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## Gaming health on Reality TV

### Ludic emotions, counter culture and covert spirituality in The Biggest Loser show

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**Gaming health on Reality TV:  
Ludic emotions, counter culture and covert spirituality in *The Biggest Loser* show**

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Reality TV is since the 1990s a steadily growing phenomenon (Lewis 2008a). *The Biggest Loser* show (CBS 2004) is an extremely popular game show in this genre, which is now broadcast in 90 countries and produced in 25. It casts morbidly obese contestants, on a ranch in California, in a competition involving rigorous dieting and exercising with the goal to lose the most amount of weight in six months. It is a show that has grown into a global phenomenon. The show draws huge attention to obesity and suggests drastic and controversial measures to deal with it (Sender & Sullivan 2008). Spreading globally it plays a big role in mediating images of bodies, health and medical strategies, as well as cultural conceptions of the body and beauty, across national borders. As many productions of Reality TV, it relies heavily on its ability to tap into affective realms, creating spaces for “televisual intimacy” (Kavka 2008). Here, I focus on the emotional and “affective” (Skeggs 2010) moments in a number of *Biggest Loser* episodes – selected from 13 studied US seasons - connected to the program’s *game* format, i.e, *ludic* elements. The constant *paradoxical* negotiation among the show’s participants, trainers and producers of the *Biggest Loser*’s ludic content, or in simplified terms: its *status* as game, in combination with playing with your health and 250 000 dollars at stake make for affective content that simultaneously questions and reinforces the *reality* of the reality format and the *game* of the game format. Interpreting the close readings of the shows in terms of anthropological theories of rituals, an emergence of a counter culture can be discerned, which emphasizes bonding and community, love, heightened emotions and an experience of a sacred kind. This can be found not only in the discourse and actions of the participants but also those of the program’s trainers, coaches and doctor. I call this a trend of “covert spirituality” that can be spotted not only in the *Biggest Loser*, but in many contemporary media productions. In sum, the *Biggest Loser* experience on the California ranch creates, I claim, the outcome of a complex utopian territory of ludic emotions, counter culture and covert spirituality.