

Quality TV and the Branding of U.S. Network Television: Marketing and Promoting *Friday Night Lights*

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Branding has become indispensable to any analysis of the contemporary United States television environment. Niche marketing strategies, cable and satellite distribution, and the Internet and other digital media technologies have all worked since the 1980s to unsettle the oligopolistic dominance of the national broadcast networks, making it increasingly less feasible to draw in a truly mass audience for any one television program. While television studies scholars routinely discuss the branding and narrowcasting of cable television, however, these subjects have received much less attention in relation to network television programs and channels. This article offers a case study of the NBC series *Friday Night Lights* (2006–2011; co-produced with DirecTV from 2008–2011) an hour-long drama series set in high school football obsessed rural Texas and its transition from initially being branded as a teen football show to eventually being branded as a sophisticated Quality TV drama.¹ This transition, however, was precarious and marked by network miscues. It was also not a complete transition; that is, NBC and subsequent distributors of the series never entirely abandoned its initial brand identity, and instead attempted to negotiate the unexpected Quality TV brand of *Friday Night Lights* with its teen and sport brands and, eventually, a more fully developed image of the show as a family melodrama. As such, this study reveals the difficulties and risks of television branding and narrowcasting in this convergent, post-network era, especially for the broadcast networks when compared with cable channels.

Combining a mixture of television industry and critic discourse analysis with textual analysis, this article considers how and why television networks pursue and execute certain branding strategies. To those ends, the article begins with an overview of television branding as a practice, the prevalence of narrowcasting and niche audiences in the post-network era, and questions of taste and cultural value as revealed through popular conceptions of Quality TV and melodrama. The branding of *Friday Night Lights*—a series that ran for five seasons and a total of 76 episodes—is primarily analyzed through the network-produced paratexts designed to promote the series (e.g., ads and commercials, publicity photos, DVD sets, websites), as well as industry discourse (e.g., marketing

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campaigns, trade press, interviews with cast, crew, and network executives). I argue that broadcast networks must leave the brand identities of their programs ambiguous and porous enough so as not to exclude a potentially mass audience, and yet they nevertheless narrowcast to select niche audiences and, in doing so, reproduce fairly narrow conceptions of audience demographics and taste.

Branding, Niche Audiences, Quality TV, and Melodrama

Simply defined, a brand is the identity of a television program or network, and branding the process through which that identity is developed and communicated to the viewing public. A brand, though, is much more than a name, slogan, logo, or design; it is often conceived of as a personality—a set of associations, thoughts, feelings, attitudes—that both identifies the program or network and relates it to key constituencies (i.e., target or niche audiences). Indeed, the business and marketing literature is full of concepts like “brand experience” and “attitude branding” that point to the emotional, metaphoric, and psychological aspects of branding, and highlight a brand’s status as a symbolic or semiotic construction. Douglas B. Holt describes a conventional branding model known as “mind share,” which reduces brands to a handful of key benefits and timeless, abstract principles (e.g., safe, affordable, fun). As a result, “mind share” brands take on almost transcendental qualities, which leads Holt to liken branding to a form of mythmaking (20). Holt further asserts that brands are devoid of meaning until various “authors”—marketers, media producers, critics, audiences—tell stories about them, which circulate through society and eventually establish stable collective understandings. In addition, Holt notes that it is rare that a single brand image or story emerges; most often there are several different ones. “Over time,” Holt writes, “ideas about the product accumulate and fill the brand markers [name, logo, design, et al] with meaning. A brand is formed” (3). This concept of (television) brands as unstable cultural texts that nonetheless create frames and assign value, and which attempt to connect (television) texts to *specific* audience segments, is an important point that I will return to frequently, particularly through the discussion and analysis of paratexts.

In this contemporary age of media convergence, conglomeration, and ever-expanding multi-channel distribution, television branding has become entirely essential. Since the 1980s, a series of industrial and technological shifts have dispersed the television audience across a multiplicity of shows, channels, and viewing devices (cable and satellite television but also DVRs, DVDs, computers and the Internet, and iPods, for example). Whereas the “Big Three” broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) once dominated the American television market, these networks and all other channels must today distinguish themselves and their programming within a wide and highly competitive field. One of the most prominent industry strategies of this “post-network era,” as Amanda Lotz has termed it, is the practice of narrowcasting: targeting programming to smaller, demographically defined market segments, as opposed to a broad, mass audience of everyone from everywhere. While the networks still aim to produce series like *American Idol* (2002), *Dancing With the Stars* (2005), and *NCIS* (2003) that draw audiences in the tens of millions, they have become increasingly focused on marketing their programs toward key “niche” demographic groups. Indeed, as Lotz explains, “Although television can still function as a mass medium, in most cases it does so by aggregating a collection of niche audiences” (28). More recently, Julia Himberg has termed this brand building strategy of accumulating multiple small, targeted audiences “multicasting” (290). Still, most of the television studies research on narrowcasting and related ideas like multicasting has

focused on cable television. These concepts and strategies generally have not been articulated to U.S. network television, as I do here in this article.

While media convergence and the multi-channel era have fragmented the television audience and forced television producers and distributors to be more competitive, this situation has also increased the opportunities for marketing and promotion, especially for media conglomerates. A trend in the U.S. toward greater concentration of media ownership means that a handful of large, transnational corporations now own companies in various mass media, including television, radio, film, publishing, and the Internet (Bagdikian 3). Michael Curtin has called this new synergistic, multi-media television environment the “matrix” era, one in which media conglomerates are struggling to manage television audience behaviors and advertiser demands through marketing and distribution practices that span across a range of media. By repurposing and cross-promoting a television program via a variety of channels and platforms, networks are able to use this “matrix of media opportunities” to both raise a program’s profile and establish a distinctive brand. “Rather than assembling a mass audience,” Curtin writes, “these [network] services *accumulate* a very substantial base of users via the multiple circuits of matrix media” (15). In other words, while gaining instant, mass appeal for a show is increasingly unlikely, through the multitude of channels and media platforms now available to the broadcast networks because of convergence and conglomeration, a sizable audience can be constructed from various niche fragments.

The primary means by which television branding is created and managed is through ads, promos, and a variety of what Jonathan Gray refers to as “paratexts” (6–7). These are texts that prepare audiences for other texts, such as commercials and previews, talk show guest appearances, and product tie-ins. As Gray points out, paratexts are always at work creating and recreating the meaning of the text in the mind of the audience; they “are not simply add-ons, spinoffs, and also-rans: they create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them” (6). Indeed, these paratexts promote or extend the television show, but they also create meaning for it, often before the audience encounters the actual television show for the first time. As such, these paratexts structure the audience’s expectations for, and subsequent experience of, the text by offering certain meanings and interpretations. Particularly with regards to branding, paratexts serve to assign value and hail target audiences, informing viewers that a television series is a comedy or a drama, intended for teens or families or gay men, and so on. Therefore, any discussion of television branding must discuss paratexts because it is through them that channels and networks brand their programs, their schedules, and themselves.

In the past decade, the subject of cable channel branding has received a fair amount of attention in both the trade press and the academic field of television studies.² It has become common practice for cable channels to program for specific niche audiences, branding the entire channel according to a common target audience, genre, or theme. For example, the basic cable channel Lifetime very explicitly brands itself as a “women’s network,” particularly marketing itself toward adult women age 18 to 49 years (Lifetime Television). Likewise, the Viacom-owned BET (Black Entertainment Television) targets African American adults ages 18 to 49 years (BET Networks). Comedy Central, ESPN (Entertainment Sports Programming Network), and Food Network are examples of specialty channels that brand themselves through the exclusive presentation of specific genres or categories of programming (comedy, sports, and cooking, respectively). Still other channels, including many premium cable channels, offer a variety of original and syndicated programming that does not quite as clearly hail a specific age, gender, or

racial/ethnic group, and yet they have crafted a distinct brand identity for themselves. In the well-studied case of HBO (Home Box Office), the channel has distinguished itself through a reputation for innovative and artistically challenging original programming (Edgerton and Jones 318 19). Such programming caters, however, to a particularly classed, “upscale” demographic: affluent, well-educated, upper-middle class professionals, who are also usually young and urban-dwelling.³ As Avi Santo argues, HBO’s discourses of “quality” and “exclusivity” famously articulated through the channel’s slogan “It’s Not TV. It’s HBO.” (later just “It’s HBO,” and currently “So Original”) attempt to position the channel and its subscribers in a contradictory (and superior) position to the broadcast networks and their mass audiences (20). In this way, HBO achieves its brand identity by distinguishing itself from the rest of the American television industry, adopting a set of elitist cultural values and reformulating, if not outright defying, standardized television genres and practices. In each case, cable channels are not simply in the business of selling individual shows, rather they sell the entire channel as a branded product.

Broadcast network branding, on the other hand, works quite differently from cable channel branding, and it has received considerably less scholarly attention. The reason for this is at least partly industrial. In comparison to subscriber-based cable channels, the major broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, The CW) each reach nearly all American households with televisions, and thus still must attempt to appeal to a broad, general audience. As a result, they are not able to narrowcast to the same degree as cable channels. Apart from generic slogans (e.g., NBC’s “More Colorful”) or sweeping claims to national identity (e.g., “NBC The Network of America”), there is rarely a coherent branding or programming strategy that unites all of any one network’s programming. Rather, specific programs must be branded individually or, as is more common, blocks of programming will be branded together. For example, during the 1990s, NBC branded its Thursday night primetime block of sitcoms, which included the highly rated shows *Seinfeld* (1989 1998) and *Friends* (1994 2004), as “Must See TV” (Schneider). More recently, the network has promoted its Wednesday night lineup of female-fronted police procedurals as “Woman Crush Wednesdays” (Roffman). Nevertheless, it is not always the case that an entire night’s programming will be easily compatible, nor will every block be branded as a unit. Many shows are left to be marketed and promoted individually. Moreover, this situation poses some unique problems for the networks, including that they must make some series “fit” into a brand or image that may not always best suit that specific show. Furthermore, every branding strategy should be recognized as an exclusionary process, as well as an inclusionary one. That is, in their attempts to brand a show in a specific way in order to reach one or a few target audiences, the networks are potentially excluding other audiences that might find the show appealing.

Still, narrowcasting is central to the U.S. television industry’s programming logic, and the “upscale” or “quality” demographic remains the most desirable niche audience segment for both the broadcast networks and the cable channels. While the term “Quality TV” invariably evokes discourses of taste, value judgment, and aesthetics, it has historically been, and still remains today, a media industries concept (Feuer, Kerr, and Vahimagi ix x; Newman and Levine 19 23). That is, it is an economically driven production strategy, the “quality” in Quality TV referring to the audience itself—it is programming that the networks produce to attract an audience with optimal age, education, occupation, and income demographic characteristics. Typically, this “quality” audience is defined as wealthy (\$100,000+ household income), well-educated (some college), and young (18 49 years), as well as living in urban areas. These viewers are highly desirable to

advertisers because they buy more (and more expensive) products than the average consumer, and they also tend to be hip, fashionable, early adopters of new products. Yet, they are also the hardest consumers to reach, since on average they watch relatively little television—all of which means advertisers are willing to pay the networks a premium to attract their attention, and the networks are incentivized to produce programming that targets them as its primary (although hopefully not its only) audience. It is this industrial discourse of Quality TV that this article concerns.

Nevertheless, Quality TV can never be separated entirely from questions of taste, value judgment, and aesthetics. As mentioned previously in the case of HBO, this “quality” audience possesses certain cultural values, whether perceived or real, that television producers draw upon when creating programming designed to appeal to them. In this way, “quality” comes to operate in a double sense, meaning both a socioeconomic category (*class*) and a particular aesthetic form (*taste*). Thus, while no analysis of Quality TV can or should disregard questions of the industry and the audience (advertising, distribution, scheduling, and production strategies, for example), critics and scholars have developed a series of predominantly aesthetic characteristics that distinguish Quality TV from the rest of the field of television programming. For example, in the influential 1996 book *Television’s Second Golden Age*, Robert J. Thompson established a set of criteria for identifying Quality TV programs that includes: novelty, or in his words, “Quality TV is best defined by what it is not. It is not ‘regular’ TV”; a “*quality pedigree*,” (emphasis added) by which he means having an auteur creator; *authenticity*, which is mainly achieved through creative struggles with the network and low ratings; *a large ensemble cast*; a *serialized narrative*, or as he calls it, “a memory”; *genre-mixing*, usually in the form of comedy integrated into a serious drama; *scripting* that is “literary and writer-based”; a narrative that is “self-conscious” or *metareflexive*; *controversial subject matter*, in particular a tendency toward liberal politics; *verisimilitude*, i.e., “aspires toward ‘realism’”; and receiving *awards and critical acclaim* (13–16). Certainly, other characteristics could be added to this list, and most programs identified as Quality TV will not contain every one of these elements. Moreover, together these characteristics reveal a bias for a certain type of programming, namely fictionalized, dramatic hour-long primetime serials.

Notably, too, a good many Quality TV texts invoke the form of melodrama and the soap opera genre, even if critics and scholars are loathe to admit it. In addition to texts that might be colloquially referred to as “smart,” “stylish,” or even “arty” (*Twin Peaks* [1990–1991], *Moonlighting* [1985–1989], *Northern Exposure* [1990–1995]), Thompson also privileges texts that aim for realist depictions of modern life, including portrayals of social problems and controversial issues. Robin Nelson, emphasizing this point about realism, argues that Quality TV should encourage viewers to “think more reflectively and feel more profoundly about human life and drama” (230). Thus, there is often an expectation that Quality TV should be inspirational and introspective. Broadly defined, melodrama is that which stirs up the emotions: dramatic confrontations, heroism and villainy, romance, tragedy, scandal and intrigue, cliffhanger endings, et al. It is a performance style marked by an exaggerated emotionality and intensity, and as such melodrama is often opposed to realism (Gledhill 123). Moreover, television melodrama is most closely associated with the daytime soap opera, which as a genre is among television’s most denigrated forms and about the furthest thing away from Quality TV (125). Nevertheless, numerous television scholars have argued that melodrama and soap opera are, in fact, foundational to much contemporary television, the primetime serial especially—Charlotte Brunsdon going so far as to call the soap opera “the paradigmatic television genre” (121). This centrality of melodrama and soap opera to the

primetime serial, however, has been repressed or displaced in most critical discourses surrounding television because of their low cultural valuation.

The prime example of the intersection of soap opera and Quality TV is the “primetime soap opera” genre of the 1980s, exemplified by *Dallas* (1978–1991), *Dynasty* (1981–1989), and *Knots Landing* (1979–1993). In the late 1970s and 1980s, as more women entered the workplace (and thus were not watching the daytime soap operas targeted to reach them), the networks began producing primetime television programming that was specifically designed to appeal to this “working women’s audience” specifically wealthier, well-educated professional women who were a sub-section of the highly desirable “quality” demographic (D’Acci 65–73). The defining characteristic of the daytime soap opera is its open-ended narrative, with storylines spanning several episodes or even seasons. Primetime soaps were also serialized drama series featuring long-running story arcs. They also closely resembled daytime soaps through their focus on melodrama and use of large ensemble casts. However, they aired in the evening in primetime and only produced one episode per week rather than five. Also, unlike daytime soaps, which shot in a studio using a multicamera video mode of production, these primetime soaps tended to use a single-camera film setup and shoot on-location (Geraghty 3–4). Thus, these primetime soaps were something of a hybrid that closely resembled other Quality TV programs in their production values and visual stylishness. Moreover, the networks attempted to make these series appealing to male viewers, as well, through greater use of action, suspense, and strong male lead characters like J.R. Ewing (Larry Hagman) of *Dallas*. Nevertheless, the influence went both ways: Thompson himself cites *Hill Street Blues* (1981–1987) as a pinnacle of Quality TV, a series that has often been credited as integrating the police genre with elements from the soap opera, as well as documentary film and even the sitcom. Current discussions of “narrative complexity” are also undeniably rooted in the themes and forms of primetime soap operas, and the soap opera genre more generally (Mittell 32). However, as Michael Kackman has pointed out, many of the texts being regarded as narratively complex today contain subtle or not-so-subtle strains of melodrama, but this “sentimentality and excess” is ignored or covered up by producers and scholars alike (para 17–18). Indeed, the popularity of these primetime soaps led to a trend referred to as the “soapoperafication of primetime” (D’Acci 72) a trend that very much still exists on television today in just about any serialized drama.

It is through various thematic and formal features traditional to melodrama and soap opera that the contemporary primetime serial narratives so commonly championed as Quality TV actually develop their realism. These range from the previously mentioned serialized narrative structure to an emphasis on character development and emotional and everyday life to the centrality of dramatic conflict and a heightened moral register. For instance, Ien Ang maintains that viewers of the primetime soap opera *Dallas* found the series appealing due to a sense of “emotional realism.” That is, the series was perceived as realistic not because it offered “knowledge of the ‘objective’ social reality” but rather it produced “a subjective experience of the world: a ‘structure of feeling’” that viewers connected with on an emotional level (45). Moreover, much of the acclaimed narrative complexity and realism of contemporary Quality TV series is attributed to the intensive character development and emotional believability resulting from the focus on both relationships between characters and individual characters’ emotional and psychological state. These, however, are signature characteristics of melodrama and beneficiaries of soap opera’s serial narrative form. As Ang has argued about *Dallas*, it is the narrative structure of the serial—the fact that the narrative goes on for years, even decades—that enables viewers to connect with the characters and perceive their stories as “real” (87). Emotionality, high

drama, richly developed characters, seriality, ensemble casts, extended plot arcs: these are all traits of melodrama and soap opera, and they are among the defining characteristics of the contemporary primetime dramas often branded as Quality TV.

The Branding of *Friday Night Lights*

The television series *Friday Night Lights* began its life as an adaptation of an adaptation, based on the 2004 film *Friday Night Lights* which, in turn, was based on the 1990 nonfiction book, *Friday Night Lights: A Town, A Team, and A Dream*. The book, written by Pulitzer Prize winning journalist H.G. “Buzz” Bissinger, and the film, directed by Peter Berg (who also developed the series for television), were both critical and commercial successes. The book was a *New York Times* number one bestseller and, to date, has sold in the vicinity of two million copies (“About Buzz”). It was named the fourth greatest book ever written about sports by *Sports Illustrated* in 2002, and declared “the best book on sports over the past quarter-century” by ESPN (McEntegart et al.). The film starred Billy Bob Thornton, ranked as the second highest grossing film of its opening weekend, earned approximately \$62 million worldwide, and was well-reviewed (“*Friday Night Lights*,” Box Office Mojo). All of this is to say that the television series arrived with a considerable pedigree.

While both the book and the film document the true story of an Odessa, Texas, high school football team, the Permian High School Panthers, as they make a push toward the Texas state championship, the television series fictionalizes the story, moving the action to small-town Dillon, Texas, and the Dillon High School Panthers football team. The series nevertheless retains the documentary style of its predecessors, in particular a verisimilar narrative approach (large ensemble cast, densely layered plotlines, linear narrative, vernacular language, lack of exposition and reiteration) and a handheld, *cinéma vérité* cinematography style. Even the film’s iconic soundtrack, scored by the post-rock instrumental band Explosions in the Sky, is closely imitated in the series, carrying over the film’s distinctive, bleak, introspective tone. These are all Quality TV traits, and yet NBC initially chose to brand the series as both a teen show and a football show. Returning to the Lotz, Himberg, and Curtin assessments of narrowcasting in the “post-network” or “matrix” era, this decision to target multiple target demographics is an example of the need to accumulate numerous niche audiences in order to make up for the loss of a mass audience.

In the lead up to its first season premiere, NBC’s decision to market *Friday Night Lights* to teens and sports fans is an example of both the contingency and difficulty of network branding. *Friday Night Lights* debuted in NBC’s 2006–2007 lineup on Tuesdays at 8:00 PM Eastern/Pacific time, followed by two established hour-long police procedurals in the *Law & Order* franchise, *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* (2001–2011) and *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (1999–). *Friday Night Lights* lacked a strong lead-in, and it could not feasibly be block branded with these two series. Moreover, the network did not have any other teen- or sports-themed dramatic programming anywhere else in its primetime lineup, nor did it have any similar Quality TV-esque dramas with which *Friday Night Lights* could be grouped. Nearly all of its hour-long dramas were police, legal, or medical procedurals like *ER* (1994–2009), *Medium* (2005–2011), and the *Law & Order* franchises. The series, in other words, was a true outlier in NBC’s primetime schedule. In fact, although sports dramas are rare on network television, branding *Friday Night Lights* as a football show can be seen as making some sense in the context of NBC’s 2006–2007

lineup, considering that football is big business on network television and 2006 2007 marked the return of the NFL to NBC with *Sunday Night Football*.

In other words, across all seven days of NBC's primetime schedule that year, the program that *Friday Night Lights* best matched with was actual professional football, at least in a crude thematic sense. The series was, indeed, promoted heavily on-air during NBC's NFL broadcasts (Goetzl). In an additional scheduling twist, *Friday Night Lights* was programmed against three of the top 20 most-watched programs of the season: *Dancing With the Stars* on ABC, *NCIS* on CBS, and *House* (2004) on Fox. Thus, marketing *Friday Night Lights* as a teen and/or sports show, rather than an adult-themed drama, could be viewed in this context as a counterprogramming move. Furthermore, in her analysis of the geographic mythology surrounding the series' promotion and reception, Victoria Johnson adds that the show was pitched primarily at a middle America, "red state" mass audience, as opposed to an urban, "blue state" Quality TV audience (59). In other words, NBC quite explicitly figured *Friday Night Lights* and its audience as non-"quality."

All of NBC's Fall 2006 marketing paratexts for Season One of *Friday Night Lights* point to their branding the series as both a teen and a football show. The press materials coming out of the May 2006 upfronts, for example, alluded to its book and film lineage but otherwise only emphasized it being about high school football. An early poster for the series features three large, horizontal images, from top to bottom: a medium close-up of the teenage couple Lyla Garrity (Minka Kelly) and Jason Street (Scott Porter) making out in a car, an intense close-up of star running back Brian "Smash" Williams (Gaius Charles) in full football uniform and helmet, and a long distance shot of four uniformed football players exiting a tunnel and entering onto a playing field (*Friday Night Lights* Poster, TVPoster.net). There is no slogan or text on the poster other than the title "*Friday Night Lights*," typeset in a Varsity font standard to high school and college letterman jackets. Thus, the poster features the teen cast exclusively, putting a heavy emphasis on the football content, as well as teen romance. Similarly, a series of widely circulated publicity photos all show images of the teen football player and cheerleader characters in uniform and/or on the football field. Some pictures include a number of the non-team member cast Julie Taylor (Aimee Teegarden), Tyra Collette (Adrienne Palicki), and Landry Clarke (Jesse Plemons) but they are all nonetheless depicted together on the field and the only adult ever shown is head coach Eric Taylor (Kyle Chandler). Notably, Coach Taylor's wife, Tami Taylor (Connie Britton), who from the beginning of the show was a core cast member, is absent from these pre-air publicity images. Early commercials and promotional videos prominently featured the football action and gave voice to "the game," too (Dailymotion website). Again, in each of these instances, the brand identity is entirely formulated around the show's teen characters and football content.

Early in the first season, NBC also launched a number of marketing partnerships that targeted the youth market and athletic programs. For example, the network teamed with the youth-oriented social networking website Bebo to create a video and photo upload site where high school students could post content and blog about their local football teams. In return, participants were entered to win a series of \$5,000 college scholarships. NBC promoted the Bebo website by sending "school spirit" publicity kits containing DVDs of the pilot episode, posters, mini-footballs, and other *Friday Night Lights* emblazoned merchandise to 1,000 U.S. high schools (NBC Teams). Another marketing campaign, the "*Friday Night Lights* Hometown Sweepstakes," paired NBC with car manufacturer Toyota. The contest, open to high school students ages 14 to 18, offered grants of \$50,000 and \$25,000 to local high school football programs. Winners could also win a trip to Austin, Texas, to appear in the show. Participating students could download

IM icons, screensavers, and desktop wallpaper, as well as free passes to attend one of 50 advance screenings of the pilot episode in movie theaters nationwide (Learmonth; Scott). These marketing campaigns again reveal NBC's initial efforts to brand *Friday Night Lights* as a show for teens and sport fans.

The network, however, miscalculated the audience for *Friday Night Lights*. As Jonathan Gray has observed, the series garnered critical acclaim right out of the gate. Many reviewers, however, found themselves in a perplexing situation where they immensely enjoyed the show *despite* its football content and the way it had been hyped by NBC. Indeed, many critics were "quick to insist that the show is not 'just' about football, or not *even* about football," notes Gray, and they attempted to re-brand the series as Quality TV (168 171). Critics, it should be noted, are what Pierre Bourdieu calls "cultural intermediaries," in that they mediate between cultural producers and consumers (327). They are members of the "petit bourgeois," or middle class, who strain to separate themselves from lowbrow, "popular" culture while striving to participate in highbrow, "legitimate" culture. They share what Bourdieu calls a "cultural pedigree," that is, certain dispositions and competences that are not available to most of society because of their higher-than-average levels of education and/or knowledge achieved through their occupation. These cultural competences function as "cultural capital," providing critics with distinction, legitimacy, and a socially dominant position (63). In other words, most critics perceive themselves (and their idealized audience) as having superior tastes; they are squarely within the "quality" audience demographic, and it would not be socially acceptable for them to enjoy a melodramatic teen or sport show without some strong qualifications. Thus, as Gray describes, the reviewers were "keen to 'rescue' [*Friday Night Lights*] from its low-culture connotations" and insist "upon its high-culture credentials" (170 71). And they were able to do so because reviews are a form of paratext that "recod[e] the marketing rhetoric" (168). In this way, critics, as de facto cultural gatekeepers, were able to re-brand *Friday Night Lights* and direct it toward an alternate, Quality TV niche audience.

The series struggled to find an audience, and midway through the first season NBC revamped its branding efforts to pursue an upscale female audience. During the first season, *Friday Night Lights* averaged only a 2.3 rating/6 share in the Nielsens and 6.1 million viewers overall (Bruno). As mentioned above, critical praise is a defining attribute of Quality TV, as are low ratings and the presence of inauthentic Others in the form of inept network executives and an unappreciative mass audience. All of these factors validated the series in the eyes of the critics and fans who embraced it as Quality TV. Not surprisingly, NBC latched onto the critical acclaim in much of its future marketing for the remainder of the series' run, including the awards that it began to win after its first season, notably a Peabody Award and an Emmy for Outstanding Casting for a Drama Series. Moreover, apart from the Quality TV viewers the series picked up, the early audience for the series was mostly "young men drawn to the football," a fact that has been attributed to the network's early emphasis on the sporting element in its initial branding (McDowell para 3). As a result, the network soon focused its branding efforts on the female demographic in particular, drastically diminishing the visibility of football while spotlighting the character relationships and melodramatic elements. In the branding that followed, football and teens were never entirely evacuated, but the themes of family and community were accentuated, as were the adult characters, most of all Tami and Eric Taylor and their marriage.

The network and producers were actually quite vocal about their desire to attract women to the show. At least in part, this was a byproduct of *Friday Night Lights*' early critical acclaim, in so much as critics and fans, well aware of the series' ratings struggles,

were anxious about whether it would get picked up for a second season or it would get cancelled. In the early months of 2007, during the lead-up to NBC's 2007-2008 schedule announcement and while the show was still airing new Season One episodes, television critics ran a number of stories that championed *Friday Night Lights* and probed NBC executives about its "on the bubble" status. In one such interview, NBC Entertainment President Kevin Reilly readily admitted, "We knew that the football might be a barrier for women. Women don't think the show's for them" (McDowell para 3). He pointed, too, to the fact that *Friday Night Lights* was scheduled against *Dancing With the Stars*, which was very popular with the adult female audience, and indeed NBC moved *Friday Night Lights* to Wednesdays mid-season to avoid that conflict (Ryan 14). In order to broaden the audience to hopefully include more women, the network began playing up the character-driven elements of the show in its marketing, in particular the profile of Coach Taylor and the Taylor family. It also adopted a new tag line, "It's About Life." NBC's in-house marketing president Vince Manze summed up the discursive repositioning of the show when he declared, "It's about family. It's not about football" (McDowell para 5). Reilly also referred to the show's "very fervent fanbase" and emphasized its "quality" status, but stressed that it needed to "break through" in order to stay on the air (Ryan 10). In these interviews, while the executives express appreciation for the show's existing audience and hope to retain them, they make it clear that the male football and niche Quality TV audiences alone would not be enough to sustain the show. In order to survive on the network, *Friday Night Lights* needed to register with other audiences as well.

Adult women seemed a natural fit for the series, at least in part because of the predominance of melodrama. From the beginning, the series featured strong strains of melodrama in its narrative, in particular an emphasis on rich character development and dramatic confrontation. For instance, tragedy strikes right away in the pilot episode, when star quarterback Jason Street is paralyzed during a game. The episode concludes with a somber montage of the town in shock and despair—praying, embracing, weeping. The sequence is narrated by an emotional Coach Taylor speech, in which he pronounces, "Life is so very fragile. We are all vulnerable. We will all, at some point in our lives, fall. We will all fall." This might be a football show, but it is clear from the outset that triumphant victory is not its main objective. Extended textual analysis reveals that the show itself—its main plots and themes, as well as its televisual style—changed very little over the course of the first season. In other words, everything that might make the show appealing to women—and not just teens and male football fans—was already present in the show. Moreover, the melodrama of this scene and so many others like it is unmistakable. It is scenes like this one, and the intense emotionality and serialized character development that make them possible, that critics and fans frequently hold up as evidence of *Friday Night Lights*' sophistication and realism. Yet, as described earlier, these thematic and formal features are rooted in melodrama and soap opera. Melodrama is not only closely associated with female-oriented programming like soap operas, of course; it is also associated with women, more generally, and female audiences, in particular (D'Acci 121). Thus, it is *Friday Night Lights*' investment in character, seriality, and melodrama that lends it much of its Quality TV credibility and, at the same time, makes it accessible to female audiences more commonly associated with daytime and primetime soap operas.

Since the text itself did not need revamping, NBC needed only to exploit the show's more melodramatic and soapoperatic elements in its paratexts. A particularly strong emphasis was placed on the themes of family and community, attention shifting from the football field and the Dillon Panthers to the town of Dillon and its diverse residents.

Promos for the series began to prominently feature Tami and Eric Taylor, as well as move off the field, both visually and narratively. This is a trend that remained consistent in all of NBC's promotions since the latter part of the first season. For example, some of the NBC promos advertising the airing of Season Three did not even depict football in them at all, instead showing only couples—Tami and Eric, Julie and Matt Saracen (Zach Gilford), Jason and Lyla—experiencing tender, intimate moments (“FNL NBC S3 Promo #2”). Posters for the third season also feature Tami and Eric front and center, warmly embracing in an open meadow. The principal teen cast members loiter in the background, looking largely despondent and all wearing street clothes. Only in the distant background are the football stadium lights visible, the only sporting iconography at all visible (*Friday Night Lights* Poster, *TV Fanatic*). Similar images of the cast out of uniform and situated in the rural Texas landscape dominate NBC's advertising campaigns for seasons two through five. This motif is also reflected on the series' Netflix page, where the entire series is available for instant streaming. Tami and Eric again feature prominently, with seven of the show's teen cast taking a supporting role, all portrayed in street clothes (*Friday Night Lights*, Netflix). It should be noted, however, that other Season Three promos, while emphasizing melodrama more than the Season One promos, still prominently featured football footage, as well as touted the high praise of critics (“FNL NBC S3 Promo #1”). Such branding hints at NBC's attempt to continue pulling in multiple niche audiences, not only women.

To further re-brand the series, the network adopted a number of marketing strategies to reach this female demographic. Still during Season One, in addition to moving the series to Wednesday nights, the network made sure to make all episodes of the season available to new viewers who might have missed or ignored the show previously. This availability included, in December 2006, placing every episode on the NBC.com website. Then, during the lead-up to the Season One finale in April 2007, NBC began airing blocks of *Friday Night Lights* reruns on its Bravo sister network, known for having an upscale female audience (Goetzl para 2). Additionally, prior to the premiere of Season Two in Fall 2007, NBC launched a marketing campaign targeting women ages 35 to 49 years. This particular strategy involved a home video push in family retailers like Walmart, as well as a “word of mouth” campaign through House Party, a social marketing company that facilitated 1,000 home viewing parties for the second season premiere (Grossman 3, 10). Thus, the branding involved more than simply re-tooling the promos, and included NBC taking advantage of its other corporate properties and various media platforms.

The DVD box sets also reveal a good deal about NBC's branding of *Friday Night Lights*. As scholars like Matt Hills have observed, DVD box sets often function discursively to increase a television text's cultural value, including through bonus material paratexts, such as audio commentaries with producers and showrunners, which reinforce discourses of auteurism and cultural authority (54). Barbara Klinger has similarly described what she calls a “hardware aesthetic” in the DVD culture, which attributes value to technological features, such as sound and image quality, the number and quality of extra bonus materials, and the physical object of the DVD package itself (75). For Klinger, this is a particularly masculine aesthetic, and she and Hills both point out that Quality TV and cult texts, as well as genres associated with spectacle (e.g., action, sci-fi, horror), are the most highly valued in these fan/collector circles. For instance, the DVD box sets for cult series like *Lost* (2004–2010) include a multitude of extras, ranging from (sometimes multiple) commentary tracks for every episode to deleted scenes, behind-the-scenes footage, and making-of featurettes. The commentary tracks often feature the writers and producers

of the show and pay particularly close attention to the plot (the mystery of the island, et cetera), as well as emphasize authorship and the aesthetic artistry of the program.

In contrast, the season DVD box sets for *Friday Night Lights* are relatively spartan and place an emphasis on story and character over plot or aura. While every set features at least some deleted scenes, other bonus materials are minimal, especially for the first few seasons. The Season One DVD set, for instance, contains no audio commentary tracks and only one making-of featurette. The Season Two DVD set offers one featurette (a festival interview with the cast, already widely available online) alongside only three episodes of audio commentary. These commentary tracks are interesting, too, in that they mostly feature cast members in conversation with one another (Connie Britton, Aimee Teegarden, Jesse Plemons, Adrienne Palicki). Discussion in these commentaries centers primarily on story and character, which is very much in line with the network's branding efforts. Although elements of acting, scripting, cinematography, editing, and so on, invariably come up, they are almost always mentioned in service of the stories and characters. This is true of even the commentary track with executive producer Jason Katims and co-executive producer Jeffrey Reiner on the Season Two premiere, "Last Days of Summer." The two converse about the actors at length, as well as emphasize that family dynamics are key to the series, Katims calling the Taylor family "the heartbeat of the show." Katims adds that football is merely a "backdrop for the show," furthering the "this is not a football show" rhetoric. Later seasons present similarly bare bones offerings on their DVD sets, providing at most a few audio commentary tracks and featurettes.

The content of these DVD box sets are in line with the pricing structure that NBC has pursued, too. Each season retails for \$20-\$30, and now a few years after the season finale, most can be regularly found on sale for around \$15. As part of its pre-Season Two marketing campaign, NBC issued a special bargain DVD containing six episodes, and which sold for \$10 exclusively at Walmart stores (Grossman 10). Such a move may seem counterintuitive for a series hailed as Quality TV—Walmart is the antithesis of an exclusive, highbrow retailer—but it suggests NBC's continued attempts to draw a broader, mass audience, including middle-age women and "red state" residents. The simple fact that every season of *Friday Night Lights* is available on DVD indicates the series' Quality TV status: as Hills notes, Quality TV texts tend to be quickly issued on DVD, while much "ordinary TV" is marginalized by not being made available on DVD (46). At the same time, however, the lack of extras and affordability of the *Friday Night Lights* DVD box sets appears to snub the elitist, masculinist DVD collector culture in favor of greater accessibility, especially amongst women and families.

While the emphasis in this article is on network branding and NBC's marketing of *Friday Night Lights*, it is worth noting how other channels that have distributed the show have also branded it. Most notably, DirecTV struck a unique deal in 2008 to co-produce seasons three through five of *Friday Night Lights* with NBC Universal. In exchange, DirecTV held exclusive rights to air the new episodes first on their original programming channel, The 101 Network. After each season had aired on DirecTV, it would run subsequently on NBC. In somewhat of an odd twist, DirecTV seemed most interested in *Friday Night Lights* for its upscale, Quality TV audience and its football content—precisely the niche audiences that had struggled to keep the show afloat on NBC. In its press releases, DirecTV plays up the show's critical acclaim and Quality TV pedigree, referring to it as "one of the best shows in the history of television" (DirecTV para 6). Moreover, as a premium satellite television provider, DirecTV's main clientele are from the upscale audience demographic, and one of their most

unique assets is the NFL Sunday Ticket sports package, which provided the satellite provider with ample cross-promotion opportunities.

Meanwhile, in 2010, the ABC Family basic cable channel, which provides “optimistic, heartfelt programming” aimed at a “modern day family” audience, acquired syndication rights for the series. In the press release announcing the deal, the channel highlighted *Friday Night Lights*’ melodrama and themes of family and community, describing it as a series in which “high school football brings the community together and the drama of small town life threatens to tear it apart” (ABC Family). ABC Family posters for the show prominently featured the romance between Lyla Garrity and Tim Riggins (Taylor Kitsch). Promo spots, too, spotlighted the interpersonal relationships and the melodramatic themes of family, friendship, and romance. One commercial, for example, prominently features images of couples in love, while Eric Taylor tells his wife Tami that “There’s nothing more important to me than this family” and a narrator declares, “It’s the perfect show about family and first love” (“*Friday Night Lights* Begins”). Although the series was pulled from ABC Family’s schedule after only a month due to low ratings, the cable channel’s decision to rerun *Friday Night Lights* highlights the show’s appeal to the female and family demographics (Ausiello). On the other end of the spectrum, ESPN has, since 2011, regularly re-run episodes of the series on its ESPN Classic channel, cross-promoting it with other sports programming and events targeted at an adult male demographic (Lang).

Conclusion

Despite all the media industries and scholarly discourse about convergence culture and niche marketing, mass audience distribution and programming still persists on the broadcast networks. The over-the-air networks, while having little choice but to engage in narrowcasting practices, must still attract appreciably large audiences for their programming. Thus, they need to adapt a show’s brand to multiple target audiences and, as Lotz has observed, “aggregat[e] a collection of niche audiences” (28). This is largely achieved through exploiting the “matrix” of media platforms that Michael Curtin describes the networks as having at their disposal due to convergence and conglomeration. In other words, broadcast television still depends on a relatively mass audience to survive, but the manner in which that audience is assembled varies considerably from the classic network era. Today, broadcast television’s mass audience is in actuality a conglomeration of many niche fragments, and they are often delivered to their television sets on, say, Friday nights at 8:00 PM Eastern/Pacific time (*Friday Night Lights*’ final season slot on NBC’s schedule) via a wide range of off-the-air paratexts. All of this requires an elaborate branding strategy, or rather, a combination of multiple, flexible branding strategies that must be sufficiently narrow enough to attract niche audience segments and yet open enough to not exclude other potential viewers.

Television branding strategies, such as narrowcasting, are formulated around rather crude assumptions about class and taste disguised as audience demographic research. As this study of *Friday Night Lights* reveals, television branding is an unstable and often incoherent practice that is shaped as much through audience reception as it is through network planning. During the series’ first season especially, the industry’s initial branding efforts were combined with the critical reception and subsequent re-branding strategies to reveal the tensions that exist in narrowcasting, as well as the taste and social class presumptions that underlie such practices. Indeed, the uncertainty that surrounded *Friday*

Night Lights early on (and that followed it throughout its five-season run) was primarily a question of *who* the show is for.

Notes

1. In this article, I use capital letter *Q* in *Quality TV* in the same way as Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine (172n3): as a reference to television programs targeting an upscale audience (and the industrial and critical discourse that surrounds them) rather than my own assertion of value.
2. I wish to make an important distinction here between cable *channels* and broadcast *networks*. The term *network branding* is often applied indiscriminately to all television channels regardless of their distribution model. However, referring to cable channels, such as HBO and Bravo, as the terms *networks* is somewhat of a misnomer since these channels do not need to act through local affiliate stations in each media market. It is this distribution model that defines a television network as a *network*, and hence I reserve the term *network branding* for the broadcast networks and utilize “channel branding” for all other cable channels, even those like HBO that feature numerous companion channels (Cinemax, HBO Family, and HBO Latino, for example), a model sometimes referred to as *multiplex delivery*.
3. The term *upscale demographic* is used rather loosely throughout the media industries, and does not appear to possess a singular definition. Within television, however, Nielsen reserves “upscale” for households earning an income of \$100,000+, with adults age 25 to 54 age in \$100,000+ income households being the most highly desirable audience segment.

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