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THE IDEOLOGICAL SPACE FOR RE-ENCODING: A CASE STUDY OF ITV2'S *LOVE ISLAND* AND THE REALITY TV PARTICIPANT

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Meaning is Everywhere	3
The Genre: The World of Reality TV	6
Stuart Hall: Encoding and Decoding Model of Television.....	11
A Collective Re-Encoding.....	14
The Reality Dating Show	16
Reality Dating and “Toxic Masculinity”	17
Reality Dating and the “Desperate Woman”	20
Reality Dating and Whiteness as the Ideal Romance	25
<i>Love Island</i>	27
Why British?	32
“Mate It’s Horrendous”	
<i>Love Island</i> and Masculinity	37
“Do You Want to Tell Me Something?”	
<i>Love Island</i> and the Desperate Female.....	43
“I’m Just Me and You’re You”	
<i>Love Island</i> and Race	56
Conclusion: Just the Beginning	69
Bibliography	72
Tweets Cited	77
Clips Cited	79
Televisual Bibliography.....	80
<i>Love Island</i> Episodes Cited	82

Introduction: Meaning is Everywhere

Messages and meanings are found in everything. They can be found in a book, a religion, even on the side of the road in a billboard. The weight of these messages and themes can all be or mean something different to various people, but that does not limit the power or impact they can have in someone's life or in culture. Meaning in the form of art and media can often be seen as where some of the most important messages circulate and are created, but when it comes to a form of media such as reality television it is often omitted as a valuable site to make meaning. An individual taking values and meaning from reality television will not be treated on the same scale as someone taking meaning from a normal television program. However reality TV proves to be a complicated space where it acts as a "site of ideological maneuvers."¹ Ideology is pushed by the producers and creators of reality television and with the stigma surrounding the genre as "low" art it is not even apparent to most viewers.

Reality television ideologies establish themselves in between the nature of what is considered "real" and performative. It is located "in border territories, between information and entertainment, documentary and drama."² Critical studies of reality television has generated fascination about what makes up the genre and its characterization. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette find scholars, viewers, participants and producers are concerned with the hybrid space of the real and performative where ideological messages and signs occur.³ This is vastly important within the realm of television studies, however, I am interested in relationships regarding participants and the entirety of a program.

¹ Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, "Introduction," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 16.

² Annette Hill, *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television* (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2005), 2.

³ Murray and Ouellette, 7.

In this thesis, I will argue that the British reality program, *Love Island* demonstrates a participant's active role in showing TV as malleable through Stuart Hall's model of encoding/decoding television. *Love Island* is an example of contestants demonstrating polysemic mediation as a dialogue with dominant ideologies regarding dating intended by production - the desperation and passiveness of females, ideas of "traditional" masculinity, and whiteness being the ideal in a partner and romance. This case study positions *Love Island* as a different kind of reality program that redefines the relationship between reality television, its participants, and the kinds of messages created when the two work alongside each other - whether successful or not.

Television is a more malleable and fluctuating format than film, which tends to be quite static. Cinema becomes frozen in a moment of time. Even more so, Reality TV has become a complex televisual environment that operates and works on many levels, continuing to adapt to viewers, political ideologies and technology. As an example, with the advent of social media, many programs have taken on the ability to include feedback from viewers. The twentieth season of the U.S. version of *Big Brother* took use of technology and social media as apart of the season's main theme in which the "most trending" and "least trending" houseguests received an advantage or punishment respectively. Reality television has become an ever changing force, possible through productions' ability to quickly adapt. But what about the participants within these programs? Do they have a role in any of the adaptation? When they are situated in this space that is in between the real and fiction, what kind of power do they have? And towards what ends is any power employed?

Love Island, airing on ITV2 in the United Kingdom for eight weeks during the summer – the first week of June to the final week of July – may not seem as though it holds the answers to these questions, but its unique space of reflexivity as a program provides a realm for discussion.

The program is a reality dating style competition show where men and women partner up in a heterosexual couple together in an attempt to find love and avoid elimination each week. It may seem to be a standard reality program, but it goes further in its creation of space where production and participants work in an almost collective manner, presenting new meanings to traditional ideologies. The production and participants' unification is only possible due to *Love Island's* structure of acting as a contemplative space for ideologies rather than reinforcing them outright. Thus this move becomes compulsory as if it should be a given for other reality programs.

An example of participants straying from traditional ideology is while her boyfriend and partner Jack Fincham is away at a different villa, Dani Dyer receives a video message on her phone of him interacting with his ex who has now entered the program. This is a deliberate ploy from producers to create drama, conflict and frame Dyer as a female who is desperate and hysteric. She may appear that way for a moment, crying about the matter and panicking herself, but ultimately she takes control of the situation. When the opportunity presents itself, she talks to Fincham about what really happened, not allowing the short video – specifically edited by production – to split them up. They then stay together for the full nine weeks of the show and first place on *Love Island*.

What exactly does this mean? Traditionally the audience would expect Dyer to cry, jump to conclusions and be overly emotional – then creating drama between her and Fincham. The production of course clues the audience into the matter that Fincham was never doing anything with his ex in the other villa, thus setting us up to laugh at how clueless Dyer is. Through the use of Stuart Hall's model it would be expected and meant for the audience to decode the meaning that Dyer is essentially pathetic – that women are something to be laughed at in unfortunate

situations. They in turn “should have seen it coming.” That however, is not what happens – instead we deeply feel for her and hope she can rise above the poorly edited video the production sent to cause chaos. Dyer uses agency to directly talk to Fincham about the situation once he returns and this alters the common ideology of what the role of the female in romantic relationships is supposed to be. She provides the ponderance and decoding opportunity that women have agency and are strong enough to be independent from societal ideas.

Love Island providing this opportunity for the exchange between Dyer and Fincham to be shown provides evidence as to how the program is a different kind of reality dating show. There is no use of tight editing to reinforce ideologies, but instead goes alongside Dyer’s move and actions to lead as an example in the effort of countering the typical reality program narrative. This example alone leads us to take an in-depth look at *Love Island*, how Dyer and Fincham’s situation is not a standalone instance and how the relationship between production and participants alter Stuart Hall’s model. These elements ultimately lead to a new kind of reality program with *Love Island* paving the way in representing an opposition to the genre.

The Genre: The World of Reality Television

Before discussing the ideas associated around modern reality television in collaboration with Stuart Hall, we must first contextualize the genre and its origin. When the first advertisement for a television set appeared in the July 2nd, 1928 edition of a magazine appropriately called *Television*, it was not clear what “television” was meant or going to be. It wasn’t until much after World War II in the 1960s when televisual broadcasting became popular in the United States and Great Britain, that people began to own TV sets in their homes. Much of television’s influence and formatting came from commercial radio, being “structured around just a few programming networks, paid for by commercial advertisers, and dedicated to attracting the

largest possible audience.”⁴ Many of the programs that originated from commercial radio also found itself on television very early on – as it was already recognized that audiences would find them enjoyable.

The makeover program *Queen for a Day* (Mutual Radio Network, 1945 - 2004) was a part of this trend in which it made a transition from radio to television, being an early example of the reality television format. A large amount of what was shown in the early years of broadcast television were narrative based programs such as *Amos 'n' Andy* (WMAQ, 1928 - 1960), *Beulah* (CBS radio, 1945 - 1954), *Dragnet* (NBC radio, 1949 - 1957), *Father Knows Best* (NBC radio, 1949 - 1954) and more that had thrived on the airwaves. There were, however, a few programs that had a looser, more fluid form – that can resemble reality television programming today – which made it onto TV screens early on.

The 1940s is when early foundations of what would later be the reality television we know today, were set into place. The early foundations of reality television were found on commercial radio with programs such as *Queen for a Day* and *Candid Camera* (ABC radio, 1948 - 1954). The intentions of these programs were to portray people in unscripted situations in the game and quiz show.⁵ Quiz shows and other programs such as *Queen for a Day* and *Candid Camera* continued to appear over the next two decades, with talent search shows also joining the realms of broadcast. *The Original Amateur Hour* became a televisual favorite on NBC in 1948 after it had originated on ABC's radio station from 1934 - 1945. Performers would audition for judges and if chosen would compete with their fellow contestants until a ultimate winner was selected. The program helped launch the careers of multiple stars – Gladys Knight and Frank

⁴ Harry Castleman and Walter J. Podrazik, *Watching TV: Six Decades of American Television Second Edition* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), x.

⁵ *Ibid*, 43.

Sinatra to name a few – and it’s addictive competitive spirit has influenced years of talent reality shows – *America’s Got Talent* (NBC, 2006 -), *American Idol* (Fox, 2002 - 2016 & ABC, 2018 -) and *The X Factor* (Fox, 2011 - 2013).

It is often cited that the first true reality television style program is that of PBS’ *An American Family* (PBS, January 1973-March 1973) , a twelve episode series “documenting the affluent lifestyle, personal revelations, and banal daily routines of the Loud family of Santa Barbara, California.”⁶ Originally advertised and marketed as a documentary, many viewers felt shocked from the content of the Louds’ divorce and their son coming out as gay. Unlike documentary, however, there was a large discussion from spectators and critics of whether the family was acting for the sake of being filmed and if the editing was specifically made to be overly dramatic.⁷ Thus, the debates that emerged from the program only fueled interest around the style and enlightened networks to emulate *An American Family* and create a new nonfiction televisual format.

An American Family ended after twelve episodes and questions regarding a “new” genre of reality programming began to surface. Many of the questions asked in the 1970s are still the concerns critics of reality TV ask now, such as what the notion of being “real” means? This question does not have one specific answer and many in media studies – such as John Corner – continue to grapple with notions of “the real.” John Corner in his essay “Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions,” attempts to define how reality television is almost a branch of documentary cinema – that there is a difference between “documentation” and “documenting.” “For me, such “performance of the real” was questionable, its self-conscious and often mannered

⁶ Susan Ryan, “Reviewed Work: *An American Family: A Televised Life* by Jeffrey Ruoff,” *Cinéaste* 29, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 66.

⁷ *Ibid.*

display to camera an element of the “commodity real” within the new framework of “reality-as-entertainment”.⁸ It seems that most of what critics believe to be “unreal” about reality television is the content and how the subjects within the programs act.

An example of a program celebrated for presenting “reality” to criticized for being unreal is MTV’s *The Real World* (MTV, 1992 - 2017 & Facebook Watch, 2019 -). *The Real World* was highly praised when it was first broadcast in 1992 for the content it featured - a diverse cast that discussed and addressed certain “issues such as racism, homosexuality, HIV/AIDS, and abortion.”⁹ *The Real World* became an open discussion rather than reinforcing any kind of prejudice or preconceived notions regarding the topics. Documentary cinema carries many of the characteristics of what *The Real World* was intended to be originally – the use of non-actors and unscripted, poignant conversations about social issues. There was a noticeable shift in what was being shown on *The Real World* - with each season becoming formulaic with its “sensationalized sexism, racial prejudice, homophobia, sloppy hookups, and drug and alcohol addiction as the main viewership draws,” after the first season aired.¹⁰

Deeper into the new millennium, visibility of reality television grew and became a necessity on most major networks’ lineups. In February of 2003, Fox was allocating 41 percent and ABC 33 percent of their schedule to reality television programs.¹¹ This increase can be cited due to the airing of the first season of *The Bachelor* on ABC in 2002 and the networks’ acknowledgment of the views it brought. The reality television sub genres began to take form

⁸ John Corner, “Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions,” in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 61.

⁹ Jennifer L. Pozner, *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth about Guilty Pleasure TV* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2010), 12.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid, 11.

during this time such as the makeover shows – *Extreme Makeover* (ABC, 2002 - 2007), *Trading Spaces* (TLC, 2000 - 2008 & 2018 -) – the dating show – *The Bachelor* (ABC, 2002 -), *Joe Millionaire* (Fox, January - November 2013)– the competition show – *Big Brother* (CBS, 2000 -), *Survivor* (CBS, 2000 -) – and the “celebrity” reality program – *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (E!, 2007 -)– to just name a few. Often times sub-genres tend to overlap with one another such as American model Tyra Banks’ *America’s Next Top Model* (UPN, 2003 – 2006, The CW, 2006 – 2015 & VH1 2016 - 2018) which merges the makeover show with the competition.

Unlike other genres, reality television can obtain high viewership for nearly less than half of what the cost for scripted programs is. Being shot on location, the use of non-actors and no script - or not as formal - makes reality TV more enticing to networks that want to cut down on cost. As many of these programs are rooted in some kind of social belief or deal with the notion of social issues, the idea that they are real can be even more detrimental. Randall L. Rose and Stacy L. Wood conducted research that found that consumers can readily distinguish between the authentic and the factitious.¹² Programs having this hybridity and the foundation of various social beliefs or ideologies built within the production does not make the viewer passive. Instead, their acknowledgement of the real and performative working together encourages audiences to be reflective regarding their personal views on authenticity and themselves. Those on screen are still “real people” and there is a desire to observe these people who are in fantastical situations that spectators often dream about, “in modern hedonism, pleasure is not simply a quality of experience, but a self illusioned quality of experience.”¹³ The fascination with reality television

¹² Randall L. Rose and Stacy L. Wood, “Paradox and the Consumption of Authenticity through Reality Television,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 32, no. 2 (September 2005): 286.

¹³ *Ibid*, 290.

therefore must no longer come from the conflict of the lack of “real” or the apparent performative nature, but instead the ideas that productions are trying to pass off as “real.”

Jennifer L. Pozner, Media Critic and journalist, notes the difference and change in viewer reaction to reality television between the early 2000s to the 2010s. When she first gave lectures regarding reality television at high schools or universities, she would show a clip from a reality tv program and students would find the shows to be “vile” and unrealistic. A student at Fordham University couldn’t believe the ideological implications the program had in regards to the framing and treatment of women.¹⁴ Later, Pozner found a different response to the clips she showed, with both women and men telling her that the shows were “hilarious,” and ultimately that it was “just TV.”¹⁵ The shift from outrage regarding the ideological messages of reality television programs to simply viewing it as entertainment is troubling. Reality television being reduced to “trashy” entertainment and “just TV” can cause audience members to lose their active viewing experience. The ideological ideas that are often behind reality television can cause a certain level of influence in the public’s mind regarding social issues such as race and gender. If reality television is made out to be unimportant because it is simply television, the ideas the producers on these programs reinforce about gender, race, and class are suddenly made to be surpassed and not focused on in a critical way.

Stuart Hall: Encoding and Decoding Model of Television

The producers and executives of reality television have a vast amount of power within the program. Producers decide what kind of people get casted, where those contestants will be staying, how their words will be edited and how certain scenarios within the show will play out. With this framework set, it may seem as though the impact of participants on a given program

¹⁴ Pozner, 30.

¹⁵ Ibid.

might seem restrictive. The control from producers while large, does not completely hinder the ability for any kind of agency from contestants as the genre itself is a combination of performative and “real.” Therefore, something within the means of “real” must emerge, and we must then ask if this can come from participants.

What is exactly the role of the participant? Are they limited in the content of the program and their agency, because of the producers’ power? Or is there space for contestants to truly be apart of this reality television and its messages? British cultural theorist, Stuart Hall who is known as one of the founding figures of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, believed culture to not be something that is simply studied. He found culture to be a “critical site of social action and intervention, where power relations are both established and potentially unsettled.”¹⁶ Hall recognized that media plays a pivotal role in defining our culture and that the interaction between the audience and these texts are vital. Media offers a form of political socialization where many viewers obtain their own personal values and morals, these messages that the media offers up often continue to circulate. Therefore, it can be difficult to alter certain ideologies regarding ideas of race, gender and class.

One of the key theories Hall developed was the encoding/decoding model of television, an approach to textual analysis focusing on the negotiation and opposition the audience or “decoders” are met with when presented with a text. Hall theorizes that television - and other media forms - present messages that are meant to be decoded. The way that these messages are decoded can vary depending on an individual’s personal experiences, background, and various other social identifications, although the original message that is encoded might be made to have

¹⁶ James Procter, *Stuart Hall*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2004), 2.

a different meaning.¹⁷ A person who was raised in the Christian, Republican deep South and someone from the more liberal West Coast will often have different reactions to media messages. If both of them view NBC's *Nightly News with Lester Holt* – the Southerner may view the program as too secular and liberal while the West Coaster would have the opposite reaction – that it is not bias enough. Using personal experiences has a viewer placed into what Hall believes is “three hypothetical positions from which decodings of a televisual discourse may be constructed.”¹⁸ The dominant-hegemonic position, the negotiated position, and the oppositional code are these positions.

The viewer takes the stance of the dominant-hegemonic position when they decide to operate within the hegemony¹⁹ of a program and do not perform any additional decoding apart from the production's original intent. The negotiated stance has a mixture of accepting and rejecting the message(s) that are being presented to them, they understand what the dominant²⁰ message is, but do not completely accept it at face value. Lastly, those in the oppositional position know that their ideology and experiences lead to decoding that is not the dominant meaning, but changes the message to create “an alternative framework of reference.”²¹ When Hall created and theorized this model of encoding/decoding television he was specifically thinking about fictional television programs and the media. Where does reality television fit into this model? How is the model impacted when you have able-bodied participants who are

¹⁷ Stuart Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*. (Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1973), 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 14.

¹⁹ Hegemony: often referring to the political, economic and social control of one state over others. In this case we can consider the hegemony those in control of our society (the government, lawmakers, newsmakers) who dictate our societal character and what we are to value in social issues.

²⁰ Dominant: refers to the most important or most influential, powerful. In this case it is in reference to the most influential and powerful values in our society.

²¹ *Ibid*.

supposed to have free will to move within the space of a program? Are the participants in these reality programming having some kind of effect on the encoded message put out by producers?

With the rise of reality television, it is important to intervene in Stuart Hall's model and discuss the participant's role. In regard to "encoding," we can define it as the sender - usually a producer, writer or content creator of a program - using certain signals that are meant to be interpreted by the audience a certain way.²² These messages can vary, but usually, there is a trend within the media to advertise and convey certain ideas about social issues and ideologies that reinforce dominant culture. The dominant culture, in this case, white, heterosexual, Protestant values that signify anything else as different and the "other." If anything besides the dominant culture is presented, then it is in a way that fits within the hegemony's standards and in a secure, non-threatening way.

A Collective Re-Encoding

Unlike the scripted and fictitious programming Stuart Hall describes, reality television has a looser form where there are no formulated characters that have to stick to a script. Reality TV has the most opportunity for subjects to make decisions and diverge from the dominant encoded values it would be reality television. What the participants would enable is instead of presenting the exact and original encoded message made by producers, the ideology becomes a mixture of oppositional ideology and the dominant, this can be considered and known as "re-encoding." This concept of re-encoding occurs when there is a reckoning between the actions or verbal cues of a participant within a reality program and the intentions of that program.

In a dating reality program such as *The Bachelorette* (ABC, 2003 -) the main goal is to present a picture perfect romance between two white contestants. If there was a season where *the*

²² Ibid, 10.

Bachelorette chooses an Asian male contestant as who she wants to be with, this would go against the production's intent. The media has circulated images historically to emasculate Asian men and tell the public that they are not sexy, masculine or an ideal partner. An Asian male winning *The Bachelorette* would go against traditional media expectations and the ideas *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* franchise want to portray – this is clear through the lack of Asian male contestants that have actually appeared on the program in its 14 seasons.

This re-encoding is often not intentional from participants and in order for it to occur there must be some kind of negotiation that is occurring from the side of the production. In the case of the Asian male contestant on *The Bachelorette*, the program would have no choice but to show this love story play out, thus causing the production to play a role in creating a new message that challenges recirculating ideologies about Asian men.

This concept is fairly new, and it is not assumed that participants knowingly go into a program with the motivation to disrupt the dominant messages of a production. From the programs studied, it's clear that the production still exhibits the power to decide what is and isn't shown to audiences through the power of editing. Meaning when the viewers do see this re-encoding of the normal dominant message, it can be said that there is a collective process operating within this mode – the participants simply acting on their own will to be oppositional and the production to allow this to come across to viewers.

To recognize this, a viewer must be familiar with the normalized tropes and ideology that have become the “default” role in our society. If we see programs showing audiences a different approach to these ideologies based on the actions and cues of the participants, then that is when a second stage of encoding occurs – the re-encoding. Re-encoding is possible when the production of a program allows this second stage of encoding to be shown and visible to the audience rather

than editing around it. Whether or not re-encoding is successful is ultimately based on the reactions and discussion of audience members. The British network ITV2's *Love Island* (2015 -) can perhaps lead us to an answer to what re-encoding can look like. The reality dating program carries the weight of multiple dominant messages in place about what the ideal relationship and romance looks like, importantly, *Love Island* has been a force to represent an alternative. The reality dating show and its history have established hegemonic messages that continue to circulate and describe the optimal relationship as a white dominant male and a passive, desperate white female. These messages are clear in tracing the history of reality dating and notable programs that represent the subgenre.

The Reality Dating Show

Reality programs that revolve around dating and romantic relationships have been some of the most popular and desirable reality programming in the last decade. These programs have a historical tie to the dating game shows of the 1960s where matchmaking and gameplay is involved. Usually, there was one individual that contestants are competing for to go on a date with through answering questions. These programs' episodes were short and featured one time contestants who never appeared again, causing an emotional disconnect between viewer and contestant. Jonathan Gray goes on to contextualize this in his essay: "A short, half hour program allows little time to grow attached to a character or a relationship, instead allowing the schadenfreude that would in time become a central staple of much reality television."²³ In the early 2000s a new kind of dating show merged with reality television where there was more of an emphasis on relationship and fairytale scenarios to suggest long term romance rather than for

²³ Jonathan Gray, "Cinderella Burps: Gender, Performativity, and the Dating Show," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 261.

dating to just be a game show. While these relationship and dating reality shows are still a game, they aim to showcase the drama and tensions that come with dating, but making sure to show the “happy ending” that comes with it. These programs monopolize everyone’s idea of falling in love with prince charming and having the picture perfect date. At the same time, they intend to expose the viewer to a dating landscape that is more dramatic and stressful than their own.

Reality dating shows have created a formulaic and normalized version of what dating is through the continual circulation of problematic ideas. Often those problematic views provide a plethora of female stereotypes and patriarchal ideas. One with a passive gaze is able to acknowledge this, but it has in turn created a negative stigma regarding unscripted television. In a majority of the reality television programs centered around dating made after the year 2000, there has been a trend of multiple women competing for the affection of one man. These longer forms of dating shows are all set up with the basic idea of “turning fantasy into an authentic experience,” and giving the viewers an outlandish scenario that is steeped in some social belief.²⁴ The basic idea is for viewers to feel relation to the idea that dating is complicated and messy, but also be enthralled with the lavish dates and gifts thrown in by the show’s sponsors wishing that was them.

Reality Dating and “Toxic Masculinity”

Masculinity and manhood often are characterized as someone having strength, power and dominance. This dominance is often meant to act as an overpowering opposition to women and to assume the role of their “master” or “guardian” who knows best. What society tells men is that they need to be tough and any kind of toxicity that comes from it is completely fine because that is whom they are supposed to be and that is the box that culture has placed them in. Andrew L.

²⁴ Pozner, 16.

Yarrow encompasses this in one sentence: “real men don’t cry, don’t talk about their feelings, don’t give up, don’t avoid a fight if provoked, aren’t “sissies,” aren’t passive, aren’t vulnerable, and expect women to take care of the kids and the home.”²⁵ Often times the idea of being a man can be disempowering for the female identity, which is placed as an opposite. In “Masculinity, Mating, and Misogyny,” a young African American male in Washington D.C. was cited as feeling as though “it’s manly to have many partners and have a crude and degrading attitude toward females,” even if he didn’t necessarily feel that way.²⁶

Men do not have to think about their personal reputation for having many sexual partners and “playing the field” when it comes to romantic relationships; for women, however talking about sex openly has become taboo. Therefore, with the emergence of an era where young people are constantly “swiping” on their phones to find their next “match” or hookup, the societal impression that men have to be degrading towards females has become a lot easier. On apps such as Tinder the first thing shown of someone’s profile is a photo of them without any kind of context into who that person is. Getting rid of emotional or personal ties reduces users to an image instead of a human with feelings. Hiding behind an online app or persona has increased a norm in the sexual harassment and emotional abuse of women.

While the culture of online dating apps has also opened the realm for women to be more free and confident with their sexuality, it has only enhanced misogyny. Nancy Jo Sales best illustrates this in her 2019 piece for *Vanity Fair*: “Exploitative and disrespectful men have always existed. There are many evolved men, but there may be something going on in hookup

²⁵ Andrew L. Yarrow, “Masculinity, Mating, and Misogyny,” in *Man Out: Men on the Sidelines of American Life* (Brookings Institution Press, 2018), 62.

²⁶ Ibid, 63.

culture now that is making some more resistant to evolving.”²⁷ For example, in the fourth season of *Love Island*, contestant Adam Collard continuously illustrates to each female contestant he pairs up with that he wants nothing but to “settle down” and find “real love” in the space of the show. However, he continues to change his mind and go from woman to woman, later revealing that he has slept with over 200 women at the age of 22. There is obviously something in him that makes him feel as though he wants to calm down from that lifestyle, but the idea of hooking up and how easy it can be has translated from apps to his methods within the show. Collard wants commitment, but there’s something that makes him hesitant and resorting to the behavior associated with hookup culture.

In various other situations, men do not tend to even display a sense of wanting to be evolved, which often works in the favor of reality television. On the twelfth season of *The Bachelorette*, Chad Johnson who encompasses everything the program wants us to believe a man is. Chad represents what Emma Gray describes in her article about masculinity that “feelings are bad. Muscles are good. Being too nice is bad. Telling it like it is is good. Affection is bad. Blind rage and physical violence are good.”²⁸ Although these programs might be intended for a female audience, reality dating programs still attempts to encode a message that the men should be domineering and have agency in every situation.

²⁷ Nancy Jo Sales, “Tinder and the Dawn of the “Dating Apocalypse”,” *Vanity Fair*, September 2015, accessed on February 17, 2019, <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/08/tinder-hook-up-culture-end-of-dating>.

²⁸ Emma Gray, “Want To See What Toxic Masculinity Looks Like? Watch *The Bachelorette*,” *Huffington Post*, May 31, 2016, accessed on February 17, 2019, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/chad-the-bachelorette-toxic-masculinity-slash-hot-garbage_us_574cf679e4b055bb1172913f.

Reality Dating and “the Desperate Woman”

The Bachelor, developed by Mike Fleiss for ABC, first aired on March 25, 2002, and revolves around a single male who is to select a wife out of a pool of twenty-five potential romantic interests. Throughout the course of the show, the bachelor goes on various dates with the women and eliminates the candidates one by one in the “rose ceremony,” he eventually proposes marriage in the finale episode. *The Bachelor* highlights and frames the women to appear as desperate and eager to please a man they have known only for a short time. This is something that happens in the normal dating sphere, but adding the reality television element encourages the idea of a woman is also eager to be a reality TV princess. Editing is what is used to paint this picture which, “convincingly establishes that the women consider this opportunity more important than anything else in their lives. Their degrees, careers, and loved ones are marginalized for their chance to accomplish what is being touted as women’s primary objective, marriage.”²⁹ The program moves to completely remove the agency the female contestants have in an effort to show these women as submissive, compliant, passive, but also slanderous.

Reducing the female contestants to incompetence encourages the viewers to criticize, ridicule and demonize the women. This is still present when roles are reversed as Jonathan Gray describes that *The Bachelorette* and programs like it where the woman decides between multiple men, “often made the single female appear more desperate than the cool and collected men, and they allowed the men considerably more power and agency in the process.”³⁰ The women never have the agency even when the dating program is specifically structured for them to have the “upper hand.” Constantly they are put through some kind of test and made to prove themselves.

²⁹ Gray, 264.

³⁰ Ibid.

Some dating programs take another step in attempting to portray women as desperate for love, and their fairytale ending. For example the Fox Broadcasting Company has done this with their reality dating programs *Joe Millionaire* and *I Wanna Marry "Harry"* (Fox, 2014). In both programs nearly eleven years apart, the main premise of the show told to the female contestants is fabrication and ultimately fictional. Mike Darnell, a television executive who has worked for both Fox and ABC and who produced *Joe Millionaire*, has rejected the social relevance to programs such as his. Darnell would be an example of an individual who does not agree with Stuart Hall's theories of the media producing messages regarding ideology. When Darnell is asked about the social responsibility of his shows he often is quoted as saying that he is "in entertainment, not in news."³¹ This is incorrect, as Stuart Hall and other cultural theorists have found that in fact the programs Darnell creates and the messages circulated by the media become just as important as the news. Television programs go on to reflect the ideas and norms that are portrayed on the news, thus entertainment and information bleeding into one another.

In *Joe Millionaire*, the women are under the impression that the bachelor Evan Marriott is a very wealthy man looking to be married. The show is similar to *The Bachelor*, though Co-Executive Producer Liz Bronstein's envisioned the show to be a spoof of the ABC program. Except in *Joe Millionaire* affluence becomes a factor giving women the impression that the expensive and exotic dates would continue after the show's production. Jonathan Gray illustrates this: "Thus, the show invited viewers to enjoy the site of "gold diggers" being "put in their place," positing the truth, and setting the entire season up to punish the ultimate "winner."³² At the end of the program, the chosen woman would be told the truth that Marriott was indeed not a millionaire and have to make the decision if she would like to stay with him or not.

³¹ Pozner, 16.

³² Gray, 264.

I Wanna Marry “Harry” premiered on Fox in May of 2014, the series followed twelve American women who were led to believe that they were competing for the affections of Prince Harry, who was actually a look-alike named Matthew Hicks. In the beginning, the contestants are not aware of the premise of the show, but are taken by production to a “royal setting.” Through Hicks’ resemblance to Prince Harry, lavish dates, professional servants and security given to Hicks, the women draw their own conclusion that Hicks is indeed Prince Harry. It is not until the fifth episode when Hicks tells one of the contestants alone that he is Prince Harry, the hired butler later announces this information to the rest of the women.³³ Fox only aired four of the eight produced episodes due to low ratings and made the rest of the season available on streaming platforms.

In *Joe Millionaire* and *I Wanna Marry “Harry,”* Fox aims to give the viewer something that we are aware of that the contestants are not. To laugh at the women’s expense for thinking they were going to marry a millionaire or that anyone with red hair and an English accent can be Prince Harry. These shows, however, also deceive the viewer in the way they are produced and set up. While of course viewers might be under the impression that certain things are filmed again, or things might be fabricated to set up a narrative or plot for an episode, they often do not expect the production to completely pull the wool over their eyes.

This is what is typical of the reality dating show and *Love Island* displays this in a different way. In its opposition to the reality dating program, there are no plot twists or surprises within *Love Island*. To illustrate this, one of the common occurrences in the structure of the show is the continuous entrances of new contestants in an attempt to “threaten” the secure couples in

³³ Dana Schwartz, “Revisiting the ill-fated reality show *I Wanna Marry “Harry,”*” *Entertainment Weekly*, November 27, 2017, accessed January 23, 2019, <https://ew.com/tv/2017/11/27/revisiting-i-wanna-marry-harry/>.

the program. Whenever this occurs the viewers are told by production, even an episode before, that there will be a new islander in the villa. Often times viewers can vote for who they want the new contestant to go on a date with in the program. Instead of attempting to trick their audience members, *Love Island* aims to make them feel included in the entire process. It may feel as though the production is still circumventing the contestants on the show with the constant new arrivals, but that is a known characteristic in *Love Island*. Unlike *Joe Millionaire* and *I Wanna Marry "Harry"* there is nothing being hid from those in the space of the show.

The constants to *Love Island*'s oppositional reality show go through great lengths to keep up the ideologies and stereotypes it attempts to enforce. This is done through the means of greatly controlling every segment of the show even if it is detrimental for contestants. During a round of post-show interviews for *Joe Millionaire*, Evan Marriott let it slip in one that he only chose the winner Zora Andrich because "I had to pick one of the girls," and that the producers specifically wanted him to choose Zora. Out of all of the girls, the producers believed that Zora was the purest and within the realm of being a "good girl" who has a heart of gold.³⁴ Zora herself even confirmed that as soon as the cameras stopped rolling the relationship between her and Marriott had ended during an appearance on *Live with Regis and Kelly*. The entire time what *Joe Millionaire* had been doing was create a scenario has depicting women as crazy, desperate gold diggers, except for the good girl who does charity work to provide the audience with the allusion that good girls can finish first and have their perfect ending.

What the production of *I Wanna Marry "Harry"* did behind the scenes was a little different, manipulating and convincing the contestants they were crazy all so they would believe that Matthew Hicks was Prince Harry. For the most part, in the finished product of the show, the

³⁴ Pozner, 34.

way that it is edited makes the contestants to blindly believe that he is Prince Harry through small details of what is displayed to make the women look ludicrous. Nearly a year after the show aired, the winner Kimberly Birch gave an interview in which she revealed some of the girls did not believe that he was Prince Harry. She stated, “They actually had a therapist come on the set at one point and talk to a few of us who were saying it wasn’t him. We found out later that it wasn’t a real, licensed therapist. It was just someone from the production team.”³⁵ The production staff made the women feel like they were foolish for believing that Hicks was not Prince Harry and people from the team would actually whisper things outside the room’s of the women at night. For example the production staff would “whisper, “you have to get him back to Buckingham Palace. The Royal Family’s very upset. They’re not happy about the show. It’s this new thing they’ve never done before, and they’re trying to be up and up with social media, and the way that the world is.” They really messed with us.”³⁶ Not only within these shows does a toxic form of manipulation occur, but the contestants are put through it as well when cameras are no longer rolling.

The productions of *Joe Millionaire* and *I Wanna Marry “Harry”* have no sense of ethics when it comes to treating the contestants that provide them with material to make the programs. Instead, they intend to use them as a means to an end in portraying their ultimate idea about romance, dating and relationships. Specifically in both of these cases they aim to portray females as lost, pathetic, incapable and desperate – willing to do anything if it means accomplishing their ultimate goal in life, finding a mate.

³⁵ Molly Fitzpatrick, “One year later, ‘I Wanna Marry Harry’ winner reveals behind-the-scenes ‘brainwashing,’” *Splinter*, June 5, 2015, accessed January 23, 2019,

<https://splinternews.com/one-year-later-i-wanna-marry-harry-winner-reveals-behi-1793848169>

³⁶ Ibid.

Realing Dating and Whiteness as the Ideal Romance

This normalized and toxic form of the dating reality show in comparison to *Love Island* not only makes the women look unintelligent and daft, but it also embraces the dominant ideology in our society. These dominant values held by those in powerful positions as well as the public had been hidden within the last decade and swept underneath the surface. However, within the last four years those ideologies have reemerged and become a large point of discussion. Specifically, the racism that many believed had been gone and “dealt with” after the Civil Rights Movement became visible once again with the United States 2016 Presidential Elections. This racism had always been present, but the new political climate in the U.S. allowed it to materialize.

Reality television to a certain extent is an example of the racial tension that had been pushed to the back of many individual’s minds, mainly white individuals. The diversity of race in dating reality shows has been a continual problem as it is either nonexistent or is dealt with in a stereotypical way. Many reality TV productions simply cast diversity for the sake of being diverse in an effort to prove to the public that they are inclusive. It took thirteen seasons of *The Bachelorette* for there to be a woman of color as “the bachelorette.” In 2017 Rachel Lindsay from the previous season of *The Bachelor* became the first black bachelorette on the show. Robin M. Boylorn describes her hope for Rachel when she was first announced as being the bachelorette, as many professional black women would be able to relate to her: “Like us, Rachel had spent several years waiting for commitment from men who were incapable of offering it. And like us, Rachel was cynical about the possibility of love, in part because of deep-rooted insecurities stemming from how infrequently black women see ourselves portrayed as viable

love interests in pop culture.”³⁷ Black women often become framed as a “sassy” best friend in many narratives, reality or fiction, and Rachel Lindsay’s lead as *The Bachelorette* provided implications that this was not going to be the case.

A season that advertised itself as “the most diverse” season in franchise history, soon diverged from the inclusivity and traditional reality television boundaries it was trying to break. That is the boundaries of the caucasian romance. While for the African American community there was a hope that they would finally see a real black love story on TV, soon enough many of the eleven black men on the show began to disappear, “the decision to cast a black bachelorette was merely evidence of the network’s interest in pushing faux-colorblind love stories as fairy-tale fantasies the show failed to account for the ways that race would complicate the existing narrative, including the real challenges that interracial couples experience - especially black woman who date non-black men.”³⁸ While the show was okay with having a black bachelorette, having her love interest also be black was too much for them. Clearly, they wanted to still be able to sell the season and the love story to white viewers, which meant Lindsay with a white partner. The issues, although, that might come with this pairing is too complicated for the network and production as it is not the apart of the ideal romance.

Boylorn does, however, give Rachel Lindsay’s season of *The Bachelorette* credit for the way black men were portrayed in the way that they were no longer “caricatures” as they had been in the past within the same franchise: “Their confidence, cool poses, and camaraderie

³⁷ Robin M. Boylorn, “The Heartbreaking First Black *Bachelorette*,” *Slate*, August 8, 2017, accessed January 24, 2019, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/television/2017/08/why_rachel_lindsay_s_season_of_the_bachelorette_was_heartbreaking_for_black.html.

³⁸ Ibid.

challenged cultural representations of black men as angry, violent, and sexually aggressive.”³⁹

While this is a great step forward in the way black men are portrayed as opposed to being shown as ignorant or unreliable on shows like *Basketball Wives* (VH1, 2010 – 2013 & 2017 -) and *Love and Hip Hop* (VH1, 2011 -), Boylorn’s example describes how once again the men have all the agency and power on these dating shows. Many of the men talked about Rachel in a way that made the subtext seem as though they believed “that it is unusual for black women to be smart, beautiful, or successful.”⁴⁰ What was meant as a powerful season for the black women watching to see someone who looks like them and for Rachel led to a season where much of the racial discourse was left out to be analyzed and pondered through subtext.

Love Island

Reality dating programs have proven themselves to be constructed modes functioning as an ideological tool in pushing the hegemonic agenda, recirculating static messages. It was not expected in 2015 when British network ITV2 first aired their take on dating in reality program *Love Island* that this problem would be closer to being solved. Through its four seasons *Love Island* has displayed an alternative reality dating space in which the constrictions of the reality dating show are challenged and the ideas the genre aspires to portray are confronted.

Love Island offers hybridity in its self-reflexive nature, poking fun at itself as a genre, through its production and narration tools. As well as this, the program transcends common sexist toxicity found in the age of online dating, thus diverging from dominant ideologies. Critically discussing the show has the ability to find what exactly works about *Love Island* in its presentation of a new form of reality television and where it falls back into reinforcing ideas about gender and race that are common with dating programs. Certainly *Love Island* does not

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

position itself in a space to solve all of the issues surrounding reality television and dating, but its popularity and non-confirmative nature can cause a struggle with what we know now to be traditional reality television, creating change. This all begins with the exploration of how the production of *Love Island* and its participants foster an unconscious dialogue with one another that deviate common conceptions about dating and romance. The production constructs while the participants act and are given the ability to have agency, thus either enforcing the production's construction or impacting Stuart Hall's model of encoding/decoding television and acting fervently.

In 2005, the British Television network ITV aired a reality program entitled *Celebrity Love Island*, which starred celebrity contestants living together in a secluded villa, and viewers voting each week online for the houseguests they wished to save. The series only lasted for two seasons due to low ratings and controversy regarding the "status" or notoriety of certain celebrities as well as their intentions on the program. However, in 2015 ITV's second channel, ITV2 announced the reboot of *Celebrity Love Island* with a twist. Instead of having contestants associated with fame, members of the public would live in the villa together and interact. The show dropped the word "Celebrity," and it became known as *Love Island*. The show's format involves a group of contestants - known as Islanders - living in a secluded villa and constantly being recorded. The show airs typically on ITV2 for eight weeks during the summer and airs six times a week, with one of the six episodes being a recap of the week for the Islanders.

During the course of the show, the Islanders must couple up with another contestant to survive and make it to the end of the summer where the winning couple has the chance to win fifty thousand British pounds. The show is a hybrid between a typical dating reality show and *Big Brother*. The show's *Big Brother* influence is seen through the way the Islanders are

constantly being filmed and under surveillance with many of the camera angles being from a secure position. As well as that, *Love Island* takes use of the idea of audience participation and interaction with having viewers vote for their favorite contestants and couples. The Islanders do not have any contact with the outside world, but they are given “phones” which the producers use to send them messages regarding challenges, dates they must go on and general information.

As the program continues, each week there are re-couplings that occur where one can choose to remain in their couple or swap for someone else. Although the show begins with an even number of Islanders, each week new contestants enter the villa to test the relationships between the couples and try their own luck at finding love. This then can lead to uneven islanders who are at risk for elimination and being dumped from the island during the re-coupling ceremony. Having new contestants coming and going from the villa during the show is a key idea of what makes the whole premise of *Love Island* successful and so popular. This creates the realistic idea in today’s modern dating landscape where everyone is always looking for the “next best thing.” The threat of someone else coming into the villa and splitting up a couple is representative of what may and probably has occurred to viewers, but in this case it is broadcasted for everyone to see and constantly. Unlike the previous shows mentioned, such as *The Bachelor* or *The Bachelorette*, *Love Island* does not have an apparent end goal of what is to come with the relationships it creates.

In an era where online dating apps and hookup culture has challenged society’s traditional idea of romantic relationships, *The Bachelor* suddenly seems old fashioned. At one time the expected way to meet an prospective partner was in a bar, at work or a coffee shop, but now most individuals are meeting multiple possible partners and through a screen. Reality dating programs typically try to enforce the former option of dating with the end goal of a “happily

ever after,” but this is not the case anymore. Young adults and millennials are using dating apps such as Tinder and Bumble to make judgements on people based on photos swiping their fingers across their phone screen endlessly to determine whether or not they like them. The new culture around dating has presented the idea of always looking for the “next best thing,” and has shifted many into thinking about relationships only being short-term. While *The Bachelor* was a form of the reality dating program making use of displaying multiple partners, the end goal is a stable, long term relationship. *Love Island* differs from this as it offers a realistic version of dating that is reflective of the lack of commitment and guarantee of stability that is present through the popularity of dating apps.

Instead of having one male or female surrounded by multiple people they choose from to ultimately marry, the show’s end is more ambiguous. The only ending that is certain in *Love Island* is that the final couple remaining, whether it is a couple based on friendship or love, has the opportunity to win the prize money. During their time in the *Love Island* villa, a contestant might have been in nearly five different couples or extremely “short-term” relationships with all of the new islanders that constantly enter. Not setting up an initial framework for the fairytale ending gives the program more flexibility to be reflexive and exhibit what it truly is like to date in the 2010s. The program takes this characteristic, but still does attempt to make it “romantic” and a dreamlike scenario though the traditional tool of reality dating programs to stage exotic, outlandish dates.

Airing almost every day of the week, the contestants always under surveillance - *Love Island* has had rapid growth over its four seasons with an average of nearly three million

viewers.⁴¹ It's clear that the British public is fascinated to see their real-life dating habits play out in a fantasy like scenario. The show even includes the option for the audience to be an active part in the contestants' dating lives by adding in a public vote where each week there will be a variance in what exactly is being voted for. It could be voting for a couple to stay one week, or voting for one individual to leave the next.

It is in being reflexive where any kind of alternate encoding can occur as the self-aware reality program does not feel the need to be completely restrictive in its intent of what values it is trying to portray. *Love Island* does attempt to get the traditional societal ideas regarding whiteness and gender roles across to the audience, but with the overall ambiguity of what is to occur between couples on the show combined with its constant filming, creates a less structured space that works in the production's favor. The fluidity leaves room for the participants also to display their own intentions and values that could in fact be different from the production's.

While *Love Island* currently has a total of four seasons in its rebranding and over 150 episodes, for the purpose of this paper I will specifically be looking at the most recent season of the show. The fourth season of *Love Island* which aired during the summer of 2018, has gained the greatest viewership and claims to exhibit a more "diverse" cast, including the second black woman to be featured on the show. The popularity does not only come across in the ratings but also in its response from the public on social media platforms and even merchandise being sold at fast-fashion retailer Primark.

⁴¹ Lindsey Weber, "Shock! Anger! Joy! Confusion! An American watches *Love Island*," *The Guardian*, July 28, 2018, accessed October 9, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/jul/28/love-island-review-american-reality-tv>.

Why British?

While many of the examples brought up in this paper regarding the traditional and problematic ideologies that reality dating programs put forth are American, exploring a British program can cause an intervention in the States through the alternate lens *Love Island* provides. A vast amount of critical theory and study on American television is often done by British cultural theorists as well. The originally identified cultural studies scholars come from Britain, Stuart Hall being one of them, and it has greatly impacted an emphasis on this study in British culture. This combined with media and culture being one of America's biggest exports causes a different take on such programming.

In the United Kingdom, there are a few basic structural qualities that differ from American television where we can see a bigger space for intervention on the part of the participant in reality TV. The United States is known for its advertisements and marketing that appears in between segments of a program. On an average a commercial break occurs every five minutes, disrupting the program.⁴² These companies featured during the breaks often pay large amounts to the network to have their advertisements shown and this can often greatly impact what is shown on the actual program.⁴³ The content of a show can be edited or structured to specifically reflect a product for the viewers watching. The U.K. on the other hand, pay for a television license to the government which pays for programming on their government-controlled networks – such as the BBC. This limits the number of advertisements shown and therefore, a program is less likely to cater to a company's product.

⁴² Madger, Ted. "Television 2.0: The Business of American Television in Transition," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 145.

⁴³ Pozner, 276.

The issue of censorship also plays a role in what makes the U.K. more suited in this case study, as programs in Britain are less regulated than the United States. U.S. industries often advertise themselves as being some of the most “free” in the world, but there is a degree of content that cannot be shown. The major broadcast networks within the U.S. are very conscious of this factor and take great measures to ensure that they follow guidelines put in place by the government as Thomas Streeter writes in his paper regarding television and the law. “The US commercial television networks, for example, typically have ‘programme practices departments’ that engage in systematic and thorough censorship of scripts for television series, typically to ensure that scripts are morally ‘appropriate’ – or at least safely inoffensive – for mainstream audiences.”⁴⁴ The FCC (Federal Communications Commission), an independent United States government agency acts as the regulating body for what “appropriate” content is.

On their official government website, they describe that: “federal law prohibits obscene, indecent and profane content from being broadcast on the radio or TV.”⁴⁵ What this entails is “sexual or excretory organs or activities” and “grossly offensive language that is considered a public nuisance.”⁴⁶ It is not exactly clear what language can be considered “a public nuisance,” but the FCC makes use of Supreme Court Justice Stewart Potter’s statement, “I know it when I see it,” during a 1964 case regarding obscenity in dealing with determining what falls into the categories of sexual activities or grossly offensive language.⁴⁷ The FCC’s rules fall onto Justice Stewart Potter’s quote as well as the context of the incident on a case by case basis. While there

⁴⁴ Thomas Streeter, “Television and the Law” in *Television Studies*, ed. Toby Miller (London, UK: BFI Publishing, 2002), 42.

⁴⁵ Federal Communications Commission, “Obscene, Indecent and Profane Broadcasts,” date last modified September 13, 2017, <https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/obscene-indecnt-and-profane-broadcasts>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

are premium channels that American television consumers can separately pay for through their telecommunication company, one will never see this explicit content on any of the main broadcasted networks or basic cable channels.

The United Kingdom's Ofcom Broadcasting Code specifically is meant to protect children under eighteen from seeing certain content, which restricts any kind of adult content to after 9 pm. This content, however, can be shown after the nine o'clock hour at night – i.e. “offensive language,” and “representations of sexual intercourse” that is “justified by the context.”⁴⁸ The lack of censorship of content that British television has in comparison to the U.S. gives the participants of reality television more freedom to express themselves and their counter-ideologies through explicit content. This can include, but not be limited to explicit language as a form of expression or the performance of sexual activities. In *Love Island* when contestant Wes Nelson wants to entertain the idea of leaving the couple he's in with Laura Anderson he decides to have a discussion with her. With the lack of censorship that British television offers we are able to truly feel what Anderson feels upon hearing Nelson's words. Editing out the explicit language or “bleeping” it out reduces Anderson into a role of a picture perfect woman who is proper and ladylike. Hearing her use the word “fuck” or “shit” helps her truly express how she is feeling, but also diverges from the stereotype that the female is not supposed to use vulgar language and get mad.

Reality television as a genre in the U.K. is viewed by the British public in a similar manner as it is often viewed in the United States, as “populist and an example of the lowest common denominator television,” partly due to its connection with American commercial

⁴⁸ The Ofcom, “The Ofcom Broadcasting Code,” date last modified December 2009, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0027/19287/bcode09.pdf, 12.

television.⁴⁹ Both American and British reality programs - and even scripted programs - tend to reflect each other in format, genre and sometimes content, but author Faye Woods believes that the biggest difference is in tone. In comparing British reality programming *The Only Way is Essex* (ITV2, 2010 – 2014 & ITVBe, 2014 -) and *Made in Chelsea* (E4, 2011 -) to American reality programs *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County* (MTV, 2004 - 2006) and *The Hills* (MTV, 2006 – 2010), she finds the British programs to be more introspective: “The British programs also recognize and foreground issues of construction for their reality TV-literate youth audience. It suggests the programs play a key role in their respective channel identities and the ideologies of British youth television connecting to larger issues of class, gender, and taste.”⁵⁰ For example *The Only Way is Essex* uses the cast’s elite status and makes use of a bright lighting scheme and colorful aesthetic within their homes to knowingly display to the audience an artificiality and camp-like nature. The American programs Woods mentioned do not offer any kind of self-awareness and “demonstrate an awkwardness,” overall being cited as performative.⁵¹ They intentionally do not take themselves too seriously and use these qualities in an effort to make it known to the audience.

Through narration and voiceover, often used in some British reality program including *Love Island*, there is another layer to the idea of U.K. reality programming wanting to question and ponder itself. Narration would be expected in animal and nature reality programs (*Meerkat Manor* (Animal Planet International, 2005 - 2008), *Walking With Dinosaurs* (BBC, October -

⁴⁹ Annette Hill, “Fearful and Safe: Audience Response to British Reality Programming,” *Television & New Media* 1, no. 2 (May 2000), accessed on March 1, 2019, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/15274764000100205>.

⁵⁰ Faye Woods, “Classed Femininity, Performativity, and Camp in British Structured Reality Programming,” *Television & New Media* 15, no. 3 (2012), accessed on March 1, 2019, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1527476412462246>.

⁵¹ Ibid.

November 1999), but even more basic concepts and subgenres within reality television use a voice over. Often times these “voice of God” type figures are used as a tool to provide the audience with exposition or information regarding something. An example of this is Channel 4’s reality program *Gogglebox* (Channel 4, 2013 -) whose sole purpose is for audience members to watch someone else watch TV. In this case, the narration is used as a tool to inform the audience what the members of the show are watching, who they are and where in the country they’re located. Programs like *Celebs Go Dating* (E4, 2016 -) and *Love Island* use known comedic talents to act as narration and use the tool in a different way. The voice directly interacts with what is happening within the show – making snarky remarks and comedic jokes at contestants or the different situations that occur. These voiceovers are always recorded after the initial filming and editing of the episodes, therefore the contestants never have any direct power in hearing or interacting back with the narrator’s comments.

Love Island uses Iain Stirling as a method of making concrete what the program wants the viewers to decode from the episodes shown. BBC news cited Stirling’s voice over as a method to “bring them [the contestants] back down to earth” through sarcastic remarks, but it operates as something much more than that.⁵² In the case of participants and re-encoding the dominant ideologies of the program, Stirling’s narration offers a kind of complication. It acts as a hybrid, sometimes siding with the contestants and what they’re doing – making fun of the tropes of reality television, but it also can present a reinforcement of what is viewed as “traditional” in terms of dating. It essentially tries to be another influencing factor within the encoding of messages to tell the audience what the show wants them to think. That is when the viewers must

⁵² Debbie Jackson, “Iain Stirling: the man behind the Love Island voiceover,” *BBC Scotland*, June 21, 2018, accessed on March 13, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-44520829>.

decide whether they want to be led by this voice, negotiate it's positive and negative implications or outright reject it altogether.

Difference in censorship, tone and narration provides us with an understanding of where American and British reality programming diverge from one another and why it is important to look at a British reality dating program for the scope of this paper. *Love Island* exhibits all of these things as a British reality program, but there is even more of an opportunity for the the participant to become an active part in Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model due to the added factors of it's *Big Brother* nature and focus on capturing modern dating in reality.

“Mate it's horrendous.”

***Love Island* and Masculinity**

Many might believe that *Love Island* endorses toxic masculinity due to the effortless capability of contestants being able to move from person to person. It is clear that this might be the message that the program wants to set forward, but the show also uses editing to create a space for the male contestants to have their own agency. We are able to see the male contestants vulnerable in discussing their feelings - whether directly to other participants within the show or in a direct address to the audience. During “Episode 42,” the audience is exposed to this when contestant Jack Fowler discusses heartbreak he had encountered in the past. He says: “When it ended, I was heartbroken yeah... I was like rah what is this pain man... I was like what kind of pain is this? Mate it's horrendous. There's nothing physical, it's emotional. It can make you be ill.”⁵³ Fowler is considered the ideal male for a dating reality program - he is tall, fit and

⁵³ *Love Island*. “Episode 42.” Directed by Jan Genesis. Written by Mark Busk-Cowley. ITV2, July 22, 2018.

conventionally attractive - and *Love Island* rather than editing Fowler to seem tough, as though he has never been hurt, defies this expectation to allow him to be sensitive.

Fowler's ability to be raw and emotionally present in speaking of his past heartbreak situates him in a different position than what is expected of reality dating programs such as *The Bachelor* franchise. He is not playing the role of the dominant male who creates conflict and is brutal to others in order to prove an idea regarding his ability to be masculine. *The Bachelor* may disguise this kind of behavior as a form of emotional expression, but that is not the kind of vulnerability that is being shown and told on *Love Island*, nor is it positive. *Love Island* does not choose male contestants and make use of editing to position the men in a dominant position over the female contestants.

In his continual efforts in being vulnerable, Fowler gives a direct address to the audience in the private confessional room, "especially being a guy, sometimes it is hard to um... voice how you feel. I have been through heartbreak. I have gone through that. Yeah, it's not nice. Talking to the others about it was quite refreshing actually because guys, we don't really do that."⁵⁴ He is displaying a self-awareness that is often missing from not only American reality programming, but reality TV in general. Fowler is aware of the role men such as him are placed in and acknowledges the therapeutic aspect in presenting the opposition and being vocal about his feelings. While giving his address to the audience, we are simultaneously reminded of what kind of man Fowler is – his muscles and physical being on display. On the outside, he displays characteristics of traditional masculinity, but with the audience's exposure to the struggles within Fowler, a new meaning is given to what masculinity can mean in the scope of reality television and *Love Island*.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

The audience has the opportunity to ponder the dominant messages about “being a man,” and what Fowler or perhaps the program is saying about them. However, *Love Island* nevertheless casts typically contestants who seem to inherently have all of the qualities that define them as the ideal partner by society – white, physically attractive and heterosexual. Fowler is acting in opposition to what is usually meant to be encoded. Perhaps in any other situation, a program would try to flip Fowler’s confession into him not caring about heartbreak and being portrayed as strong, but the producers and editors of *Love Island* decide to leave this moment in. There would be no need to reevaluate Stuart Hall’s model if the production had acted as is typical for reality programming, all that would be performed would be audience members decoding the encoded message of the program. However, since Fowler acted as an opposition to male stereotypes and the production worked with him to show this, it is now Fowler and the production’s encoded message that is to be decoded.

Angela Jain who has been involved in the series since the first season as a managing director for entertainment at ITV spoke with *The Guardian* on her thoughts: “It’s got men talking about their feelings in a way that feels honest and refreshing when most people don’t think men talk to each other. In the environment we’ve created, you can’t run away from decisions that you make, and people are having to deal daily with situations they have made. You can’t swipe left or hide behind texts.”⁵⁵ Essentially what this does is promote the idea of online dating apps in which there will always be a new romantic partner, but it takes away the social crutches that it fosters. While the contestants have the option to ignore their couple and perhaps switch partners

⁵⁵ Nosheen Iqbal, “‘It’s a microcosm of reality’: why so many have decided it’s OK to love *Love Island*,” *The Guardian*, July 8, 2018, accessed October 23, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/jul/08/love-island-ok-to-love-microcosm-reality>.

they are not allowed the typical simplicity of this as if they were using a dating app. They cannot “ghost” someone - the act of avoiding someone online until they stop contacting you - as they perhaps would if they were using Tinder. Instead, the contestants are forced to directly deal with whomever they have betrayed or have taken advantage of.⁵⁶ They are able to handle the confrontation how they find fit. This also provides even more of a space for men to be something outside of society’s framework and new ideas surrounding the culture of dating.

Contestants Wes Nelson and Laura Anderson had been a pair in the *Love Island* villa since the first coupling of the season in episode one. From the beginning they were a couple that had shown a romantic connection, developing their relationship in a more advanced ways than other islanders – emotionally and physically. To viewers, it seemed Wes and Laura would last to the end, with many Twitter users believing them to be a perfect couple, such as @H3phz1_m4yy, “Wes and Laura are also adorable #loveisland.”⁵⁷ It was thought Wes and Laura would not become interested in anyone else that came into the villa. This was true for a time, but soon islander Megan Barton-Hanson who had been paired with contestant Eyal Booker for approximately 15 days, approached Wes romantically. In “Episode 20,” Megan takes Wes to the upstairs lounge and tells him, “I think it is obvious that I fancy you,” – meaning that she has feelings for him.⁵⁸ Megan puts her emotions on the line to Wes and points out the cons of Wes being with Laura. In the conversation Wes continues to retract his thoughts about Laura: “Yeah we are happy, but have I tried anything else? Not really. Could I be happier? Maybe.”⁵⁹ The

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ H3phzz1_m4yy. Twitter Post. June 14, 2018, 1:14PM.

https://twitter.com/H3phz1_m4yy/status/1007355575854870529

⁵⁸ *Love Island*. “Episode 20.” Directed by Jan Genesis. Written by Mark Busk-Cowley. ITV2, June 26, 2018.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

audience had only been exposed to Wes and his feelings towards Laura, but in discussion with Megan his demeanor shifts.

Wes' sudden change in feelings may seem toxic, but unlike other dating programs, the audience is exposed to Wes' thought process after the initial exchange with Megan. In conversations with islanders Adam Collard and Zara McDermott, Wes is able to discuss what the repercussions between him and Laura would be if he began to get to know Megan further. The visibility of this allows for Wes to not be reduced to the role of the dominant male who does not think about the feelings of others when making decisions. In this case we are wholly exposed to Wes considering the emotions of both Laura and Megan. Having mixed feelings and choosing between two individuals is a common occurrence within dating apps, however, the difference here is that since *Love Island* takes place in the space of a reality program, Wes must deal with the situation directly. This may be the case for other reality programs, but if that it is so, it is not shown and ultimately edited out to paint the male as someone who moves from woman to woman.

Wes comes to the conclusion that he feels limited by Laura, as though he acts like a different person. After this realization, Wes does not wait to discuss his feelings with Laura, asking to speak with her while she is in the kitchen with others. He opens the conversation with, "what I'm saying is, I'm being honest with myself, I have taken time to reflect on what we have. And I feel like, in a sense, I feel something is missing."⁶⁰ Laura becomes defensive wondering why, then, Wes had said he was falling for her within the first week of being together. He makes it clear those feelings had been genuine, he would never lie about that – but now he is rethinking their future together.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Love Island allows for the true thought process of a man going through a similar situation to be shown and exhibited. Wes could have disregarded Laura and moved on with Megan, as many in the villa have done before, but he makes the conscious decision to speak with Laura about his feelings. Wes is moving away from the commonality of hookup culture by approaching the situation with the intent of being candid. This is an example from Wes of a divergence against the expectation of men being able to be promiscuous and not have any remorse in outcome. He is aware that he needs to speak with Laura before making a hasty decision and this awareness as well as his agency to do just that, implicates a counter to the dominance that is displayed within the toxic male ideology. However, this would not make a difference if it was never shown to viewers, which could have been an option if the production of *Love Island* wanted to align itself with the traditional values reality dating programs cater to. Instead, in a program where the format is structured to reflect what is socially expected of men in these “dating app dilemmas,” there was a decision made to present the opposition. This could have not been done without Wes, but also of *Love Island* filming and showing all of the ways Wes comes to his ultimate conclusion of ending his relationship with Laura.

After Laura and Wes break up – many fans took to Twitter to discuss the end of the relationship. A majority of people were upset at Wes and took Laura’s side in the matter. The fashion brand PrettyLittleThing even used their Twitter to include a GIF of Viola Davis in *How To Get Away With Murder* (ABC, 2014 -) rolling her eyes with the caption, “We thought you were different Wes,” along with a crying emoji of course.⁶¹ Another popular U.K. fashion

⁶¹ OfficialPLT. Twitter Post. June 26, 2018, 2:13 PM.

https://twitter.com/OfficialPLT/status/1011719087418953733?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1011719087418953733&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bu.stle.com%2Fp%2Fwes-lauras-love-island-break-up-was-totally-brutal-twitter-is-already-taking-sides-9594899.

company – boohoo - tweeted something similar in support of Laura, “I would honestly throw that drink right over Wes if I was Laura #LoveIsland.”⁶² While the situation is complicated and it’s clear that it is still viewed by many as an example of traditional misogyny, there is worth more to explore. These viewers are not seeing the importance of Wes’ thought process in breaking up with Laura and starting anew with Megan, instead they are only seeing the breakup. Although Wes received criticism from audience members, he was honest with his feelings when men are told to not show any. He was not “tough” or treat women in a disempowering way, he talked to other contestants about where his head was at and was honest with Laura in his choices.

“Do you want to tell me something?”

***Love Island* and the Desperate Female**

While many men have seized the opportunity *Love Island* presents for them to be emotionally vulnerable and direct in relationship, this does not cause erasure for men to take advantage of this. Take contestant Adam Collard who is introduced in the first episode after all of the men and women have been coupled up with one another. Immediately he is positioned as a “threat,” someone who will come and take one of the girls away from their guy. He is an example of what many of the women on *Love Island* have described as their ideal type in their on camera interviews, specifically contestants Samira Mighty and Laura Anderson. In Adam’s intro Adam characterizes himself as tall, dark and handsome - also making sure to mention his

⁶² boohoo. Twitter Post. June 26, 2018, 2:13 PM.

https://twitter.com/boohoo/status/1011719130561556482?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1011719130561556482&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bustle.com%2Fp%2Fwes-lauras-love-island-break-up-was-totally-brutal-twitter-is-already-taking-sides-9594899.

physique, “I’ve got abs, what more could anyone want?”⁶³ He and the show characterize him into a strong, macho guy who encompasses what the traditional male should look and act like. Him also being exactly what multiple female contestants want has the producers of *Love Island* attempting to orchestrate a situation where the women will be vying for his attention. This is the beginnings of *Love Island* trying to set up the framework of the desperate female willing to do anything for love.

The production’s implication that women will fight over Adam combined with his patriarchal and misogynistic behavior is meant as a tool for audience members to laugh at the women. Just as with *Joe Millionaire* or *I Wanna Marry “Harry,”* we, the viewers are meant to ridicule these women for going after men for a shallow or materialistic reason, in this case Adam’s appearance although he does not treat women with respect. *Love Island* is trying to stimulate this image of a female being pathetic by including Adam in the program and hoping to encode the message that women are meant to be the weak ones in relationships with the passive ability to accept anything they are given. This point attempts to reiterate itself in instances within the first few weeks of season four of *Love Island* in Adam’s behavior and treatment of multiple female contestants. Adam unlike Wes falls into the societal expectation of men continually diving into new relationships and having no outstanding remorse. This is the production’s entire intent in Adam, and they even put him in the position of being the first male contestant to steal one of the girls away.

When Adam has his opportunity to couple up with one of the girls already in a couple, he decides to couple up with Kendall Rae Knight who was originally with Niall Aslam. With the way the program is structured, Kendall does not have a say or any agency to protest to Adam

⁶³ *Love Island*. “Episode 1.” Directed by Jan Genesis. Written by Mark Busk-Cowley. ITV2, June 4, 2018.

wanting to couple up with her. Although she had been having a positive experience getting to know Niall and showed no sign of having interest in Adam, she is passed off to him like an object. Through this the audience can see that Kendall has an opposition to being in a couple with Adam, strengthening her overall agency, but *Love Island* encodes a message that Kendall – and women – are objects that get passed around and should be grateful that anyone chose her.

As viewers we hope the best is to come from this relationship between Kendall and Adam although it is a situation and relationship that Kendall did not choose. This begins to occur as the pair grows closer and we see Kendall to develop feelings for Adam. The production's wish for us to decode from their encoded message that maybe if a female doesn't have a choice and is passive things will work out for the best, almost occurs until two new female contestants enter the villa. The arrival of Rosie Williams and Georgia Steel in "Episode 4" is meant to bring viewers back in reality and treat *Love Island* as the traditional reality dating program in positioning woman against woman.

Rosie has interest in Adam and *Love Island* cast him with the intent and knowledge that he would be the type of male to forget about Kendall and move on to the next best thing. Rosie is meant to be a threat to what Adam and Kendall have – or are beginning to have – and to follow suit it is expected that Kendall will be desperate to do anything she can to keep Adam. Since she had gone with him and away from Niall, although she had no choice, she would want to please Adam. Rosie is introduced as a kind of sexy bombshell who has an hourglass figure and lip fillers, a deep contrast to Kendall. They're both so different, thus what is it exactly that Adam's looking for? It's unclear. Other contestants in the show pick up on this and tease Kendall about getting closer to Adam in a physical way. At once, we can see that Kendall is resistant to this in the way she answers them: "No, I'm not gonna put it on you just to keep you with me. I'm going

at my own pace, and if it's going too slow for you, you can go with another girl.”⁶⁴ This resistance is not supposed to occur in reality dating programs as in any circumstance it relates back to pleasing the man. Kendall is expected to do what she has to in order to keep Adam as it is clear that the way the program represents and films Rosie that she will not hesitate to. As well as this, because Adam is represented as “god like,” Kendall should *want* to prove herself as physically competent to him.

Kendall is rejecting notions of being desperate, which goes against what *Love Island* was clearly attempting to frame her as, and yet the production decides to show her agency to not want to submit. The women on *Joe Millionaire* may have often protested or showed an objection, but with the way they are edited that would never be known or have the chance to be decoded by viewers. The production of *Joe Millionaire* distinctively decided to endure with their original objective of classifying the female as weak or less than. Stuart Hall did not map out what it was to mean if a program that had originally intended to encode one message, then adapts it after a participants actions alter it into change. This is what I argue *Love Island* does and continually exhibits in this fourth season. The route of *Joe Millionaire* and traditional reality dating programs is not taken by the production of *Love Island* instead playing along in Kendall's continual opposition of doing something she does not feel comfortable with as Adam and Rosie grow closer.

In analyzing the scenario and love triangle between Adam, Rosie and Kendall one who is familiar with reality dating programs or traditional tropes regarding romance would expect as time goes on that Kendall would finally succumb to what is expected of her. We are waiting for her to give in to our preconceived notions that have been filtered by what we see time and time

⁶⁴ *Love Island*. “Episode 4.” Directed by Jan Genesis. Written by Mark Busk-Cowley. ITV2, June 7, 2018.

again in the media. However even when Adam tells Kendall he wants to kiss her while they're in bed together, she retracts.⁶⁵ Continually we see this kind of behavior from Kendall, being consistent with her morals and intentions although there is a feeling that her and Adam are growing distant. In each situation she constantly also explains herself and her reasoning to whoever she's discussing the matter with, although she shouldn't have to.

It could be assumed that by this point the production of the show would grow boring with the back and forth of Kendall denying the hegemony's intended role of her being pathetic and desperate, but *Love Island* continues to edit this in. However, in one instance the show seems to go back to what it originally intended to encode regarding the identity of the female role in relationships as it cuts together scenes of Adam discussing the Kendall situation with Dani Dyer, him in the private confessional and Kendall in the kitchen. Adam tells Dani that he believes Kendall is insecure and that is the reason why she won't kiss him or do anything physical with him. He believes her to be weak in comparison to Rosie, and by saying Kendall's insecure he is enforcing the female in relationship stereotype helping the producers foster their original encoded message. To further emphasize this belief, the audience is then presented with Adam in the confessional room addressing viewers that Kendall's insecurity makes him want to go for someone completely different in the villa, knowing that he'd be able to get any one of the girls in the villa to be with him. This encodes the message from producers that not giving the dominant male what he wants can and will lead to him leaving you for someone else who will.

Almost as though they do not want to miss their opportunity to further concrete their message, viewers see a cut of Kendall in the kitchen with a voice over from comedian Iain Stirling: "Kendall, bit of advice, stop feeling insecure or Adam will definitely ditch you from

⁶⁵ Ibid.

someone else. I'm not helping am I?"⁶⁶ This commentary shows that the production clearly knows what they're doing and the message they're portraying by making a joke out of itself by "not helping." The commentary in its own way is a mix – at times it makes a joke out of the program itself, but also making a joke of the contestants and reinforcing harmful ideology. In this particular case, they are taking Adam's side but it is presented as if the voice is talking to Kendall as if she can hear the commentary. Of course, she cannot hear Iain Stirling, thus recirculates back to an inside joke for viewers to make fun of the clueless female. Although the production has shown Kendall's counter of the having no agency, *Love Island* attempts to save the original message by using this post-production method of narration to obtain the audience's attention, directing her back to the ideology of the pathetic female.

Love Island attempts to show one last ditch effort in having viewers see Kendall as less than by editing together a talk Adam and Kendall have where he essentially blames their distance on her for not giving "enough" to the relationship with a scene Adam and Rosie with sharing a kiss in front of the entire villa, Kendall included.⁶⁷ These two clips are meant go together to tell viewers that this is all Kendall's fault, she did not give what she needed to give in order to keep Adam. He instead had to go looking for someone else who would fulfill his demands and desires. Essentially in both options *Love Island* puts forth, Kendall would have looked desperate for giving Adam what he wanted, but she looked equally as pathetic for having to watch him kiss Rosie.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ *Love Island*. "Episode 5." Directed by Jan Genesis. Written by Mark Busk-Cowley. ITV2, June 8, 2018.

At Adam's hand, in "Episode 5" during the re-coupling ceremony, he chooses Rosie which leads to Kendall's elimination.⁶⁸ While this might be seen as a disappointment and can be viewed as Adam "winning," Kendall was only eliminated because she held her ground in the face of toxic masculinity and the production of the program. That is something to view as positive and influence others within the realm of not only dating reality programs – but reality programs in general, that it is possible to be visible and change what is considered the "norm." From the circumstances that played out between Kendall and Adam it's can be read that *Love Island's* production still wanted viewers to laugh at Kendall and ridicule her, even though they edited in her resistance to being the desperate female. They tried to overlay her opposition with the narration and editing, but ultimately it failed. What the production originally intended to say and encode fell short because of the inclusion of Kendall presenting an active, agent female. This changes the encoded message completely, shedding a negative light on Adam and his behavior towards Kendall instead of her "losing" by being eliminated.

Casting Adam was a certain thing for *Love Island* as his behavior as being misogynistic and unchanged in the face of the women he is coupled up with would continuously repeat itself. Although he seems to be happy with Rosie, who gave Adam the physicality he wanted, when the next new girl, Megan Barton Hanson enters the villa his eyes turn away from Rosie. This tries to illustrate the point that something is wrong with Rosie for Adam to be showing interest in another girl. Clearly she must have not done enough to make him stay or she must have been too clingy and too needy. Adam even tells Megan that he feels as though Rosie, "is probably a little bit more into me than I am into her."⁶⁹ The physicality that Adam felt was originally missing

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ *Love Island*. "Episode 7." Directed by Jan Genesis. Written by Mark Busk-Cowley. ITV2, June 11, 2018.

with Kendall is what he detests the most about Rosie, because all in all *Love Island* producers want us to know that women can't win. Their inclusion of this can be read as two possible ways, as the production being on Adam's side and wanting us to encode Rosie as pathetic or to see the toxic behavior that Adam and people like Adam bring forth in dating at an attempt to ridicule women.

Of course in other programs the former would be the only option and at first that is it what it seems like *Love Island* is trying to do, but their allowance of showing Rosie's reaction and impulses suggest the latter. Here we have a contestant attempting to instill messages about the female being not enough as he ridicules his partner for being too possessive. These messages Adam tries to spread ultimately get back to Rosie and in these situations it is expected to see her crying and completely causing a chaotic scene. However, we are offered an alternative situation where Rosie calmly confronts Adam regarding their relationship in front of the other contestants. She is not read as weak or passive in this scenario, instead she comes off as strong and attentive when Adam pretends like he doesn't know what she's talking about.⁷⁰

As viewers begin to feel for Rosie and her situation with Adam, it is worth noting that she goes back to him. This creates an encoded message that women can do anything they want to stand their ground, but they will continue to go back to the person that hurt him. Further emphasizing this can be seen when Adam actually is the one to apologize to Rosie, but it is only in an effort to not be eliminated from the show. In a private confessional to the audience, Adam announces that he will be what Rosie "wants," that he needs to put in groundwork to make up with her, because: "it's definitely me that's gonna have to do that."⁷¹ Essentially what this reads

⁷⁰ *Love Island*. "Episode 8." Directed by Jan Genesis. Written by Mark Busk-Cowley. ITV2, June 12, 2018.

⁷¹ *Ibid*.

as is Adam being the bigger person by having to put in work to gain Rosie's trust again, although he is the one who caused this lack thereof. After Adam says this however, the commentary surprisingly aims back at Adam's words and actions, "So Adam prepares to win back the only woman in here that really matters to him. Kendall. Megan. Rosie, Rosie, I meant Rosie!"⁷² This is where we see begin to see Adam beginning to be encoded as the antagonist rather than Rosie being shown as weak. The production is calling attention to Adam's tendencies of being a player and a misogynistic who can't make up his mind on what he wants – then blaming the women at hand when they don't fit his image.

This pivoting into the creation of Adam as the enemy is seen as re-encoding, as originally he was not meant to be shown as this role. The production casted Adam knowing well the kind of man and behavior he exhumes with his conventional good looks and the over 200 women he has slept with at the age of only 22. *Love Island* knew the kind of cycle this would create as Adam would go from woman to woman with no remorse and the female contestants would simply have to take it. That they would look foolish and sad for believing that he would be interested in them in the first place. However, when first Kendall and then Rosie showed their objection to being a pawn in Adam's game, *Love Island* made the choice to include these resistances in the final cut, thus adding to the original message they intended to put forth.

Then when Adam and Rosie are back together, it is expected that once two new girls, Ellie Brown and Zara McDermott enter the villa, Adam's cycling behavior will continue. As Ellie and Zara are introduced, the camera continues to position itself on Adam listening to them speak. As this is happening the girls in the villa are having dinner away from the house to have a "girl's night." Here Rosie reveals to the her fellow female contestants as to how comfortable she

⁷² Ibid.

feels with Adam and how they've moved their relationship into the realm of being more physical with one another. *Love Island* takes us back and forth between Adam being enthralled by Zara McDermott and Rosie sharing her strong feelings for Adam. The production makes use of this editing in a continual attempt to go back to emphasizing Rosie as pathetic for believing her relationship is secure.⁷³ It does not work as now the audience has been exposed to Rosie standing up for herself and Adam becomes the vilified one as he later goes on to ignore Rosie and move on to Zara.

Instead of sitting around and playing the victim, Rosie immediately makes a plan of action to confront Adam once again, but this time there would be no space for reconciliation. In the confessional Rosie admits this: "I just want him to see that he has actually hurt someone by the way he's being. But I'm not the kind of girl who will let someone do that to me over and over again."⁷⁴ She is now aware of the type of constructed toxic male Adam is and will not let herself be encoded as passive. From the way Rosie speaks about the circumstances, we can assume that she is not aware that she is making an intervention in the originally encoded message of the production, but is acting the way she is, as it is what is natural to her. Once, however, the show is edited together and methods of post production are used, in looking at the bigger picture it reads as an intervention in *Love Island's* primary plan of using Adam to show the woman as weak and desperate.

Love Island's implications are in a definite shift when Rosie has her last confrontation with Adam regarding the way he has treated her. Marching down the steps in with a glass of champagne in hand, bright red lipstick, and a striking white dress, Rosie signals Adam with a

⁷³ *Love Island*. "Episode 12." Directed by Jan Genesis. Written by Mark Busk-Cowley. ITV2, June 17, 2018.

⁷⁴ *Love Island*. "Episode 14." Directed by Jan Genesis. Written by Mark Busk-Cowley. ITV2, June 19, 2018.

powerful single head nod to the left and tells him to “come on.” Clearly offended, Adam asks “What was that? A nod?” “Yes, it was. You coming or not?” Rosie replies. This can not be read as anything else besides a moment where Rosie has all of the power and unlike the previous confrontation they had Adam is not defensive, but just stares at her instead. He leans on the table in front of her with his hand under his chin, staring at her with the slightest smirk on his face. *Love Island* leaves this reaction in as well as Adam telling Rosie that the way she feels is “funny” as she pours out her emotions.

The nonchalance that is shown from Adam is almost chilling as he attempts make her seem crazy for the way she is reacting.⁷⁵ In this moment the production of *Love Island* has found itself a new message to encode to the audience in which women do not have to submit to the hands of toxic men. If producers were still trying to encode the opposite, they would have completely edited out Rosie’s words when she stands up to Adam or added a narration over her as a means to making her seem foolish. It would have been easier for *Love Island* to give in and present Adam in this situation as calm, collected and cool, the guy everyone wants and wants to be. He instead comes across as vile as Rosie doesn’t let him assert his traditional masculine dominance over her, letting him know that she hasn’t actually done anything wrong.⁷⁶ Throughout the conversation as well, she continues to call him out on little things such as him rolling his eyes at her and how cocky he’s being.

Rosie, just as Kendall did stays loyal to her truth and morals as a woman to not be treated or change herself for a man. Her one sided discussion with Adam proves that she with not show methods of desperation, but instead truly attempts to warn him that his treatment of women is not something to be proud of. In any other reality program setting, there is a want to show viewers

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

that the role of women in romance is expected in what we know to be true about gender roles. The women takes care of the male, is desperate for attention and is a material object that can be passed around. The fact that Rosie even has the agency to confront Adam, much less set him straight, proves that *Love Island* supports her in the matter of women being active.

Rosie standing up for herself has not gone unrecognized by the viewers of *Love Island* and by the Women's Aid Federation of England, a charity aimed towards ending domestic violence against women and children. The chief executive of the charity, Katie Ghose stated that Adam's behavior towards Rosie: "exhibited signs of gaslighting and emotional abuse."⁷⁷ "Gaslighting" meaning when a partner attempts to manipulate someone into questioning their recognition of events and sanity. Ghose then goes on to urge viewers to recognize the tell-tale signs of this toxic and problematic behavior. There have been questions that have arose from Adam and Rosie's relationship and whether it was a positive or negative thing to be shown in the first place. Critics have found that *Love Island* is another example of a reality TV program normalizing emotional abuse and creating a space where it is "natural" to do so. The show may have formulated an atmosphere for manipulation and abuse, but ultimately it was Rosie who derived herself from that.

Showing this abuse was intentional and an important part in demonstrating to audiences what toxic relationships look like. Performing a deeper analysis also clearly shows that this says something different about the means of production of *Love Island* as they did originate a space where abuse can take place and casted someone like Adam, but they did not take away Rosie's voice in the post production process. *Love Island* shows that it wants to be apart of the narrative

⁷⁷ Lizzie Cernick, "Love Island normalises emotional abuse – and we call it entertainment," *The Guardian*, June 22, 2018, accessed March 5, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/22/love-island-emotional-abuse-entertainment-adam-collard-gaslighting>.

in telling Rosie's empowering story in facing Adam and dominant male hegemonies. This proves successful as viewers were cheering Rosie on and supporting her. "ROSIE HAS GONE INNNNNNNNNNNNNN, BYE ADAM HUN #LOVEISLAND"⁷⁸ and "Rosie walking away from Adam with "enjoy the next bombshell hun because this one's done" is a MOOD #LoveIsland,"⁷⁹ were some of the countless comments sent on Twitter during the live broadcast.

Not only was their support for Rosie, but there was clear and overwhelming recognition regarding Adam's behavior. Instead of thinking Rosie was foolish and overreacting as what is wanted from reality television programs, audience members truly antagonized Adam instead of obtaining a mindset of "boys will be boys." @molromu tweeted, "Unfortunately we've all met an Adam. Absolutely no loyalty and when that lack of loyalty is questioned they turn it around on the girl, make her feel inadequate and then smile whilst she cries admitting he hurt her."⁸⁰ Even Adam's own mother tweeted from his account to say that their family didn't agree with Adam's actions in the house and that they felt sorry for Rosie.

Rosie does get eliminated from the villa, but work as being an opposition to what is traditionally expected of the female in dating programs does not end with *Love Island*. She takes the notoriety that she obtained from being on the show to speak about matters regarding her relationship with Adam. In an interview with *Good Morning Britain* following her elimination, Rosie expresses her desire to help empower women and make a difference. Her statement is met

⁷⁸ lucyflight. Twitter Post. June 19, 2018, 2:00 PM.

<https://twitter.com/lucyflight/status/1009179234173177858>.

⁷⁹ soulofaunicorn. Twitter Post. June 19, 2018, 2:03 PM.

<https://twitter.com/soulofaunicorn/status/1009180001730748419>.

⁸⁰ molromu. Twitter Post. June 19, 2018, 3:53 PM.

https://twitter.com/molromu/status/1009207661068541952?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1009207661068541952&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bustle.com%2Fp%2Fadam-rosies-love-island-relationship-is-over-twitter-is-fuming-at-his-manipulative-behaviour-9503337.

with defiance from Piers Morgan, a journalist and television personality who is often outspoken on many topics. Morgan in this case doesn't understand how Rosie, a person with intellectual capabilities, could go on a show like *Love Island*. He calls her disempowering to women because of the law career she left behind to pursue being on the show.⁸¹

Rosie defends herself, proving that her actions on the show are valid as women should not be treated as though they are inactive objects, and how her decisions have been met with success from fans of *Love Island*. "Honestly, I've had so many girls come up to me since I've come home saying that I've helped them through breakups and not feel victimized. That they can stand up for themselves."⁸² It is important that the audience is able to understand and acknowledge that she did something that counters how the women on *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, *Joe Millionaire*, and countless other programs are structured to look. Viewers are the ones who are decoding these messages put in place by the production and then it is up to them to take these ideas and attempt to create change in how these issues are treated in our culture.

"I'm just me and you're you..."

***Love Island* and Race**

The most interesting case in terms of looking at the participant's impact with agency and the encoded message, occurs with *Love Island*'s second black female contestant Samira Mighty. Her casting comes after viewers' complaints of continually being shown idealized white women

⁸¹ *Good Morning Britain*, "Love Island's Rosie Hits Back at Piers' Comments About Her Intelligence | *Good Morning Britain*." Filmed June 2018. YouTube video, 4:28. Posted June 25, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KF89kjoIcbc>.

⁸² *Ibid*.

on the show.⁸³ While her appearance on the show may be seen as the program and production trying to prove their ability to be diverse and cover any kind of non-inclusive tracks, Samira's journey in the program must be seen as more than that, because her presence on the show provides visibility for the issues and struggles many black women face in the world of dating. Compared to the other contestants, Samira faces the most difficulties when it comes to coupling up or being in a romantic couple rather than a friendship based one such as she has with Dr. Alex George early on. In the very first episode of the season when the women are stepping forward for the male contestants they want to couple up with, Samira holds back. It isn't until the fourth guy comes out that Samira steps forward to be in a possible couple. In this case, it is up to the men, in the end, to decide whom they want to be with and Samira is not chosen. She ends up being put in a couple with Alex George – both of whom were ultimately not chosen by anyone putting them together by default.

As time goes on we see men continually come into the villa expressing their interest in all of the other women, except Samira. It becomes apparent to audience members how slim the variety of racial type is when it comes to contestants. For women, when they are asked about their ideal match they tend to be specific and often do talk about their love for mixed race and black men – contestants Georgia Steel and Ellie Brown being an example – but for the male contestants it is often the description “blonde or brunette.” Her partner, Alex, also has a difficult time finding a romantic relationship in the villa, but early on in the show when different female contestants come in they at least show some kind of interest in him. Samira is never any of the men's “type” and what the show is encoding that black women are not considered a type. Black

⁸³ Yomi Adegoke, “Single black female: *Love Island* and the problem with race and dating,” *The Guardian*, June 26, 2018, accessed October 9, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/shortcuts/2018/jun/26/single-black-female-love-island-the-problem-with-race-and-dating>.

women cannot be considered a type and black women in a relationship are not something people want to see – it is not the ideal in a relationship. It took thirteen seasons for there to finally be a black bachelorette on *The Bachelorette* and it isn't due to coincidence. The norm of reality dating shows is to encode and put forth these messages by lack of inclusion of women of color through editing or through the lack of casting. In this regard *Love Island* is no different and attempts to approach this in the fourth season through the male contestants they cast and framing of Samira as the “sassy black friend” stereotype.

All of the contestants on the show go through an interview process where various questions are asked and the casting team gets to know what everyone is looking for. One of the casting producers for the show, Lewis Evans told *Cosmopolitan* that within the villa, “there is something for everyone, but once they're in there anything can happen.”⁸⁴ However, in comparing the men that come into the villa within the first two and a half weeks not a single one describes Samira as their ideal type. This alone proves that it is evident that the producers are attempting to orchestrate some kind of message where Samira is sidelined and not chosen. Not only is she framed as a pathetic female, but it is encoded to represent that this comes from her race. It is not until day nineteen when Sam Bird enters the house where there's even the slightest possibility that Samira can be in a romantic couple.

Before Sam enters the production sends a text to Samira's phone telling the islanders that a new boy will be entering the house. Before reading the text out loud Samira lets out a large yell in excitement, thinking that finally her opportunity has arisen. When he comes in later that night,

⁸⁴ Olivia Blair, “Here's how you can apply to be on *Love Island* 2019,” *Cosmopolitan*, January 2, 2019, accessed March 15, 2019, <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/a9976629/love-island-how-to-apply-cast-itv/>.

the Islanders interrogate Sam and ask who is top four choices in the house are.⁸⁵ In no particular order, he lists Ellie, Samira, Georgia, and Zara. Immediately after this, Rosie – still in the show at this point – takes Sam away to talk to him privately. During the discussion, Samira approaches and sits beside them in an effort to get to know Sam, but she is ignored. Samira attempts to ask preliminary questions, but Sam immediately turns to Rosie and asks her a question – the shot cuts back to Samira and she lets out a clearly uncomfortable, nervous laugh. Samira then continues to sit there as she watches Sam and Rosie discuss their ideal type. It ends up being Rosie who turns the conversation to Samira asking, “go on Sammy, what’s your type babe?” Samira says “jokes, general jokes,” saying her ideal type has to be funny, Sam repeats this, but then immediately turns to Rosie and asks her “are you loud?”⁸⁶ another divergence away from Samira.

It is uncomfortable to see how blatantly Samira is ignored and left out of the conversation. Although Sam originally listed Samira as one of the girls he’s most interested in, she is sidelined in the face of Rosie, a white woman. Many fans on the outside cheering for Samira to find love combined with Sam listing Samira as his type, but not giving her notice causes us to wonder if he listed her intentionally. It would not be far off to say that Sam felt obliged to name Samira due to her overwhelming support from public and pressure from production to show that they do cast men interested in women of color. However, these kind of dynamics continue to occur to Samira day in and day out with other male contestants with romantic endeavors.

⁸⁵ *Love Island*. “Episode 16.” Directed by Jan Genesis. Written by Mark Busk-Cowley. ITV2, June 21, 2018.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*.

Later, Sam discusses what he thinks about Rosie in the private confessional, but no mention of Samira. However, he does end up later choosing Samira to go on a date where they have more one on one time, ending in Sam choosing her to re-couple with at the end of the week. Many on Twitter expressed their happiness for Samira to finally have the beginnings of something romantic in the villa, @DiegoDan5o tweeted, “That choice from Sam was a significant W [win] for Samira and black girls all around. Just to show that a black girl deserves a chance just as much as anybody else. #LoveIsland.”⁸⁷

Based on past experiences of *Love Island* sending in men with eurocentric ideas of beauty, there was finally a male who found Samira attractive and desirable, but it did not last long. Aside from Samira being one of the original girls in the villa he found attractive, the other three girls, Ellie, Georgia, and Zara are all slim white women. It was clear from this that if any other women entered the villa, Sam certainly wouldn’t think twice about straying away from Samira if they were more his usual type of caucasian.

In “Episode 22,” the show reintroduces a feature that had been used the previous season – “Casa Amor.” Casa Amor has all of the boys separating from the girls for three days into a new villa where they get the chance to meet 6 new girls and the female contestants meet 6 new boys back at the original *Love Island* villa. At the end of the week, they all decide whether to stay in their old couples or be with one of the new guys or girls.⁸⁸ The separation comes at a time where Sam and Samira are still getting to know each other and things are new. There hasn’t been enough time for them to develop into something more serious before going into the Casa Amor week. Tearing Sam and Samira away from one another so quickly feels constructed as it creates

⁸⁷ DiegoDan5o. Twitter Post. June 22, 2018, 2:03 PM.

<https://twitter.com/DiegoDan5o/status/1010267001061769216>.

⁸⁸ *Love Island*. “Episode 22.” Directed by Jan Genesis. Written by Mark Busk-Cowley. ITV2, June 28, 2018.

the encoded message that even if black women do find something tangible in romance it will end if someone with lighter skin comes along.

Casa Amor in *Love Island* poses another situation where Samira feels rejected and unwanted as a black woman. Although she is not present for it – a couple of the girls ask all six boys who are in their top three and not a single one of the boys chooses Samira. If *Love Island* does indeed cast to include someone for everyone – then why is it that the men that are chosen all disregard Samira as a possible partner? In Issa Rae’s book *The Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl* she puts it in these terms, “if dating were an assortment of Halloween candy, black women and Asian men would be the Tootsie Rolls and candy corn – the last to be eaten, if even at all.”⁸⁹ User data on the popular dating app OkCupid showed in 2014 that black women were viewed as less attractive than women of other races and ethnicities by most men who used the site.⁹⁰ Even the black men featured on the show did not view Samira in a romantic way and tended to go for the white skinned, blonde women, “only black girls see a man of their own race that they are romantically interested in and have to consider whether he even likes black girls.”⁹¹ Samira’s own type is blonde hair and blue eyes which makes it that much more difficult since the show is casting her “type” on the outside, but none of them see Samira as *their* type.

The lack of space and possibility for Samira to be with anyone in the villa in a romantic way places her as support to her white counterparts. The production wants to encode the long standing trope of Blackness in the service of Whiteness. From the very beginning black

⁸⁹ Issa Rae, *The Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl* (New York, Atria Publishing Group, 2015), 137.

⁹⁰ Ashley Brown, “‘Least Desirable?’ How Racial Discrimination Plays Out In Online Dating,” NPR, January 9, 2018, accessed on March 16, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2018/01/09/575352051/least-desirable-how-racial-discrimination-plays-out-in-online-dating>.

⁹¹ Adegoke.

characters have been used to guide white characters. In shows such as *Beulah* and films like *The Help* (Walt Disney Studios, 2011), *Driving Miss Daisy* (Warner Bros, 1989) and *Gone With the Wind* (MGM, 1939) we have black characters playing in physical roles that exude servitude – maids, housekeepers and drivers meant to catapult white protagonists into a new stage in life. When black characters are not playing a domestic role, they still in some way act as support to the the lead white character. In the film *The Devil Wears Prada* (20th Century Fox, 2006), Tracie Thomas plays friend to the lead, Anne Hathaway only acting as a friend who brings her back down to Earth after losing touch with herself. Roles such as this suggest that these black characters have nothing going on in their life and emerge at the right moment to give thoughtful advice. This is the message that *Love Island* wants to encode, that black individuals and especially black women are needed in the role of serving and not in the role of romance.

Through the tweets from fans, it is apparent that they have caught on to what the production is attempting to do. “I’m soo tired of Samira being the epitome of black side kick please #Love Island,” tweeted @ChantayyJayy in annoyance at the situation.⁹² There is a want from viewers to support contestants of color in the same way that they do the white contestants, but with the lack of diversity included in descriptions of the other contestant’s ideal partner, it makes this next to impossible. Viewers and viewers of color are then left seeing Samira “helping the other contestants with their dramas, informing their narratives rather than shaping her own.”⁹³ Essentially, Samira becomes Tracie Thomas in *The Devil Wears Prada*.

⁹² ChantayyJayy. Twitter Post. June 13, 2018, 1:57 PM. https://twitter.com/ChantayyJayy/status/1007004150889099265?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1007004150889099265&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bustle.com%2Fp%2Fsamiras-love-island-experience-stings-for-women-of-colour-heres-why-9509574.

⁹³ Aimée Grant Cumberbatch, “Samira’s ‘Love Island’ Experience Stings For Women of Colour & Here’s Why,” *Bustle*, June 22, 2018, accessed on March 12, 2019,

Out of all the connections Samira made in the villa, one of the closest is with her original partner Alex who tends to lean on her for girl advice. In one instance Samira addresses her concerns for Alex when he begins to pursue Ellie, as Samira is not sure if Ellie's interest in him is genuine. It's clear right away that Alex takes some kind of offense to it, although he had happily accepted Samira's advice in the past, and another contestant – Josh Denzel – gets more offended. He criticizes Samira and tells her to “let Alex have his time” with Ellie, thinking that the only reason Samira voiced her opinion is that she is afraid of being eliminated.⁹⁴ The conversation between the two does get a little tense, ending in Josh storming off. Later, the *Love Island* official YouTube page, often posting highlights from episodes, posted a clip of the conversation with the caption “Samira Kicks Off Out Of Nowhere.”⁹⁵ “Kicks Off,” in this situation meaning to start something or begin some kind of altercation. What the title of the clip is suggesting is that Samira is the one who created some kind of disturbance when really she remained calm throughout and it was Josh who became offended. The production clearly trying to place Samira within the box of the “angry black woman” stereotype.⁹⁶

The network ITV and *Love Island* have also used the term “sassy” in much of their promotions and marketing when showing Samira. Her introduction video on YouTube is appropriately titled, “Meet Samira: Our Sassy Performer | Love Island 2018,” with the comments being disabled for the video.⁹⁷ Twitter user @manlikedami actually responded to the show and

<https://www.bustle.com/p/samiras-love-island-experience-stings-for-women-of-colour-heres-why-9509574>.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ *Love Island*, “Samira Kicks Off Out of Nowhere | *Love Island* 2018,” YouTube video, 3:49. Posted June 18, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAL0xN0b1k8>.

⁹⁶ Cumberbatch.

⁹⁷ *Love Island*, “Meet Samira: Our Sassy Performer | *Love Island* 2018,” YouTube video, 1:47. Posted May 29, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAL0xN0b1k8>.

asked “hey @LoveIsland, just wondering what exactly it was in Samira’s intro vid made you decide to describe her as “sassy”? I didn’t get that impression at all so would love to hear from you! Xx #LoveIsland.”⁹⁸ Even when Samira does leave the villa, later on, the ITV2 Twitter page posted a montage video of some of her “best moments,” with the caption “Stay sassy Samira.” The poorly edited video includes micro-moments of Samira’s time in the villa with her giving “sassy looks,” shouting things like “YAAS,” doing dances and essentially not showing any part of the true Samira.⁹⁹ Samira does not read as “sassy” in any way, and while in the villa did not allude to any kind of behavior that could be classified this way. Viewers have failed to give in to *Love Island*’s attempt at encoding Samira to be a stereotype she’s not and continued to do it even after she exited the show. Many took to Twitter to respond to the video, “Samira has been anything but sassy throughout this whole season. But go off with you micro aggressions,”¹⁰⁰ “Samira is goofy, cute and funny and that’s OK but they’ll never push that narrative because she’s a BW [black woman] therefore she is sassy.”¹⁰¹ From the get-go the intentions were to cast Samira to play the sassy and dramatic black friend – to encode that black women are only meant to be in the background of romantic stories, not to ever have their own.

These are the signs mentioned by Stuart Hall for the production to create their intended ideological message. The lack of inclusion of male contestants interested in black women as well

⁹⁸ manlikedami. Twitter Post. June 13, 2018, 12:27 PM.

<https://twitter.com/manlikedami/status/1006981392012541959>

⁹⁹ ITV2. Twitter Post. July 12, 2019, 1:40 PM.

<https://twitter.com/itv2/status/1017508950504329216>.

¹⁰⁰ lilnig666. Twitter Post. July 12, 2018, 1:57 PM.

<https://twitter.com/lilnig666/status/1017513258956320769>.

¹⁰¹ victoriasanusi. Twitter Post. July 12, 2018, 3:05 PM.

<https://twitter.com/victoriasanusi/status/1017530290795839488>.

as exaggerating Samira into clips of a YouTube video to fit a certain stereotype are all the signs meant to tell the audience that whiteness is the ideal in a partner and romance.

These signs are continued to be pushed by *Love Island* even as Samira does find a real and tangible romance with new islander Frankie after Sam and the other boys leave to Casa Amor. At the onset it seems as the signs the production have provided for us will be the same as they had been when Frankie shows great interest in Megan instead of Samira. In a discussion on the daybeds, Frankie continues to talk about Megan and how he he needs to have his chance to talk to her as Samira nods in agreement clearly hurt.¹⁰² Samira later expresses her feelings in the confessional in which she tells the audience that she felt as though she couldn't put her feelings out to Frankie due to his infatuation with Megan. This is when *Love Island* surprises with showing Samira be vulnerable, something read as rare for how she had been edited previously. Samira having feelings and emotions does not fit into the sassy and supportive black friend stereotype as she is not supposed to have anything going on in her own life. However, when Samira tells the rest of the female contestants that she knew she wouldn't be Frankie's type the roles are reversed as Megan attempts to console and support her. Samira continues to shrug this off telling her that she's beautiful, shrugging, "I'm just me and you're you."¹⁰³ Samira breaking down and showing how she feels provides a sign to the audience that she is aware of her treatment and the situation she is in. She has even begun to compare herself to the other idealized white female contestants such as Megan, a popular choice for the men in the house.

Although she does not explicitly say that she feels victimized and singled out because she is black, this is ultimately the case as we do not see any of the other female contestants similarly

¹⁰² *Love Island*. "Episode 23." Directed by Jan Genesis. Written by Mark Busk-Cowley. ITV2, June 29, 2018.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*.

affected. Yet, the producers clearly leave Samira's emotional break down into the final cut of the show for a particular reason. What exactly might that be? They have been doing all they can to sideline her with the male contestants chosen, but showcasing her vulnerability and insecurities provides us with a different encoded message than what was intended. *Love Island* does not do anything particular to frame this to reflect the black women's dating experience, but that is what it becomes. With their treatment of Samira in the past, they saw her race as a role rather than an identity. Therefore here, it is the belief that they want to encode the message of perhaps the pathetic woman who can't find anyone, but due to her race – a marker of difference – and black identity she is encoded to viewers as the common dating difficulties black women face as being a last choice.

While Samira does end up finding a real connection in the villa with Frankie, but once they are in a couple together, compared to other contestants we barely see any of their relationship in the program. *Love Island* was able to be relevant and encode a message of reflection for the black woman in romance with Samira, but they soon attempt to cover up that message by never editing Frankie and Samira into the program.¹⁰⁴ Due to this, many audience members never got to know Frankie and when it was time to vote for their favorite male and female islanders to stay in the villa, regardless of the couple they were in, Frankie did not receive much support. He is eliminated from the villa after spending a total of twelve days with Samira. Once he is gone from the villa we see Samira crying over him, almost to the point of weeping and this is met with confusion.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ *Love Island*. "Episode 24." Directed by Jan Genesis. Written by Mark Busk-Cowley. ITV2, July 1, 2018.

¹⁰⁵ *Love Island*. "Episode 31." Directed by Jan Genesis. Written by Mark Busk-Cowley. ITV2, July 9, 2018.

Why is Samira crying over this guy? There has been next to nothing shown regarding Samira and Frankie's relationship, and this positions Samira to look crazy. She's crying over Frankie for being eliminated from the villa, but the audience had no exposure to the both of them being together, therefore it makes her seem obsessive for crying over something that was nothing. Samira then ends up leaving *Love Island* after Frankie has left to be with him as she feels she won't find anyone else on the show like him.¹⁰⁶

We must not decode Samira's departure as disempowering to black women and what it means to be a woman of color in a relationship with a white male. Unlike the other case studies mentioned in this paper, Samira's re-encoding takes place outside the scope of *Love Island* and their production. *Love Island* had not been as generous to Samira as they had been to their white contestants in regards to giving them the space for agency and having an impact on the program's messages about social issues. Continually, *Love Island* pushed Samira to the side of the program by casting male contestants with eurocentric ideas of beauty and placing her into the role of the sassy, supportive black friend. Her exit from the show and decision to go home to pursue what she had with Frankie should lead viewers and fans of the program to look back at her time on the show. This reflection and acknowledgement of Samira's experience on the show versus a white contestants along with her departure leads to a re-encoding message that black women do not have to fit within society's expected role.

Love Island certainly formulated a mirror image of what societal expectations are associated with romance and above all attempted to keep dominant ideologies about race unchanged. Tobi Oredein's article found that: "following Samira's departure, it has come to light that the ITV2 show actually failed to air scenes which showed how close Frankie and Samira had

¹⁰⁶ *Love Island*. "Episode 32." Directed by Jan Genesis. Written by Mark Busk-Cowley. ITV2, July 10, 2018.

become – including a night they spent together in the hideaway.”¹⁰⁷ The Hideaway is one of the most important steps a couple can make on *Love Island* – it is a private, luxury suite in the villa where the closest relationships go to have “alone” time. This is a pivotal part of the show and choosing to not air Frankie and Samira’s night together in the Hideaway is certainly not a simple oversight. This was done in an effort to reduce the exposure of an interracial relationship that featured a black woman, because it does not play into the message they want to encode. If they showed a successful relationship such as this, that would not prove their and reality dating television’s intended goal that black women can not find romance.

In response to the confusion and outrage many fans felt regarding Samira and Frankie being edited out of the show, *Love Island* released a statement to *Digital Spy*, “As we have said before, it is not possible to show everything that happens in the villa due to time constraints. There are a number of couples whose time in the Hideaway has not been shown.”¹⁰⁸ This is indeed true, but Samira has been a fan favorite from the start and one of the first girls to step foot in the villa for the summer, many would assume she would get her fair share of screen time whenever she found love.

From Twitter, we are able to conclude that her decision to leave the show was decoded by audience members not as her giving up or being weak, but as her taking matters into her own hands and knowing what she wants. Receiving nearly two thousand retweets and ten thousand likes, @TheClassicManny tweeted, “This makes me respect Samira even more. She left on her own accord and didn’t wait for no damn recoupling. Now THAT is loyalty without screaming it

¹⁰⁷ Tobi Oredein, “Why Samira Mighty’s cut Love Island scenes are actually really important,” *Digital Spy*, July 13, 2018, accessed on March 13, 2019. <https://www.digitalspy.com/tv/reality-tv/a861559/samira-mighty-love-island-black-woman-woc-experience/>.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

24/7. #LoveIsland.”¹⁰⁹ In the case of Samira, the show attempted to tightly edit Samira until there was nothing left and encode a certain message regarding her. Leaving the villa was her only option in assuming agency and dominance over the production by not being their tool anymore. This leads to a new encoded message that the black female must take matters into her own hands rather than continually operating in the confines of societal expectations and ideologies.

Conclusion: Just the Beginning

Love Island has demonstrated a negotiation with the ideology that it traditionally aims to put forward and what the contestants actions are. At moments we can see the production of *Love Island* try to go back to their reinforced ideology through means of narration to remind audiences of a certain idea, but it ultimately fails. Once they have edited together, moments of Rosie standing up for herself against Adam and Wes talking things out with Laura we do not push these instances to the side. Instead, combined with the productions efforts at enforcement of harmful ideologies, we as decoders simply put together these attempts along with the participants exposure. There may have been examples of this in *The Bachelor* and *Joe Millionaire*, but viewers will never know that due to the networks and productions of the programs’ goal to keep up with what their advertisers want and what they *think* their audiences want. We saw this when *Love Island* attempted to edit Samira into a certain stereotype and erase her relationship with Frankie, but her ability to exit the villa and speak about her time on her own terms demonstrates a re-encoding.

Her post show interviews have not shown a great amount of opposition to the show, but this can partly due to her want of celebrity status. Most contestants who come from the show end up with some kind of following, popularity or sponsorships with clothing companies and to

¹⁰⁹ THECLASSICMANNY. Twitter Post. July 16, 2018, 1:26 PM
<https://twitter.com/THECLASSICMANNY/status/1018955041045131265>.

distance herself from the show wouldn't have benefited Samira in that realm. Therefore, many of her answers regarding her race and relationship with the show have been kept short and simple, "when I watched it back, I thought 'wow'."¹¹⁰ Her reaction, however, should not be discredited and viewed as unsuccessful in terms of a participant's intervention with the encoded message. Through the response of the audience we have seen spectators comprehend Samira's situation in the villa through her exit over Frankie's own departure. Ofcom – the UK's communications regulator – actually received over 300 complaints "relating to mis-treatment/unfair portrayal of Samira."¹¹¹

Reality television and reality programs about dating seem like a tightly constructed space that blurs reality and fiction while presenting the reinforcement of dominant ideologies. The televisual apparatus is fluid and has the ability to change, mold itself over time – this is apparent through its episodic structure and audience response, but often times reality programs attempt to disguise itself. Through the manipulative editing and structure, reality TV attempts to make participants and audience members forget its malleability. The relationship that is possible between participant and program does have the power to reappropriate the encoded messages and work alongside one another. Looking at examples through *Love Island*, we were able to see this inkling of what can occur in reality television when the program leaves more of a space for participant action. The meaning of this study is to plant the beginnings of what re-encoding looks like and to make evident that the original structure of Stuart Hall's model of encoding/decoding television can no longer keep up with reality television. Television scholars need to recognize

¹¹⁰ Kelly, Emma. "Love Island's Samira 'understands' why people think her race was reason behind editing drama," *Metro*, August 3, 2018, accessed October 9, 2018, <https://metro.co.uk/2018/08/03/love-islands-samira-understands-people-think-race-reason-behind-editing-drama-7794099/>.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

where else there are elements of re-encoding within reality programs, make an intervention and execute their own case studies to develop the concept further.

After the success of the fourth season of *Love Island*, CBS announced it had secured the rights for a U.S. version of the show.¹¹² The reality television space created by *Love Island* is truly unique, and I am not positive that this same kind of fluidity within the program is currently possible in any American reality show. There is no telling what the Americanized format of the show will be like – if it'll include recoupling, audience interactivity, contestant challenges and “who’s in your top three” conversations, but as for re-encoding? That is for the participants and Stuart Hall to decide.

¹¹² CBS, “Smash-Hit Reality Show Love Island Gets New Series Order at CBS,” date last modified August 8, 2018, <https://www.cbs.com/recommended/news/1008727/-smash-hit-reality-series-love-island-gets-new-series-order-at-cbs/>.

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