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## Big Brother Brasil. Longevity, Innovations, and Interaction with Fans

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Clarice Greco Alves & Fábio Teixeira Arantes

## Big Brother Brasil

### Longevity, Innovations, and Interaction with Fans

#### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the TV segment CAT BBB [BBB Customer Service] of *Big Brother Brasil*, broadcast between 2020 and 2023, to understand how it operated as a strategy to prolong fans' experience. This case study is based on the theoretical contributions by Jenkins (2007; 2009), Fechine (2014), Gosciola (2014), and Pratten (2015). The analysis was developed around the following research question: What elements does the segment CAT BBB potentially add to the reality TV show *Big Brother Brasil*? The hypothesis was that the segment attempted to play at least three different roles: 1) bringing a fresh perspective to the show in response to its *longevity* after 24 seasons, 2) exploring transmedia strategies to bring *innovation*, and 3) enhancing the *interaction* with fans. The main takeaways lead to the perception that the fans' engagement with this media phenomenon, while certainly a consequence, also contributes to the show's longevity. Despite the impact of fans, the cyclical aspects of the broadcast also encourage reflections on the concept of originality in audiovisual production.

#### KEYWORDS

BBB, CAT BBB, participatory culture, fan culture

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Clarice Greco Alves & Fábio Teixeira Arantes

## Big Brother Brasil

### Longevity, Innovations, and Interaction with Fans<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

In 1999, Dutch TV producer John de Mol created the television show *Big Brother*. Hill (2005) attributes the show's instant success to the fact that it takes advantage of the convergence of media, such as websites and telephones, which triggers the format's great transmedia potential, which will be discussed in this article using the example of CAT BBB. According to Carvalho (2022), *Big Brother* has more than two hundred seasons, shown in more than 70 countries on all continents. Such reach attests that it is a highly exportable format (cf. Hill 2005) with great local variation in each country, as it can change to meet the demands of production or the game itself.

The show has been on air in Brazil for 22 years on TV Globo. Brazilian television has a history of shows that promote interaction with the public, and this contact has technically evolved over time. From letters received by post during talk shows—examples would be in kids programming in the 1980s, such as *Xou da Xuxa* (1986-1992) or *Programa do Bozo* (1980-1991)—to phone-ins—as in variety shows during the 1990s, such as *Programa Silvio Santos* (1963-2024) or *Fantasia* (1997-2000)—viewers could play games or tell jokes on air. Spectators could also participate or make suggestions to shows via e-mails and direct messages suggesting topics and making complaints. Another example of viewer interaction from the 1990s was the TV show *Você Decide* (1992-2000), in which a fictional narrative could have more than one outcome. The program always addressed ethical dilemmas or controversial subjects (polyamories, honesty, euthanasia, abortion, among many others) that brought up the question, 'Should he or should he not?' Two endings were pre-recorded and the public voted by telephone during the broadcast to choose which one should be aired.

Lotz (2014) explains that this type of early interaction also worked as audience measurement in the early 1990s. This evolved to websites that collect audience data. This function of websites should be addressed by researchers who aim to reflect upon audience and fan engagement with TV shows. As stated by Palmer (2002):

Connecting to the Big Brother house via the internet is truly a combination of the panoptic and the synoptic in that as we watch the internet, unseen others can load multiple amounts of information onto our hard drives. (Palmer 2002, p.307)

<sup>1</sup> This paper is an expanded and updated version of a paper that was presented by the authors in Portuguese at the INTERCOM National Conference in Brazil in 2023 and had been published in the Conference Proceedings ([https://sistemas.intercom.org.br/pdf/link\\_aceite/nacional/11/08142023224564dae1754c19d.pdf](https://sistemas.intercom.org.br/pdf/link_aceite/nacional/11/08142023224564dae1754c19d.pdf)).



The examples mentioned above illustrate that, whereas *Big Brother* was considered a phenomenon of sorts, audiences have contributed to successful media outlets for over a century, as pointed out by Griffen-Foley (2004). Recollected magazines, newspapers, and radio efforts to engage viewers show that the Internet did not create interaction with the audience. However, technologies have changed how viewers interact, making it faster, broader, and more open to responses from the producers. That is, not only do the viewers send their messages, but they can also have their messages broadcast, talk to the host, and even change the course of the narrative.

In this context, we were encouraged to reflect on *Big Brother's* long-term success, with a particular focus on the CAT BBB segment. We consider this segment as a strategic course of action for increasing the relationship and interactivity between the showrunners and the public. Whereas the *Big Brother* format sustains a three-way power struggle (between the audience, the production, and the contestants), CAT BBB shows an alliance between two parts of this relationship. With that in mind, the analysis was developed around the following research question: Which elements does the segment CAT BBB potentially add to the reality TV show *Big Brother Brasil*? The hypothesis was that the segment attempted to play at least three different roles: 1) bringing a fresh perspective in response to the show's *longevity* (after 24 seasons), 2) exploring transmedia strategies to bring *innovation*, and 3) enhancing the *interaction* with fans.

The idea of *longevity* is understood as the characteristics that help a show to last on air for decades. Rogers (2004) wrote that many elements could help a program have long-term success, such as production issues, memorable characters, and fandom. We will focus on the latter since fandom is one of the main factors that may keep a TV show alive. In turn, *innovation* means any necessary adjustments that pop culture products receive to keep the audience engaged, especially regarding technology. Christian (2018) argues that the web brought innovation to television by opening up the development of the series to new producers, fans, and sponsors that had previously been excluded. It is important that the show presents changes that will keep the viewers interested but not so radical that they will lose the attachment to the format or narrative. And finally, the concept of *interaction* is seen as an essential element for this type of show. The producer of the *Big Brother* franchise, Gary Carter (cf. Andrejevic 2004), says that to fit the definition of a *reality show*, it must engage in interaction with the public. As far as BBB is concerned, this exchange is intensive. According to GSHOW (2020), fans have space at the network's Customer Service Centre, which registers an increase of 40% during the months in which *Big Brother Brasil* is on air. The show's management strategy follows the line of approaching and interacting with its target audience, remaining relevant to the audience through constant novelties and innovations each season. We start by presenting the show *Big Brother Brasil* and then the segment CAT BBB. The theoretical discussion is based on the notions of *reality TV* (cf. Dowd 2006; Machado/Vélez 2009; Orbe 2008), *transmedia storytelling* (cf. Jenkins 2009; Gosciola 2014; Fehine 2014), and *participatory culture* (cf. Jenkins 2009; Hills 2002) in which BBB fans interact *with* and are featured in the segment. At last, we bring examples and data about the latest 2023 season of the show, in which the audience actively participated in the channel opened by the interaction proposal.

These concepts generally reflect changes seen in reality TV programs and other genres. Instead of worrying about the death of television as a medium, Gripsrud (2010) believes that TV is not going to disappear soon. However, it will continue to undergo changes to survive and adapt to the Internet and

mobile phones. He believes that what is happening is a restructuring of the public sphere, which TV shows and television itself are trying to follow.

## Reality TV and Big Brother

The basic purpose of a reality TV show is to bring together a group of people under circumstances that could engender conflict and observe them with cameras. Although this definition seems straightforward, reality TV encompasses a range of formats and genres (talent, survival, relationship, confinement, among others) that researchers examine from different angles.

Based on a theoretical discussion about the reality show genre, Dowd (2006) uses the term reality show to broadly describe “a genre of programming that, whether scripted or not, offers its viewers an ostensibly real depiction of both individuals and issues” (p.18). A similar definition is given by Smith and Wood (cf. Orbe 2008), who add that one of the hallmarks of reality television is “deriving some entertainment value from the perception of their activities being unscripted” (p.346). In other words, the effort to resemble reality is one of the genre’s primary attributes, whether spontaneous or scripted. As a counterpoint, Hill summarizes the genre’s fragmentation by pointing out that reality television consists of subgenres formed by combining characteristics from documentaries, talk shows, talent shows, and even TV fiction (cf. Hill 2014, p.9). It may be, therefore, conceptualized as a hybrid format.

There are several attempts to define the reality TV genre, and many complement each other. Andrejevic (2015) states that due to “the wide range of formats encompassed by the genre [...] the genealogy of reality TV is a complex and hybrid one that overflows the disciplinary field of television studies thanks to its roots in the history of cinema (and, even further back in the novel), its connection to the online world, and its reliance on the influence of the social psychology experiments of the 1960s” (pp.299f.).

Thus, such television productions and the fragmentations of reality’s subgenres have been tested and adjusted over the years. Beginning in the 1940s in the United States, the capture of images of real people by cameras, hidden or not, sought to reveal the reality of everyday life of ordinary people (cf. Machado/Vélez 2009).

In 1973, the first reality TV show closest to what we know today was broadcast on PBS (*An American Family*), conceived from its origins as an “explicit experience of self-consensual surveillance” (Machado/Vélez 2009, p.14). The show had a format considered innovative for the time, noticeable in the review by US anthropologist Margaret Mead in the fortnightly magazine *TV Guide*, specializing in TV programming, in which she states that it was “as new and significant as the invention of drama or the novel—a new way in which people can learn to look at life, by seeing the real life of others interpreted by the camera” (Lutkehaus 2008, p.194).

In the late 1980s, the genre experienced its first fragmentation when it addressed the daily life of the working class and its common challenges, such as police chase and paramedic services in street rescue situations (cf. Hill 2014). By the 1990s, the genre already had a robust audience.

The path followed so far has caused a significant increase in the variety of reality programs that emerged over time, such as *The Real World* (1992) on MTV. The production brought together men and women in their 20s and 30s with different values and personalities to share a flat in New York and be filmed for entertainment purposes (cf. Hill 2014). The text of the show’s opening vignette was self-explanatory: “This is the true story... of eight strangers... picked to live in a house... work together and have their lives taped... to find out what happens... when people stop being polite... and start getting real...



*The Real World*" (DeVolld 2011, p.43). As milestones in reality television, *An American Family* and *The Real World* opened up new possibilities for television productions to be created based on surveilling participants. In this context, Couldry's (2008) referral to reality TV as a 'system of cruelty' in neoliberalism is crucial. According to Couldry, the way that reality TV shows organize social resources and human labor "requires of its participants continuous loyalty, submission to surveillance and external direction even within the deepest recesses of private life, yet demands of those same individuals an acceptance of the fragility and impermanence of the opportunities it provides" (Couldry 2008, p.3).

Since its initial broadcast in 1999, *Big Brother* had been conceptualized to invite viewers to vote by phone to decide which participants would be eliminated from the competition—this dates back to the beginning of the digital era and the internet as a means of mass communication. In Brazil, *Big Brother* has been on air for more than two decades, being one of the longest-running franchises in the world. Since its release, more than 70 countries have reproduced its format, from Germany to South Africa, totaling more than 500 editions worldwide (cf. Capuano 2022). According to Costera Meijer and Reesink, creator de Mol described in the year 2000 the initial format as

the voluntary locking up of nine people during a hundred days in a house, watched continuously by 24 television cameras, to which the viewers, at the intercession of the inmates, once in two weeks vote against one of the inmates who has to leave the house, until the last person to stay in can be called a winner. (Hill 2005, p.31)

Since its debut in the Netherlands, *Big Brother* was an instant success. According to Hill (2005), Channel 4 had the best Friday night ratings in its history during the show's broadcast. *Big Brother* began with three million viewers, gradually increasing to a 46% market share during one specific week, with a peak of ten million viewers (56.5% market share) on the final night. Hill (2005) believes the format works well with convergent media, contributing to its economic performance on the TV market. Certainly, working well with convergent media also gives the production great transmedia potential, which will be discussed later.

Over the years, the cultural and economic differences of the markets where *Big Brother* has been produced highlight the flexibility of the format and help explain its long duration. For example, in its Brazilian version, the most common eviction rule is that one participant has to leave weekly instead of one person every fifteen days, as in the original Dutch version. Also, in the Brazilian version, a kind of qualifier was created that precedes the start of the show, called *Casa de Vidro* [Glass House], in which participants are confined within a glass dome in a public place, such as a shopping mall, allowing direct inputs by the public on who should be admitted into the house and the competition. Another example of the difference in markets, as mentioned by Andrejevic (2015), is that, in the US version, eviction by public vote was uplifted, switching to a cast-based eviction, as it was clear that US audiences were evicting the most controversial participants, and that, from the producers' perspective, were actually the ones who needed to stay as they generated conflict and viewership.

These examples reinforce the notion that *Big Brother* has a versatile structure that can be attributed to the needs and expectations of viewers from different countries. Such global-local formats (glocal) help build international brand equity for formats easily identifiable with the region in which they are broadcast, concludes Andrejevic (2015).

## Big Brother Brasil and CAT BBB

*Big Brother Brasil* has had 24 seasons so far. Participants from the general public had been selected for the show in the past 22 years. However, celebrities have been added to the cast since 2020. That year, the show received the Guinness World Record title for the highest number of public votes received by a television show “with 1,532,944,337 votes on the official website” (Sánchez 2020). Since the first season, Brazilian viewers have supported or encouraged the eviction of participants as early as the first speculations in the media come out. Fandoms are formed when a new season premieres, taking part in the interaction between the show and the audience.

In 2020, a new segment was created, named CAT BBB, in which CAT stands for *Central de Atendimento ao Telespectador* [in English: Viewers’ Customer Service]. The segment was broadcast on Tuesdays after that week’s eviction (when a contestant has to leave the house) and was announced as a way of bringing fans closer to the show’s content. Its first seasons, in 2020 and 2021, were hosted by comedian Rafael Portugal and the last ones, in 2022 and 2023, by also-comedian Dani Calabresa. At the end of 2023, the network announced the segment would be canceled, so it did not feature in BBB24.

The then-host of BBB 2020, Tiago Leifert, summarized the function of the segment: “Social networks get on our case a lot; there are conspiracy theories, but there are also a lot of good things [...] If you have any complaints, any questions, just talk to Rafael Portugal. He is at the BBB Viewers’ Customer Service waiting for your complaint” (Cerqueira 2022, p.82). The segment commented on topics discussed on social media with a humorous tone and was an indicator of what viewers enjoyed (or not) in the show.

CAT BBB emerged from a real service that has existed at Globo for over 40 years: its Viewers’ Service Centre. The network values contact with its audience, and the means to reach out have technically evolved over time. In the past, letters received by post were the way to get closer to the public. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the show *Xou da Xuxa* featured a pile of letters sent to the host, Xuxa, to generate content and give a voice to her fans who were not in the studio audience. Nowadays, letters, phone calls, e-mails, and other direct messages suggesting topics and making complaints are analyzed by the broadcaster’s management and considered in terms of what appeals to viewers. The production’s strategy follows the guidelines for approaching and interacting with its target audience and remaining relevant to the audience through constant changes and innovations each season.

The show’s production has tested new strategies and segments over the years to keep the audience engaged throughout the seasons and beyond the voting system, as well as incorporating a type of discussion and debate that is already happening on social media platforms. Three relevant features implemented in the 2023 season to improve the show were changing the opening theme song, the final prize for the winner, and the continuity of CAT BBB. These small changes illustrate recent attempts to refresh the traditional program. Whereas the main structure of the show remains similar to its first installment, significant transformations, such as the casting process and new hosts, occurred over the decades. However, these three examples from the 2023 edition may also be a way for the producers to show they care about their audience.

## Changes to Big Brother Brasil

Over the 22 years of the *Big Brother Brasil* broadcast, the show has carried out successive tests of its rules to renovate the show. For example, in the first seasons, participants were selected before the show went on air. But, as of 2009, the *Casa de Vidro* dynamic was implemented, and, in the following season, it



was set up in the house's garden. In 2011, *Casa de Vidro* was used to put up for voting who could return to the house after having been evicted.

Participants' feedback was also implemented in different ways to give it an air of freshness. In BBB10, three participants from previous editions returned to the competition. One of them (Marcelo Dourado) won that year after being evicted in BBB4. In 2013, seven participants evicted in previous seasons also returned to the show to participate in the competition again.

Another emblematic change occurred in 2020 when the show started to include celebrities in its cast. This happened in the same year that CAT BBB was created, as mentioned above, to bring fans closer to the show's content by receiving voice and text messages from viewers that would be commented on and read by host Dani Calabresa.

A new change worth mentioning concerns the theme song. An icon of the show in all its seasons, the opening theme song, *Vida Real*, is a song written by Brazilian musician Paulo Ricardo. As previously mentioned, the opening narrative of the US reality show *The Real World*, which summarized what the show would be, also occurred in *Big Brother Brasil* and its theme song. This excerpt from the song summarizes what is at stake in the Brazilian version: If I could choose / Between good and evil, to be or not to be? / If wanting is power / You must go through with it / If you want to win. Since 2002, the song has opened the show and has become a brand for attracting attention, having consolidated itself in national memory and creating a sound identity for the TV show.

Despite such great identification amongst viewers, a change was made for the 2023 season. *Big Brother Brasil's* production reformulated the song from a rock version to a Rio funk one—an innovation signed by Dennis DJ and the group Funk Orquestra (cf. Natalie 2023). This change can be understood as an attempt to gain a greater connection with the reality show's young audience, considering the prevalence of the musical style on social networks. In fact, in connection with the transmedia potential of the show, a challenge was launched for fans to create dance routines and appear on the show through personal posts using the hashtags #BBB23 and #DesafioBBB (#BBBChallenge).

Still, while highlighting some transformations in the show, one of the most emblematic changes is in the value of the prize given to the winner of each season. In the first four seasons, the prize was R\$ 500,000. From the fifth season onwards (in 2005), it rose to R\$ 1,000,000; in the tenth season (in 2010) it reached R\$ 1,500,000. In 2023, Globo partnered with a company that sponsors the show, leading champion Amanda Meireles to pocket the largest sum in *Big Brother Brasil's* history: R\$ 2,880,000.

Thus, in 2023, *Big Brother Brasil* renewed expectations of financial gain for its participants—and, of course, fans who support their idols ended up projecting themselves into a possible victory for their teams. This is connected to what Adorno and Horkheimer (1947) argued regarding the 'Culture Industry' and aspirations of the middle class, aware that only *one* can win:

Only one can draw the winning lot, only one is prominent, and even though all have mathematically the same chance, it is so minimal for each individual that it is best to write it off at once and rejoice in the good fortune of someone else, who might just as well be oneself but never is. (Adorno/Horkheimer 2002, p.116)

Thus, the fan rejoices in the award given to the other, aware that they will never actually be the winner themselves. The high prices paid to reality competition show winners in Brazil give viewers the idea of

being a part of that triumph as if they were next to—or carrying—their idols with the votes leading to victory. Likewise, the show’s production encourages the participation of these fans, suggesting their ability to create content for the season’s narrative, which is the case of the CAT BBB segment.

Since its first season, CAT BBB has attempted to innovate, adjust, and expand the possibilities for the show’s viewers to interact with it. In 2023, CAT BBB had its fourth and most recent edition, the second under the command of comedian Dani Calabresa. She is the one who receives requests from the public to comment on the participants, the events, and the dynamics of the game through an interaction channel—a WhatsApp number to which Globoplay subscribers (Globo’s streaming service) can send voice notes. The segment was a hit in its first two editions, in 2020 and 2021, when it was led by comedian Rafael Portugal, securing more than 40 hours in trending topics on Twitter.

The resourcefulness of CAT BBB’s comedian hosts gave the show an identity, which was, however, canceled after four editions. Van Es (2016) believes that television producers nowadays are beginning to realize which types of relations between television and social media ‘work’ for them and which do not. Nevertheless, the cancellation of the segment can be seen from the perspective of innovation through trial and error, meaning that the producers are constantly trying to create new ways of dealing with their audience. Even after CAT BBB was canceled at the end of 2023 (cf. Pasin 2023), the network retained the comical undertone in the show, looking for new talents to lead *Big Brother Brasil*’s humor.

In any case, the dynamics mentioned show the constant concern of the show’s production team and the network, eager to evolve and develop its rules and participants every year. These strategies maintain interest in the show—and among them is the creation and updating of CAT BBB, which is based on another key element: transmediation as a way of expanding viewers’ experience.

### Transmediation to expand viewers’ experience

In a nutshell, *Big Brother*’s original premise that its participants would receive votes and be evicted by viewers via phone calls dates back to the beginning of the digital era and the internet as a means of mass communication. This strategy of uniting two means of communication—television and telephone—was decisive for the voting experience, through the interaction of its audience, to highlight the transmedia potential of the reality show, operating with media convergence. In this way, the transmediation of *Big Brother Brasil* has been present since the beginning of its broadcast in Brazil. Below, we provide descriptions of the concept known as transmedia storytelling and examples of how reality television incorporated it into its essence.

According to Jenkins (2007), transmedia storytelling is a “process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purposes of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience.” Robert Pratten (2015), in turn, argues that this narrative aims at “telling a story across multiple platforms, preferably allowing audience participation, such that each successive platform heightens the audience’ enjoyment” (p.2). Fachine (2014) states that “the term transmediation designates, generically, a varied set of strategies for developing and distributing content on multiple platforms” (p.69). These concepts can be applied to a reality TV show like *Big Brother Brasil* that uses multiple media platforms to unite the actions on multiple screens, adding each experience to provide a more complete experience for its viewers.

*Big Brother Brasil* is broadcast on FTV by Globo, which can be considered its first screen. However, the show reverberates in at least three main places with great impact, guiding the audience back to the



first screen, that is, the main show. These locations can be described as (1) within the show itself, for example, through the CAT BBB segment; (2) on social networks, on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram; and (3) on news websites that comment on the participants and the developments of their challenges and behavior.

CAT BBB is a pillar of the transmediation process as it serves as a communication channel between the show and its viewers. Host Dani Calabresa also provides feedback to the main show by imitating the participants. When viewers return to watch the participants, they can identify her imitation and gain sympathy for the comedian. Furthermore, Calabresa created her own narrative within the context of imitation, working as a brand asset for CAT BBB itself.

The segment featured mini-editions of the main show in 30-second, humorous versions, already in portrait orientation, posted and replicated on digital networks such as Instagram. Due to their format, these videos can be viewed on a mobile phone, where vertical positioning is used more than horizontal. This is a way of telling the story of the *Big Brother Brasil* participants, dividing it into parts through alternative means of communication to the first screen of FTA TV, in a dynamic in which, as Gosciola (2014) points out, each media environment is “defined by its greatest potential to explore that part of the story” (p.9).

Secondly, in *Big Brother Brasil*'s transmediatisation, Instagram's vertical screen can also be used by accounts that promote discussions around the show and explore the content initially generated by the first screen. Content is modified and reposted via WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook, and Twitter. This is done by fans of the show, who have access to an image-editing app or software and create their own content using original material from the show. This mode of production is accessible to the general public, as Geoffrey Long (2009) described, highlighting the ability of transmedia narrators to use these tools to extend the content experience for viewers.

News websites also play a crucial role in the transmedia development of the *Big Brother Brasil* experience. Some of the websites that regularly comment and promote the show are part of the same conglomerate, Grupo Globo. Revista Quem, a publication by Editora Globo, and GSHOW, an entertainment website on the globo.com-portal, are examples of news generated by *Big Brother Brasil* and other news coming from within the conglomerate itself. Transmedia narratives are a form of communication used by large media conglomerates that take advantage of their various companies, as emphasized by Fecine (2014). Jenkins (2009) summarizes this as ‘entertainment franchises’ that expand the reach and experience of their target audience within the *Big Brother* universe.

Thus, CAT BBB is part of an array of transmedia strategies, as it functions as a source of replicable content and an extension of the main show. The transmedia narratives adopted by *Big Brother Brasil*'s production to prolong its fans' experience converge towards creating segments in the show that can generate interaction between those who watch it and those who make it.

Gunn Enli (2012) relates this type of interaction with the notion of a ‘parasocial relationship,’ which is established between the host and the viewers during the television broadcast. When producers include audience representatives in the show, they are trying to strengthen the parasocial dialogue with the viewers to increase ratings and market share. Gunn Enli explains that digital channels, with their capacity to process instant feedback, have brought audiences closer and even integrated into the actual production. Within this context, the *parasocial interaction* is articulated through the continuous dialogue with the audience, and “the viewers are represented in production, not only as studio audiences clapping or

laughing, but also as contributors to content production with individual messages or as having accumulated influence on competition” (Gunn Enli 2012, p.128).

Van Es (2016) lists four social media applications: promotional, affective, functional, and phatic. The *promotional* applications would be a brand-oriented activity that aims to increase brand awareness. With this strategy, a show can spread its brand among its viewers’ social networks by encouraging them to share their content. The second type is the *affective* application, through which social media is used to nurture and deepen the viewers’ emotional investment. The third application would be *functional*, in which social media plays a role for practical purposes, such as voting or uploading videos for auditions online. The last one would be the *phatic* application, meaning that the primary function of social media would be to keep communication channels open to guarantee the viewer’s possible involvement without allowing them to influence the narrative directly.

CAT BBB presents at least three of those applications. First, it is *promotional* because it makes the viewers talk about *Big Brother* longer. It is also *affective*, since it strengthens the viewers’ relationship with the show. For example, when a comment from a viewer appears live on TV, this can be understood as an attempt to deepen the viewer’s emotional bond with the show. And there is also a *phatic* application on social media since the audience can write and even call the segment’s host, but they do not change the plot of the *Big Brother* show, in the sense that their voiced opinions are not counted as votes.

Although Van Es (2016) is talking about social media when claiming these types of applications, the categories can be applied to CAT BBB because the segment works as an expanded narrative of *Big Brother*, which is also the function of social media regarding TV shows. CAT BBB represents an alternative to a user experience usually created for social media platforms. How it operates to engage the audience is quite similar to the description given by Gillan (2011):

Sponsors have taken advantage of new media platforms as spaces in which to attract and engage viewers [viewers/users], offering series-related sponsor content such as “sneak peeks” or exclusive content available on a tech device (e.g., mobile phone or iPod). They also license the rights to create themed content that is produced in conjunction with, not just as an ancillary to, the original on-air text. The latter often has its own media presence on mobile devices, in games, on-air, and/or online. (Gillan 2011, p.2)

## Participatory culture and interaction with BBB fans

The reality TV show genre and, more specifically, the confinement shows are typically broadcast live and in seasons, which last a few months each. They depend on the viewer to shape the narrative’s events by deciding who leaves the show and who continues to compete. This setting boosts fan engagement in supporting the show’s participants. Interactions could be synchronous (real-time) or asynchronous (e.g., voting system on a website). Since CAT BBB works with both types of interactions (voice messages, instant text messages, phone calls), we may also consider the notion of social TV. According to Van Es (2016), while transmedia storytelling can occur without synchrony between the viewer and the show, social TV occurs with real-time audience participation. Thus, social TV can engage audiences and create affective value through live broadcast interaction.

As *Big Brother* plays a decisive role in the media landscape and popular culture of Brazil, it is also a major case study on *participatory culture* (cf. Jenkins 2009, p.378) as indicated by the enormous so-



cial media traffic the show generates (cf. Capuano 2022). With this high volume of engagement, fans of the reality show noticed the opportunity to participate in the CAT BBB segment explicitly created to cater to them. Fans sent voice notes to a WhatsApp number and, after some curation from the show’s production, the selected notes were shown to Dani Calabresa, so she could comment on them. Table 1 shows examples of voice notes sent by the audience and shown on the CAT BBB segment in 2023. The comments span from remarks on the participant’s personalities to the challenge of confinement to any requests or suggestions for the producers—amongst other aspects.

<p><i>(Audio aired on April 11, 2023)</i></p> <p>Fan: “It’s time to shut down one of these bedrooms and leave just one. I want to see some beef!”</p> <p>Dani’s response: “I agree! There are more chairs than entertainment in this show.” [She gets up and comes back holding a chair like the ones in the house, suggesting theft that would lead to a fight].</p>
<p><i>(Audio aired on April 4, 2023)</i></p> <p>Fan: “Hi, Dani. Is there any way you can narrate what goes through Fred’s head when he gets so serious during the ‘Jogos da Discórdia’ [another segment]?”</p> <p>Dani’s response: “Do you know that I can almost hear something when he has that restrained expression? The squinting eyes...” [cuts to three scenes of Fred, close-up on his face].</p>
<p><i>(Audio aired on March 28, 2023)</i></p> <p>Fan: “Gabriel, for God’s sake, Gabriel. Make up your mind!”</p> <p>Dani’s response: “This one is more lost than lice on Cesar Black’s bald head [another participant]. Poor lad! But do you know there are times when Gabriel wakes up for the game and cheers me up? I swear!” [cut to Gabriel giving some attitude].</p>
<p><i>(Audio aired on March 21, 2023)</i></p> <p>Fan: “[Cezar] Black’s desire to go back home is so strong that he cried like a child when he went to the doctor’s.”</p> <p>Dani’s response: “No, no, no! I won’t admit playing games with our crying baby, no. He’s having a hard time in there. Poor thing!” [cut to Black placing an order for pajamas with the production and then several scenes of him bawling].</p>
<p><i>(Audio aired on March 14, 2023)</i></p> <p>Fan: “Dani, can you give Amanda some help? She’s always talking to herself in there. I don’t know if she’s thinking about her life with Sapato [another participant] or if she’s thinking about her debts.”</p> <p>Dani’s response: “Last week I tried to share a message from [raises tone] ‘Feirão Serasa Limpa Nome’ [debt-relief service], but they thought it was a hoax.” [cues Serasa Limpa Nome’s ad].</p>

Table 1: Audio transcription and interactions with the host (Source: GSHOW website)

The show also cuts back to flashbacks that illustrate viewers' comments, as in the case of participant Cesar Black crying and asking for pajamas. Calabresa's responses were good-humored, always in direct relation to what viewers were saying, but with the addition of some comical effect—such as picking up a chair or saying things like “more lost than lice on Cesar Black's bald head.” The voice notes also opened up a space for ads, as in the last example in Table 1.

CAT BBB, therefore, provided possibilities for interaction, comic effect, ad insertion, and the extension of the fans' experience—both those who sent and had their voice notes played on air and those who watched and agreed with their comments. This exchange between the fan and the show generates certain expectations—“an audience not only offers attention but also requests attention” (Jenkins 2009, p.354). Thus, CAT BBB had a cyclical performance, as it had fans as a content source for interactions while also offering content to these same fans.

## Final remarks

In this paper, we analyzed elements of innovation, transmediation, and participatory culture through a case study of *Big Brother Brasil's* Customer Service Centre (CAT BBB) to understand how the segment operated to prolong the fans' experience since it turned to the fans themselves to produce content and engagement. We laid out brief definitions of the reality show genre (cf. Dowd 2006; Hill 2014; Andrejevic 2015) to understand aspects contributing to the maintenance of *Big Brother Brasil* as Brazil's longest-running confinement reality show. For analytical purposes, we listed three factors that deserved attention: attempts to improve and renew the show after 23 seasons, the transmedia strategies used by *Big Brother Brasil* and the aspect of participatory culture, which describes interactions with the fans.

The engagement of fans is at the core of the CAT BBB segment. The fans move incommensurable data on social networks and act as content distributors of *Big Brother Brasil*. The fans' engagement with this media phenomenon, while certainly a consequence, also contributes to the show's longevity. Thus, CAT BBB had a cyclical aspect, as it held fans as a content source for interactions while offering new content to these same fans. At first glance, this means that it appears to bring aspects of renewal and reinvigoration to the show based on transmediation and participatory culture. However, we can also think critically about what is new and what is based on the repetition of these initiatives after so many years of the show on air. The cancellation of the segment shows that attempts for original initiatives around *Big Brother Brasil* can be a success or a failure. Either way, they seem to be necessary for shows broadcasting for so many years.

We understand that the segment strategically used the fans' engagement and dedication to participating, commenting, and sharing their views to promote the show. At the same time, it seemed to give the show a youthful, fresh aspect and implement innovations to the show, resorting to transmediation and participatory culture. Either way, it raises questions about originality and creativity in audiovisual productions as, in times of quantitative increase in content offering, maintaining a show for more than two decades with minor changes—which may resemble ‘rehashed’ products—may not be enough to stimulate the creative potential of the television industry. The segment's cancellation may be proof of this.



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