You Did(n't) Build That: Audience Reception of a Reality Television Star's Transformation from a Real Housewife to a Real Brand

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In the spring of 2011, reality television personality Bethenny Frankel made headlines when Jim Beam, the thirdlargest whiskey company in the United States, announced it had bought her brand Skinnygirl cocktails for a reported $120 million (Little, "Bethenny Frankel's Empire"). Viewers of Bravo's *Real Housewives of New York* (*RHONY*) had watched Skinnygirl germinate into a full-fledged business in just a couple of years. Just before the sale, the season two finale of *Bethenny Ever After*, a *RHONY* spin-off show starring Frankel, showed Bethenny receiving news of the deal, inviting them to share in Frankel's journey from a single woman who struggled to pay the rent to a married woman, mother, and successful entrepreneur.

This sentimental episode culminated in a montage, cued by sounds of a piano, honoring the passion, dedication, and hard work it took for the once unknown reality television star to arrive at this auspicious moment. Foreshadowing the Jim Beam buyout, the montage begins with dubious but earnest forecasts from Frankel declaring, "I will stop at nothing. I am going to be a huge success." It recycles comments from her time on *RHONY* to remind audiences of dilemmas the ambitious star used to face: "I want a partner. But I don't know if you can have it both to the degree that I want this kind of success." After the montage, the show presents a teary-eyed interview with Frankel in which she states, "You couldn't have more things change in a person's life than I did in the last year." She proclaims, "Nothing is the same. The future looks very bright. And I have my family. And good people around me. And we can just all take a little bit of a deep breath now."

This excerpt exemplifies a familiar trope in reality television texts: a narrative of transformation based on overcoming the precarious obscurity of ordinariness by refashioning oneself into a brand. Alison Hearn argues that reality television is "ground-zero" for the work of doing and watching self-branding: the construction of a promotionally oriented self that is "singularly focused on attracting attention and acquiring cultural and monetary value" ("Confessions of a Radical Eclectic" 317). Hearn, among others, analyzes how such narratives normalize self-management strategies to better serve neoliberal doctrines, contributing to a productive line of thinking through the import of reality television texts. What is missing in this critique, however, is the affective resonance of Frankel's reputed struggles and her audiences' interpretations of and identifications with self-transformation and its possibilities. Analyses of reality television limited

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to the ideological and disciplinary are not enough to fully grasp and take seriously the complicated pleasure of watching Frankel produce, sustain, grow, or damage her branded self on screen.

This study explores themes and issues related to the variable reception of gendered practices of self-branding in popular culture and media. By analyzing discourse on two online fan forums, it examines the ways in which audiences of Frankel's two spinoff series, *Bethenny Getting Married* and *Bethenny Ever After*, respond to Frankel's transformation into a branded self. This branded self is a constellation of stylized and manipulated affects and produces meanings and values that audiences might incorporate into their everyday lives. By analyzing audience engagement with Frankel's branded self on reality television, it contextualizes the particularities of the branded self as a polysemic text and situated social practice. It complicates an argument about the branded self as uniformly constructed and received by pointing to the ways in which subjectivity infuses the text and practice of self-branding with culturally and historically specific meanings, values, beliefs and norms. What meanings does Frankel's branded self generate? How might gendered meanings delimit the forms and valences afforded to self-branders?

This study also draws on Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, which is a "relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility," to examine the ways in which viewers' responses to Frankel's branded self might speak to the promises of self-branding as a means to "the good life" of financial security, familial belonging, and sustained intimacy (*Cruel Optimism* 24). At issue is how a presumably majority female audience interprets and identifies with the range of possibilities often supplied by female-oriented cultural texts and the kinds of meanings, desires, pleasures, and fears that are mobilized in the process. Attention to viewers' negotiations of what is at stake for the self-brander suggests it is a contestable and conditional manipulation of affect, thereby denying the presumption that socially situated self-branding practices are uniformly acceptable, that concepts of success to which self-branders aspire are uniformly constructed, and that the growing historical condition of precarity under neoliberal reform is uniformly experienced and managed.

Reality Television and Laboring the Branded Self

Since the reality television genre has become an industry staple, scholarship has proliferated on various aspects of its production, technology, content, and reception. Much of the criticism of reality television draws on governmentality studies, which provide a particularly useful lens for understanding the ways in which genre conventions of reality television programming promote a neoliberal ideology that frames surveillance as a necessary and welcome measure to ensure a healthy society and moral citizenry. Laurie Ouellette and Susan Murray argue that reality television "teaches us... that in order to be good citizens we must allow ourselves to be watched as we watch ourselves and those around us, and then modify our conduct and behavior accordingly" (9). Thus, the genre plays a disciplinary function in that self-surveillance becomes routinized through such programming.

Hearn applies this critical lens to an analysis of self-branding practices as presented on reality television shows. She argues that reality television represents "the corporate colonization of the 'real,'" which involves "legitimating being seen, celebrity, and television's

forms of visibility, structural logics, and economic imperatives as central cultural values" ("Confessions of a Radical Eclectic" 317). She critiques the ways in which self-branding, including through reality television shows that promote or require it, normalizes the hypervigilant work of being what she dubs an "image-entrepreneur," the producer of a consistently flexible self constructed for and mediated by the interests of capitalist promotion. Hearn sees the construction of such a self as problematic for the ways in which it "delimit[s] the field of possibilities within which any imagined 'authentic self' might be performed" and "reduces the 'self' to a set of purely instrumental behaviors and circumscribes its meanings within market discourse" ("Insecure" 498). Though manifest in the practices of individuals, self-branding relates to a set of structural constraints, rather than personality characteristics, that explain its historically and culturally situated appeal. Drawing on theorists of post-Fordist economies and the rise of immaterial labor, she considers the ways in which reality television presents practices of self-fashioning and the manipulation of emotion as potentially lucrative strategies for an "unstable, unqualified, underpaid, and unprotected" workforce in an economy "marked by flexibility, casualization, segmentation, work intensity, and increased job competition and precarity" ("Insecure" 496). For Hearn, this social environment creates the conditions under which the branded self has come to bear value.

In fact, many scholars such as Laura Grindstaff, Katherine Sender, and Beverly Skeggs note what Mark Andrejevic calls "the work of being watched" on reality television, highlighting the ways in which (re)presenting the emotional and intimate aspects of 'real life' are parts of the job that are valued by audiences and valuable to the television network. Part of this emotional labor involves producing personalized narratives of self-transformation, a theme common to the genre. Convincingly portraying such a transformation often involves excavating an individual's interior life. Scholars link this emphasis on interiority to a long line of historically women's media, which include soap operas, magazines, talk shows, and melodramas (Sender 30). In her study of reality television makeover shows, Katherine Sender stresses the ways in which reality television builds on a premise of women's media to "provide a forum for marginalized, female concerns" albeit in a commercial context that requires a great deal of emotional labor to sustain (43). She invokes Berlant's definition of an "intimate public" as a "space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general" to argue that reality television shows "make 'girl talk' public. . .. With its domestic location, use of the close-up shot, and emphasis on women's discourse and concerns, reality television is a 'technology of intimacy,' particularly well-placed to construct this sense of an intimate public in prime time" (44).

In fact, the popularity of some reality television shows stems from their focus on women's contributions to the reproduction of domestic life (taking care of children, feeding the family, keeping up a household, etc.) and the intimate familiarity of these experiences. Skeggs argues that reality television "is premised upon spectacularly visualizing women's affective labor, through its focus on relationships, dispositions and emotional performance" (30). While the experiences and knowledge of women, particularly working-class women according to Skeggs, do not figure prominently in public or academic discussion, many reality television shows rely on portraying these identities in public and making visible the intricacies of their daily private lives. Berlant notes how "gender-marked texts of women's popular culture cultivate fantasies of vague belonging as an alleviation of what is hard to manage in the lived real—social antagonisms, exploitation,

compromised intimacies, the attrition of life" (*The Female Complaint* 5). Reality television, then, takes on what Misha Kavka calls an "affective productivity," serving as a site where normativity, what Berlant describes as "a felt condition of general belonging and an aspirational site of rest and recognition," circulates in subtly pleasurable ways (Kavka 5; *The Female Complaint* 5).

Viewing reality television as women's media highlights the ways in which it reflects what Berlant calls the juxtapolitical in its ability to reveal deep-seated desires that drive women's allegiances to ideas, situations, and lifestyles (*The Female Complaint* 10). Kavka argues against considering the affective import of reality television in Marxist terms of "false emotion or false consciousness" and instead states that women's media provides a "strange comfort" that "involves the amplification of everyday familiarity to produce a level of the hyper-familiar" (28). She calls this shared feeling the "affective base" that is "the 'raw material' of reality TV" (27). Reality television is an important zone for constructing and negotiating affective structures that reify the boundaries for marginalized groups who find value in the hyper-familiarity of shared affects and emotions.

The affective structure of what Berlant calls cruel optimism penetrates reality television narratives that laud the transformation into a branded self as a strategy for achieving self-fulfillment, specifically with respect to the goals of social mobility, financial security, and sustained intimacy and belonging. Cruel optimism describes the ways in which fantasies of the good life create "clusters of promises" to which affective attachments are formed despite their intrinsic connection to "compromised conditions of possibility" (*Cruel Optimism* 24). The cruelty of optimism lies in its misdirected energy toward the fantasy despite conditions that preclude its ultimate emergence. Berlant implicates the historical condition of precarity in what she argues are insidious fantasies that simultaneously reinforce affective structures that do not provide the material for achieving their stated promise. Still, Berlant describes moments of impasse as evidence of and ways to work through the loss of these fantasies as desired objects, which creates an entry point for envisioning alternative possibilities.

Possibilities of Pleasure

While the research on reality television texts mentioned above provides a compelling story, the inclusion of insights drawn from reception studies allows for an approach that considers the complexity and contradiction of audience pleasure.

Feminist cultural studies of reception in particular take seriously the role of affect and emotion in the reception of cultural texts, shedding light on women's experiences of pleasure and agency from otherwise denigrated cultural texts. Tania Modleski's study of soap opera audiences, Ien Ang's study of *Dallas* fans, and Janice Radway's work on romance readers privilege audience experiences over textually deterministic readings of media typically produced for and consumed by women and traditionally regarded as a part of "low" culture. This scholarship has made considerable strides in accounting for the socially and culturally situated constraints and possibilities that constitute the emotional attachments and identifications activated through the active audience's interpretive work. Rather than reduce the pleasures of entertainment media as symptomatic of false consciousness, a tool to disarm and numb the minds of the masses, these researchers pay specific attention to what Ang describes as the "mechanisms" that "lie at the basis of

that pleasure, how that pleasure is produced and how it works" (19). Ang, for instance, provides an analysis of *Dallas* lovers that unpacks how audiences identify with the emotional substance or psychological reality of a media text, its "emotional realism," and take pleasure in the reliable conventions of narrative cinema and the use of cinematic techniques that obscure the constructedness of a media text known as "classical realism," in spite of its faulty portrayals of a social reality, what she calls its "empirical realism."[1]

This study draws from and builds on this research to unpack how intersections of realism and pleasure inflect responses to a transformation narrative viewed through the process of self-branding. How do viewers interpret Frankel's emotional labor as both an entrepreneur, responsible for self-promotion, and a worker in the reality television industry, pressured to perform for television ratings? On what grounds do they find pleasure in watching this process unfold?

Audience Reception of the Branded Self

This study examines discourse from two related but unique online fan forums: (i) Bethenny Frankel's blog available on the official Bravo website; and (ii) Television Without Pity's (TWP) forum for her spinoff shows *Bethenny Getting Married?* and *Bethenny Ever After*. Responses were purposively sampled and include 100 posts to each forum for a total of 200 responses that span the course of all seasons. Importantly, responses fall before and after a pivotal moment on the show and in Frankel's life: getting the Jim Beam deal and achieving millionaire status. Using inductive textual analysis and open-ended coding, three overarching audience categories emerged: (i) Brand Ambassadors, (ii) Brand Detractors, and (iii) Brand Analysts. These three identifiers delineate types of interpretations and identifications on the basis of how the brand is received as a promotional text that makes truth-claims based in a structure of affects and emotions. The following sections provide and analyze excerpts from the online forums to illustrate the dimensions of these categorizations.

Brand Ambassadors

Contributing predominantly to Frankel's official Bravo blog, brand ambassadors identify with her as an authentically imperfect self whose success they feel is strongly deserved and whose problems they lament in familiar ways. Brand ambassadors are highly identified audiences that do not overtly question the realism of Frankel's reality television show and branded self. As a result, they tend to equate her identity to the cultural value of her brand. These respondents do not consider her to be hiding her authentic self behind a brand because her brand *is* authenticity. In contrast to brand detractors and brand analysts, ambassadors express appreciation for the toil and turmoil of building a brand. Watching Frankel accomplish these goals has made their engagement with her brand that much more enjoyable. Their responses focus on the ways in which the show seems empirically real and Frankel's branded self seems emotionally relatable. The following comment reflects this familiarity and emotional identification with Frankel's self: "I really feel you and I have a lot in common when it comes to our families and the past. You are a great strong woman and I love you for that."

Since contributors to Frankel's blog speak directly to her, they offer the star encouragement and advice on marriage, family duties, and work-life balance or, more often, thanks and praise for her "honesty" in representing these struggles that many women face in their daily lives. Their identifications with her are embraced and grounded in their sense of the show's realism. Brand ambassadors celebrate Frankel's sale of the Skinnygirl brand to Jim Beam as evidence of success that has collective significance. They express gratitude to Frankel for being a role model to other women and revealing vulnerable sides of her personality on national television. Her success as a businesswoman in a male-dominated industry positions her symbolically at the helm of an "intimate public" that counts on women like her to corroborate a story of happiness that awaits its constituents. One viewer explicitly evokes this sentiment when she says: "Bethenny, trust me when I say that we are so very proud of you!! Happy that you now have money in the bank, a loving efficient staff, wonderful husband and beautiful baby girl." This statement interpellates a community of women with a common subject position from the masses of reality television viewers. These viewers share a love for what Frankel represents as a cultural text, as what Grindstaff labels an "ordinary celebrity" who has become, as another blog commenter puts it, "an EMPIRE MAKER!"

Reactions to the Jim Beam deal reveal desires and fantasies about the "good life." Now seemingly a multimillionaire, brand ambassadors instruct Frankel to "take a break," "stop and smell the roses," and "enjoy success." For example, one viewer states, "I'm so happy for you and your family. Take some time off to enjoy and I'll look forward to seeing your next chapter!!," while another calls Frankel "living proof that people who have a vision and work hard can still achieve the American dream." The vindication of Frankel's branded self is made even more enjoyable by her emotional labor on the reality television show, and audiences recognize this performance as a "gift" she has given them. For instance, one viewer writes: "Bethenny, It has been an adventure watching you grow into the successful woman you have become. . . . Thank you for letting us be a part of your journey!" As this comment indicates, Frankel deserves success precisely because this audience member has watched her work for it. In this way, Frankel's branded self is deemed to be authentic because audience members see her brand as a work-in-progress. The viewer also indicates her awareness that appearing on reality television is a form of work by thanking Frankel for her appearance. She frames what it takes to become an "ordinary celebrity" in a more favorable light than brand detractors, who prefer the label of "famewhore."

Perhaps due to this identification with the emotional realism of Frankel's branded self, brand ambassadors are especially disappointed and disturbed by what they see as Frankel's inability to appreciate her family life, which has taken a turn for the worse since the sale of Skinnygirl. The deal has inspired comments for Frankel to "get off the train" of the "fast-track" and appreciate what is most important, her husband and her baby. Season three of *Bethenny Ever After* shows Frankel to have not heeded this advice. While Frankel maintains an air of ordinariness through quips about her and her husband's failed attempts to conform to the standards of "high" cultural taste, Frankel's imperfect family life has gone from humorous and relatable to excruciatingly real. Several viewers relay intense emotional reactions to this difficult season. One simply says, "It is so hard to watch Jason and you struggle. I hope that you can both find your way to a happier place very soon." Another echoes this emotion, "This is so painful to watch that I'm not sure I can anymore.

I love Bethenny, Jason and Bryn and wish them all that life has to offer, but I can't keep tuning in and watching this family implode." Others pinpoint Frankel's successful career to be the problem and highlight evidence in Frankel's affective demeanor to support their assessments of her unhappiness. To these viewers, Frankel has lost something—the self with which they identify—when the Jim Beam deal and "being a multimillionaire" is not enough. For instance, one commenter notes this loss:

> I used to defend and adore Bethenny. There's glimpses of the old her (e.g., her joy at the new apartment). But I think she's only happy about material things and that kind of happiness fades fast. She got everything she ever wanted (great guy, baby, uber-successful business, new apartment) but now she seems so hard and bitter and shrewd. It is getting very Kris Jenner-esque with her—that dangerous and endless ambition and drive.

Not only has her success made her "hard and bitter and shrewd" and likened her to another reality television matriarch vilified for finding ways to cash in on her family's intimate moments, but now the characteristics with which audiences identified are becoming a burden. Ever the neurotic, describing herself as "tortured and damaged," Frankel is now seen to be pathological, especially since she has achieved a level of success only available for a few and *should* be happy. One viewer tells her:

> I used to absolutely adore you—now, not so much. Many people grow up with horrible childhoods much worse than you my dear and even more don't become as successful as you. Time to grow up and stop blaming your parents. You should know by now that they don't define you and it's just a crutch to not succeed or have loving relationships. I thought you would have wanted a family, but you really don't.

Brand ambassadors engage with Frankel's branded self in earnest and intimate ways, rooting for its success precisely because of their strong identifications with her plight as a woman who wishes for a successful career, a fulfilling intimate relationship, and a happy family life. The emotional labor she performs on the show works to facilitate these identifications as viewers take these moments as evidence of a "real" plight they can vicariously experience and that reflects what they envision to be the process of dealing with a level of success only a few, if any, will know. Frankel's continued unhappiness despite appearing to have gained a framework for a secure life inspires a shift toward less favorable interpretations of her struggle to be happy since, after all, she has now achieved what she has always been yearning for: legitimation and approval gained through her career achievements for which these audiences have watched her toil with apparently no reward. This resolution is considered to be confusing and frustrating at best and ungrateful, unacceptable, and even offensive at worst.

The notion that Frankel has lost something when she does not stop working after her brand comes to its fruition with the Jim Beam deal contributes to this sentiment that Frankel's misery is pathological. Interpretations of Frankel's drive for success as sick reveal an impasse for brand ambassadors. The cruelly optimistic belief in the branded self's power to keep the commercial separate from the private despite blurred boundaries, no small task and one familiar to working mothers, is revealed to be a fantasy of the "good life." promised to women. The sacrifices by way of a marriage in turmoil—which ultimately ends in divorce—are too much for some audiences to bear, but this discrepancy is resolved when these audiences trace their origin to Frankel's psychological

shortcomings and adopt therapeutic discourses to dissuade these pathological tendencies. Doing so personalizes her failure to recognize what should be kept sacred and keeps the promise of the branded self intact.

Brand Detractors

In contrast to brand ambassadors, brand detractors launch tirades against Frankel, lamenting the ways in which her brand is unfounded since she is unqualified and fraudulent. These viewers interpret Frankel as a disgusting display of self-interest and promotionalism and take pleasure in demonstrating reflexive responses that deconstruct Frankel and her shows as classical realist texts whose emotional and empirical worlds they do not accept. Brand detractors often refer to events and interactions from past episodes or even from Frankel's time on *RH0NY* and reinterpret these moments to reveal Frankel's true character that significantly departs from the branded self she wishes to sell. For instance, one conversation among commenters illustrates the reinterpretation of a friendship Frankel had with *RH0NY* cast member Jill Zarin, which dissolved by the last season Frankel appeared on the show. These commenters view Frankel to be at fault in not only ending the friendship, but also in forming a friendship that was ultimately based in self-interest. One commenter says, "I have always believed that she used Jill and took advantage of everything Jill (and Bobby) could offer her (like a free place to stay at the Hamptons). It was wrong of Jill to try and buy her friendship, but it was wrong of Bethenny to be bought. The minute the Skinnygirl thing started panning out for Bethenny, Jill was forgotten." In response, others add, "Agreed. Her own show, the pregnancy and the marriage (not necessarily in that order) was the perfect catalyst," and, "There was a dynamic at work there, and Bethenny played it for all it was worth. And, when it wasn't worth anything, she was done."

These audiences interpret the affects that constitute Frankel's branded self negatively and in ways that diverge dramatically from the ambassadors. Though it behooves the network and Frankel to appear authentic to viewers in their re-presentation of reality, detractors express readings that in fact hinge on the *inauthenticity* of Frankel, her relationships, and her branded self-identity. Frankel is labeled a "famewhore" whose presence on television serves to "build her empire" by "being a good shill." One brand detractor states, "I find Bethany a vicious publicity seeker who would do almost anything to get her 15 minutes to last. I will not be watching her show." Detractors share this sentiment that a "real" Frankel lies beneath the branded self she presents to audiences, and they use their interpretations of affect to make this point. As one detractor puts it, "The light in her eyes never shines more brightly than when a camera's in her face. Just like the many celebs who came before her she's addicted to hearing, watching and reading about herself. Down the rabbit hole she goes. There's no turning back now." Still another detractor makes this argument:

> Bethenny seems consumed with fame, publicity and media exposure... so much so that it appears she is willing to compromise her marriage to gain a larger fan base and greater adulation. Her trials with Jason never felt like a genuine attempt to "make it real" or relate to other women, but rather a strategy to keep up interest in the show and have a villain to make her look better, and even more vulnerable, to an audience that is beginning to doubt her sincerity.

Being a "publicity seeker" puts the authenticity of Frankel's branded self into question, and claims challenging her authenticity become more apparent on TWP after the Jim Beam deal is finalized. One brand detractor voices these doubts by saying, "Watching B in the kitchen over various episodes makes me question if she is even a cook. It really comes across as a hobby and one she hasn't put a lot of advanced thought into." While this detractor questions Frankel's culinary skills, which represents one aspect of her branded self, another detractor challenges her newfound status as a businesswoman and budding entrepreneur:

> I've learned that Bethenny knows absolutely NOTHING about business. Not hers or anyone else's. . . Whenever Bethenny shows up for a business "meeting" she always looks and sounds like she hasn't a freaking clue of what's going on! Absolutely nothing! Instead she makes vulgar jokes and tries to sound funny or whatever she calls herself doing. Jim Beam does NOT want her for anything, except to show up to events.

In this way, brand detractors consistently point out the ways in which Frankel's branded self does not live up to its promise and obscures the darker reality of a need for hypervigilant promotion. These determinations are made on the basis of interpreting Frankel's affects as a chef and a businesswoman as fake. In other words, these audiences use their sense of "reality and artifice" to figure out just how inauthentic Frankel's branded self is, and use these analyses as ways to discount her success. In his analysis of the co-occurrence of "reality and artifice" on reality television, Justin Lewis argues for an understanding of reality television as representing "*two adjacent realities*, each with its own conditions of existence" (295). The first is "the world of everyday experience" and the other is "the mediascape," or "the cultural environment" (297). While these realities "intermingle and overlap," they "have their own identifiable norms and values" (296). As a representation of both realities, reality television prompts intense scrutiny from audiences, according to Lewis, who attributes this tendency to the democratic belief that anyone can be an "expert," in reality, because our life experiences make us think "we 'know' enough about the kinds of people thrust into [reality television's] spotlight to judge whether or not they might be faking it" (296). At the same time, we use material from both our everyday experience and from the mediascape to arrive at conclusions about what is "real." For this reason, determinations of the "real," especially the reality of a female entrepreneur and newly minted multimillionaire which is arguably foreign to most viewers, are based on a mix of interpretations of affects and emotions from varying cultural sources. In this sense, audiences interpret Frankel as not acting the part of the cook or the entrepreneur perhaps because the affective structures that compose these personae are typically coded as masculine.

The ways in which brand detractors view Frankel as undeserving of success and devoid of the talents and skills it requires betrays the cruel optimism that the branded self inspires: those who achieve the fantasy of the good life earn this success in a meritocratic society. However, what emerges for detractors is the sense that success is somewhat arbitrary and not based on merit. This moment represents an impasse, a juncture with political stakes, to recognize systemic discontinuities between the American political economic system and the cruel promise of a meritocracy. Yet these stakes do not take hold. Instead, detractors argue the point on the stratum of media realism, on the duplicity of television and celebrity brands, without questioning the duplicity of the social reality they claim to

represent. It is neither the fantasy of a meritocracy nor the social structure upon which it is built that is unsound. It is Frankel's transgressive self-branding that elevates her material worth at the expense of her cultural status. Ironically, Frankel's success reinforces the belief in an equal, meritocratic process despite sociological conditions of gender disparities in the workplace, while also perpetuating the belief that as an individual she 'really' has not earned it.

Brand Analysts

Brand analysts read Frankel's branded self in negotiated ways. Like the brand detractors, brand analysts usually identify as "not fans," display high levels of reflexivity, and recognize the ways in which Frankel's branded self has been created to "dupe" audiences and generate support for whatever products she attaches to her name. However, they interpret her far more favorably than one might expect. Acknowledging that the show is "promotional entertainment," they do not fault Frankel for attempting to further her career by appearing on the show and occasionally selling her audiences products when she gets the chance. The following comment exemplifies this interpretation:

> I don't consider myself a Bethenny hater nor a fan. And I don't begrudge her the success she had with her SkinnyGirl brand (the liquor business)... But with all her being "real"... she is still selling an idea of this perfect life (with its share of "drama" so that she looks like she's beating obstacles) that she herself does not live. I still don't believe the Bethenny on TV is the real Bethenny. I don't think it's a totally fake Bethenny, but it's her best representative.

This brand analyst is well aware of the ways Frankel works emotionality into her branded self to create a dynamic and authentic persona for fans to support. This critique negotiates the meaning of such representations, however, by not "begrudge[ing] her the success," departing from the brand detractors' perspective. Brand analysts show greater awareness and appreciation for the ways in which appearing on reality television and creating a branded self are strategies to cope with a precarious labor market. When work is difficult to find, brand analysts make concessions for what it takes (self-promotion) to make an income doing something that seems easy and accessible to anyone willing to make the sacrifices required of working in this industry.

Brand analysts are especially vocal about their opinions of how Frankel's branded self may interfere with her authentic self after Frankel accepts the Jim Beam deal. Like the brand ambassadors, they interpret the deal as a moment for pause, but their responses indicate an awareness of the emotional labor it takes to maintain the branded self on reality television. These audiences foresee the detriment to Frankel's family before it plays out in the third season of her show. They appeal to the types of affects and emotions they have seen. For instance, one worries, "I do wonder how she will adjust to having 'made it.' For someone like her, it's the gnawing doubt and anxiety that usually drives them to succeed, and now she has to find another source." Others worry about how the needs of the branded self will impact Frankel's family, particularly her child:

> I really really hope Bethenny only does one more season of this show—that would lend credibility to me. Raising a kid with cameras and boom mikes following around for 5 months seems really not normal and potentially damaging.

Unlike the ambassadors and detractors, brand analysts view themselves as able to help chart the course of Frankel's branded self. Since they are cognizant of the ways in which reality television is partially structured by scripted situations, they see it as a job in the television industry that comes with its own demands. Realism for them is knowing that Frankel is a woman juggling many roles in the entertainment and lifestyle branding industries. Brand analysts share their opinions not just on what *has* happened on the show, but what they think *should* happen in Frankel's real life. For instance, after a season of dramatic fights and crying spells, one tells Frankel to "[t]ry a therapy session without cameras and maybe you'll get somewhere," referring to Frankel's agreement to be filmed during her therapy sessions. (Whether or not these are "real" and Frankel indeed does not see a therapist off camera is up for to debate.) Still, another brand analyst advises Frankel to "[s]wallow your pride, get off TV and get back with Jason. Your real life does not hold a candle to your TV life. Step back. You are financially secure, now run off and hide out for a few months and heal yourselves." In this way, brand analysts reiterate brand ambassadors' opinions of Frankel as unable to find "true" happiness, but they are more reflexive about the toll, the emotional labor, of working in the reality television industry. They see the path to true success as realizing when to stop.

Brand analysts stress the ways in which reality television is a means to an end, a strategy that is acceptable to adopt when times call for it, but Frankel's branded self has outgrown this genre. She has been transformed, and brand analysts prefer to believe in the finality of this narrative. Thus, brand analysts' interpretations reveal a particularly disturbing impasse for the branded self: the realization that life as a brand requires keeping the self in motion, ever flexible and ready to move into new territories. The branded self is a fashioning of the self that is made for and used by a public. In this way, one cannot just stop. The branded self is a textual self, a culturally constructed artifact of the self that has surplus value, and brand analysts are wary to acknowledge the consequences that branding of the self may conjure, namely the dehumanization of an authentic self and its self-objectification in the marketplace.

I See (Through) You

This analysis demonstrates a range of interpretations of and identifications with the branded self created by one reality television star, Bethenny Frankel, by deploying an analytical heuristic of three audience types in an effort to better understand the polysemy of the branded self as a media text characteristic of reality television. Brand ambassadors make invisible, brand detractors belittle, and brand analysts sympathize with Frankel's branded self. As a representative of a new kind of womanhood on television, Frankel reveals attachments to certain fantasies of the "good life." While brand ambassadors are particularly perturbed by the idea of "having it all" and still being unhappy, brand detractors find fault in "having it all" and not having earned it. Brand analysts call attention to "having it all" but not being able to stop, thus jeopardizing the basic reason for working—to nourish a thriving family life.

Frankel's branded self is rooted in her status as an upper class white woman in her late thirties to early forties living in the northeast United States. Her transformation into a brand provides the basis for affective identifications that see her past

struggles as intrinsic to a familiar narrative in which work pays off. At the same time, this narrative presents a version of reality that is presumably unrelated to and in conflict with the reality most women in the United States face in their everyday lives. Making up 47% of the workforce and only 4% of Fortune 500 chief executive officers, women continue to face many hurdles on the way to achieving success in the business world, but Frankel's branded self exemplifies how it can be done and provides fodder for deciphering the realism of her narrative using affective cues and emotions (*Pyramid: U.S. Women in Business*). Identifications made regarding Frankel's branded self may not always be positive, but they do stem from what Berlant has discussed as the "intimate public" of women's genres. Interestingly, none of the three audience types outlined by this study focus on the ways in which Frankel's branded self relies on the acceptance of an empirical realism that blurs distinctions between what Lewis has called the "two epistemes" of reality, which include everyday "real-life" experience and the mediascape. In other words, Frankel's branded self moves in a world that is necessarily constructed by its own and the television industry's capitalistic needs, but is deconstructed by audiences as sovereign in its decisionmaking and democratically accessible.

Frankel's branded self represents a distant reality—one where finding out the third-largest whiskey company has bought your small business for millions—for which a majority of audiences must turn to the media to understand. Frankel's reality television show explicitly focuses on the work of developing a brand, but doesn't purposely call attention to the emotional labor required of her as a worker in the television industry. Audiences variably recognize this work; Brand ambassadors address it indirectly, thanking her for allowing them to be a part of her journey; brand detractors downplay its exploitative nature since they see it as self-serving; and brand analysts acknowledge it as potentially threatening to her and her family. Thus, appreciating or invalidating this emotional labor represents an intervention by audiences who use their own experience to address it. Set against a backdrop of precarity in life and in work, discussion of emotional labor can be pleasurable. Frankel stimulates hope in some and resentment in others. Her self-transformation into a celebrity, as P. David Marshall puts it, "works discursively" in the space between the "the individual and the collective," providing both an aspiration and an omen for what it means to be free yet still in the ranks of those whose work is precarious and potentially disposable (25). Though a worker in industries considered "unstable, unqualified, underpaid, and unprotected," Frankel epitomizes the fantasy of the image-entrepreneur to achieve social mobility and its deliverance of and ability to foster security, intimacy, and belonging (Hearn, "Insecure" 496). Audiences struggle to maintain attachments to this fantasy when Frankel's narrative diverges from its confines, but they reconcile these discrepancies by ascribing failure to Frankel's individual character. Audiences who began watching Frankel at the beginning of her reality television career express feelings of loss and mourning for a lost soul that has been engulfed by the branded self. This branded self exhibits high degrees of rationalization, self-interest, and manipulated emotion, as well as anomie, insatiability, and an unstable identity. In this way, audiences rely on a sense of Frankel as agentive, an arbiter of her own destiny, but still subject her to constant evaluation by the public. Fantasies of Frankel as a woman who has it all, and the ambivalence they inspire, are

problematic precisely because the focus on individual triumph and mastery over an unruly self stands in as a barometer for collective gains.

Note

1. See chapter 2 of Ang, especially 34–46, for her insightful discussion of how parsing out these different types of realism helps explain why a text like *Dallas*, considered "bad" according to certain sets of criteria, might be pleasurable to audiences and an active, rather than passive, engagement with mass media.

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