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Methods People (2)
12 May, 2022

Integration and Frustration: Bravo Network's Race Problem and Audience Reaction

The Real Housewives franchise was created in 2008 during The Great Recession and is noted as “recession proof television.” It became an instant success because of its cheap production costs but also because of the antics of the women on the network. At that time Orange County, Atlanta, Beverly Hills and Washington DC. Diverse cities like Dallas, Potomac and Salt Lake City have been added by the network in recent years as a way to keep audiences engaged and give them new content. Tropes that continually show up in these semi-scripted television shows are excessive wealth, entrepreneurship, divorce and marital issues, female empowerment, drug/alcohol abuse and in the last few years criminal cases. These storylines are echoed throughout all of the franchises yet it is obvious to myself and to “Bravo-holics,” who are fans that create their own fandoms on social media that comment on the state of housewives, that there is a race problem at Bravo. Franchises like The Real Housewives of Atlanta and Potomac are the lone cities with all-Black casts and before 2020 there were noticeably no women of color on casts of Real Housewives of New York (RHONY), Real Housewives of Beverly Hills all cities full of a range of diverse cultures, religions, ethnicities and economic backgrounds. The call to Bravo to integrate housewives was loud and clear from fed up fans and by the Summer of 2020, shows celebrating plantations were cut (Southern Charm), suspected racist Bravo-lebrities were fired (Vanderpump Rules) and there was an increased effort to bring people of color into the network.

It was not long after the racial reckoning in 2020 that Bravo announced they'd be adding women of color to the RHONY and RHOBH. African-American lawyer and news host Eboni K. Williams was set to join the 13th season of RHONY in October 2020, African-American actress and TV host Garcelle Beauvais joined season 10 of RHOBH. These women served as “tokens” in their respective franchises and had to overcome, defend, educate, inform and sometimes

“drag” (Bailey, 2021) their white female co-stars throughout their seasons. Each franchise handled the integration differently, as each aired post summer 2020 yet the reaction to the implicit racism seen in their white colleagues was a conversation piece on social media within the Bravo fandom.

In this study I aim to locate audience reactions to Bravo’s integration of RHONY, RHOBH and RHOD through conducting a focus group of Bravo fans. I hope to examine the reactions and see if the fans offer any solutions to the production companies as that was seen in the discourse online.

RQ: How do Bravo fans feel about the network integrating RHONY, RHOBH, RHOD?

RQ 2: Do the fans have any solutions/interventions to offer to Bravo?

Literature Review

Bravo

“The Rich Bitch” article outlines how American society has come to understand who and what the real housewives franchise is. The authors trace the beginnings of housewives noting that it started as a “recession proof” show during the 2008 Great Recession. At the start the franchise focused on showing women with extreme wealth was paraded around by women who were seemingly untouched by the financial crisis. This article emphasizes the classed nature of this franchise and how audiences are introduced to class consciousness through winks and nods from Bravo production. These winks inform the audience of the ironic nature of the women’s lives; for example LuAnn from RHONY sings a song called “Money can’t buy you class” while appearing disheveled, drunk and cursing on screen. Moskowitz and Lee highlight how the women are framed as “working mothers” yet they fail to live up to traditional gender roles of caring for their children as many of them are shown outsourcing their motherhood. An aspect of empowerment is relevant in these shows as the viewers are able to take in the ridiculous consumerist nature of these shows while reinforcing they will never act like said housewives (2013).

In this piece the authors explore the racialized and sexed nature of being an African-American housewife of color on the reality series *The Real Housewives*. Glascock and Preston argue that there isn't much research on the racial and gendered nature of verbal aggression has gone unexplored. After conducting various content analysis of popular reality tv series and docusoaps they found that African-Americans were overrepresented as aggressors in verbal attacks and women were overrepresented as victims of verbal aggression. They found that African-American females were more likely to be aggressors yet in another analysis they are more likely to be victims. This study points to the nuanced and intersectional nature of being a Black woman in America and is relevant to my analysis of the integration of housewives into franchises, specifically looking at the altercations the women get in (2018).

In Arcy's text "Digital Money Shot" she discusses the gendered labor associated with reality tv program the real housewives. She discusses the political economy behind the franchises as production companies encourage housewives to engage in new media like blogs and social media. These often dramatic recounts of episodes enable the casts to continue storylines as they are expected to "perform exaggerated versions of their personal lives." Arcy aims to trace the ways the housewives construct transmedia storyworlds that compete with their fellow costars. She argues that the reality TV industry requires housewives to create a "digital money shot" or an online performance of dramatic emotions that drives transmedia engagement. She goes on to discuss how the stars posts are surveilled by Bravo and how Executive Producer Andy Cohen promised the wives the ability to market their products and then denying that after they went too far off message. Bravo has experimented with multiple platforms that the stars can use in order to disclose their "real lives" as this engagement increases viewership and popularity of the network (2018).

Black Feminism and Stereotypical Representations

In Collins seminal work "Black Feminist Thought" (1990) she discusses the notion of self-definition which is a concept that Black women use in their everyday lives as a tactic, to be

self-defined is to have the power to name one's on reality. This can lead to frustration, empowerment and the development of a Black feminist consciousness. Women who employ this tactic are able to navigate white patriarchal spaces that keep marginalized groups stuck. In a separate chapter Collins describes the media's use of what she calls "controlling images." These images are tropes that are rooted in negative depictions created during chattel slavery to keep Black people, especially Black women in place. These images made it difficult for Black women to move past representations such as the "mammy" "matriarch" and "jezebel" as they continued to evolved as American society progressed and kept the foundation of institutional racism at its core. These representations are still circulated in today's media as they've transformed into new names like "welfare queen" and "Strong Black woman."

In Bailey's book *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance*, she discusses the nuanced nature of being a Black woman in America. Throughout her book she discusses her term misogynoir which is defined as the anti-Black hatred and misogyny directed at Black women in visual and digital culture. This violence is imparted on Black women and girls as Bailey explores the ways this marginalized group is policed and harrassed by the public. She also discusses the activist response to misogynoir online and in the media highlighting case studies that reveal the resistive nature of Black women and allies on social media, talking back (hooks) to those who devalue their very existence. (2021)

In hooks book "Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black" the prominent Black feminist theorist discusses her definition of "talkin' back" which she defines as speaking as an equal to an authority figure. Talkin' back includes legitimately speaking to someone who is perceived to have more power than oneself in a manner that is not socially acceptable especially for Black women and girls. Silence, laughter and signifyin' are rhetorical moves used to resist authority and share one's own opinions, perspective. Hooks explores the ways in which she navigated a white patriarchal society that historically deems marginalize groups and their opinions invisible (1989).

In Levy's piece "Serial Housewives: The Feminist Resistance of The Real Housewives" explores theories of Soap'disorder in order to trace the resistive acts located in housewives shows. He contends that the franchise revolves around wealth, excess and absurdity that tend to reinforce gender and sex roles yet the women in the show navigate it by challenging these very ideals. He argues The Real Housewives offer feminist resistance in a matrixial form—meaning the ongoing introduction of new franchises, women and storylines along with the format of reunions allows the women to negotiate their ideal form of womanhood and motherhood. The essence of these shows coming to an end is contrary to the never-ending nature of soap operas. This matrixial order enables feminist resistance as it disrupts the common practices of female centered media like docusoaps (2018).

Method

I plan to conduct a focus group of 3 individual Bravo fans via Zoom showing them a powerpoint full of clips from RHONY and RHOBH that illustrate racial tension between the wives. During this session I'll proctor the focus group but will do my best to stay out of the conversation other than providing guiding questions to the members. I want to be able to get an organic response from them while checking if I have informed consent throughout the process. The focus group session will consist of questions thought up by me revolving around the integration of Bravo shows The Real Housewives of New York, The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills and The Real Housewives of Dallas 2020 seasons. The questions will be supplemented with video clips from the shows that illustrate the nuanced nature of being the only person of color on one's cast. Through this analysis I aim to expose the fan reactions to Bravo's own "racial reckoning," their thoughts on the housewives' reception by their white co-stars and if they recommend any advice or solution for Bravo in the future when attempting to diversify their network.

Analysis

During the focus group I was able to take note of not only the rich discussion but also nonverbal communication that indicated feelings and sentiment about specific housewife franchises. After analyzing the conversation I found there were three main themes that emerged from the conversation: The “Rich Bitch” construct, threats from Black Housewives Agency and White guilt and tears.

“The Rich Bitch” Construct: Celebration of Wealth

I began the session by asking each participant how they became interested in the housewives franchises. Each one of them reiterated that they began watching out of boredom while searching for something good to watch. Two African-American young women, Denice, 25 and Danielle, 29 discussed beginning their Bravo journey in the late 2000’s with Atlanta and Orange County ladies. They both emphasized the pull to see the “glamor” of society while engaging in guilt-free “stupid” TV.

Danielle recounted how she began watching during college when the Kardashians were in the hay day on the E! Network: “I put that on (KUWTK) and then an episode of Orange County came on and I was like what’s this?”

She went on to discuss the appreciation she felt seeing representation of wealthy Black women on the Real Housewives of Atlanta, “At first it painted these women in a positive light, because.. Of how society is. They were Black women who were entrepreneurs, all millionaires who married influential men.”

Denice nodded her head in agreement as Danielle said “they talked about things we talk about, they have these little idioms and idiosyncrasies that I can recall my Mom doing or Nana!”

In this instance they demonstrate rhetorical tactics that are linked to Black women, as they signify back to each other in agreement about RHOA (Bailey, 2021).

Much like Michael and Moscovitz Danielle theorized the notion of “The Rich Bitch” on housewives as she wondered aloud how other women don’t utilize their platform correctly: “I feel like if I was asked to be on real housewives of whatever, I’d go about in the same way the most

successful women have. Bethenny used it to build up her brand. Nene used it to launch several projects,” and listed other wives like Lisa Vanderpump and Tamra who used the show to promote their entrepreneurial opportunities (2013).

The group went on to discuss the ways specific housewives fail to do anything other than be a housewife, “don’t you want to do anything else? Like build a legacy for yourself if you’re going to be on this show,” Danielle asserted.

Denice and Amelia nodded and affirmed her in agreement while expanding on Danielle’s theory. Amelia explained that she came to the Bravo family during quarantine as she was kept from watching reality TV like Jersey Shore and Real Housewives by her mother when she grew up. During the quarantine period she delved into her guilty pleasures realizing that one can engage with these programs as educational docuseries for understanding how to be an empowered “business woman” while having fun and showing one's wealth.

Denice discussed her attraction to housewives beginning out of a state of boredom as she was entertained by the opulence displayed on RHONY, “they seemed very glamorous, they were at New York Fashion Week, they were travelling the world, they were all like, mingling with ultra-famous high society people but they were also doing stupid ass shit at the same time, like cussing each other out on the [Brooklyn] bridge,” Danielle and Amelia laughed and nodded in agreement, “this is a weird mix in New York, I was like is it always like this in New York? I don’t know so I just kept watching.” These quotes all illustrate the incorporation of the “rich bitch” construct on this network as it serves as a defining trope for the wives. The women in the focus group emphasize how this wealth was fantastical and exaggerated, illustrating Micheal and Moscovitz assertion that these women paraded their extreme wealth during the Great Recession (2013). This fantasy of wealth is what drew viewers to housewives in the first place and the wives continue to use this evolved trope today as a storyline that has proved to be unsustainable.

Danielle briefly discussed the nuanced nature of Nene Leakes entrepreneurial pursuits while on the Bravo network as she was one of the first wives to sustain profitable deals stemming from her performance on Bravo. This participant reiterated the fact that the former Atlanta housewife is now “blacklisted” and served a racism lawsuit to the network in April 2022 listing that fellow lone white co-star Kim Zolciak, production and Andy Cohen supported a racist workplace on RHOA. Leakes position as a reality star on a predominantly Black housewives franchise (except Zolciak) makes her lawsuit all the more powerful as she aims to “talk back” to Bravo production and executives who she claimed allow racist behavior to proliferate on the network. The women in my focus group go on to discuss this in the following themes.

Black Housewives Agency

I showed the women various clips from RHONY and RHOBH from the season when they integrated their shows. Both shows added tokenized African-American women to their franchises in an effort to diversify the networks and cities. The first clip I showed was from RHONY where Eboni is called an “aggressive woman,” the next clip showed her at “Black Shabbat” and the third item I included was a tweet from Bravo fan page that discussed post-production claims of racism on set.

The women were familiar with the season and audibly groaned but claimed they were excited to get into the details of this season considering there was no reunion to unpack the racial issues present. As we watched the videos, the women in the focus groups body language was indicative of their feelings about the show. They covered their faces as Sonja discussed “listening to the Blacks and Jews” at Black Shabbat and scoffed when Ramona made anti-semitic comments.

“Oh my god...” Danielle said, “Just cringe,” Denice exclaimed, “It’s uncomfortable” Amelia reiterated.

They recounted the comments from the wives mocking them and Danielle summed up everyone’s feelings when she said “This is an example of someone like literally putting on

display their conscious bias,” Amelia agreed “Oh my god yeah! It seems like whenever anyone of color brings up any issue that they’ve faced in a room that has white people that aren’t ready to take on any constructive criticism or hear any of the issues. They don’t even address the issues that are brought up they just turn it around to like ‘I’m a woman and I’ve experience trauma because of that.’”

Amelia exclaimed, “they’re really uncomfortable when it’s not about them.” Nini agreed by reiterating Ramona’s insensitive comment that “She literally said she wanted to be jealous just to social climb.”

When I showed them the tweet about post-production discussing a racist incident with Ramona which kept the franchise from having a reunion. Amelia stated she feels that historically Bravo doesn’t take issues of racism seriously, “there is a history of it and the women that cause the issues– Ramona, Luann are staple housewives. So if you were to hold them accountable in a public setting... then I think they may get backlash or quit.”

Denice concurred emphasizing the political economy driving the success of Bravo and how they deal with these issues “internally.” Danielle introduces Bravo executive producer Andy Cohen, emphasizing that he knows “it’s time for her to go (Ramona)” highlighting that the network could be more successful when they get rid of women like her.

“Anti-Vaxx stuff, covid stuff, racism stuff– all of these are big issues whether you like it or not” Amelia said, noting that giving women like this a platform gives their ignorant viewpoints value, “it’s all about money” Danielle said.

We went on to discuss the nuances of being a Black woman on RHOBH and the way Garcelle Beauvais navigated a predominantly white franchise. I first showed them various clips showing racial tension between Beauvais and the group during the first season of the franchise's integration. Throughout the season Beauvais expressed feeling like an outsider as she was held to a different standard than the other women.

Danielle reacted to the clips by expressing the self-defined (Collins, 1990) nature of

Beauvais and how this can be threatening to white women who aren't used to being around women of color, "These women probably don't interact with a lot of Black or Brown people, let alone women. That in itself is very, very intimidating and can bring out insecurity in people who aren't aware and don't take the time to educate themselves," Denice nodded in agreement.

Danielle describes Beauvais as a "strong woman" which speaks to the stereotypical representation of Black women in the media that is rooted in violent tropes from slavery used by white supremacists to limit the imagination of Black people. These controlling images are prevalent today even in reality TV programming as Beauvais is met with several interactions where she has to tell her white co-stars that "my feelings don't negate yours, but can I have my feelings?" (Collins, 1990).

The focus group shifted to discuss the ways in which the Black women on these franchises exercise agency and how this poses a threat to their co-stars.

Danielle agreed, "when they (white women) see a Black woman who is well-dressed, put together, has her hair done, is very social— they get very angry about that shit. So they start picking away, chipping away at little things. It's very weird to experience," she goes on to emphasize how Beauvais sets boundaries because none of her friends stuck up for her during this altercation.

They started discussing a RHOAH episode where Kathy Hilton discussed her childhood friendship with the Jackson 5 stating like Michael she "didn't see color." This along with Sutton's "I don't see color" on RHOAH illustrates the dated racial understanding displayed on this network. Beauvais had to educate the women that this renders her Blackness invisible which is not helpful.

"It's not fair to take away someone's race, you're taking away their identity!" Danielle exclaimed.

Amelia, talked about this phrase being outdated and speaks to the fear of Black female agency when she states: "White women historically, I don't think they were taught to stand up for

themselves, how to say that they're feelings were hurt, that they weren't happy with how a situation went," she emphasizes that these older white women aren't used to voicing these opinions, "So when a successful Black woman comes in, or any woman of color, says 'Mmm that doesn't work for me.' It's like Oh! She's aggressive, she's so mean, she's bullying me because she said I crossed a boundary." This shows what Glascock and Preston describe as racialized and sexualized verbal aggression on reality TV and how Black women are more likely to be victims and aggressors (2018).

Amelia recounts that these women of color are just asserting themselves in a way that is indicative of self-definition or being able to name one's reality. Doing so can cause discomfort but in all enables Black women to navigate a white supremacist patriarchal society that often devalues and ignores them (Collins, 1990).

Denice mentioned another example of self-definition seen on RHONY when Eboni reacted to the women negating her education and calling her aggressive. She points out Williams states "I'm comfortable and I'm not going to sit here to make you feel comfortable for the sake of your white fragility, I'm not doing it," all of the participants nodded in agreement.

The theme of white fragility and white tears is the third theme I will examine.

White Housewives Tears and Guilt

This theme was seen throughout all of the clips we examined in our 2 hour focus group session as it was a common response from the white housewives to react with white tears and guilt at the moment a woman of color shows agency. Each participant became lively as we discussed this topic with examples from both franchises.

The group agreed and emphasized that it is not the women of color of the franchise job to educate the white housewives about race issues in America, "I agree with Amelia that white women are not used to asserting their feelings or boundaries... they have such an adverse reaction to that (Black women's agency) probably because they're not around many people of color."

Amelia agreed that it has to be taxing for women of color to have to educate these women about racism “go read a book!” Denice and Danielle giggled in agreement as she emphasized that these women stay in a “bubble” where when they are open to “others” the onus is on women of color to inform them. This speaks to the Mammy trope (Collins, 1990) which is also the “strong Black woman” stereotype which is illustrated through this example as these token Black women are expected to take on the burden without complaining of solving larger racial issues by themselves on all-white programs and when it isn’t done “right” they are vilified in violent ways on social media (Bailey, 2021).

Denice yelled “It’s transmission of guilt really!” the other two participants nodded along with her before she emphasized that white women tears from racism drove audience viewership. She posed questions speaking from the political economic viewpoint of Bravo “... largest audience is white women, so how am I gonna appeal to that audience that is a die-hard audience for so long? Why should I exploit this very comfortable, very loyal base by catering to the minority of my base to make them feel comfortable when they just got here, or we just started to notice them?”

Amelia agreed, asking who is the majority of their audience? Stating that it is still predominantly white women who watch who may think to themselves “Gee, Garcelle is a bully, isn’t that crazy?” and highlighted that if Bravo continues to show plot lines with women of color navigating racial tension, white women will engage with it in a superficial, racist manner.

“It’s free marketing!” Denice exclaimed.

This theme shows how the housewives storylines from 10 years ago are filled with implicit racism and are outdated especially in the age of Bravo Integrating franchises. The women in the focus groups argued that it is time to fire and hire new production companies that will authentically cast and film real women who reflect an empowered cultural and political ethos. Black women invoking Black feminist tactics scare their fellow white co-stars as they

simply exists which points to whether or not it was a good idea to integrate these cities with one token Black housewife.

Conclusion

This analysis aimed to account for the audience reactions to the integration of Bravo Real Housewives of New York and Beverly Hills after the racial reckoning of 2020. These shows were distinct in that they were the first all-white casts to be integrated with an African-American woman after years of social media campaigning by Black Bravo twitter and other Bravo fandoms. Using Black feminist tactics like self-definition RHONY's Williams and RHOBH's Beauvais have been able to navigate the white supremacist patriarchal society they are apart of while in an all-white space. This is not easily done and is usually met with backlash and violence as the themes that emerged account for the evolution of the "rich bitch" (2013) construct, Black women's agency, and White housewives' tears and guilt. The analysis of the integration of these shows was met with celebration and then disdain for the tokenism of these women. The focus group rarely strayed in their opinions from one another and reaffirmed that there needs to be an intervention where the Bravo's production is fired and they hire new production that films these women in an authentic, respectful manner that is reflective of our country and it's best values.

Reflection

I found this to be a fun project to complete though I was under a time constraint of my own doing (procrastination) and feel if I had taken the time to process this more slowly I could've taken more time with my analysis. I felt like I wanted to include almost all of the quotes and this really brought me back to my journalism days where I tried to capture the feeling of the quote or paraphrase instead of showing pages of "Amelia said: and then Danielle said:" as that can get tedious and uninteresting to read and write. If I had more time I would pay more attention to the nonverbal cues from each participant but I feel I did the best I could over zoom considering I was only able to see them from the should up. Shrugging, giggling, silence, rolling eyes and scoffing were all invoked in a way to agree with fellow participants and mock housewives while

not interrupting the flow of the conversation. One thing I'd do differently is I'd try to do this in person, I'd allow for more time in the beginning to get comfortable and do ice breakers with the group. If I were to conduct it on zoom again I wouldn't keep my camera on as I feel like my body language could've indicated how I felt about questions I asked or answers I was receiving, I don't want to interfere in their reaction whatsoever and feel that could be considered a bias in the future. I wish I could've spent more time discussing an emergent theme that I didn't include which is the lack of LGBTQ+ relationships on real housewives and how only one show (Miami) displays a lesbian marriage. The conversation got a bit off-topic as the group began talking about the lack of acceptance of queer individuals in the media and everyday life and the deadly violence queer and trans people of color have to navigate on a daily basis. It became a feminist conversation where each participant emphasized the need for a "progressive" network like Bravo, headed by possibly one of the most recognizable gay men in America, Andrew Cohen to begin casting queer women on the show as it is representative of their realities in this country. In a future paper I hope to outline other cases discussed during this focus group including: Crystal on RHOBH, Tiffany Moon on RHOD, Nene Leakes blacklisting and lawsuit and the reaction to Candace Parker coming out as a lesbian as these are sites of investigating being the lone marginalized woman in a predominantly white space.

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