

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Banking on Females: Bravo's Commodification of the Female Audience

Nicole B. Cox

Department of Communication Arts, Valdosta State University, Valdosta, GA 31698, USA

Airing to more than 94 million subscribers in the United States alone, Bravo has made a name for itself as a successful cable network. With popular programs such as The Real Housewives and Top Chef, Bravo has attracted a predominantly female, upscale audience that has garnered much media attention. Using Bravo as a case study in popular culture, this article utilizes feminist political economy to explore how Bravo connects with—and commodifies—its female audience. In so doing, it is argued that through Bravo's Affluencer campaign and online initiatives, as well as through Women@NBCU, Bravo and parent company NBC-Comcast turn the audience into a product unto itself, and invite females to participate in their own commodification and the commodification of others.

Keywords: Feminist Political Economy, Reality TV, Critical Studies, Commodification.

doi:10.1111/cccr.12091

In 2010, Bravo's *The Real Housewives* was the seventh most searched TV franchise on the Internet search engine, Google (Google Trends, as cited in Bravo Media, 2011a). While audiences, fans, and presumably critics tapped away at *The Real Housewives* online, the network was simultaneously experiencing astonishing growth and success on-screen. As an integral component of Bravo's programming lineup, *The Real Housewives*—alongside other successful series such as *Top Chef*, *Million Dollar Listing*, *Shahs of Sunset*, *Don't Be Tardy for the Wedding*, and *Vanderpump Rules*—have made Bravo a formidable force in the cable arena. Reaching more than 94 million subscribers in the United States alone (Bravo Media, 2013a), Bravo specializes in original programming and reality fare, and has made a name for itself with its upscale, educated audience (e.g., Copple Smith, 2012).

But beyond the network's reach, popularity, and audience makeup, part of what makes Bravo so noteworthy is its success in attracting audiences and getting them involved in the process. As Walsh (2012) suggests, "Bravo has proven itself

Corresponding author: Nicole B. Cox; e-mail: nbcox@valdosta.edu

to be a leader in both cultivating and growing an engaged audience through savvy social-media strategies, promoting interactivity between audience and talent, and developing multi-platform brand extensions that actually make good on the promise of transmedia” (para. 4). As a media outlet that prides itself on being innovative and technologically savvy, this article interrogates two key ways in which Bravo succeeds in commodifying its predominantly female audience (Cox & Proffitt, 2012): by increasing audience’s engagement and interaction online, and in the development of Women@NBCU. In both of these ways, Bravo and parent company, NBC Universal, strategically imbricate women in their own consumption patterns and commodification. And while Bravo’s use of social media, audience analysis, and original programming has brought the network much attention in mainstream press, female-oriented programming on Bravo has also emerged as a hot topic of debate in the academic realm (e.g., Copple Smith, 2012; Cox, 2014; Cox & Proffitt, 2012; Sender, 2007). Scholars have addressed specific Bravo series (e.g., Cohan, 2007; Cox & Proffitt, 2012; Sender, 2007; Velazquez Vargas, 2010), its cross-promotional tactics (e.g., Copple Smith, 2012), and its role in the changing patterns of television ownership and control (e.g., Chris, 2006). But in all of this, a valuable question that has been overlooked by media and communication scholars is how *gender*—and, specifically, females—factors into the network’s business practices.

Thus because Bravo is an outlet that attracts predominantly female fans (Bravo Media, 2013a; Cox & Proffitt, 2012), this article adds to the existing literature as it applies feminist political economy to interrogate the ways that Bravo and NBC-Comcast target the female audience for commercial gain. While much has been written about Bravo and its marketing tactics (e.g., Copple Smith, 2012), it is in overlooking the role of gender that the workings of gender, under patriarchal capitalism, remain unquestioned and thereby untouched (e.g., Balka, 2002).

Through ideological, interpretive textual analysis of corporate documents, popular press articles, and scholarly publications,¹ the following pages elucidate how Bravo connects with and commodifies its female audience. Importantly, it should also be noted that discussion of the commodity audience is also influenced by race, whereby Bravo—despite its recent efforts at producing more “diverse” programming (Cox, 2013)—still delivers a predominantly White audience, with Bravo’s audience composition of “Other” racial and ethnic groups measuring below the national average for both cable and broadcast TV (e.g., Ji, Lin, & Waterman, 2013). Thus using Bravo as a worthwhile case study (e.g., Copple Smith, 2012), it is argued that while Bravo banks on its gendered audience through marketing, viewership, and interactivity, both Bravo and NBC-Comcast do more than just this as they successfully get females to participate in their own commodification. In these ways, media’s market logic gives precedence to profit, thereby disrupting the notion that television (and, by extension, transmedia storytelling) “gives us what we want” (Meehan, 2005).

To address these concerns, the following section outlines feminist political economy, followed by a section addressing how Bravo commodifies and invites female

viewers to participate in their own commodification via online interaction. The fourth section provides exploration of Women@NBCU's marketing efforts and then concludes with implications for females at home.

Feminist political economy

Within the media industries, multiple scholars have argued that politics, economics, and power guide the production and distribution of media texts (Bagdikian, 2004; Meehan, 2005). Known as the political economy of communication, this line of critical inquiry examines media's conglomerated structure and the ways that political, economic, and social institutions influence output (Mosco, 2009). Emerging from political economy of communication, feminist political economy incorporates feminist concerns into studies of media ownership, illustrating how capitalism and patriarchy are enmeshed in media and the daily lives of women. Studies interrogate how media perpetuate problematic social and power relations, and the ways in which females reproduce social and power relations themselves (Meehan, 2002b; Riordan, 2002). Feminist political economists contend that gender and economics are inextricably woven, with each component influencing—and influenced by—the other (Meehan, 2002b).

In this regard, it is argued that without specifically accounting for how gender factors into media's commercial arrangements, gendered concerns fail to be recognized (Balka, 2002). Feminist political economists aim to uncover how gender factors into media's commercial decisions that determine the output, how gender is communicated through output, and the role that gender plays in consumption patterns (Wyatt, 2002). To better understand how gender factors into commercial arrangements, one must begin with Bravo's onslaught of interactive strategies, as discussed later in this article.

Bringing the ladies online

As political economy suggests, the success of commercial media is largely dependent on the audience it attracts. But it is not only the size of an audience that matters, equally important is *who is in that audience*. The quantity and quality of television's viewing audience is used to determine advertiser appeal and commercial "value" of the viewing audience (Meehan, 2005). As advertising serves as the main revenue source for both broadcast and cable outlets, it thus becomes media's job to determine, first, what advertisers are hoping for in an audience and, second, who is in their audience. When there is a disconnect between these two components, media corporations will work to either redefine programming so as to alter their audience or work to redefine their audience in ways that appeal to advertisers. Media corporations' goal is to "sell" advertisers on the idea that they have the audience(s) that advertisers want (e.g., Meehan, 2005). Fully attuned to this commercial logic, Bravo has strategically coined its core audience members as "Affluencers" (Dominus, 2008) and sold

them as such; this campaign has helped Bravo build its media brand and provides a selling point for marketing Bravo's audience to advertisers (Advertising Research Foundation, 2009).

Simply put, the affluencers are characterized by lifestyle and consumer habits, social influence, affluence, education, and access to capital (e.g., Copple Smith, 2012). Nielsen reports that Bravo outperforms all other cable networks in delivering the highest concentration of viewers (18–49 years) in households earning more than \$125,000, the highest concentration of viewers who have attended 4+ years of college, and has been named the “most engaging” cable network for 6 years in a row (as cited in “Bravo Reaching the Affluencers,” 2012). Collectively, the Affluencers “account for more than \$231 Billion in spending” (Bravo Media, 2011b, para. 1), and are both *capable* and *willing* to spend. Perhaps more significant than these general characterizations, however, is that the majority of Bravo Affluencers are women aged 18–49 years, and are targeted at varying life stages, according to senior vice president of advertising sales for Bravo/Oxygen (Crupi, 2008). The audience of Affluencers is disproportionately an audience of females—thereby making their role in their own commodification of central concern. In fact, Bravo Media (2013a) reports that the Affluencers are factored into four groups: adults, 18–49 years, women 18–49 years, adults 25–54 years, and women 25–54 years. Dominus (2008) reports that “among women ages 18–49, Bravo is the fastest growing of the top 20 entertainment cable networks” (para. 12), and by 2013, Bravo was rated a “top 5 network for women” among all of TV (Bravo, 2013, n.p.). As Carter's (2008) headline aptly states, “Bravo's chief targets affluent urban *women*” (n.p., emphasis added).

And while the viewing audience itself is commodified via Bravo's creation of the “Affluencer” campaign, one of the more strategic ways in which Bravo repeatedly involves female viewers in the process is through its bevy of interactive technologies attached to the Bravo brand. While Oxygen was the first female-oriented outlet to integrate online TV content at the start of the 21st century (Lotz, 2006), Bravo—like countless others—has followed suit as an integrated media brand. As Bravo Media (2011c) reports, “when the TV turns off, Bravo keeps its audience turned on” (para. 2).

In this way, the Bravo experience is not restricted to program content but extends via online interaction that is grounded in viewer engagement and participation (e.g., Brooker, 2001). Offering such interaction keeps viewers connected to their favorite programs and “Bravolebrities” across multiple platforms; it also keeps them “tuned in” during and after the program has ended. As Stone (2011) states, “our social media efforts have opened up a whole new frontier that allows us to gain a deeper level of engagement around the brand, to drive the dialog between fans and talent and to create buzz around our shows” (para. 2). Generally speaking, social activity during prime-time television viewing increased 193% from 2011 to 2012 (Gunheim, as cited by Poggi, 2012, p. 8), which “means programmers are looking at social-media chatter not just as an *amplifier* of TV programming but as *content* in its own right” (Poggi, 2012, p. 8, emphasis added). It is thus in promoting Bravo programming as a *social*

experience that Bravo is able to connect with (and commodify) its female audience, through their own participation. For example, Hernandez (2013) reports:

Playing off the ratings and social-media success of the *Real Housewives* franchise, Bravo announced this week that it will launch “The Real Housewives Awards” as a 2013 digital initiative ... Fans of the six *Real Housewives* series will get to vote online in such categories as Best Supporting Agitator, Hottest Hubby, Most Coveted Closet, Best Heels and Most Desirable Destination Vacation. Winners will be revealed on *Watch What Happens Live* and in ads. (para. 1 and 2)

Thus when Bravo’s majority-female, Affluencer audience is combined with the fact that it is often *females* who go online to participate in media’s online platforms (e.g., Baym, 2000; Bury, 2005), Bravo’s motions to involve viewers in the process of commodification become one that is not gender-neutral, but one that is distinctly *gendered*.

And females’ involvement in online social networking comes as no surprise to industry analysts. As Nielsen 2010 data demonstrates, “recent innovations in local, mobile and social technologies have accelerated women’s online engagement, particularly in social networking activities” (as cited in Krotz, 2012, para. 9). And all of this interactivity has resulted in a “rise in female-friendly portals” that are not limited to social networking, but also include retail and advertising applications (Krotz, 2012, para. 10).

Likely understanding this trend, Bravo has been busy staying abreast of the interactive options offered to its Affluencer audience. Bravo has launched “talk bubble” — a media platform that compiles fans’ Facebook posts and Twitter “tweets” in real time and connects them with Bravo’s cast celebrities (i.e., “Bravolebrities”), and with much success. In 2009, for example, *The Real Housewives of New York City* “talk bubble” garnered more than 1 million page views per night (Omniture SiteCatalyst, as cited in Hsia, 2011a, para. 4). Bravo has created the “@bravotv” Twitter initiative, comprised of a “Tweet tracker” where audiences can view and track Twitter conversations surrounding Bravo shows and Bravolebrities. They have created a “Just saying” forum where audiences give feedback on the unfolding drama and initiated “Tweet battles,” where fans “challenge each other to a one-on-one debate” related to Bravo topics (Bravo, 2011d, n.p.). Bravo has also launched “Bravo Now,” an iPhone and an iPad application “that takes users along a timeline of the show, giving them complementary content as they watch” (Hsia, 2011a, para. 5). As Bravo’s synergistic strategies are increasingly dependent on technological innovations and social interaction, these interactions work to further the Bravo brand and increase the value of the female commodity audience. In the age of audience fragmentation and interactive technologies, such social media is used by networks to “prove their popularity” to advertisers (Bazilian, 2011, para. 1) and demonstrate how engaged the female commodity really is. Linking back to Krotz’s (2012) claim of “female-friendly portals,” the look and “feel” of Bravo’s interactive initiatives are distinctly coded as feminine, too. Bravo’s use of playful (often pastel) colors, graphics, and design imitative of gossip/celebrity

magazines — as well as its appeal to the “social” dimension that is oft-considered “feminine” in nature — makes Bravo’s attempts at interaction ostensibly feminine in form. Adding support to Levine’s (2010) argument that it is often females who engage with popular programs online, a cursory overview of Bravo tweets and “talk bubble” participants suggests that while Bravo leaves its interactive technologies open to all, there is a distinctly female demographic that participates in Bravo’s interactive technologies. And this comes as no surprise, as social media use often differs based on gender. Duggan and Brennan (2013) report that women are “more likely than men to use social networking sites” (p. 2), as 71% of female Internet users reported using social media, compared with 62% for men (p. 3). These general findings lend credence to the claims of Bravo’s engendering of its online initiatives, as nearly 80% of U.S. visitors to Bravo’s official website are, in fact, female (Quantcast, 2013).

While scholars such as Andrejevic (2004) and Jenkins (2009) have long noted how television is increasingly relying on the Internet to connect with audiences, it is through social media initiatives outlined above that Bravo is able to co-opt culture and sell it back to its predominantly female audience for a price (e.g., Jhally, 1989). From a feminist political economic perspective, while audiences can be more “connected” to Bravo throughout the day, their consumption patterns and participation become problematic as Bravo is able to collect personal information via social media, which it then feeds back into its commercial goals. As Andrejevic (2004) argues, media corporations use the online economy to tap into audiences and reframe audience labor as something “fun.” In exchange, media corporations use the information collected for more effective marketing that services profit goals, rather than using it to service audiences’ programming wants and/or needs. Indeed, it is through such transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2007) that Bravo is able to increase fan participation, use that participation to tweak programming, and enhance its own ratings (Hsia, 2011b). As Hsia (2011b) states, “By unifying elements with the common goal of driving engagement around this transmedia centerpiece, we’re setting out to prove that all metrics—ratings, traffic, and social buzz—will lift. We are not only trying to increase the value of the proposition in terms of engagement, but also in terms of ROI [return on investment] for our long-term *sponsors*” (para. 11, emphasis added). Females’ engagement is not fostered to enhance their experience with the media text, but is fostered to improve sponsors’ bottom line.

Importantly, however, one must also consider how these online initiatives affect what is seen on-screen. Interactive platforms are consistently promoted throughout Bravo programming, and often correlate with the program aired in real time. Viewers of *Top Chef*, for example, are repeatedly encouraged to learn more about the chefs and their recipes at bravotv.com, vote for their favorite chef, and vote for who they thought was right/wrong in on-screen conflict. The network has rolled out additional transmedia opportunities such as the “Battle of the Sous Chefs Competition,” which unfolds completely online and then affects the outcome of Bravo’s on-air program, *Top Chef Masters*. Bravo created the “Last Chance Kitchen” competition, which allows viewers to use their laptops and mobile technologies to watch their favorite *Top Chef*

contestants who were previously kicked off the show, alongside shows such as *Watch What Happens Live!*, which is a program entirely dedicated to transmedia storytelling and audience interactivity. Bravo also uses “vignettes” to prompt viewers to partake in trivia contests related to programming, while “talk bubbles” appear on the TV screen with comments from the viewers in real time. Falling in line with Brooker’s (2001) theory of overflow, audiences are increasingly encouraged to visit Bravo’s website for background information and/or supplementary material not available through the program itself. To extend the life of programming and the attention of fans, programming directs Bravo viewers to Bravo’s official website, and that website in turn directs viewers *back* to Bravo TV.

Thus in terms of market logic, this means that the Bravo brand is placed in front of the predominantly female audience through multiple platforms that support and further reinforce the brand and its many components (e.g., Brooker, 2001; Lotz, 2006). Audiences are commodified and sold to advertisers via programming and then to advertisers, again, via Bravo online. Beyond the axiomatic, moving audiences online proffers digital data on the audiences’ interests, likes, and consumer behavior, which Bravo then uses as part of its market research (Clifford, 2010). Such online interaction is a source of information on—and a means to profit from—the female commodity audience. In a cyclical manner, the information proffered by fans is turned back on itself, as Bravo enhances and alters its marketing tactics according to consumer feedback.

And much of this is done, specifically, to combat the multitasking habits of females; the goal is to turn such habits into opportunities for engagement (Miley & Mack, 2009). Bravo “encourages viewers to multitask while watching shows ... to text, e-mail, or read blogs about Bravo content or play around on the network’s website” (Cardinale, as cited by Miley & Mack, 2009, p. 20). The goal is to keep audiences *engaged* and *contained* along Bravo outlets, providing Bravo with an increased opportunity for profit (e.g., Brooker, 2001). As Cardinale states, “We’d rather have them looking at [our] screen than making a sandwich” (as cited in Miley & Mack, 2009, p. 20). One benefit of this, according to Bravo Media (2013b), is that those “multiscreen” users who utilize a variety of Bravo platforms are “ever bigger CPG [consumer product goods] spenders” (n.p.). While multiscreen users demonstrate elevated levels of consumerism, Bravo’s goal “is to give fans as much Bravo as they want, wherever and whenever they want it and by doing so, we can wrap the consumer in the Bravo experience while including our partners messaging *organically* and effectively” (Stone, 2011, para. 6, emphasis added). Bravo’s aim is to utilize social media in conjunction with programming, to present advertising as a *natural* part of the entertainment package. These components are no longer framed as separate entities indicative of commercial arrangements, but purposefully muddy the waters between media content, advertising, and the role of audiences in the process. It is about cloaking entertainment in advertising and selling it to audiences as part of the Bravo “experience.” And thus by participating in ever more forms of consumption, fans of Bravo open themselves up to greater means of commodification.

In all of this, however, females play a central role for their status as the primary viewers of Bravo programming and as the group of people more likely to go online following Bravo's prompts. As scholars contend that it is often *females* who go online to actively discuss their favorite television programs (Baym, 2000; Bury, 2005), research shows that they are also more likely to utilize social media in the process (e.g., Duggan & Brennan, 2013). As Baym (2000) argues, Internet technologies provide women with a space to discuss their favorite shows: a space that is free from judgment and ridicule for watching—let alone *discussing*—TV. When the fact that Bravo's audience is dominated by females is taken to its logical conclusion, it can be argued that the interaction is dominated by females, too.

And these female fans log on to Bravo's website by the droves. In 2009 alone, *The Real Housewives* franchise garnered more than 200 million page views and more than 25 million video streams (Seidman, 2009, para. 6). By 2010, *The Real Housewives of Orange County* garnered nearly 66 million page views and 3.7 million video streams during its fifth season (NBC Universal, 2011, para. 8), while *NJ's* season 2 generated 119 million page views, 76,500 unique daily visitors, and 6.2 million video streams (Futon Critic, 2010a, para. 2). In 2012, *Top Chef* "recorded a 92 percent increase in page views, 140 percent increase in unique visitors, and 70 percent increase in streams from the prior week's day after premiere ... On Bravo Mobile, 'Top Chef' delivered a 101 percent increase in page views, 148 percent increase in unique visitors, and a 263 percent increase in streams" (para. 2). Again, *roughly 80 percent of these visitors were female* (Quantcast, 2013).

In these ways, Bravo's Affluencer campaign seemingly solidifies Smythe's (1981/2006) commodity audience argument put forth decades ago.² The Affluencers campaign works to "turn the Bravo audience into a brand unto itself" (Advertising Research Foundation, 2009, p. 1). Because media sell advertisers *access* to eyeballs, Bravo's business-to-business marketing creates a group of individuals who are valued for what they bring to the proverbial table. Through Bravo's discursive construction of the Affluencer group (Copple Smith, 2012), the audience becomes something bartered for in the marketplace, as Bravo works to convince advertisers that the Affluencers are *the* audience worth paying for. As Copple Smith (2012) states, "Bravo represents a remarkable success story, and the channel's triumph comes from constructing a very specific and lucrative audience commodity" (p. 287). Understanding the Affluencers is about helping Bravo's marketing partners succeed (Cardinale, 2011), not providing more fine-tuned programming for audiences at home. But commodifying the female audience is also about how NBC-Comcast involves females in the process, as discussed later in this article.

Bringing females into the fold: Women@NBCU

While Bravo has attracted its own female following, targeting female consumers is also influenced by parent company NBC-Comcast. One strategic way in which this occurs is through NBC's female advisory board, Women@NBCU. Established in May

of 2008 to bring together industry professionals interested in tapping into female buying power, Women@NBCU consists of females working in the advertising, finance, digital, fashion, retail, media, and entertainment industries. “Women at NBCU is a powerful combination of media assets reaching women across multiple platforms. This ad sales, marketing and research initiative creates custom solutions for advertisers to connect with female consumers via NBC Universal’s wide portfolio” of female-skewing outlets and programs (Women at NBCU, 2010, p. 18). And one of those outlets is Bravo.

“Reach[ing] 95% of U.S. women per month” across its television and digital outlets (Women at NBC, 2010, p. 18), Women@NBCU is a “‘think tank’ on female marketplace issues and trends, and provides counsel to Women at NBCU and the marketplace” (Women at NBC, 2010, p. 2). From a feminist’s political economic perspective, Women@NBCU was not created with an eye to fair representation, more equitable wages, or advancing female leadership in an industry where men continue to hold 97% of clout positions (e.g., Falk & Grizard, 2003). Instead, it is about getting women to *spend*.

In fact, this focus on female *consumerism* is illustrated in the many studies that Women@NBCU has commissioned. Women@NBCU conducted a “Cause & Effect” study on cause marketing, female responses, and ways to “cut through the clutter” (Women at NBCU, 2010, p. 3), initiated a “Recessionomics Study” to understand female spending habits in a recession (Greenwood, 2011), and studied how the changing role(s) of women influence consumerism (McClellan, 2009b). They began a Brand Power Index to measure “the brands most important to women” (NBC Universal, 2010, para. 1), a “Family on Shuffle” Study to learn about the different “mom segments” (“Family on Shuffle, 2013), and a “Curve Report” that helps “fuel[s] hit television shows and engaging content, and forms the basis for every creative campaign we [Women@NBCU] develop” (Curve Report, 2013, n.p.). Although this list is nowhere near exhaustive, researching females’ interests, concerns, and consumer habits provides Women@NBCU with in-depth information on female consumers, which they then sell to advertisers to help develop more effective marketing campaigns. But more than just this, Women@NBCU also provides marketers with *access* to females across NBC platforms. The goal is to “bring ‘targeted mass’ to the legions of advertisers seeking to reach highly desirable groups of females” (Hampp, 2008, para. 1), although the use of psychographics across female-oriented outlets has long been a selling point in the media business (Lotz, 2006). And while female audiences can be dissected according to various characteristics, “income as related to purchasing power and buying practices outweighs all other basic demographic attributes” (Lotz, 2006, p. 47). Bravo’s hyper-consuming, Affluencer audience—and Women@NBCU’s research on female consumers—thus makes for a convincing sell.

Of course, Women@NBCU’s efforts would mean little if women were not a lucrative audience in the first place. While scholars have addressed the profitability in marketing to females, Women@NBCU was established partly in response to the fact that females are no longer purchasing only “female” products or household goods.

Females are “the CFOs of their families, controlling the purse strings of much of the consumer marketplace” (Whyly, 2009, p. W2). They are marrying later and waiting longer to have children (if at all), and are acquiring advanced postgraduate and professional degrees. Women@NBCU clamors over the fact that females are more involved in the purchasing of big-ticket items and financial family planning than ever before (e.g., McClellan, 2009b). It was precisely “to help advertisers capitalize on this valuable audience, [that] Women@NBCU was launched” (NBC, 2009, para. 5).

While targeting female consumers has existed throughout history, Women@NBCU is different for the role in which females play on the *business side* of the arrangements. Using a critical lens, it is argued that Women@NBCU strategically invites females to *participate* in their own commodification and the commodification of other females. Created at a time when social anxieties about the U.S. recession existed alongside media discourse that frames female consumerism as empowering (Andersen, 2002; Cox, 2011; Douglas, 2010), Women@NBCU targets females and *involves* them in the process via participation with Women@NBCU.

Women@NBCU has become a commercially successful endeavor, too. Wal-Mart was the first to sign with Women@NBCU (Elliott, 2008), followed by Pepsi-Cola and its “Pepsi Refresh Project” (Elliott, 2010). BlogHer, a female-oriented blogging community, partnered with Women@NBCU to feature blogging content on NBC’s female-oriented websites, including iVillage, Oxygen.com, and BravoTV.com (Shields, 2008). General Mills partnered with Women@NBCU, alongside a “cross-network deal” with American Express (Miley & Mack, 2009, p. 21) and a digital platform partnership with Unilever’s Dove (Futon Critic, 2010b). In all of these arrangements, there is a distinct marketing approach that targets female consumers. Kodak, which contracted with Women@NBCU to market its printer and ink business, incorporated product integrations across NBC outlets (McClellan, 2009a). Shortly after Kodak signed with Women@NBCU, *The Real Housewives of New York City* housewife, Jill Zarin, hosted a Kodak event that was prominently featured in programming. Even through an economic recession “there’s money to be made catering to women” (Feroohar, 2010, para. 2), and Women@NBCU understood that.

Yet these arrangements are worthy of attention — and exposed as problematic — in light of advertisers’ ability to influence programming. As Herman and Chomsky (2002) contend, “the power of advertisers over television programming stems from the simple fact that they buy and pay for the programs” (p. 16). In many ways, these million-dollar deals reinscribe media’s focus on capital accumulation and perpetuate the gendered notions regarding what are socially considered “female” concerns. Even as research shows that women are increasingly purchasing big-ticket items, such advertising continues to focus on areas of life stereotypically associated with femininity and “feminized” roles. By researching and creating campaigns that emphasize the role of women in the family, the “momtourage,” female appearance and fashion, retail habits, and household cleaning and product campaigns, Women@NBCU continues to perpetuate a patriarchal way of categorizing, “understanding,” and marketing to

women. From a feminist political economic perspective, the larger issues that arise from females' participation in the process are discussed next.

A paradoxical position: Conclusions and implications for females at home

To say that Bravo is a formidable force among cable TV is an understatement at best. With millions of viewers tuning in and logging on to interact with the Bravo brand, it is because of this that the network's attempts to commodify the female audience cannot be overlooked. Using feminist political economy, this article has elucidated the ways in which Bravo and Women@NBCU commodify the female audience and tout their participation in that commodification as an enjoyable part of the Bravo "experience." As females have become the commodity audience increasingly desired by advertisers (e.g., Lotz, 2006), Bravo and Women@NBCU have utilized transmedia storytelling and psychographic research to parade its female audience to advertisers for commercial gain. While females have historically been the "lesser" of the sexes in terms of advertiser demand (Meehan, 2005), Bravo's upscale, educated, affluent, and predominantly female audience represents a commercial gold mine for all of the corporations involved.

More important than its demographic makeup, however, are the implications that arise from females' participation in their own commodification. Using feminist political economy, it is argued that females' participation as *consumers* and *creators* of media content help perpetuate female commodification under a patriarchal and capitalist media system. As Meehan (2002a) argues, "taking a feminist perspective reveals that societal divisions of labor based on gender, plus prejudicial assumptions about gender, played a significant role in defining and differentiating the commodity audience" (p. 216). While the same can be said in regard to Bravo, NBC-Comcast, and Women@NBCU, feminist political economy illuminates how females' interaction with media corporations—across a multitude of platforms—keeps intact their position as a commodity audience that is largely valued for their societal designation as "shoppers" by trade (e.g., Cox & Proffitt, 2012).

Thus while scholars such as Riordan (2002) warn against females' reproduction of problematic social relations, it is imperative to recognize that Women@NBCU capitalizes on exactly that. In fact, this is central to the advisory board's pitch: Who better to tap into the minds of female consumers than females themselves? Women@NBCU not only commodifies female audiences (which is nothing new), but also takes commodification one step further as it encourages females to *participate* in commodification that is centered on branding NBC outlets as the source of lifestyle consumerism. And while involving females in the process is problematic, perhaps more disconcerting are the limits within which females involved with Women@NBCU are able to "do business." That is, operating under the guise that Women@NBCU gives women a "voice" on how females are presented and/or marketed to, this research suggests that such a "voice" is only able to operate within the confines of preexisting gender stereotypes. Women@NBCU—despite its claims to be more in tune with

contemporary womanhood and its challenges—continues to market to women in the same predictable ways that situate them at the center of the private sphere. Despite changing social roles, increased educational attainment, and ever-advancing professional roles in the workforce, Women@NBCU continues to suggest that the “mom segments” and household roles still reign supreme.

Equally important, too, is the fact that female *audience* members are also active participants in their own commodification as they interact with the Bravo brand. In this vein, Bravo has successfully turned the TV-viewing experience into a *social experience* unto itself, via the countless opportunities for online interaction with Bravo and fellow fans. Through transmedia storytelling, Bravo capitalizes off of the female commodity audience as it learns audiences’ preferences, behaviors, values, and concerns, and then uses that information to better serve advertisers. And while there is pleasure to be had by audiences engaged in these processes, that pleasure is bound by the commercial logic—the structure of patriarchal capitalism—that shapes the opportunities for viewing and interaction in the first place. As Smythe (1981/2006) suggests, corporations rely on the fact that the commodity audience often does not recognize the cognitive work they perform. As Bravo fans log in, cast votes, and “Tweet” their opinions, such interaction is framed as empowering and socially desirable. This is *free labor* for Bravo.

Applying feminist political economy, one must question how such labor not only reinscribes patriarchal capitalism but also deflects conversation *away* from larger social, political, and economic concerns. For example, while much of Bravo programming places conspicuous consumption as integral to series’ plots (and, in turn, female identity), it is able to capitalize off of the “masstige” mindset that has taken hold in the larger cultural milieu (Dominus, 2008).³

Paradoxically, while both Bravo and Women@NBCU claim to understand and champion the changing roles of women, they likewise continue to support representations of women that are anything but progressive in form. Females’ representation and the audience participation that emerges as a result of that representation tend to neglect the gender disparities in the socioeconomic status of women nationally and globally (e.g., Riordan, 2002; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2011).⁴ When the masstige mindset is juxtaposed against wage-earning patterns of females, the economic climate of the U.S. recession, record numbers of unemployment, high levels of credit card debt, and the housing market crash, the portrayals of excessive consumerism that are encouraged and embraced by Bravo and Women@NBCU only conflate an already troublesome state. Bravo encourages its viewers to consume and interact with its select representations of womanhood, without the critical conversations about what is wrong with such images overall. Female audiences are not encouraged to discuss the social, political, or economic ramifications of positioning women as Bravo and Women@NBCU do. They are merely encouraged to sit back and enjoy.

Even from a critical perspective, however, one must acknowledge that in order to profit from the female commodity audience, Bravo must attract those audience members first. Yet the problem remains that Bravo’s goal is not to provide *quality*

programming, meaningful interaction, or fully represent the “contemporary” roles of women. The network’s goal is capital accumulation. The overarching problem is not that Bravo works to generate profits via capitalism, but that it zeroes in on a select consumerist caste and uses psychographic research and participatory culture to manipulate and sell products to them. This becomes problematic when commercial arrangements neglect audience wants, needs, or desires (Meehan, 2005). Programming is produced because of its commercial value for advertisers, rather than for the value it holds for audiences at home. The Affluencer campaign helps Bravo “hyper-target” its content so that programming resonates highly with its Affluencer groups (Advertising Research Foundation, 2009), yet leaves those who are *not* Affluencers out of programming negotiations. Females who are older, not financially well off, those who are part of marginalized or “Other” groups based on race and/or ethnicity, those who are differently abled, and those who do not ascribe to traditional femininity are all left out of the programming fold. As Bravo’s executive Tony Cardinale states, Bravo “only talk[s] to those very specific groups” (as cited in Clifford, 2010, para. 21). And those “very specific groups,” more often than not, are White women aged 18–49 years, with the willingness and ability to spend. But in targeting only *certain* individuals (contingent upon gender, race, and class, primarily), Bravo normalizes and reifies their perceived “value” in the media market and beyond.

Further, such interaction is dependent on portrayals of womanhood that fail to acknowledge the many challenges that women face socially, economically, and politically in the contemporary epoch. And while scholars cannot purport that entertainment television should exist for education, “change,” progressive purposes, or the like, for a network—and parent company—that claim to understand and speak to females’ concerns, it is only just that we question what those “concerns” are made of and how they affect our understandings of the world in which we live.

Notes

- 1 Relying on these varied sources of information has long been a method employed by scholars in political economy (e.g., Bagdikian, 2004; McChesney, 2008; Meehan, 2005) and cultural studies (e.g., Levine, 2007; Miller, 1997), and as such provides a means for applying feminist political economy to Bravo.
- 2 As an integral argument in political economy, the commodity audience was first articulated by Smythe (1981/2006), who suggested that the media industries operate by buying and selling access to consumer eyeballs, rather than buying and selling media products and/or advertising space.
- 3 The “masstige” movement is a new(er) social trend in which middle and upper-middle class consumers are increasingly splurging on smaller brand-name, luxury items (i.e., Coach purses).
- 4 According to a study done by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, in 2010 women continued to earn lower wages than men, were overrepresented in low-wage jobs, and continued to have lower personal earnings than men. Women comprised 49% of the

overall workforce, but accounted for 59% of low-wage workers, and continued to earn 86 cents for every dollar earned by a man (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2011).

References

- Advertising Research Foundation. (2009). The ARF: 2009 David Ogilvy awards. *Advertising Research Foundation*. Retrieved from <http://thearf-org-aux-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/ogilvy/cs/Ogilvy-09-CS-Bravo.pdf>
- Andersen, R. (2002). The thrill is gone: Advertising, gender representation, and the loss of desire. In E. R. Meehan & E. Riordan (Eds.), *Sex & money: Feminism and political economy in the media* (pp. 223–239). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Andrejevic, M. (2004). *Reality TV: The work of being watched*. Oxford, England: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bagdikian, B. (2004). *The new media monopoly*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Balka, E. (2002). The invisibility of the everyday: New technologies and women's work. In E. R. Meehan & E. Riordan (Eds.), *Sex & money: Feminism and political economy in the media* (pp. 60–74). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Baym, N. (2000). *Tune in, log on*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Bazilian, E. (2011, May 19). Networks display social media savvy at upfronts. *AdWeek*. Retrieved from <http://www.adweek.com/news/television/networks-display-social-media-savvy-upfronts-131805>
- Bravo. (2013). *Women at NBCU*. Retrieved from <http://womenatnbcu.com/tv-digital/bravo/>
- Bravo Media. (2011a). Affluencer magazine. *Bravo*. Retrieved from http://www.affluencers.com/_media/Affluencer%20Magazine%202011.pdf
- Bravo Media. (2011b). MRI Affluencer study: Key insights. *Bravo*. Retrieved from <http://www.affluencers.com/research/insights>
- Bravo Media. (2011c). Breakthrough with Bravo. *Bravo*. Retrieved from http://www.affluencers.com/breakthrough_with_bravo/
- Bravo Media. (2011d). Breakthrough with Bravo. *Bravo*. Retrieved from http://www.affluencers.com/breakthrough_with_bravo/innovations
- Bravo Media. (2013a). Bravo's brand profile. *Bravo*. Retrieved from http://www.affluencers.com/brand_profile/
- Bravo Media. (2013b). *Insights: Consumer product goods*. Retrieved from <http://www.affluencers.com/insights/#/onesheet/cpg>
- Bravo Reaching the Affluencers. (2012, April 23). *AdWeek*. Retrieved from <http://www.adweek.com/sa-article/bravo-139587>
- Brooker, W. (2001). Living on *Dawson's Creek*: Teen viewers, cultural convergence, and television overflow. *Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4(4), 456–472.
- Bury, R. (2005). *Cyberspaces of their own: Female fandoms online*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Cardinale, T. (2011). Untangling the DNA of BRAVO affluencers. *Bravo*. Retrieved from <http://www.affluencers.com/research/tony>
- Carter, B. (2008, April). Bravo's chief targets affluent urban women. *Lifestyles*. Retrieved from http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2008-04-16/features/0804140293_1_bravo-nbc-universal-snl-kagan
- Chris, C. (2006). Can you repeat that? Patterns of media ownership and the “repurposing” trend. *The Communication Review*, 9(1), 63–84. doi: 10.1080/10714420500500943.

- Clifford, S. (2010, June 6). We'll make you a star (if the Web agrees). *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/06/business/06bravo.html>
- Cohan, S. (2007). Queer eyes for the straight guise: Camp, postfeminism, and the fab five's makeovers of masculinity. In Y. Tasker & D. Negra (Eds.), *Interrogating post-feminism: Gender and the politics of popular culture* (pp. 176–200). Durham, NC: Duke University.
- Copple Smith, E. (2012). "Affluencers" by Bravo: Defining an audience through cross-promotion. *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture*, **10**(4), 286–301. doi: 10.1080/15405702.2012.715327.
- Cox, N. B. (2011). A little sex appeal goes a long way: Feminist political economy, commodification, and TLC's "What Not to Wear." *Kaleidoscope*, **10**, 19–36.
- Cox, N. B. (2013, April). *It's a mostly White world: Explorations of gender and race on Bravo's "The Real Housewives."* Paper presented at the Southern States Communication Association, Louisville, KY.
- Cox, N. B. (2014). Bravo's "The Real Housewives": Living the (capitalist) American dream? In A. F. Slade, A. J. Narro, & B. P. Buchanan (Eds.), *Reality television: Oddities of culture* (pp. 77–100). Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Cox, N. B., & Proffitt, J. M. (2012). The housewives guide to better living: Promoting consumption on Bravo's "The Real Housewives." *Communication, Culture & Critique*, **5**(2), 295–312. doi: 10.1111/j.1753-9137.2012.01126.x.
- Crupi, A. (2008, October 27). Girl Power. *Ad Week*. Retrieved from http://www.adweek.com/aw/content_display/news/e3i69a1fca74124be46c44e9a4000d66610
- Curve Report. (2013). *Women at NBCU*. Retrieved from <http://womenatnbcu.com/research-trends/the-curve-report/>
- Dominus, S. (2008, November 11). The affluencer. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/02/magazine/02zalaznick-t.html>
- Douglas, S. (2010). *Enlightened sexism*. New York, NY: Times Books.
- Duggan, M. & Brennan, J. (2013, February 14). The demographics of social media users—2012. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from http://pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2013/PIP_SocialMediaUsers.pdf
- Elliott, S. (2008, July 14). To reach mothers, Wal-Mart signs deal with an NBC unit. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/14/business/media/14nbc.html>
- Elliott, S. (2010, February 1). Pepsi invites the public to do good. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9900EED61538F932A35751C0A9669D8B63>
- Falk, E. & Grizard, E. (2003). *The glass ceiling persists: The 3rd annual APPC report on women leaders in communication companies*. The Annenberg Public Policy Center, University of Pennsylvania. Retrieved from http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/downloads/information_and_society/20031222_glass_ceiling/20031222_glass-ceiling_report.pdf
- Family on Shuffle. (2013). *Women at NBCU*. Retrieved from <http://womenatnbcu.com/research-trends/family-on-shuffle/>
- Foroohar, R. (2010, June 13). The richer sex: Companies had better cater to women. *NewsWeek*. Retrieved from <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/06/13/the-richer-sex.html>
- Futon Critic. (2010a, August 24). Bravo's "Real Housewives of New Jersey" finale pulls in 3.4 million total viewers, becoming the most watched episode of the season. *The Futon Critic*. Retrieved from <http://www.thefutoncritic.com/ratings/2010/08/24/bravos-real->

- housewives-of-new-jersey-finale-pulls-in-34-million-total-viewers-becoming-the-most-watched-episode-of-the-season-37120/20100824bravo01/
Futon Critic. (2010b, October 29). NBC Universal digital entertainment announces new partnership with Dove® Beauty Brands. *The Futon Critic*. Retrieved from <http://www.fiercemobilecontent.com/press-releases/nbc-universal-digital-entertainment-announces-new-partnership-dove-beauty-brand>
- Greenwood, C. (2011). From the corner office: Lauren Zalaznick. *Success Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.successmagazine.com/from-the-corner-office-lauren-zalaznick/PARAMS/article/884#>
- Hampp, A. (2008, June 2). Lauren Zalaznick; President of women's lifestyle networks, NBC Universal. *Advertising Age*, p. S-8.
- Herman, E., & Chomsky, N. (2002). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Hernandez, B. (2013, April 07). Bravo launching interactive "Real Housewives' awards." *Mashable*. Retrieved from <http://mashable.com/2013/04/07/bravo-launching-17-new-shows-and-real-housewives-awards/>
- Hsia, L. (2011a, May 18). Dialogue leads to action. *Bravo Media*. Retrieved from <http://www.affluencers.com/research/lisa>
- Hsia, L. (2011b). How transmedia storytelling is changing TV. *Mashable*. Retrieved from <http://mashable.com/2011b/11/17/transmedia-tv/>
- Jenkins, H. (2007, March 22). Transmedia storytelling 101. *Official Blog of Henry Jenkins*. Retrieved from http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html
- Jenkins, H. (2009). Buying into *American Idol*: How we are being sold on reality television. In S. Murray & L. Ouellette (Eds.), *Reality TV: Remaking television culture* (pp. 343–362). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Jhally, S. (1989). The political economy of culture. In I. Angus & S. Jhally (Eds.), *Cultural politics in contemporary America* (pp. 65–81). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ji, S., Lin, H., & Waterman, D. (2013). *Basic cable network segmentation toward minorities and other niche audiences in the U.S.: An empirical study*. Retrieved from http://www.tau.ac.il/~spiegel/media-workshop/Cable%20TV%20segmentation-Ji,%20Lin,%20Waterman%209-20-13_1_.pdf
- Krotz, J. (2012, January 4). If you want to sell online, target women. *Fox*. Retrieved from <http://smallbusiness.foxbusiness.com/biz-on-main/2012/01/04/if-want-to-sell-online-target-women/>
- Levine, E. (2007). *Wallowing in sex: The new sexual culture of 1970s American television*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Levine, S. (2010, April 11). Femmes flock to cable. *Variety*, p. 11.
- Lotz, A. (2006). *Redesigning women: Television after the network era*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- McChesney, R. (2008). *The political economy of media: Enduring issues, emerging dilemmas*. New York, NY: Monthly Review.
- McClellan, S. (2009a, April 20). Kodak zooms in on women. *Adweek*. Retrieved from <http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/kodak-zooms-women-105641>
- McClellan, S. (2009b, September 29). NBCU study gauges changing roles of women. *Adweek*. Retrieved from <http://www.adweek.com/news/television/nbcu-study-gauges-changing-roles-women-100487>

- Meehan, E. R. (2002a). Gendering the commodity audience: Critical media research, feminism, and political economy. In E. R. Meehan & E. Riordan (Eds.), *Sex & money: Feminism and political economy in the media* (pp. 209–222). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Meehan, E. R. (2002b). Intersections and new directions: On feminism and political economy. In E. R. Meehan & E. Riordan (Eds.), *Sex & money: Feminism and political economy in the media* (pp. 3–15). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Meehan, E. R. (2005). *Why TV is not our fault: Television programming, viewers, and who's really in control*. New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Miley, M., & Mack, A. (2009, November 16). The new female consumer: The rise of the real mom. *Advertising Age*. Retrieved from <http://adage.com/images/random/1109/aa-newfemale-whitepaper.pdf>
- Miller, T. (1997). *The avengers*. London: British Film Institute.
- Mosco, V. (2009). *The political economy of communication* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
- NBC Universal. (2010, November 29). "Women at NBCU Brand Power Index" October results underscore technology is a hot topic among women. *NBC Universal*. Retrieved from <http://www.nbcuniversal.presscentre.com/Content/Detail.aspx?ReleaseID=2713&NewsAreaID=2&ClientID=20>
- NBC Universal. (2011, January 26). Bravo's "The Real Housewives of Orange County" returns on March 6 at 10 pm ET/PT. *NBC Universal*. Retrieved from <http://www.nbcuniversal.presscentre.com/Content/Detail.aspx?ReleaseID=3422&NewsAreaID=2&ClientID=5>
- Poggi, J. (2012, May 14). Social chatter doesn't just amplify TV, it's now content in its own right. *Advertising Age*, 83, 8.
- Quantcast. (2013). Bravotv.com. *Quantcast*. Retrieved from <https://www.quantcast.com/bravotv.com#!demo&anchor=panel-GENDER>
- Riordan, E. (2002). Intersections and new directions: On feminism and political economy. In E. R. Meehan & E. Riordan (Eds.), *Sex & money: Feminism and political economy in the media* (pp. 3–15). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Seidman, R. (2009, December 17). Bravo media celebrates fourth consecutive best year ever across all key demos. *TV by the Numbers*. Retrieved from <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2009/12/17/bravo-celebrates-fourth-consecutive-best-year-ever-across-all-key-demos/36637/>
- Sender, K. (2007). Dualcasting: Bravo's gay programming and the quest for women audiences. In C. Christ & A. Freitas (Eds.), *Cable visions: Television beyond broadcasting* (pp. 302–318). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Shields, M. (2008, July 16). NBCU's iVillage partners with BlogHer. *Adweek*. Retrieved from <http://www.adweek.com/news/technology/nbcus-ivillage-partners-blogger-96387>
- Smythe, D. (2006). On the audience commodity and its work. In M. Gigi Durham & D. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and cultural studies* (Revised ed., pp. 230–256). Malden, MA: Blackwell (Reprinted from *Dependency road: Communications, capitalism, consciousness, and Canada* [pp. 22–51, 1981]. Norwood, NJ: Ablex).
- Stone, E. (2011). Embracing social media. *Bravo Media*. Retrieved from <http://www.afluencers.com/research/ellen>
- U. S. Government Accountability Office. (2011, October). *Gender pay differences: Progress made, but women remain overrepresented among low-wage workers*. Retrieved from <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/business/GAO-12-10.pdf>
- Velazquez Vargas, Y. (2010). *A queer eye for capitalism: The commodification of sexuality in American television*. Newcastle, England: Cambridge Scholars.

- Walsh, B. (2012, January 1). Frances Berwick, president, Bravo and Style Media. *RealScreen*. Retrieved from <http://realscreen.com/2012/01/01/frances-berwick-president-bravo-and-style-media/>
- Whyly, L. R. (2009). Marketing to women. *Adweek*. Retrieved from http://www.girlpowermarketing.com/files/83954-0518_mktg2womenLow.pdf
- Women at NBCU. (2010, November 17). Advisory board meeting: Activating women through cause marketing. *Women at NBCU*. Retrieved from http://womenatnbcnewsletter.com/DL/advisory_board_conclusions_november.pdf
- Wyatt, J. (2002). Weighing the transgressive star body of Shelley Duvall. In E. R. Meehan & E. Riordan (Eds.), *Sex & money: Feminism and political economy in the media* (pp. 147–163). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.