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When being obese is a good thing: voices of Ghanaian participants in a dance reality TV show

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ABSTRACT

The discussion on (mis)representations of black women's bodies often focuses on their hyper-corporeality and hyper-sexualisation, with little attention paid to the women thus represented and their views. Reality shows are roundly criticised for objectifying women, being unAfrican and offering little to Africans. This paper contests this perspective by drawing on interviews with 19 contestants in a dance reality show in Ghana. We demonstrate that African participants in this show have a much more affirming view of the show. For them, the show offers benefits including celebrity status, training and employment opportunities. These benefits were not lost on family and friends who supported the candidates in various ways. Given the economic conditions in Ghana, this reality show offers obese women an opportunity to turn their condition into an asset and to do so largely with the backing of friends and family.

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Introduction

Except for a few names in the fashion and media scene globally, African women's bodies are generally invisible in various sites of representation. When they are included, their bodies tend to be hypervisible and presented in an exaggerated fashion. Historically, based on Eurocentric beauty standards, African women's bodies have been considered unnatural. Consider the lived experience of Sarah Baartman, the Khoi Khoi woman who was taken to Europe by Hendrik Cezar and Alexander Dunlop. There, they transformed her into the Hottentot Venus where she was displayed as a human curiosity for two shillings a viewing in London (Qureshi 2004, 236) and later at the Museum of Man in Paris (Crais and Scully 2009). Even after death, she was still on display, this time at the Museum of Man in San Diego until the 1970s, her body parts having been dissected by Georges Cuvier (Crais and Scully 2009). Baartman's hypervisibility was simply because her female body parts (buttocks, genitalia and breasts) were considered in the description of a British doctor as 'amusing, inferior and oversexed' (Mowatt, French, and Malebranche 2013, 650). Beyond the physical presentation of Baartman, South African feminist scholar Gqola (2010), has pointed out that media representations of her have also focused on her

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'hyper-corporeality' and noted that this is not just specific to Baartman, but can be generalised to black female bodies.

Other scholars such as Harris-Perry (2011) argue that this view of black female bodies is not limited to African women on the continent. In the Diaspora as well, the black female body is viewed as either a hyper-sexualized or hyper-corporeal spectacle. In addition, these views of black women's bodies are as prevalent in contemporary times as they were in the past. Mlotshwa (2018) for example demonstrates this with his analysis of the ways in which Ndebele women are framed in contemporary Zimbabwean cartoons. He argues that the emphasis in these cartoons is on the hyper-sexualisation of Ndebele women's bodies. Such a framing of black female bodies as hyper-corporeal or hyper-sexual can best be described as a 'crisis of representation' (Alcoff 1991, 9), one that is marked by the hierarchies of oppression which perpetuate a system where creators, producers and directors, in making decisions about what shows to produce and how to produce them, speak for and represent black women in ways that deprive them of the voice to represent themselves. Like Couldry (2010) who speaks to the importance of voice, we value the voices of African women who have been silenced for far too long. Witness Sarah Baartman, whose views on the display of her body are unknown.

We seek in this paper to centre the voices of African women whose bodies are presented as spectacle for the entertainment of others. We do so by investigating the rationale for Ghanaian women's participation in a reality television show. Rather than focus on the ways in which their bodies are represented in this show, we interrogate why these women participated in the show. In doing so, we by no means seek to obfuscate the fact that the ways in which women's bodies are represented in this show can be read using the themes of hyper-sexuality, hyper-corporeality, invisibility, and hypervisibility. We seek, however, an alternate reading to allow for a more nuanced understanding of women's representation in African media spaces, particularly in the newly emerging world of reality television.

Compared to other parts of the world, reality television is a recent phenomenon on the African continent. The most successful has been the Big Brother Africa show. Big Brother is a franchise created by John de Mol and first shot in the Netherlands in 1999 (Mudzanire et al. 2016, 78). Its continental version produced by the South African company M-Net debuted in Africa in 2003 (Dolby 2006) to an audience of 30–40 million viewers (Mudzanire et al. 2016, 78). In spite of widespread public support, it was roundly criticised by many. One of Africa's foremost cultural icons, Wole Soyinka, is quoted as calling it 'banal, lacking anything to offer to the continent' (Jacobs 2007, 856). Churches called it immoral and unAfrican (856) and academics such as Mudzanire et al. (2016, 76) argued that it was 'a showpiece of a Western elite culture detached from the average African lifestyle.' In short, these cultural icons are essentialising African culture, suggesting that African culture consists of a specific set of immutable attributes, a view that Tomaselli (2003) finds problematic. The negative perceptions of TV reality shows are not only offered by African cultural icons. They are also echoed in the words of other scholars who suggest that reality television shows are simply forms of exploitation (Andrejevic 2010) that exhibit bodies, black bodies in particular, to be viewed as spectacle (Henderson 2014).

This idea of spectacle is linked to the visual construction of the social (Johnson 2012, 22) in the sense that the meaning produced by the spectacle is often contingent on the range of prejudices and cultural assumptions that an audience brings to a performance. One major prejudice that audiences bring to a performance is prejudice against 'fat bodies'. Known as fat shaming, fat people are often erroneously assumed to be 'lazy', 'irresponsible', and lacking 'self-control' (Colls 2007, 358) or in the Ghanaian context 'slow', 'timid' and 'lacking strength' (Wrigley-Asante, Agyei-Mensah, and Obeng 2017, 420). Reality TV shows that focus on obese people have thus been roundly criticised for perpetuating such negative perceptions. The Biggest Loser, one such show ostensibly with the biggest following globally, has been described by most research interviewees as 'derogatory' and using 'weight for entertainment' (Thomas, Hyde, and Komesaroff 2007, 214). However, we enter the conversation to suggest that by participating in a dance reality show, dancing 'fat bodies' may be claiming the spotlight to speak back against prejudicial assumptions and by tapping into the potential of dance to liberate 'from [prejudicial] representation through the construction of an active moving body that "speaks" its own forms of corporeality' (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996, 242).

We therefore move away from the negative perception of the shows, not because it is not a valid perspective, but because it frames the discourse on black women's representation in narrow terms. The body of work on women in TV reality shows rarely centres these women. This lacuna is even more severe in Africa, where the body of work on reality shows is fairly limited. This paper thus seeks to redress this gap by exploring the views of the women whose bodies are on display in reality shows that focus on the obese, to ascertain the extent to which they view it as problematic. We use their own words to demonstrate that to conceptualise these reality TV shows as unAfrican ignores the fact that Africans can and do take cultural tropes from the West and make them their own. This idea of glocalization (Robertson 1995) is not limited to the elite. Low-income Ghanaians who are not necessarily part of the global elite have bought into the idea of reality TV shows and participate fully in its execution either directly or indirectly (Resario and Darkwah 2021). Indeed, contrary to Soyinka's assertion that it has nothing to offer the continent, we demonstrate that reality television shows have something to offer the Ghanaian women who participate in these shows.

In the ensuing pages, we illustrate both why contestants participated in the show and how their community of friends and family supported them to benefit from the show. In demonstrating that the show benefits the contestants, we by no means seek to discount or downplay the extent to which the show, as has been argued for other such reality shows, was a money-making venture for its creators and producers. This paper seeks to offer a counterpoint to that critique in two ways. First, it demonstrates how in Ghana the participants derive benefits from the show. Second, in illustrating how family and friends support the women to take part in the show, we demonstrate community approval for these shows through the support offered to the female participants.

Methodology

The participants in this research project were 19 of the 20 finalists who contested in the first season of Ghana's *Di Asa reality* show. They were interviewed in their various homes in Accra between September 2018 and September 2019. In addition, we held focus group

discussions with viewers and in-depth interviews with the producer and director of the show. The data for this paper are drawn from the interviews with participants which were analysed using NVivo. The data collection was subjected to the highest standards of ethical guidelines and was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Humanities at the University of Ghana. As such, participants in this study took part voluntarily and could withdraw at any time. We also took care not to harm them emotionally in this study. Finally, the information they shared with us was kept confidentially and they are represented here with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

The *Di Asa* show

The *Di Asa* reality show was created by Atinka Media Village in 2017. The media village is made up of a TV station, radio stations in three different cities in Ghana and an online platform. The television station targets the Twi speaking population of Ghana. Established in 2015, the TV station entered a rather competitive market that had been growing since the liberalisation of the airwaves in the late 1990s. As a result, each Ghanaian media house was seeking to capture a corner of the market by developing niche programmes (Prah 2012). For the Atinka Media Village, the *Di Asa* show was intended to be its claim to fame, and it achieved its goal; the first season won TV Reality show of the year. It was the first reality TV show designed exclusively for low-income market women, and it was offered to them in Twi, the most widely spoken local language in Ghana. The show began with a two-month audition period from 11 July to 13 September 2017. These auditions took place in markets around the country. Contestants danced to songs chosen by the producers and winners were declared by popular acclamation.

The auditions identified 62 contestants, mostly market women, who then participated in the thirteen-week reality TV show for a chance to win a saloon car, Kia mini truck, and a tricycle for the first, second, and third places, respectively. All 62 contestants were housed in a newly refurbished building on the outskirts of the capital city for the duration of the 13-week contest. Each week, the contestants participated in two activities for which they were judged: a freestyle dance event on Wednesdays and prescribed dance routines on Saturdays. Three judges scored these two performances, as did viewers. The TV station partnered with the telecommunication companies of Ghana to harvest viewer votes, which constituted 60% of the total score for each participant. Given the higher rating of viewers' votes, participants took great pains to encourage their friends and family members to vote for them. For each of the 13 weeks, the participant with the combined lowest score from the judges and viewers was evicted. Using this process, the 62 contestants were whittled down to 10 and eventually the 3 final winners.

Socio-demographic characteristics of the research participants

As stated above, this study is based on 19 of the final 20 participants in the first season of the *Di Asa* show. It is important to take into account the socio-demographic characteristics of the contestants to better understand what they made of the show. These women were aged between 20 and 59, with the majority aged between 30 and 40. Two of them were in their 50s and five in their 20s. Nine of them were single, 6 married, 3 widowed and 1 divorced. Three of the single women had no children, but the rest had at least one

child. All 19 participants were Christian. In terms of education, 2 had no formal education, 3 had only primary education, 4 had middle school education and 5 had completed high school. The other 5 had post-secondary education of different forms (vocational, polytechnic, and nursing training). None of the participants had university education, which in the Ghanaian context is the most assured route to formal sector work. Therefore, it is not surprising that most of our research participants, 8 to be specific, worked in the informal sector as traders. Three worked in the service industry as seamstresses and hairdressers, 3 were unemployed, another 3 worked as packaging assistants while 1 combined her job as a trader with her job as a packaging assistant, a point to which we shall later return.

Turning obesity into an asset

Research across the continent (Holdsworth et al. 2004; Duda et al. 2006, 2007; Ettarh et al. 2013; Okoro et al. 2014; Appiah, Otoo, and Steiner-Asiedu 2016), shows an aversion to being thin. In the African context, for the most part, an overweight woman is not likely to be viewed as one deserving scorn, but one to be admired. There are, however, limits to how overweight it is socially acceptable to get on the African continent, Ghana being no exception. Terms like 'obolo' and 'cargo' convey a sense of unacceptable body imagery in the Ghanaian context (Aryeetey 2016). The *Di Asa* show, with its promise of a car for the ultimate winner, offered an opportunity for those with an unacceptable body image to turn their bodies into a potential financial asset.

For all 62 participants, there were monetary benefits for participating, which amounted to approximately $50 a week for each of the 13 weeks they spent on the show and an additional $250 at the end of the 13-week period. Given that the country's per capita income was approximately $1500 in the year 2017, these were substantial amounts, as various participants attested. Veronica shared her views on the value of the money they were paid in these words:

> Yes, there were lots of benefits. I had money. We were getting GHS 200 per week from them; we ate freely, and we drank freely, in fact everything was free. Our father Tobinco [the owner of the TV station] really did well. They also gave us one thousand Ghana Cedis in addition (GHS 1000). You won't get this amount of money even leaving your things there to be sold. I personally appreciate everything they did for us, I'm very grateful. I'm still living on that money.

Similarly, Hagar opined, 'Yes, with what they gave me, I was able to pay my debts and I still had some to keep, about GHS 400 (approximately $100).' In addition to the financial incentives, the companies that sponsored the event provided the contestants with their products. Latifa observed, 'I also had a lot of products from the sponsors.' Latifa went ahead to list some of these products saying, 'I had Cocoa Processing and Happy Man products [a herbal energy drink]. I remember Indomie [a noodle company] also sponsored. In fact, all the sponsors did well.'

Beyond the outright gifts, participants were introduced to the idea of fitness. This was not entirely new to all of them. A fair number knew about the importance of fitness and a few exercised regularly. What was eminently clear though was that participation in the show provided them with the necessary discipline to commit to fitness and was

something many of them appreciated. A quarter of the women we spoke to commented on the health benefits of participating in the show. Jashie noted, 'The early morning training that we did, I really liked it. Being comfortable is a good thing. When you don't go anywhere and do this kind of training in the morning, it is really good.' Swag Mama added,

> What I liked about the show was how we got to exercise our bodies … . The house was a storey building so I went up and down the stairs till I felt that I had had a workout. And then we did the general exercise.

Besides fitness exercises, the producers assessed the health of the contestants. Leticia noted thus, 'Yes, we had a doctor from Kasoa coming over to speak with us.' They were also provided with health talks. Pam shared some lessons she learnt from that as follows,

> Oh for that they brought personnel and resource people to come and engage us in health talks. [For instance], if I am going to town, I'm not supposed to just buy things from street hawkers. Or if I am going on a long journey, I just have to pack all that I would need till I reach my destination.

Beyond their health needs, participation in the contest also gave the women an opportunity to gain some financial management training, training that is of crucial importance to women who trade for a living. Leticia shared some lessons from the training in the following words:

> They advised us, especially the people from ABii National [a savings and loans company]. They taught us how to manage our money. You see, we market women spend a lot. We buy almost everything that hawkers pass by selling, so they taught us to bring cold water from the house to drink if that's what we wanted. They also advised us to cook and come to the market with it and eat that when we are hungry.

In addition to fitness training as well as health and financial education, participation in the contest exposed these lower-income women to the workings of top companies in Ghana. The sponsors in particular opened their doors to them and provided them with the kind of access they would otherwise not have had. Leah pointed out, 'We were also going to many places, I met a whole lot of new people.' And Joselyn declared, 'Well, I liked everything. … I can't just wake up and say I am going to Cocoa Processing, or Inés fly [an insecticide solutions company] and other places. You won't get that opportunity.'

Even the house they lived in differed vastly from the spaces they otherwise inhabited. Newly completed, it was fitted with all the trappings of a modern home. Naa Darkoah declared, 'I liked the way the place was set up.' Jashie was even more effusive in her language. She said:

> And the house we lived in, some of us don't live in such places, so we had a lot of fun and excitement. As soon as they finished building it, we occupied the place. I didn't have much interest in participating in the show but when I went to the house, that was when I gained an interest in it. We were exposed to a new reality. So, if you were not careful, you couldn't go back to your trading business … . If you were not determined, you couldn't go back and work. You would be full of life's fantasies.

Jashie's definition of life's fantasies included the various places they visited, but her other colleagues discussed life's fantasies in terms of the celebrity status they had gained and

by extension the confidence it gave them. The *Di Asa* show turned these otherwise ordinary women into celebrities. As Prah (2012) has argued, the burgeoning entertainment industry in Ghana has democratised the celebrity space, ensuring that it is no longer the preserve of politicians and traditional rulers. Many actors in the entertainment industry can now be rightfully classified as celebrities and, indeed, nearly half of the participants in the *Di Asa* show interviewed for this study affirmed the fact that the show had propelled them into the world of celebrities, moving them from the status of individuals ashamed of their bodies to individuals boldly owning their bodies. Leah noted, 'I used to be looked down upon in my neighbourhood but now I'm seen as a star.' Jashie added, 'In the past, plus sized people were not regarded as important in society, but now it's not so.' Pam put it best in the following words:

> Oh yes. Since I came back, there is this lady at Banana Inn who invited me to her wedding ceremony. As soon as I got there, they announced my presence, and I was made to dance. As soon as I began to dance, people started raining money, and I was so happy. The lady who invited me was so excited. She said, 'everywhere I go I want you to go with me because, I always get excited. Because of you people now know me.' People even ask of me. Frankly speaking, life is okay. If I go past a place, you will hear people saying *Di Asa* just came here, or she is here. My real name has faded in importance. If someone is organising a programme and I appear there, I elevate the status of the programme.

This sense of importance and self-worth was important, particularly for those who had low self-esteem because of their size. As Aryeetey (2016) has noted, while being thin is not a goal that Ghanaians would aspire to, being obese is also problematic because it suggests unpalatable character traits (see Wrigley-Asante, Agyei-Mensah, and Obeng 2017, for example). This is clear in the name calling obese people have to endure in Ghana. Participants acknowledged being called Obolo, Oboshie or Ngozi, the latter linked with the rather obese woman used in the music video accompanying the song "Ngozi" sung by Michael Dwamena (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_q78Czm2Ax8). Leticia had quite poignant stories of the poor manner in which she was treated prior to participating in the show compared with now. She noted that before the competition, taxicabs she hailed failed to stop for her, but now when she hails one, it stops quickly and, in fact, some do not even charge her any money. Leticia's new-found respect extended to the domestic sphere as well. She continued:

> *Di Asa* has done a lot for me … . After my father's death, I went to one of my uncles for money to pay my practical fees. His response to me when I asked him for money was 'whose child are you?' He pretended he didn't know me … . But when he saw me on TV, he came to the house in a convoy of three cars to come and look for me. I said it on *Di Asa* and I'm saying it here too, *Di Asa* has really helped me.

While Leticia's account is perhaps the most poignant, three other research participants also spoke about the extent to which taking part in the show had been good for them, helping them to overcome their shyness and stage fright, basically boosting their confidence.

For most of the participants, the celebrity status they gained from participating in the show was important not for recalibrating their relationships or boosting their confidence, but for the job opportunities it could provide. Naa Korley pointed out,

> Let me say I went to *Di Asa* because of the exposure. If I got the car it would have been a bonus, but the advantage and exposure was my primary focus. So, my dream was to be part of the *Di Asa* final ten and that's where I got to.

Similarly, Veronica noted:

> I didn't go in because of the money, but actually after the auditions, people kept telling me and calling me that they had seen me at *Di Asa*, even the little children in my neighbourhood will come around me because they had seen me on TV. So, I thought to myself, if that's the case then the show could actually take me far and that's why I went ahead with it.

And indeed, it did 'take them far' as Veronica put it. She continued, 'If it wasn't for *Di Asa* I would have never been on TV, I'm even called for interviews on TV, so *Di Asa* has really helped me.' Almost half of the participants in this study turned their celebrity status into income-earning opportunities for themselves. Nine of the 19 women we interviewed shared personal testimonies of the job opportunities that had come out of their participation in the *Di Asa* show, the majority of which were entertainment related jobs. Some like Mary and Latifa were now starring in music videos and also performing live at various rite of passage celebrations. Naa Korley was a regular panellist on entertainment shows. Naa Darkoah was working in the video industry, Joselyn and Swag Mama were being called to shoot advertisements. In fact, in the case of Swag Mama, her advertising gig had given her the opportunity to travel the length and breadth of the country as well as neighbouring countries. Leticia, who was told off by friends and previously shunned by her own family members, had created a YouTube channel. She revealed:

> I wasn't discouraged that I didn't win because I did what I could do. Now, I make my own videos and dance pieces and upload them on YouTube and I get likes for the videos. Friends phone in to tell me how much they like my videos. Through that channel, I get people calling me to come dance at their weddings and I get at least GHS100 for that. And they feed me in addition. Now I also shoot videos with stars. The other time someone called me that they want me to shoot a music video with [name withheld]. Someone also called from Nzema that I need to go and shoot a video, but the time was not favourable for me. However, I could shoot the [name withheld] video because it was a Sunday.

Hope, who had a very young baby, had to wait to take on the job offers coming her way:

> As I speak to you, I have an opportunity to go and perform in Nigeria, so I was speaking to my husband to be my manager and go out there to look for opportunities for me like performing with Davido during concerts, etc but the baby is too young now, she is now one month three weeks, at least if she turns three months then I could start doing something.

Besides opportunities in the entertainment industry, the owner of the television station that sponsored the show runs a drug manufacturing company and offered all the participants in the show who so wanted, an opportunity to work in the formal sector. He offered them jobs as packaging assistants. Four of the 19 respondents we spoke to took the owner up on his promise and followed up on the job offer. Mary explained:

> As for the job, he gave everyone the opportunity. He even said it on air that he was going to give everyone a job. So, when I was about to leave the house, we were asked to write application letters. I followed up on the application, just like some of the other women. They placed me in the position I specified in the letter.

Not all the women took advantage of the job offer for various reasons ranging from being too old to work as a packaging assistant, to inflexible family situations and distance from their homes to the job location. For the short duration of the competition, however, these women benefitted from what the show had to offer.

Communitarian support for the participants in the *Di Asa* show

As has been noted in the literature, especially the Western literature on the matter, reality shows that focus on fatness can be described as derogatory (Thomas, Hyde, and Komesaroff 2007, 214). Four of the 19 women we interviewed affirmed that, in particular, male figure heads in their lives had been opposed to their participation in the show because it required them to show off their body parts. While the show did not necessarily require near nudity, it definitely required movement of body parts with emphasis on specific female body parts (Resario and Darkwah 2021). This was viewed as problematic in some cases. In fact, in the words of Abena, her family members described the programme as 'nasty.' Her husband was unhappy with her decision to participate because, as she put it, 'I was going to mess up for people to make fun of me, but I disagreed with him.' Naa Korley said of her dad:

> My dad is a bit controversial. He doesn't like things like *Di Asa*. Especially when he is watching a video and the women are stripping, he will insult them and say all kinds of things and will change the channel. His interest is news and soccer.

Similarly, Mary described the reaction she got from the leadership of her church as follows:

> A week before going to the house, I went to tell my pastor again, expecting to hear it being announced in church, but I heard nothing. So, when we closed, the pastor's wife called me. When I went, she said, 'You are a believer who sings at church and you want to go and do this?' She wanted to discourage me.

The vast majority, though, were supported by friends, family, and even complete strangers in their ambitions to participate in the show. Support came in different forms throughout the process. Friends and family were particularly instrumental in encouraging the women to go out to audition in the first place. Abena said of her friends:

> They knew how I loved dancing, so before the auditions got to Madina, they had started calling me to participate because I could do it. It was normal for friends [to think of me auditioning] because of how I danced when we went for parties, engagement [ceremonies] and weddings.

For Jashie, who worked in the market as a trader, it was her boss who encouraged her to take part. In her words:

> I didn't want to go at first but the market leader said I have to go else I will have to leave the marketplace. She really liked me. Even when it was time for the audition at the market, I wasn't feeling well. She said she would give me medicine so I would get well enough for the audition.

Pressure came from people at work as in the case of Jashie and at home, as Leah experienced. In her case, as she put it,

> My neighbours would come and inform me about this dancing show for plus size people called *Di Asa*, and I would tell them to get off me. I would tell them they're not the ones to tell me because I also watch TV and I see the advertisements they show.

Charity had a similar experience. In her case, 'It was a certain guy at my sister's end who called to tell me about the show and urged me to join,' she noted. While Charity had actually seen the advertisement but paid no heed until she was encouraged to do so, others such as Naa Darkoah were first informed by strangers and encouraged to audition. She explained:

> At the time, I sold [drinks] at a pub and people came to tell me about the show but I never watched. At night, I went to set up my business, so I didn't really have time to watch the show. When they came describing the show, they asked me to join.

Similarly, Abena described how she came to find out about the programme from her cousin. She said:

> A cousin of mine told me about it because he knew I loved dancing. I dance all the time, so he called me to say that there was this programme. Initially, I didn't even know that there was a TV station called Atinka. He called and told me it's a dance programme for fat people and that was the first time I heard of it.

Family members tended to be more persistent. Leah described how deeply involved her aunt was in her audition process:

> I received a call also from an Aunty who sells cassava at Ashaiman. She is the Cassava Queen; I used to go there to help her. She called to tell me she had registered my name with the *Di Asa* show. I told her I would gladly join if they would come to Tema, but she said no, they were coming to Ashaiman instead. A day before their arrival, she called me to come to my mother's place at Ashaiman. She called again to inform me they were going to come in the morning.

In Naa Korley's case, it was her brother who basically pushed her to attend the audition. When persuasion from her aunties and mother failed, her brother called her. To get him off her back, she claimed she had no money. Next thing she knew, he had sent her money through a mobile money transfer system. At that point, she had no more excuses and registered for the audition. Apart from friends and family members, religious leaders also supported some of the participants, as Joselyn revealed. In her words:

> Oh yes, they supported me. The pastor's wife encouraged me. Initially I hadn't decided to go because these kinds of competitions if you join, in the end, you hardly win, but she said if I didn't go for the *Di Asa* competition and she saw me dancing in church, she would be upset with me. So, I called the pastor's wife and told her that if God wants me to go, he will show me a sign. So, I told her it's been almost 18 years since I left Agbogbloshie [market]. How many people would remember me? But she said, 'Don't you know the favour of God is upon you?' So, I should go. 'If men don't support you, God will send angels to come and support you,' she said.

Besides being encouraged to audition, the participants found that friends, family and fans campaigned vigorously on their account. Charity described her husband's support as follows: 'After my success at the auditions, my husband supported me the most. I would be lying if I don't say it, he campaigned for me.' Likewise, Veronica was supported by her husband. As with Charity's husband, he campaigned for her in his hometown and encouraged everybody in the town to vote for his wife. Other family members, especially

siblings and in some cases neighbours, supported the participants by purchasing banners and hanging them in strategic locations to encourage the populace to vote for their person of choice. In some cases, total strangers who fell in love with the women, once they moved into the house and were performing weekly, took it upon themselves to ensure that they had the requisite number of votes to win. Leticia was one such participant who was supported greatly by her fans. As she put it:

> I had fans who loved me so much, two of them printed banners freely for me. They lived near the *Di Asa* house. They shared the banners with many people. Even on the last day of the performance, they printed a large banner for me.

Beyond encouraging others to vote, some took the campaign for votes even further by providing the resources with which people could vote. Veronica says of friends in her neighbourhood, 'They went to the market during weekends with songs, taking money from the market women to vote for me.' Others such as Becky got votes from members of her alumni association. Those who were registered members of political parties such as Jane got votes from them too. A major source of support for voting came from the religious associations to which these women belonged. Leaders of these churches took it upon themselves to ensure that church members actively took part in the voting process. Hope explained what happened in her church as follows:

> All of them were in support of me. My church was my number 1 supporter. They knew my new name [taken on for purposes of the competition] and kept me in the house for about a month with the vote. Every week, my Pastor, would lead them to take an offertory to vote for me, or he would give a break and ask everyone to vote for me at least twice. They did that. During the break, everyone pulled out his or her phone to vote so if you said you would not vote because you were not in support of me, then that was between you and God. My pastor had spoken, and they all did it because they respected him very much.

Those like Shandy who had strayed from church discovered that even in their absence, their church members were supportive. Shandy told us:

> I was part of the women's fellowship and I had friends amongst them. Some of them would call me and say, 'Shandy you said you've stopped attending church, but we are voting for you, so if you win you should come back to thank God.' They made me aware that they were voting for me.

Support for the competition was not limited to the geographical boundaries of Ghana. Friends and family members of women in the show who lived abroad also participated fully in the process of voting. As Becky said,

> My friends really supported me through voting, my Facebook friends and my friends, even those outside the country all voted to support me. And because it was international, anybody that saw the audition and didn't know you would even add you to their friends list then follow you and vote.

If they were not voting, friends and family abroad sent financial resources to enable those in Ghana to participate more fully in the voting process. Swag Mama was one such participant who got financial support from her relatives abroad in the voting process:

> My mum was the one sending me money from USA. She knew something good would surely come out of it. Yes, my mother and one of my siblings live in the United States. They are the

ones that sent me the funds. I used to call my mum and the rest of my family. My other siblings would even call my mum telling her I'm close to winning so she should send more money for them to vote some more. So, when the money came, they shared it so everyone could vote.

Conclusion

The literature on reality television shows in Africa is limited. This is perhaps not surprising given the fact that reality television is a fairly new phenomenon on the continent having blossomed only with the democratisation of the airwaves in the last two decades. Much of what is written focuses on Big Brother Africa, the largest reality TV show in Africa, in terms of both reach and the variety of countries from which the participants come. The show has not been without criticism. The negative commentary centres among other things on its unAfricanness. Similarly, the academic literature on reality shows that focuses on weight loss programmes has tended to criticise these shows for basically being a fat shaming exercise. The negative perceptions of these shows are not surprising, especially with respect to black female bodies. A large body of work does exist which shows how black female bodies tend to be represented in problematic ways. However, rarely do the studies on corporeality or black female bodies draw on the voices of the people so represented in making their arguments. This paper offers a different view of the representation of black female bodies and reinforces the need for a more nuanced, context-based accounting of different forms of (mis)representation. In spotlighting the words of the participants in a reality show that focuses on fat bodies in Ghana, we demonstrate that their experience was largely positive, so positive that 18 out of 19 were quite willing to go through the process a second time. The participants would have loved a second chance to participate in the reality television show because it came with a whole range of opportunities: health talks, financial management discussions, exposure to a range of experiences they otherwise would not have had access to, celebrity status and, perhaps most importantly, employment opportunities.

The fact that these shows had benefits were not lost on the participants in the show. Interestingly, the wider network of individuals with whom these women associated seemed fully aware of its benefits as well. They encouraged them to audition, sometimes filling in the forms or providing the money to register, campaigned vigorously for them by word of mouth or through the use of banners and, best of all, voted for them, including in some cases providing resources to ensure that as many people as necessary could vote for them. Clearly, the idea of reality TV shows that focus on fatness primarily as a fat shaming exercise is not a fully accurate reflection of the perception of the show from the perspective of the participants on one such show in Ghana. For these participants, these shows can be described as a fat claiming exercise that provides them with opportunities that they otherwise would not have had; hence the general support for auditioning and participation that they got from all and sundry. Obesity can pay in the Ghanaian context.

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