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"It's a mix of authenticity and complete fabrication" Emotional camping: The cross-platform labor of the *Real Housewives*

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Abstract

Despite popular interest in reality television, social media, and self-branding, much scholarship focuses on a single platform and places the burden of self-branding on the individual alone. Drawing on 6 years of research into the *Real Housewives* (RH) franchise and interviews with "Housewives," I focus on the women's performances of identity and self-branding across platforms. This article demonstrates that the women of RH become experts at working the system that exploits them via a form of labor I conceptualize as "emotional camping." Successfully branded "Housewives" tend to be (1) dedicated to Bravo, (2) inclined to present as walking GIFs on Instagram, and (3) seemingly authentic. I argue this self-branding strategy affords these women a semblance of privacy in their highly public careers. These findings are a critique of and feminist mediation into the legitimate labor reality stars do for networks and themselves across platforms.

Keywords

camping, emotional labor, postfeminist media, reality television, self-branding, social media

Introduction

Real Housewives (*RH*) is a reality television (RTV) docusoap franchise that follows affluent women in different cities. A celebration of overtly feminized women, wealth, drama, and materialism, *RH* (Bravo in 2006) expanded into an eight-series franchise in the United States (*RH-Orange County, New York City, Atlanta, New Jersey, Beverly*

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Hills, Potomac, Dallas, and *Salt Lake City*) over the last 15 years. There have been 10 iterations of *RH* in cities across the globe. Each series foregrounds heterosexual, cis-gendered, women of privilege. The franchise presents all women through a meta-lens that centers whiteness as an ideal (Dominguez, 2015). The women are thus positioned similarly across series as perfectly gendered residents of their respective cities (Johnson and Trelease, 2018). In this way, *RH* is hugely responsible for branding a particular type of woman seen across mediated platforms.

These women do not have to be married, stay-at-home mothers, or even friends with each other to be on the show, although title suggests otherwise. Women are cast if they live glamorously, are entrepreneurial, confrontational, dedicated to looking good, and open to having emotional breakdowns on camera. Such are the unwritten expectations of any Bravolebrity. Bravolebrities have fame from being on Bravo reality shows and serve as consummate examples of Bravo's aspirational lifestyle, which is anchored by a post-feminist, neoliberal mentality. Bravolebrities are part of Bravo's expansive marketing strategy, operating as "mini-brand extensions" (Curnutt, 2011) of the network across social platforms.

The women's personas from the series can seamlessly translate to social media where they self-brand and garner upward of a million followers. Some women do this better than others and it depends on existing capital, media enterprising skills, and as I argue here, the ability to neatly align their persona from the series with their persona on social media. The women who do so are considered here to be successfully branded "Housewives." Studies about self-branding usually look at one platform and also assume that the branded-persona is curated by the individual doing the self-branding. RTV stars are unique in that producers and editors of the series curate much of their persona for them, so it is imperative to study RTV stars on social media platforms because they have more agency in crafting their public identity. The women of *RH* come to social media with a large ready-made audience and unique brand-protection. The protection is from the network; Bravo owns part of any business or brand endeavor the women undertake while part of the franchise. When the women's enterprises succeed, so does Bravo, which will obtain a majority of the financial return (Hearn, 2016).

RTV stars are often exploited by the networks that employ them (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006; Skeggs, 2009). *RH* is no exception. It has been found to exploit the women's bodies, work, and reputations (Hearn, 2016). The franchise has also been critiqued for its racial (Bunai, 2014; Hawley, 2014) and gender stereotyping (Lee and Moscowitz, 2013), conspicuous consumption (Cox, 2014), and fandom (Nayar, 2015; Psarras, 2014). Scholars have also honed in on the franchise's matrix-like structure (Levy, 2018) and format on a global scale (Johnson and Trelease, 2018). Other scholars have shifted focus to Bravo's transmedia story-telling strategies (Arcy, 2018). Arcy's case study of Housewives Twitter wars shows how Bravo monetizes the franchise across platforms via "digital money shots" (moments of emotional disorder for audience attention) (p. 488). This article also considers the women's performances across platforms by focusing on the identity work these women do to benefit themselves more than the network or the audience.

I argue here that the women of *RH* have become experts at working this system of exploitation. This article describes a concept I term "emotional camping," which summarizes the self-branding identity work of successful Housewives. This concept was developed over six years of extensive research into the franchise, which includes interviews with former Housewives—a key population that social researchers have not obtained access to until now.

In this analysis, I discuss prominent characteristics associated with emotional camping: a dedication to Bravo, an inclination to present as a walking GIF, and perceived authenticity. All three of these characteristics reiterate tenets of postfeminism, that is, successful women are entrepreneurial, aesthetically pleasing, confident, self-expressive, and "real" (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2009). Such qualities reinforce dominant classist ideas about gender while advancing the economic goals of Bravo. I argue in the analysis that adhering to the characteristics of emotional camping enables these women to procure a semblance of privacy in an extremely public career. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of this identity work, which is grounded by emotional labor, a concept discussed next.

The emotional labor of a bravo "Housewife"

Emotional camping references the type of performance the women of *RH* do across platforms to create and maintain popular public personas. It is rooted in two concepts: emotional labor (Hochschild, 2012 [1983]) and camping (Sontag, 1964). This section reviews emotional labor in the context of RTV and digital media. I also conceptualize performances of identity on *RH* as camping, through a postfeminist lens. Afterward, I present my analysis.

Emotional labor refers to the work people are compensated for, which includes conveying the proper emotions and feelings to complete a job (Hochschild, 2012 [1983]). Emotional labor requires one to evince certain emotions and suppress others. In *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild focused on flight attendants and debt collectors. Flight attendants, she found, conduct the emotional labor of feeling happiness to carry out their work. Analogously, debt collectors conjure up an intimidating and uncompromising demeanor. Such examples illustrate how we have been conditioned to emote in ways that satisfy the institutions we serve. These examples are also representative of what Hochschild called the "commercialization of human feeling."

Materializing from this idea is what autonomist Marxist scholars refer to as "affective labor" (Hardt and Negri, 2004). Affective labor, as Woodcock and Johnson (2019) describe, is any commodified activity that is not, in a conventional sense, considered "work." An example of this is identity performance. Woodcock and Johnson (2019) analyze the affective labor of "characters" identity performance on the live streaming platform, Twitch. The type of affective labor conducted on Twitch is explained here as a "digitally mediated outward countenance," requiring characters to solicit donations and cultivate parasocial bonds with viewers through a demonstration of humor and affability (p. 813). Underscoring the labor of performing and the economic goals informing this labor, they find that characters develop "unique" methods of interaction with streamers

that draw on "the theatricality of character acting" (p. 820). Put simply, on the surface, a Twitch character may appear to be playing themselves, yet they are actually carrying out a complex form of labor. This is similar to the women of *RH*, who appear to be playing themselves on television, but are actually engaging in a type of labor that I argue enables them to maintain their contracts with Bravo, their persona, and fan favor.

Other established and recent scholarship describing elements of emotional labor, whether paid or unpaid, focus on gender (Cottingham et al., 2015; Erickson and Ritter, 2001; Hearn, 2016). Increasingly, scholars have situated discussion of emotional labor and gender in a digital context (Duffy, 2016; Jarrett, 2015). Jarrett's analysis of the "unproductive" and "invisible" labor (clicks, likes, and shares online) carried out by "digital housewives" reaffirms how necessary "women's work" is for the continuance of capitalism. Duffy's (2016) concept "aspirational labor" focuses on productive processes of creative cultural production. Her analysis shows that for women, "doing what they love" online in fashion, retail, and beauty may come with social and economic gain, but not without conforming to conventional ideas about gender and class. Finally, tracing similar phenomena back to early systems of capitalist expansion in the 16th century, Hearn (2016) argued that *RH* specifically launches other kinds of aspirational labor in gendered ways, such as "housewifization." This refers to the hidden, precarious, and unregulated labor behind RTV, which also happens to depend on the disparagement of "women's work."

These discussion threads about emotional labor each foreground invisible work and gender stereotyping. They also highlight that while emotional labor may take new forms in new mediums, the goal remains the same—to serve capitalist expansion and the organizations for which the work is conducted. Emotional camping does the same, but speaks to labor across platforms and RTV stars specifically. RTV stars are not micro-celebrities (Senft, 2013) or A-List talent, but exist amid both. Their labor also aligns with the aim of capitalism because they are, like the platform they originate from, inexpensive to produce and easily replicable (Bielby and Harrington, 2008). These concepts describing gendered labor practices demonstrate women are instrumental to patriarchal capitalism. Bravo Housewives personify this reasoning.

The job of a Bravo Housewife is to coordinate emotions that represent an amplified, highly emotional, and reactive personality. While emotional labor is about management of emotions, the work the women do for *RH* is interesting because these women are performing on a network that benefits from them losing control of their emotions. The women of *RH* therefore have to appear to lose control of their emotions in whatever way the scene demands. Such work, I argue, is comprised of (1) emotional labor, or the process of formulating the necessary emotions for the job, and (2) camping, which is the actual performance of this loss of control, or the performative outcome of this labor. This type of communicative competence formulates the basis of their self-branding strategy.

Self-branding via postfeminist performances and camping

Self-branding is the curation of "a distinctive public image for commercial gain and cultural capital" (Khamis et al., 2016: 2). While there is an increasing focus on self-branding and social media (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2013), RTV can still be

considered "ground zero" for self-branding (Hearn, 2016) because it is a platform centered on identity performance. Successful reality stars conduct convincing "emotional identity performances" (Dubrofsky, 2011). This requires individuals to first acknowledge that they are being filmed and then act naturally like they are not on camera. RTV has been around long enough now that participants "perform performance" to deliver what a scene requires (Grindstaff and Murray, 2015). This suggests RTV participants know the behavior that will garner more screen time or a particular edit, which can propel their popularity across platforms.

The women of *RH* are paid to perform on a reality series where they are filtered through a postfeminist lens, positioned into "pseudo-events" (Boorstin, 1962), and edited into gendered archetypes like "the rich bitch" (Lee and Moscowitz, 2013). This postfeminist lens is best described as a "sensibility" (Gill, 2007). A postfeminist sensibility is characterized by reactionary statements against feminism, dominant neoliberal ideologies, and an uncritical stance toward capitalism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2009). It is also evinced in discourses of "choice," "balance," and "having it all." "Having it all," according to Nayar's (2015) textual analysis of fan forums dedicated to *RH-New York City's* Bethenny Frankel, includes financial security, familial belonging, and sustained intimacy. "Having it all" also means embodying a particular aesthetic.

Being a Bravo "housewife" requires one to emphasize their femininity by way of material goods, beauty treatments, and plastic surgery. This aesthetic includes having an ideal body type, hair extensions, makeup that includes highlighting and extreme contouring, false lashes, and noticeably labeled designer clothes. This femininity is also hinged on social class (Squires, 2014). Squires' (2014) analysis of *RH* reunions demonstrates how the women perform "culturally elite identities" by displaying "materially endowed" public images (p. 33). Material endowments include luxury cars, private planes, and designer handbags. It is not enough for these women to look typically hyper-feminine, they must also uphold the principle of *RH*, which is affluence. Their performances are presented through the meta-lens of a postfeminist sensibility. This elides race as a key facet of identity by presenting the women's experiences, across *RH* series, as primarily associated with gender and class origins.

This is because *RH*, Dominguez (2015) argues, frames Black femininity through a White perspective, which enables White viewers to "not see race" (p. 171). That perspective is related to the postfeminist sensibility, which does not factor in how race and ethnicity impact people's lived experiences, opportunities, and the types of choices people can choose from. *RH-Atlanta* and *RH-Potomac* center on Black women's lives. *RH-Atlanta* is the most-watched series in the franchise and often gets double the viewers of the other series (NBC Universal Media Village). That viewership comprised affluent, educated, 25- to 54-year-old women and gay men, who are mostly White (Quantcast). That White audience has expectations about how Black Housewives should perform (Dominguez, 2015: 156).

Scholarship is divided over whether the women are catering to a multitude of stereotypes (Bunai, 2014) or positively reshaping media representations about Black women (Hawley, 2014). In media, Black women with personalities that evoke ideas about White women (i.e. they are passive, vulnerable, reserved) have often been deemed "inauthentic"

by viewers (Boylorn, 2008: 418). Authenticity is central to RTV. Dubrofsky's (2011) analysis of the women of *The Bachelor* established that performances of "authenticity" and "naturalness," necessary components for a favorable edit, are "intricately aligned" with whiteness (p. 20). Black women must enact stereotypical actions of Black women who are identified as "ghetto" or "low-class" in order to be perceived as authentic (Bunai, 2014: 8). The women of *RH-Atlanta* and *RH-Potomac* are under pressure to deliver on stereotypes about Black women (along with the other classist and gendered stereotypes of the franchise), in order to maintain their position on the series. I argue in the analysis that women who play to these stereotypes can successfully self-brand on Instagram. The act of playing to stereotypes on *RH* becomes evident when women work with the ironic framing of the series.

In their analysis of *RH-New York City*, Lee and Moscowitz (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." This is when editors highlight the hypocrisy of the women's actions to let the audience "in on the joke." The use of irony on *RH* camouflages serious issues and stereotypes as amusing content. As Gill (2007) showed, irony in media is a way around apologizing for exposing and then playing into gender stereotypes (p. 39). In short, ironic framing tactics assist producers in shifting criticism about the stereotypes the show creates and perpetuates, to the women.

The "Bravo wink" is a hallmark of the series and part of Bravo's brand of comedy. The women, especially seasoned cast members, as I will show in the analysis, know to exaggerate the stereotypes the series trades on by playing into the irony of the series. This is how they ensure camera time and appear in on the joke. The women who translate that knowingness to social media produce a stronger brand online because it is more neatly aligned with production's framing of them. Aligning their image from the series with their online brand is key to the establishment of "brand authenticity" (Khamis et al., 2016). Image alignment across platforms requires self-awareness. Performances replete with this type of knowingness are best characterized as camping.

Camp presents as a sensibility (Sontag, 1964). It is "serious," a "love of the unnatural," "artiface," and "exaggeration." Early seasons of *RH-Orange County* could be characterized as camp because camp "is always naïve" (Sontag, 1964). The women who appeared in the first season of *RH-Orange County* were naïve, in particular, of the ironic frame. In 2006, *RH* was an experimental program because the women had no template to model themselves after. They may have played up their personalities for the cameras, but they also took themselves quite seriously. In its early seasons, the women did not yet grasp the show's use of irony or that they were put on display to be the comedy. As the series gained traction, the "Bravo wink" became readily apparent to the women, as did their need to amplify their personas.

RH cannot be considered camp today because the women's conduct and the emotions they display are often deliberate and devoid of innocence, which are two features of camping. Instead, I argue here, the women perform exaggerated versions of themselves by simultaneously breaking and playing to the stereotypes the show puts forth about women (e.g. they are hypocrites, preoccupied with looking good, love spending money, close to an emotional breakdown), as a means to ensure camera time.

Centering RTV performances around camping or "camp play" is a programming strategy on other RTV shows, like the British docusoap *The Only Way Is Essex* (Woods, 2014). Woods (2014) shows that the series "positions its performances and excessive femininities as knowingly comic" in an attempt to neutralize negative stereotypes. This demonstrates docusoaps like *RH* are aware of the stereotypes they trade on. The women of *RH* can be just as aware and, as I will argue, play to those very stereotypes as a means to fulfill the requirements of their job. Other researchers have even shown that audiences for these shows employ a "camp sensibility" to admire these "bad" objects of culture (McCoy and Scarborough, 2014: 51). Camping is thus acknowledged by producers of RTV docusoaps and the audience. I will show here how it is also employed as a strategy by performers on RTV.

Performing on RTV is a legitimate form of labor. This is the result of a heightened demand for celebrity, in part created by a changing economy, convergence culture, populist politics, and the explosion of RTV in the early aughts (Andrejevic, 2004; Jenkins, 2006; Turner, 2006). Having people perform on RTV is an easy way for networks to generate money and content (Curnutt, 2011). While the women of *RH* are exploited, they demonstrate awareness by performing in ways that emphasize certain stereotypes. This is the work of emotional camping, which affords them the chance to build a stronger branded-persona online, shield themselves against negative perceptions, and secure a sense of privacy in very public-facing careers.

Method

This research is based on comprehensive analysis of *RH*. Using a "three-pronged" cultural studies approach to media, I studied *RH* production, content, and audience reception (Kellner, 2011). I conducted (1) semi-structured interviews with four former producers and insiders at Bravo, (2) an extensive culturally based frame analysis of each series in the franchise, (3) visual and textual analysis of select women on Instagram, and interviewed (4) 26 fans and (5) eight former main cast members. While this article draws on the analysis mentioned here, I focus on the women's Instagram use and the in-depth interviews with fans, insiders, and the Housewives to discuss emotional camping.

Emotional camping

Based upon these data, I argue that the work these women do can be conceptualized as "emotional camping," which I define here as a form of labor conducted by reality stars, the women of *RH* in particular, across platforms for image consistency and brand authenticity. What started as critical research into classist and anti-feminist producer framing techniques became a gateway to understanding the work these women do to increase their economic capital and sense of stability and privacy. Take what one former Housewife shared:

> I called the two new housewives of [redacted]. 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. You can talk shit on Mickey Mouse because he's a fake character. But you talk shit on a reality star, it hurts because it's real. So, I told them remove yourself . . . It's hard to think of yourself as a kind of out of body character, but that's really what this is. (RH 5)

Creating "mickey mouse" personas, among other things, enables the women to deal with the negative repercussions of being associated with the series. I demonstrate next that successfully branded Housewives tend to be (1) dedicated to Bravo, (2) inclined to present as walking GIFs, and (3) seemingly authentic. These tendencies intersect and bring forth a nuanced understanding of the complex labor the women of *RH* conduct. The analysis concludes by demonstrating how adhering to the characteristics of emotional camping affords the women of *RH* a semblance of privacy in their highly public careers.

Dedicated to Bravo. According to a Bravo insider, the women of *RH-New York City* are the most "dedicated" housewives because they are the "best at performing." "The New York ladies" they explained, "know when the cameras are on and do what they're supposed to do." What they are supposed to do is "play up" the scene by "amplifying their interactions." Doing so demonstrates a commitment to the job, and subsequently Bravo:

> Now it's a job. You know they go in, they do their stuff, and then leave. Now they're vying for screen time . . . [Name redacted] is very good, she 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. (RH 7)

> 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. I realized that if I didn't get into it I was going to be let go . . . It's a job and I wanted to keep the job. Every year you're on it, your salary goes up . . . [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)

The job of a "Housewife" is to perform and cultivate an amped-up, reactionary persona. It is evident from the quotes that the women have learned over time how to conduct themselves on the show and manage their emotions. In a typical job, management of emotions would call for a person to be less reactive and dramatic. This is not the case for women on *RH*:

> Anybody you can parody easily and imitate, those are your best housewives. (RH 1)

> 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. (RH 7)

> People turn it up for television. Several of the housewives that I knew—that's not what they are in person, when it's not on camera. (RH 8)

The emotional labor of any job requires a "coordination of mind and feeling" that draws "on a source of self" that is "deep and integral to our individuality" (Hochschild, 2012 [1983]: 7). In most types of work, people are instrumental, alienated from themselves as they labor. Hochschild used the example of a factory worker being alienated from the part of their body that does the job. She compared this to a flight attendant who

has to feel happiness in order to please customers. Happiness, Hochschild argued, feels different when a flight attendant is not working. The emotional labor of camping and curating these "mickey mouse" personas could alienate the women from their sense of self, as some women hinted:

> Anybody and everybody who meets me, who has watched the show and didn't know me before, is shocked by how different I am. (RH 2)

> I wish the fan base had seen how solid I really am. That's the one regret I have. (RH 7)

Alienation as such is evidence of emotional labor. Curating personas that may alienate them from who they are outside of work is part of "what they are supposed to do" and illustrates a dedication to the job and Bravo at large.

Complying with production during filming is an indicator of dedication. Women who do this tend to be favorited during the editing process. The women interviewed agreed that favoritism was based on being compliant with production:

> The producers said 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. That's what happened in the second season I was on where I was taken on as an actual housewife and I was downgraded. (RH 1)

> Production plays favorites. It's that simple. If they like you, you can say and do anything and you will get a great edit. If you give them a difficult time and don't kiss their ass, you are doomed . . . when [producers] don't get what they want, they threaten that the show will be cancelled, which then makes some of the really desperate [women] do some over the top desperate things to please [producers]. (RH 4)

> [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 . . . There's definitely favoritism. I think a lot of it comes down to what someone's willing to spend to make a scene. (RH 8)

These quotes demonstrate that women will show dedication to the job by delivering whatever scene producers demand.

Other ways the women indicate dedication to the show is on social media. Interviews with the women revealed that they are contractually obligated to use social media to promote the show. Analysis of the women's public accounts on Instagram indicates that "Housewives" will either align themselves with production's edit or share their side of the story. The former affirms job security and relations with production, while the latter results in a fine or termination:

> Oh yes, they tell you what to post about. But they don't tell you your endorsements. What you post about the show is controlled by the production company and Bravo. For good reason. They don't want to ruin [the story] coming out. (RH 4)

> You can't talk about editing [on social media]. You can only talk about what the viewers see . . . that's contractual. My third year they introduced a fine so that if you did do something like that, it was $500 or $5000. (RH 5)

Women who choose to comment on social media about the editing of the series are in breach of contract. One former "Housewife" who chose to go against production shared with me that her primary use for social media was not to brand but "to explain to your fans who love and follow you the truth of what happened" (RH 4). This cast member had a particularly negative relationship with the production company:

> Production is allowed to manipulate the edit anyway 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 . . . The devil in the game is the production company. If you don't . . . follow what they want you to do to make their jobs easier, to hand in a show so everybody can collect their paycheck, you're dead meat. (RH 4)

Like many women, this "Housewife" received a positive edit on her first season on the show. By the second season, things changed because she was labeled "a little bit difficult" by producers:

> 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 . . . [I had] become labeled as a little bit difficult. I said no to them for certain things . . . so, what happened in season two is very simple. You didn't see the prior—interactions. (RH 4)

Here, she explains how editors slice together certain takes for their own story purposes. "Prior-interactions" refer to the parts of the conversation she was reacting to in a scene. On Instagram, after each live episode that season, she detailed the parts of the story not being shown on screen. She was then terminated at the end of the season.

RH-Atlanta's Kenya Moore tried a similar approach on Instagram. During filming of Season 10 (5 November 2017–22 April 2018), Kenya jeopardized relations with production because she refused to film her wedding. Producers retaliated by showing Kenya's relationship in a negative light throughout the season. Interviews with former producers confirmed that women receive "bad edits" if they upset production. Jamie, a former field producer for Evolution Media, shared that "[the women] just kind of screw themselves" when "they refuse to film" or when they attempt to "create their own storyline."

Kenya shared detailed behind-the-scenes information on Instagram after each episode that season to defend herself against the negative edit. By the finale of Season 10, Kenya's contract was terminated. By Season 12 (November 2019–May 2020), Kenya was back on the show, openly showing the breakdown of her previously off-limits marriage on camera. She never mentioned editing once on Instagram while Season 12 aired.

In sum, the women must comply with production to keep their job. Women who do not are retaliated against in the editing process and contract negotiations. The best way to communicate compliance is to play whatever role producers need them to play by delivering the reactions and scenes they ask for during filming. In other words, the

women must put on a show. Compliance with producers becomes more evident on the women's social media, particularly when we do not see women (especially on the receiving end of a bad edit) discussing the unfairness of editing online. Some women, described next, further their dedication to Bravo by playing to their bad edit on the series online. Such actions indicate dedication to their role that season and an inclination to present the self as a walking GIF on Instagram.

Walking GIFs. Of the women's accounts analyzed here, Sonja Morgan and Luann de Lesseps (*RH-New York City*), Lisa Rinna (*RH-Beverly Hills*), Teresa Guidice (*RH-New Jersey*), Shannon Beador *(RH-Orange County*), LeAnn Locken (*RH-Dallas*), and Karen Huger (*RH-Potomac)* present as dedicated housewives on Instagram. These women appear to parody their character on the show on Instagram through the use of GIFs and memes that depict their own best and worst moments from the series. I refer to these women as "walking GIFs." Andy Cohen echoed the term in an Instagram post on 17 September 2020. In the post, he commemorated Nene Leakes' departure from *RH-Atlanta* and referred to her as a "GIF and catchphrase machine."

Presenting as a walking GIF on Instagram is evidence of the women's dedication to being Bravo Housewives. Other evidence of their dedication is seen in the women's account biographies where they proclaim before anything else that they are a "Real Housewife of," or an "original Housewife." Other evidence of their dedication is that these women, during data collection, did not defy production by talking about editing on Instagram. Analysis revealed that these women use social media to actively construct a preferred image of the self that is aligned with their (negative or positive) image from the series. This points to emotional camping.

On the show, emotional camping presents as a sensibility. The labor these women conduct is apparent, but understated, on screen. Fan interviews revealed that viewers are highly receptive to which women are intentionally performing on camera. Most women referenced above were also discussed by fans as performing intentionally, but expertly. For instance, one fan shared,

> [My favorite] in terms of just great TV, really understands the medium that she's playing with, for better or worse, I would say LeAnn 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)

Having the sensibility that women are performing does not detract from viewing pleasure. As long as they are not overt, their performance will not interfere with the suspension of disbelief required for viewing. Some women, like LeAnn Locken, conceal performances with an earnest artificiality that projects a seeming authenticity or naturalness on screen (Dubrofsky, 2011). It is on Instagram that the labor of emotional camping becomes more pronounced because the women can explicitly declare to be "in on the joke" by posting pictures and GIFs that demonstrate awareness and a sense of humor.

Presenting an image through GIFs that depict your own emotional displays also demonstrates that these cast members are playing to the stereotypes evinced on the series on

Instagram. Playing to stereotypes is evidence of camping. Women who present as walking GIFs online capitalize on whatever type of edit they receive on the show each season. They also embrace the idiosyncrasies associated with their image by using humorous hashtags, post content that is not overtly tied to a promotion, and post more pictures than other women from the series that have the appearance of being instantaneous. For instance, Sonja Morgan's post from 19 July 2017 boasts "crazy women on the loose #Sonjaisms." The accompanying image is a Gifshare of Sonja from the show. While many women from *RH* use hashtags associated with their branded products, "#Sonjaisms" is distinct because it refers to her branded-persona.

Repositioning oneself on Instagram as a walking GIF is a smart self-branding tactic because it creates image alignment across platforms, which is central to brand authenticity (Khamis et al., 2016). This tactic also simultaneously alludes to the fact that the women are performing intentionally, or camping, and have a strong sense of awareness about who they need to be on the show. Scholars have shown that GIFs "relay multiple levels of meaning," enhance "the performance of affect," and demonstrate "cultural knowledge," all of which embody the "pillars of digital communication" (Miltner and Highfield, 2017: 4). The fact that these women post GIFs of themselves is an amplification of their own affect and a definitive method of demonstrating their "cultural knowledge" about what they (and the series) represent.

Many of the women of *RH* have been working this job for years and angle to deliver sound bites while filming. This in itself is an example of emotional camping. These women now know that a good sound bite or catchphrase will produce a moment on RTV that will become a meme or GIF they can proliferate on social media to embed their branded identity into the fabric of popular culture. These strategic performances make the women "GIF machines" and thus experts at garnering excessive media attention across platforms. The memes and GIFs these women share of themselves are likely thought out before their performance on the series and are thus evidence of emotional camping. In sum, amplifying the multifaceted image produced by RTV producers on Instagram makes the labor of emotional camping readily apparent and increases the authenticity of their persona.

Seeming authenticity. This seeming authenticity is a marker of a successfully branded Housewife. Authenticity, according to analysis of fan interviews, refers to women who show it all—the good, the bad, and the ugly. This use of the word "authenticity" among fans here does not mean that fans view authenticity as fact. It is simply used as a descriptive term for the women who perform well on the show or, rather, do the labor of emotional camping:

> Obviously, this is not who they really are. This is a media image. (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)

The media image and the creation of authentic personalities is known and acknowledged by fans. This does not take away from their pleasure or support of certain women who have successfully worked with production to craft this "authentic image":

> They are still very authentic in that they're willing to put a lot of themselves out there for the viewer. They've all gone through a relatable struggle. I think they all just kind of project a real authenticity that makes them enjoyable to watch, while also bringing entertainment value into it. (Jenny)

Interview analysis shows that fans believe they can pinpoint the emotional realism behind these images. Fans know this is an RTV show and that the women are crafting personas, but as they reason, those personas are still based on ordinary women going through actual situations. Emotional realism is "what fans recognize as realistic" in "fictional worlds" (Ang, 1985: 43). This emotional realism formulates a seeming authenticity of the women across platforms.

This coincides with the "emotional intimacy" required for celebrities to appear authentic (Littler, 2004). Littler's analysis of celebrity and meritocracy revealed that "authentic" celebrities put forth a "presentation of emotional intimacy" and "a degree of reflexivity about being in the position of a celebrity" (p. 126). This is what the women of *RH* do for work. They share their changing emotions scene by scene. Since they are ordinary women, their personas evince a "degree of reflexivity." In essence, authenticity here is not meant in the veritable sense of the word, but rather it refers to a successful performance. Sometimes these performances are so successful that people believe them. One former Housewife, when I asked about whether or not the women of *RH* are authentic on the series, shared this:

> I remember saying to one of the Housewives, "I can't get over what [people] are saying about [us]. Don't they know that this is all just kind of a fake, dramatized show and it's not real?" People assume they know you, because they're in your home and they know your dog and they know your husband and your closet. For the most part, that's not who we really are. (RH 8)

In summary, the work of a Bravo housewife is to present an image of the self that is so emotionally real that people view their personas as authentic. Emotional camping is how they accomplish this job. While it affords the women solid standing with production and Bravo, and subsequently increased media attention and economic gain, emotional camping also allows the women to keep parts of themselves hidden. This semblance of privacy, I argue next, is a key benefit for the women doing the work of emotional camping.

Emotional camping for privacy

Social media is "driven by a profound confusion of the private and public" (Chun, 2017). RTV is driven by the same confusion. RTV stars live extremely public lives across platforms to reject the ephemerality of their fame. As workers, RTV stars must continually adapt to the precarity of their position. In spite of RTV's longevity, the large "ordinary labor pool" (Curnutt, 2011) of participants is still seen as "dispensable" (Collins, 2008) to networks. While many willingly sign what a former Housewife called "one-sided contracts" that "give your life away," these individuals should still be allowed privacy. By privacy, I simply mean solitude.

For viewers, watching these women's lives unfold across various channels has become an integral, habitual part of their lives. When media become habitual they become invisible and also the most impactful (Chun, 2017). We have come to expect these women to always be on, exposed, and available to us. Bravo's business model facilitates this expectation through the "Bravo experience," which includes watching and then participating online with Bravolebrities after shows end (Henshell, 2011). I argue that over time, these women have figured out ways to get around the very publicness of their job, so they can keep certain things to themselves.

Emotional camping refers to a type of identity performance that emphasizes the parts of the self these women are comfortable with showing. Intentionally managing one's emotions to align with the network's goals is one way these women—ironically—negotiate a semblance of privacy. Their performances and privacy however depend on their relationships with the other women on the series:

> 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 [without production]. (RH 8)

> [Stories are] not really authentic. 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)

> We literally had a handshake to not go after each other . . . like "I'll never come after you and you never come after me and we're good." (RH 8)

These quotes point to feminist action in this patriarchal labor environment. Binding together to bring certain storylines on camera to ensure co-stars' privacy is one way these women can work effectively within the constraints of the system and maintain professional relationships. Kenya More attempted to keep her nuptials hidden without consulting the other women. Perhaps if she did, the women could have supported her by providing other storylines for the season. It appears that as long as the women are willing to amplify some part of themselves, they can create a show with producers and cast members:

> 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], I really had that idea. I was talking to [name redacted] off camera . . . 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 [this cast member's] idea. (RH 2)

If the women agree with what to bring on camera, their job then is to play up the agreed-upon drama so that it is entertaining and believable. When the labor of emotional camping is done effectively, it beguiles people into believing this is who the women authentically are, so much so, that other aspects of their personality and identity need not be revealed. Emotional camping therefore speaks to new methods of operating within the limitations of a surveilled society because it carves out a path to solitude for people doing the "work of being watched" (Andrejevic, 2004).

Conclusion

Emotional camping summarizes the self-branding identity work the women of *RH* do across platforms. This concept identifies the labor RTV stars do to maintain their personas and working relations with each other and production. As such, emotional camping could be characterized as a complex, interdependent, process of mutual exploitation between the women and the network. In this way, the work of emotional camping reveals potential processes of commercial compliance to the institutions people serve.

Emotional camping also reintroduces conversations about what constitutes feminist action in sexist environments. This sort of labor does not disrupt patriarchy; in fact, emotional camping follows the "logic of popular feminism" by individualizing women's issues and celebrating visibility, confidence, and "realness" (Banet-Weiser, 2018). While this may be a limitation to my argument, emotional camping still highlights sites of resistance in this particular line of work. Since feminist media research is to open finding such sites of resistance in patriarchal milieus, the conversation can be continued in future research. Other limitations to this research include the diversity of interview subjects. The insiders and former cast members interviewed were mostly White, so I cannot speak more specifically to different people's experiences. My future research is actively pursuing greater inclusivity of voices.

In closing, emotional camping provides interesting discussion for future research. This research should continue to explore sites of resistance and feminist action in work environments informed by patriarchal capitalism, situated in the context of RTV and social media. At the very least, emotional camping can be used to understand the work behind self-branding image manipulation in a time when performance is authentic, facts are fiction, and TV is reality.

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