

They're Not in Orange County Anymore: The Convergence of Social Semiotics and Social Television in Audience Responses to Reality Television Depictions of Dairy Farming

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They're Not in Orange County Anymore: The Convergence of Social Semiotics and Social Television in Audience Responses to Reality Television Depictions of Dairy Farming

Abstract

In 2016, the reality television program *The Real Housewives of Orange County* aired an episode featuring a cast visit to an Irish dairy farm. While the cast members struggled to acclimate to milking cows, audience members were actively tweeting their thoughts and feelings about the episode. The phenomenon of discussing television online while actively viewing a program is known as “social television” and has major implications for audience engagement, retention, and enjoyment. To fully explore the audience’s response to this depiction of dairy farming, we conducted a social semiotic analysis of the episode’s agricultural content alongside a thematic analysis of the resulting Twitter/X conversation. We found that the farm segments focused on the inherent humor in affluent American women taking part in farm labor, with emphasis on their distaste for getting dirty. The farm itself was presented as bucolic, and the individuals working on the farm largely avoided traditional media stereotypes of farmers. The resulting Twitter/X conversation closely echoed the show’s depiction, with many viewers poking fun of the women’s behavior and statements while also bemoaning the farm setting as unglamorous. Some viewers agreed with cast member comments about avoiding animal products due to either emotional connections to the livestock or concerns about the cleanliness of the farm, but little focus was placed on the ethics of dairying or animal welfare concerns.

Keywords

Reality television, social semiotics, social media, social television

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Introduction

“Reality TV is often shorthand for what people think is wrong with modern culture – time wasting, low grade, rubbish,” wrote television scholar Annette Hill (2015, p. 3). Despite criticisms levied against it, reality television (RTV) remains one of the most commercially successful forms of entertainment. In the decades since the Public Broadcasting System released *An American Family* in 1973 (Hathaway, 2017), the RTV genre has grown to encompass dating, competition, and slice-of-life shows that put humanity on display (Doyle, 2012).

Reality television’s enduring popularity makes its content a critical contribution to the cultural milieu. Millions of people watch RTV programs every week, and these programs have spawned everything from spinoffs to cultural movements (Carey-Mahoney, 2016; Day, 2014). They have also created online communities of fans who gather on digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter/X, and Reddit and engage in conversations about these shows. The phenomenon of “social television” (Lin et al., 2018) merits scrutiny, as research suggests that individuals who comment on live television programming tend to be more engaged with the content (Giglietto et al., 2016; Nielsen, 2015; Yang & Fernández Peña, 2025), leading to potentially stronger effects than that of traditional single-screen viewership (Pynta et al., 2014).

Social television has become so engrained in today’s entertainment culture that broadcasters encourage such participatory viewing with onscreen graphics featuring hashtags to use and follow (Patterson, 2018). For example, ABC’s “Thank God It’s Thursday,” or #TGIT, campaign, which promoted a block of programming created by producer Shonda Rimes, specifically targeted a multicultural, largely female audience and made *Grey’s Anatomy*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, and *Scandal* number-one among 18- to 49-year-old viewers in their heyday (Patterson, 2018). Networks that platform major sporting events, like the Super Bowl, the World Cup, and the Olympic Games, also encourage social engagement by visualizing hashtags and trending topics during broadcasts (Yang & Fernández Peña, 2025).

The combination of RTV and social television could have major implications for a variety of fields, including agriculture. As will be discussed in more detail, agriculture has been the subject of numerous television series and standalone TV episodes, leading scholars to question how RTV depictions of the industry may impact viewers’ knowledge and perceptions of the industry. As defined by Frick et al. (1991), agricultural literacy is understood “as possessing knowledge and understanding of our food and fiber system. An individual possessing such knowledge would be able to synthesize, analyze, and communicate basic information about agriculture” (p. 52). While watching agricultural RTV could serve as a form of informal agricultural knowledge acquisition, this popular medium may lead to potential audience misconceptions based on stereotypical, outdated, or staged depictions of agricultural issues or practices (Cosby et al., 2022; Specht & Beam, 2015; Summerfield et al., 2025).

Purpose and Research Questions

Because researchers theorize that social television leads to increased engagement, individuals who live-tweet or -chat programs may be gleaned more than entertainment from their viewership. In the case of reality television, higher engagement could increase the

likelihood of viewers internalizing attitudes and behaviors on display in “real-world” situations and interpreting “knowledge” based on skewed or stereotypical representations. In this vein, we wanted to examine how an episode of a popular reality television program portrayed agriculture and how that portrayal was discussed by the program’s audience in a social television context. The study was guided by three research questions:

RQ1: How did *The Real Housewives of Orange County* episode depict the dairy industry in Ireland?

RQ2: How did viewers utilize social television to engage with the episode?

RQ3: What shared themes emerged from the episode depiction and social conversation?

Conceptual Framework

Television and the Social Construction of Reality

The concept of social reality, or that reality is constructed by individuals’ own perceptions, first gained traction in the 1970s (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). According to Adoni and Mane (1984), social reality occurs on three levels: *objective reality*, *symbolic reality*, and *subjective reality*. *Objective reality* is the ‘real’ reality in which mankind exists; *symbolic reality* is the expression of objective reality in the form of cultural artifacts like art and literature. *Subjective reality* combines the two into a lens through which the individual perceives the world around themselves. Subjective social reality is influenced by external forces, including mass media (Riddle, 2010). Riddle (2010) found that prolonged exposure to graphically violent television content increases viewers’ estimates of the societal prevalence of brutality, crime, and immorality. Similarly, watching weight-loss programs like *The Biggest Loser* exacerbated viewers’ negative attitudes toward overweight individuals and perpetuated stereotypes of obesity, including the notion that obesity is a personal choice (Domoff et al., 2012).

More recently, McNutt (2024) investigated the potential impacts of RTV on audiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The author analyzed how home-improvement network HGTV created a “COVID-free” fantasia on its channel, with shows like *Home Town Takeover* depicting hosts and guests ignoring pandemic-era health and safety procedures (e.g., masking, testing, and social distancing), despite these practices being rigorously followed behind the scenes. McNutt argues that crafting a “reality” that ignored the pandemic was imperative to HGTV’s ability to re-run these COVID-era episodes in syndication, despite the potential positive societal outcomes of airing accurate portrayals of the show’s rigorous protocols.

Agriculture on Television

Agriculture has been part of the television milieu since the medium’s inception. Popular TV programs like *Green Acres*, *Lassie*, and *Petticoat Junction* alternately mocked and celebrated agrarian life while depicting a “pastoral fantasy” of rolling green fields, red barns, and hardworking rural folk (Specht & Beam, 2015; Specht & Rutherford, 2016). The more recent advent of reality television has led to exaggerations of that pastoral fantasy, with candid RTV programs like *The Simple Life* and dating shows like *The Bachelor* peddling in stereotypical depictions of farming as dirty, menial labor played for laughs (Ruth et al., 2005; Specht & Beam,

2015). *The Simple Life*, which followed the exploits of socialites Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie as they worked on a farm in rural Arkansas, suggested to viewers that “agriculture is hicks in the country” (Ruth et al., 2005, p. 9). The 19th season of the popular dating competition *The Bachelor* starred Chris Soules, an Iowa farmer looking for love among a bevy of young women. The season prominently featured stereotypical images and sequences—from contestants dressed in flannel and cowboy boots to tractor races and farm-themed obstacle courses—while also reinforcing ideals of farmers being hardworking, down-to-earth individuals (Specht & Beam, 2015).

A more recent example of candid RTV about agriculture is *Clarkson’s Farm*, an Amazon Prime Video production that follows the agrarian exploits of Jeremy Clarkson, a former host of British TV mainstay *Top Gear* (Fincham, 2021-2025). While the show largely adheres to the pastoral fantasy, thanks to its bucolic Cotswolds setting, it nonetheless presents a more authentic depiction of agriculture, as Clarkson dabbles in rearing sheep, beef cattle, chickens, and various crops with varying degrees of success. Given its realistic portrayal of the challenges of farming, *Clarkson’s Farm* has been studied for its potential implications for agricultural literacy and perception development (Summerfield et al., 2025).

Social Television and Second Screening

Television viewing is an increasingly “communal, interactive, and engaging experience” in large part thanks to social media and other computer-mediated channels that allow disparate users to connect in real time while watching television shows (Lin et al., 2018), an activity called “social television” or “second screening” (Fossen & Schweidel, 2019; Guo, 2020; Lin et al., 2018; Weimann-Saks et al., 2024) that some 88% of American TV viewers engage in (Wu et al., 2025). Researchers have estimated that roughly 20% of American television viewers use social media to discuss their favorite programs, and approximately 72% of Twitter/X users active during prime time (8-11 PM EST) live-tweet the shows they watch (Nagy & Midha, 2014; Rao, 2014).

Social TV has powerful implications for communicators as it impacts physical, cognitive, and affective responses to television content, especially among RTV viewers, 47% of whom reported taking part in online activity while watching television (Alvarez, 2015). A 2015 Nielsen Neuro study found that social television—specifically, Twitter/X use during viewing—increases neurological engagement in content by triggering emotion, memory, and attention (Nielsen, 2015). In addition, social TV expands on traditional viewer-to-content interactions, allowing viewers to interact with each other across geographic barriers and to form virtual communities tied to program engagement (Guo, 2018).

Lin et al.’s (2018) study of social television behaviors found that viewers typically participate in social television for program-related information from official sources and reactions from other audience members. The researchers discovered that engagement in social TV activities increased viewer satisfaction with and investment in programs, findings that were supported by Waddell and Sundar (2020). Social TV also encourages program salience and commitment among viewers: Individuals who build online viewership communities report stronger loyalty, resulting in increased viewer retention (Lin et al., 2018).

Methods

This qualitative case study represents a social semiotic analysis of the content of an episode of *The Real Housewives of Orange County* (RHOC) (Ross et al., 2006) and a thematic analysis of posts generated by X/Twitter users in real time as they watched the program on its original airdate.

RHOC Episode Analysis

Text Selection

The Real Housewives of Orange County premiered on the Bravo network on March 21, 2006, offering viewers a RTV version of ABC's popular drama *Desperate Housewives* (Reality TV World, 2006). RHOC followed the lives of affluent women in an exclusive gated community in Southern California (Chang, 2006). As of 2025, the show was in its 19th season and is regarded as the flagship in the ever-expanding *Real Housewives* franchise, which has been described as one of the best reality shows of all time by popular press (Park, 2025). The episode selected for analysis was Season 11, Episode 16: "Bringing Up Old Ghosts" (Karpel et al., 2016). According to the episode synopsis, the program follows the cast as "Meghan [Edmonds] searches for relatives, while Vicki [Gunvalson], Tamra [Barney], Heather [Dubrow], and Shannon [Beador] trek to a milk farm" (Peacock, n.d.).

"Bringing Up Old Ghosts" first aired on October 17, 2016, and was watched live by 1.82 million viewers (The Real Housewives Wiki, n.d.). Crucially, this episode, along with much of the back catalog of Bravo reality programs, was made available on Peacock, NBC Universal's proprietary streaming service, in Summer 2024 (Tinoco, 2024), leading to both a resurgence in franchise viewership for the streamer (Hamilton, 2025) and the researchers' desire to revisit the episode and its related social conversation.

Social Semiotic Analysis

Social semiotics is a researcher-focused form of content analysis that allows the researcher to situate texts within a specific sociocultural context while considering the researcher's own perspective as an element of the interpretive act (Chandler, 2007; Iedema, 2001; Van Leeuwen, 2005). Social semiotic codes classify and frame relationships among meanings, their realizations, and their contexts as viewed through the lens of the researcher (Bernstein, 1981; Thibault, 1991). Social semiotics is an ideal methodology for studying social reality, in that it allows us to analyze a media artifact through objective, symbolic, and subjective lenses and to discuss the circumstances of that artifact's creation.

In this study, the researchers undertook a close reading of the selected episode of RHOC Season 11. Close reading involves taking detailed notes and reflexively questioning the critic's interpretation of narrative, thematic, and stylistic features during the review (Ohrvik, 2024). Before beginning the review, the researchers established a codebook of elements to examine, including the appearance of livestock, crops, farm equipment, and the participants' wardrobes. Dialogue and music were noted and transcribed, and screenshots were taken of key visuals.

Special attention was paid to agricultural stereotypes identified in prior research (Ruth et al., 2005; Specht, 2013; Specht & Beam, 2015; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2002). Periodic crosschecks, including clarifying discussions between coders and referencing additional data sources, were conducted throughout the coding process to ensure study dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thick description and direct transcriptions are included in the findings to support the transferability of our conclusions. We triangulated (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) our findings with an episode recap of the program (Moylan, 2016) from the pop-culture website *Vulture*, an online offshoot of *New York Magazine*. This piece allowed us to compare our analysis with the contemporary observations of writer Brian Moylan, who has extensive knowledge of the *Real Housewives* as both a recapper and the author of a bestselling book on the franchise and its creation (Moylan, 2021). We discussed any discrepancies in our findings until consensus was reached on all themes.

Contextualization

Social-semiotic discourse analysis relies on the disclosure of the researchers' experiences with and beliefs and attitudes toward the subject matter (McKee, 2001). One researcher used their personal experiences with agriculture to inform their analysis of agricultural imagery and themes. This member of the research team was raised on a small dairy farm, earned a B.S. degree in agriculture from a land-grant institution, and holds two advanced degrees in a social-scientific agricultural field. The second member of the research team grew up in an agriculture-centered community and similarly earned a B.S. and M.S. degree from a land-grant institution focused on agricultural education and communication, all of which aided in their analysis of the themes present in the episode.

Social Media Analysis

Data Collection

Twitter/X data were gathered in October 2016 using Meltwater Explore, a "listening" platform that can gather and archive social and news media, blog, and video content related to Boolean queries, individual users, or hashtags and keywords. Scholars in our field have used Meltwater Explore and similar tools to study public issues like cultured meat, water quality, foodborne illness, and extreme weather events (Haller et al., 2019; Wagler & Cannon, 2015; Wickstrom & Specht, 2016). The Twitter/X content of interest in this study comprised tweets posted immediately before, during, and immediately following the airing of the identified episode of *The Real Housewives of Orange County* on October 17–18, 2016. (No additional tweets were collected or analyzed after the original airing of the episode.)

Bravo, the network that airs the *Real Housewives* franchises, promotes live-tweeting among its audiences by posting chyrons with show hashtags for viewers to use while posting. Data were collected using the hashtag #RHOC with time parameters set for the day the episode aired and the following day to ensure all relevant conversations were captured, regardless of U.S. time zone. To further refine the data to tweets about the farm content and to produce a more manageable data set, sub-keywords were added. Since the episode featured a trip to an Irish dairy farm that supplies milk for liqueur brand Baileys and manure was prominently discussed and

shown throughout the episode, the words *cow*, *milk*, *poop*, and *Bailey* were used, resulting in 315 relevant tweets. We acknowledge that the application of such specific keywords may have impacted our resulting themes, given that some tweets relevant to the episode's farm content may have been excluded from our data set and those we included focused heavily on animal-related responses.

Social Media Thematic Analysis

All the resulting tweets were downloaded in .csv format and opened in Microsoft Excel for Mac for analysis. Information relevant to the content analysis—including the authors' usernames, the tweets themselves, and their unique tweet identification numbers—was copied into a separate page of each spreadsheet. Both researchers analyzed all 315 tweets to uncover themes within the farm-related content. We each followed a systematic thematic analysis protocol to identify emergent themes (Daly et al., 1997; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Once we developed initial themes, we reviewed our findings together and clarified our interpretations of the themes, collapsed related themes, and grouped sub-themes under broader theme categories. Once these themes were outlined, one member of the team re-coded the data using the final theme categories to provide examples for our reporting.

Limitations

Before we present our findings, we feel it is important to address the limitations of our study, with a focus on our text selection and the analysis of tweets generated by RHOC viewers during and immediately after the October 2016 airing of “Bringing Up Old Ghosts,” to help contextualize our results and conclusions. First, we selected this specific episode of *The Real Housewives of Orange County* because it represents the first (and, to date, the only) depiction of animal agriculture in the *Real Housewives* franchise. We recognize that agricultural content exists in other contemporary reality television programs, but we wanted to explore the industry's representation on one of the longest-running and most popular RTV programs. The episode is also still available for viewing via the Peacock streaming service, meaning that audience members are still able to engage with it (as of 2026).

Second, we acknowledge that the tweets, at the time of analysis in 2024, were already several years old. However, they are nonetheless valuable because they represent a snapshot of the thoughts and feelings of RHOC audience members viewing the episode while it aired, giving us valuable insights into their processing of the episode, its images, and its messages in real time. Additionally, discussions on Season 11 of RHOC—the season of the episode analyzed in this study—are still occurring on social media, specifically on Reddit (LadyoftheUnderdark, 2022; Wide_Committee1835, 2025). The results of these qualitative analyses of episode and social content, presented below, are thus not generalizable beyond the scope of this specific case, but they are illuminating of the potential knowledge and attitudes of both past and future viewers of the episode.

Findings

This section outlines our findings for RQ1 and RQ1, while our discussion section addresses RQ3 and the implications of our analyses.

RHOC Episode Analysis

The episode “Bringing Up Old Ghosts” included 14 minutes and 22 seconds of footage from the Baileys Farm in its 43-minute runtime. The excursion to the dairy was portrayed as a getaway from the regular activities of the protagonists of the show during a cast trip to Ireland.

Clothing and Attire

The women from *The Real Housewives of Orange County*—Vicki, Tamra, Shannon, and Heather—appear for their farm visit some five minutes into “Bringing Up Old Ghosts.” Vicki sports a dressy green blouse and leather riding-style boots, while Tamra arrives in a plaid button-down shirt worn over a white tank top, jeans, and rubber muck boots. Shannon and Heather both wear sweaters and jeans. Shannon’s rubber boots are by the British luxury-clothing company Burberry, based on the telltale pattern proprietary to the brand.

Once they arrive at the farm, the women are met by farm owner Joe Hayden, who awaits them in the middle of a cow pasture. Joe, a middle-aged Irishman, sports a farm-branded black-and-red polo shirt and a pair of belted slacks. The four women change into white protective coveralls, eye goggles, gloves, rubber Wellington boots, and plastic booties. The women question the change in clothing: Vicki asks, “Why do we need this much protection to milk a cow?” Heather inquires if the suits are mandatory, and Shannon queries, “Is this a hazmat suit?” Later in the episode, once the milking has commenced, Joe appears in an apron and latex gloves like the ones given to the cast members as they got “toggled out” in their coveralls.

Livestock and Farming Operations

The farm featured in “Bringing Up Old Ghosts” is a bucolic estate of green pastures lined with stone fences, introduced with lively traditional Irish music. The dairy cattle are clearly housed outdoors: Our first glimpse of the Holstein cattle comes as the women arrive at their location and meet Joe in one of the pastures in which cows can be seen grazing and resting in the sunshine. “Well, we see some of these wonderful animals here in front of you...it’s that time of day when they need to come into the milking shed,” Joe tells the women, indicating that the cattle are pasture-grazed when not being milked. When the show returns from a commercial break, b-roll footage of the cows walking into the milking “shed” or parlor is interspersed with shots of the green landscape and a stream.

The milking shed is a green corrugated metal building with a concrete foundation. As the cast enters the shed, military-themed music plays, indicating that the task ahead is a battle of sorts. They also pass a sign posted near the door, which, from a distance, resembles a warning or danger sign but is, in fact, a quality assurance placard indicating that the barn is a biosecure area.

As they enter, Joe thanks the women for volunteering for the evening's chores, to which Vicki responds, "We're from Orange County, we've never done this before. It's a whole new journey."

The cast members follow Joe into the milking parlor, a double-seven parallel parlor that appears relatively old but is clean and well-maintained. He brings them to the pit, or the space between the two raised rows of milking stalls. Dramatic music plays as the camera zooms in on the metal bars and milking equipment, lending the moment a degree of tension that is broken by Joe demonstrating how to apply the suction cups to the cows' teats and the women growing concerned about their proximity to the cows' backsides.

Animal Treatment and Care

As noted before, the cattle on the farm appear to be primarily housed outdoors and brought inside for milking. This system represents a very traditional form of dairy cattle housing that is still common in Ireland, one that has largely been replaced in the United States by indoor housing in freestall barns (Medeiros et al., 2022). The cows are clean, their hooves trimmed, and they appear to be healthy and well-cared-for. Interestingly, many of the cows shown have docked tails, or tails that have been partially removed, a practice that is increasingly fallen out of favor or been banned entirely in many countries due to animal-welfare concerns (American Veterinary Medical Association [AVMA], 2014). Other cows in the milking herd have trimmed switches.

Despite her hesitations about their proximity to manure, Shannon seems supportive of the notion of milking the cattle—at least in theory. "Hey, listen, I used to breastfeed, and it felt good to get that milk out of there," she tells the other women as they prepare for the cows' arrival. With Joe's encouragement, Heather and Vicki attempt to apply the milking units to the sometimes-fractious animals. Contradicting Shannon's earlier comment, several of the cast find the experience distasteful. In a talking-head segment, Heather reflects, "This machine, it's—sucking up the udders; it just seems so violent....It's not, like, sexy, like S&M. It's like 'Fifty Shades of Cow.'" Tamra, likewise, is unenthused:

TAMRA [in a talking head]: Why? Why? Why do we have to milk a cow? They have machines that do that.

Cleanliness and "the Poop Factor"

While reactions to milking cows were mixed, the cast had something in common: a distaste for getting dirty. Encounters with what Joe jokingly refers to as "landmines" are presented as slapstick humor, such as when Vicki slips in a manure pile in the pasture and screams in disgust while the rest of the cast laughs. (For emphasis, the incident is later repeated after a commercial break.)

Once inside the milking shed, the women become increasingly worried about the possibility of being defecated upon.

HEATHER: Do they ever pee or poop?

JOE: Sometimes.

SHANNON: I'll start screaming.

JOE: That's part of the reason you're covered this evening.

SHANNON: In case they pee on us?...[Continues in a talking head] There's a poop factor going on here. Like, who wants to touch poop?

Vicki is the most demonstrative in her disgust, constantly pinching her nose closed, retching, and refusing to participate, calling this “the weirdest thing ever, in my entire life.” Eventually, the women are overcome by the cows’ urinating in the parlor and leave, complaining loudly about fellow cast members Meghan and Kelly not participating in the day’s activities.

Consuming Animal Products

Despite the cast members’ lack of enjoyment of the milking process, only two—Vicki and Tamra—seem uncomfortable with the concept of consuming animal products. Before they begin milking, Vicki tells Joe and her castmates that “I’ve never—I don’t drink milk because I know it comes out of an animal.” Later in the evening, when Joe informs the women that they’ll be enjoying a steak dinner, Vicki intones, “First I had to milk ’em, then they peed and pooped on us, and I stepped in it, and now I gotta eat one. Like, how about just a vegetarian dinner?” Interestingly, her qualms with drinking milk and eating meat seem more connected to her perceptions of cleanliness and sanitation than they do with any moral concerns. (She later indicates that she’s “just going to do cheese” when asked if she would like butter with her meal.) Tamra, on the other hand, indicates that her time on the farm may have changed her feelings about eating meat due to a newfound emotional attachment to the animals: “Today, I met the cows. I got kind of close to them and now I kinda feel like I’m eating somebody’s brother.”

Agricultural and Rural Stereotypes

Compared to previous RTV depictions of farms and farmers, this episode relied less heavily on stereotypes or stereotypical imagery associated with food production. As noted above, farmer Joe appears, not in denim and plaid, but in a businesslike polo shirt and dark pants, more formal than most pop-cultural depictions of farmers. His demeanor with both the women and the cows is patient and calm, and he seems excited at the prospect of the cast visiting the farm. The farm’s adherence to quality assurance standards is also apparent beyond just the prominently displayed signage: The women are asked to dress in coveralls, rubber boots, and boot covers, all of which are measures for preventing the introduction of pathogens to the farm.

The farm location does allow for some depiction of images traditionally associated with agriculture. For example, the women are treated to dinner at the farm, which is hosted in what appears to be either a retrofitted wooden barn or a rustic space designed to resemble a barn. Straw bales are stacked in the background, and the wooden tables are covered in gingham tablecloths, a traditionally “country” touch. The segments filmed at the farm also contain lingering camera shots of green pastures, dairy and beef cattle, and sheep, many of which are accompanied by traditional Irish music.

Social Media Analysis

The content analysis of the 315 live posts/tweets on Twitter/X from the Baileys Farm segment of *The Real Housewives of Orange County* episode revealed several consistent themes among the viewers: *humor and jokes*, *agrarian life*, *cast representation*, *animal commodities*, and *production logistics*. Three of the tweets were unrelated to the content of the Baileys Farm section and were coded as *undecided*. (Please note that the quoted Twitter/X usernames and posts retain their original spelling, punctuation, and formatting, with the exception of transcribed emojis.)

Humor and Jokes

Throughout the section of the episode on Baileys Farm, viewers consistently incorporated humor and jokes in their posts. We identified 130 of the 315 posts that included some form of this theme. Overall, we defined this theme with three distinct sub-themes: *wordplay*, *scatological*, and *at the expense of cast members*. *Wordplay* focused on puns made by viewers or cast members during their time at the farm. Several Twitter users seized upon Heather Dubrow's "fifty shades of cow" joke, including Louthan2, who wrote, "50 shades of cow [two crying laughing face emojis] #RHOC". This pun was also referenced by several other users, including TVChaz ("LMMFAO! 'Fifty Shades of Cow'... HYSTERICAL!! #MadeMyDay #RHOC") and JohnnyBarrToons ("50 Shades of Cow! @HeatherDubrow found her next book title! #RHOC").

Scatological was the second major sub-theme that emerged from the posts, comprising references to poop, manure, and more incendiary terms like 'cowshit' or 'bullshit' in a humorous or joking manner. Several users included this subtheme in their posts, including sneakers1957, who wrote, "#RHOC And apparently Vicki is scared of cow shit. She's used to bullshit though." Similarly, tselles72 posted, "Lol did Viki actually freak out by the sights of cow dungs like it's about to attack???? #RHOC".

Humor at the expense of cast members included jokes made about cast member(s) by viewers or by cast members directed to their peers. While some of the posts in this sub-theme were tied to wordplay and scatology, certain users specifically focused on jokes outside of these subthemes. For example, _phillybee wrote, "@vgunvalson ur arm getting stuck on the trunk door before you headed to the milk farm had me laughing out loud!!! 🤔 #rhoc". User PeteyOwe posted, "So Riff-Raff now works at the Bailey's Farm, I see. #RHOC #RockyHorrorPictureShow."

Agrarian Life

Fittingly, the Baileys Farm portion of the show generated posts related to the farm and the people shown working at the farm. Some 137 posts were related to the theme of agrarian life, which we further divided into the sub-themes of *farming activity*, *farm personnel*, and *reactions to [personnel or activities]*. *Farming activity* in this content analysis centered on viewers' and cast members' observations about or reactions to specific husbandry activities and food production practices. In this sub-theme, a common discussion point among viewers was the sentiment that milking a cow is something they would never do. For example, VinoCaPisco

explained that “milking a cow is the antithesis of my idea of a good time. #RHOC”, and IsaLeeWolf wrote, “I can probably live a full life without ever milking a cow. #RHOC”.

The second sub-theme, *farm personnel*, can be described as the viewers’ and cast members’ observations about or reactions to people working on the farm. Satchelsofgold was disappointed in the farm scenes and posted, “watching the #RHOC ladies at the dairy farm in Ireland. Totally insulting to hardworking folks who work in the dairy industry, @Bravotv.”. Other viewers expressed sympathy for the farm workers or really liked them, including megatronmegg, who wrote, “This poor milk man. I feel for him having to deal with these women. The cows are probably easier. #rhoc”. Viewer pinklily7333 posted, “I’m [*sic*] obsessed with Joe from the cow farm. Obsessed. #rhoc”. Viewer DaniellePatt also mentioned how “the guy working on the farm sounds like mrs. doubtfire! #rhoc”, referring to farmer Joe.

The last sub-theme in this category, *reactions to [personnel or activities]*, was focused on visceral or emotional viewer and cast responses to the farm personnel or activities, including the use of words like “dirty,” “gross,” or “disgusted.” In line with the sentiment of never wanting to milk a cow, realityaddictx posted, “I have lived this long without milking a cow, and I’m good with that. Shopping, anyone? #nothanks #poopfactor #RHOC”. User elwhyessayy reacted to the scene by stating, “#RHOC That cow milking place was gross. Just saying”. Other users reacted with emotions like boredom, such as RealityAshhole, who wrote, “visiting a farm... [sleeping emoji] #RHOC”.

Cast Representation

The third main theme that emerged from our content analysis revolved around the representation of the cast of the show and included 149 posts. This theme was broken down into the sub-themes of *behavior*, *attire*, and *interactions*.

Behavior was seen as the viewers’ and cast members’ observations about and reactions to the actions and statements made by members of the cast. Angelaharper11 pointed out that “Vicki wants to harp on disrespectful behavior from others but how she behaved with the farm man & cows was very disrespectful. #RHOC”. KathieinCLE was annoyed with the cast behavior and noted, “this middle class girl would kill to be at that farm eating steak and fresh Baileys!! Ladies appreciate what u have and stop fighting! #rhoc”.

The second sub-theme, *attire*, was related to viewer and cast member observations about cast attire or wardrobe choices. One key focus of this sub-theme was the “hazmat” overalls that the cast wore while on the farm. ShannonBeador wrote, “Cow milking haz mat style tonight on #RHOC! And then the Ireland trip turns ugly...”; meanwhile, sherryc74 posted, “#rhoc [two laughing face emojis] they look so stupid walking in to milk those cows in those jumpsuits it’s funny as hell [two laughing face emojis]”. Alternatively, some viewers pointed out farm-inappropriate clothing the cast was wearing or attire they felt the cast was missing. For example, BNFluellen1 wrote, “Why would you wear heels on a farm? Makes no sense. #RHOC”, and HermitTVJunkie posted, “they are wearing these hazmat suits to milk the cows but no hairnets? ok. makes sense #rhoc”.

Tweets representing the *interactions* sub-theme were connected to behavior and attire but distinguished by commentary about the cast members' interactions with their fellow Real Housewives or others in the scenes. For example, during an argument among the cast members, AAndersenPhoto wrote, "wait... all this taking place in front of the farm staff? Yep, super classy. #RHOC". In a similar vein, TalesFanGirl commented, "Seriously, Bravo? You film Tamra milking a cow but you can't catch a major fight between Vicki, Tamra and Kelly? #rhoc".

Animal Commodities

The theme of animal commodities was less common among viewers, with 49 related posts, and was broken into sub-themes of *consumption of products*, *veganism/vegetarianism*, and *reactions to product consumption*. Since the cast visited the Baileys Farm, some users, like whatjuliawrites, joked about consuming Bailey's (the liqueur): "mmm... Bailey's... I may or may not add a shot to a cup of coffee at least once a week. #realhousewives #rhoc". Another example of the *consumption of products* sub-theme that tied to the *reactions to consumption* sub-theme was a post by misnsomething, who wrote that "I could not play with cows and then eat steak, while on a cow farm. #Gross #RHOC".

The animal commodities-related sub-theme of *veganism/vegetarianism* emerged in large part due to cast member Vicki commenting that she does not "drink milk because... it comes out of an animal." Several users discussed this comment, and many pointed out the hypocrisy of her statement, given that she is shown eating steak later in the episode. For example, Realhurricane posted, "so #IckyVicki is a #Vegan? She doesnt drink milk cuz its FROM an animal but she eats the animal? #MakesNOSense #TheLiesKeepComing #RHOC"; and cmorgan1968 wrote, "#RHOC Did Vicki just said that she doesn't drink milk because it comes out of an animal? Didn't I see her eating eggs?" Other viewers mentioned that they do not drink milk, including TerriLAustin, who wrote, "I drink almond milk. Milking almonds is much less disgusting. #RHOC", and seoyunxo, who commented, "me looking at the cow selfies knowing the cow will be abused and killed later... #RHOC #goVegetarian #GoVegan praying it isn't how it looks". Visceral or emotional *reactions to product consumption* were seen in comments like those from seoyunxo and Cattrayeal3, who posted, "#RHOC Remind me not to drink milk from Ireland that looks nasty". Another user, p_mccaffrey, also stated, "there's something a little weird about them eating steak at a cow farm..... #RHOC".

Production Logistics

The last major theme from our analysis of the Baileys Farm scenes related to production logistics, specifically the sub-themes of *producer or network interference* and *filming locations*. There were 89 posts associated with this theme. *Producer or network interference* included posts related to viewer observations, questions, or theories about specific production decisions and cast activities. YogaGer commented, "@Bravotv #RHOC This is so bogus! Did Bailey's help foot the bill, there are so many historical things to see in Dublin!", and RothweilerEvent joked that "production was so amped about this cow milking scene being filmed. #rhoc". Similarly, negativenancy mentioned, "Please fire whatever producer came up with this whole cow milking sequence [eye roll emoji] #RHOC".

The *filming location* sub-theme, comprising viewer observations, questions, or theories about filming locations or cast activities, included a number of negative tweets from viewers. The user misn something commented, “Who plans a vacation that includes working on a farm? I need the name of that travel agent, so I know who to avoid. #RHOC”. Further, user mamecastle posted, “You know, ladies of #RHOC, we have dairy farms, cows & giant piles of cow poop right here in the USA! [cow emoji, poop emoji, american flag emoji] Maybe stay home from now on?” Many users shared similar feelings, including as rymills, who wrote “A farm?! Well y'all could've come to Ohio for a lot cheaper and I would've shown you tons of farms around here. #rhoc”.

Discussion

Our analyses of the RHOC episode “Bringing Up Old Ghosts” and its attendant Twitter/X conversation found close ties between the presentation of farming activity onscreen and viewers’ reactions to it. While a handful of viewers discussed their own feelings about or experiences with dairy farming, they largely focused on how the cast members responded to the activities they were tasked with. Most negative tweets were directed to the women for their behavior or to the show’s production team and network for what the viewers saw as an unglamorous locale for a cast trip. In his episode recap, *Vulture* writer Brian Moylan responded similarly to both the location and the cast’s activities:

When Vicki is informed they are going to a farm, her response is a sarcastic, ‘Wonderful,’ which is always the appropriate response when you are informed that you will be going to a farm...Farmer Joe tells them that they will not only tour the farm, but also work on it. Oh no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no. NO. (Moylan, 2016, para. 5)

The convergence of negativity around the filming location and subsequent events represents an example of social TV at play: The cast responds with disgust, which is noted by viewers and recappers and reinforced in the online discourse.

Like the cast members, the majority of the commenters seemed to have limited farming experience, and thus little of the online discussion focused on the specific husbandry practices that the researchers noticed. Previous research (Specht & Rutherford, 2013) investigated media portrayals of farming methods that consumers view as unethical or cruel, including tail docking and indoor livestock housing, and found that how these practices are visually or verbally presented can influence viewer perceptions. In this case, because the cast spent little time reflecting on the morality of the tasks they were undertaking, the viewers also largely ignored potential animal-welfare issues. Even the most negative comment about a specific practice—Heather’s suggestion that using a milking machine seems “so violent”—was perceived as a joke by the viewers because she framed it in the context of “sexiness,” an interpretation echoed by Moylan (2016), who described a milker as a “torture device that looks like a sex toy for some sort of alien creature” (para. 6). This finding suggests that, in the case of reality television, the visual portrayal of farming has less impact on viewers’ opinions than cast reactions to it.

Perhaps the most concerning intersection of show content and viewer commentary was the focus on sanitation: The women's reactions to encountering animal manure and urine led to comments from them and from viewers about avoiding dairy products over hygiene concerns, despite the fact that several practices aimed at food safety and biosecurity—dipping cows' teats with disinfectant before applying milking machines; wearing gloves, overalls, and boot covers to prevent the spread of pathogens; and removing cows' tail hair—were shown onscreen. This finding indicates that dairy industry communicators and marketers should continue to emphasize the production and processing procedures that ensure the wholesomeness of their products—preferably during relevant RTV programs with high levels of online engagement (Fossen & Schweidel, 2019).

Parallel to the discussion of show content and viewer commentary is how popular culture and the decisions made by producers impact the perception of farming. Previous literature suggests that television shows tend to focus on the negative aspects and stereotypes of agriculture (Ruth et al., 2005; Specht, 2013; Specht & Beam, 2015), which we noted in this episode and its social-media discourse. Viewers calling the dairy farm “gross” or milk from Ireland “nasty” perpetuates the stereotype that RTV producers continue to make that agriculture is inherently unpleasant. Similarly, farm scenes are edited for the highest entertainment value and do not typically showcase realistic portrayals of agriculture, which was apparent in this episode and has been noted in previous research (Bottinelli, 2005; Egbert & Belcher, 2012; Rose & Wood, 2005; Specht & Beam, 2015; Tyree, 2011).

Due to this perceived interference with the reality of agriculture by production, agricultural communicators should continue to focus on differentiating between the fantasy shown in RTV for entertainment and what dairy farms and related areas in agriculture actually look like. As a recommendation for future practice, we suggest that agricultural communicators and educators utilize RTV episodes featuring representations of agriculture in classrooms and during workshops to fact-check episodes, discuss ways in which agriculture can counteract negative portrayals, and promote the positive aspects of the shows. By incorporating agricultural RTV, communicators and educators can promote agricultural literacy and provide insight into the true reality behind reality television.

A goal of the agricultural industry is to emerge unscathed from popular media portrayals of agriculture, but the continued tendency for production—and thus audiences—to focus on negative cast reactions and practices that may seem dirty, cruel, or scary presents an issue for communicators. Producing media in which onscreen presences—whether fictional characters or reality-show cast members—react positively to modern husbandry methods could steer resulting discourse in a more positive direction, a phenomenon exemplified by the popularity of *Clarkson's Farm* (Summerfield et al., 2025). The show has created what farming proponents dub the “Clarkson effect” (Ellson, 2025, para. 1), promoting local British products and increasing enrollments in the United Kingdom's agricultural schools (Harcombe, 2025). Investing in such projects—which toe the line between entertainment and educational media—could increase audience trust in the food and fiber system and its attendant practices.

Although the episode aired in 2016, and all tweets were collected in 2016, we found its depiction of dairy farming still relevant because NBC has made this and other episodes readily

available on their streaming service, Peacock; thus, the episode can be watched by audiences either discovering or revisiting RHOC. Additionally, we find it important to recognize that with the re-release of the seasons on Peacock, contemporary online conversations about RHOC—including Season 11 and the trip to Ireland—exist on Reddit (LadyoftheUnderdark, 2022; Mysterious_Note_4195, 2025; Wide_Committee1835, 2025). We believe it is vital to continue analyzing shows with rewatchability, like RHOC, to understand how agriculture was being depicted in the past and how that might influence current or future perceptions. We also suggest that future research analyze more recent RTV show portraying agriculture (such as *Farmer Wants a Wife* on FOX or Bravo's foray into the farming sphere, *McBee Dynasty: Real American Cowboys*) and their resulting online conversations to understand whether negative agricultural stereotypes and industry depictions persist.

We recognize the limitation of qualitative research not being generalizable, and that this episode is a single case and only presents a snapshot of conversations in a designated time frame; however, the discussions can offer insights into similar future cases and a framework for agricultural communicators to utilize when analyzing the myths and stereotypes that are perpetuated by RTV and potentially reinforced in social conversations about these programs.

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