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JMC 262

 The Reality of Weight Loss

  Nowadays with about 63.1% of adults in the United States being either overweight or obese, it is no surprise that many reality television shows have chosen to focus on the journey of weight loss. Over the last several years there have been many weight loss television shows that I have caught myself watching, including but not limited to, *The Biggest Loser*, *Weighing In*, *Celebrity Fit Club*, *Shedding for the Wedding*, *I Used to be Fat*, and *Dance Your Ass Off*. Also, interestingly enough, a couple days ago I saw the first advertisement for a new show on ABC called *Extreme Makeover: Weight Loss Edition.* I found this particularly interesting because *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* and *The Biggest Loser* have always been my two favorite shows. It seems like this new show is going to be a perfect combination of the two.

  Through my journey of media studies, I have begun to ask myself why I enjoy watching weight loss shows and what they really mean to me. Many of these reality programs in the beginning seem to claim that they focus on health issues such as obesity and diabetes, however I feel there are other issues that are more of a focus of the program than health. One of the most obvious issues would be beauty and body image. Why is this you may ask? I would say this is because of entertainment purposes. How exciting would it be to only hear about the health issues and not see the whole before and after transformation? The answer is, probably not very interesting. For the purpose of this short paper, I will focus mainly on *The Biggest Loser* since I have seen almost every episode since it has been on air, but I will also make a few references back to some weight loss shows.
  Strangely enough I found that Levy’s article that we read called *Female Chauvinist Pigs/Raunch Culture* contained a lot of interesting examples that could also pertain to weight loss in reality television. The first thing I would particularly interesting was where it talked about the television show, *The Swan.* It talks about the “cookie cutter” makeovers and says, “ A reality series launched on the Fox in 2004 in which average- looking woman were surgically, cosmetically and sartorially redone to look average in a shiner, pornier way- the brunettes became blondes, the breasts became bigger, the clothes got tighter and sparklier, and all the teeth became implausibly white.”

 While there is no surgical work that is done on The Biggest Loser, I still believe this correlates very strongly. In the beginning stages of The Biggest Loser, contestants step up onto the scale to be weighed and are wearing very loose fitting t-shirts and baggy pants or shorts. As the season goes on and the contestants begin to lose a lot of weight, their outfits to get weighed in become much tighter and their shorts much shorter. Also, throughout the season if you are lucky enough to make it to the half way point, there is a huge makeover session. The contestants go on a shopping spree, get a fancy dress or tux for the men, as well as getting their hair and makeup done. In addition to that, at the season finale, everyone comes back together and receives an additional makeover.
 I would say that my favorite part of the whole season is the makeovers. This is interesting because the makeovers really have nothing to do with health. It is all about their body image changing and their new beauty emerging. Throughout the season, the contestants are never shown with makeup on, their hair worn down, or wearing anything other than a t-shirt. At the end they are suddenly made much sexier and appealing. There have even been some love connections on the show that have taken place after the makeovers, which is odd to me because it seemed like if they would have met each other before they were transformed they would not have fallen in love.
  Another topic talked about in Levy’s article was Playboy, Girls Gone Wild, and pole dancing. You may think, how does *The Biggest Loser* have anything to do with pole dancing? Well, on an episode last season, I remember watching an episode in which for exercise, both men and woman did pole dancing. I remember being extremely shocked when I saw the episode because it is on NBC which is a family network. Not only is it a family show, but it is a weight loss show where people are losing hundreds of pounds so why would they feature pole dancing? I think that this comes back to the aspect of entertainment. It wouldn’t be as entertaining if they just went to the gym and did the same old work out every episode. Along with entertainment, it is also interesting that the episode was towards the end of the season when they were all close to their goal weights. Why didn’t they do it at the beginning of the season? This is likely because it wouldn’t have been as “sexy.” They did it at the end because the contestants were becoming more comfortable with their bodies and their overall image.
 A quote from Levy that I really liked was, “This is our establishment, these are our role models, this is high fashion and low culture, this is athletics and politics, this is television and publishing and pop music and medicine and –good news!- being a part of it makes you a strong powerful woman.” I found this interesting because even though these people are working very hard to lose weight, watching these types of programs to look up to these people is pretty low culture. The reality is, many people do look up to these people on The Biggest Loser, however, the often do nothing about it and remind obese. It is kind of ironic to have reality weight loss shows on television because they say television watching is highly correlated with obesity, yet you are putting a weight loss show on television hoping overweight people will watch and change.
 In the Media Society book by David Croteau and William Hoyness, there is a chapter that talks about Television and Reality. This chapter mainly focuses on dramas and not reality. However, I found something that really struck me. It states, “The images are not simple reflections of an unproblematic reality but representations of a world that is not as orderly as a 30- or 60- minute program.” It also talks about the goal of the producer being to attract mass audiences. I felt that both of these are very true. Weight loss reality television appeals to so many people because over half of America is overweight or obese. I also agree that it is so hard to fit everything into a half hour or hour show without being slightly misrepresented.
 The Biggest Loser is generally an hour to 2 hours long, but even that is still not long enough to show everything. It does seem like everything is very orderly, and almost even as if it is easy to lose weight because during the show they show them working out about a half hour a day. Obviously it is not possible to lose up to 15 pounds in a week by working out a half hour a day. The reality is that the contestants workout anywhere from 5 to 8 hours a day. Because of this, there have been many claims that the show is not very real and it would be unrealistic for your everyday person to accomplish. I would have to say I agree with this claim because people who have jobs often aren’t even able to find the time to work out for a half hour, let alone 5 to 8 hours.
 I also find it interesting that with the show claiming to be so focused on health, they never really show what they are eating, healthy recipes, or their exact workout plans. The only thing I ever really see them eating is Subway because it is a sponsor of the show. I think this is an area where the show does have a really big opportunity to expand and become a lot more informative, but they have yet to do this. Along with this, at the beginning of the season they do a pre medical screening and they talk about the individuals risks for heart disease, diabetes, etc. I think it would be really good idea and very informative to give us updates throughout the season to see how their health is improving, however they never do that. I think the show would be a lot more effective at motivating its viewers if you could see the exact numbers and risks laid out in front of you.
 As well as during the show, you have to look at the effects of these people after the show is over with and they are no longer being watched over. In fact several season winners and contestants within a year of their season ending have gained 100% of the weight back, and in some cases, weigh even more than they did when starting the program. As we all know, losing and regaining large amounts of weight can be very dangerous for your body. In some cases because of the weight regain, the contestants now have a higher risk of diabetes and heart disease than they did before they were on the show. The metabolism is a very tricky thing and is usually significantly slowed down which creates additional problems down the road that are not ever seen on camera. Of course this is not the case with all contestants; however it is a very difficult lifestyle to maintain.
 When reading through *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, An American Fairy Tale* by Garneth Palmer, I found it amazing how closely this show relates to not only the newest weight loss show, *Extreme Makeover: Weight Loss Edition,* but also to *The Biggest Loser*. The themes are all so similar. One thing that really stuck out to me was when Palmer said, “In each case a person with limited resources is assisted into a new look and given the confidence he or she needs to progress.” This of course is in reference to the people being given a new home, however it relates closely to being given a new body. So many people on *The Biggest Loser* much like those on *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* have so little and are nominated by others to be on the show. In most cases they don’t go on because they nominated themselves. People who go on *The Biggest Loser* don’t have much faith in themselves anymore and find themselves at the end of their rope, so they get nominated in hopes to help change their life. The people who go on *The Biggest Loser* need those trainers and nutritionists just like the people on *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* need the builders to give them a better home, and it both cases begin to rebuild their lives.
 I have watched the trailers and read a lot about the new show coming out at the end of the month, *Extreme Makeover: Weight Loss Edition.* It looks shockingly similar to *The Biggest Loser* in a way in which these people are more concerned with their image and being beautiful again than they are with their health, even though that often goes hand in hand. However, one major difference is this show features just one contestant per one hour episode. Each episode will follow the contestant through one year of their lives. I feel that this show may have made some improvements from *The Biggest Loser*, however I believe it will still be really tough to cover much of their weight loss journey in a year, condensed down to only an hour. It is also worth noting that in both of the trailers I watched, at the end they showed the contestants getting makeovers and finding new love. At this point it is hard to say whether or not it will fall into the category of those cliché weight loss shows or not, so I am very interested to watch and see.
 The media is a very powerful industry that plays an important part in American society. The media uses beauty and ideal body image, which is closely related to weight loss to sell standards to the masses. The public in turn has taken this ideal body image and set a goal to change their lives. This image is unrealistic for most individuals. Unfortunately, this has led to a society filled with quick, and sometimes, dangerous fixes to achieve this goal such as reality television. It is a game of deception, envy, and impractical standards that will continue long into the future as obesity rates continue to climb.