

Monson, O., Donaghue, N. & Gill, R. (2016). Working hard on the outside: a multimodal critical discourse analysis of The Biggest Loser Australia. *Social Semiotics*, 26(5), pp. 524-540. doi: 10.1080/10350330.2015.1134821



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**Original citation:** Monson, O., Donaghue, N. & Gill, R. (2016). Working hard on the outside: a multimodal critical discourse analysis of The Biggest Loser Australia. *Social Semiotics*, 26(5), pp. 524-540. doi: 10.1080/10350330.2015.1134821

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Working hard on the outside: a discursive multimodal analysis of *The Biggest Loser Australia*

“Welcome to the biggest loser community”. *The Biggest Loser* (TBL) has been on Australian screens since 2006. Over 100 contestants have lost over 5 tonnes of body weight. Singles, couples and families have struggled through gruelling exercise regimes and physical challenges, resisted or succumbed to food temptations and “confronted their demons and rebuilt their lives” (S7:Ep1). Over its eight seasons TBL has become a key text in obesity discourse, a discourse that has been the subject of sustained critical attention as it has grown to achieve the status of unarguable prescription for not only health but also morality (Rich & Evans, 2005). TBL has itself been the subject of critical attention particularly in relation to fat stigma and discrimination (Lupton, 2013; Thomas, Hyde & Komesaroff, 2007). Despite these concerns there is a widespread belief that the ‘overall’ message of the program is positive because it educates viewers about the importance of diet and exercise (Christenson & Ivancin, 2006; Thomas et al., 2007). But weight loss and obesity discourse is multi-faceted and complex; beyond the messages of healthy lifestyle choices are values relating to personal responsibility and failure, as well as messages that construct overweight and obese individuals as unable to successfully manage their bodies or their lives (Bordo, 1993; Gard & Wright, 2005; Throsby, 2006). The dialogue and other verbal elements of TBL may be ‘on message’ promoting behaviours believed to be healthy, but media that have visual and sound components also communicate through those aspects, adding layers of meaning that are missed by analyses that consider only overt textual content. This paper examines both the language and televisual conventions at work in TBL in an effort to understand how the program constructs its address to its Australian viewers. We apply a discursive multimodal approach to a key episode, the finale, of the 2012 season of *The Biggest Loser Australia*. Although the overt message is that all contestants have worked hard, turned their lives around and been the most successful group ever in terms of weight loss, examination of the editing choices, the lighting and colour, the clothing and the amount of time focused on contestants will allow us to see that the program constructs varying degrees of success between contestants and provides accounts for these differences in outcomes. We will argue that in doing so TBL

is reinforcing cultural beliefs surrounding the character failings of fat people and the aesthetic value of fat bodies. Further we will show that in line with the findings of Skeggs and Wood (2008) and Skeggs (2009) in relation to reality television, success is inextricably linked to labour (or “the work” as it is called in TBL); contestants’ achievements are the result of the amount of emotional and physical work they are willing to do. In the logic of TBL, body size is “work” made visible. We will discuss the different constructions by looking at contestants located at differing points across the success spectrum.

### *Context and critique*

Obesity is constructed in western media as a uniquely modern cultural phenomenon that is of concern to us all; the terminology used to discuss overweight and obesity, particularly the phrase ‘obesity epidemic’ brings with it connotations of a fast spreading disease that threatens everyone (Gard & Wright, 2007; World Health Organisation, 2000). In response to the growing influence of ‘obesity crisis’ discourse a counter movement of obesity critics and Fat Studies researchers has arisen (e.g., Aphramor, 2005; Campos, 2004; Cooper, 2009; Gard, 2011; Gard & Wright, 2005). These critical obesity scholars and activists contest many of the claims of ‘obesity crisis’ discourse, and draw attention to the ideological functions of the bodily surveillance that is mandated and legitimised by the invocation of a ‘crisis’. They point out that in this context of heightened attention to weight, weight-loss discourse addresses everyone irrespective of current body size (Gard & Wright, 2007). Whether you are working to obtain or maintain a thin body you must remain ever vigilant; “everyone everywhere” is vulnerable (Gard & Wright, p 20).

Despite widespread acceptance of the view that the “obesity crisis” warrants urgent forms of intervention, TBL has been criticised in the academic literature, popular media and on public forum sites by viewers and even some previous contestants. In both popular media and academic literature one concern expressed relates to the physical and emotional wellbeing of TBL contestants. The intense exercise regimes, the expectations of large weekly weight losses and lack of long term support are considered problematic (Arbor, 2010; Edwards, 2013; Hill, 2005; ninemsn, 2011). There is also concern

that the effects of TBL stretch beyond accepted health practices. The ways in which the contestants are treated and portrayed -- the revealing clothes, the close ups of flesh, the shots and montages highlighting both physical and emotional weakness and the bullying by trainers -- are considered by some to be humiliating and exploitative (Lupton, 2013; Thomas et al., 2007). Thomas et al. (2007) argue that the program strengthens negative stereotypes of overweight and obese people, the notion that fat people are lazy and greedy and lack the ability to manage their lives (Thomas et al., 2007; Waddell, 2010), as well as the belief that fat people cannot be happy or successful in their lives, nor can they love themselves or be loved by others (Lupton, 2013). Studies have also suggested that TBL increases the belief that weight is controllable and a matter of purely personal responsibility, a belief that is central to the stigmatization of overweight and obese individuals (Domoff et al, 2012; Yoo, 2012). Thomas et al. (2007) found that viewers felt that TBL sanctions the bullying of the overweight and obese, clearly communicating that it is acceptable to shame and degrade fat people. In fact four of Thomas et al.'s (obese) participants had been abused by strangers in direct relation to TBL, reinforcing Levy-Navarro's (2012) concern that the program relegates every fat body to 'before' status; inherently problematic and requiring work and transformation. What this highlights is that TBL is not just about the contestants who choose to participate in the program; every fat body can be scrutinised and judged and every fat person is positioned as needing to reject their current self for the 'true-self' trapped by their excess weight (Levy-Navarro, 2012).

### *Reality Television and The Biggest Loser*

An important part of understanding both the allure and the constructed nature of TBL is understanding reality television. Reality TV is a diverse and evolving genre made up of many subgenres (Nabi, 2007). Broadly speaking its main characteristic is the use of non-actors (as themselves) in non-scripted scenarios (Nabi, 2007). In terms of production, casting and editing take primacy over directing (Skeggs, 2009) as character and narrative are developed in the post production stage (Ibrahim, 2007: Lundy, Ruth & Park, 2008). Production choices involving lighting, sound and editing options are made to

construct a piece of entertainment with characters and scenarios that will “engage and enrage” viewers over a whole season (Brooks, 2013).

Lundy et al.’s (2008) focus group discussions on reality television revealed that viewers are aware that these programs have an ambiguous relationship with reality. Viewers readily admit that the programs are not “real life” and in fact watch them as an “escape” from reality (p214). However part of the appeal is being able to identify with the contestants and imagine what they themselves would do in a similar situation (Lundy et al., 2008). This tension can be conceptualised as the difference between the ‘real’ and the ‘actual’; while the scenarios are contrived and the footage edited, the audience are still witness to how participants ‘actually’ act in and respond to those scenarios (Skeggs & Wood, 2008, p 559). So while viewers have an awareness of, and even a cynicism about, the editing process involved and the manufactured scenarios, they still find themselves becoming invested in the characters and some report becoming “addicted” to the programs (Lundy et al., 2008, p 215).

A popular focus in reality TV is the transformation narrative in which any and all aspects of life can be made better with the help of targeted advice from experts and sufficient hard work (Harvey & Gill, 2011; Ibrahim, 2007). According to Ibrahim (2007) the appeal of the transformation narrative lies in its mythical qualities whereby life’s obstacles can be overcome with the assistance of Fairy Godmother figures. She describes the “liminal space” (2007, p 41) between what is real and what is fictional in reality TV, a “magical sphere where reality and make believe fuse...where technical and specialist discourses are woven to transform and to instantly gratify audiences” (p43).

TBL certainly employs discourses that are technical and specialist and they are enacted by ‘experts’ who have the knowledge and power to physically transform contestants. The ostensible focus of the program is to assist overweight and obese contestants to lose weight by removing them from their everyday lives, placing them in the controlled environment of ‘Camp Biggest Loser’ and implementing a

regime of exercise and dietary changes. Their lives are micro-managed by ‘experts’ in the form of trainers, nutritionists and doctors, creating the impression of a credible source of information and support.

The weight-loss and obesity discourse that is the bedrock of the program is well known and widely accepted; for example it is commonly understood that there is a straightforward causal relationship between body size and health and that it is necessary to exercise and diet to lose weight. This combination of ‘common knowledge’ and seemingly authoritative advice enables the program to achieve a level of legitimacy as it tackles ‘real life’ issues which are constructed as matters of life and death. Although focussed directly on individual contestants this discourse addresses all members of society making the relationship between viewers and the contestants arguably more immediate. Whether viewers identify with the contestants’ desire to lose weight or feel superior for already being lean, the ‘lessons’ being taught about weight loss and healthy living are relevant to everyone, and the magical transformations give hope (or prurient satisfaction) to all.

However it cannot be forgotten that the program is a competition with a large cash prize on offer. Contestants are voted out of the show each week by their fellow contestants during “elimination” sessions, a process that often involves strategic decisions related to the competition. They compete against each other physically and psychologically and in some cases strategic advantage is offered as a reward for behaviours that explicitly undermine the health messages of the program. For example, in a particular “temptation challenge” the contestant who consumed the most chocolate won “immunity” from elimination and a 24 hour leave pass. Although TBL has become an authoritative contributor to weight loss and obesity discourse, it is not a health documentary series, it is “infotainment” (Werneke, 2006).

While TBL is superficially about helping people to change their lives, it actually evicts contestants from the camp while they are still overweight and thus, in terms of the premise of the show, still needing help. It contains a great deal of humiliating footage of contestants in underwear or similarly revealing clothing and it contains game elements that go against the supposed main goal of the program

by offering strategic benefits to contestants who engage in specific ‘unhealthy’ behaviours. These structural and visual elements seem to be conveying something other than health advice. If we want to understand these messages our analysis must examine both the language/textual content and the visual and structural elements. In order to do this we approach the data from a social constructionist position that holds language and talk, and indeed all forms of communication, are social action, and we apply discursive analysis as explicated by Wetherell (2001) and multimodal analysis informed by Machin (2007). Discursive analysis provides tools to deconstruct language and identify the social action that is being achieved. Multimodal analysis involves the examination of the production components such sound, colour, lighting, framing, editing pace and clothing to identify the discourse and ideology that is being supported, perpetuated or created (Machin, 2007). This study will apply discursive and multimodal analysis to the 2012 Australian season of *The Biggest Loser* to examine what messages about obesity are being communicated beyond health advice and how they are being communicated.

### *Data and Analysis*

The 2012 Australian season of *The Biggest Loser* consisted of a total of 72 episodes broadcast over 16 weeks from Jan 23rd 2012 to May 8th 2012. The episodes were formulaic and predictable both in structure and style. The elements shown below were repeated throughout the series.

<b>Structural elements</b>	<b>Stylistic elements</b>
Weigh-ins	Montages (e.g. training, or pre TBL life)
Elimination sessions	Intense close ups (e.g. flesh or facial expressions)
‘Confessional’ sessions	Direct to camera (e.g. trainers and contestants retelling events)
Training sessions	Surveillance footage
Education/nutritional sessions	
Physical challenges	
Temptation challenges	
Make-overs	
‘Reveals’	

The 2012 season focused on singles – all contestants were either separated or had never been in a romantic relationship. There were 16 contestants, eight men and eight women who were divided into four teams according to sex and age; the white team-under 30s women, the red team-over 30s women, the blue team-under 30s men and the black team- over 30s men. Each team worked with a trainer of the same sex who was responsible for their exercise regime. The contestants received medical and nutritional advice throughout the season from experts and the trainers. The contestants competed either as teams, as “boys vs girls”, as “old dogs vs young pups” or as individuals in various challenges. These challenges were sometimes physical, for example completing a 2 kilometre obstacle course, and sometimes food related, such as the chocolate challenge mentioned earlier. Each week the contestants were weighed and the two who had lost the lowest percentage of weight were put up for elimination, with one contestant voted off the program by the others.

The analysis process began by watching the whole series and it soon became apparent the volume of data was too large for the fine-grade analysis afforded by the combined discursive multimodal method. After several analytic strategies were considered it was decided to focus on the finale episode. This decision was made for two main reasons. The first is that the finale is representative of the series in that it contains not only all the formulaic elements listed earlier, it also makes use of footage from throughout the season. The second is that as the finale is the culmination of the season it includes all contestants regardless of how long they were actually in ‘Camp Biggest Loser’. It therefore provides the unique opportunity in terms of the course of the series to examine how the varying degrees of success (and failure) are treated.

The finale ran for just over 90 minutes and built over that time towards the crowning of ‘The Biggest Loser’ for 2012. It began with a montage that briefly covered previous seasons, summed up the current season and finished with the “the final four”; the four finalists who were in contention for the main prize. Each of the teams (excluding any members who were in “the final four”) was re-introduced and ‘revealed’ to the audience. A montage of footage of the team members from throughout the season



was shown and then in the studio a screen with larger than life images of the contestants at their original size was pulled back to reveal the team members as they were at the end of the season. They then spent a few minutes talking to the host who asked them a questions or series of questions, and another montage was shown that focused on either a contestant from the team or an event relevant to the team. The team members then sat on bleacher type seating at the side of the stage. At the end of each team segment a pre-filmed sequence was shown for team members in “the final four”, which showed each of the finalists going home and revealing their transformed bodies to their families and friends. Between the reintroduction of the team and the “getting down to business” of the final weigh-ins, two of the contestants performed a duet. The non-finalist contestants were then weighed onstage and the person with the highest percentage of weight lost won a cash prize of AU\$20 000. Each member of “the final four” was then reintroduced in a similar manner as the teams, with a montage followed by the reveal and a chat with the host. Once the process had been repeated for all four finalists, they were all weighed on stage and the finalist with the highest percentage of weight lost was announced as the winner of the season and the cash prize of AU\$220 000.

An orthographic transcription and description of the finale episode was made. Each discrete section, for example team montage or team reveal, was watched repeatedly to identify the visual and auditory elements, and their relationship with corresponding dialogue. Once analysis of the entire episode was completed it was apparent that two strong elements formulated the stories of ‘success’ (and, by implication, failure) that form the essence of TBL’s narrative. The first element concerns the criteria for success, the second involves the reasons to which success (or failure) are attributed. In order to highlight the major means by which these differences are made apparent, we focus our analysis on the construction and portrayal of contestants located at differing points across the success spectrum: two of the female contestants (Michelle and Selena), two of the male contestants (James and Ryan) and the winner of the series (Margie).

*Welcome to The Biggest Loser finale*

The audience for the finale is made up of family and friends of the contestants. Live action in the studio is interspersed with montages of footage from the season that re-introduce the contestants, the trainers and certain events that occurred during the season. The colour saturation in the studio is high and a lighting wash is used to add warm tones to skin. The set is down lit and the black walls to either side and around the back of the studio are covered with small lights that resemble a starlit night sky; the result is that the set appears to glow. Host Hayley Lewis is dressed in a glamorous black one shouldered dress that highlights her thin frame. The bodice sparkles echoing the star-lit walls; she too glows. The colours and the lighting effects create an environment that is more intense and luminous than reality producing the impression that the studio -- and what is about to occur within it -- is somewhat “magical” (Ibrahim, 2007, p.43). In contrast the colour saturation in the montage sequences of life before TBL is less intense than the studio footage which gives it a slightly washed out appearance, as though the contestants could not possibly live ‘in full colour’ until they have lost weight.

Most of the music is written specifically for the show and seamlessly contributes to the sense of a cohesive story being told. It changes pace, tempo and key to convey different messages at different points without drawing attention to itself with gaps, or changes of instruments, or lyrics. In this way the music supports the narrative structure that is being created by the edited footage. The theme song for the opening credits, however, which was also used extensively in the advertising campaign leading up to the series, is a cover performed by *Florence and the Machine* called “You’ve got the love”. The lyrics “sometimes I feel like throwing my hands up in the air, sometimes I feel like saying Lord I just don’t care...” play at the beginning of each episode with low colour saturation footage of four solemn-faced contestants showing us the things that they want in life but that being fat has prevented them from having, the music helping to construct their despair. Then as the music soars with the lyrics “but you’ve got the love I need to see me through” we jump into high colour saturation footage of the contestants in their team colours with their trainers. The lyrics and the uplifting beat construct TBL as the inspiring force that is going to change the contestants’ lives for the better.

Clothing is another important element of character construction throughout the series that a multimodal approach allows us to analyse. Within Camp Biggest Loser the contestants wear a limited range of clothes consisting of shorts, t-shirts and crop tops. While the clothes may be defensible as ‘exercise clothes’, the amount of flesh that is visible and the lack of any individuality conveys the message that these people are their bodies; their size is the thing that defines them. Furthermore the revealing clothing combined with the close ups of flesh and the use of surveillance footage tells viewers that we are allowed, indeed encouraged, to scrutinise and judge these fat bodies. The narrow range of predictable and highly specific ways in which bodies are visualised communicates far more powerfully than words alone the notions of value that attach to different bodies: that a male stomach on which the abdominal muscles are visible is ‘masculine’ and ‘strong’, or that a female stomach that is flat or slightly concave is ‘sexy’ or ‘beautiful’. Conversely the visual techniques of TBL convey a visceral sense of disgust about fat, figuring larger bodies as abject and shameful (Tyler, 2008). As Harvey and Gill (2011) have argued in relation to televisual sex advice, the use of visual and sound technologies transforms the genre, rendering it affectively charged in a way that is quite different from purely written texts. As we will show, TBL evinces a similar emotional impact, seeming to confer the status of obviousness to the stereotypes and hostile judgments that we all always already ‘know’ about fat bodies. Later in the finale, clothing also serves as a reward for losing weight, and a symbol of success. This is particularly the case for the female contestants as the choice of clothing for the ‘reveals’ seems to communicate that the ultimate reward for losing weight is to be able to dress in a manner that draws attention to and accentuates the body.

The first team to be re-introduced and then revealed to the audience is the white team (young women): Michelle, Selena, Kasey and Bek. As we will show, of all the female contestants (including Margie, the eventual winner of the series) Michelle is clearly constructed as the most successful and Selena as the least successful.

### *Michelle and Selena*

“Once upon a time there were four young girls whose weight held them back from finding love”. The white team montage begins as a ‘fairy tale’ (Ibrahim, 2007) with Pachelbel’s Canon in D Major playing under the voice over. Their weight is assigned to the fairy tale role of the wicked witch and they are the princesses who need to escape to find their princes. A montage of each of the young women briefly lamenting their single status -- for example Michelle sadly saying “to never really have had a boyfriend, yeah it’s a bit painful” -- is followed by shots of training and the elimination process. The footage used to depict each contestant in this section works to create very different characters. The voice over tells us that “it was a rocky start...especially for Selena”. She is shown shouting and in conflict with their trainer Tiffany, and then her name is written on an elimination voting card: “you are not the biggest loser”. After her elimination a member of another team wins a prize that allows an eliminated contestant to return; the other contestants are shown smiling and excited in anticipation, waiting to see who will return. A shot of Selena entering the room is followed by a shot of the others no longer smiling and there is a moment of silence (not even any music, the first instance of silence to this point). Even with no overtly negative dialogue this series of shots clearly constructs the impression that the other contestants do not like Selena. The construction of Selena as disruptive and unpopular continues with more shots of her shouting and in conflict, this time with another contestant. The montage then shifts from Selena to Michelle, who, by contrast, is portrayed as blossoming across the course of the season, the ideal ‘self-improving’ subject of TBL. Over shots of Michelle and Hamish (from the young men’s team) embracing and giggling together we are told that “Michelle found her confidence and her Prince Charming”. Selena in contrast succumbs to “the pressure of the game” and asks to be eliminated. Michelle and Kasey are shown after makeovers, extremely happy with their new appearance. But some sad music signals the end for Michelle as she forlornly confesses to Tiffany “yeah I just binged again”, a response to stress and an act she needs to be consoled over. The voice over links this incident to her “emotional” departure. In this montage Selena and Michelle have the most time and footage. But Selena is constructed as disruptive and disliked by the others while Michelle receives a much more sympathetic portrayal. This ending to the montage sets up the sequence in the studio that follows.

Back in the studio the crowd cheers loudly and dramatic music pulses as two screens pull away to either side to reveal the three contestants in frozen model poses, Selena on the left, Michelle in the middle with one arm in the held above her head, and Bek to the right (Kasey, a finalist, is not included in this part of the program). Selena is wearing a flowing, floor length gown in a dull petrol green tone with a black shrug. Michelle is wearing a short, fitted dress with spaghetti shoulder straps that is covered in silver sequins, she is glowing and the viewers' eyes are drawn to the sparkling dress. Michelle's dress is 'sexy'; it exposes a lot of skin and highlights the shape of her body. In contrast Selena's dress virtually covers all of her body and it is clear that she is still fat.

Selena steps down from her position at the back of the studio set and walks along the right hand side of a catwalk runway towards the audience. But she doesn't walk alone, an image of her 'fat' self, wearing bike shorts and sports bra top, walks at the same pace up the left hand side of the runway. When they reach the end, the current Selena looks the past version of herself up and down and waggles her hand at her in a dismissive gesture. The old version disappears and Selena steps into the centre of the runway and poses to show off her new body. She turns so that the audience can see her from all angles. Michelle and Bek repeat the process, with one important addition; once they get to the end of the runway and have turned around, there is a slow camera-tilt from their feet to their heads so that the television audience can examine their bodies. Viewers were not given the same opportunity to scrutinize Selena, clearly communicating that her still large body is not worth 'checking out'.

The three contestants join host Lewis to the left of the runway. The conversational exchange that takes place between Lewis and the three contestants reflects and reinforces the hierarchy of success. Lewis first addresses Michelle and both speak four times. Lewis then turns her attention to Bek, and both speak three times. Lewis then addresses Selena, who responds, and Lewis moves on to introducing the next montage (i.e. they both speak only once). For both Michelle and Bek, Lewis wishes them "best of luck", to which they both respond with "thank you" and the audience cheers. Selena is neither wished luck, nor given the opportunity to speak again, and there is no appropriate moment for the audience to

cheer for her. In her exchange with Selena, Lewis offers her an acceptable reason for leaving the program, “Were you homesick? Is that why you returned home?” But Selena doesn’t take up this suggestion, instead she explains that she didn’t like being told what to do and wanted to do things her own way. Selena’s facial expression shows that she is expecting Lewis to respond to this, but Lewis moves on. Although none of these contestants have made the final four it is clear from the way they are addressed by Lewis and the cameras that Michelle and Bek have been more ‘successful’ than Selena. Furthermore Michelle has been more successful than Bek in that she not only managed to lose weight but also to find a boyfriend during the process. Later in the program she gets more air time as she appears in an even more glamorous dress and sings the Delta Goodrem song *Born to Try* live for the audience. Michelle is now ‘thin and sexy’ and has a boyfriend; her body size tells us that she has ‘worked hard’ and become a successful woman who is worth paying attention to. Selena is still fat; her body size is enough to tell us about her character flaws and that she hasn’t worked hard enough; she doesn’t deserve our time or attention.

The contrast in the constructions of Michelle and Selena not only communicates different degrees of success but also explanations for those different outcomes. The footage shows Selena in a series of arguments and confrontations with her trainers and teammates, while the voice over tells us that “the pressure of the game proved too much” before showing Selena asking her team to vote for her elimination. This choice of footage creates the impression that Selena was unwilling to do the work that was required of her, she did not pay due respect to the superior knowledge of the trainers, she was not a team player and lacked the fortitude to continue with the program. The shots of Michelle, by contrast, include her vomiting into a bin during a hard training session, training on an exercise bike, hugging Hamish, and swinging on a trapeze. An act of bingeing ‘caught’ on camera is portrayed sympathetically as evidence of her “struggle with life at camp”; what might have been portrayed as a ‘weakness’ instead becomes a further reason to admire Michelle, as it shows the magnitude of the difficulties that she was prepared to work to overcome. Unlike Selena, Michelle gave herself over to the process and followed the

steps necessary to lose weight. The constructions of these two contestants and the contrasts between them reinforce accepted ideas found in obesity discourse; that fat people are both lazy and weak willed, and recalcitrant and dysfunctional in society. Thin people in contrast work hard, have relationships and lead fulfilling lives.

In the final weigh-in towards the end of the program, all contestants (apart from the final four) are weighed one last time in front of the studio audience, competing for a cash prize. Lewis has a few brief words with some of the contestants before they approach the scales. Again we see a disparity in both the amount of time spent on Michelle and Selena and the nature of the comments. Selena needs to have lost a certain amount of weight to take the lead and Lewis asks her “how do you think you’ve gone?” to which Selena responds doubtfully, and Lewis replies with “it’s a lot of weight isn’t it?”; clearly neither of them think that she can win, and she doesn’t. Michelle is up next and Lewis tells her that she is looking fantastic, “you must have worked hard on the outside”, referring to the training she has done since being eliminated from the program. Michelle affirms, “I worked very hard, Hayley, on the outside”. Michelle actually takes the lead at this point and there is another exchange between the two regarding how hard she has worked to achieve this.

Michelle’s dramatic body transformation and her relationship with Hamish make her a winner irrespective of whether or not she wins an actual prize, and she is portrayed as deserving of her success not only because her thin body tells us that she ‘worked very hard’. Selena has lost weight too but does not look as dramatically different. She is not a winner because she didn’t commit to the process; the message being that we can tell from the size of her body that she didn’t work hard enough. The constructions of Michelle and Selena support the concept of personal responsibility being central to weight loss but reveal a tension in its conceptualization. Part of ‘doing the work’ on TBL is handing over control to others; you must do what the trainers tell you to do, therefore admitting that you do not know how to manage yourself properly. Rather like in 12 step programmes this tacit admission of failure and of needing help is central to succeeding. Skeggs and Woods (2008) refer to this as “responsibility given and

yet surveillance required” (p 570). The individual and the experts thus share responsibility for success, but the individual is solely responsible if they fail.

Distinctive gender dynamics and attributions are central to the show, and elsewhere (ref) we have looked in detail at this. Below, however, we examine the ways in which similar broad criteria are ‘put to work’ in the treatment of the male contestants. This is apparent when comparing and contrasting the two extremes: James, who like Michelle has had the most dramatic body transformation, and Ryan who, like Selena, despite having lost a substantial amount of weight, is still fat.

### *James and Ryan*

“Four young men letting life pass them by”. The familiar format once again is utilised starting with the slightly washed out footage representing the lives of the four young men before TBL. Luke is drinking by himself; James is pouring milk into a large bowl of chocolate flavoured cereal which he then consumes sitting on a couch; Hamish is eating fast food in a car; and Ryan is lying back almost horizontal on a park bench. These images clearly imply that self-indulgence and lack of discipline are ‘to blame’ for these men’s body size. James and Ryan grimly examine their semi naked bodies in the mirror and there is a close up of Ryan’s stomach as he wobbles the flesh, saying “you can’t love yourself if you’ve let yourself get this big”. Ryan is singled out as the heaviest contestant ever to have been on the program, a fact that is met with shots of shocked and disappointed family and friends (who attended the initial weigh-in at the beginning of the season) and a gesture of shame by Ryan as he closes his eyes and tilts his head back. Again the stereotypes of fat people as gluttonous and lazy, lonely and unhappy, ugly and unlovable are reinforced.

The opening montage reminds the audience that James chose to leave the show during a temptation challenge in week 3, taking \$30 000 to the disapproval of the other contestants (this is an interesting parallel to Selena for whom choosing to leave the program is constructed as a weakness/failure, but, as will be discussed, is treated differently with James). As the screen pulls back



James and Luke are in matching casual poses with their thumbs hooked into the pockets of their jeans. They are both dressed casually, James in jeans and a blue jumper over a white shirt, Luke in a jeans and a dark grey shirt. However James ‘pops’ visually; his blue jumper is bright, and the folded white cuffs and collar accentuate his white teeth. He is also thin. Once they have done their runway walk and have joined Lewis she tells them “Wow boys you look great, don’t they look great, you guys?” She then cuts straight to the chase asking James if he regrets his decision to take the \$30 000 and leave. The money was a ‘temptation’ that was meant to be avoided as proof of dedication to the process of transformation. But James doesn’t regret it, “it was something that I had to do for myself and when it came down to it the most important thing to me was making sure that I followed through”. Though the scenario is similar to that of Selena in that they both chose to leave the program and ‘go it alone’, it is constructed quite differently for James because he is now thin. As Lewis observes “ looking at you, you obviously went on the outside and you were very determined.” James’ transformed body represents success. And although he did this without the assistance of TBL, it is possible to read off his body that he ‘worked hard’ , “...if I was to come back here today and still, you know, be the same size I was, I couldn’t, couldn’t live with myself”. He is testament to the notion that anyone can do this, as long as they have the right attitude (which Selena was obviously lacking). In terms of body transformation it is apparent by the end of the program that James is the most successful male contestant. And his success is further reinforced later in the program when he joins Michelle on the piano.

The remaining members of the blue team, Hamish and Ryan, are next to be revealed. But as the screen pulls away there is no cool pose struck by these two contestants, rather they look decidedly awkward. Ryan is still very big, he is dressed in a dark suit with a dark purple shirt, but the suit doesn’t appear to be a good fit, the shirt collar is askew and he looks uncomfortable and ungainly. His turn at the end of the runway is followed by a very brief panning shot. Ryan’s conversation with Lewis is almost as brief as Selena’s. Rather than asking him a question she reminds him that he was the heaviest contestant “worldwide in the history of The Biggest Loser”. Ryan responds with an acknowledgment and a comment

about needing a lifestyle change. Lewis replies with “well Ryan, you’re well on your way, well done” and the crowd cheers. While this interaction does include a congratulations of sorts from Lewis and a point for the audience to applaud, it is extremely brief and doesn’t include any reference to how Ryan looks or how much weight he has lost, instead bringing everyone’s attention back to a humiliating statistic.

*And the winner is...*

It would be fair to expect that as the program is a competition the main stars of the finale would be the contestants who have ‘made it’ to the final four, and ultimately the overall winner of the series. But although there is a montage of each of those four (and they are included in the team montages) they seem to be strangely absent from the finale as though most of the party has gone on without them.

The official winner of this season is Margie, a member of the red team. She is a 34 year old ‘openly gay’ former elite athlete. She is the “power house” of the competition. The images that are used in the various montages work to construct her as strong and competitive. She is also constructed as the ‘joker’ and the emotional footage in the montage is less intense than with most of the other contestants. During the ‘makeover’ section of her team’s montage there is a very brief shot of her looking at herself in a mirror (wearing a top and long pants) compared with many shots of another contestant Lydia wearing a feminine, figure accentuating dress and getting applause and affirmation from their trainer Michelle. In the final reveal Margie is wearing masculine clothes; trousers, a dinner jacket and white shirt, with an untied pink bowtie draped around her neck. Lewis asks “am I allowed to say you’re looking very pretty?” eliciting laughter from the audience and “no” from Margie. Lewis then describes her as Australia’s answer to Ellen DeGeneres. Her sexuality and masculine presentation are thus brought to the fore.

When it comes time for Margie to weigh in (she is the final contestant) Lewis asks her “do you think you’ve done enough?” evoking personal control and responsibility once again and implying we will be able to judge who has worked the hardest once we know who has won. Margie’s actions during this segment also reinforce the importance of the trainers, Margie looks back at her trainer Michelle several

times, and before she walks to the scales she says to Michelle "... hope I win it for you and I". Margie, like all the contestants needed someone to take over management of her life and her success is the success of everything the program espouses. But once she has been weighed and announced as the winner the program ends very quickly. At this point it could have been appropriate for the format to include a winner montage of some description, instead there are brief celebrations on stage, Lewis wraps it up and the credits roll within two minutes.

*And the real winner is...*

Margie's win is a numbers win only; she may have lost the highest percentage of weight, but her body is not as dramatically altered as Michelle's. She does not wear revealing feminine clothes that allow us to scrutinize her body and being thin to attract a man is not relevant to her. The rushed ending is the standard format that has been used in previous seasons, however what is unusual is the 'talent section', and this two and a half minute performance tells us who is the most worthy of our attention. Michelle and James are both now thin and attractive and it would have been more satisfying for the show's narrative if they had developed a romance (Michelle's actual love interest, Hamish, was not as successful at transforming his body and was constructed as somewhat lazy and whiny). However the program sidesteps this inconvenient reality and puts Michelle and James together as a pseudo couple by having them perform together on stage -- Michelle singing, accompanied by James on a grand piano. Both contestants have changed clothes for their performance and though both look more sophisticated, James' lounge suit and skinny tie do not match the formal dress standard of Michelle's floor length sequin covered strapless gown. effectively positions Michelle, in particular, as the 'real' winner of the series. The finale is a celebration of the thin female form, encouraging us to look and judge, and viewers are invited to understand that Michelle through her dramatic body transformation, her pleasant and compliant nature, her creative talent and her romantic attachment has earned the right to wear not one but two of the most glamorous gowns of the evening and to be the centre of attention. As Michelle herself says at the final weigh in, "At the end of the day I've already won".

## *Conclusion*

Despite its stance as a response to the “greatest health crisis of our time” *The Biggest Loser* is about much more than health. The discrepancies in the treatment of particular contestants in the finale, whether it is differences in clothing, camera angles, amount of camera time or the nature of the conversation with the host, communicate messages about success and value. The messages are not always explicit but multimodal analysis has enabled us to make visible features that discursive analysis alone would miss; the televisual elements that confirm and strengthen the textual messages in some cases, while communicating very different messages in other cases.

A large amount of research, some of it going back 20 years, tells us that that body size is not an appropriate proxy for health and that weight loss should be decoupled from the process of improving health (Aphramor, 2005; Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Gard & Wright, 2005; Puhl & Heuer, 2006). Furthermore extreme calorie restriction and intense exercise regimes to lose large amounts of weight in a short amount of time are potentially dangerous in both the short and long term (Arbor, 2010; Edwards, 2013; Hill, 2005). The existence of evidence to contradict the current beliefs about obesity and weight loss raises an important question as to why they remain so entrenched. The analysis of TBL finale goes some way in answering this question. TBL communicates what is important and ‘true’ about obesity and weight loss without explicitly telling us. It is an effective and powerful a vehicle for these messages for a number of reasons. The visual medium brings to life the fat body as a ‘figure of abjection’ known to the audience as disgusting and unhealthy (Ferreday, 2012, p145; Tyler, 2008) It is framed as a health program that is responding a certain problem. It frames this problem (in accordance to a widely held belief) as being everybody’s problem thus playing on a cultural anxiety. It further exploits/operates on a set of accepted beliefs so it ‘rings true’. Its competitors are ‘real people’ enabling equal measures of “judgement

and self-placement” (Skeggs & Wood, 2008, p 570). Essentially what is being communicated is a web of ideas that support and perpetuate the status quo.

So what does TBL finale tell us? Anybody can be thin. And everybody should want to be thin. There is one method of weight loss that works for anyone and if you cannot lose weight it is because you are not working hard enough. Fat people cannot have successful or fulfilling lives, they cannot get along with others, they are unhappy and lonely and always conscious of their fat bodies. Fat people are not full members of society, their talents and skills and achievements do not count as much as the talents and skills and achievements of people with thin bodies. There is only one solution: get thin. And there is only one way to get thin: work hard. It is made clear from the very first words of the season that “Australia’s one of the fattest, if not the fattest nations on earth” (S7:Ep1), so this message is to, and about, all Australians. The audience is both the observer and the observed, and we must judge ourselves and be judged by others. And body size provides all the information that is required; lifestyle and health practices are irrelevant. We will know if we have worked hard enough by the size of our bodies.

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