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Overweight, obesity, and reality television: Exploring health data and the popularity of local versions of *The Biggest Loser* in the European context

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Abstract

With rates of overweight and obesity on the rise around the world, there have been numerous reality television shows dedicated to this complex and enduring issue. This exploratory contribution outlines the global epidemiological situation relating to overweight and obesity in the European context, before seeking to discover whether there is any linkage between the rates of overweight in a given European country and the popularity – as demonstrated through the number of seasons broadcast – of the local version of the weight-loss reality show *The Biggest Loser*. Through the analysis of online sources, preliminary data is gained, providing useful information for further research on the topic at a later date.

Keywords: *The Biggest Loser*, weight loss, obesity statistics, BMI, obesity rates, reality television

Introduction

Although the world is currently in the grip of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, another serious epidemiological situation remains a threat to the planet. According to figures

from the World Health Organisation (WHO), global rates of overweight and obesity have skyrocketed over the last four decades, with almost 2 billion people recorded as being overweight and 650 million suffering from obesity (World Health Organisation, 2021). Indeed, the current coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the challenges faced by a world that is growing increasingly fatter, with obesity listed as one of the major risk factors for COVID-19-related complications and fatalities (see, for example Mahase, 2020; Alberca et al., 2021; Gao et al., 2021).

Humanity's growing waistline has been well-documented not only in the medical domain, but also in various fields of the humanities and social sciences. This has included historical, cultural, and sociological approaches as well as new fields of interdisciplinary research such as fat studies and critical weight studies (for example, see Gilman, 2008; Monaghan, 2013; Monaghan, Colls, & Evans, 2013; Pausé & Taylor, 2021; etc.). Outside of academia, as outlined by Peltier & Mizock (2012, p. 93), society's increasing preoccupation with overweight and obesity has also attracted the attention of the media and entertainment sectors. This has led to the development of related reality television shows, many of which originated in the United States and have subsequently been adapted and remade in various countries and languages across the globe.

The genesis for the current contribution develops from the author's previous research (Hoyte-West, 2020) on strategies used to translate the title of the internationally popular weight-loss reality show *The Biggest Loser* in its various European versions. The findings noted that there were certain geographical and linguistic similarities between the translated titles. In addition, there was a demonstrated link between the English proficiency of a given European market and the decision to either translate the title into the local language or

retain the original English-language title, complete with its inherent wordplay. During the course of that research study, it was noticed that there were demonstrable national differences in the popularity of the show, even between neighbouring countries and/or nations with similar linguistic or cultural backgrounds. For example, in some countries, only one season was shown, whereas in other countries the show was much more popular and multiple seasons were broadcast. Accordingly, it was noted there was sufficient scope for further exploratory research on the topic.

Though it was recognised that there are many factors at play both in the spheres of entertainment media and of public health, in the first instance it was decided to conduct a small-scale exploratory study to examine if there were any links between the rates of overweight in a given country and the popularity of *The Biggest Loser* television series. In the first instance, therefore, the current epidemic of overweight and obesity in the European context will be outlined, before the televisual concept of *The Biggest Loser* is introduced and contextualised. Subsequently, the contribution's methodological approach will be outlined, before the relevant health-related data is presented and analysed.

Obesity, overweight, and *The Biggest Loser*: an overview

Although the WHO notes that obesity has grown to epidemic proportions (World Health Organisation, 2021), some believe that the situation has worsened to pandemic level (e.g. Egger & Swinburn, 1997; *The Lancet Gastroenterology & Hepatology*, 2021). Indeed, in several European countries around two-thirds of the population suffer from overweight or obesity (European Commission, 2021), with the issue concerning enough for the European Parliament to recently launch an MEP interest group

on obesity and health systems resilience (European Association for the Study of Obesity, 2021). This year, the European Commission also officially recognised obesity as a chronic disease (Burki, 2021).

With overweight and obesity defined by the WHO as “abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health” (World Health Organisation, 2021), the commonly accepted major scale to measure the condition is the Body Mass Index (BMI). Originally developed by the Belgian statistician and social scientist Adolphe Quetelet in the nineteenth century (Eknoyan, 2008), the index defines a BMI of 25 as overweight, and a BMI of above 30 as obese (World Health Organisation Regional Office for Europe, 2021). The physiological impacts of overweight and obesity are well-known (for example, see Must et al., 1999; Pi-Sunyer, 2009) and these include chronic conditions such as diabetes mellitus type 2, as well as cardiovascular and circulatory issues such as elevated risks of hypertension and strokes. As has been previously mentioned, obesity has been noted as one of the main risk factors for COVID-19 complications (Alberca et al., 2021; Gao et al., 2021). Research has also indicated that obesity can also negatively impact mental health and psychological well-being (for example, see Romain, Marleau, & Baillot, 2018; Chauvet-Gelinier et al., 2019).

As noted previously (Peltier & Mizock, 2012), growing popular interest in the obesity crisis led to corresponding interest from the media and entertainment sector, especially in the United States, where the first season of *The Biggest Loser* premiered in 2004. Its success meant that the original show was broadcast in almost a hundred countries around the world, with more than two dozen local versions subsequently made for European and other markets (Zimdars, 2021, p. 60). In essence, the show is based on a straightforward competitive

“up or out” format. Over the course of a series, a group of obese participants are isolated from the outside world in the “Biggest Loser” camp. Under the supervision of personal trainers, they vie with each other to lose the largest percentage of their initial bodyweight through intensive exercise, group challenges, and healthy eating. The drama is maximised through competitive weekly weigh-ins and the elimination of a poorly-performing candidate. At the show’s finale, the winner gains the coveted title of “Biggest Loser” and a substantial financial reward.

Although the show generally proved popular with viewers (in the US it has had eighteen seasons), and numerous contestants successfully lost vast amounts of weight (see Greenwood-Robinson, 2008, pp. 1-37), the series has also proved controversial. In the first instance, some observed that the intensive exercise regimes and rapid weight loss displayed by contestants on the programmes were unrealistic and possibly dangerous (for example, see Hall, 2013; Klos et al., 2015), and that these may have profound effects on participants’ metabolic systems (see Kolata, 2016 and Fothergill et al., 2016; although these findings were debated by Kuchnia et al., 2016). As also noted elsewhere, the series has been criticised by former participants for the way they felt they were treated during their time on the show and for fat-shaming and stigmatising overweight and obese people in general (e. g. Yoo, 2013; Callahan, 2015; Fell, 2016; Greenleaf et al., 2019). In response to criticisms about the unsustainable nature of the weight loss portrayed in *The Biggest Loser*, a spin-off show, *The Big Fat Truth*, which featured former contestants who had regained the weight they had originally lost, was also broadcast (Brodwin, 2017). In addition, the original American version of *The Biggest Loser* took a four-year hiatus between the seventeenth and eighteenth series, returning in 2020. Accordingly, though this most recent series promised to address these concerns via a

new and updated format (e.g. Dehnart, 2020; USA Network, 2021) the show's return also came in for criticism (e.g. Bernyk, 2020; Gilbert, 2020).

In the European context, however, local versions of *The Biggest Loser* have enjoyed significant levels of popularity in certain countries but not in others. In Europe, too, the programme has received criticism, including with regard to the long term effectiveness of the weight loss regimen portrayed (for example, see Hamann, 2016; Köhler, 2019). However, the criticism has generally not been so sustained and intense as in the US, and the show remains popular in certain markets and several contestants who successfully lost weight have been profiled (e.g. Nový Čas, 2019; Roeder, 2019; Helmbrecht, 2021). Over a decade after their first broadcasts, local versions are either still shown or are planned in Germany, Finland, Sweden, and Ukraine.

As has been outlined briefly above, *The Biggest Loser* has been the object of both scholarly and popular attention, including examinations from sociological, communication, and public-health-related perspectives. As noted previously, these have largely focused on the American version of the show, as well as on the Australian incarnation of the series (for example, see Thomas, Hyde, & Komesaroff, 2007; Monson, Donaghue, & Gill, 2016; Smith & Bonfiglioli, 2019). However, it appears that comparatively little research has examined local versions of *The Biggest Loser* with regard to the wider European context, especially with a focus on exploring any possible links between the show's popularity and macro level topics such as rates of overweight or obesity in a given country. Accordingly, this small-scale exploratory study is both novel and relevant.

Research question and methodology

In the light of the preceding overview, it was decided to conduct exploratory research relating to possible links between the percentage of overweight people in a given country and the popularity of the relevant domestic version of *The Biggest Loser*. Accordingly, the following research question was devised:

- Is there any link between the percentage of people with a BMI >25 in a given country and the number of seasons broadcast of its version of *The Biggest Loser*?

Building on the author's previous study, it was decided to limit the countries analysed to those European countries – and selected candidate countries – which had developed local versions of the show and which also had reliable and consistent health data available.

Regarding national levels of overweight, a variety of potential data sources were considered. In the first instance, data from the OECD was considered (OECD, 2021), but was not chosen because not all of the countries that made domestic versions of *The Biggest Loser* were covered. Data from the WHO, though comprehensive, came from 2016 (World Health Organisation, 2021). As such, it was decided to use relevant statistical data from the European Commission (2021a) which referred to the year 2019 and covered all of the countries selected.

In terms of the local versions of *The Biggest Loser*, the relevant Wikipedia page was used as a starting point (Wikipedia, 2021a), and the information there was then verified and cross-checked with the official websites of television channels and local media to determine whether the programmes formed part of *The Biggest Loser* concept in appearance and format. As noted in the author's previous study (Hoyte-West, 2020, p. 78) this stage was crucial as there are

several weight-loss-focused television programmes listed on the Wikipedia page that are not part of the show (for example, see *La Báscula* in Spain (Canal Sur, 2021); *De Afvallers* in The Netherlands (Wikipedia, 2021b)). In addition, the collaborative nature of Wikipedia means that there were some errors listed, particularly regarding the number of seasons; this also proved challenging to verify, given the time that had elapsed in some cases and the multilingual nature of the source material. Nonetheless, every effort was made according to the best of the researcher’s ability to ensure the accuracy of the data obtained.

Data and analysis

Building on the review of the relevant literature and the methodological approach outlined above, this section presents the data and analysis regarding the research question.

Table 1: Number of seasons by country

Country	Title of local version(s)	Seasons broadcast
Croatia (HR)	<i>Život na vagi</i>	4
Finland (FI)	<i>Suurin pudottaja</i>	4
Germany (DE)	<i>The Biggest Loser Germany</i>	13
Hungary (HU)	<i>A Nagy Fogyás</i>	1
Latvia (LV)	<i>XXL</i>	1
The Netherlands (NL)	<i>The Biggest Loser Holland</i>	1
Norway (NO)	<i>Biggest Loser Norge</i>	1
Poland (PL)	<i>Co masz do stracenia?</i>	1
Portugal (PT)	<i>Peso Pesado</i>	3

Romania (RO)	<i>Marele câștigător</i>	1
Slovakia (SK)	<i>Supertelo; Najväčší vitaz</i>	2
Slovenia (SI)	<i>The Biggest Loser Slovenija</i>	3
Sweden (SE)	<i>The Biggest Loser Sverige</i>	11 (10 + 1 celebrity version)
Turkey (TR)	<i>Yeni Bir Hayat</i>	1

Source: Elaboration by the author, based on Wikipedia (2021a)

As noted in Table 1, the scope of the study encompassed fifteen local versions of *The Biggest Loser* in fourteen different countries (two versions with different names were made in Slovakia). Multiple seasons of the show have been broadcast in half of the countries. The highest number of seasons have been shown in Germany and Sweden, where special celebrity versions of the show have also been made. However, in the remaining seven markets just one seasons was shown.

Table 2: Percentage of overweight population (BMI >25) by country

Country	% Population with BMI >25
Croatia (HR)	65
Finland (FI)	59
Germany (DE)	54
Hungary (HU)	60
Latvia (LV)	58
The Netherlands (NL)	50
Norway (NO)	51
Poland (PL)	58
Portugal (PT)	56

Romania (RO)	59
Slovakia (SK)	59
Slovenia (SI)	58
Sweden (SE)	51
Turkey (TR)	59

Source: European Commission (2021)

Table 2 shows the relevant data on rates of overweight among the population of a given country. It is notable that all of the countries surveyed record more than 50% of the population as having a BMI greater than 25. The highest figures, were noted in Croatia and Hungary. The highest figures were noted in Croatia (60%) and Hungary (59%), and the lowest rates in The Netherlands (50%) as well as the two Scandinavian countries featured, Norway and Sweden (both at 51%).

Chart 1: Number of seasons of local versions vs percentage of overweight population

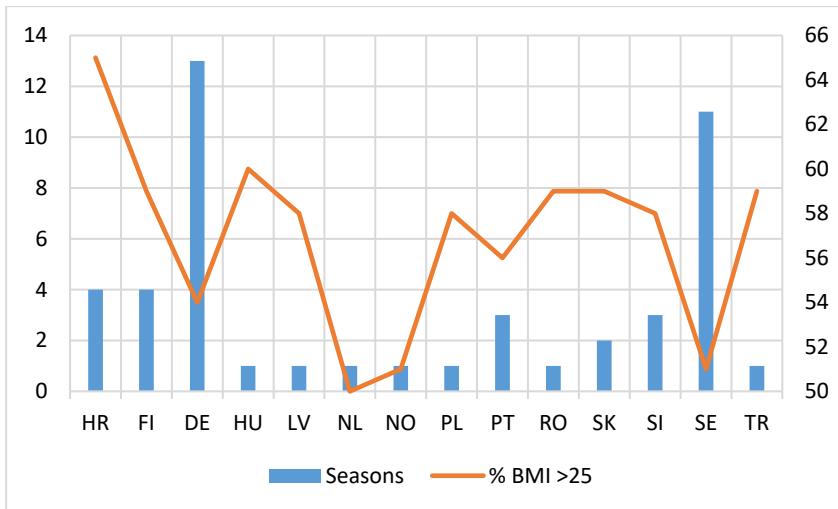
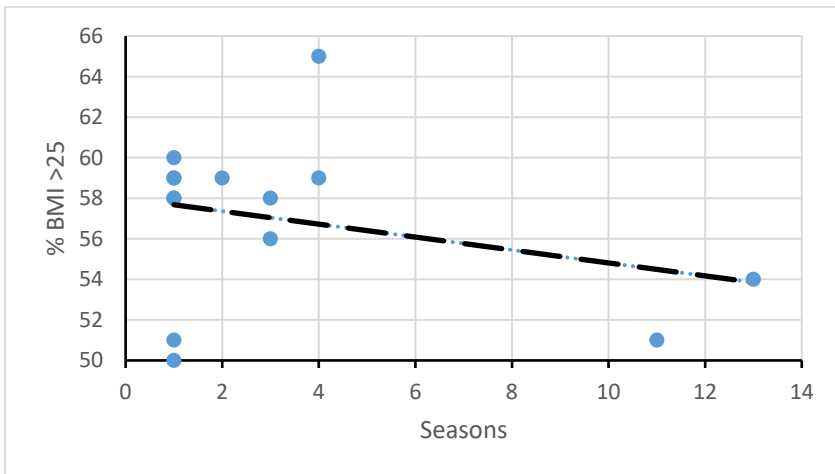


Chart 2: Scatter graph presenting the number of seasons of local versions vs percentage of overweight population



The above two charts analyse the data outlined in Tables 1 and 2. As presented in Chart 1, the number of seasons for each nation is plotted as bars, and the corresponding percentage of overweight is shown as a line graph. Chart 2 plots the values of both the number of seasons and the corresponding percentage of overweight in a scatter graph, which has allowed for a trend line to be drawn.* In broad terms, this illustrates that for the twelve nations where there have been four or fewer seasons, there is a range of rates of overweight among the population; however, the overall average of the overweight population for these countries is several percentage points higher than for the two countries (Germany and Sweden) where substantially more seasons have been broadcast. Accordingly, this demonstrates that there is a possible correlation between the rates of overweight in a given country and the number of seasons

*Two of the points on the scatter plot in Chart 2 contain the data for two countries.

shown of the relevant local version of *The Biggest Loser*. It should be noted, however, that this initial analysis has only looked at the percentage of overweight population in absolute terms based on the data from 2019 (European Commission, 2021).

Accordingly, it is clear that there are other factors which may be at play. Further work could usefully examine whether nations with many seasons of the series had experienced national-level reductions in their overweight percentages over this period. Additionally, factors relating to the production, broadcasting, and the reception of the show by audiences could be investigated. Indeed, as Duthie & Brown (2015) observe, there are myriad factors involved in creating and casting a reality television series, and furthermore, as noted by Webster & Ksiazek (2012), the general media landscape has changed significantly over the past few years, a development which has led to increasing audience fragmentation. As such, data on audience size may need to be accommodated at a future point in the research study; for example, a media article about the Polish version of the show highlighted the low viewing figures it received (Rutkowska, 2008). In addition, a further factor explaining the absence of any clear linkage may be the availability of other weight loss-based reality television shows. For example, only one season of the local version of *The Biggest Loser* was made in The Netherlands and in Romania, and just two in Slovakia. However, shows with a similar premise were renewed for multiple seasons, including the aforementioned *De Afvallers* and also *Obese (NL)* in The Netherlands (RTL, 2021), *Ajutor! Vreau să slăbesc!* in Romania (Prima TV, 2021), and *Extrémne premeny Slovensko* in Slovakia (Televízia Markíza, 2021).

Concluding remarks

Having analysed the relevant background and data, the findings of the study appear to indicate that there does appear to be a potential correlation between the popularity of the local versions of *The Biggest Loser* – expressed through the number of seasons broadcast – and the rates of overweight in each country. However, given the preliminary nature of this exploratory study, significant further research will be required. This includes a deeper examination of the televisual landscape of each of the relevant countries, thus providing a panorama which includes reference to other weight loss-related shows. In addition, data regarding viewing figures, as well as qualitative analyses of relevant coverage in traditional and online media sources, might offer further contextualisation and deeper scope for analysis. With regard to potential limitations of the study, the choice to use the EU-based data sources meant that countries such as Iceland, Russia, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom were excluded from the analysis, even though local versions of the show had been made there and had run for several series. It was recognised, though, that due to the exploratory nature of this study, relevant data regarding these countries could be incorporated into a later stage of the research project. Accordingly, in providing a foundation for further work, this exploratory overview has offered several possibilities for development which may prove to be impactful in the future. Indeed, as levels of overweight and obesity continue to rise across Europe and the world as a whole, the topic will certainly remain important over the years and decades to come.

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