

A Reflection of Reality? The Consumption and Sharing of Obesity Discourses by *The Biggest Loser's* Viewers Through Facebook

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Abstract

The Biggest Loser promotes itself as an avenue for 'obese' individuals to lose weight through exercise and diet modification with the end goal of a 'healthy lifestyle' (NBC, 2013). A driving premise behind *The Biggest Loser* is the idea that Western countries are in the midst of an 'obesity epidemic' and immediate action by all citizens is required. The purpose of this study was to provide insights into viewers' consumption of the obesity discourses reproduced by *The Biggest Loser*, through the social media platform

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Facebook. Viewers' Facebook posts were analyzed and categorized under the theoretical framework of biopedagogy. Data analysis observed that viewers' Facebook posts reproduced obesity discourses concerning children, active or inactive citizens and inequalities. Facebook enables active participation of body surveillance and also serves as a multiplier of surveillance. The authors maintain that social media is a form of cultural texts; these texts reflect broader cultural understandings. Although some scholars argue that social media can facilitate movements of resistance, the authors observed that *The Biggest Loser* viewers reproduced obesity discourses.

In North American society, neoliberal undertones link personal choice and accountability with an individual's health status (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). Health is achieved unproblematically through individual efforts and discipline of the body toward a specific shape and size (Crawford, 1980). The rise of reality television showcasing the making and remaking of citizens, contributes to the labeling and differentiation of citizens as 'good' or 'bad' depending on their adherence to technologies of the self. A 'good' citizen is an individual who monitors and regulates his or her health behaviours such as food consumption or engagement in exercise (Halse, 2009).

Ideas about health behaviours or subjectivities are created through the popularization of reality television series that advocate the necessity of certain lifestyle behaviours and interventions. These messages are consumed by the viewing audience and reproduced in various ave-

nues such as social or mass media. Reality television can present individuals as victims of their own lifestyle choices rather than broader societal problems because individuals are shown in a controlled and episodic manner (Redden, 2008). Factors such as structural inequalities, which may impact individuals' choices, are often ignored by reality television because they may not be reflective of the reality of the targeted television viewers. With the rise of social media and integration with reality television, television viewers can discuss and negotiate subjectivities through a social media platform. Reality television continues to be a mainstay in prime time television while social media continues to increase in popularity with the number of users increasing each month (Dubrofsky, 2011; Oliveira, 2012). Although these two can exist on their own, cross-pollination between the two has occurred with reality television programs and contestants having official Facebook pages or Twitter accounts (Dubrofsky, 2011). The cross-pollination contributes to surveillance technologies as individuals on the reality television programs form identities and engage in activities interpreted by and commented on by the viewing audience through social media. Media can "reflect, rearticulate, and participate in larger cultural discourses about valorizing expression and displays of the self under surveillance" (Dubrofsky, 2011, p. 114). Reality television contestants and the viewing audiences' participation in social media may be considered symptomatic texts and may be reflective of larger cultural issues.

The purpose of this study is to explore the use of social media by reality television shows to engage the viewing audience and in turn the interconnectedness of

the viewing audience's responses with larger societal issues. This study explores the consumption of *The Biggest Loser (TBL)* through the viewing audience members as they are compelled to share their thoughts, fears and challenges about the show through social media. Furthermore, the study examines the interconnectedness of the viewing audience's response with larger societal issues and subjectivities.

TBL is a competitive reality weight loss television show, which provides contestants with a personal trainer and a restricted diet in an effort to assist obese individuals in losing weight and establishing a healthy lifestyle all while competing for a \$250,000 cash prize based on the amount of each contestants' weekly weight loss. Individuals apply to participate as contestants on the show through online applications and are chosen by producers based on requirements such as a willingness to change their life and having "at least 80lbs to lose" (NBC, 2013).

A driving premise behind *TBL* is the idea that Western countries are currently experiencing an 'obesity epidemic' which requires immediate and vigilant action by all citizens. The use of the term 'epidemic' frames obesity as a disease in which every individual is at risk of developing obesity and therefore needs to monitor and regulate his or her lifestyle choices (Gard & Wright, 2005). Participants of *TBL* are represented as 'doing their part' to counteract the epidemic by allowing their bodies to be subjected to scrutiny and discipline by the personal trainers and viewing audience. In turn, home viewers tuning into *TBL* each week may also be 'doing their part' by consuming the advice and instructions as to how they can monitor

their current weight and lifestyle choices so they do not fall victim to, or contribute to the ‘obesity epidemic’.

It is not only adults who may fall victim to the ‘obesity epidemic’ but children are also cautioned as potential victims. Media and politicians often use the idea that parents will outlive their children to make the concerns over children’s bodies relevant and alarming (McMahon, 2011). This statement is often repeated in the media and medical community despite its misrepresentation of one study’s findings that obesity may shorten the life expectancy of the current generation, rather than children dying before their parents (Olshansky et al., 2005). These inflammatory claims portray children as being ‘at risk’, which has propagated fear in the eyes of parents and children (Hilpern, 2002). As a result, people may be more willing to monitor and regulate their bodies and the bodies of their children while resisting any government controls (Gard & Wright, 2005).

Until recently, contestants on *TBL* were adults who weighed over 200 pounds; however, in season 14 (2013), children were included to help illustrate the fear and combat childhood obesity. In their marketing efforts, NBC stated that “with childhood obesity at an all-time high, jeopardizing the health of kids and future generations, The Biggest Loser is committed to fighting this epidemic by featuring children this season to serve as ambassadors of change who can inspire kids all over the country to get healthy” (NBC, 2013). The idea of protecting children’s health facilitates the controversial, and arguably exploitative, use of children in a television show that is based upon body regulation and competition. Unlike adult contestants, the children live at home and are supported by

the personal trainers as they work toward weight loss. Each episode features weekly visits from the children to the ranch as they participate in group challenges but avoid the weekly weigh in. Instead, the children participate in fitness tests and are compared to what have been deemed average measures for children.

TBL merges entertainment and social welfare by molding the contestants into healthy, active citizens along with the television viewers (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). Social media supports *TBL's* efforts by engaging the viewers to actively participate in the show by posting comments on the official Facebook page, as well as interact with other viewers in an effort to mold themselves into healthy active citizens.

Facebook is a social networking site that allows individuals to create a profile, add other users as friends, post pictures and status updates on their own profile as well as comment on their friends' postings. Furthermore, individuals can become fans of different pages and post their own comments. Originally limited to college students, Facebook opened to anyone with a valid email address in September 2006 (Associated Press, 2006). In the United States and Canada, over 186 million people are members of Facebook with 1.5 million people being fans of *The Biggest Loser's* Facebook Page (Socialbakers, 2013). These fans vary in age, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. The only connection these fans have with one another is their viewership and fondness for the show. Facebook relies on user-generated content and connects users through interactions and exchanges of information or 'posts' on Facebook pages in combination with paid advertising (Dubrofsky, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact Facebook may have on its users' reproduction, negotiation and/or resistance to messages and themes such as notions of health as an individual responsibility, fears of obesity, and thinness as a sign of health. The authors explored the relevance of Facebook as it pertains to *TBL* and the reproduction of biopedagogy.

Theoretical Framework

Jan Wright (1996) first coined the term 'biopedagogy' to encompass the instructions individuals receive about their bodies and lifestyle choices from media, public health officials, government organizations, etc. Influenced by Michel Foucault's articulation of biopower, biopedagogy attempts to understand the modes of subjectification through which individuals' work on themselves and the types of surveillance an individual engages with for so-called healthy behaviours (Wright, 2009). For example, an individual may regularly use a scale to monitor his or her body weight. It uses the idea of disciplinary power as an extension of biopower and Foucault's concerns with technologies of the self. Technologies of the self "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being as to transform themselves" (Foucault, 1988b, p. 18). Disciplinary power can be understood in terms of the self-monitoring and self-discipline engaged in by individuals as a result of internalized cultural norms (Foucault, 1991); it is a "subtle, constant and ubiquitous power over life" (Gastaldo, 1997, p. 115). This power can be under-

stood as the urging of people to work on bettering themselves.

Harwood (2009) suggests biopedagogy represents a range of instructions on “*bios*: how to live, how to eat, how much to eat, how to move, how much to move” (p. 15). It encompasses all of the instructions about how we should live and is value laden to assist in laying down the rules associated with belonging to a class and culture. It is a fusion of bios and health with more at risk than living well (Harwood, 2009). Shilling (2005) offers that body pedagogies construct intrinsic, embodied subjectivities that serve as corporeal orientations to individuals. Particular social meanings are constructed about health and influence behaviours. Body pedagogies are “any conscious activity [under] taken by people, organizations or the state, that are designed to enhance individuals’ understandings of their own and others’ corporeality” (Evans, Rich, Davies, & Allwood, 2008, p. 17). Individuals and populations are put under surveillance and provided with instructions about health risks. Citizens are compelled to self-monitor and heed particular responsibilities (MacNeill & Rail, 2010).

It is the responsibility of an individual for his or her own health and wellness as a productive citizen (Callaghann, 2011). An obese body is pathologized through medical discourse of health and wellness as an individual responsibility while moral and political discourses suggest there are ‘good’ and ‘bad’ citizens based on physical appearance (Callaghann, 2011). A virtue discourse is entangled with the ‘obesity epidemic’ and obese individuals because of the moral fortitude, which surrounds those who retain their slim figure and low body weight (Halse, 2009).

An individual who incorporates biopedagogy into his or her life is deemed as having a high sense of moral fortitude and are considered virtuous bio-citizens (Halse, 2009). More specifically, an obese individual is thought to purposely engage in the harmful behaviours of poor eating habits or inactivity as well as being morally bankrupt and out of control because of choices (Callaghann, 2011; Rose, 1999). A bio-citizen's first obligation to society is to be accountable for his or her personal health. A 'good' and 'virtuous' citizen is an 'active' citizen who consciously monitor's his or her body in an effort to contribute to the wellbeing of a community (Halse, 2009).

Biopedagogy is interlinked with biopower and bio-citizenship because of the desire to conserve or protect life. However biopedagogy differs in its attempts to draw attention to pedagogical practices from government health organizations (such as public health campaigns) and to question the disguised pedagogical practices of biopower (Harwood, 2009). The study of biopedagogy enables us to understand the words and actions of the contestants but also the social media messages of the audience and the influences on cultural texts.

Methodology

To analyze the consumption of *TBL* viewing audience through the use of social media, *TBL* Facebook account was used as the primary data source in this study. The authors' approached the data collection using virtual ethnography as the means to collect, interpret and analyze the data. Although virtual ethnography can take on many different forms, the authors used a traditional participant observation approach of observing participations without

interaction (Hines, 2008). The authors' approach differed in that passive observations occurred in a virtual online community rather than traditional face-to-face interactive observations. Although it has been argued that merely lurking in the shadows of the Internet "implies a lack of engagement and the ability to develop...in-depth understanding from the inside that ethnography requires" (Hines, 2008, p. 262), the authors contend that the lack of active participation by the researchers in the virtual ethnography does not impact the data produced in a positive or negative manner. The intention of the authors was to observe the themes, which emerged by those who interacted on Facebook without coaxing or prodding by the researchers.

Initially, a grounded theory approach was used to collect and analyze the data simultaneously in order to capture theoretical explanations and themes which emerged from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Once themes of biopedagogy emerged, data not pertinent to the study were eliminated. This approach was also used because of the sheer volume of posts on *TBL's* Facebook page. An ethnographer is required to put boundaries around the collection of data (Markham, 2003) thus, Facebook posts from individuals advertising products or those expressing support for a particular team or personal trainer (e.g. Go red team!) were discarded which allowed for a more manageable pool of data. A total of 14,175 postings occurred during the data cycle and 5,585 were used in the analysis. Virtual ethnography was also used to help interpret the complex connections that take place within the boundaries of online communities and highlight the

importance of participants' written accounts (Wilson, 2006).

Each episode of season 14 of *TBL* was recorded and watched to provide the context necessary to understand the online discussions but no material from the television program was used for analysis. Due to the volume of Facebook posts on *TBL's* official Facebook fan page in relation to *TBL*, its content, and its personalities (i.e., trainers, hosts, medical experts, contestants), analysis of the posts were analyzed within a designated time frame. Facebook posts between 8pm EST on Monday evening until 1pm EST Tuesday afternoon were collected and used for analysis. This time frame allowed posts to be collected from both the east and west coast feeds until twelve hours after the end of the west coast airing. This time frame was used because there was an increase in engagement of Facebook users within the *TBL* Facebook page during this time frame.

Facebook posts were collected and coded into the following themes: parenting; inequalities; obesity epidemic; references to children; personal motivation, confessions and frustrations; fat shaming; allocating blame; and expert advice. Three consistent themes emerged from the users engagement: references to children, the 'obesity epidemic' and ignorance to societal inequalities. Drawing on Wright (2009)'s work on biopedagogy, the authors analyzed and interpreted the users contributions to the dialogue on *TBL* Facebook page. Halse's (2009) and Rose (1999)'s work surrounding moral discourses took the form through viewers' posts about poor parenting and fat shaming. A biopedagogical approach provided perspicacity about why viewers regurgitated obesity discourses.

The Facebook posts have been included verbatim unless otherwise indicated. A Facebook post displays the user's first and last name and therefore the users' Facebook last names have been removed to prevent the users from being easily identified. The authors did not need to join the *TBL* Facebook page in order to access the data and Facebook users agree to the use of data and privacy each time they login to Facebook (Facebook, 2014). Social media content may be personal in nature but is no longer private (Hookaway, 2008). Facebook posts on *TBL* page can be viewed as data in the public domain.

Viewers' Facebook posts were copied and coded as common themes among the data started to emerge throughout the 12 episodes. The themes and common codes resulted in the content of the Facebook posts being grouped into three distinct sections: inclusion of the children into the show; the blame placed on individuals within the framework of the 'obesity epidemic'; and inequalities, which are often ignored within the premise of *The Biggest Loser*.

Findings and Discussion

Save the Children

The characterization of childhood obesity as an 'epidemic' establishes a crisis surrounding children's bodies and a societal climate which suggests that children and adolescents in North American society need to be 'protected' or 'saved' from obesity (Gard, 2009; Tinning, 2002). Children are considered to be disproportionately affected by the 'obesity epidemic' and are always 'at risk' of becoming overweight or obese because children are not considered mature enough to monitor and regulate their

own bodies (Flores et al., 2002). The characterization of children as always being potentially ‘at risk’ and requiring protection, legitimizes the actions of the government or other organizations’ efforts to implement policies and programs to thwart the ‘epidemic’ (Rich & Evans, 2009).

Season 14 of *TBL* was promoted as having a “big, bold mission: to tackle childhood obesity head-on” (NBC, 2013). The show’s goal was to create child ambassadors who would in turn inspire other children to control and monitor their own weight. Many of the viewers were invested in the idea of tackling childhood obesity and applauded the show and network for their efforts to save the children. One viewer suggested the experience was empowering to children, “I think this is the best thing that has happened. support and therapy to empower our kids!!! Thanks NBC jillian, bob and all!!!” (Sonia). While another saw the inclusion of child ambassadors as an important element in providing examples to others and drawing attention to the obesity issue, “so happy to see the kids....Setting the best example for our nations youth....and Adults.....way to go all of you....Kudos to NBC and all of the trainers for bring this up front!!! [sic]”(Beverly).

These messages support subjectivities reinforcing a childhood ‘obesity epidemic’. Instead of being concerned about the televised exploitation of children and their bodies, the viewers were supportive of the inclusion of the children into *TBL* franchise. The viewers applauded the attention given by the media and the timely nature of the inclusion of the children. The issue is given relevancy in the minds of viewers because of the uptake of the issue by popular culture on television, Beth states:

Thank you Biggest Loser for addressing childhood obesity and the importance of our youth eating healthy foods and staying active. I've been making my daughter watch with me and I think she is starting to see the importance. I've been telling her the same thing for years, but hearing it on TV from famous people helps it sink in!!

The viewers do not question the inclusion of children in the program and embrace the necessity of the child ambassadors to help educate others about how to achieve health and prevent illness. These messages underline biopedagogical instructions the audience have received about being vigilant about their lifestyles, the requirement to eat healthy, maintain one's weight, and prevent illness or disease. The ability to regulate one's *bios* is thought to be necessary "in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality" (Foucault, 1997, p. 225). The viewers' associate the need to monitor their bodies and the bodies of children, in order to achieve a normalized weight, as necessary behaviours to actualize happiness in other aspects of their lives.

Parents are often blamed for not monitoring and regulating their children's bodies to prevent them from being overweight or obese (Crowe, 2011; Plakas, 2012). Beth's quote above, suggests that one mother "made" her daughter watch *TBL* with her as an educational tool, which helps illustrate the pressure some parents feel to have 'healthy' children in order to reflect parental competency. Parents become responsible for monitoring their child's health and body weight because it is assumed that children are not mature enough for self-governance (Kirk

& Spiller, 1994). The body is a political space and it is the responsibility of parents to not only produce their own bodies as a space for normalizing truths but they are also expected to reproduce these truths via the bodies of their children (Wright, 2009). If parents fail to impress the same attitude of self-governance on their child this may signal a weakness in the “apparatus of governmentality” (Rail & Lafrance, 2009); in other words, biopedagogical discourses may be undermined and future generations could be at risk of falling victim to obesity. Viewers provided insight into the putative culture that parents must contend with, which is reflected in Tina’s post,

Its very much the parents fault (until a certain age). The parents buy the food and facilitate family activities. They choose to go out to eat multiple times a week. They teach their habits to their children. Every child should participate in a sport or some activity that requires them to move.

The viewers appear to bolster the biopedagogical instructions that currently exist in broader society, which state the need for children to eat specific foods and engage in a certain amount of exercise to achieve or maintain a specific weight because being fat is unhealthy. The viewers’ posts also reinforce the idea that overweight children result from poor parenting and that in order for America to get healthy, incompetent parents must be held accountable by society at-large because “UNLESS THEIR PARENTS JOIN IN, IT WILL HAPPEN AGAIN. Take a look at the parents, one OR both of them are fat!!!” (Sam). The broader message that resonates with viewers is if children are going to be saved from an ‘obesity epidemic’, they must

first be saved from poor parenting. Recalcitrant parenting becomes symbolic of social exclusion and, as Foucault (1982) writes, an “intransigence of freedom” that assumes the obese consciously refuse to belong to the dominant culture. To avoid social exclusion, it is the role of parents to assist their children in following the biopedagogical instructions and conforming to societal expectations about their bodies to ensure they fit within the established norms.

It’s Your Fault, Not Mine

The framing of the show’s contestants perpetrates obesity discourses that the contestants or individuals are at fault for their current health status and no blame is placed on larger society. Media, government reports, and health professionals often endorse the view that “bad biology, psychology and habits, resulting in too little exercise and over indulgence in the pleasures of readily available, cheap, bad food, can be apportioned disproportionately to particular categories of the population” (Rich & Evans, 2009, p. 162). These biopedagoical instructions and perceptions shape the ideas and behaviours of citizens. Facebook posts often reflected the ideas that the contestants were overweight or obese as a result of their own actions and failures but did not consider that societal standards or expectations may be restrictive or unrealistic. The contestants are considered to be physically weak while the personal trainers or Facebook users were viewed as physically superior. The Facebook users’ posts often reproduced ideas surrounding the ‘obesity epidemic’, which is largely premised on the assumption that there is a standard body shape and weight for all individuals and one’s health can

be measured using the body mass index (Rich & Evans, 2005). “The idea that weight is associated with optimum health and longevity could be determined by height” (Seid, 1994, p. 7), has been embraced by the health industry (academics, health professionals, government agencies, etc.) (Rich & Evans, 2005). The framing of obesity as strictly a weight issue encourages individuals to think there is an ideal body weight (Rich & Evans, 2005). The ideal (slender) image is also pedagogized through the media, medical, health and fitness professionals using an alarmist discourse to spread concern over the ‘obesity epidemic’ (Azzarito, 2009; Seid, 1989). In the eyes of the Facebook users, the contestants on *TBL* have failed in their self-monitoring and self-discipline in order to embrace the cultural norms surrounding a slender body.

To prevent the ‘obesity epidemic’, citizens are required to participate in physical activity on a daily basis and monitor and regulate their diets to protect themselves against the disease of obesity (Murray, 2008). Individuals who are obese are understood as inactive citizens because of their failure to avoid obesity and their inability to control their weight through diet and exercise. Disciplining the body is fundamental to changing obese individuals from inactive to active citizens.

The necessity to discipline the body is often used to justify the rigorous exercise and discipline the contestants of *TBL* are subjected to by the trainers and health professionals. The personal trainers encourage the contestants to reflect on their physical weight and demand they take personal responsibility for their past failures, which led to their size. Viewers offered support for the personal trainers’ actions on the show, “these people, and the viewers,

need to be pushed but also trainers that care enough to help them get past the humps that has created failure prior to coming to the ranch” (Bobby). The viewers often blamed the contestants for their appearance and thought the discipline the contestants received was justified and necessary:

If you respected yourself and your body first of all you wouldn't be on the show. Secondly the trainers are there to train you, put your body back in shape restore it...They knew this was coming so they really need to stop being cry babies and listen to professionals and DO IT!!! Nobody made them this way but they can certainly take the help giving what ever way it's given to get to a healthy and respect place.... (Jessica, quote truncated).

Viewers did not acknowledge that societal issues or limitations may have contributed to the contestants body size, but choose to blame the contestants' personal choices for their appearance.

Biopedagogical messages and obesity discourses attached to 'fat' bodies and fatshaming circulate on *TBL* such as notions of lack of control, laziness, moral failings, and defiance (Crandall, 1994; Francombe & Silk, 2012; Murray, 2008). A contestant on the show is represented as unfit and unhealthy but also a moral failure because of physical size and fat body (Hearn, 2008). The body of an overweight or obese person is framed as the physical manifestation of lack of willpower, low self-esteem and general laziness (Sender & Sullivan, 2008). When contestants did not fully submit to the discipline that was prescribed to them by the health professionals on the show,

viewers labeled contestants as whiners, or not worthy of being on the show. The willpower of the contestants to self-monitor, discipline and regulate their bodies and eating habits is often tested. In one episode, contestants were locked in a room filled with 'junk food' during a contest called a "Temptation" where each contestant's will power is pitted against the will power of fellow contestants. Ironically, the contestant who wins is the contestant who eats the most calories. It is an aspect of the show that marks *TBL* as an entertainment show first and foremost by creating drama. Even though viewers understand that temptations are intended to interfere with the contestants and are commonly used as game play tactics they condemn contestants who 'play the game' rather than make the healthy choice, "its so wrong that the person who ate 1300 cals got to stay to me that just shows shes not going to make it far in life with her weight..." (Miriam). Even when presented temptations, it is an individual's responsibility to self-monitor and resist.

Moral weakness was generally found to be intolerable for the *TBL* audience. When a contestant decided to leave the show, she was labeled as weak and blamed for taking the spot of other more dedicated individuals, "I think she is such a ZERO for having taken a spot that so many people wanted and deserved. I could care less about her and her crybaby ways!!!" (Mary). Viewers did not have tolerance for behaviours or emotions they viewed as a sign of weakness. Lisa posts, "Gina is a basket case! Someone needs to call her a WAAAAAAHHHMBULANCE!! I hope she conquers her weight issues but more than anything, I hope she gets rid of her excuses and issues!!!" The post suggests a lack of patience for contestants who are unwill-

ing to go to extreme lengths to discipline their body. Foucault (1988a) suggests that disciplined individuals should have the ability to silence one's fears and appetites from within. The viewers' posts suggest frustration that the contestants aren't able to control their urges and are therefore perceived as morally weak and lacking in resolve.

Entertainment Before Reality

TBL is designed for entertainment purposes so it serves the home viewer to be ignorant to the realistic nature of the show and its practices. Although promoted as a reality television show, *TBL* is designed to capture the audience's attention and encourage weekly viewership. Video clips are selected to entertain but not necessarily educate home viewers. As a result, issues such as social inequality become masked behind the notion of individual determination and self-discipline, as demonstrated, by *TBL* content and the Facebook viewers' posts. *TBL* assumes people have the choice and opportunity to engage in the health behaviours deemed necessary to self-monitor and self-discipline their bodies. *TBL* producers or trainers do not acknowledge barriers and give little consideration as to the reasons why people may not be able to organize their lives around physical activity and be vigilant about their caloric intake. Facebook posts reflected the struggles home viewers have with being physically active and eating the types of foods promoted on the show. Viewers expressed their cries for help with their weight issues and frustration for not knowing what to do to improve their health. Kelli states,

I love this show, it always makes me cry. And then I think about my own morbid obesity and get all depressed and immediately go to drown myself in food to feel better but it only makes it that much worse. I wish I had the ambitions to accomplish what they do on the ranch!

Kelli acknowledges the emotions that may accompany individuals who are overweight and the feeling of helplessness to do it on their own. Regular physical activity and healthy eating is not presented as a choice by *TBL* but rather a biopedagogical requirement for a productive citizen. Individuals who do not comply are not being socially or morally responsible. However, the fact that the individuals on the ranch do not have to work or provide for a family while they are attempting weight loss is often lost in *TBLs'* messaging. To remain on the show, contestants are under constant surveillance and are required to monitor their eating habits and discipline their bodies through exercise with the help of personal trainers. Facebook viewers' posts often reflected their difficulties in applying the lesson from 'reality' television into the reality of their own lives.

Although social inequalities related to physical activity were not acknowledged by the show or Facebook users, the socioeconomics surrounding the cost of healthy eating was discussed by the Facebook users when an episode of *TBL* focused on contestants learning to eat healthy for only \$10 per person per day. Many viewers point out the difficulties they have supporting their families on their current budget. Sharon posts,

Get Real BL. Most of us don't have a \$10 per person per day food budget....try else than ½ that and throw in paper towels, soap etc. Even better try it with a food stamp budget. And no the words restaurant and junk food aren't even a special occasion consideration in the budget.

However, not all viewers agreed that these inequalities existed and rather saw other viewers as making excuses for poor choices. Jodean states,

If you can't spend 10/day, then don't! Doesn't mean you have to eat junky... It's not rocket science. I think rather than focus on the types of foods the contestants bought (whole, fresh, healthy foods), people are getting hung up on the dollar amount instead and using that for an excuse to not shop for healthy stuff. It's not the show's responsibility to cater to lower incomes, it's just a show about other people (quote truncated).

The concept that a family is unable to feed themselves on \$10 a day is rejected by some viewers on the premise that everyone has a 'choice' and individuals need to exercise that choice to make smart decisions about what food they purchase. These types of posts project biopedagogical undertones as it is deemed an individual's responsibility to make healthy food choices and their inability to do so is their own personal failure not social inequalities.

Conclusion

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study that has analyzed the consumption of *TBL* viewing audi-

ence through the use of Facebook. It is also one of the few studies that seek to unpack how people make sense of the information presented to them through social media platforms, rather than evaluating the information produced by those in positions of power. With the interconnectedness of social media and reality television, the reproduction of biopedagogical messages were demonstrated through Facebook users' posts and reproduced obesity discourses. Facebook and other social media provide a platform for users to share and interact on their own terms and in their own level of comfort. The anonymous nature of these interactions prevents people from being held accountable for their words or actions, which may be disinhibiting when posting online (Suler, 2004). The use of social media by *TBL* may contribute to the stigmatization of fat individuals and reproduction of biopedagogical messages about self-monitoring and self-surveillance. The data generated may reflect more honest thoughts and opinions because users interact in a virtual space rather than a shared physical space. Future research could use social media as a vehicle to examine issues of a sensitive nature because the participants may be more comfortable with the interactions.

Although Facebook users can choose what they post and how they respond to other users, their responses may reflect larger societal responses as a result of their own self-surveillance. The inclusion of children into *TBL* without the Facebook users questioning the negative impacts on the children, suggests the ideas surrounding the need to regulate and monitor children's bodies is ingrained in Western society. Facebook users' posts often suggest the parents are to blame for their children's health status and that children need to be saved from themselves and poor

parenting. The Facebook users reproduced the common childhood obesity discourses that children are at risk and need to be protected. The inclusion of children into a reality weight loss show is applauded because many viewers think it draws attention to the 'obesity epidemic' with hopes of saving the children. However, the lack of concern by the Facebook users about the surveillance of children's bodies is cause for concern. The absence of vocal objections suggests the requirement to regulate and discipline children's bodies is considered a necessity in contemporary society.

For adults, however, the blame is placed solely on the individuals themselves because their lack of discipline and self-regulation is considered the reason for their body weight and shape. The Facebook posts suggest there are narrow perspectives about health and the conflation of thinness with health. A strong acceptance of biopedagogical instructions about the ways to achieve health and a thin body were demonstrated within the posts. Facebook users did not tolerate the behaviours of contestants, which were presented as moral, emotional, and physically weak. Users did not question societal beliefs and expectations about health and one's body nor were they willing to accept more inclusive expectations. The overall problem was the contestants and not the Facebook users themselves or broader society.

Facebook users often took the stance of ignorance to barriers some people may face when following the biopedagogical instructions concerning healthy eating or engaging in physical activity. Although some Facebook users questioned the cost of eating healthy as a barrier to this behavior, neither the users nor the show questioned self-

sufficiency issues surrounding physical activity. The ignorance of users to barriers individuals may face concerning their health reproduces ideas that those who do not conform to societal expectations about their bodies, are making excuses about their behaviours.

With the anonymity of the Internet and the platform of Facebook, users had the opportunity to question the status quo without direct judgment. Social media provides a platform for users to share, reconfirm or solidify their ideas about health. This study found that instead of challenging the dominant societal discourses, viewers' posts often reproduced dominant discourses. Posts often exuded neoliberal undertones with the blame of the contestants' physical appearance being placed solely on the individual with no considerations made about barriers the contestants may face. The health information presented on *TBL* goes unquestioned by viewers and is reproduced as simplistic and common sense. To achieve the ideal slender body, good citizens need to self-monitor, self-regulate and discipline their bodies. This in turn, will help broader society and thwart any obesity epidemic.

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