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Boutique Branding: Televisually Signifying the Feminine Business-Owner

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Boutique Branding: Televisually Signifying the Feminine Business-Owner

Payton Blakney

Eastern Illinois University

2020

Abstract

While women-owned businesses continue to grow, increasing 58 percent from 2007 to 2018 (Guidant Financial, 2019), producing on-brand communication content remains a challenge. Adding to the challenge, this branded communication must combat the societal narrative that women are less capable of running a business than men and utilize the complex mode of televisual storytelling. The purpose of this creative thesis was to incorporate the work of woman television producers and writers from the comedy-drama genre with semiotics theory to create five webisodes of branded entertainment that married the contradictory sign systems of woman and business owner. By analyzing and implementing the televisual conventions of the comedy-drama genre (specifically the narrative structures, characterization, and visual storytelling through *mise en scene* and production elements), I created five scripted, episodic webisodes that combatted gender stereotypes and joined in the conversation to marry these two contradictory signs for a woman-owned business in Charleston, IL. This creative thesis is important as it can inspire other women who are business owners, considering running a business, or in media production to keep changing this societal narrative.

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Objective report

During afternoon walks around my small home town, I observed many small businesses. After further investigation, I noticed many of these small businesses were being run by women. In fact, four in every ten U.S. small businesses are owned by a woman, with women-owned businesses growing 58 percent from 2007 to 2018 (Guidant Financial, 2019). Businesses range in industries from health, beauty, fitness, food, business services, and retail (Guidant Financial, 2019).

This rise in women business owners sparked my curiosity about how these women brand their businesses. It turns out that while women find success in starting a business, one of their top challenges is lack of branded, communication content (Guidant Financial, 2019). A survey by American Express (2017) found 39 percent of the women said that they lacked marketing and communication for their business. Women are suited for many aspects of business, but as the saying goes, there is a difference between working *on* your business versus working *in* your business. In this case, women are not working on building branded communication. Branded communication is a strategic, clear message by and about a brand meant to engage audiences (de Aguilera-Moyano, Baños-González, and Ramírez-Perdiguero, 2015). If woman business owners are challenged by creating branded communication, then branded entertainment is a tactic even lower on their to-do lists as it utilizes the complex mode of televisual storytelling. This is a problem as branded entertainment and video are the future for organizations due to the growing use of the internet and other digital platforms (de Aguilera-Moyano et al., 2015).

Another challenge for women business owners is the societal narrative that women are less capable of running a business than men. Although research shows that there are more similarities than differences in how women and men run businesses, women business owners are

still evaluated differently (Malmstrom, Voitkane, Johnansson, Wincent, 2018). After reading many articles on this topic, I became interested in what could be done to slowly change this narrative. This led me to consider how women television writers and producers communicate about women business owners in their productions.

These two challenges for woman-owned businesses led me to the goals of my creative thesis. My first goal was to create branded entertainment for a woman business owner who does not have time to create all of her own content and was struggling to figure out how to communicate about herself. My second goal was to explore how woman television producers and writers communicate about woman business owners to guide my endeavors to marry the two contradictory signs of woman and business-owner.

To reach these goals, I partnered with Trueblood Collective, a women-owned clothing boutique. Shannon Trueblood founded this business on December 21, 2018. The boutique is located at 315 Lincoln Ave. Suite 200 in Charleston, IL. Trueblood is currently branded as an upscale boutique that sells quality clothing and accessories to women of all ages. Shannon described that customers feel her boutique is welcoming, warm, and comfortable. Trueblood differentiates from other small businesses because it is one of the only places in the surrounding area that sells quality clothing. The key strength of Trueblood is the outstanding customer service provided. Shannon states that building relationships with her customers is her number one priority. Trueblood has five stars on Google with 34 reviews. Some reviews state, "I love this place, small boutique, yet somehow it feels very spacious and welcoming," "great customer service and great new styles," and "Trueblood Boutique is probably one of my most favorite places to shop. Not only because of the wide selection of clothes they sell but because of the workers that are there to help." Overall, Trueblood has a positive reputation due to its quality,

unique clothing, and great customer service. The brand promise of Trueblood is expertise.

Boutiques are successful because they promise their customers that they are style educators

(Alderson, 2018). Customers go into Trueblood unsure of what is in style or on-trend. Once at

the boutique, Trueblood employees show their style skills by guiding customers to certain

clothes for their special occasion or just helping them pick out a fashionable new item.

Based on Trueblood's current brand, I chose to create webisodes that reflected the

comedy-genre drama. This genre goes beyond the obvious elements of comedy by exploring

deeper issues and focusing on relational aspects of drama. One example that inspired my project

is *Gilmore Girls*, a comedy-drama that centers around Lorelai Gilmore and her daughter, Rory.

Lorelai owns the town inn, which provided a strong example of how women-owned businesses

are positively represented in media. This show was written and produced by Amy Sherman-

Palladino. By observing the works of Amy Sherman-Palladino, Marta Kaufmann, and Catherine

Reitman, woman television writers and producers, I learned how these women communicated

about woman business owners. I was fascinated with how *Gilmore Girls*, *Grace and Frankie,*

and *Workin' Moms,* broke the traditional narrative by signifying the contradictory signs of

women and business owners. I took a similar approach with my webisodes through character,

narrative, and *mise en scene*.

Quick treatment

The final products of my creative thesis are five two-minute, scripted, episodic

webisodes. Each webisode focuses on a different occasion when a customer needed the style

expertise of a Trueblood employee. I followed the prior works of woman television writers and

producers Amy Sherman-Palladino, Marta Kaufmann, and Catherine Reitman to unpack how

they communicate and signify woman business owners. These works shaped my overall

understanding of woman business owners which guided my writing and stylistic choices. The webisodes followed the comedy-drama genre. I mapped the genre which also impacted my decisions in each production phase. Overall, I combined semiotics, branded entertainment, television, and production techniques to guide my creation of each webisode.

To begin my project, I mapped the comedy-drama genre by watching three televisions shows to fully understand what makes the genre unique. I chose to watch *Gilmore Girls, Grace and Frankie,* and *Workin' Moms* because each break the traditional narrative by signifying the contradictory signs of women and business owners. While watching these shows, I noted details like narrative, character, music, sound effects, voice, costumes, lighting, edits, set design, acting, and credits. These elements gave me an idea of the larger trends in the comedy-drama genre, which I will further break down in this section.

Mapping the genre I found three common trends in each television show. The first trend was the character sketches. Each show had an A character that followed traditional, confident, strong-willed ideals of a business owner. They also had a B character that balanced out the A character and added comedic elements. For example, in *Gilmore Girls,* Sookie, the B character, balanced out Lorelai often by telling jokes when scenes got tense. The second trend is how each show demonstrates the A character as a business owner. The A character was often faced with a business-related logistic problem, then found a creative solution to fix the problem. This was shown in *Grace and Frankie* when Grace, the A character in this episode, noticed the labels for her products were incorrect. She fixed the problem by calling the label company, which ended up being an ordeal as they were in a different time zone. But, Grace successfully solved the problem by demanding they fix the labels. The third common trend is the dialogue between the A and B characters. Each show used quick, witty back and forth between the A and B characters. For

example, in *Workin' Moms* Kate, the A character, and Rosie, the B character are often shown

talking with fast banter when Kate enters the office. This displays their strong relationship and

adds elements of comedy as the banter is often humorous.

Characters

Characters are what brings every story to life. Corbett (2013) states characters give us the

general outline of a story, setting, fundamental problem, or moral dilemma. In television and

video, characters embody central ideas that make each narrative feel real and add meaning to

stories.

The character sketches I created for my webisodes were two recurring characters based

on characters from *Gilmore Girls, Grace and Frankie* and *Workin' Moms*. The A character was

Shannon, as she was in every webisode and played the main role. Her character was modeled off

of Lorelai from *Gilmore Girls,* Grace from *Grace and Frankie*, and Kate from *Workin' Moms.*

The main ideals these characters embody are confidence, strong will, problem-solving, and

kindness. Luckily, Shannon naturally demonstrates these ideals so this character fits her

personality well.

The B character was Maggie, as she is a Trueblood employee who only works part-time

and does not appear in every webisode. Her character was modeled off of Sookie from *Gilmore*

Girls, Frankie from *Grace and Frankie*, and Rosie from *Workin' Moms.* The main ideals these

characters embody are quirky, laid back, and forgetful. For example, Sookie from *Gilmore Girls*

is the head chef at the inn Lorelai manages. She is often seen starting fires in the kitchen, which

Lorelai has to problem solve how to fix.

Narrative

The syntagmatic elements of sequencing are important in the creation of narrative. Alder (1981) explained that a narrative regardless of genre is composed of certain functions or elements that are essential in story creation. The order in which a narrative takes place also is important. There is logic behind every narrative element and the sequencing of these elements impact the meaning of every story.

I based my narrative structure on similar conventions to what is seen in the comedy-drama genre. Each webisode followed the enigma, delay, and resolution structure. The stories have syntagmatic choices like a clear beginning and end. This is also known as Barthes' proairetic code (Barthes, 1974). For example, in the pilot episode of *Gilmore Girls,* the enigma was whether or not Lorelai's daughter was accepted into a prestigious private school, the delay was Lorelai and Rory waiting on the mail to arrive that day, and the resolution was the mail arriving and in it is an acceptance letter from the school. Also, it features causality and problem-solution storytelling which are important elements of a narrative. I created scripts (see Appendix A) for each webisode that followed this same narrative structure.

Mise en scene

The aesthetics, or *mise en scene*, of television and video, can make or break a production. According to Alder (1981), *mise en scene* includes all stylistic elements like lighting, costuming, acting, sound, and location. In the same way that characters and narratives are important to meaning-making, *mise en scene* visually communicates meaning to the audience.

One of the most important aspects of *mise en scene* in each webisode was the filming location. The webisodes were all filmed in Trueblood to give the look of an authentic shopping experience. Other aspects like costuming, lighting, acting, video and audio quality, and credits were chosen to reflect the comedy-drama genre. Shannon wore polished, casual outfits to match

her personal style and Lorelai Gilmore's typical costuming. The lighting was flat, high key lighting which is common for the comedy genre as it creates a cheerful look. I directed the recurring characters acting to reflect typical interactions they have at work. For some of the customers acting, I directed them to be more over the top to add comedic elements. Music was another aspect of *mise en scene* that was guided by the comedy-drama genre. For example, the show *Grace and Frankie* uses upbeat, pop music with no lyrics to transition between scenes. I found similar music to layer throughout each webisode. I chose to add a simple credit slate at the end of each webisode that was inspired by the simple credit slate used in *Workin' Moms*.

Overview of communication phenomenon

The main communication phenomenon I used to inform my creative project was semiotics. Semiotics is the study of signs through message and meaning (Chandler, 2007). Saussure (1974), one of the founders of semiotics, distinguished that a sign is a dyad consisting of a signifier and signified, also known as the message and meaning. The signifier or the message is the spoken or written word connected to the sign. The signified or the meaning is the mental image or concept associated with the sign. These two terms are linked tightly together because we can never have one without the other (Saussure, 1974). For example, if we see someone smiling in a video, their smile would be the message or signifier. The signified or meaning associated with a smiling person is that they are happy. Or, in the case of this creative project, if we see a mannequin in a store window display with a dress on, the dress would be the message or signifier. The signified or meaning associated with the dress on the mannequin is that the store has feminine qualities. One may reason the store sells products for women because of this signification. Signified and signifiers are important to this project because they can be used to connect resonant mental concepts and meanings to every message.

Barthes (1957) furthers semiotics by connecting signified and signifiers to order which demonstrates semiotics deeper functions. Barthes (1957) explains signs are used to understand the world, so one of their basic functions is to 'denote' or label something. This is the first order of signification. Again, consider the example of a person in a video smiling, the smile denotes happiness because this is the culturally agreed-upon meaning. However, Barthes (1957) states along with the denotative function of signs is a deeper association called 'connotations.' This is the second order of signification. For example, the smiling person in the video is also wearing a luxury, Rolex watch. Because Rolex watches are expensive and luxurious, they can be used to connote wealth and quality. The person smiling is no longer just denoting happiness but generating a whole set of connotations that are created from our social experience. The connotation is unique to this creative project because it works in connection with the denotation. Connotations limit the polysemy of a message while justifying the social or cultural aspects. This focus helped guide my decisions during the message creation phase of this project to identify and limit cultural connotations in each webisode to make the most intentional meanings.

Bignell (2002) explains that Barthes' phenomenon of 'myth' refers to the combining of signs and their connotations to shape message and meaning. Myths indicate ways of thinking about people, products, places or ideas which are designed to send particular messages to target audiences. "Myths is not an innocent language, but one that picks up existing signs and their connotations and order them purposefully to play a particular social role," (Bignell, 2002, pp. 16-17). Barthes (1957) furthers this by suggesting that myths must be packaged up in a digestible form to circulate. This form is commonly referred to as narratives. Narratives are the process by which myths or stories are told (Bignell, 2002). Narratives are part of human culture and can be used to overcome cultural contradictions or problems. This project focused most on narratives

and the second-order signification of the signs representing women and business owners.

Semiotics provided a tool to help uncover the complicated question of how two competing

second-order signifiers, women and business owners can be married through branded video.

Semiotics and video

One specific area of semiotics important to this creative project is mode. The mode of a

sign can include a series of connecting signs, such as a sequence of visuals that comprise a

message (Berger, 1999), or the meaning of a video due to its order of elements (Ferguson and

Greer, 2018; Bignell, 2002). Video is a unique mode because of its use of syntax, the sequencing

of a visual sign. In my webisodes, I considered visual syntax to create messages and strategic

order to make meaning. The visual syntax is important in video as each image of an object,

person, or landscape will have first-order denotative meanings. But all videos are culturally

charged by second-order signification (Bignell, 2002). The camera angle, the position of objects

in a frame, lighting, and sound all place a role in creating a different meaning in a video. For

example, I began each webisode with an establishing shot to visually set up the scene for

viewers. Then, as each scene progressed I moved the camera in to get close-up of actors. Feng

and O'Halloran (2013) explain this in their study on visual metaphors in advertisements. They

found that different camera angles were used to convey meaning, including the distance between

the camera and the subject, differentiating sizes of items to show relationships, and positioning

elements in either the foreground or background to connote degrees of importance. Therefore, it

is important to understand how to approach each mode to create the most successful content.

To make a cohesive narrative, I combined syntagmatic and paradigmatic elements to

construct the story of each webisode. As mentioned above, syntagmatic elements relate to the

order in which a sequence occurs, while paradigmatic elements are the characters and settings in

a narrative. According to Fiske (1987), "Narrative structure demonstrates that people and places are not anarchic and random, but sensible, and then combines the paradigmatic sense of places and people with the syntagmatic sense of events and time into a grand signifying pattern" (p. 129). While events and decisions in a narrative can seem random, they must all come together in the end to complete the narrative. The balance of paradigmatic and syntagmatic texts can be seen throughout each webisode. One example of this can be seen in the first scene of webisode three. It began with Shannon and Maggie discussing Maggie's breakfast, cereal pizza. Their conversation then moved to what Shannon should post. When Shannon could not decide, Maggie secretly created a post about sweaters and cereal pizza. This scene was crucial in setting up the rest of the webisode as it created the reason that customers then came into the store. The final scene of the webisode ended with Shannon referencing the first scene, which completed the narrative.

Another area of importance in creating meaning through video is conflict and resolution. To keep viewers engaged, the narrative must go through points of equilibrium (resolution), where the character is stable, and disequilibrium (conflict), where the character is trying to get back to balance. Kozloff (1992) notes that areas of conflict and resolution are known as "a move of equilibrium through disequilibrium to a new equilibrium" (p. 69). An engaging story then will stay at equilibrium or disequilibrium just long enough before it becomes dull, to then switch to the other. I implemented around two to four points of conflict and resolution per webisode. These points can be as small as Maggie asking Shannon what they should have for lunch, Or, bigger areas of conflict like a customer coming into the store because they needed to find an outfit for a job interview.

Semiotics and brand

Brands are signs. They communicate messages and build shared meaning with their audiences. Therefore, semiotics plays a large role in brand. Perez and Barion (2013) noted, "the brand can be understood as a complex sign . . . established in the mission, vision, and values shared by the organization," (p. 578). For example, the branding of a clothing boutique that strives to sell quality clothing would be strategic. The clothing boutique would be a sign of luxury. Therefore, the message elements in promotional materials and videos would focus on high perceived prestige, aesthetic value, and association with an affluent lifestyle. Brands do not just represent a product or service, but also the culture, mission, and any other messaging elements.

Each aspect of a brand constructs a cultural and societal meaning, and in turn society and culture reinforce the brands meaning. For example, the golden arches of McDonald's have a strong meaning in American culture. Sudarsan (2015) states for children, the arches represent food and fun. For adults, the arches represent several meanings like fast food, convenience, and quick service. McDonald's brand has a clear meaning of American food in consumer's minds. Doyle (1990) argues that a brand provides a foundation for consumers, so they can identify and connect with a product or service. Through a semiotic approach, a brand uses signified and signifiers to create a distinguishable identity. Oswald (2007) furthers this stating semiotics creates the foundation of a brand since symbolic communication ties consumption to the forms of a brand. These forms combine paradigmatically and syntagmatically through advertising, packaging, brand logo, and branded communication. This means any new product or message will immediately make sense to consumers as the meanings originate from the culture itself. Ultimately, semiotics applies to brand because brands communicate meanings.

Semiotics can also be used to examine culture to attempt to identify underlying cultural meanings. Or, semiotics can be applied to help brands actively create culture rather than just respond to it (Oswald, 2007). In this project, I used a semiotic approach to identify cultural meanings for brands owned by women that are seen as quality, comfortable, and warm. While watching *Gilmore Girls, Grace and Frankie* and *Workin' Moms* I identified how the woman writers and producers of each show positively communicated about women-owned businesses. Each show used similar conventions for doing this, showing the business-owner identify a problem and then offer a creative solution for each problem. For example, in *Gilmore Girls*, one problem Lorelai faced was her inn being overbooked. Lorelai was shown thinking fast on her feet to solve this problem. She asked her receptionist to upgrade the patron to the Jefferson suite for the night and offered them free dinner. These cultural signs are shown in each of my webisodes to match message with these cultural meanings and shape a changing narrative around women business owners.

Signifying the woman business owner

Historically, the second-order signs, woman and business-owner, hold contradictory meanings. The business owner identity is based on societal adjectives, metaphors, and clichés. Owning a business is infused with language that it as a masculine sign. This is because early studies about business owners used mostly male-only or male-dominated samples (Orser and Elliott, 2015). These studies furthered stereotypes that businesses only gained success if the displayed masculine characteristics like self-reliance, assertive, forceful, dominant, and ambitious. Women were categorized to be cheerful, understanding, modest, and passive (Orser and Elliott, 2015). The traditional feminine sign was explained to be great for secondary or support roles in an organization, not for leadership or business-owning roles. This has created

imaginary hoops for women interested in business. Being a business owner and a woman is possible and is successfully shown in many television series like *Gilmore Girls*. By following the guide of woman writers and producers and creating branded entertainment, I joined in the conversation to change these second-order signs.

One of the biggest challenges for women business owners is the societal narrative that women are less capable of running a business than men. (Guidant Financial, 2019). Using video as a signifying practice is a way of making resonant meanings where different signs can interact. Because women-owned businesses still have stereotypes, video is an effective way to promote a business while signifying a message that contradicts norms of society due to its complex nature. Videos are culturally charged by second-order signifiers (Bignell, 2002). So, rather than using a picture or graph that typically contains first-order signifiers, videos go beyond the basic meanings and better address issues such as stereotypes. For example, the brand Always aired a campaign called 'Like a Girl' that sought to eliminate gender stereotypes, while still promoting their brand. The short film showed viewers that the phrase 'like a girl' is often meant as an insult. Many of the boys and girls in the video laugh, flip their hair, and flail their arms around when they are asked to run, throw and fight like a girl (The Drum, 2016). This video showed how powerful videos can be at combatting culturally embedded issues like gender stereotypes. Also, this series was directed by Lauren Green, who according to an article by Leo Burnett (2015), "is proud to direct like a girl." This is just another example of the importance of following the guide of woman writers and producers.

Branded video is a great tool for women business owners to marry the two contradictory signs and promote their businesses. By showing Shannon effectively running her business in each webisode, I made resonant meaning to combat this gender stereotype. Following the guide

of successful woman producers and writers, these webisodes act to marry the two contradictory signs of women and business owners.

Full treatment

In my creative project, I made five two-minute, scripted, episodic webisodes. Each webisode focuses on a different occasion when a customer needed the style expertise of a Trueblood employee. In this section, I explain how theory, genre, and brand bolster each webisode. To do this, I focused on the seven most important elements of this project: webisode breakdown, overall conventions, production cycle, narrative, characters, *mise en scene*, and production elements. In each of these sections, I discuss how theory, genre, and brand informed each webisode throughout different phases of the production process.

Webisode Breakdown

To give context to the next sections, I will give a short description of the two main characters and breakdown the premise of each webisode. Shannon is the A character and the owner of Trueblood Collective. She is a confident, strong-willed, problem solver with a kind-heart. Maggie is the B character and a part-time employee at Trueblood Collective. She is quirky, laid back, forgetful, and a major foodie. Webisode one: Shannon helps a customer find confidence and a new outfit for a job interview, while Maggie is out getting a snack before lunch. Webisode two: Shannon demonstrates how high-quality her clothes are to a skeptical customer. Webisode three: Maggie secretly posts about her favorite food, cereal pizza, on Trueblood's social media which goes viral. Webisode four: Shannon handles a label error while Maggie helps a customer find clothes to fit her active lifestyle. Webisode five: Shannon gives gift ideas to a customer while helping her navigate her first experience in a real store.

Overall conventions

Trueblood Collective Webisodes are a comedy-drama, or dramedy, take on branded entertainment content. Throughout each webisode, different customers come into Trueblood, a small boutique, looking for style expertise. During the development stage of the production process, I reflected on many different shows with women successfully owning a business. Each show followed the conventions of the comedy-drama genre. Creeber (2004) states this genre, "blends generic modes of soap opera, drama, and comedy to engage with individualized or "micro" identity politics around gender, sexuality, and community," (p. 115). This echoes my intent for each webisode, to provide entertaining content through drama and comedy while combating societal identity stereotypes around women business owners. Additionally, this is furthered by Havas and Sulimma (2020) who explain female-centered dramedies, "offer a particularly useful case study to unpick the combined deployment of generic blending and identity politics, since these female-centered series emphatically use both comedy's cringe tradition, prestige drama's characterization methods, and foregrounded political commentary," (p.77). Each webisode was written to have elements of comedy, drama, and subtle commentary showing Shannon as a successful business owner.

Once a logical genre was identified, I added conventions of it to each webisode along with incorporating branded entertainment trends. As mentioned above, the generic blending of comedy and drama is commonly used. This left me with room to implement specific elements that would best fit Trueblood's brand in each webisode. One element of a dramedy that I pulled from is the focus on relationship building through minor everyday conflicts that are resolved in each episode (Havas and Sulimma, 2020). For example, in webisode one the main conflict was a customer looking for a job interview outfit, but also feeling unsure if she was qualified for the

job. This fits the genre as it is a conflict almost everyone faces. Shannon resolves this conflict with reassuring words (relationship building) and by helping the customer find a new outfit she feels confident in.

Another area way I establishing logic was by matching webisodes to current branded entertainment trends. Choi, Bang, Wojdynski, Lee, and Keib (2018) state, "branded entertainment videos typically expose the products or brands in the videos in an attempt to transfer the positive emotions evoked by the entertainment video to the brand," (p. 18). I focused each webisode around a brand-positive problem that represents Trueblood employees as competent style experts. For example, webisode four went through several edits before I could find the appropriate brand-positive problem. I originally wrote the main conflict as an indecisive customer that made annoyed Maggie and drove her to get Shannon's help. However, this did not represent the level of customer service that Trueblood's brand demonstrates, nor was it brand-positive. Therefore, by making the conflict involve an active customer that needed an outfit to fit her dynamic lifestyle I kept the webisode brand-positive.

One other branded entertainment trend that I followed was the length of each webisode. Typical dramedies are a network 60 which are around 44 minutes of screen time (Havas and Sulimma, 2020). But, because each webisode was created for the web, I choose to follow the mode rather than genre. I made short format, two-minute webisodes. Short format is used most on webisodes because people lose interest fast online (Tuomi, 2010). Therefore, I focused on writing fast-paced dialogue, with planned points of equilibrium and disequilibrium (Kozloff, 1992) to keep viewers interested.

The last convention important to each webisode was the visual style. The paradigmatic element of location was a big part of this. As mentioned earlier, I choose to shoot each webisode

in Trueblood boutique to give the authentic experience of shopping there, but this was also a stylistic choice. The interior of Trueblood is vibrant and organized, which indicates to viewers that it is a great place to shop. If the interior was not stylish, then I would have chosen to film in other locations as well. I spell out these paradigmatic choices more in the *mise en scene* and production elements sections. Additionally, the syntagmatic sequence of each webisode was important. Each webisode begins with the exterior of Trueblood, then moves to an establishing, coverage shot of Trueblood employees. When signifying time had passed, I added in a transitional video of a product with the Trueblood tag on it. Each of these choices were strategically made to visually represent cohesive content (Fiske, 1987). I explain these syntagmatic choices more in the narrative section.

Production Cycle

Each phase of the production cycle was crucial in created webisodes that followed brand, theory, and genre. These phases include development and pre-production, production, and post-production. A unique aspect of this project was how I was at different points of the production process for each webisode. For example, when I was editing webisode one, I was filming webisodes two and three, while writing webisodes four and five. I will briefly explain this and what I did in each phase.

The development and pre-production phase involved a significant amount of time and planning. This phase included mapping the genre, character development, drafting scripts, and making shot lists for each webisode (see Appendix B). While mapping the genre I took notes of both narrative, character, and production elements in *Gilmore Girls, Grace and Frankie,* and *Workin' Moms.* I noted aspects like the typical stories told, styling, speech, core ideals of the main characters, customer types, and how each show positively represented a woman running a

business. After I mapped the genre, I began developing the main characters and writing rough drafts of each webisode script. I started each script by establishing the main arc and at least two other moments of equilibrium and disequilibrium. These scripts went through at least two edits each and many ideas were scrapped to create the best webisodes. Once the scripts were finalized, I went through each and made a shot list of everything I would need to get footage of when in the production phase. I wrote the first webisode and moved into the production phase for it. However, I did not finalize any other scripts at this point. I decided to film webisode one and learn from it so I could implement changes to the other scripts as needed.

The production phase included aspects like casting, gathering props and camera equipment, costuming, rehearsing, and filming. Casting was a challenge that I break down further in the character section. Gathering props and costuming was done with the Trueblood brand and comedy-drama genre in mind. Rehearsing included a table read of the scripts. Once everyone was comfortable with their lines, we combined the acting and dialogue elements and did a dry run. I gave acting and dialogue cues and blocked each scene. Finally, I began the filming process which took a lot of energy and focus because I wore many hats as the only director on most of the shoots. I ensured I captured every shot on the shot list and more because as the saying goes, you cannot spell post without options. I explain the rehearsing and filming process a bit more in the production element section.

The post-production phase included aspects like logging and editing footage. Logging involved writing down a description of the shot, the action in the scene, *mise en scene,* and shot composition for each video file (see Appendix C). This helps to organize the footage and identify the best files. After logging, I began the editing process. While editing webisode one, I began filming webisodes two and three. This helped me to catch any errors in shot composition or

camera settings that I made while filming to avoid making the same mistakes in other webisodes. When editing, I went through an assembly, fine, and final edit for each webisode. The final edits are where I focused on mirroring stylistic choices guided by the dramedy genre. I discuss the more technical aspects of post-production in the production elements section.

Narrative

Narrative was established in each webisode with arc, coherence, causality, and conflict. To keep each narrative engaging (Kozloff, 1992) they were at least two points of disequilibrium and equilibrium, or conflict and resolution, per webisode. As mentioned above a unique aspect of this project was how I was at different points of the production process for each webisode. This allowed me to test what worked in the first few episodes, especially narrative aspects, and make changes to scripts as I went. I will explain the narrative choices I made based on theory, genre, and brand in each webisode.

The main arc for webisode one was building self-confidence for the customer. The main narrative begins after the customer hesitantly entered the store and began talking with Shannon. The customer disclosed that she was looking for an outfit to wear to a job interview but followed up that she was not sure she was qualified for the job (disequilibrium). This led Shannon to reply if they asked you there for an interview so you must have the qualifications. Then, Shannon suggested they begin looking for an outfit. After two attempts to find the perfect outfit, Shannon helped the customer find something bold and polished (equilibrium). The final resolution occurred when the character found an outfit that she felt confident in which adds coherence and causality to the start of the webisode.

Webisode one also had a b-story that added elements of coherence, causality, and conflict. The webisode began with disequilibrium because Maggie and Shannon were unsure

what to eat for lunch. Equilibrium occurred when they decided to get pizza for lunch. Maggie

then left to get a snack to hold her over until lunch. Maggie's love of food became an arc for her

character in this webisode and each of the others she was in, which ties into the comedy-drama

genre. After Maggie left, the main narrative plays out. Then, when Shannon began to ring up the

customer, Maggie returned. This syntagmatic choice (Fiske, 1987) added coherence and

causality as she stated she was going to get a snack and would return later. If Maggie never

returned in this webisode, it would have left a hole in the b-story. Also, when Maggie returned

Shannon tied the narrative back into the customer's job interview and asked Maggie to offer

some advice. Maggie recommended the customer get pizza after, then followed up with their

need to go get their pizza for lunch. Maggie and Shannon's earlier conversation about pizza

caused Maggie to mention this again.

Webisode two began with the b-story of Shannon talking to Maggie on the phone.

Maggie requested to have Saturday off work for her cat's birthday. Maggie's love for cats was

another arc for her character throughout several webisodes. Again, this quirky interest played

into the comedy-drama genre. Shannon kept getting phone calls from Maggie as she was trying

to fold shirts, which led Shannon to become frustrated with Maggie. When the phone rang a third

time, Shannon expected it to be Maggie, but it was the customer from webisode one stating she

got the job. This added an element of coherence from webisode one to show that although each

webisode followed an episodic structure, they still build on each other.

The main arc for webisode two was showing the quality of Trueblood clothing, one of the

primary strengths of the Trueblood brand. The narrative began after Shannon's phone

conversations when a customer stomped into the boutique and thrust worn-out jeans in

Shannon's face. The customer was upset her jeans wore out so fast and asked if Trueblood

clothes are better made (disequilibrium). Shannon picked up a pair of jeans and rather than just

telling the customer about the quality had the customer pull, stomp, and throw the jeans around.

The customer decided Trueblood clothes are high quality, ending the webisode in equilibrium.

Before the episode ended, the customer stated she was trying to find a new outfit for her friend's

cat's birthday on Saturday. This enhanced coherence and causality by connecting back to the

beginning of the webisode when Shannon was on the phone with Maggie. The narrative structure

was a theory-based decision to follow semiotics as I made a syntagmatic choice through the

sequencing of events (Fiske, 1987).

Webisode three went through many edits during the development and pre-production

phases. I wanted to show how the boutique was organized and easy to navigate, as this was one

of the strength's Shannon mentioned. However, instead of overtly mentioning this and spending

a whole episode spelling it out to viewers, I showed the store's organization by filming in

different areas. So, I changed the main arc of the webisode to focus on a sweater sale that was

promoted on social media. This webisode also emphasized the B character as Maggie was the

main employee working and Shannon was in the back working on higher-level business

operations.

While there are many elements of narrative demonstrated in webisode three, I will focus

on how cereal pizza demonstrates the main causality and coherence in the webisode. The

webisode began with Maggie entering the store holding coffee cups and a pizza box. Shannon

greeted Maggie, but Maggie said her energy was off today (disequilibrium). Shannon replied that

maybe her energy was off because she was eating cereal pizza (equilibrium). This implied that

cereal pizza was a breakfast food that Maggie ate often. I chose this because in webisode one

Maggie wanted pizza for lunch and I wanted her to bring in a new eccentric food to this

webisode. The webisode continued with Shannon stating she needed a hashtag for a sweater post (disequilibrium). Maggie thought Shannon's idea was lame and insisted Shannon take a picture of her holding the pizza box, wearing a Trueblood sweater. Shannon took her picture and said she looked too ridiculous to post it, then went to the back to decide what to post. Maggie posted the photo of herself anyways and came up with the #cerealpizza (equilibrium). The hashtag became the focus of the webisode as it brought in new customers who also loved cereal pizza and sweaters. Again, this sequencing of events was based on semiotics and syntagmatic elements (Fiske, 1987). This webisode was when I finally felt I had written a narrative and jokes that worked. Since I was still in the writing phase for webisode's four and five when I filmed this, I was able to implement similar narrative and jokes in those.

Webisode four began with Shannon and Maggie unboxing a new shipment of clothes. Maggie noticed the clothing labels were incorrect (disequilibrium), a problem Shannon had dealt with before. The labels were for Truemuscle Collective instead of Trueblood. Shannon decided to handle the problem by calling the manufacturer. She stated she better do this before the store turned into a gym. The webisode ended with Shannon and Maggie discussing the label problem. Shannon fixed the problem and got 20% off the order, restoring equilibrium. This specific logistic problem was inspired by *Grace and Frankie,* as Grace dealt with a similar problem and handled it the same way. Also, this demonstrated Shannon as a competent business owner. I added one piece of coherence from webisode four to the end of this when Maggie stated she was happy the store did not turn into a gym because she liked cereal pizza too much.

The main arc for webisode four was showing how Trueblood had a style for every story and excellent customer service to match. The customer needed an outfit that was stylish but still fit her active lifestyle (disequilibrium). Maggie had the perfect outfit idea and the customer tried

it on. However, the customer insisted on completing a fit test in the outfit before buying it. I added the fit test as a comedic element that showed just how far customers go to make sure clothes meet their needs. The fit test included jogging in place, lunging, and stretching. Maggie stood by the customer and happily let her fit test the outfit, which the customer ended up loving (equilibrium). This idea added coherence to the labeling mistake at the beginning of the webisode because showed the boutique as if it were turning into a gym.

Webisode five began with Shannon noticing an unclothed mannequin (disequilibrium). When she noticed, Shannon sighed and said, Maggie. This suggested Maggie was asked to dress the mannequin but forgot as she typically does which caused Shannon to put a shirt on the mannequin (equilibrium). This scene added coherence to the end of the webisode as the customer was shopping in a boutique for the first time. When she saw the mannequin, she was intrigued and asked Shannon if it was a piece of modern art.

The main arc for webisode five was a customer shopping in a boutique for the first time because she needed a gift for her friend (disequilibrium). This was the customer's first time shopping in a store as she always ordered online. The narrative was established by the customer bringing in a baby-sized onesie and stating that she bought it online for her friend but she thought it might be too small. Shannon agreed and asked what kind of gift the customer had in mind. The customer read a product description on her phone but was unsure what she wanted. From that point, Shannon explained everything from what a super soft plush shirt would feel like to the fact that you can try clothes on in a real store. The customer found a gift she thought her friend would like and left the boutique with a newfound love of real stores (equilibrium).

Characters

In television and video, characters embody central ideas that make each narrative feel real and add meaning to stories. Every production has main characters and secondary characters. The two main, recurring characters in my webisodes are Shannon and Maggie. The customers are all secondary characters. Primary characters appear numerous times throughout a narrative, while secondary characters play supporting roles and appear in fewer scenes. This was a strategic casting choice as Shannon and Maggie were available to act more often, while the customer characters were harder to find and cast. So, I chose not to make any customer a primary character as it would have potentially caused the shooting schedule to go off track.

The A character in each webisode was Shannon, the owner of Trueblood Collective. Shannon was modeled off of Lorelai from *Gilmore Girls,* Grace from *Grace and Frankie*, Kate from *Workin' Moms,* and herself as a business owner. The main ideals these characters embody are confidence, strong will, problem-solving, and kindness. Luckily, Shannon naturally demonstrates these ideals so this character fits her personality well. Shannon wore casual, stylish clothes to match her personal style and Lorelai Gilmore's typical costuming. Also, this style matches the boutique setting well. Grace from *Grace and Frankie* and Kate from *Workin' Mom* typically wore formal business attire that would not match Shannon's role as a boutique business-owner. Shannon was constantly seen smiling and happy to be at work. However, she got a serious, business face when a problem developed. Shannon loves pizza, which was one reason she got along well with Maggie. Shannon always found the perfect way to solve problems, whether that be how to style a mannequin or a bigger business issue.

The B character in webisodes one, three, and four was Maggie, a part-time employee at Trueblood Collective. Her character was modeled off of Sookie from *Gilmore Girls,* Frankie from *Grace and Frankie*, and Rosie from *Workin' Moms*. The main ideals these characters

embody are quirky, laid back, and forgetful. Maggie also wore casual, stylish clothes to match

the boutique setting. Frankie from *Grace and Frankie* guided this decision, she did not change

her personal style because of the business setting. Therefore, I modeled Maggie to show

glimpses of her personal style as well. Maggie was often smiling as she loves her job and

building relationships with customers. But, her quirkiness gets the best of her at times and she

can be seen with confused or strange faces. Maggie loves pizza in any form, playing with her cat

Winston, and taking the more than occasional nap.

In webisode one, Shannon and Maggie began with their usual banter, this occasion it

revolved around what to eat for lunch. Of course, they both decided on their favorite food, pizza.

Shannon demonstrated her confident, but friendly nature throughout the webisode by greeting

the customer and finding her the perfect outfit, even though it took three tries. Maggie showed

her quirky and laid-back ideals by leaving work to get a snack right before her lunch break.

Additionally, when asked for professional advice she turned to food for the answer.

The customer in webisode one embodied the ideology that confidence comes with a new

outfit. She had an upcoming job interview that she did not think she was qualified for, which was

why she came into the store. She appeared hesitant and unsure during the first half of the

webisode. As Shannon helped her find the perfect outfit, her confidence grew. This was

demonstrated by her picking out the final piece she ended up purchasing. While the customer

was indecisive about what she wanted at first, she ended by stating that her outfit was perfect.

Webisode two focused on building Shannon's character as Maggie did not make an

appearance. Shannon showed her kindness and strong-will when on the phone with Maggie. She

let Maggie have Saturday off for her cat's birthday. But, when Maggie continued to call Shannon

for silly reasons, Shannon decisively said she cannot talk as she had tasks to complete around the

boutique. Also, this back and forth between Shannon and Maggie was a large part of their character's friendship as it demonstrated how they balance each other out. Shannon's confidence was shown throughout the episode as she let her customer mistreat a pair of jeans. She was confident that the quality test would not damage the product, but it would instead demonstrate how high quality the jeans are.

The customer in webisode two embodied the ideology that some clothing stores are just after a profit. She came into Trueblood skeptical of the clothing quality because she had experienced clothing that wore out after one wash. The customer sighed and stomped into the store to demonstrate her frustration. However, after Shannon showed her the quality of Trueblood clothes her demeanor changed. The customer began to smile and consider that some clothing stores care about their customers more than making a quick buck. By the end of the webisode, the customer had opened up and began to trust Shannon.

Webisode three focused on building Maggie's character as Shannon only made two brief appearances. This strategic choice to occasionally switch the B character to the A character is a common television convention. Again, the two are seen joking around with quick dialogue to demonstrate their growing friendship. Maggie's quirkiness was one of the main ideals she embodied in this webisode as her cereal pizza made its debut. Customers entered the store because of the cereal pizza post and Maggie greeted them all warmly by smiling and chatting with them. Also, in this webisode, Maggie revealed she was a cat person. When a customer states they are a dog person, her quirkiness almost got the best of her, but she remained friendly because the customer loved cereal pizza.

There are three customer characters in webisode three. Because of this, each customer interaction was shorter than previous webisodes so these customers are less developed. Customer

one was a shy, quiet, sweater lover. She wore layers of sweaters but comes into to Trueblood to buy more. The customer states her purpose for coming into the boutique and then silently nods to Maggie demonstrating she was shy and quiet. Customer two was a cereal pizza lover, who was energetic and loud. Maggie and customer two have a spirited discussion about cereal pizza. Customer two used many hand gestures and spoke loudly to show her energetic and noisy ideals. Customer three loved dogs, sweaters, and social media. She came into the store because the hashtag had gone viral and she needed to be in on the latest trend.

Webisode four again focused on developing both Shannon and Maggie's characters. The webisode began with a similar back and forth between the two demonstrating their growing friendship. While Shannon solved the higher-level business issue, Maggie handled the front. This showed that the two characters balanced each other out. Maggie embodied her laid back trait and demonstrated her love for naps during this episode. While the customer was even more eccentric than Maggie, she did not mind and worked to ensure the customer was happy. Maggie mentioned naps several times and even had a line where she referenced her favorite food, cereal pizza. This was the last webisode that Maggie appeared in. From webisode one to this point, she had grown tremendously while developing interests and specific quirks with each webisode. Even though the actress that played Maggie was not comfortable in front of the camera at first, by this webisode, she acted naturally and fluently delivered lines.

The customer character in webisode four went through several changes during the development process. At first, the customer embodied the ideals of an extreme fitness fanatic, to the point where she was unlikable. While I wanted this character to be funny and eccentric, I did not want the customers to be unrelatable. Each customer character needed to be written so that viewers could envision themselves as a customer. Also, I needed to ensure the actresses would

not feel like they were the butt of the joke. So, I switched the customer to be less focused on shaming others for not being as fit as her, to be a more balanced fit person. For example, one of the customer's lines was that rest is equally as important for recovery. Also, rather than being completely destructive during the fit test, the customer did the fit test in place. Each decision was to make the customer more relatable and likable.

Webisode five focused on rounding out Shannon's character. While Maggie did not appear in the webisode, Shannon referenced her, and her forgetful tendencies, at the beginning of the webisode. Throughout, Shannon demonstrated her kindness and problem-solving. While the customer was skeptical about shopping in-store, Shannon was friendly and welcomed the customer. In the webisode, the customer quizzed Shannon about different aspects of shopping and had several problems. Shannon answered each question and used her problem-solving ideals to help the customer come to a solution. From webisode one to this point, Shannon's character had grown tremendously while demonstrating she was a likable, competent business owner. One of the challenges in filming was finding actress, Shannon herself was not thrilled about acting but by this webisode, she opened up on camera and worked well with every actress.

The customer character in webisode five embodied the ideology that online shopping was horrible, but she had never shopped in-store before. She was a teenage girl who spoke in online lingo and was dryly enthusiastic. For example, she said clothing sizes online are "trash" and that her "BFF will tots" love her gift. When she was excited about free returns, she slightly smiled but did not show much change in vocal inflection. Also, the customer looked at her phone often during the face-to-face conversation but did not seem to miss any it.

Mise en scene

Each webisode takes place inside Trueblood Collective and each part of *mise en scene* had to reflect the brand. This includes settings, props, lighting, costuming, and any other small details. All of the webisodes had a cohesive look and feel, even though small elements changed in each. These stylistic choices are common in the dramedy genre. For example, *Gilmore Girls, Grace and Frankie,* and *Workin' Moms* each are well-staged and have complex aesthetics to give them the look and feel of a comedy-drama.

Webisode one, and each webisode, began with a close up of the Trueblood Collective exterior sign. While I had intended to film a different style of exterior shot for each webisode, I discovered the windows on the outside of Trueblood reflect everything and did not give off the look I wanted. Therefore, during the editing process of this webisode, I decided that using the same close-up, bright shot would work best.

As mentioned in the character section, Shannon and Maggie wore stylish clothes that fit the boutique setting. This includes light makeup and a casual hairstyle, which was how they both were styled in every webisode. The customer wore basic clothes one would wear when running errands or going shopping. However, her costuming changed as she tried potential interview clothes on. Shannon and I decided to have the customer try on two shirts, one that was not professional dress and a second that was. Then, we picked a blazer to go over the professional shirt to make the outfit look even more sophisticated. These choices were intentional to show viewers that Trueblood had options for professional wear.

One element of *mise en scene* missing in webisode one is close up shots of each dialogue scene on the x and y-axis. While I shot close-ups of Shannon, I failed to shoot close-ups of the customer. This element was crucial to give the webisodes the look of comedy-drama TV shows (Zettl, 2011). Also, these close-ups are important during the editing process to ensure continuity

when cutting between clips. Since I shot this webisode first and reviewed it before filming the rest, I was able to fix this mistake in webisode two through five.

Based on the minor filming error, webisode two was the first webisode where scenes were set up with an establishing, coverage shot. Then, they cut back and forth between close-ups of each character as they spoke. Sometimes a character would speak before you could hear them, this would help the dialogue move faster. Additionally, I added in reaction shots if one of the characters spoke for more than three seconds. As mentioned above, this element of *mise en scene* is vital to give the webisodes the look and feel of comedy-drama TV shows (Zettl, 2011).

One specific aspect of *mise en scene* unique to webisode two is the props. The customer enters the scene holding a worn-out pair of jeans. The jeans were needed to visually demonstrate to viewers what the customer was upset about. The other prop is the jeans from Trueblood. Shannon and I decided on jeans because it is difficult to find quality jeans anywhere. Also, the jeans at Trueblood are known for being high quality and could withstand several takes during the quality test.

In webisode three, props were another important factor. Maggie enters holding two coffee cups and a pizza box. The coffee cups were an important prop to visualize the webisode was beginning early in the business day. As the video progressed, the coffee cups were gone to show the passing of time. Also, the pizza box was essential in setting up the cereal pizza joke. While the characters talked about cereal pizza during their dialogue, visually showing a pizza box helps viewers to connect the abstract idea. Another prop that helped set up the look and feel of the webisode was Shannon's phone. She used this to take a picture of Maggie and then Maggie used Shannon's phone to post on social media. As the social media post was what drove the narrative, using a phone as a prop helped to push this scene forward.

Costuming was another important part of *mise en scene* in webisode three. While the costuming of Shannon and Maggie remains the same as mentioned, the styling of each customer was important. As mentioned in the character section, customer one's character revolved around her love for sweaters. She also wore glasses and a beanie. This was important as customer one and customer three are the same person but styled and acted as different customers. Customer three did not wear glasses or a beanie and had on a completely different outfit. Since finding actresses was one of my biggest challenges, I had to get creative with the styling of customers in this webisode to achieve the look and feel of a busy store. Customer two was styled with basic clothes one would wear when running errands or going shopping.

Webisode four had many similar elements of *mise en scene* as previously mentioned. One difference was the styling of the customer. Since the customer was written to be a runner and live an active lifestyle, she wore athletic clothing, her hair up, and a fitness watch. Additionally, Shannon and I chose a specific outfit for the customer to try on that would be comfortable, stylish, and fit an active lifestyle.

Props were an important aspect of *mise en scene* in webisode five. The webisode began with an undressed mannequin. Shannon chose a stylish top that would be easy to put on and placed it on the rack behind the mannequin. This helped the scene where she dressed the mannequin flow better. Also, the prop at the beginning helped to set up the joke at the end of the webisode. Another important prop in this webisode was the customer's phone. This helped to build the customer's character and give the look of an actual customer showing Shannon an online product she was hoping to find something similar to. Also, the baby-sized onesie was a needed prop. This was the reason the customer came into the store because if she had received a normal size shirt, then she would not need a new gift for her friend. Additionally, I chose the

baby shirt rather than a smaller adult shirt to dramatize this prop and add aspects of comedy to the scene. The close-up shot of Shannon holding the baby shirt also helped to make the joke.

Production elements

This section will be broken down slightly differently from previous sections since most of the production elements took place during the production and post-production phases. However, I planned the production process during pre-production. During this phase, I identified the actresses needed in each webisode. Then, I coordinated and scheduled the shoot days and times. Also, I decided what production equipment was necessary for each shoot. The equipment I used included a DSLR camera, 50 mm lens, 18-55 mm lens, rode microphone, clapboard, tripod, two light kits, and a reflector. I rented the equipment I needed and transported it to each shoot. When props were needed, I also had to identify and bring them. Finally, I ensured scripts were finalized, sent scripts to the actresses ahead of time, created a shot list, and printed copies to bring to each shoot.

During production, I first set up the equipment. The entire project was filmed at 24 frames per second which is standard to give video a filmic look (Elliot, 1990). Each shot was stabilized with a tripod to look stable and professional. I used two main light sources, a key and a fill light to ensure every shot was well light and bright. The lighting was flat, high key lighting which is common for the comedy genre as it creates a cheerful look (Zettl, 2011). Also, because Trueblood has many windows that create natural light I used a reflector when shooting in the day. Therefore, the sun became the key light and the reflector acted as the fill.

When the equipment was set up, the actresses read through scripts off-camera and at this point I tested audio. After everyone felt comfortable with their lines, we combined the acting and dialogue elements and did a dry run. I gave acting and dialogue cues and blocked each scene.

Since the actresses did not have much acting experience, a specific cue I gave often was to make sure they faced the camera. I told them to imagine they have a logo on the front of their shirt and try to have it always squared up with the camera. Finally, I would make lighting adjustments then began to film.

As mentioned above, I filmed coverage, close-ups from the x and y-axis, and hides of every scene. Coverage is typically a wide shot and establishes the scene for audiences. Coverage shots are also important because if something goes wrong with the close-up shots, it can always be cut back to. Every webisode began with the exterior establishing shot and then cut to a coverage shot to set up each scene (Zettl, 2011). Shots from x and y-axis are close-up and meant to show the expressions of the actresses. These shots add variety and interest to the production as viewers would get bored of watching the same one wide shot. Also, both angles are needed to cut back and forth between each scene to avoid jump cuts and help to maintain continuity (Zettl, 2011). This was especially important as I used a single-camera to film and had to shoot every shot individually. Hides are shot in case something goes wrong with all of the footage (Zettl, 2011). These shots are of nondescript exposition that can be cut to at any point in time.

Each webisode was filmed with the 18-55 mm lens. Continuity between these different takes had to be exact, to give the appearance that they were not separate takes. When filming, I looked through the script and shot list, so I did not forget to film anything. Also, I filmed transitional videos of different products around the boutique with a 55 mm lens. This lens worked better for these shots as they were close up and more cinematic than the dialogue shots (Zettl, 2011).

The filming and directing process was a challenge to do alone. When filming webisodes one, two, and three I struggled to move equipment, set up scenes, give directing cues, and film

everything. This led me to find a director of photography for webisode four. She helped to move equipment, set up each scene, and gave blocking advice. During the scene where the customer enters, she helped decide where Maggie would stand when the customer ran by. Then, she came up with the idea that Maggie should slide to the left third to fill the space and the customer would take the right third. This helped so that Maggie was not standing awkwardly while the customer ran and so the customer did not have to run in front of Maggie across the frame. The director of photography let me focus on camera settings, lighting, and dialogue which led to this webisode being one of the best quality.

        In post-production, I logged each video to track the description, action, composition, and any other notes for each scene. Once I identified the best files, I imported them into Adobe Premiere where I edited each webisode. During this phase, I went through an assembly, fine, and final edit for each webisode. The assembly edit consisted of putting each video into timeline and editing together the basic dialogue scenes. At this point, I identified any pickup shots I might have missed during the production phase and would film those. In the fine edit, I went through each webisode to comb through the audio to make sure everything sounded right. Then, I added in the reaction and pickup shots. Adding close-up reactions shots throughout dialogue scenes is common in dramedies and pulls the viewer in by adding emphasis to the emotions of a character. Once everything looked and sounded right, I completed the final edit. This included adding in the introduction video of the exterior of Trueblood, transition videos when needed to symbolize a passing of time, music, sound effects, and a credit slate. The shot of the exterior sign and the transition videos of the Trueblood tags were similarly filmed to focus in on Trueblood logo. This filming technique is another convention of the comedy-drama genre.

Music was important in making each webisode look like a comedy-drama. I tried out several different songs that were upbeat and sounded similar to what was used in *Gilmore Girls, Grace and Frankie,* and *Workin' Moms*. Finally, I found the perfect song when editing webisode four which I then put into each other webisode.

The closing scene and credit slate were another production element that I played around with during the first webisodes. Around webisode four or five I finally found a sequence I liked. I wanted the closing scene to hold at the end, but in most of the webisodes, one of the actresses would look at the camera. So, I decided to put a picture of the last shot and hold on that for a few seconds. Then, I faded into the credit slate to signify the webisode was ending. For this, I wanted something simple with only the name of the show and my name. This was inspired by the simplistic title slate in *Workin' Moms.* I choose to use a script font similar to the font of the Trueblood logo and a simple sans serif font for my name.

Sound effects were another key element I added in the final edit. In each webisode, I added the door ringing when a customer entered. Webisode two I added the phone ringing in the first scene. Webisode three and five I added a small click each time someone took a photo. These were important to give the look that the actresses were doing what they appeared to be. The sound effects were all subtle and I lowered the volume on them significantly so they appeared in the background like they would off camera.

The final step in post-production was color correcting each webisode. Due to Trueblood's abundance of natural light, some of the webisodes came out with a very cool, blue tone. This gave off a look that was unnatural and did not match the comedy-drama genre (Zettl, 2011). So, I added a layer with slight color correction to add warmth to each of the webisodes. This gave them a look that was closer to the natural tones of the store.

Project implications

The completion of this project has allowed me to reach the two primary goals: to create branded entertainment for a woman business owner who does not have time to create all of her content and in that content to marry the two contradictory signs of woman and business owner. The completion of these goals also addresses and begins to breakdown two challenges women business owners face.

The creation of low-budget branded entertainment during this project provides a theoretical guide for business owners. While Shannon and many business owners partake in sale driven content creation, the webisodes show that relational and experience-driven content is an area that still needs to be explored. Although this kind of content is complex and many small business owners may not have the time our resources to create it, there is still a space for branded entertainment in communication plans for organizations that can afford it. Choi et. al (2018) state this type of entertainment increases brand awareness and attitude in different ways than traditional branding strategies. Creating branded content that does not overtly push sales, but still positively and uniquely displays a brand is an area that continues to grow. While most research shows branded entertainment works best with the audiovisual mode (de Aguilera-Moyano et al., 2015), small business owners might find success in scaling down branded entertainment to a different mode. Because creating graphic and photo-based content takes less equipment, planning, and technical knowledge to create, this would be an interesting approach to take when creating branded entertainment, but this still needs more research to prove its effectiveness. Overall, it is essential to use theory such as semiotics to bolster this content to create culturally charged understanding. These webisodes display semiotics role in video that speaks to the

importance of choosing strategic culturally charged second-order signification to create impactful meaning (Bignell, 2002).

Additionally, this project begins the process of marrying the two contradictory signs of woman and business owner. It takes time and repeated representation to change an engrained societal narrative like the stereotypes around women business owners. My project showed Shannon effectively running her business in each webisode. This creates resonant meaning and combats gender stereotypes to join in the conversation to marry these two contradictory signs. I hope to inspire other women who are business owners, considering running a business, or in media production to keep the conversation going. When we ignore these narratives, it only feeds the stereotypes. Women are equally capable of owning a successful business.

Future direction

This project has helped me narrow down where I see myself as a future communication producer and scholar. I found a place where I can effectively mix my skills in creative and strategic communication projects. By planning, developing, and creating these webisodes and thesis, I learned how to take an idea, then use theory, television conventions, and brand to turn it into successful content.

One specific area from this project I will implement in my future work is how semiotics theory informs written narrative. I plan to work in communication and content creation which will allow me to develop creative pieces for a variety of modes. Semiotics and narrative will help guide my decisions during the creative process because of their role in meaning-making, specifically when it comes to marrying sign systems. As Fiske (1987) states, "Narrative structure demonstrates that people and places are not random, but . . . combine the paradigmatic sense of places and people with the syntagmatic sense of events and time into a grand signifying pattern"

(p. 129). My skills in joining sign systems through writing and production will translate no matter which mode I ultimately end up creating content for. If I am pitching a story idea or producing a branded video my decisions will be rooted in sign systems and storytelling.

Another concept I learned from this project that I will add to my future work is a deeper understanding of television conventions. After spending months viewing and studying television, I learned that it is the foundation for all branded entertainment. From characterization to storytelling, I noticed television conventions in every piece of branded content I saw and created. Also, I learned how women producers and writers have communicated about gender issues through their decades of work. I will continue to learn from these producers and writers and keep developing my voice when it comes to communicating about these complex issues. Overall, my experience as a graduate student and my creative thesis have provided me with the experience and education to take on my future goals that will benefit me and society.

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Appendix A

Webisode scripts

Trueblood Collective

Webisode 1

By

Payton Blakney

Trueblood Collective
Webisode 1

Cast List

Shannon .... Shannon Trueblood

Maggie .... Maiya Eskew

Customer .... Madalyn

<u>Trueblood Collective</u>

<u>Webisode 1</u>

EXT. TRUEBLOOD BUILDING - DAY

Two women are working in Trueblood Collective, a stylish boutique. MAGGIE, Trueblood employee, laidback, free-spirited, and quirky. SHANNON, owner of Trueblood, confident, practical, but friendly.

      MAGGIE
   (sighs)I'm getting hungry. What
   should we get for lunch?

      SHANNON
   Hmmm, we could get salads, tacos, or
   (pause, then enthusiastically) I
   KNOW! (point at MAGGIE)

     MAGGIE & SHANNON
   Pizza (both grin at each other)

      MAGGIE
   Marvelous. I'm going to run and grab
   a snack to hold me over. Let's go
   when I get back.

MAGGIE exits (door chimes).

SHANNON continues tiding up. Door rings as a CUSTOMER enters and quickly starts walking around

      SHANNON
   Hello. (slight pause, looks at
   customer) You look like you're on a
   mission.

      CUSTOMER
   (stops walking to talk)Yes I'm
   looking for something to wear to a
   job interview.

      Shannon
   What kind of job is it?

      CUSTOMER
   It's a business administrative
   position at this trendy tech firm.
   (continues quickly and anxiously) I'm
   not sure if I'm qualified for it.

                         SHANNON
               If they asked you there for an
               interview that means you are
               qualified. Let's look around.
               (gestures around).

Both begin looking at racks.

                         CUSTOMER
               (still panicking, but finds cute
               dress) Um, this could work.

                         SHANNON
               Cute! Go ahead and try it on.

CUSTOMER takes clothes and goes into fitting room… a few moments
later comes out.

                         SHANNON
               That looks great! How do you feel?

                         CUSTOMER
               (frowning) No different than before.

                         SHANNON
               Let's try something else.

                         CUSTOMER
               Yes, I am looking for something a bit
               more bold and polished.

CUSTOMER looks at rack to her side. She notices an item she
loves and points to it.

                         CUSTOMER
               Like that! I'll be right back.

                         CUT TO CUSTOMER EXITING FITTING ROOM.

                         SHANNON
               How do you feel in this one?

                         CUSTOMER
               A little better.(look down at
               outfit). It's still missing something
               though.

                         SHANNON
               (Ponder, tap chin, then light bulb)I
               know the perfect piece. Stay right
               there.

SHANNON goes to rack and comes back with a blazer.

                         CUSTOMER
          Well, third times a charm.

CUSTOMER puts on the blazer… a few moments later struts
confidently and smiling

                         CUSTOMER
          This is perfect! I feel confident,
          polished, but still bold.

                              CUT TO SHANNON RINGING UP CUSTOMER

                         SHANNON
          I wonder what's taking Maggie so
          long. She would have some great
          advice for your interview.

Door rings and MAGGIE enters

                         SHANNON
          (peaks toward entrance)There you are!

                         MAGGIE
          (from afar) Hello!

                         SHANNON
          Any advice for this young lady about
          job interviews?

                         MAGGIE
          Treat yourself to some pizza after.
          Speaking of pizza,(point to door)
          let's go get ours!

                                             FADE OUT

                    End of show

Trueblood Collective

Webisode 2

By

Payton Blakney

Trueblood Collective
Webisode 2

Cast List

Shannon .... Shannon Trueblood

Customer .... Peighton Hinote

Trueblood Collective

Webisode 2

EXT. TRUEBLOOD BUILDING

SHANNON starts folding shirt in store while talking on phone.

                    SHANNON
            Yes, Maggie you have Saturday off for
            your cat, sorry Winston's, birthday
            party. (pause)Send Winston my regards
            (hangs up)

Shannon sets phone down, moves hand away slightly, picks up same shirt to fold, and phone rings again.

                    SHANNON
            Thank you for calling Trueblood. This
            is Shan (gets cut off, rolls eyes)
            Maggie, I don't know how to style
            cat's but I guess go with something
            cat-sual.(grins) I really need to go.
            (hangs up)

Shannon moves to sets phone down again, picks up shirt, phone rings and Shannon tosses shirt down before answering.

                    SHANNON (LOOKING ANNOYED)
            Seriously, Maggie (pause) Oh, yes
            this is Shannon I'm so sorry.(pause)
            Of course you got the job! That's the
            power of a Trueblood blazer. (pause)
            Talk to you later. (hangs up)

                                  CUT TO EXT.

Doorbell rings as a CUSTOMER enters the store boldly.

                    SHANNON
            Hi. Are you on a mission for anything
            specific?

                    CUSTOMER
            Look at this.

Customer thrusts worn out jeans at Shannon

                    SHANNON
            Well these look like they've been
            through a lot.

                    CUSTOMER
          I know but, I've washed and worn them
          ONE TIME. Please tell me your clothes
          are made better than this.

SHANNON pulls jeans from the rack she is straightening and hands
it to the CUSTOMER.

                    SHANNON
          Feel these jeans.

                    CUSTOMER
          Sure they feels nice. But, how do I
          know it won't wear out faster than I
          do at the gym.

SHANNON puts the jeans on the ground.

                    SHANNON
          Go ahead and jump.

                    CUSTOMER
          Um, alright. (Customer jumps on
          jeans).

                    SHANNON
          (picks up jeans). Okay now, pull.

Customer and Shannon both pull on shirt.

                    CUSTOMER
          Hmm, that didn't seem to stretch them
          out like usual cheap jeans.

                    SHANNON
          Right, now go long. (points to
          opposite side of store)

Shannon wads shirt up and throws across store to Customer.

                    SHANNON
          Now, feel. No damage at all.

                    CUSTOMER
          (growing more friendly)Okay I'll
          bite. I am looking for a new outfit
          to wear to my friend's cat's birthday
          this Saturday.

                    SHANNON
          You must be friends with my employee
          Maggie. Follow me! I know the perfect
          thing.

Trueblood Collective

Webisode 3

By

Payton Blakney

Trueblood Collective
Webisode 3

<u>Cast List</u>

Shannon .... Shannon Trueblood

Maggie .... Maiya Eskew

Customer 1 .... Melissa Stone

Customer 2 .... Annie Pettit

Customer 3 .... Missy Stone

<u>Trueblood Collective</u>

Webisode 3

EXT. TRUEBLOOD BUILDING

SHANNON is deciding what to post on social media.
Door rings and MAGGIE enters store with coffee and pizza box.

                    SHANNON
          Good morning Maggie. How are you
          today?

MAGGIE walks toward SHANNON and hands her the cup.

                    MAGGIE
          Eh. My energy is feeling a bit off.

MAGGIE slumps into chair holding pizza box and coffee.

                    SHANNON
          Cereal pizza again today? Maybe
          that's making you feel off.

                    MAGGIE
          Don't disrespect my favorite triangle
          shaped food with it's comforting
          cereal topping.

                    SHANNON
          (sighs and gives Maggie a side eye)
          You know it upsets your stomach.

                    MAGGIE
          You are upsetting me more.

                    SHANNON
          Fine. I need a hashtag for our
          sweater post today. I'm thinking
          #sweatersale.

                    MAGGIE
          Lame.(pause) I know take a picture of
          me in my comfy sweater eating my
          comforting food. Good thing I brought
          extra for a snack!

                    SHANNON
          You're the only one that would find
          that comforting. But, you look so
          ridiculous I will take a picture.

SHANNON sets coffee down, and takes picture.

                    SHANNON
          Alright, I need to decide what to
          post. I'm going back in my office.

Shannon exits. Maggie stands up and grabs tablet Shannon took
picture on.

                    MAGGIE
          I know I'm not the only one who
          enjoys cerealized pizza and sweaters.
          #cerealpizza #comfortfood
          #comfortwear(clicks screen) Post!

                                        CUT TO EXT.

MAGGIE is working in the store. Door rings and CUSTOMER 1 enters
walks straight to Maggie.

                    MAGGIE
          Hi. Are you on a mission for anything
          specific?

                    CUSTOMER 1
          (Shows Maggie phone)Cereal Pizza. I
          need more sweaters so I can be
          comfortable when I eat my comfort
          food.

                    MAGGIE
          I guess you can never have too many.
          Follow me.

Cut to Maggie walk and Customer 1 entering frame near sweaters.

                    MAGGIE
          Here they are. (Door rings and Maggie
          turns to door) I'll be right with
          you! (turns to Cust. 1) Let me know
          if you have any questions.

Customer nods silently.

Maggie enters frame with Customer 2.

                    MAGGIE
          What brings you in today?

                    CUSTOMER 2
          You eat it too?

                    MAGGIE
          Eat what?

                    CUSTOMER 2
          Cereal pizza.

                    MAGGIE
          Only every day. With chocolate milk!

                    CUSTOMER 2
          I've been dipping my c.p. in c.m. for
          years. But, I never thought to wear a
          sweater when eating it.

                    MAGGIE
          You have to try it, comfort food in
          comfort wear. Our sweaters are over
          here.

All exit frame.

                                        CUT TO EXT.

Door rings and Customer 3 enters. Maggie is restocking and
straightening sweaters.

                    MAGGIE
          Let me guess - #cerealpizza

                    CUSTOMER 3
          Yes! Please tell me you have some
          left. My feed is normally full of dog
          pictures, but cereal pizza is taking
          over.

                    MAGGIE
          You're a dog person.(scowls) Since
          you like my favorite food, I guess we
          have a few more.(points) Here.

Shannon enters and observes all the sweaters are gone.

                    SHANNON
          Looks like my hashtag wasn't so lame
          after all.

                    MAGGIE
          (looks at Shannon) Sure. Um, just
          don't check our social media.

                                        FADE OUT

                    End of show

Trueblood Collective

Webisode 4

By

Payton Blakney

Trueblood Collective
Webisode 4

Cast List

Shannon .... Shannon Trueblood

Maggie .... Maiya Eskew

Customer .... Maria Baldwin

<u>Trueblood Collective</u>

Webisode 4

EXT. TRUEBLOOD BUILDING

Women are looking through a box of clothing. MAGGIE pulls out an item and looks at the tag inside. She looks confused.

              MAGGIE
     Um, Shannon. Did we change the name
     of our store to TrueMuscle
     Collective?

              SHANNON
     No. I better get on the phone with
     the manufacturer before our store
     turns into a gym. Can you handle the
     front?

              MAGGIE
     I've got the front. Please fix our
     labels, gyms are my nightmare.

Shannon takes box and exits frame.

                                      CUT TO INTRO

Maggie is tidying up when a CUSTOMER enters.

              MAGGIE
     Hello!

Customer jogs past Maggie out of frame, Maggie looks confused, Customer enters and stops watch.

              CUSTOMER
     Hi, sorry I was .01 away from 11
     miles. That makes 150 miles this
     week.

              MAGGIE
     Impressive. Are you looking for
     anything specific?

              CUSTOMER
     Hold on, I need to get my heart rate
     down to its resting rate, 26 beats
     per minute.

              MAGGIE
     Do you need to sit down? We have a
     really comfy chair up front, it's
     perfect for naps.

                          CUSTOMER
               I would probably fall asleep if I sit
               down. Anyway,I need a new outfit
               that's stylish but still fits my
               active lifestyle.

                          MAGGGIE
               Got it! All our active customers LOVE
               this one piece jogger. Let me get you
               a fitting room.

                                                        CUT TO EXT

Customer exits fitting room.

                          CUSTOMER
               This is adorbs. But, will it pass my
               fit test?

                          MAGGIE
               I am not sure what your fit test is,
               but it passed my nap test!

                          CUSTOMER
               Naps are equally as important. Fit
               test starting in 3, 2, 1!

Customer presses watch screen and begins lunging in place.

                          MAGGIE
               So, this is a fit test.

                          CUSTOMER
               Yes! It passes the movability test.

Customer runs out of frame.

                          MAGGIE
               Here we go again.

Customer keeps runs in front of Maggie.

                          CUSTOMER
               So far.

Runs out of frame again quickly. Maggie looks confused. Customer
re-enters frame and stops running.

                          CUSTOMER
               So good. Breathability test, check!
               Last phase.

                          MAGGIE
               What else could you need to test.

Customer in a yoga pose.

> CUSTOMER
> Flexibility! (stands from pose and
> stops watch) Fit test complete. This
> scores a 100%.

Shannon enters frame as customer tumbles out of pose.

> SHANNON
> Are you okay?

> MAGGIE
> She just fit tested our jogger. Maybe
> we *should* change our name to
> TrueMuscle Collective.

> CUSTOMER
> I like that idea!

> SHANNON
> I may be a traditionalist but I think
> we'll stick to Trueblood. Can we ring
> that up for you?

> CUT TO EXT

> MAGGIE
> So, did you get the labels fixed?

> SHANNON
> They are sending us new products with
> the correct labels (slyly) and giving
> us 20% off the order.

> MAGGIE
> Good. I like cereal pizza and naps
> too much to be TrueMuscle.

> SHANNON
> Me too. I'll stick to traditional
> pizza though.

> FADE OUT

End of show

Trueblood Collective

Webisode 5

By

Payton Blakney

Trueblood Collective
Webisode 5

Cast List

Shannon .... Shannon Trueblood

Customer .... Drew

Trueblood Collective

Webisode 5

EXT. TRUEBLOOD BUILDING – SIDE OF BUILDING PEERING INTO THE WINDOWS

SHANNON walking through store and spots an unclothed mannequin.

>   SHANNON
>   (sighs) Maggie. (pause) Well, I can't
>   leave you exposed like this. You'd
>   look great in one of our jackets.

Shannon puts clothes on the mannequin.

>   SHANNON
>   Much better! This jacket looks great
>   with your skin.

>   CUT TO INTRO

CUSTOMER enters with phone in one hand, shirt in other.

>   SHANNON
>   Hello. Are you on a mission for
>   anything specific?

>   CUSTOMER
>   I need a gift for my bestie's
>   birthday. I ordered this online, but
>   I think it's a bit small for her.

Customer hands baby shirt to Shannon.

>   SHANNON
>   A bit small? This would barely fit a
>   baby.

>   CUSTOMER
>   I know! Clothing sizes online are
>   trash. So, I'm here because I was
>   told you can *actually* see the clothes
>   before you buy them.

>   SHANNON
>   You sure can! What are you looking
>   for?

Customer begins to scroll through phone.

                         CUSTOMER
              I want a super soft plush shirt like
              this one online. Someone rates this
              10/10 on plushiness. What does that
              even mean?

Shannon pulls a soft sweater from the rack and hands it to
customer.

                         SHANNON
              I'd say this is what 10/10 plushiness
              feels like.

                         CUSTOMER
              So plushy! My BFF will tots love
              this.

                         SHANNON
              What size?

Customer holds up sweater and examines.

                         CUSTOMER
              This wasn't made for a baby so it's
              closer to what she'll need, but I
              don't remember her actual size.

                         SHANNON
              No problem! Returns are free and
              easy.

                         CUSTOMER
              Wow, free returns! And how long will
              it take to ship to me?

                         SHANNON
              This is yours to take once you pay.
              If you were keeping this for
              yourself, you could even wear it out
              of the store!

                         CUSTOMER
              Real stores are amazing! I'm getting
              two, we love to match.

Customer takes two from rack.

                         CUSTOMER
              Can I get a fitting room? I have to
              wear this right now!

                                        CUT TO EXT

Customer walks around in new sweater holding other. Then she notices the mannequin. Shannon is organizing clothes nearby.

                    CUSTOMER
          What is this? Like a piece of modern
          art or something?

                    SHANNON
          Um, yes or something.

                    CUSTOMER
          Cute (pulls out phone to take a
          picture) I am posting. Wait, this is
          the cereal pizza store!

Customer shows Shannon phone.

                    SHANNON
          (shaking head) Maggie!

                                              FADE OUT

                    End of show

Appendix B

Sample shot list

Shot list- Webisode 2

1. Coverage of Shannon on phone
    a. Close up Shannon on phone
2. Hide of Shannon folding shirts
3. Hide of Shannon picking up/hanging up phone
4. Coverage (full body if possible) of Shannon and Peighton talking until throws
    a. X – axis convo
    b. Y – axis convo
5. Coverage of last bit
    a. X- axis of convo
    b. Y-axis convo
6. Close up of jeans on ground and Peighton jumping
7. Close up of pulling jeans

Exposition:
- Exterior of Trueblood
- Wild sound phone ring
- Close-up of Trueblood tags

Appendix C

Sample log sheet

PROJECT: Webisode 2   LOG SHEET# 2

File name / (length)	Description of shot	Action in scene / *mise en scene*	Shot composition / production notes
✱ 0044	Customer enters		full
0045	" "		medium
✱ 0046	"		medium + Shannon looks
0047	Customer + Shannon meet		medium (Door reeds dringing)
0048	" " take 2		" " weird pause
✱ 0049	take 3		
0050	" " close up Shannon		Bad light