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Bringing Sexy Back: To What Extent Do Online Television Audiences Contest Fat-Shaming?

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Articles

The latest reality program about weight loss makeover, Australian Channel Seven's *Bringing Sexy Back* maintained the dominant frame of fat as bad, shameful and unsexy. Similar to other programs' point of view, only slim bodies could claim to be healthy and sexy. Conversely the Fat Acceptance movement presents fat as beautiful, sexy, and healthy. But what did online audiences in 2014 think about *Bringing Sexy Back*? In this article online-viewer-generated comments are analysed to find out: a) whether audiences challenged and contested the dominant framing; and b) what phrases did they use to do this. The research

task is a discourse analysis in which key words and phrases are highlighted and colour coded as categories and patterns begin to emerge. My intention is to represent the expressions of the participants responding to the articles and or online forums about the program. The focus is on the 'language-in-use' (Gee 34), in particular their gut reactions to the idea of whether only slim people can be sexy and their experience of viewing the program. Selected television websites, online television forums and blogs will be analysed.

Introduction

The latest makeover television program drawing on the obesity-epidemic discourse *Bringing Sexy Back (BSB)* promises the audience that by the end of the program participants will have bought their sexy back. Sexy in the program is equated with one's younger and slimmer self; the program host Samantha Armytage (from Sunrise the national Australian morning show) tells viewers sexy can be reclaimed if participants (from their late 30s and up to 51 years) drop kilos, commit to a strenuous exercise regime, and re-style their wardrobe. Experts, the usual suspects, are bought in—the medical machinery, the personal trainer, the stylist, and the hairdresser etc.—to assess, admonish, advise and appraise the participants. At the final reveal the audience—made up of family, friends and the local community—show enthusiasm for the aesthetic desirability of the participants slimmer sexier body as evidenced by descriptors such as "wow", and "oh my God" as well as an outpouring of emotion such as crying and squeals of delight.

Previous researchers of fat-shaming television programs have found audience's reactions divided: some audience members see it as motivating; others see it as humiliating; and others see it as what the contestants deserve (Holland, Blood and Thomas; Rodan, Ellis and Lebeck; Sender and Sullivan)! I want to find out if online and social media audiences of the relatively tame makeover program *BSB*, which features individual Australians and couples who are overweight and obese, challenge and contest the dominant framing. In my analysis of the phrases online audiences' have used about *BSB*, posters mostly found the program inspiring and motivating. From this inauspicious first strike, I will push onto examine the phrases posters have used to respond to the program.

The paper begins with a short background about the program. The key elements of the makeover television genre are then discussed. Following this, I provide an analysis of the program's official *BSB* Facebook site, and unofficial viewer-generated sites, such as the bubhub, TVTONIGHT, MamaMia, The Hoopla and the hashtag #sexybackau on Twitter. Posters to these sites were regular, infrequent or intermittent viewers. My approach to the analysis of these online forums and social media sites is a discourse analysis that examines "language-in-use"—as well as other elements such as values, symbols, tools and thinking styles—so as to identify and track tacit knowledge—that is, meanings emerging from obesity-epidemic discourse (Gee 34, 40–41). Such a method is apt given its capacity to analyse contributors' spontaneous statements of their feelings—in particular their gut reactions to the program and the participants. The paper ends with my findings and conclusions.

Bringing Sexy Back: Background Information

Created in 2014, season one of *BSB* format consists of a host Samantha Armytage, fitness trainer Cameron Byrnes and stylist Jules Sebastian and her team of hairdresser, groomers etc.

Undoubtedly, part of the program's construction is to select participants who appeal to a broad range of viewers. Participants' ages range from 21 years (Courney Gollings) to 51 years (Vicki Gollings). The individuals or couples who make up the series include: Ned (truck driver), Sam and Gary (parents of two boys), Lisa Wilson (single mother and hairdresser), Vicki and Courtney Golling (mother and daughter), Livio Caldarone (pizza/small restaurant owner), and Paula Beckton (mother of four),

The first episode was aired on Australia's Channel Seven on 12 August 2014 and the final episode on 13 January 2015. This particular series consisted of 9 episodes. In this paper I focus on the six episodes that were aired in 2014. Generally each individual episode consisted of: the intervention, presenting medical facts about participant's weight; the helper figures setting training and diet regimes; the trials leading to transformation; and the happy ending evident in the reveal. Essentially, these segments illustrate that the program series is highly contrived and they also demonstrate the program's method of challenging participants to lose weight.

Makeover Television

I now provide a further construct to assist the reader's understanding of 'what is going on' in the *BSB* program, which fits within the genre of makeover program. As reflected in the literature, makeover television has some or all of the following ingredients:

- personal fitness trainer as expert
- stylist and grooming experts
- family members and contestant's reflexivity (reflect on their own behaviour)
- new self-celebrated photo shoots
- contestant winning challenges
- symbols, such as the dream outfit, and before and after photographs
- transformation before the 'big reveal'

Moreover, makeover programs are about the ordinary person on television. According to Redden, identities on these programs are individual rather than collective in that they serve to show a type of "individuality" as if it exists irrespective of any social or cultural group (156). And what is the role of the expert? Redden points out the expert on makeover programs interprets the "life situation of the given person, who may represent a certain social category of ordinary person" (153). So while makeover programs purport to be about the ordinary person and make claims about the actuality of the ordinary person's life (Skeggs and Wood 559; Stagi 138), they also depict a hierarchy of social categories. The participants' class also features in makeover programs like *BSB*. Class is evident in that participants who are selected to be on the program are often from lower-middle class backgrounds. Most participants have non-professional occupations—truck driver (Ned), hairdresser (Lisa), pizza/small restaurant owner (Livio), body caster, a person who makes body casts (Paula). Similar to *The Biggest Loser* (2004–2014) on American NBC, and Australia Network Ten, the participants in *BSB* were also mainly from lower-middle class backgrounds (Rodan; Sender and Sullivan 575)

Several researcher's show that makeover television promises advancement for lower-middle class citizens (Fraser 188–189; Miller 589; Redden 155; Skeggs and Wood 561) based on the position that contestants have the power to transform themselves (Bratich 17; Ouellette

and Hay 471–472; Lewis 443; Sender and Sullivan 581). Like other makeover programs *BSB* takes advantage of the aspirations of working and lower-middle class participants. And, not surprisingly, the desired transcendence is something most participants/viewers from lower-middle and working class backgrounds cannot strive to achieve without participating in the program (Miller 589).

Transcendence in *BSB* comes from losing weight, and acquiring new gym equipment, gym clothing, access to a personal trainer, gym membership, holiday at a health retreat, new wardrobe, new haircut, and new gym clothes. These acts to transform oneself are often “presented” as the middle class “standard,” taste and specific ongoing “intimate practices” of the “middle class” (Skeggs and Wood 561; Redden 155). But clearly much of the sprucing up (such as a private gym at home, personal trainers) are expensive and beyond the budget of even an Australian middle-class family.

Analysis

Posters on the official *BSB* Channel Seven Facebook forum overall were the most positive about the program—they found the program motivating and inspiring. Several posters on Facebook asked how they might apply to be on the program. After the airing of the reveal, posters on all the online forums and social media analysed consistently used adjectives such as fantastic, awesome, congratulations, stunning, amazing, gorgeous, wow, incredible, look sensational, look hot, look great, champion effort, fabulous, impressive, beautiful, inspirational.

Fat-Shaming

In *BSB* fat-shaming works through the use of medical machines and imagery, which measure weight and body fat percentage (BMI) using the DXA scanner and X-ray machine. Even though many physicians object to BMI measurement, it has become an “infallible marker of dangerous risk-saturated obesity” (Morgan 205) in Health Department campaigns, insurance company policies and on makeover television. Participants’ current weight is compared to the weight of their 20 year-old self.

The program also induces fat-shaming through visuals of food and drink stashes found in participant’s bedroom cupboards (Ned), remnants of take-away packaging in rubbish bins (Lisa), processed foods in pantry cupboards (Vicki and Courtney), and pizza cartons at work (Livio). Here food amounts are quantified for audiences to gasp with shock and horror reinforcing the stereotype that people are fat because they have insufficient willpower and overeat (Farrell 34), thus perpetuating the view that obese people are undisciplined, sloppy and “less likely to do productive work” (Greenberg et al.).

Banners are produced of participants’ photographs in their 20s; the photographs chosen have been taken when participants were slim and looked hot at the beach or night clubbing. These banners are juxtaposed with a banner of participant’s current self—appearing overweight in unflattering short crop top and underwear. Both banners are flashed onto the screen during the program especially in the final reveal presumably as a visual measurement to shame participants for “letting themselves go”. Even though host Samantha provides reasons for participants gaining weight—such as the stress of being a single parent, having a busy life as

a mother of four, work commitments etc—the visual banners powerfully signify more than the presenter’s dialogue. Katrina Dowd on Facebook suggests it is the banners that signified the truth about participants’ lifestyles when she comments:

Absolutely. Amazing how people whom follow unhealthy eating patterns for years with lack of exercise get congratulated because they’ve lost weight. Should never have let yourself get to that stage. Using your children and work commitments as excuses for why you got that way is a big “fail”.

Some social media participants on Twitter and online forum posters saw the participants as “Bogan” (a white working-class person who lacks fashion sense, is uncouth unsophisticated and invokes disgust), lazy, slob as represented in the following comments: “Bogan Hunters Makeover” (tvaddict); “STILL A FUCKING FAT BOGAN [...] JUST STOP EATING” (Al_Mack); “Stop being a lazy bitch [...] Seriously lazy slob” (Dutchess of Tweet St); “learn to cook lazy cow” (Gidgit VonLaRue). Thus, for Katrina and the posters above, it is the “fat body” that is seen as the “uncivilized body” that lacks the self-control of the thin body (Richardson 80).

Inspirational and Motivational

I discovered that many online forum and social media participants found the program *BSB* inspiring and motivating. A similar finding to my study of *The Biggest Loser* online viewers (Rodan), as well as other researchers who interviewed audiences about *The Biggest Loser* (Readdy and Ebbeck). For instance, Twitter posters said the *BSB* inspires “everyday women” (Sharon@Shar0n) and “inspires me that I can do the same” (Sharon@KeepitRealV), “another great show #inspiring” (miss shadow). On Facebook most of the posters talked about how inspired they were by the show and or by the individual participants, for instance:

Hi Lisa, I think I see a lot of me in you, I pretty much cried through the whole show. You have inspired me, much admiration for sharing your story with Australia. (Haigh)

Many posters on Facebook identified with Lisa as a single mother (Jenkins) and her declaration that she was “an emotional eater” (McTavish). This may account for Lisa Wilson (5,824 likes) receiving the most likes on Facebook.

There were those who identified with individual participants, such as Paula, who were attempting to lose weight. On the forum the bubhub, a forum for parents established in 2002, the administrator BH-bubhub started a thread titled “Need some motivation to shift those kilos? Our pal Paula is here to help hubbers!” Paula was the participant on *BSB* who lost the most weight, and was invited onto the forum to answer forum members’ questions. On this forum, disparaging, negative, demotivating comments were removed from public viewing (see caveat BH-bubhub).

Overall, online forum posters on the bubhub expressed positive feelings about *BSB* as a weight loss program. Participants comments included “Awesome work Paula, I have no doubt you will inspire many and I look forward to hearing all your tips” (Mod-Uniquey) “and ... you look fabulous” (BH-KatiesMum), “Wow, you must be so proud of yourself! That is an amazing achievement and you look great” (Curby), “What an inspirational story!” (Mod-Nomsie).

Facebook posters on the *BSB* official forum found the show motivating and evidence of others finding the same are: "I feel great after watching #sexybackau" (Freeburn), "an uplifting hour" (Hustwaite), "feeling motivated now to change a lot of things about myself" (McDonald).

However, online posters rarely commented that the program inspired or motivated them to take specific actions about their own body size or lifestyle. For some, as other researchers have found about makeover programs, it is a form of televisual escapism (Holland, Blood and Thomas; Readdy and Ebbeck 585)—that is, the pleasure of watching others' emotions in achieving their goal. For many others, identifying with the participants' struggle, and seeing them overcome daily challenges and obstacles to losing weight, gave posters insights about themselves and how to change their own lifestyle. But maintaining weight-loss and a lifestyle that supports it—as Facebook posters frequently suggest—is very challenging for most people who are overweight. The transformations and reveals make for fairy-tale endings (the essence of makeover television), but the reality of losing weight is persistence, perseverance and hard work.

Criticisms of the Program

Posters on Facebook were censored more than some of the other online forums and social media. Facebook criticisms about the program *BSB* were dealt with swiftly by other posters—that is, posters were pressured to only express positive feelings about the program. For instance, Lynne Nicholas in response to Peter Thomson's criticism that the program is "exploiting these people for cheap television entertainment" (Facebook, 14 August 2014) posted on Facebook:

If you don't like the show then don't come on the page and comment. Channel 7 gives these people a chance to change their life and inspire others to do the same. (Facebook, 14 Aug. 2014)

And in response to criticisms about the amount of processed food Cam discarded from participants Vicki and Courtney's cupboard, Emily McCabe commented:

If you don't enjoy the concept of the program, feel free to change the channel and keep your negative comments to yourself. (Facebook, 2 Sep. 2014)

Nevertheless, a lot of criticism appeared on the various online and social media outlets ranging from: the commercial aspects (matúš; Hales); the constant use of the word "fat" by the host (Spencer); the sponsorship and advertisements by a take-away food company (Daisy Murray; Patriot); the "irresponsible/unsafe training!" (M_Gardner; Ashton); the insufficient number of "diet tips" (Pedron-Peggs); and "sick of seeing all that food thrown away!!" (Barkla; Dunell; Robbie; Martin; Coupland).

As noted above, some of the sites were censored. Criticisms of the program were only aired if the online forum and social media allowed people to vent their feelings and express their opinion. Allowing viewers to express their concerns about mainstream television programs such as *BSB* counters the argument made by other researchers suggesting that makeover

programs do the work of audiences becoming “self-managing” and self-governing citizens (see Stagi; Ouellette and Hay 471-472; Sender and Sullivan 581; Ringrose and Walkerdine); and makeover programs perpetuate the myth that obesity is solely an individual behavioural problem (Yoo). Such critical comments (above) reveal that some viewers do question the show’s premises, and as a consequence they do not accept the dominant framing. Thus the hypothesis that all viewers of makeover programs are pliable and docile cannot be supported in my analysis.

Findings and Conclusion

Most *BSB* posters said they found the program inspiring and motivating. It seems many of the online posters identified with the participants’ struggle to lose their weight, and stay motivated to keep it off. So there was little fat-shaming from posters on Facebook and the online forums. The posters on Facebook expressed the most positive comments about the *BSB* program and the participants; however, the Facebook site was the official *BSB* social media site. It seems that many of the Facebook and online forum discussants were makeover television fans who had acquired a taste for the makeover genre – that is the transformation and the big reveal at the end, the re-styled self, the symbols as well as the tips, information and ideas about how to lose weight and change their lifestyle. Questions were often asked by posters about the participants’ eating plan, exercise regime, maintenance program etc., as well as how they (the posters) could apply to be on the show. Very few social media or online posters questioned and challenged the makeover genre, the advertising during the program, the quality and number of diet and nutrition tips, and the time as well as financial cost required to maintain the new self.

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