Thirty Minutes to Self-Esteem: Love, Lust or Run

Love, Lust or Run is a new reality TV show which premiered on January 23, 2015 on TLC. It is a makeover show aimed at a female audience, airing on Friday evenings at 9 p.m. The show's host is fashion expert Stacy London, who was previously featured, along with co-host Clinton Kelly, hairstylist Ted Gibson, and makeup artist Carmindy on What Not to Wear. What Not to Wear ran on TLC from 2003-2013 and featured people who had been nominated for a makeover by their friends. In the new series, Love, Lust or Run, the participants nominate themselves for a makeover, or a Stacy refers to it, a make-under.

In my textual analysis of Love, Lust or Run, I analyze the similarities and differences between it and other makeover shows. As with similar shows, the candidates on Love, Lust or Run are all young women. However, on this show the women are younger, in their twenties and thirties, with the average age being twenty-nine. On Love, Lust or Run, 70% of the participants are white. This ratio is similar to that found on other makeover shows. However, as noted by Weber, ethnicity and race are rarely mentioned on reality TV. The makeover candidates on Love, Lust or Run are, as Sender wrote about Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, “young and lower-middle class [people] who have failed to produce an adult self able to function in the world”. The female participants are focused on their stalled careers. The majority of the women are people with precarious self-employment, such as artists, makeup artists, dance instructors, singers, and musicians.

Love, Lust or Run is a spin-off from What Not to Wear and is a copy of a British show called Snog, Marry, Avoid. By using the ideas found in What Not to Wear and the format of Snog, Marry, Avoid, Madger argues that, “creative uncertainty [is reduced] by using a template that has proven

successful”.

Stacy is a bankable commodity as a recognized expert; however, having only one host is less expensive in terms of production costs for the show. *Love, Lust or Run* follows the premise proposed by Mikkonen that, “How you dress makes a huge difference to how other people perceive you and therefore treat you: with respect, admiration or contempt.” Indeed the show's tag line is “Does the world see you the way you see yourself?” implying that, as Weber notes, “majority perception equals truth, so it follows that one's public image is critical.” As Sender and Sullivan point out, on *What Not to Wear* and other makeover shows, it is presumed that, “badly dressed bodies reveal broken hearts and self-sacrifice. The show's emphasis on self-improvement through 'good' forms of consumption is couched as an obligation for women to care for the self, so no one else has to”. On reality television, makeovers result in increased confidence and personal power, which leads, in neoliberal theory, to a more productive life.

What is different about the candidates on *Love, Lust or Run* is that they nominate themselves. This is significant because, as Weber says, “it is important that we do not too quickly categorize those who desire or participate in makeover culture as wholly docile bodies.” On *Love, Lust or Run*, the reason articulated by the majority of women for deciding to apply for a makeover is work-related. Unlike *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, where “the 'crisis of masculinity' requires that heterosexual men must now attend to their relationships, image, and domestic habitus”, on *Love, Lust or Run* the majority of the women are focused on improving their career prospects as the outcome of their make-under. In fact, 70% of them mention wanting to open their own business.

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Only two of the seventeen women are participating in the makeover in order to attract the 'right' kind of man. Sender notes, “the current neoliberal ethos frames [career] hardship as a personal failing. And if it is a personal failing, it is also a personal responsibility to fix it, through the ministrations of experts” such as Stacy. None of the women on Love, Lust or Run seem to be married, some have children but there is no mention of husbands on any of the episodes. The viewer is left to assume that the women are supporting themselves.

Stacy gives the candidates on Love, Lust or Run a 'make-under' rather than a 'makeover' as the chosen participants have a truly over-the-top, in-your-face, style. Stacy tells the women that their extreme looks are polarizing. On makeover shows Ouellette and Murray note, “the 15 minutes of fame that is the principal material reward for participating on the programs limits the selection of 'real people' to those who make good copy for newspaper and magazine articles”. Therefore, although their 'before' looks are over-the-top, the participants selected for a make-under on Love, Lust or Run must, according to Sender and Sullivan, “have the potential to look conventionally attractive after their makeover”. As with Stacy's earlier show, What Not to Wear, on Love, Lust or Run Stacy educates the women to become more informed consumers within, “the implicitly white, appropriately aged, preppy norms of the show”. Stacy uses words like 'sophisticated' and 'classy' to describe the appearance of the made over women.

Mikkonen argues that wardrobe self-help shows such as Love, Lust or Run subject, “women's appearances to a panoptical gaze 'that reprimands those who do not conform'”. This premise is evident on Love, Lust or Run, where the participant's 'before' and 'after' photos are shown to strangers on the street for commentary. Sender's suggestion that participants may be more

10 Ibid. 146.
13 Ibid. 577.
receptive to feedback from strangers is incorporated into *Love, Lust or Run* by using this technique.\(^\text{15}\) Sender and Sullivan found that this tactic of, “showing the candidate to herself as if through the eyes of another is the linchpin of the transformation”.\(^\text{16}\) As with similar shows, Weber notes, it is “in the guise of kindness that is also sadistic delight in public shame, [that] the host plays back for the subject the nastiest of the remarks”.\(^\text{17}\) The goal of Stacy's make-under is to change the reactions of these strangers on the street from mostly 'run' to mostly 'love'. Weber argues that this public shaming and humiliation allows for, “a narrative of increased intimacy between the subjects and the style gurus.”\(^\text{18}\) *Love, Lust or Run* starts from this point, with Stacy being portrayed not as an antagonistic dictator, but as a concerned friend who wants to help.

The make-under begins in a bright studio that is starkly white. The women strip down, as Stacy tells them they need to be a 'blank slate'. They strip off their clothes, makeup and hair extensions. Then, wearing a white bathrobe, with their hair pulled back off their face, they are forced to confront their naked face in a mirror. The subjects do not like to look at themselves 'naked', and are visibly upset. Weber notes that this is part of the transformation process stating, “though makeover methods often require the humiliation of transforming subjects, the end-product of heightened happiness and self-esteem makes abjection only a means to an end.”\(^\text{19}\) She argues that the makeover is a, “transformation process that strips [participants] of their rights of bodily privacy and emotional stability, exposing them to the scrutinizing and colonizing gaze of both expert and audience.”\(^\text{20}\) It is necessary for the participants to go through this process in order to open themselves up to the expert's advice.

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\(^{20}\) Ibid. 77.
After preparing the 'blank slate', Stacy takes the participants shopping for new outfits. The women are wearing non-descript grey sweat suits when they leave the studio. In a change from *What Not to Wear*, the participants do not all shop at the same store. However, the product tie-ins are still obvious as each store is mentioned by name, as well as having a camera shot of the store's sign. The *Love, Lust or Run* web site does not have shopping tips, but does have instructional videos and before and after pictures of the makeover candidates. In addition, viewers are invited to go to the show's web site to try the virtual make up software program that Stacy uses with the participants in the studio.\(^{21}\)

One criticism of *What not to Wear* was that when Stacy and Clinton chose clothing for the subject of the makeover, they did not consider the candidate's lifestyle.\(^{22}\) Additionally, Sender's research found that audiences, “criticized *What not to Wear* for 'trying to make everyone look the same.'”\(^{23}\) On *Love, Lust or Run*, the candidates end up with more practical clothes. While Stacy allows the women to keep different looks, their style is certainly brought more in line with white, middle-class norms of beauty. Weber notes that, as with other makeover shows, “the women themselves are depicted as eager to exchange their differences for beautiful sameness.”\(^{24}\) *Love, Lust or Run* is slightly different in that most of the women talk about wanting to keep some of their difference, or edginess, and Stacy makes some concessions to this, such as hair colour. However, on *Love, Lust or Run*, as with other makeover shows, Weber argues:

> women who wear clothes that are 'too ethnic,' artistic, or individualized are refashioned to emit signs of middle-class professionalism and desirability. The reward for dressing like 'the rest of us,' we are made to understand, is universal approval, and thus love - a woman will be seen and appreciated, she will command and deserve the gaze, she will no longer be an


\(^{23}\)Ibid. 68.

embarrassment to her children or husband.\textsuperscript{25} As Weber notes, “learning to put the self first often dominates as the major lesson to be learned from each show.”\textsuperscript{26} On \textit{Love, Lust or Run}, this is seen with Serena, a woman who wears her children's cast-off clothes. Women who put themselves last in order to care for their children are viewed as a problem in a neoliberal society.

The post make-under reveal takes place in a darkened room, where the participants are revealed only to themselves in front of a full length mirror. This is different from other makeover shows where the reveal is a big deal for the participant's family and friends. In her research, Weber found that each subject's reaction to the makeover results was enthusiasm, gratefulness, and delight.\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Love, Lust or Run} is no exception with participants exclaiming: “I feel like this is going to propel my career”, “I look more adult and mature”, “I didn't even know this was possible” and “I feel like a million bucks”. The one candidate that did not have a positive reaction on \textit{Love, Lust or Run} is Rew, the only older woman participating on the show [age 54]. Rew is not really happy in the end; however she states throughout the show that she is only doing it for her daughter. The editing of the show implies that her reluctance to participate is the reason that she is not overjoyed with her transformation.

Unlike other makeover shows, \textit{Love, Lust or Run} is only 30 minutes in length, with one or two women featured per episode. Sender notes that, “makeover shows draw on melodramatic narrative structures”.\textsuperscript{28} However, the shortened episodes of \textit{Love, Lust or Run}, do not provide the time necessary to develop this narrative, so the viewer has limited information concerning the participant’s background and transformation. Viewers must seek additional information from the

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid. 62.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid. 72.
TLC web site.²⁹ Love, Lust or Run is more like makeovers as seen on daytime talk shows in that, “the entertainment here is the dramatic transformation, with little emphasis on the instruction offered” because of the shortened time frame.³⁰ Sender notes that, “the political economy of television production and audiences demand quick and simplistic solutions to complex problems of the self.”³¹ The implied outcome of the makeover is improved self-esteem, which will lead to increased financial success. These results support Weber's argument that, the neoliberal mandate for care of the self in service of the market fuses with values of a mythic, egalitarian America.”³² Indeed, after the makeover the candidate's themselves believe, “There's no stopping me now.”

In my textual analysis of Love, Lust or Run, I found that, as with other makeover shows, the candidates were mostly young females. What was different about Love, Lust or Run however was the fact that the women nominated themselves, rather than being nominated/shamed by family and/or friends. The other striking difference was that the majority of the women were hoping that the makeover would have a positive impact on their career aspirations, rather than changing their looks to attract the 'right' kind of man. This emphasis on careers falls neatly in line with other researcher's findings that neoliberalism has a strong influence on what we see on reality television. Indeed, on Love, Lust or Run, it is implied that all of the candidate's issues are resolved by the make-under within the thirty minute time frame of each episode.

Works Cited


