object of “bad culture.” Pairing irony with this “knowingness” enables us to “have it both ways” (Gill, 2007). Put simply, the ironic frame acknowledges that these representations of women are bad, but enables us to enjoy viewing because we are all in on the joke of mass culture – that yes, this is bad, but of course we *never* take it *seriously*.

RH highlights the experiences of conspicuously rich women, framing them often positively as hard-workers, but most consistently as hypocrites or women who lack basic intelligence and self-awareness. The ultra-visibility of these women across media platforms and their ironic displays of wealth, behavior, and work-ethic formulate much of what we see about the wealthy. This hyper-visibility exudes a sense of closeness and legitimates conspicuous displays of materialism, “hustle,” and bad behavior – confirming ambivalent ideas about class.

This helps normalize the exploitative nature of capitalism by keeping the super-rich hidden, new money types on display for aspiration and derision, and the rest of us sated by the emotion of *schadenfreude*. This emotional release creates an ironic distance that releases us from thinking critically about what we see, where we stand, and why.

As Fussell (1983) discussed in the eighties, the “myth” of the class situation in the U.S., is that we think we “can readily earn” our way upward, but when we come to terms with reality that we are “trapped in a class system” we have “half persuaded” ourselves into believing is not important, we are left with envy and disappointment (p. 20). The way around this is to come up with coping mechanisms. One such coping mechanism is to watch a series that confirms all of our ambivalent ideas about class position, makes us feel better for tuning in, and reconciles us to feel better about where we stand in reality. In the end, the use of irony repositions fans, likely economically inferior to the women on *RH*, as culturally superior. This is important because feeling culturally superior to others plays into how fans viewed their own class position.

Audience’s personal conceptions of social class

Sociologists and economists will define social class as one’s socio-economic position, which can be quantified by occupational grouping, working conditions, and labor market resources (Weber, 1922; Torche, 2015; Cramer, 2016). Pew (2016) defines the upper class as individuals who take home an income of over \$100,000 or more than double the national median, which in 2016 was \$55,775. Pew, other organizations, and scholars agree that class is not only income, but depends on net worth, education, and occupation. Household income however is the easiest way to group individuals. Intertwined with an individual’s job and income are their parents’ income and education. Both of which play a fundamental role in the opportunities people will encounter later in life (Stiglitz, 2014). This means one’s socio-

economic origins play a role in one's class position throughout life, yet where one originates does not necessarily mean they will stay there.

This makes class difficult to readily identify in daily life. Class becomes something more personal when individuals discuss it on their own terms. This is why there is a disconnect between class in terms of a social science concept designed to group people from a macro-perspective, and class as an individual identification. The audience interviews attest to this.

All 26 interview subjects identified as being in the *middle class*. Recent Pew research has shown that about 70 percent of Americans view themselves as being a part of the middle class, but only 52 percent have incomes that actually qualify as middle class (Pew, 2018)²³. People who might actually be in the upper class are increasingly categorizing themselves as part of the middle. The Brookings Institute casts a wide net for the middle-class – defining it as three-person households (or their equivalents) with an income anywhere from \$37,000 to \$147,000 (Reeves and Guyot, 2018).²⁴

Each person interviewed categorized themselves into an upper middle, middle of the middle, and lower middle class, without prompting. A majority of the thirty-eight percent who identified as being a part of the *upper-middle class* appeared to be the most insecure about their position. As the analysis showed, some people who identified their position this way could actually qualify as being a part of the upper class. These findings demonstrate that people might feel more comfortable identifying as part of the middle even if they could qualify as being above it because of social comparisons or a general fear of falling (Ehrenreich, 1985). Social class for those in the “upper middle class,” viewed class as social capital, access, privileges experienced

²³ [Pew Research](#)

²⁴ [Brookings](#)

in daily life, rather than income and economic capital. It was described by many as a feeling of never having to worry.

The thirty-eight percent of respondents who identified in the middle of the middle class were the most confident, using education level, job, where they live, and tax status to describe position. They were also the most confident about the state of the economy a decade from now. For the 19 percent who identified as being a part of the lower-middle class, social class was discussed more explicitly as being transitory, situational, and relative to other people. It was also described – similarly to those who identified in the upper middle – as a structure of feeling. For the lower-middle however that feeling was described as “feeling like you can’t have everything you want.” Cultural capital, like education, taste, belongings, and manners become more important as an indicator of one’s position for those in the lower-class. When coupled with the media framing analysis, this shows that feeling at least culturally superior to those who are perhaps economically superior provides a sense of comfort and status.

Income and social origins were discussed in respondent’s answers, however, neither were considered the most important in determining one’s position. The most important aspect of social class for everyone in this sample was in how they were positioned relative to the people in their immediate lives. As argued here, this is what makes watching *RH* so enjoyable to fans; viewers can take comfort in their general position, because they may be positioned as economically inferior to the women on the series, but are better positioned culturally.

Overall, fans were most confident in their cultural and social capital when discussing class. Economic capital is one of the most important designations for class position, but it was the most lacking aspect of people’s personal categorizations. Identifying with the middle class appears to comfort all respondents. Identifying as being a part of the middle, rather than

identifying as being a part of the upper class or lower working classes, demonstrates that no one felt truly secure.

The least secure in this sample were those who identified as upper middle class. This again, corroborates with current findings that those in the upper classes feel more comfortable identifying as being a part of a lower-class bracket. When asked, *in ten years do you think we'll see a stronger economy or not?* a majority of respondents said no. It appears that those on the outskirts of the middle-of-the-middle feel the most precarious. Only those who identified in the middle-of-the-middle demonstrated confidence in the economy a decade from now. Perhaps because they positioned themselves in the safest spot, between two other groups that are closer to general class boundaries. All of this demonstrates that we might feel confident in our positions, but only for certain increments of time. When it comes to class, our understanding changes in relation to how we view others as well as larger structural forces.

This discussion demonstrates that social class position is understood through a variety of media frames that promote ambivalent ideas and people's individual perceptions of where they are in relation to others. The frames of *RH* work to present the audience with upper class aspirations and at the same time evince *schadenfreude*. This positions the audience as culturally superior to the women on the series. The media frames' deliberate deployment of class ambivalence and resentment work to distract and redirect ideas about class position. This is however not a top-down argument, whereby the audience is powerless to media framing. The findings in the audience analysis section have shown otherwise by noting various sites of resistance. It is not only ideas from media that curate our sense of class, but also our relative position to people close to us that inform our class identification.

Bottom line, ambivalent ideas about class exist in multiple layers of culture. Another layer to unfold is that of social media. These ambivalent ideas are reinforced by the women themselves on IG. The women's social media provides a stronger sense of immediacy between followers, the women of *RH*, and these class based aspirations. Following next is discussion of how the women perform class on IG and the labor that goes into those performances. This will introduce deeper discussion of emotional camping. This is the identity work the women do to simultaneously get around, profit off of, and proliferate hegemonic ideas about class, race, and gender across media platforms.

5.3 **How the women of *RH* frame themselves: Action, representation, and identification**

In terms of media framing, the women of *RH* are packaged into ironic characters that capitalize on classist, racist, and sexist stereotypes about women. Looking at the women's identity work on other platforms was imperative to formulate understanding of whether and to what extent the women had agency over part of their public identity. Analysis of the second research question, how do the women frame themselves on IG? revealed examples of agency and that these women can capitalize on their branded-identity from the show across platforms for economic and social gain.

The *action* or purpose of the women's individual posts is to depict their 1) interpersonal relationships, 2) hustle, 3) charitable endeavors, 4) empowerment advocacy, and 5) capital. These posts facilitate curation of a branded-aesthetic that both aligns with and contests the image presented on the show. For instance, all women pay homage to certain frames from the show, while some actively work to deemphasize frames like the "You're a hypocrite" Frame. This means the women play with their branded persona online in ways they cannot on RTV. Former cast members from *RH* confirmed in interviews that social media gave them an avenue to convey

other aspects of their identity that the show was not highlighting. The women therefore resist and perpetuate hegemonic media representations of gender, race, and class.

Noticeable displays of advocacy for other women were present on the women's IG. This redirects ideas from the show that the women compete against each other. Yet, analysis also demonstrates that the meta-frame of *Postfeminist Nirvana* informs much of the women's IG aesthetic. In terms of *representations* of gender, the images posted to IG promote ultra-feminized beauty ideals, dominant gender roles, and popular ideas about feminism.

One major divergence from producer framing tactics is that race is a more salient and celebrated component of the women's identities on IG. Discussions of racial discrimination and differences appear via celebratory hashtags and posts dedicated to public figures in the African American community. The women's charitable endeavors and the content they share in posts that center race, help to re-shape the women's stories. At the same time, these stories and images are embedded within a postfeminist sensibility. On IG, however, it appears the women work within this frame on an individual level. Whereas on the series, from a structural level, the frame seems to elide the women's experiences with racial discrimination by highlighting other frames that show the women in privileged positions. The women on IG however are not immune to a postfeminist sensibility. Even communicating race online, where women of *RH* supposedly have more agency, is done within the parameters of a postfeminist sensibility.

This is important to note since many scholars who interrogate postfeminist media discuss how a postfeminist sensibility excludes certain groups in its representations by centering whiteness (Dubrofsky, 2011; McRobbie, 2013; Gill, 2007). Other scholars however have contended that postfeminism is no longer 'for white girls only' or something only white women can perform completely (Butler, 2013). Just because the postfeminist sensibility has been

formulated around whiteness, does not, Butler argues, mean that women of color are excluded from interpellations of postfeminism. The women of *RHOA* and *RHOP* confirm Butler's argument. These women might use IG to promote their racial identity in ways that the series does not, still they align with postfeminist sensibilities in other ways. Like purporting similar gendered and classist ideas as the white women across other series. This corroborates the analysis of the women's IG accounts in that, Black women who appear on *RH* have more stereotypes to play into – and against – than the white women on the series.

This might be evidence of a specific kind of “respectability politics” women of color on *RH* have to adopt. “Respectability politics” describe a “self-presentation strategy historically adopted by African American women to reject white stereotypes” (Pitcan, Marwick, & boyd, 2018). This presentation strategy emphasizes morality while deemphasizing sexuality. It refers to the curation of a more neutral image online, one that avoids lower class connections, and aims to emulate elitist ideas. This, the authors argue is the type of identity work necessary for women of color to position themselves onto an upwardly mobile track. The analysis of the women's IG's in this research align with their findings. The women of *RHOA* and *RHOP* studied here use IG to celebrate racial identity by promoting prominent figures and charitable causes that support people in the Black community. Everything else on IG purports similar gendered and classist ideals that are representative of being a ‘Real Housewife.’ The women of color on the series thus highlight other important parts of the self on social media, but only in ways that work within the confines of being a branded ‘real housewife.’ This means representations of race on IG are informed by a larger postfeminist sensibility and ambivalent, yet aspirational ideas about class.

The women's displays of capital most overtly facilitate *representations* of class on IG. Displays of capital are variegated according to the women's location, their position in daily life

and within the field of *RH*. The women borrow from the *Bling Frame* and the *Hustler Frame*, both of which are amplified on IG. The *Hustler Frame* particularly comes alive on IG and provides a more covert representation of social class than the *Bling Frame*.

Analysis revealed what is referred to in this research as the women's "IG Hustle." This notes a specific type of labor engagement on the IG platform. The women use IG to perform the work of a branded-self. For example, the women post to IG first and foremost to curate a branded image of the self. They do this partially by posting about the show and in posting about products they have developed (i.e. *explicit branding*) to build a tangible brand extending from their persona. IG Hustle however can be further narrowed down to focus on the labor of posting sponsored content or other types of product endorsements. Posting sponsored content for weight loss products, clothing, accessories, and subscription boxes of products is a productive way for the women to make money outside of the series. Deeper analysis of IG Hustle also pointed to ideas about the women's classed backgrounds. The women who are in more precarious positions financially appear to post sponsored content more than the women on the series who are cast because of their pre-existing economic capital.

As indicated by the interviews with former cast members, many of these women are in need of additional income (from the show and otherwise) to keep up the appearances necessary for the show. Curating a successful branded-self on IG brings these women economic rewards that can enable upward mobility or maintenance of their status quo. For instance, viewers have watched many women on the series go through divorce and other events that foster financial difficulties. Their contract with Bravo and the access that opens up for them on other platforms fosters financial independence. This also means that as the women move up the economic and social ladder, they will bring ingrained, class-based dispositions to their newly acquired, higher

status position on IG. This blurs class boundaries further. Class ambivalence is thus embedded within the habitus of the women.

Identification brings the habitus of the individual into consideration in textual analysis. Identification is a deeper interrogation of how the women position themselves online – or how the women choose to identify. The women analyzed here, either diverged from the image on the series by calling out producers. Thus, they identified as being outside of the ideal ‘Real Housewife.’ Others positioned themselves powerfully as the embodiment of a branded ‘Real Housewife’ – i.e. as a “Walking GIF.” The women who called out production and re-positioned themselves apart from the edit they received on the show were not offered a role on the show for the next season. The women who position themselves as “Walking GIFs” create branded personas on IG that align with the meta-image and meta-narrative of being a ‘Real Housewife’ on RTV. Therefore, successfully branded women of *RH* are reproducing the dominant ideas about race, class, and gender from the series on an individual-influencer level. This is an example of how RTV perpetuates hegemonic ideas across platforms. On social media, these women act as “mini-brand extensions” of the network, reproducing on a seemingly intimate level, the ideas that satisfy the goals of the network.

5.3.1 **‘Walking GIFs’: Social media and the amplification of emotional camping**

“Walking GIFs” amplify their character from RTV on IG, neatly aligning their image with production across platforms. They amplify their image from the series by evoking a postfeminist sensibility and projecting class ambivalence through different displays of capital that depict materialistic goals, hustle, and their best and worst behavior. The women who position themselves as Walking GIFs post content that plays with the multitudes of a Bravo identity. The key is they admit mistakes, laugh at their own hypocritical moments, and make fun

of themselves. In other words, they make use of all of the media frames from the series, even irony, to create the appearance of being “in on the joke.”

Doing so enables these women to garner a following on social media, which inevitably leads to an increase in economic and social capital via endorsement deals, branding opportunities, and public appearances. Presenting as Walking GIFs from the show means the women have successfully parodied their characters and capitalized on the affordances of being branded a ‘Real Housewife.’ Parodying themselves gives their following tangible evidence that they are knowingly “in on the joke,” which simultaneously points to acknowledgement of the exploitation involved in being a part of this RTV franchise.

The relationship between IG and RTV is profound. More and more these women, who are contractually obligated to use IG, use it to maintain relevancy between seasons. To be relevant means to have your name and/or image circulating in public discourse. The best way to do so in the age of participatory media and active audiences is to become a meme or GIF that can be used as a form of expression across a multitude of communicative contexts. In the early era of RTV, soundbites from contestants would go viral often without the individual planning ahead. *RH* has been around for 14 years, at this point, the women know what to say to get this kind of attention.

These women are performing on RTV for more screen time and to deliberately give production explicit soundbites that might produce a moment on RTV that can later become a meme or GIF. This is an example of the labor that goes into maintaining relevancy on the series and on social media. This type of work embeds the women’s branded-identities into the fabric of popular culture, to be reproduced and shared across platforms and cultural fields. This act reveals part of the outcome of emotional camping. This form of labor is conducted by the women on the

series. It becomes more visible and explicit on social media because different social media platforms proliferate these images that make the women household names. People who do not even watch the series still have an idea of what being a ‘real housewife’ means because of GIF culture on social media. All of this calls up a specific type of labor conducted by individuals who are a part of media phenomena like *RH*.

5.3.2 **Emotional Camping: Guile for the postmodern digital age**

The last section demonstrates that some of the more powerfully positioned women in the field of *RH* mostly frame themselves to align with their portrayal on the series. The women who go against production, call out unfair edits, or present an image that departs from the ideal ‘housewife’ find themselves in a precarious position with the network. To frame oneself as a ‘Walking GIF’ demonstrates that in order to win in the field of *RH*, women have to be willing to self-exploit. Presenting the self as a ‘Walking GIF’ or *not* on IG and other social media platforms shows agency. The women who do present as Walking GIFs reveal the labor of emotional camping, or the work that goes into embodying the ideal ‘real housewife.’ The power that comes from presenting this way is not only economic, it is in the privacy that the women can temper in their lives by engaging in this work.

Emotional camping is described throughout the analysis as a hybrid form of labor because it blends the work of both Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) *emotional labor* and Susan Sontag’s (1967) *camping*. Hochschild’s concept of emotional labor has been overused in public discussions and has more recently been called up as a name for the work people do in their homes and relationships²⁵. The key to Hochschild’s concept in the *Managed Heart* (1983) is that emotional labor is the work people are *paid* to carry out, mainly in the service sector. Emotional

²⁵ Arlie Hochschild says ‘emotional labor’ is [being used incorrectly](#).

labor involves emotional, mental, and physical labor and happens in jobs requiring public contact and the production of a state of mind. This work is all about presenting the appropriate feelings required for the job, which become representative of the “commercialization of feeling” (Hochschild, 1983).

Emotional labor requires a coordination of mind and feeling which can sometimes draw “on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). This labor alienates the worker from an aspect of the self as they perform for the job. In most types of work people are instrumental, alienated from the self as they labor. She uses the example of a factory worker being alienated from the part of their body required to get the job done, and compares it to a flight attendant who has to feel happiness in order to please customers. Happiness feels different when a flight attendant is not working. All of this evokes the type of work involved in being a ‘real housewife’ on Bravo.

While emotional labor is about the “management” of emotions for the job – the work the women do for *RH* is interesting because these women are performing for the public and for a network that requires them to appear to *lose control* of their emotions. This does not mean that Emotional camping foregoes managing emotions. These women must manage how to effectively appear to lose control of the emotions that are required for a scene. Emotional labor is essentially the process behind the performance of these required emotions. This means the women of *RH* are alienated from the emotions being displayed for their work. The actual performance of this loss of control comes by way of *camping*.

Camp is “always naïve” and proposes itself seriously. Its presentation is however “too much,” so it cannot be taken seriously (Sontag, 1967, p. 19-26). *Camping* however is camp that knows it is camp. The women of *RH* know that they are being framed to look at times ridiculous,

ostentatious, and as though they are “too much.” Sontag does argue that certain people can be induced to camp without their knowing. This can happen with mediated depictions of people, where the individual gives up control, like on a RTV show, and is framed according to someone else’s idea. *RH* was once so amusing to viewers because the women took themselves incredibly seriously, and the ironic framing played them. Today, the women are hyper-aware of the irony involved in the series – and many of the women – new cast members who have watched the show over the years and original cast members who have grown with the series – have changed how they act on camera. Now they act in accordance with irony. They play up parts of the self that will give producers a good sound bite, intentionally acting like they are “too much.” In other words, they induce camping to entertain and create a sense of emotional realism for the audience.

The job of a “housewife” is to coordinate emotions that represent an amplified, highly emotional, and reactive personality. This job is comprised of two layers, 1) emotional labor or the *process* behind formulating the necessary emotions, and 2) camping, which is the *performative* outcome. This form of labor alienates the women from themselves. This is confirmed in interviews with former “real housewives” who discussed openly how they needed to separate themselves from the characters they were on the series. Some women, as revealed in the final analysis section, think of themselves as “mickey mouse characters” or separate people in real life and on the series. Doing so enables the women to deal with negative repercussions of being associated with the series. Most of these repercussions relate to fans and hurtful criticisms about the women. The women who deal best with the onslaught of negativity on social media and elsewhere understand that on TV they are playing a character version of themselves. They can view the negative talk about them as negative talk about the “out of body” “mickey mouse” personalities they have created.

The agency involved in engaging in this type of self-exploitation gives the women potential for power because they can be better equipped to deal with negative commentary from fans and critics. The agency involved in engaging in this self-exploitive form of labor may also (ironically) give the women a pathway to privacy. The women of *RH* are expected to “show it all” on RTV. From what the women told me in interviews, they give up their right to privacy when they sign the contract. What we see about these women on RTV is whatever producers and the network want us to see. Some women work to effectively translate the image from the show onto social media. Continuing the labor of emotional camping on social media gives the women the potential for power. In keeping up with the branded image from the show, the work of emotional camping on social media conveys that these women are in charge of their presentation because the image is consistent, and therefore really ‘who they are.’ Successful branding requires consistent image alignment (see Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2016). The women who pose as ‘Walking GIFs’ are more successful brands in that they tend to have more followers, endorsements, a renewable contract, and a more authentic branded image.

This image consistency across platforms curates a public branded identity that also appears to be a realistic or authentic extension of their personality. Fans and followers therefore watch these women as they “show it all” for the cameras on television, and then show even more on social media – where the women can engage in parasocial relationships with the audience. How could this consistent image not be authentic?

The public-ness of “showing it all” across platforms actually enables the women to keep what they want to be private, hidden. Emotional camping affords these women the chance to amplify the parts of the self that producers want everyone to see. At the same time, this can subsequently work to deemphasize all the parts of the self these women want to keep private.

The consistent branded-personas constructed by producers and the women themselves are anything but authentic. Authenticity just happens to be the outcome of successful branding and the work of emotional camping.

As demonstrated in the audience analysis section, “authentic” personalities are valued by fans. Hochschild cites two important concepts in the last chapter of *The Managed Heart* that help identify why authenticity is so valued. The first is from Rousseau who argued in the eighteenth century that personalities were becoming a form of capital, whereby the individual personality could be conceptualized as a “medium of competition.” The women of *RH* who do the labor of emotional camping are working to craft personalities that will position them better in the competitive field of *RH*. The women therefore curate ‘Walking GIF’ personalities with the help of production that eventually become their strongest form of capital. Walking GIF status therefore affords the women a type of personality capital, which if deemed ‘authentic,’ can be translated into economic and social power.

Hochschild noted in the eighties that as a culture we began placing an exceptional amount of value on spontaneous ‘natural’ feelings (p. 190). This she argued, is one of the ramifications of “the commercialization of human feeling.” As a culture, we want so desperately to feel things in their raw authentic form because we have been conditioned to feel in ways that alienate us from the self in order to satisfy the goals of the institutions we serve. This is also related to why people watch RTV. This programming form appears to present us with ‘real people’ experiencing ‘real emotions’ in daily life, outside of traditional work environments. But the concept of emotional camping reminds us that RTV and media are part and parcel of the service sector that fostered emotional labor.

Hochschild cites Lionel Trilling's work on *Sincerity and Authenticity* to note two decisive changes in the way society evaluated expressed feeling. Trilling argued that sincerity became a relevant value in England during the sixteenth century because "there was an increasing rate of social mobility in England and France" and "more and more people found it possible, or conceivable to leave the class into which they had been born" (p. 191). As quickly as sincerity became a value it became devalued by guile, a useful tool for class advancement. "Making avowals not in accord with feeling" became a valued art that was good for taking advantage of new opportunities (Hochschild, 1983, p. 192). The sincere person thus became viewed as a fool, devoid of communicative competence, or the ability to express the self in a way that could advance them socially.

Emotional camping is guile for the postmodern, digital age. It is exceptionally deceitful because the outcome is authenticity. Hochschild argued in the eighties that authenticity had become a virtue. This holds true more than ever today. The value on authenticity is "a cultural response to a social occurrence" and that occurrence is "the rise of the corporate use of guile and the organized training of feeling to sustain it" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 192). The more our feelings became managed, the more we grew to value unmanaged feelings and responses – or authenticity. The women who engage in emotional camping do so for economic and social status – *not class* – advancement. This makes the labor of emotional camping worthwhile. The outcome of this labor provides an 'authentic' façade that allows the women to keep parts of the self hidden, including perhaps, their social class origins.

All of this suggests that if the women want to win – i.e., gain economic/social capital and/or attention on public platforms, they need to self-exploit. Self-exploitation is the path to power in this field. Power comes in the form of followers, which breeds economic rewards, and

likely a renewed contract for the next season. This is not an argument for self-exploitation. Self-exploitation is discussed here as a way for the women to work within the confines of a field informed by patriarchal capitalism. The labor the women of *RH* decide to engage in is not worth criticizing, since women have had to find ways to work within these types of environments in order to survive for centuries. Self-exploitation and emotional camping do not disrupt this misogynistic working environment, and may in fact allow it to thrive. The only other option to gain any sense of power is to walk away. That option is however only an option for the more economically privileged women, as the interviews with former cast members showed. There is no way to win at class advancement, but emotional camping helps and presents itself as a new form of guile in postmodernity.

5.3.3 **Class versus authenticity**

There are two issues with emotional camping. The first is that its outcome is perceived authenticity, the second is that the idea of authenticity further legitimates class ambivalence. According to audience analysis, the best ‘Real Housewives’ are authentic, meaning they “show it all,” including their worst reactions. Fans’ used the term “authenticity” when describing the women who do the labor of emotional camping. Fans however understand that the women are also curating images that are planned, and thus not authentic in the true sense of the word. Still, fans rationalized that they could pinpoint the emotional realism behind the image, which reintroduces the idea of authenticity through the back door.

Fan interviews also highlighted an essential point about authenticity and perceptions of class. There is an apparent disconnect between showing class and acting authentically. Self-monitoring is required for conducting oneself with class. To act authentically is to relinquish any self-monitoring. When fans discussed class, it was talked about mostly in terms of old and new

money. New money is associated with being fleeting, ostentatious, and crass-like behavior. Old money was associated with reserved behavior and privacy. Even more, the reserved behavior of old money individuals was viewed as an innate or authentic way of being. Yet reserved behavior is anything but authentic.

In fact, only one interview subject referenced their experiences knowing “old money” individuals, and stated that the wealthy are “*trained to be* more down to earth” (- Interview with Carey). Thus, old money types’ behavior is viewed as classy and authentic, even though it is just as put upon as new money types’ behaviors. New money behaviors are viewed as being devoid of class, but also authentic. In other words, it is the women’s “classless” behavior that alludes to authenticity. This also however demonstrates that classy behavior, embedded in ideas about old money and the saying “class is something you are born with,” is anything but authentic.

The process of hegemony manifests in cultural ideas about class. Viewing class as best behavior indoctrinates us into believing that the truly wealthy are presenting an authentic type of reservation, when really it is a perfect visage that comes by way of the wealthy’s ability to manage emotions in public. Fans view new money types, like the women of *RH*, as authentic because they are displaying unreserved behavior, and “tell it like is.” Either way, whether we discuss old money or new money types, we believe their actions to be authentically speaking to their class. This means the perception of authenticity gets in the way of viewing what is under the image.

The problem with perceiving authenticity in people’s public performances is that we believe we know everything about the person behind the image. We start to think that we can see through to the individual or we pinpoint the emotional realism that is conjured up in these presentations, and we stop being critical of what the performance is hiding. We believe

wholeheartedly that they are telling us the truth. So much so, that we might even stop being critical of the individual because, “this is just who they are.”

Over time, many of the women of *RH* have been caught lying, stealing, cheating, and manipulating people – and they deny all of these things in the face of tangible evidence. They are either believed or forgiven because our appreciation for authenticity is so strong. The most problematic response however to the coarser revelations about these women’s behaviors is that their fans can believe these things to be true, note that this person is guilty, but are not deterred from supporting them. For several of these women, lack of accountability, lying, manipulating, and denying has become a part of their authentic branded-image. They can be loud about whatever part of the self they want to be through the labor of emotional camping. The loudness drowns out everything they want to hide. Emotional camping can create a façade of authenticity so impenetrable, the things that would normally threaten to crack their image ricochet right off.

No matter the person, where they are, or where they come from, if emotional camping is done right, they are believed to be presenting a self that is true. In this labor, class as a reference becomes something that we perform, we get to pick and choose how we want to convey this aspect of our identity, and usually do so in ways that will position us more powerfully. Whether that is downplaying ostentatious labels or amplifying status symbols does not matter. It is all relative to our personal feelings. The women of *RH* who engage in emotional camping do so for economic and social status advancement. Status advancement is *not* class advancement because status can be faked. Yet the image presented may still look like a representation of class advancement.

In short, the labor of emotional camping, which can be undertaken by any ordinary person with support from a major media platform, has significant, yet silent societal impacts.

This type of identity work legitimates class ambivalence, blurring the issue of social class and class privilege even further. The issue with the legitimization of class ambivalence is that social class becomes disassociated from inequality.

Class as a concept describes inequality (Tyler, 2015; Skeggs, 2015). It could be argued that separating class from inequality is one aim of hegemonic media messages. Separating class from inequality fosters the belief that inequality is natural, even necessary for society. As though class disparities are really based on malleable degrees of income, wealth, and work (Kendall, 2005). Once normalized, these beliefs make us particularly tolerant of inequality, which subsequently guides the way we implement solutions to this problem.

Inequality today is characterized by extreme wealth at the top, lack of social mobility for those in a disappearing middle, and an intense concentration of poverty. This concentration of wealth at the top slows social mobility for those in the middle and lower-class brackets (Saez, 2016; Hout, 2015; Beller and Hout, 2006). I am not arguing that inequality can be rectified completely. The extreme economic and social inequality of today however, is a choice, because much of it is related to political forces (Stiglitz, 2013; Noah, 2012; Levy and Temin, 2011; Bartels, 2009).

Bartels (2009) looked at inequality under different administrations and found that it historically increases when a republican is president. Bartels work focused on the implications of George W. Bush's tax cuts. This work is still applicable a decade later because his analysis broadly demonstrates that beliefs, ideologies, and values guide policy decisions and their economic outcomes. This work also revealed that the way American's conceptualize opportunity is tied to the way they view inequality. Inequality, as argued here, when decoupled from class, is

viewed then as a non-issue or something that can be easily rationalized in terms of varying degrees of wealth, income, and work.

A 2016 Gallop poll showed that despite disparities in income inequality, Americans are more optimistic now (compared to five or six years ago) about the amount of opportunity in the U.S. Seventy percent of Americans polled said that there is “plenty of opportunity” for people who are *willing to work hard*. Opportunity is therefore viewed conditionally. It is also viewed incongruently. Bartels’ cited research from an American National Election Study (ANES) on people’s support of egalitarian values that said 60 percent of Americans agreed strongly that, “our society should do whatever is necessary to make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed” (p. 131). Within that same survey, a majority of people also agreed somewhat that “the country would be better off if we worried less about how equal people are” (p. 131). The underlying idea is that there is a schism between the reality of inequality and how people view equal opportunity in the abstract. Views of inequality and opportunity are therefore two sides of the same coin.

Our views on opportunity are not the only perceptions that interfere with how we view inequality; it is also our own desire to be rich. In a 2018 GALLUP poll, 61 percent of Americans answered yes to the question, “all in all, if you had your choice, would you want to be rich or not?” However, the majority of respondents (34%) to this same GALLUP poll said that it was “not very likely” that they will ever be rich. Interestingly, the fourth question polled asked “do you think that rich people in America today are happier than you, less happy, or about the same? An overwhelming majority (56%) said “about the same.” This dissertation demonstrates that the ideas we have about the rich come from shows like *RH*, who’s main message is “the rich are just like us.” This more recent GALLUP poll supports Bartels’ (2009) conclusions from a decade ago

– that our desire to be rich, when paired with the promise of an equal opportunity to achieve wealth, can facilitate passivity in voting for policy that would reduce the economic gap (p. 257).

As I argue here, class ambivalence is comprised of all of these things and thus impacts the way we view inequality and political decision making. Class ambivalence undergirds the media frames on *RH*. Those frames are perpetuated across social media platforms, like IG, by the women on these series through the labor of emotional camping. The audience recognizes these frames and uses idea elements and symbols associated with those frames to make sense of social class. In sum, the labor of emotional camping enables the curation of an authentic branded identity that performs and simultaneously evades social class, which further legitimates class ambivalence. Class ambivalence is a significant issue because it affects how we think about rich people, economic inequality and social class, and the policies we implement in government.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 **Methodological and theoretical contributions**

This dissertation was based on an overarching question, what does *RH* communicate about class in a time of exacerbated class resentment? I answered this question by way of a three-pronged cultural approach to media (Kellner, 2011). This approach requires discussion of media production, a study of audience reception, and engagement with textual analysis. From a methodological standpoint, this research illustrates the significance of utilizing mixed methods in communication and media studies. Frame analysis and discourse analysis were used to study *RH* and media content. Framing was coupled with in-depth interviews with reality TV insiders to study media production and how certain issues are presented. In-depth interviews were conducted with fans of *RH* to study audience reception.

The media framing conducted here was tested, contrasted, and reinforced by the audience analysis of this research. Studies that include media framing often only look to the content, and do not directly ask the audience questions related to the media frames at play. This research does by highlighting how audience members' understanding of *RH* is informed by media framing. The audience's understanding of *RH* and social class is also formulated by knowledge related to their sense of place, cultural capital, and social networks.

This methodological approach also enabled triangulation of findings. The frame analysis of the series and the discourse analysis of the women's social media is interpretive work. The interviews with show insiders and viewers however helped to cross-check the interpretive nature of the textual analysis. Finally, the in-depth interviews with the women of *RH*, while unexpected, contributed greatly to the overall triangulation of this research. Their voices added a unique view to this phenomenon and confirmed many of the findings from the framing, discourse analysis,

and fan interviews. Overall, this multi-perspectival approach provided a checks and balances within each major area of inquiry into this media phenomenon.

On a theoretical level, this research makes socially significant contributions. For one, this research shows how class is presented in a popular media form. This work also reveals how people talk about class and understand it in their own lives. Importantly, this research draws connections between the two, and enhances our understanding about how media frames work across platforms and play into individual's ideas about class, privilege, status, and inequality. The use of framing as both a method and theoretical viewpoint here demonstrates how framing is essential to people's understanding of class, perceptions of authenticity, and media images. The use of framing as a theoretical framework showed how these class-based media frames help us think about issues related to social class that can consciously, or unconsciously, inform our decision making about those issues. In short, this work shows how class-based ideologies work in media, permeate multiple layers of cultural life, and play into people's understanding of identity.

This research utilized Bourdieu's field theory and related concepts like positioning, distinctions, and capital to unpack how social class was performed by the women of *RH*, both on the series and across social media platforms. Bourdieu's field theory was especially relevant for understanding class ambivalence. It was also highly useful for unpacking the positioning and power of the women on an individual level, within the series and on social media. On the whole, Bourdieu's conceptual framework offered significant insights into how class ambivalence manifests and how competition diverts issues related to class by sparking resentment.

Importantly, this work also enhances theoretical understandings of the branded-self. First, this research introduces a new model for studying reality TV and the branded-self. It

demonstrates how participants use social media to curate story and branded-identities apart from production. Secondly, this dissertation expands understanding about how the branded-self moves across platforms, as well as ideas about class and status, which are embedded in and reinforced through performance of the branded-self. Thirdly, this work develops the concept of emotional camping. This form of labor describes the work behind the performance of a branded-self that can work across a multitude of communicative contexts. In sum, looking at the branded-self across platforms enabled complex analysis of representations of class, successfully branded individuals, and the work behind these media representations.

6.2 **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this dissertation. The first being that this dissertation focuses on *RH*, a specific media form, to discuss social class representations. *RH* is but one media franchise among many media phenomena. This franchise was however chosen because of its particular emphasis on classist portrayals of select types of women in different cultural contexts. This means that the findings here, particularly in terms of media frames and fan responses, are not generalizable to a larger population. This is one study that focuses on *RH* and social class. It is not intended to describe all ways in which class is represented in media today.

Another major limitation of this work is that much of the analysis is open to interpretation. The textual analysis, i.e. the framing conducted here, the discourse analysis, and the interview analysis are all interpretively processed by the researcher. All of these interpretive methods were rigorously conducted by the researcher. They included multiple rounds of coding and discussion with objective individuals, some of whom have seen *RH*, others who have not. The framing analysis and discourse analysis have coding guides that could be used by anyone to attempt to replicate what the researcher noted, in the series, and on the women's social media.

The number of interviews conducted with fans, insiders, and former cast members might also be considered a limitation by critics. Qualitative researchers tend to look for a saturation point in their interviews, which refers to the point where the researcher stops receiving new information (Baker, Edwards, and Doidge, 2012). This being said, 26 in-depth interviews with fans garnered immense data and presented the researcher with a clear saturation point. Another limitation to this sample of viewers is the diversity of participants. A majority of fans interviewed here, not for lack of trying, were women and white.

The low number of interviews conducted with reality show insiders and former cast members was out of the researcher's control. Access to people in these positions was difficult to obtain. Any information gathered was helpful; these interviews still contribute to knowledge of production of the series and participation in this series. Much of the knowledge gained here with these interviews has not been revealed in popular discourse or in other research. All research has limitations, and the researcher is open to hearing suggestions from experts about how to minimize them.

6.3 **Future research**

This research presents many opportunities for future research. First, this research introduces a unique model into studying reality TV by analyzing the platform's personalities across platforms. Further research can explore a plethora of reality stars across other, newer media platforms to gauge additional affordances of using multiple platforms to self-brand. Second, this research introduced the concept of emotional camping. This form of labor should be studied more thoroughly by interviewing other types of public personas as they attempt strategies for self-branding. It would also be interesting to study regular people as they attempt to create personas across platforms.

Future research should continue explorations of media framing and social class to further pinpoint when particular class-based ideologies are evoked. Finally, more ethnographic research on how people comprehend social class and identity should be conducted, with the aim of creating a more solid understanding of how social class informs ideas about the self. This would perhaps help reformulate ideas about how we approach social class in communication and media research.

6.4 **Sum and substance: *Money talks, wealth whispers***

The previous chapters are about more than a reality series. This dissertation examines the legitimization of class ambivalence and resentment through the media phenomenon, *Real Housewives*. An incredible artifact of popular culture, *RH* thrives at a particular moment in U.S. history. A moment which, on a macro-level, can be characterized by social stagnation, political polarization, and economic inequality. On a micro-level, this moment is characterized by issues of the self and individuals' need to have their identity acknowledged. Identity is at the same time personal, cultural, historical, and curated. Race, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and other identity markers intersect and are undergirded by class. Social class is embedded in the structural components of society, and while often tangentially referenced in studies of communication and identity, social class as a concept has almost been forgotten.

The reality of social class has been disconnected from individual's understanding of identity because of powerful ideologies. The ideology of the American dream for instance works to obfuscate the reality of inequality, a structural component of social and economic institutions. Social class as a social science concept was designed to make sense of inequality. In this way, class is quantified by one's socio-economic origins and occupational grouping, individual's labor market resources, and working conditions (Weber, 1922; Torche, 2015; Cramer, 2016). The

American dream reframes class as transitory; something one can upwardly transcend via hard work and a little luck. The power of this ideology is perpetuated through media platforms. It is also visualized in daily life, where people view class ambivalently, in terms that are often convenient for their own position, and relative to what they know about other people. This ideology works to disassociate class from inequality, making it difficult to understand class privilege and how to fix issues of inequality.

The erasure of social class has been helped along by participatory media. Reality television and newer media platforms foster a new ideology of the American dream. Now we have seemingly equal and instant access to platforms that can be used to ascend the economic ladder. The rise of participatory media is thoroughly intertwined with U.S. culture's demotic turn to the ordinary, or the increasing attention paid to ordinary personas (Turner, 2006). Part of the success of reality TV is tied to the fact that the medium produces these types of personas who are mini-brand extensions of networks. Those mini-brand extensions, i.e. the people who participate on these shows, work with production to craft curated images that both support the goals of the network, associated cultural arrangements, and an ordinary identity. Identities based on ordinariness, according to scholars, are crafted as a means to get around social fixing, or the politics of being labeled in classist terms (Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst, 2001).

In other words, ordinary identities align with the ideal of the new American dream. These "ordinary" people may have come from nothing, but they became somebody because they had the skills required to succeed in a new attention economy. Ordinary personas pay no heed to origins, but emphasize skill, image, and display characteristics of "hard work." This creates a branded persona that beguiles us with seemingly immediate success and aspirational ideals. The ordinary persona constantly performs a self that emulates what we all want to be – without the

messiness of taking class into consideration. Failing to take class into consideration in a realistic way makes it difficult to unpack privilege and pinpoint where inequality originates. This works to impact the decisions we make about politics, the way we view life trajectories, the wealthy and the presence of opportunity, and the larger structural, institutional forces that guide our lives.

Over the past three decades researchers have analyzed reality TV content, uses and gratifications, and more immediate effects of the medium. This dissertation is in many ways an overview of the long term cultural imprint of reality TV and the influential personas endogenous to the platform. Reality TV began experimentally with willing participants. As time moved forward, participating on reality TV shows became a legitimate job. This job requires engagement with the labor of emotional camping. When conducted the right way, emotional camping fosters an authentic, ordinary, branded-persona that works across multiple platforms. The branded women of *RH* specifically, have over time, amplified idealized notions of the self for emulation. Those ideals of the self are neatly aligned with the economic and political arrangements of the Bravo TV network and society at large. The women's branded-identities extend and reinforce the basic tenants of capitalism, neoliberalism, and other gendered and classist postfeminist ideals. *RH*'s longevity and status in popular culture make it a rich site for understanding how these classist and gendered branded-selves come to be, and the long-term cultural impact of these representations.

The labor of emotional camping illustrates the work that goes on behind these media representations. Emotional camping was the most unexpected finding from this work. It is a concept that is supported throughout each chapter of the analysis and confirmed by the women of *RH*. Emotional camping is especially significant to this study; it provides a name for a form of labor many of us engage in daily. It is a form of labor that lives and evolves on participatory

media, playing into the logic of reality TV and social media. This form of labor is based on a performance of and evasion of class position. The outcome of this performance is a sense of authenticity. Emotional camping makes class an impersonal reference point; something we can perform by picking and choosing whatever we want class to mean.

Emotional camping is the identity work necessary for the women of *RH* to maintain and grow their status. This work is not only for reality stars and social media influencers. Regular people can engage in this as they attempt to brand the self across social networks. This labor then becomes a way to mask imposter syndrome. We communicate all the best, most acceptable parts of ourselves loudly to show that we belong, and that we are somebody worth paying attention to, in whatever social milieu we strive to occupy. Understanding the nature of emotional camping affords us the opportunity to peel back layers of media and image manipulation. This is important to note because this form of labor is also something people in other significant cultural fields engage with.

The long term cultural imprint of reality TV, the personalities it boasts across platforms, and the subsequent labor of emotional camping relate to why populist candidates like Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, and Bernie Sanders do so well in the political arena today. The (self)-exploitable personalities of the women of *RH*, the narratives told on the series, the framing tactics employed by producers and the women themselves can be compared to the rise of Donald Trump. Like Trump, the women of *RH* know how to strategize, how to present themselves ‘authentically,’ how to speak to their fans, in such a way that they afford themselves even more media attention.

Donald Trump is an example of the significance of the labor of emotional camping, the power of curating “authenticity,” and the legitimation of class ambivalence. Trump, like the

women of *RH*, is an expert at the labor of emotional camping. His image as “the Donald” is a visual representation of all of our conflicting, incongruent ideas about class, status, and social mobility. Here is a man who claims to be self-made, but who in reality was afforded every opportunity in life because of his rich father. He is a self-proclaimed billionaire, business man, investor, and shareholder who promised change for the middle class. In reality, he secured the richest cabinet in U.S. history. The men he hired (and of course told “you’re fired,”) created more inequality by supporting policies that blocked government intervention to manipulate the market in their favor. The inconsistencies surrounding who Trump actually is and what he promises supporters are deflected by an impenetrable, authentic branded-image, founded on class ambivalence. No matter what happens in the next election, Trump will live on forever, longer than any ‘real housewife,’ as a “Walking GIF.”

This is what makes emotional camping guile for the postmodern digital age. Emotional camping gets people places. It produces a beguiling authentic/ordinary image and blocks people from seeing what is underneath all this “reality.” People cannot be critical of what they do not see. People may even stop believing the negative things these personalities say and do because we think we know better. We believe strongly in the authenticity of the image originally presented. As mentioned in the Discussion chapter, like Trump, many of the women of *RH* are revealed as liars, cheaters, manipulators, and cons. Their fans do not care. These personas will deny wrongdoing in spite of concrete evidence to the contrary. These women, like Trump, also get to keep their jobs because their image has been built on guile, lying, a lack of accountability, denial, and manipulation. We *never* take them seriously, of course. The image is *entertainment*, so we are allowed to just wait to see what happens next.

The *Real Housewives* grew in popularity throughout the Great Recession. The franchise gained cultural relevance at a time when truly wealthy elites needed to create a distraction from the mess made on Wall Street. The women of *RH* were all too willing to be put on display because they were promised the series would be a celebration and the reward would be status advancement. In actuality however, the series in some ways, used them as a tool for distraction. Here were the fools that caused the economy to crash. Look at the people who borrowed too much money, and aspired too hard to emulate the wealthy. The characters created out of this franchise are entertaining, even inspiring. They are also characters who take up so much space in the attention economy that they help keep the super wealthy hidden.

The loudness of these personalities and the subsequent attention given to these individual characters mask many of the larger structural problems that created this crisis in the first place. Their images, steeped in overt materialism, scream for attention. Their money talks so loudly that it distracts from actual wealth and the structural inequality that extreme wealth produces. “Money talks,” as *RHONY* star, Dorinda Medley says, but “wealth whispers.” This distinction is the sum and substance of all that has been shown here. Money, and these personalities based on ordinariness, do the talking, while wealth whispers under the radar. The whisper is so quiet, we hardly notice that the existence of extreme wealth is what formulates inequality in the first place, and that inequality is embedded in the institutions and cultural arrangements that inform our individual sense of place.

Appendix A

Real Housewives (RH) Frames

This page illustrates a set of interpretive “Real Housewives” Frames concerning class. The frames are **bolded** with examples of phrases and visuals that represent what can be coded for the frame. Be mindful of multiple frames; the examples below are not exclusive or exhaustive, and your coding experience may invoke multiple frames simultaneously. Frames may also be added to the initial list of frames.

Positions: Please also note if the frame invoked involves a *position* of the women as *deserving* or *undeserving*.

Postfeminist Nirvana: The Meta Frame – This frame is evoked a few ways, i.e., by conjuring up traditional notions of femininity and through the use of discourse that tacitly acknowledges feminism as something that has paved the way for women to have it all by making smart, individualized choices. It also treats feminism as a thing of the past. It is evoked most often when the women explicitly discuss having it all, or balancing it all. It is the sensibility that these women are busy and overworked but still happy because they made the right choices, so they can also still manage to prioritize time to look their best. This frame then is also evoked when the women are shown getting plastic surgery or their makeup done by professional glam squads. This frame is the overarching way in which the women are portrayed on the series, and it gets at the major ideological idea employed by media today to depict gender and feminism. This frame is evoked on the show when:

- The women discuss choices, i.e., to stay home and raise their children, work, be married
- *“I’m a grown woman, I make my own choices, and I choose to be with Tom.”*
- *“My mom dedicated her life to her kids. I chose to follow my mom’s footsteps, it’s a choice I made.”*
- *“I just take little breaks between children. I work, I have a baby, I work again, I have another baby.”*
- *“It’s just as easy to marry a rich man as it is a poor man – it’s a choice you make.”*
- The women discuss having it all; juggling it all, balancing work, play, home
- *“I have found my balance between family and work.”*
- *“you’re a mom, a wife, a business woman, so it’s important to let your hair down with your girlfriends.”*
- *“I want to show my kids that mommy can start a business and mommy is going to take over the world!”*
- *I worked for a swimwear company, then I made my own. I kind of do it all – I’m a business woman, I’m a mother, I’m a wife.”*
- The women talk about beauty, fashion, shopping, consumerism in terms of empowerment.
- *“Finally! I get to choose what I want, because I’ll be making the money.”*

- *"People say I'm a trophy wife, but I'm more than that. I'm the powerhouse behind Kelsey Grammar."*
- *"I like looking good. I like to look good for me and for Scott. I went from a 32 A to a 32 D."*
- Traditional notions about being women are conjured up, i.e. they are wives/mothers.
- *"Happy wife, happy life."*
- *"Until you become a real woman – a mother – do not ever mention my daughter again."*
- *"I believe a woman should maintain her beauty."*
- The women are shown getting professional photos taken, makeup done, etc.

The bling frame – The wealthy are often conceived of as possessing excessive material goods. This frame echoes this conception, and particularly concerns how the wealthy display that they are wealthy. Can be invoked when a *RH* makes mention of or is filmed in:

- Limos
- Yachting
- Private jets
- Housewarming parties
- Inside their closet
- Shopping
- Vacation
- Dining out
- Plastic Surgery
- Or when a Housewife verbalizes materialism
- *"If I die tomorrow, I'll die wearing Dior."*
- *"I'm materialistic, I love designer clothes."*
- *"Give me your diamonds – what is that? Chanel?"*
- *"Damn girl, you got the coin – spend it!"*
- *"I hear the economy is crashin', that's why I pay cash."*
- *"Growing up in extreme wealth, you have to be careful."*
- *"I live on the golf course of the Four Seasons."*
- *"Only legacy and a large cash flow gets you in."*

'Maybe we are white trash' frame – The wealthy are often conceived of as exhibiting decorous behavior. This frame can be invoked by the conduct of a *RH*, their actions or reactions to scenarios on the show. This can also be invoked when one woman references or evaluates the actions of another woman:

- Physical conduct: table flip, hair pull, slap, shove, scratch, drink toss
- Verbal conduct: Reactions, actions, distinctions
- *"You don't do that,"*
- *"You can't say that,"*
- *"that's wrong,"*
- *"that's improper,"*

- *"You're trash,"*
- *"I would never do that,"*
- *"We're just different,"*
- *"They'll just do things that are unladylike,"*
- *"Maybe we are white trash,"*
- *"My kids wouldn't be allowed to do that. I was shocked, it was a formal event, I've never seen that before in my life!"*
- *"That's not classy, and I'm classy,"*
- *"What Teresa did was the opposite of what a lady should look like,"*
- *"I would never get invited to something for charity and not buy anything, that's just tacky to me."*

The hustler frame – The wealthy are conceived as the embodiment of a hard work ethic, where hard work pays off. This frame can be invoked by the RH's discussing how hard they work or when they are shown at work.

- Shown at work
- Verbalizing work ethic, or reference their businesses
- *"All I do is work, work, work,"*
- *"I've worked very hard for this."*
- *"My children don't know how hard I work or what it took to get me here."*
- *"Networking is really important to what I do."*
- *"Nothing has been handed to me."*
- *"Tonight I made a few good contacts to help build my brand."*
- *"Maybe that's why Kyle knows how to do her makeup, because she got to go to school and have friends. I didn't, because I worked more."*
- *"I don't think Andrew understands that being a socialite, being a philanthropist is a full-time job. It's not vapid."*

'You're a hypocrite' Frame – Bravo acknowledges the fun of the Bravo wink, where they show a Housewife saying something and then in the next scene, doing the opposite. This frame is invoked when a woman is revealed as a hypocrite:

- RH's making moral judgments or when one woman calls another a 'hypocrite,'
- *"she's wrong," "that's corrupt," "get off your pedestal"*
- *"Really, Nene? You and Greg both have mugshots"*
- *"she's bankrupt"*
- *"The morally corrupt Faye Resnik"*
- *"Camille when did you do your Playboy cover?"*
- When a RH is shown in an 'Interview' saying one thing and then later in the show is shown doing the opposite or vice versa
- *Vicki shown getting botox: "My kids don't care if I get old, but they're so proud when I look good."*
- *Cut to her kids saying, "botox is stupid."*

- *Ramona shown in interview talking about how she raised her daughter “conservatively.”*
- *Cut to the next scene where Ramona is talking about pole dancing in front of young daughter.*

Emergent Frames - depiction of class in terms that do not fit into the above frames provided.

- Charitable frame
 - Women discussing charity
 - *“I start charities, Megan!”*
 - *“Katie’s family donates hundreds of millions of dollars a year.”*
 - *“Brian and I donate a lot of time and money to the charity world.”*
 - Women prepping for charity events
 - Women interacting at charity events

Appendix B

<i>RHOA</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>IG Handle</i>	<i>Bio</i>	<i>Followers</i>	<i>Following</i>	<i>Dates and # of Posts</i>
	NeNe Leakes	@neneleakes	NeNe SHADE Leakes BOOKNENE@GMAIL.COM www.swagboutiqueonline.com THEFABGAB.COM Actress, TV Personality, Boutique Owner, Producer, Entrepreneur, & MAJOR shit talker swagboutiqueonline.com	2.5 million	908	11/5/17 to 4/22/18 483 “in- season” posts
	Kenya Moore	@theKenyamoore	Wife, Actor, Film and TV Producer, Writer, Director, Former Miss USA, TV Personality, CEO of Kenya Moore Hair Care available now link in bio #kenyamoore KenyaMooreHair.com	1.2 million	676	11/5/17 to 4/22/18 179 “in- season” posts

<i>RHOBH</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>IG Handle</i>	<i>Bio</i>	<i>Followers</i>	<i>Following</i>	<i>Dates and # of Posts</i>
	Lisa Vanderpump	@lisavanderpump	The official Lisa Vanderpump Instagram @veryvanderpump @vanderpumpdogs @bhlmagazine @villablacabh @vanderpumprose Documentary available on Prime amzn.to/2Ieb4nL	2 million	68	12/6/16 to 4/25/17 64 “in- season” posts
	Lisa Rinna	@lisarinna	AKA Mrs. Harry Hamlin. I love my husband, I love my kids. Life is beyond beautiful #blessed The Lisa Rinna Collection @QVC United Talent Agency	1.5 million	768	12/6/16 to 4/25/17 407 “in- season” posts

<i>RHOD</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>IG Handle</i>	<i>Bio</i>	<i>Followers</i>	<i>Following</i>	<i>Dates and # of Posts</i>
	LeeAnne Locken	@leeannelocken	#RHOD #realhousewivesofdallas/ #actress/ #author/ #Real Talk by LL Blog #bravo Press & SM Partnerships- inquiries@leeannelocken.com www.leeannelocken.com	325,000	1300	08/14/17 to 11/13/17 95 “in- season” posts
	Brandi Redmond	@Brandi Redmond	Lover of Jesus & Jesus Juice. Wife & mom to my Ginger Family. Bookings mark.turner@abramsartny.com Shop my clothing line @shopbrandiland www.brandredmond.com/	231,000	509	08/14/17 to 11/13/17 110 “in- season” posts

<i>RHONJ</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>IG Handle</i>	<i>Bio</i>	<i>Followers</i>	<i>Following</i>	<i>Dates and # of Posts</i>
	Teresa Guidice	@teresaguidice	Mother of 4 girls, RHONJ, NY Times Bestselling Author, Certified Yogi, Entrepreneur & all about the NAMASTE info: karianne@ppianentertainmnet.com teresaguidice.com	1.3 million	765	10/4/17 to 1/31/18 375 “in- season” posts
	Siggy Flicker	@siggy.flicker	Proud Israeli/American TV Personality/Speaker/Author/ #writeyourownfairytale siggyflicker.com	410,000	4998	10/4/17 to 1/31/18 175 “in- season” posts

<i>RHNYC</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>IG Handle</i>	<i>Bio</i>	<i>Followers</i>	<i>Following</i>	<i>Dates and # of Posts</i>
	Sonja Morgan	@sonjatmorgan	Fashion Lifestyle//Producer & Writer// #RHONY //Mom// @sonjamorgannewyork // Twitter/Snap: SonjaTMorgan//Bookings & Info: press@sonjaproductions.com www.sonja-morgan.com/app	534,000	690	4/5/17 to 9/1/17 120 “in-season” posts
	Luann de Lesseps	@countessluann	Mother, Author, Singer #CountessandFriends A cabaret show Real Housewives of NY #OG Inquiries: evan@ariamnes.com www.countessluann.com	462,000	582	4/5/17 to 9/1/17 207 “in-season” posts

<i>RHOC</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>IG Handle</i>	<i>Bio</i>	<i>Followers</i>	<i>Following</i>	<i>Dates and # of Posts</i>
	Vicki Gunvalson	@vickigunvalson	RHOC Original Housewife, Entrepreneur, Owner of Coto Financial, Mother of 2, Nana of 2, #followme #whoopitup #rhoc #bravo inquiries: Daniel@cegtalent.com www.cotoinsurance.com	924,000	2064	7/11/17 to 11/29/17 127 “in-season” posts
	Shannon Beador	@shannonbeador	Proud mother of 3 beautiful girls, RHOC inquiries: Daniel@cegtalent.com	1 million	94	7/11/17 to 11/29/18 175 “in-season” posts

<i>RHOP</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>IG Handle</i>	<i>Bio</i>	<i>Followers</i>	<i>Following</i>	<i>Dates and # of Posts</i>
	Ashley Boalch Darby	@ashleyboalchdarby	Life is for living! Restaurateur of @ozarlington Star on the Real Housewives of Potomac #rhop Yoga Guide contact: Ashley@sipwithsocialites.com www.ozarlington.com	149,000	1029	4/2/17 to 7/16/17 106 “in- season” posts
	Karen Huger	@officialkarenhuger	Proud Israeli/American TV Personality/Speaker/Author/ #writeyourownfairytale siggyflicker.com	983,000	197	4/2/17 to 7/16/17 74 “in- season” posts

Appendix C

INTERVIEW GUIDE (AUDIENCE)

- 1) Why did you start watching *Real Housewives*?
- 2) Would you say *Real Housewives* is similar or different to your own life?
- 3) Which series is your favorite?
Probe – why?
- 4) Who is your favorite housewife?
Probe – why?
- 5) What indicates to you that these women are wealthy – or not?
Probe a. – would you say these women belong in a wealthier class?
Probe b. – can you describe that class?
Probe c. – do some women/some series portray class differently?
- 6) How did the women on the show achieve their wealth?
Probe a. – would you say the women are deserving of their wealth?
Probe b. – would you say you have more or less than these women in terms of income/material possessions?
- 7) Do you think some of the women on the show got lucky?
- 8) Would you say some people might look up to these women?
Probe – would you say these women are feminists?
- 9) How would you describe the way the women treat each other?
Probe a. – would you describe their behavior as classy?
Probe b. – when we say classy, do you see these women fitting within a specific class? Or pretending to fit within a specific class?
- 10) Do the women ever contradict themselves?
Probe – does that affect your view of them?
- 11) What social class do you feel affiliated with?
- 12) In ten years, do you think we'll see a stronger economy or not?
- 13) What do you think the overall message of the show is?
- 14) How old were you on your last birthday?
- 15) What is your job title?
- 16) How many years of education have you completed?
- 17) How would you describe yourself in terms of gender and ethnicity?

Appendix D

INTERVIEW GUIDE (FORMER HOUSEWIVES)

1. How did you find your way onto the series?
2. What was the best part about being a Real Housewife?
3. What was the worst part about being a Real Housewife?
4. What can you tell me about your contract?/ (How did you/could you negotiate?)
5. Do you think you were portrayed accurately?
6. What are your thoughts on the editing of the series?
7. Do you think producers and/or editors favored certain women over others in editing?
8. How was your relationship with production?
9. What were the benefits/costs of using social media when you were on the show?
10. Would you say social media gave you power to convey other aspects of your identity that the show wasn't highlighting?
11. What were your relationships like with the other women on the series?
 - a. Were you told to pick sides or go after anyone in particular?
12. How did you find your way off of the show?
13. Would you ever go back to the show?
14. What advice would you give to a new *Housewife*?
15. If you could talk to students of media, what might you want them to know about the show or reality TV in general?

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VITA

NAME

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EDUCATION

Ph.D. New Media and Communication (January 22, 2020)
University of Illinois at Chicago
Advisor: Dr. Zizi Papacharissi, Professor & Head

M.A. Sociology, with Distinction
November 2013
DePaul University

B.A. Media Studies, Summa Cum Laude
June 2009
DePaul University

PUBLICATIONS

Psarras, E. (2017). From a western phenomenon to a global phenomenon: A comparative cultural analysis of reality TV in the USA and China. *The Journal of Communication and Media Studies*, 2(2), 17-31. doi:10.18848/2470-9247/CGP/v02i02/17-31.

Psarras, E. (2015). We all want to be big stars: The desire for fame and the draw to the 'Real Housewives'. *Clothing Cultures*, 2(1), 51-72. doi: 10.1386/cc.2.1.52_1.

Psarras, E. (September 24, 2015). Ordinary Fame: Perpetuating gendered stereotypes and double standards on 'Bachelor in Paradise'. The New School: New Criticals, <http://www.newcriticals.com/ordinary-fame>.

PUBLIC PRESENTATIONS

Psarras, E. "After the Final Rose": Analyzing 'The Bachelor' and Public Performances of Masculinity on Instagram." Presented at the 2019 Cultural Studies Association conference at Tulane University in New Orleans, LA, May 31, 2019.

Psarras, E. "'Money doesn't give you class, it just gives you money': Performances of class in the field of Real Housewives." Presented at the National Communication Association conference in Salt Lake City, UT, November 9, 2018.

Psarras, E. “‘Everything from the nineties is getting a reboot,’ Fan culture, creativity, and community: Reviving #BeverlyHills90210 on Instagram.” Presented at the Fan Studies North America conference in Chicago, IL at DePaul University, October 25, 2018.

Psarras, E and NeSmith, N. “After the final rose: Assessing ‘Bachelorette’ self-love and public identity formation on Instagram.” Presented at the 2018 Association of Internet Researchers in Montreal, Quebec CA, October 10-13 2018.

Appignani, T. and Psarras, E. “Out and down in Beverly Hills: A critical cultural analysis of blind-item gossip.” Presented at the Cultural Studies Association conference at Carnegie Mellon University, May 31, 2018.

Psarras, E. “‘In Beverly Hills you can be anything, but it’s most important to be yourself’: Exploring the branded-women of ‘Real Housewives’ on Instagram.” Presented at the 2016 Midwest Popular Culture/American Culture Association conference in Chicago, IL, October 9, 2016.

Psarras, E. “From a western phenomenon to a global phenomenon: Reality TV in the U.S., China, and Arab nations.” Presented at the Inaugural Communication & Media Studies conference in Chicago, IL, September 2016.

Appignani, Tim and Psarras, E. “‘Everyone in this town is so full of it’: Social class via cultural contexts in the ‘Real Housewives’ series.” Presented at the Cultural Studies Association conference at Villanova University, Philadelphia, PA, June 2016.

Psarras, E. “Is gossip good? ‘Be very afraid’: A discourse analysis of D-Listed.” Presented at the Media Sociology pre-conference at Northwestern University, Chicago, IL, August 2015.

“Doing Qualitative Research: In-Depth Interviews,” guest lecture in Dr. Greg Scott’s Qualitative Research Methods course, DePaul University, May 2014.

“Reality Television and Social Media Use,” guest lecture in Dr. Deena Weinstein’s Mass Media and Society course, DePaul University, November 2013.

“The Profusion of Reality TV and Celeboid-Celebrity,” guest lecture in Dr. Deena Weinstein’s Sociology of Celebrity course, DePaul University, September 2013.

MEDIA INTERVIEWS

Quartz, Atlantic Media, expert interview reality TV/social media influencers: "Sociologists are using the bachelorette IG posts to study modern femininity."

Rosebuds, Podcast, expert interview social media influencers and *The Bachelor & The Bachelorette*.
<https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/id1253730396>.

TEACHING

University of Illinois at Chicago
COMM 100: Fundamentals of Human Communication
Fall 2014 – Summer 2019

COMM 102: Interpersonal Communication
Summer 2016 – Fall 2019

COMM 103: Introduction to Mass Media
Spring 2018 – Spring 2019

Elmhurst College
COMM 114: Interpersonal Communication
Fall 2019 – Winter 2020

DePaul University
COMM 570: Introduction to Digital Communication
Winter 2020

HONORS, PARTICIPATION, SERVICE

Oxford Internet Institute – Summer Doctoral Program at University of Oxford, Oxford, England during July 3-14, 2017 (<http://sdp.oii.ox.ac.uk/>).

Digital Media Research Centre - Summer School Program at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia during February 6-10, 2017 (<http://dmrccs.org>).

2017 International Communication Association Student Teaching Award

ICA Student and Early Career Representative of the Popular Communication Division, International Communication Association

Session Chair for the Feminist Scholarship Division of the International Communication Association: “Gendered bodies and representations: Feminist understandings of identity and diversity.”

Session Chair for the Popular Communication Division of the International Communication Association: “Popular girlhoods.”

Student Representative, University of Illinois at Chicago, Graduate Student Council

Recipient of Student Travel Grant Award from the Cultural Studies Association, annual conference May 2019.

Recipient of Popular Communication Travel Grant from the International Communication Association, annual conference May 2019.

Recipient of the PhD Student Travel Award from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Illinois at Chicago, September and October 2016.

Recipient of the Graduate Student Council Travel Award from the University of Illinois at Chicago, April 2016, October 2016, November 2018, October 2019.

MEMBERSHIPS

Alpha Kappa Delta, International Honor Society of Sociology
Association of Internet Researchers
Communication & Media Studies Knowledge Community
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