The digital money shot: Twitter wars, *The Real Housewives*, and transmedia storytelling

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**ABSTRACT**

This article examines the construction of reality TV fame through transmedia storytelling. In the convergent TV era, reality producers increasingly require that stars post-personal content on social media, blogs, and online video sites. Rather than hire transmedia content creators, television networks incentivise stars to generate their own digital texts by placing them in competition with their co-stars for attention, status, and salary. This new industry strategy seeks to cut costs while extending viewer engagement. In the reality TV emotion economy, where the most effective path to fame involves dramatic self-disclosure, stars are representing the hyperbolic performance of misery, jealousy, and resentment online. Just as reality producers rely on participants’ performance of the ‘money shot’ – a televised moment of emotional upheaval – the convergent TV industry requires a ‘digital money shot’ – an online performance of dramatic emotions that drives transmedia engagement. To begin mapping the contours of the ‘digital money shot’, this article examines the multi-platform world of Bravo’s reality docu-soap franchise, *The Real Housewives*, and the prevalence of the Twitter war, a social media feud used to draw viewers to new media sites. This practice illustrates how performative emotions and self-disclosure form the basis of Bravo’s transmedia strategy for *The Real Housewives* franchise.

On social media, personal blogs, and online video sites, reality stars are increasingly turning to new media to share details of their ‘real lives.’ Like reality series, digital sites offer participants a platform to dramatise their so-called ‘reality’ by writing about relationship woes, engaging in Twitter fights, and posting intimate photos. While most celebrities have a digital presence, reality stars are unique because their online identity must reflect the ‘real’ lives they lead on TV. Unlike actresses who play a role, reality participants perform versions of themselves on TV and must sustain a coherent brand persona as it moves online. In this article, I explore reality stars’ social media activity to show how it is used as a new transmedia storytelling strategy. The seemingly quotidian and ephemeral quality of social media masks the immense amount of time and effort involved in performing digital iterations of stars’ ‘real lives.’

As reality celebrities mine their personal lives in pursuit of fame, they negotiate a distinct set of social and industrial demands. Unlike established celebrities who are seen as
talented artists, reality participants are viewed as expendable celeoids, a celebrity whose fame is brief and constructed by the media (Rojek 2001). Reality participants are often framed as ordinary people plucked out of obscurity and given the chance of a lifetime – to be on TV. With an endless supply of willing contestants, reality producers manipulate participants through notoriously tenuous contracts, competitive working conditions, and the fleeting promise of fame. To remain in the spotlight, reality stars are encouraged to bare the most intimate details of their lives in a melodramatic performance in order to make ‘good TV’. As Laura Grindstaff and Susan Murray (2015, p. 117–118) explain, ‘dramatic potential must be deliberately orchestrated and managed, driven by reactions to moments of interpersonal conflict and communication breakdown, as well as deliberately taken up and elaborated upon by participants themselves’. Thus, the principal ‘job’ of reality stars is to perform amplified versions of their private lives.

The convergence of television and new media have expanded the scope of reality television from a highly controlled medium to a sprawling series of interrelated texts, extending reality stars’ performative labour into the digital realm. The proliferation of transmedia storytelling – creating ongoing narratives across multiple media platforms – indicates how the television industry is using new media to keep viewers engaged between broadcasts. Each extension makes a ‘distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole’ (Jenkins 2006, p. 27–98), generating additional revenue in the form of direct payments, advertising profits, and emotional pay-off. While much of the scholarship on transmedia storytelling has focused on fictional ‘quality’ television programming, there has been a lack of scholarly attention to the transmedia strategies of reality TV. By overlooking traditionally feminine genres like reality TV and melodrama, transmedia scholarship risks reinforcing gendered cultural hierarchies that celebrate ‘masculine’ visual and narrative aesthetics and deride female-targeted texts. This article seeks to remedy this gap by analysing the engagement strategies and labour conditions particular to transmedia extensions for female-centred, docu-soap series.

Because reality stars perform ‘themselves’ on TV and online, networks increasingly require that stars construct transmedia storyworlds by posting compelling intimate content. Rather than hiring transmedia content creators, reality producers incentivise stars to generate their own digital texts by placing them in competition with their co-stars for attention, status, and salary. This new reality industry strategy seeks to cut costs while extending viewer engagement. The production of dramatic transmedia texts requires stars’ skilful attention and constant content creation to engender audience affiliation. Just as reality producers rely on participants’ performance of the ‘money shot’ (Grindstaff 2002) – a televised moment of emotional upheaval – I argue that the convergent TV industry requires a ‘digital money shot’ – an online performance of dramatic emotions that drives transmedia engagement. While the docu-soap genre has a long history of provoking negative affects like anger and humiliation to create ‘melodramatic money shots’ and boost ratings (Dominguez 2015, p. 156), in the convergent media era reality docu-soaps are pioneering the use of melodramatic emotions to push viewers to new media platforms.

As reality fame hinges on stars’ self-disclosure, their commercial successes are bound up with their intimate lives. The blurring of boundaries between public and private has specific consequences for female stars because women’s role the workplace has long required the performance of emotional labour, defined as the management of emotions
in accordance with workplace guidelines (Hochschild 1983). Emotional labour in the reality TV realm does not require that stars actually feel emotions, but rather that they can convincingly perform melodramatic sentiments in a way that captures viewers’ attention. In this sense, reality stars’ most effective path to fame involves intimate confessions and the hyperbolic display of stereotypical feminine emotions like crying and screaming. As I have previously argued, the performance of melodramatic emotions is a feminised promotional strategy that ‘harnesses the on-going activity, innovation, and flexibility of women’s affective labour’ (Arcy 2015, p. 76). While the commercial successes of female reality stars may appear empowering, Leonard and Negra (2015) explain that this model of female self-actualisation through self-branding tethers women’s economic gain to their personal lives. As reality stars commodify the successes and failures of their intimate lives, they serve as a constant reminder that women in the public eye ‘must always be undeserving and flawed, even though (or because) her fortune is at least partially sourced by her personal life’ (Leonard and Negra 2015, p. 197). For ordinary women, reality celebrity’s new media strategies provide a seemingly attainable template for economic success through personal revelations and emotional performance.

To investigate the role of intimate self-disclosure in the construction of female reality stars’ transmedia texts, I look at the multi-platform world constructed around Bravo’s reality docu-soap franchise, The Real Housewives. Across new media sites, female cast members share intimate details of their personal lives on blogs hosted on Bravo’s official website, videos on Bravo’s YouTube channel, and social media posts on stars’ Instagram and Twitter, to name just a few. As television networks face increasing pressure to engage consumers across media platforms, Bravo’s approach to transmedia storytelling centres on reality stars’ affective interactions and their performance of friendship, romance, and betrayal online. Bravo enacts its strategy to expand docu-soap narratives across new media sites by eliciting stars’ emotional expressions online. I focus my analysis on one particularly productive transmedia strategy, the Twitter war, a performative feud where stars carefully craft emotional messages to spark conflict and draw viewer attention across converged TV and new media sites. This practice illustrates how reality stars’ performance of extreme emotions and disclosure of intimate personal details form the basis of Bravo’s transmedia strategy for The Real Housewives franchise.

**Reality stardom and digital promotion**

To understand the construction of reality stardom in convergence culture, I draw upon two areas of research, celebrity studies and feminist scholarship on self-branding and emotion. Bringing these subfields together, I explore how reality TV transmedia strategies promote viewer engagement through the stars’ emotional performance and intimate self-disclosure and create a gendered model for personal and professional success on social media.

Celebrity studies scholarship provides key insights into the cultural fascination with the personal and professional lives of celebrities. In this body of work, celebrity is understood as a discursive construction of the ways an individual is represented in the media (Rojek 2001, Turner et al. 2000). Celebrity personas are constituted across many sites including tabloid gossip, interviews, red carpet events, talk show appearances, to
name just a few. On these platforms, celebrities are framed within the contradictory discourse of fame that suggests stars’ success lies in their ‘talent’ and ‘personality’ on one hand, and ‘ordinariness’ and ‘luck’ on the other. Media emphasis on talent and glamour elevates the aspirational quality of stars, while ordinariness creates a sense of intimacy with stars. New media platforms provide direct, unmediated access to stars that heightens this sense of closeness. As Marwick and Boyd (2011) find, celebrities use social media to gain status by revealing personal information to create a shared intimacy with fans. Further, the combination of the exceptional and the quotidian reinforces the American Dream myth that anyone can achieve stardom (Dyer 2006). Gamson (1994, p. 38) explains that these competing ideologies work together to expose the artifice of celebrity and invite ‘readers to visit the real self behind those images’. The cultural obsession with ordinariness and uncovering the ‘real person’ behind celebrity images is heightened in the reality TV era that constructs fame around the ‘real’. The explosion of new media platforms has led to a desire for more celebrity content and more opportunities to distinguish the ‘truth’ from the manufactured.

Celebrity paratexts also form an image of ‘the way stars live’ and provide a model for how ordinary people may too achieve fame (Dyer 2006). In this sense, celebrity is a discursive representation and a commodity used to promote products. As Turner (2004, p. 9) puts it, celebrities are ‘produced, traded and marketed by the media and publicity industries’ for economic gain. The promotion of female celebrity in early Hollywood is a direct result of the shift to consumer capitalism and the need to promote specific fashion and cosmetics (Leppert and Wilson 2008). Early advertising campaigns offered ways to emulate celebrity through feminised conspicuous consumption. Over time, the cultural construction of celebrity ‘types’ provided audiences with ways of identifying oneself (Dyer 2006), ways of fashioning oneself (Turner 2010), and detailed rubrics for success within capitalist democracies (Marshall 2014). As Turner (2010) explains, celebrity culture creates a ‘field of expectations’ for everyday life.

Reality TV intensifies these expectations by promoting the idea anyone can become a celebrity and by modelling tactics to achieve fame. This new era of celebrity culture, what Turner (2006) calls the ‘demotic turn,’ is characterised by growing numbers of ordinary people on reality TV and increased corporate oversight. Although ordinary people are cast on TV, they are subject to detailed contracts that relinquish rights of self-representation. Tensions emerge around the competing interests of reality stars who want to control their representation and producers who aim to craft a character archetype (the villain, the goody-two-shoes). Even when various parties are aligned, ‘coordinating the production process is cumbersome because it is decentralized and nonmonopolistic’ (Gamson 1994, p. 80). The messiness of celebrity image production is compounded in the digital sphere by a proliferation of outlets and no barriers to entry. Unlike edited reality programmes and celebrity gossip, social media provide stars with an unmediated forum for self-representation and, with it, the ability to control the construction and circulation of their image. The push and pull between stars, producers, and networks is further complicated by the fact that reality fame is constructed around participants’ lives and bad press reflects on their personal choices. As Erin Meyers (2014) explains, the ‘celebrification’ of participants depends upon extra-textual media coverage on tabloids and gossip sites. While ancillary coverage is needed to elevate participants’ status, media stories risk muddling reality personas and reality TV brands.
While new media ostensibly provides more freedom and flexibility, media companies have sought to rein in their stars’ social media activity. The industrial norms for successful transmedia storytelling follow the tenants of ‘coherence,’ ‘continuity’ and ‘plausibility’ to create a ‘unified experience’ across multiple media texts (Jenkins 2009). This means that reality shows have to encourage stars’ social media activity while managing their digital pursuits to protect the commercial value of the franchise. After many trials and errors, Bravo executives discovered that they could motivate star participation by putting them in competition with their cast mates. To ensure digital posts supported established reality TV narratives, Bravo executive Andy Cohen enticed stars with the promise of selling personal branded merchandise online without (much) network oversight and deterred stars by failing to renew the contracts of stars who went too far off message (Cohen 2012, p. 204). Cohen shows stars that it behoves them (and the series) to craft extra-textual content that sits easily alongside their reality TV personas. In this way reality stars’ digital presence extends the commercial reach of their manufactured reality TV image. While stardom has always required multiple spaces of performance (Gamson 1994, Turner 2004), what makes reality TV celebrity unique in the transmedia era is that stars themselves must work to produce an elaborate web of self-referential and intertextual content across a wide variety of convergent media. Further, this labour must remain hidden to preserve the so-called ‘reality’ of reality TV.

While many viewers are savvy to the constructedness of reality television, popular discourses frame reality participants as merely empty vessels for producers. As Holmes (2004) explains, reality contestants are framed as undeserving, representing a new celebrity culture that celebrates those who are ‘famous for being famous’ over ‘talent and hard work’. At the same time, reality participants are viewed as victims to ‘the manipulative powers of a ruthless fame-making machine’ (Holmes 2004). The inability to conceive of reality participants as shrewd entrepreneurs effectively erases the work they put into creating a saleable image.

While stars’ labour is often concealed, their economic successes are highly visible. News outlets were quick to cover Real Housewives of New York City star Bethenny Frankel’s 2011 sale of Skinnygirl liquor company for a reported 100 million dollars (Berg 2016). Other Bravo reality celebrities use the reality TV platform to market their private businesses like Lisa Vanderpump’s restaurants that regularly appear on Bravo’s The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills and Vanderpump Rules. As Cohen (2012, p. 204) explains, ‘The Housewives can … make serious money, especially when they use the show – with Bravo’s blessing – to brand themselves, the way Bethenny did with her Skinnygirl margarita empire, or Teresa [Giudice] with her Italian cookbooks’. Reality celebrities have now turned to social media to further promote themselves and their brands by gaining recognition through dramatic disclosures they hope will ‘go viral’.

In this way, reality TV stars’ social media strategies provide a model of self-promotion for ordinary users, reality TV hopefuls, and ‘micro-celebrities,’ Theresa Senft’s (2013) term for people who develop public personas in line with corporate media culture. While micro-celebrity self-branding is often framed as a mode of empowerment, scholars understand self-branding as a neo-liberal project to maximise human capital (Hearn 2008, Senft 2013). The production of the ‘branded self’ involves casting oneself as a salable product with economic value, in sum, turning the self into a commodity (Hearn 2008, p. 199). For women, online self-branding is a gendered endeavour that involves
promotion through the spectacle of fashion, beauty, intimacy, and emotion, much like the women-centred soap opera, gossip industry, and consumption that came before. Most important, the gendered dimensions of stars’ emotional and corporeal labour creates a feminised rubric for online self-promotion. As Laurie Ouellette and Julie Wilson (2011) contend, female-oriented interactive environments intensify the demand that women perform emotional labour. The gender division of labour, that portends women perform a disproportionate amount of emotion work in the home and at work (Hochschild and Machung 2003), now extends to women’s digital lives. New strategies for women’s social media ascendance further relegates emotion work to the feminine sphere and links women’s economic success to their emotional lives.

Transmedia housewives

Bravo’s The Real Housewives franchise is one of the most prolific and long-running examples of reality TV’s transmedia expansion. Its slue of spin-offs, interactive talk shows, web series, YouTube channels, website, blogs, web applications, online games, and social media accounts offer audiences an insider look at the purportedly ‘real’ lives of ritzy housewives. The series premiered in 2006 with The Real Housewives of Orange County (RHOC), an ensemble cast of five wealthy women recording their private lives for TV. The unscripted series updates the soap opera melodrama for the reality TV era by focusing on interpersonal ups and downs in families and friendship. Most seasons feature a wedding or divorce, child-rearing dilemmas, and conflicts with castmates, against a backdrop of lavish homes, vacations, shopping sprees, and spa treatments. As RHOC grew in popularity, Bravo extended the franchise to the east coast to showcase the lives of Manhattan socialites. With the same stylised presentation and melodramatic themes, Bravo premiered The Real Housewives of New York City (RHONY) in 2008 and later developed seven more The Real Housewives city-based series and over a dozen spin-off shows.

BravoTV.com is a hub of information about Bravo stars with extra-textual material – photos give users a glimpse into their personal lives, ancillary narratives fill in their backstory, and blog recaps add texture to episodic narratives. Visitors can click on full-body icons of each The Real Housewives star to learn more about her personal life through a biography, photographs, gossip stories, and personal blog posts. For instance, RHONY star Bethenny Frankel’s page documents her engagement, wedding ceremony, childbirth, and eventual divorce, while also showing her new single life with photos of Bethenny ‘out on the town,’ a video clip promoting her newest book, and advice columns about being a single mom. The Real Housewives blogs, written weekly by members of the cast and posted shortly after an episode airs, deliver cast members’ individual insights on the events depicted on the show. The blogs are a place where reality stars share their feelings and provide context for how they are represented. RHONY episodes often linger on Bethenny’s snarky behaviour. In one instance, while her co-star repeatedly complains about not being invited to her birthday party, Bethenny pretends to fall asleep. On her blog, she contextualises the series storyline: ‘I find that on the Housewives shows, being invited or not invited to something tends to be blown out of proportion, dragged out, and takes on a life of itself. This concept is exhausting to me … It felt manufactured to stir up drama’ (Frankel 2015). While the blog aims to soften Bethenny’s ‘harsh’ behaviour, it also shows how intimacy, drama, and the
presupposition of the ‘real’ can to motivate the viewer’s transmedia consumption. Personal disclosures can engender genuine emotional connections with stars and, at the same time, blogs attract savvy viewers who want to uncover what is really going on ‘behind the scenes’ of reality TV production. Both motives keep viewers interested in the show and encourage them to track down additional digital content.

Social media sites further extend docu-soap storylines across digital media platforms. At the top of the BravoTV.com homepage is a link to ‘follow’ stars on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Bravo celebrities share details about their personal lives and engage in disputes to draw attention to themselves and their business ventures. Kandi Burruss from *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* is one of the most popular Housewives on social media with over four million followers on both Facebook and Instagram. She (and/or her assistant) posts unique content on each platform multiple times each day with updates and photos on her daily life. In April 2015, Kandi posted 146 photographs and videos to her Instagram account, many of which recounted time spent with her friends and family and many others that promoted her ventures (a photo of Kandi brand sex toys captioned: ‘Go to BedroomKandi.com & get you some goodies or book a #BedroomKandi party!’). Through social media, stars can elaborate on their reality TV persona while channelling public interest to promote their own branded products. In this case, Kandi is promoting her sex toys while reinforcing her persona as a friendly, family-focused, sexually adventurous entrepreneur. This practice requires stars to mine and document the details of their private life to produce digital artefacts that can be consumed by fans.

In media studies, transmedia storytelling is often described as ‘a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience’ (Jenkins 2007). As this definition makes plain, transmedia studies tend to foreground fictional ‘quality’ television – auteur-driven texts that employ cinematic mise-en-scène and complex plots and are chiefly targeted at upscale male audiences (Imre 2009) – leaving female-centred texts like the reality TV docu-soap less examined. The lack of scholarly attention to reality TV transmedia texts reifies gendered hierarchies that celebrate male-oriented narratives while deriding feminine genres like melodrama and reality TV. This article aims to remedy this gap by analysing how transmedia extensions for female-centred, docu-soap series diverge from fictional transmedia strategies.

While all transmedia stories function as ‘on-going sites of narrative expansion’ (Mittell 2015, p. 293) to sustain viewer engagement and motivate further consumption (Jenkins 2006), reality TV transmedia stories differ from ‘quality’ fictional texts is several key ways. First, reality TV stars are the primary producers of expansive storyworlds, unlike the digital media producers who create fictional transmedia worlds. Nevertheless, reality extensions are just as carefully fashioned as fictional ones with coordinated cross-platform interactions. Second, reality stars construct compelling narratives about their ‘real’ lives for transmedia content while producers create fictional transmedia stories. Whereas fictional storyworlds are built according to producers’ creative design, reality stars work from a much looser set of guidelines with prompts like ‘tweet about your life’ or ‘tell your side of the story’. Third, reality producers and stars have to navigate the messy process of attuning multiple social media accounts and competing interests to tell a compelling transmedia story. Unlike fictional media producers, reality participants are deeply invested in the ways they are represented and have to coordinate and
 ethical issues: negotiate with producers to determine which stories are told. Finally, when reality stars post online they appear to be partaking in a leisurely pursuit and they seem to be in control of their own image as they document their lives. These assumptions obscure the intense labour involved in curating a transmedia story and the ways in which reality stars are beholden to the desires of network executives and legally bound to their contract. While the boundaries between work and pleasure are notoriously blurred in a genre that rewards people for broadcasting their lives, these lines are further confused in the digital arena where networks use cast competition to incentivise online productivity. Even though The Real Housewives series claim to feature wealthy housewives, over ten cast members have filed for bankruptcy and many others have made news for their legal and financial troubles. Reality stars often depend on the visibility reality TV offers to develop themselves into a brand in order to sell their own branded merchandise.

Bravo’s transmedia strategy for The Real Housewives is to expand the franchise across as many platforms as possible to reach new viewers and deliver more content to already engaged fans. In the commercial television industry, the chief financial objective is to sell audiences to advertisers. Transmedia stories help fulfil this goal by increasing viewership and intensifying interactivity, showing advertisers that viewers are active, loyal, and engaged. Bravo executive Aimee Viles explains that the network delivers transmedia content to viewers that exhibit interactive behaviour such as ‘using not just one but two or even three devices while watching TV’ to search for ‘additional companion content’ to extend the ‘fan experience’ (cited in Campbell 2014). While this strategy is not new (non-digital extra-textual content has long circulated around popular media texts) the proliferation of digital media platforms has dramatically increased opportunities for transmedia offerings. As Lisa Hsia, Bravo’s head of digital media (2011) avers, ‘This is something that has not been possible until the scaled adoption of smartphones, tablets, social networks and gamification tools’. Hsia (2011) explains that digital transmedia platforms are designed to ‘flow content from platform to platform and to bring in the fans along the way’. Hsia suggests that transmedia content helps to cure what she calls ‘empty box syndrome,’ ‘a problem affecting the millions of Bravo fans who like to keep up with their favourite reality-show stars on social media but need something to fill that space’ (cited in Hampp 2011). Bravo’s transmedia strategy is to ‘fill the space’ by offering an ever-increasing array of content about the intimate lives of its stars. According to Viles, Bravo’s transmedia content is ‘bringing fans closer to the programming’ (cited in Campbell 2014). This means that Bravo fans are spending more time with Bravo content and developing loyalty to the network brand. Networks with loyal, long-term transmedia viewers are particularly desirable to advertisers because strong emotional attachments are seen as the key to influence consumption.

To promote transmedia engagement, Bravo producers have experimented with a range of strategies including live chats, blogs, social media posts, online applications, and digital games. Bravo quickly discovered that it could motivate its talent to post on social media by placing them in competition with one another. Bravo’s earliest transmedia strategy was to teach stars’ how to be active on social media sites. Hsia explains, ‘With The Real Housewives, when we first started … most of them didn’t know how to tweet, so I just decided we should just put the leaderboard at the bottom with all five of them and how many followers they had, and that incented them to tweet more’ (cited in Dredge 2012). As Hsia notes, Bravo does not explicitly pay its stars to tweet, but rather
incentivises online activity by pitting stars against each other for innumerable rewards from bragging rights to higher salaries to opportunities to promote their brands.

Bravo’s contest model also encourages more intimate disclosures and dramatic conflicts on screen and online. This industry strategy presumes that as stars vie for visibility, they will ratchet up their performance of salacious and revealing content. As a transmedia device, shocking personal revelations arouse audience interest and lead them to digital platforms to uncover more information about the ‘real’ event and to get involved in (or witness) the social media spectacle. When Bravo stars perform outrageous emotions that engender fan activity and boost ratings, they have more power to negotiate a higher salary. Indicators like social media followers and fan sentiment play an important role in contract negotiations and help to secure stars a future spot on the show. When stars do not perform well on social media they risk being fired, as was the case for three RHONY cast members who were fired due to negative social media feedback from fans (Baskin 2012).

Bravo’s contracts indicate the extent of reality stars’ insecure working conditions. To be on the show stars must agree that their ‘appearance, depiction, and portrayal … may be disparaging, defamatory, embarrassing… and may expose [them] to public ridicule, humiliation or condemnation, and may portray [them] in a false light’ (Day 2014). Further, stars must be willing to be recorded at all times, even in conditions where most people have a ‘reasonable expectation of privacy’ (Day 2014), and footage can be used ‘at any time, in perpetuity… without any compensation to [stars] whatsoever’ (We Can Fictionalize The Footage! 2013). Stars have little control over their image and must constantly dramatise their private life to ensure future employment. Each year Bravo executive and TV personality Andy Cohen chooses to renew each stars’ contract individually based on ambiguous data like fan ‘likability’ (Cohen 2012). Unsurprisingly, these yearly negotiations are ‘tense and fraught with emotion’ (Cohen 2012, p. 202). While contract talks typically occur behind closed doors, several publicised instances illuminate how Bravo manages its employees. In his 2012 memoir, Cohen describes an attempt by RHONY stars to raise their salaries through collective bargaining. He writes, ‘In the early, uncharted territory days, the New York women used Bethenny [Frankel] to do their collective bidding – they fancied themselves akin to the cast of Friends. She once called me from Jill Zarin’s closet to demand more money on behalf of the group’ (Cohen 2012, p. 202–203). Cohen makes it clear that reality stars are not valued the same as traditional actors and he refused their request. At the end of season five, the RHONY housewives again attempted collective bargaining and ‘Bravo tried to squash … group bargaining … by dividing and conquering them’ (Nededog 2013). Bravo staggers its offers, holding the contracts of the ‘hardest negotiators’ until the last minute so that ‘not only will they have less time to negotiate, it will also instil fear that they aren’t going to be asked back’ (Nededog 2013). When the New York housewives found their salaries varied from $175,000 to 500,000 they refused to finalise their contracts and halted production on season six (Nededog 2013). In the end, each cast member signed her original contract because Bravo threatened to recast the entire series. According to a network ‘insider:’ ‘If it came down to it they would probably do it for free over losing out on the platform. They need the platform to stay relevant and to make money’ (Nededog 2013). As this ‘insider’ points out, the housewives’ relatively low pay (in relation to professional actors, not reality participants who often receive little or no salary) is rationalised as a base salary, with the real value of reality stardom being widespread visibility.
As these contract negotiations show, reality participants face precarious working conditions that are strikingly similar to the increasing insecurity and informality of working conditions in the current post-Fordist capitalist economy. As Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt (2008, p. 2) explain, ‘While capitalist labour has always been characterised by intermittency for lower-paid and lower-skilled workers, the recent departure is the addition of well-paid and high-status workers into this group of “precarious workers”’. Cultural industries increasingly depend on workers’ willingness to produce creative work under conditions such as intermittent and insecure employment, eroding boundaries between work and play, and informal work environments (Gill and Pratt 2008, p. 33). Fierce competition, exhaustion, and the stress of finding future employment have become hallmarks of the creative labour force. Reality stardom is similarly steeped in anxiety and antagonism and marred by long hours, irregular circumstances, contingent contracts, and the complete erasure of boundaries between work and home (Hearn 2014, p. 483). Bravo’s precarious working conditions are likely familiar to many viewers who feel increasing pressure to gain attention in the workplace and build a personal brand in the digital sphere.

**The digital money shot**

As a melodramatic form, docu-soaps trade on moments of emotional upheaval or what Laura Grindstaff (2002) deems the ‘money shot’. She explains, ‘Like the orgasmic cum shot of pornographic films, the money shot … makes visible the precise moment of letting go, of losing control, of surrendering to the body and its ‘animal’ emotions’ (Grindstaff 2002, p. 20). Of course, what appears to be ‘letting go’ is usually a carefully calibrated performance to provide the raw material for melodramatic narratives. On The Real Housewives, stars regularly sensationalise their emotions – collapsing into a fit of tears, screaming at co-stars, throwing drinks, and overturning tables – to conjure up a marketable ‘money shot’. These climactic moments not only anchor an episode, they are rehashed and replayed in episodes, promos, and recaps throughout the season. As Pier Dominguez (2015, p. 157) explains, the ‘melodramatic money shot’ engages viewers in a ‘never-ending loop of emotions and consequent interpretations, creating a ratings economy out of an affective one.’ As The Real Housewives storyworlds expand online, Bravo’s digital engagement strategies similarly demand a ‘digital money shot’ to increase and monetise viewers’ new media interactivity.

Reality TV producers aim to maximise drama by typecasting participants who are likely to butt heads and manipulating environmental factors to provoke conflict (Grindstaff and Murray 2015). However, it is stars’ emotional labour – the calculated exhibition of feelings through bodily registers, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and appearance (Hochschild 1983) – that engenders the money shot. As Grindstaff and Murray (2015, p. 118) explain, ‘dramatic potential must be deliberately orchestrated and managed, driven by reactions to moments of interpersonal conflict and communication breakdown, as well as deliberately taken up and elaborated upon by participants’. Since reality TV trades in extreme vacillating emotions, the performance of the money shot positions reality stars as attention seeking and emotionally volatile. While the primary cast of The Real Housewives is made up of women, when their husbands or boyfriends partake in gossiping or confronting other women they are quickly derided as ‘too
feminine’. For instance, when Slade Smiley, a long-term boyfriend on The Real Housewives of Orange County, injected himself into the reality series’ spectacle he was dubbed ‘the sixth housewife.’ This nomenclature ensures emotion work remains firmly within the feminine sphere.

On Bravo docu-soaps, carefully contrived conflicts and raucous confrontations underscore the intense affective performances that go into creating a money shot moment. Grindstaff and Murray (2015, p. 117) explain that the docu-soap genre is the most difficult to produce because narratives are not (entirely) predetermined and it lacks a structural money shot moment like a big reveal, a physical transformation, or an elaborate hoax. Instead, docu-soap stars have to manufacture a money shot out of mundane, everyday life. The most pronounced strategy used by docu-soaps stars is to create a money shot moment through interpersonal conflict. Each season of The Real Housewives, one or more cast members start a fight with another, and over the course of many episodes, conversations and retrospective confessional are dedicated to sussing out the details of the dispute. As Scott Dunlop, the creator of the series explains, ‘Conflict has to exist to drive the story forward’ (cited in Day 2014). Each conflict culminates in an unruly confrontation – the ultimate money shot moment. These intense arguments involve multiple cast members hurling insults and accusations and almost always end in a physical altercation, whether it be a slap, a hair pull, a tossed drink, or on one particularly memorable occasion, a prosthetic leg thrown across the dinner table.

As docu-soaps extend into the digital realm, networks and stars have tested various ways to translate the money shot online to entice fans to traverse transmedia platforms. A prominent strategy thus far has been to wage battles with co-stars on social media. This tactic is effective because it prolongs feuds already established on the series and promises to reveal stars’ ‘real’ feelings. As reality fame increasingly depends on stars’ ability to translate melodrama into the digital realm, emotion work is taking a new form in textual and visual signs rather than corporeal performance. The conventions of the televisual money shot (screaming and crying) are reconfigured into writing mean tweets about a co-star, subtweeting (posting indirect insults), uploading scantily clad photos to Instagram with a patent message to an ex, or proclaiming a new relationship on Facebook. The digital performance of heightened emotions, what I call the ‘digital money shot’, is a key signifier of the reality TV emotion economy, and points to the ways women’s emotional labour is normalised and intensified in the digital realm.

The digital money shot exponentially increases expectations for stars’ labour across time and space, from a once-per-week television programme to an infinite online universe. The work of performing one’s feelings to drive online engagement requires constant attention and calibration. According to Hochschild (1983), when emotions are transferred into the commercial economy, individual affect must be reconfigured to match the values and needs of the market. In exchange for emotion management, labourers gain ‘use value,’ or collect monetary wages in capitalist modes of exchange. For reality celebrities, whose fame depends on the success of their programmes and their self, transmedia extensions provide a larger arena to promote themselves and their brands. While celebrity actors are assessed on their capacity to deliver a moving performance, they are also recognised to be doing the work of playing a role (Gamson 1994, p. 58). Conversely, reality stars are more likely to be viewed as ordinary people living their lives on screen and online. The ‘real person’ and the reality star
persona become fused together in such a way that the labour of being a celebrity is subsumed under the guise of ordinariness.

The Twitter war is exemplary of the emotional labour that goes into creating a digital money shot, showing how stars create melodramatic spectacles online by carefully crafting emotions and distributing them across converged TV and new media sites. A Twitter war takes place when one reality star attacks another star on the micro-blogging platform. Provocative tweets are sometimes ‘disguised’ as a general commentary, a way of saying something negative without articulating who exactly is being addressed. This practice is called ‘subtweeting’, short for subliminal tweeting, meaning that the post contains a hidden message. But most often, the housewives post-rude tweets that directly address their co-stars by name or by linking to their Twitter handle (@username). Importantly, stars’ Twitter wars usually correspond to episode broadcasts. When an episode of The Real Housewives airs, the stars are online live-tweeting commentary about the show – pointing out important moments, musing about their (mis)representation, and attacking their cast mates. Once a housewife posts an aggressive tweet, whether it is a subtle dig or an explicit attack, the respondent fires back quickly, sparking a real-time Twitter war. Twitter wars are particularly compelling for fans not just because they extend on-screen drama, but because they unfold live on an open social media site. Unlike a televised dispute, fans can take part in the drama, posting their own views and tagging the involved reality stars in their tweets. In the midst of a Twitter war, reality stars often recognise their sympathisers by retweeting their comments or liking their posts and take on their attackers by responding to their tweets.

As a part of the Twitter war exchange, feelings such as rage, shock, and distress are produced through carefully crafted tweets. Here, it is important to keep in mind the temporal lapse between filming the fight and the distillation of those feelings on Twitter months later. For example, when RHONY star LuAnn de Lesseps finds out that her fifty-one-year-old co-star, Carole Radziwill, started dating Adam, LuAnn’s 20-something personal chef, her on-screen response falls flat (The art of being a cougar 2015). LuAnn claims to be hurt that Carole waited so long to tell her about the burgeoning romance but does not express the kind of real emotion that commands a money shot. LuAnn’s reaction is very much ‘on brand’ for her, she plays the role of the ‘hurt divorcee’ who is passive-aggressively polite (Havrilesky 2010). However, this persona has not fared well over the past few seasons as she was recently demoted to a ‘friend’ role rather than a full-fledged ‘Real Housewife.’ LuAnn’s wounded reaction does not translate well in the reality TV emotion economy where the performance of excessive feelings and conflict provide the raw material of the money shot. Even though LuAnn misses out on her televised money shot, when the episode airs, months later, LuAnn is outspoken about Carole’s ‘new’ boyfriend on social media. The tweet that started the war stated: ‘You’re a disgrace and embarssing to women our age @CaroleRadziwill @BravoWWHL @Andy [sic] (de Lesseps 2015b). Notably, LuAnn tags Bravo executive Andy Cohen and his live talk show Watch What Happens Live (WWHL) in her tweets to ensure maximum visibility for her attack. On the night The Real Housewives of New York aired, LuAnn posted over two-dozen accusatory tweets to coincide with the pre-taped broadcast and Carole’s live interview on WWHL. Because WWHL airs live, directly after the RHONY episode, host Andy
Cohen integrated LuAnn’s tweets into the broadcast and later, took a phone call from Luann where she continued her attack on air. LuAnn’s Twitter war functions as a digital money shot, a climactic moment that galvanises audience attention across different media platforms. This strategy creates a feedback loop between stars posting on social media, blog posts, docu-soap series, and Bravo’s live interactive talk show, encouraging fans to ping back and forth between platforms to stay current on all the drama. What makes LuAnn’s social media strategy particularly successful is her use of two central money shot techniques. First, she ignites an argument through a direct confrontation. By calling out Carole and linking to @WWHL’s Twitter account, LuAnn quickly escalated a seemingly minor dispute. Second, LuAnn utilises the surprise reveal, a long-standing strategy used to elicit intense emotional reactions. As Grindstaff and Murray (2015, p. 113) explain, ‘the moment of the reveal is the climactic payoff, the laying bare of raw, real emotion for all to see. It is the reveal that audiences both anticipate and take pleasure in evaluating’. On Twitter, LuAnn discloses that Carole’s boyfriend Adam recently broke up with LuAnn’s niece and they are ‘still seeing each other and were planning a trip together’ (de Lesseps 2015a). This revelation, read on-air by WWHL host Andy Cohen is mean to provoke a dramatic response from Carole, creating another money shot moment. Unfortunately, Carole claims to know about the upcoming vacation and fails to produce the kind of jealous, vengeful response intended.

The Twitter War is exemplary of the emotional labour that goes into creating a digital money shot, showing how stars express melodramatic spectacles online by carefully crafting emotions and distributing them across converged TV and new media sites. By extending docu-soap drama onto social media, stars motivate viewers to traverse online platforms to uncover more details about their lives that play out on the show. The openness and liveness of social media platforms seem to give viewers unfettered access to stars’ ‘real’ thoughts about events as they are unfolding on reality television. Given the value of the money shot for attracting attention in the reality TV emotion economy, Bravo encourages its reality stars to engage in Twitter wars and draw attention to its docu-soap series, and more broadly to the network brand. However, Twitter wars can also serve to publicise stars’ reality TV personas. After a reduced contract and a position as a ‘friend’ rather than a bona fide Housewife in season six, LuAnn attempts to resituate herself as a lynchpin in season seven’s drama to secure a future spot on the show. Instead of her usual hurt divorcée and ‘Miss Manners’ persona, LuAnn rebrands herself as a dramatic and outspoken antagonist. While Carole seems to be the ‘victim’ of the Twitter war, LuAnn’s attack occurred on the same night Carole launched her branded jewellery line and announced its release on WWHL. Stars are also invested in creating a digital money shot because it can help them secure future employment and create a branded self.

Conclusion

The Real Housewives’ transmedia strategy engages viewers by divulging personal details about reality stars’ lives. Whether viewers want to be swept up in the melodramatic pleasures of docu-soap narratives or discover the ‘reality’ behind reality TV, they are motivated to track down additional information across new media platforms. This model of transmedia storytelling depends upon female stars’ performance of overwrought emotions as a ‘digital money shot’ and increases the pressure on reality stars to perform
emotions like anger, distress, and hurt on social media. To maximise stars’ extreme emotional performance, Bravo executives have instituted precarious working conditions that generate insecurity and vulnerability. These industrial practices commodify women’s emotional labour and extend emotion work into the digital realm. At the same time, stars’ labour is obscured by industry strategies that require transmedia texts appear ‘real,’ ‘authentic,’ and ‘on brand.’

Just as stars harness their emotions to appear interesting and engaging, ordinary users face new expectations for intimacy and disclosure online. Reality stars’ social media practices reveal the ways social media are being used by celebrities and ‘real people’ to attract audiences online. The gendered articulations of social media practices show that for women, status and attention are gained through emotional performativity. These feminised models for social media success reinforce gender stereotypes and extend women’s emotional labour into the digital realm.

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