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 Love Island and Relationship Education

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3   The rise of reality TV programmes focussing on relationships and the search for 'love' has
4   focussed media attention on the portrayal of healthy relationships, gender roles and intimate
5   partner abuse (IPVA).

6   Love Island, a UK reality TV programme, was watched in 2019 by over 3 million viewers, a
7   majority of whom are young women aged 16 to 34, though a younger teenage demographic
8   also watch. Many of these younger viewers may be learning about what healthy relationships
9   are like, and entering their first romantic relationships. Contestant's behaviour on Love Island
10 prompted Women's Aid to issue a statement speaking out against unhealthy behaviours in
11 relationships – especially "gaslighting", a form of emotional abuse that makes someone
12 question their own feelings, memories and version of reality.

13 Based on our experience of running a relationship education program in 24 schools, as part of
14 the Tender national partnership and our research with young people on their perceptions of
15 Love Island, the paper will examine the role reality TV programmes; play in young people's
16 understandings of healthy relationships. It argues representations of relationships on Love
17 Island are framed within normative heterosexuality and the normalisation of emotional abuse.
18 However, we also argue that these programmes can be a catalyst for discussion amongst
19 young people and open up spaces, especially online, to challenge dominant constructions of
20 relationships. It also makes recommendations for education policy and practice around
21 relationship and sex education in schools.

22

23

25

Introduction

27

28   The 2019 series of Love Island[1], a UK reality TV dating show, had an average audience of
29   3.63 million, peaking at 4.05 million for the shows finale and gained a 21.4% average
30   audience share (BBC News 2019a). The viewing is both gendered and generational. The
31   2018 series 3 of Love Island attracted more than half (52.3%) of all television viewing by the
32   16–24 age group (Jones, 2017), most of which were young women aged 16 to 34. However,
33   a younger audience also watches, with evidence of primary school children (aged 8-11)
34   viewing the post watershed programme (BBC News 2019b). Whilst this has raised concerns
35   about the adult content of the programme, it also raises the possibility of the use of
36   programmes such as Love Island to start age appropriate conversations about relationships
37   with younger viewers. Many of these younger viewers may be entering their first romantic
38   and sexual relationships and the models of relationships shown on the programme can be
39   problematic. The behaviour of contestants on the last two series of Love Island, 2018 and
40   2019, prompted Women's Aid, a UK domestic abuse charity, to issue statements speaking
41   out against the unhealthy behaviours in relationships shown on the programme, in particular

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[1] Love Island first aired in the UK in 2015 and has run for four season to date. Based in a villa in Spain
contestants are invited to 'couple up' and 're-couple' throughout the show and couples are voted out by the
public, and the couple with the most votes winning £50,000. In a final twist, one member of the winning
couple can choose to either keep all the prize money, or share it with their partner.

42 "gaslighting", a form of emotional abuse that makes someone question their own feelings,
43 memories and version of reality.
44
45 For young people it is argued that this behaviour may influence their understandings of
46 healthy and unhealthy relationships as it normalises abuse in relationships. This is an
47 important issue as research suggests that one in four teenagers state they are more influenced
48 by celebrities than other people they know (Giles & Maltby, 2004) and national and
49 international evidence demonstrates that abuse and violence in young people's relationships
50 represents a substantial problem (Barter, 2009, Fox, et al 2014, Stonard et al 2014, Young et al
51 2107). Research from Europe (STIR, 2015, Young et al. 2107), demonstrates that adolescents
52 and young people are at particular risk of intimate partner violence and abuse (IVPA) and
53 evidence indicates that victimization is typically higher among young women than young men
54 (Barter et al 2105, 2009). Emotional partner abuse is a common experience among young
55 people, research shows that nearly three quarters of teenage girls, and half of teenage boys
56 report some form of emotional partner abuse in relationships (STIR, 2015). However, Barter
57 (2009) argues that teenagers do not recognise the unhealthy behaviour as abuse and therefore
58 do not report it to anyone.
59
60 The UK government has recognised the role of TV, celebrities and social media in promoting
61 heathy relationships and challenging IVPA. These include Disrespect Nobody and This is
62 Abuse campaigns which partnered with the Channel 4 teen soap Hollyoaks in 2013, to target
63 13 to 18-year-olds with extensive media coverage.
64
65 There is therefore a need for positive role models of healthy relationships in the media and
66 within the school curriculum (Porter & Standing 2018). The next section charts the rise of
67 reality TV and its relationship with social media, enabling young people to interact and
68 discuss in a way not previously possible for younger generations.
69

70   1.   **The rise of dating reality TV shows and social media**

71 Reality TV shows have become more popular since the late 1990s, the introduction of shows
72 such as Big Brother in 2000 [2] with the rise of reality TV defining the millennial pop cultural
73 landscape (Grazian, 2010). In 2016, reality shows were watched by 39% of adults in the UK,
74 including 48% of women and 50% of people aged 25–34 (Barker et al, 2018).

75 Reality shows are cheap to produce and offer the 'ordinary' person a chance to become
76 'known' (Couldry 2002, Holmes 2004). The appeal of reality TV lies in its supposed
77 'authenticity' of the participants, and the opportunities it offers, as Grindstaff and Murray
78 (2015:130) argue:

79 *'Reality TV is largely effective as an industrial mode of persona production because it holds*
80 *open the promise of moving an ordinary person from noncelebrity to celebrity status. Indeed,*
81 *it is typically assumed that the main goal of getting on a reality program is to leverage*
82 *ordinary participation into ordinary celebrity.'*

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[2] *Big Brother* was a UK reality TV show on Channel 4. It aired between 2000-2018 attracting a wide spectrum of contestants knows as housemates who living isolated from the outside world in a specifically designed house for a period of time. Housemates were evicted weekly by public voting. The last housemate in the house won a significant sum of money.

83   The audience sees the journey of self-transformation through which 'ordinary' contestants find
84   their 'true self', or their 'true love' (Hill, 2002, 2004). These 'authentic' experiences and true
85   love is the plotline of shows such as The Bachelor and First Dates, which are popular amongst
86   young female viewers. The concept of authenticity, of 'being true to yourself', is central to
87   reality TV, and to the ultimate success of participants. The production of a particular
88   individualised neoliberal identity or 'selfhood 'has been used by Ouellette and Hay (2008) to
89   understand the fascination with authenticity in Reality TV, in which authenticity is viewed as a
90   white Western, construct of modernity. (Feldman, 2014). Skeggs and Wood (2008) argue that
91   reality TV promotes a neoliberal 'subject of value' of middle-class selfhood, which makes moral
92   judgements about behaviour based on class, race and gender. Celebrity discourses reflect and
93   reproduce wider social attitudes whereby working class contestants are seen as 'Other' (Tyler and
94   Bennet 2010) with 'excessive and troublesome bodies and lifestyles' (Allen, 2013:463). These
95   debates are particularly relevant when examining the gendered and heteronormative moral
96   judgements around sexuality and healthy relationships.

97   Much of the literature on reality TV remains based in traditional TV viewing (Holmes and
98   Jermyn, 2014). A new demographic of reality TV show viewers and participants are able to
99   interact via social media in a way previously not seen, nor widely researched. Generation Z
100 (Gen Z) is the generation of the internet, technology and social media (Combi, 2015). The
101 rise of celebrity culture (Turner, 2006, 2010) and the rise of social media influencers and
102 Instagram culture (Okrent, 2017) mean participants subsequently become celebrities who
103 create branded identities across multiple social media channels.

104   For Love Island, and other Reality TV programmes however, many participants are already
105 'instafamous' social media influencers and are scouted by production teams bringing further into
106 question the 'authenticity' and 'ordinariness' of those taking part, for example, 30 out of the 36
107 2019 Love Island contestants were headhunted by ITV's casting team (Westbrook, 2019).

108 Marwick (2015, 2016) argues the notion of instafamous reinforces existing gendered
109 hierarchies of fame, with 'fit', slim , white women having a higher rank in both traditional
110 and social media than those who question this or do not fit the 'ideal type'. Love Island
111 presents a heteronormative image of the 'perfect relationship' and an idealised white, slender
112 perfect-bodied individual as the 'authentic' self. The colourism and misogynoir judgements
113 made on reality TV have a long history, with black and BAME contestants consistently voted
114 off early, and can be seen in the lack of diversity and early departure of the black female
115 participants (Adegoke, 2018).

116   For audiences, reality TV has 'coupled up' with social media to provide 24/7 content. In addition
117 to the nightly programme, Love Island has an after show, an official love island podcast,
118 YouTube channel, Instagram, a constant inflow of tweets and hashtags, the official love island
119 app, chat rooms, forums, tumblrs, and memes alongside other traditional media outlets. This
120 enables the audience to interact with the programme in ways not previously seen with traditional
121 media platforms. This possible effect and influence is an example of what Jones (2016) calls
122 convergence culture (Jenkins, 2016), the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the
123 cooperation of multiple media audiences and the migratory behaviour of media audiences, has on
124 young people's view on relationships is discussed below.

125

126

Love island, social media and 'healthy' relationships

The influence of reality TV on young people is contested, however, reality TV has historically been seen to incite moral panics (Thompson, 1998), and for Love Island, this is around sex and relationships, with media reports of the negative influence of Love Island on young people's self-esteem, body image and sexual behaviours (Barr, 2019). Bilandzic (2006) argues that as people watch television, they slowly begin to absorb the ideas, views, and morals presented; she calls the television the best universal vehicle for passing on views and standards, and one that can also influence people to change their beliefs. Young people actively seek information on relationships and advice on the dating experience to help them navigate and guide their anticipations and beliefs (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007), and they list television, dating partners, parents, friends, and teachers/sex educators as their largest sources (Wood et al., 2002; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). Past research suggests a link between viewing reality TV, and gender stereotyping, with watching reality TV associated with a strong adherence to traditional masculine ideology[3] (Giaccardi et al 2016), and a greater endorsement of gendered (hetero)sexual scripts for women, with sexual activity being seen as different for women and men, and turn were associated with girls´ lower sexual agency (Behm-Morawitz, et al 2016; Seabrook et al, 2017). Oosten et al (2017) found evidence that sexually oriented reality TV is one factor in young people's willingness to engage in casual sex (along with the internet, social media and peers). However young people also state that these sources of information are not very accurate and have little effect on them, with parents and peers have the biggest impact on young people's attitudes to sex and relationships (Monahan et al 2014) Wood et al., 2002). The influence of social media is also contested and contradictory; however, for Love Island's viewers, we argue it can be one mechanism through which they can discuss dating and relationships.

Love Island has been criticised for its portrayal and normalisation of toxic masculinity[4] (Petter, 2019), in particular emotional abuse in relationships, with gaslighting being a consistent problem. For example, Adam's manipulative behaviour towards his partner Rosie in series three, which Rosie called out, prompted charity Women's Aid (2018) to issue a statement asking viewers to speak out against unhealthy behaviours in relationships (Porter & Standing 2018) . Several of the male contestants in series four repeated this behaviour; for example Michael 'dumped' his existing partner Amber to couple up with Joanna, and when confronted by Amber about his behaviour, grew more aggressive in the face of her calm and reasoned questioning, calling her 'childish' and 'pathetic' and blamed her for problems in their relationship' (Verdier, 2019). Joe's controlling and possessive behaviour towards Lucy, as he asked her not to spend time with fellow contestant Tommy, calling her behaviour 'disrespectful', prompted another statement from Women's Aid, calling for the show's producers to be more aware of and end apparent "*unhealthy fledgling relationships [in the show] being used as entertainment*" (Women's Aid, 2019).

Toxic masculinity was also evident in several male contestants' behaviour towards the female contestants seen as 'difficult', for example Michaels treatment of Amber discussed above. The sexual double standard was highlighted by the male contestants' reactions towards Maura's overt

168 sexual confidence and agency[5], which challenged normative views of female sexuality, which
169 position women as passive, rather than sexual agents. Referring to her frequent discussion of sex
170 in everyday conversations, before his date with Maura in the hideaway Tom commented *'it'll be*
171 *interesting to see if she's all mouth or not''* which was overheard by Maura, causing her to
172 confront Tom and call off the date. The other male contestants colluded in this as 'banter'
173 exposing the casual sexism in the villa.

174 Social media further highlighted the gendered double standards of 'socially acceptable'
175 sexual behaviour, with Maura consistently portrayed in the media as sex obsessed and
176 portraying 'inappropriate behaviour' for her comments such as: "I am having fanny flutters,
177 I'm not even joking" (Newman, 2019) , prompting headlines like the one below from The
178 Mirror newspaper:

179

M TV ▸ TV News ▸ Love Island

Love Island fans horrified as Maura Higgins makes X-rated confession about Tommy Fury

New girl Maura made an extremely rude joke about the boxer as he stood in the kitchen 'cooking' for her

SHARE By **Vicki Newman** Senior Celebrity Reporter 22:43, 12 JUN 2019 | UPDATED 23:12, 12 JUN 2019 | TV | 4 COMMENTS

180 Her behaviour towards both Tommy and Curtis raised issues around consent, as she kissed
181 Tommy after he had had said no, and led to the hashtag #doublestandard.

182 There are other frequent examples of Love Island's women contestants being 'slut shamed',
183 of being labelled 'sexually out of control' and being punished for this behaviour (Tanenbaum,
184 2015). In series two contestant Zara Holland lost her Miss Great Britain crown after being
185 shown having sex with Alex Bowen (no reprimand was given to Alex) and Megan Barton
186 Hanson from series 3 continues to receive slut shaming comments on social media for her
187 sexual choices (Barrett, 2019).

188 In contrast when Amy left the 2019 series voluntarily after her 'half boyfriend', Curtis ended
189 their relationship), saying "*I'll let you find whatever you were looking for*," in order not to
190 jeopardise his relationship with Maura, a was seen as positive behaviour, despite prioritising
191 men's emotional and sexual views at the expense of women's. This is an example of
192 'himpathy' "the excessive or inappropriate sympathy extended to a male agent or wrongdoer
193 over his female victim", (Buxton and Habgood-Coote, 2019, Manne, 2018), reinforcing
194 gendered ideologies of female passivity.

195 Love Island does present some positive experiences, for example in showing positive female
196 friendships; in 2019 the trending hashtag #friendshipgoals, with Maura advising Amy after
197 her breakup with Curtis, and Anna confronting Michael over his behaviour. It also show
198 'bromances' and male friendships, for example in the 2017 series between contestants Chris
199 Hughes and Kem Cetiney, and Jack Fincham, and Alex George in 2018. (Wilkinson, 2019)
200 which model healthy relationships.

---

[5] Maura's behaviour towards both Tommy when she forcibly kissed him after he said no,
raised issues around consent, and led to the hashtag #doublestandard.

201 Despite Love island presenting of emotional abuse and hegemonic masculinity as normalised and
202 as entertainment, there is evidence that audiences, including you people, reject the contestants
203 who display those behaviours. The winner of series four, Amber, demonstrates both a rejection of
204 toxic masculinity, and the importance of 'authenticity' to audiences, with a recognition of her
205 journey, as illustrated in the tweet below:

Sam
@saml0ve11

Follow

Amber deserved to win. Girl got swapped for Joanna by Michael, treated horribly by them, gaslit and then the same guy tried to mess her up again and take her back but she had the self respect to choose Greg and walk away from that toxic relationship and WIN. #LoveIsland

2:04 AM - 30 Jul 2019

130 Retweets 1,819 Likes

3   130   1.8K

206

207

208 This also shows the influence of social media on audience's understandings of relationships, with
209 young people recognising, and rejecting, negative behaviours in contestants

210 Whilst early reality TV programmes were broadcast for a limited period, newer audiences,
211 generation z have a constant flow of influences. The vast amount of fast paced and interactive
212 social media coverage means young people can both engage with, that audiences learn
213 behaviours and absorb ideas from reality TV shows thus underestimates or neglects the and
214 debate programmes, enabling them to challenge, as well as absorb and copy, behaviours. If, as
215 some commentators suggest, young people are getting some of their information about
216 relationships from programmes such as Love Island, this can be a positive opportunity to discuss
217 relationships both in and out of school.

218 The article goes on to discuss young people's views of relationships presented on Love Island to
219 examine the role reality TV plays in their understanding of healthy and unhealthy relationships
220 and if this can be used as a catalyst for discussion.

221   **2. Methods**

222   This article draws on our experience of running relationship education workshops in schools with
223   pupils aged between 13 to 16 years old and is supplemented with focus groups on Love Island
224   with young people aged between 13 and 21.

225   Over a period of 6 years as part of the Tender National Partnership[6], we worked in 24 schools
226   across Greater Merseyside, UK, working with 3,158 pupils in total.

227

228   Image one: young people explore ideals of their 'perfect partner' informed consent was given for
229   publication.

230   There is evidence that using creative approaches, such arts or drama, as part of domestic abuse
231   intervention/prevention projects is valued by, and has a positive impact on, students (Bell and
232   Stanley, 2006; Hester & Westmoreland, 2005; Hester & Lilley 2014, Pana & Lesta, 2012,
233   Sander-McDonagh et al, 2016). Stanley et al. (2015) in their evidence synthesis on prevention
234   programmes in the UK, argue that drama-based interventions are highly valued by young people
235   and experts, who argue that using dramatic approaches can create emotional intensity and

---

[6] The arts charity Tender .The Tender project uses art and drama to explore the early warning signs of abusive
relationships

236   contribute to what can be understood as 'authenticity', making interventions and key messages
237   more 'real' for young people. Images one and two show examples of young people on the
238   project using creative arts based practice to explore 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' relationships as part
239   of the Tender project.

240

241   Image Two: Exploring emotional abuse

242   From the beginning of the project reality TV was a reference and starting point for young people
243   to discuss relationships. For example in the early years of the project pupils in three of the
244   schools suggested one way to resolve problems in relationships would be to go on reality TV
245   shows such as the Jeremy Kyle show[7], as image three shows. Young people acted out the
246   Jeremy Kyle show to their peers to explore unhealthy relationships, saying *we have a connection*

---

[7] The Jeremy Kyle show was a UK tabloid talk/problem show, which ran between 2005-2019 on ITV. In total, it aired 3,320 times. It tackled difficult and emotional issues in a sensationalist manner. It was take off air in June 2019 following the death of participant a week after recording an episode of the show https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/jeremy-kyle-show-cancelled-stephen-dymond-death-guest-itv-latest-a8914471.html

247 *to it rather than just doing Grease or Hairspray' (School Group (SG) year 9 age 14 Female)*
248 demonstrating the influence reality TV had on young people's understandings of relationships.

249

250 Image Three: Young people acting out the Jeremy Kyle show as part of exploring relationship
251 abuse

252 Focused discussions and focus groups also played an important role in understanding young
253 people's perceptions of healthy relationships. As part of the relationship education workshops we
254 discussed Love Island with a group of year 9 (13-14 year olds) in a mixed school setting (n=20)
255 and year 8 female pupils (aged 12-13) in a single gender school (n-29). Sessions lasted
256 approximately an hour, and notes were taken as part of the session. In addition to this two focus
257 groups in an out of school setting were conducted independent of the Tender project; one with
258 young people aged 13-17 (n=5), and one with young people aged 18-21 (n=4).

259 Focus groups, along with the arts based methods used in the workshop, generate data through
260 interaction (Kitzsinger, 1994; Morgan, 1996, 1997) and are often used with young people to
261 discuss sensitive topics such a sexual behaviour and health (van Teijlingen et al. 2007). One of
262 the drawbacks of focus groups is the potential influence of the facilitator, and as the focus groups,
263 were a part of, or came after, the workshops on relationship education, participants may have
264 more awareness of healthy and unhealthy relationships, thus influencing their answers.

265 Ethical approval was granted by the university; all participants were provided with written
266 consent forms, as were their parents and guardians. Consent was obtained to publish participant
267 verbatim quotes along with their ages and genders. We anonymised all the data, and refer only to

268 young people's ages/school year and gender. Written notes were taken during focus groups and
269 the facilitator's reflections from the workshops were recorded. We analysed the data thematically
270 (Braun and Clarke 2006) to identify and analyse patterns linked to young people's
271 understandings of health and unhealthy relationships. Three key themes emerged: the reasons
272 why young people watch and the importance of social media; young people's understanding of
273 the 'fakeness' of the relationships shown on Love Island, and the potential for Love island to be
274 used to start positive discussions about relationships. This paper now turns to explore these.

275

Findings/Discussion:

4.1 Reasons to Watch: Social media and Entertainment

278 Research shows some young viewers are influenced by what they see on reality TV shows
279 (Zurbriggen and Morgan, 2006) and watching reality dating programs is positively correlated
280 with holding gender stereotypical attitudes about dating and relationships with some viewers use
281 reality shows as informational guides for relationship behaviour. Our research found that
282 although one of the reasons young people watch reality TV is to seek advice and learn about
283 relationships, it is not the biggest reason and, as Neumann-Lenz et al (2018) argue, there are
284 multiple reasons. The young people we spoke to stated their biggest reason was the
285 entertainment value of the show, and the shared talking point with their friends:

286   *"[I] watch it because I have nothing else to do [.... it's a conversation starter. And*
287   *[for] entertainment purposes only and its comedic values" (Focus group (FG) age 17*
288   *Female.)*

289 Our research, although limited in terms of numbers, shows that young people have a more
290 nuanced awareness of the debates around reality TV, and as Hills (2005) argues, viewers
291 generally rejected the idea of learning from watching such shows and instead regarded them
292 primarily as entertainment:

293   *I honestly just watch it as entertainment and gossip" (FG age 16 F)*

294 Many of the respondents noted the importance of social media on their viewing habits
295 suggesting the interconnectedness of different media platforms:
296
297   *"We are watching it when we get to bed. You can know what's happening without*
298   *watching it because everyone talks about it as well as social media, Instagram*
299   *Magazines and Newspaper" (FG age 17 F)*

300 Others did not watch the TV programme but because of the widespread social media
301 coverage were still able to discuss it:

302   *"No [I don't watch it] but people talk to me about it.....it's all over social media"*
303   *(FG year 9 age 13 F)*

304 Social media is seen to make audiences active consumers, or 'proconsumers'(Wilson, 2015),
305 simultaneously functioning as means to connect with a world outside, engage in
306 conversations, and dive deeper into the television text. Of the target audience for Love

Island, 16-24 years, 95% own a smart phone (Ofcom 2018) enabling young people watch the show and simultaneously discuss it online, or simply see the show´s highlights or discussions about it on social media. According to Jenkins (2016), this participatory culture means audiences are no longer passive consumers, but actively engage in, and collaborate across multiple platforms, sharing views with others. Young people are not passive watchers, and they discussed the processes behind reality TV, and the power of social and digital media to manipulate the behaviour of both the participants and the audience. The older participants in particular were aware of this:

> "It keeps asking questions to keep engagement but they [the producers] don't care what they (the audience) think, it's just to get money, to boost figures and get sponsorship. Social media equals more interaction, more money" (FG age 21 F)

Social media also plays a part in the selection of the contestants. Like the young people in Allen's (2013) study, our respondents questioned 'ordinariness' and authenticity of participants. It was obvious to our focus groups that those selected to be on Love Island were already 'instafamous' Marwick (2015, 2016) prior to the show and their interest was to nurture their fame:

> They chose Insta models, people who are already famous who already have a particular life style. They don't choose average people. So if you think they are like you, you are fooling yourself [….]I think that the contestants weren't interested in love just wanted to become more famous (FG year 11 age 17 F).

This bought the 'realness' of their relationship, into question, and this idea of 'fakeness' was discussed in more detail in terms of the relationships portrayed on Love Island, what is real is reality a TV show is questioned versus reality to lived experiences with the young people we worked with.

4.2 Young people's views of relationships on Love Island: 'true love' or 'a toxic battle'?

Whilst the majority of young people were aware of the lack of authenticity of the programme, some young people saw the show as a portrayal of positive relationships, where contestants can find ´true love´:

> One of the good things about it (love Island) is that they [the contestants] find true love well sometimes they get to meet new people and make new friends. (SG F year 8 age 13)

The positive aspects of the show tended to focus on friendships rather than romance (REF) However, they were aware that although some relationships were 'genuine' the competitive nature of the programme complicates matters:

> "I think there is some genuine care but the game of the show makes things complicated and caused bad arguments. It shows how romance can blossom and you can see flirting and genuine connections and how relationship can develop" (FG age 17 F)

The majority of the young people we spoke to were critical of the 'fakeness' of the relationships shown and the fact that it is a game show with a financial incentive:

> " I don't like because its shit, it forces people to fall in love and get money and even if you don't fall in love when you find out, you still get money - the show is about trying to fall in love but it's really all about making money" (FG year 10 age 15 M)

Despite some positive comments, most young people saw the programme as promoting unhealthy relationships, with one young man commenting:

> [it's] a toxic battle between the two sides instead of being normal and that's a bad thing to show kids and teenagers" (FG year 10 age 15 M)

As the show exaggerates the drama between contestants and their coupling, this creates the illusion that relationships are built on unrealistic conflicts between abuse and love. Bourne (2019) argues abusive relationships are portrayed as 'gestures of love' with couples being rewarded for overcoming these to be 'happily ever after' which is not portraying a positive starting point for young people embarking on relationships. The young people in our focus groups however recognised that the relationships portrayed were not 'equal' and were based on unhealthy behaviours:

> Its (Love Island) is bad they change mates every week and swear, and argue at each other all the time. Someone's is always crying because it feels like there being forced into relationships and that's wrong. When you want to get with someone you both have to want it it's like a joint decision. (SG year 8 age 13 F)

Some young people were also unhappy about the lack of diversity amongst contestants, not just in terms of body size and shape, but also because of the heteronormativity presented:

> They only have boy girl relationships and that's not fair cos some of my mates are gay and it should really have gay contestants (SG year 9 age 13 M)

Young people wanted to see more diversity of relationships on the show to reflect their lived experiences. This awareness of the inauthenticity of the contestants suggest that the influence of programme such as Love Island is not as great as media moral panics assume. Young people are active viewers who 'negotiate the reality contract' of TV programmes (Allen and Mendick 2013), being aware of the ways in which it constructs identities and invites the audience to make moral judgements around class, gender and ethnicity. If the identities seem unauthentic, the viewers might begin doubting how ´ordinary´ or genuine the contestants truly are, which might result in young people relating less to the contestants and any influence to diminish. Young people were aware that the relationships may not be 'real' and therefore they may not be influenced by what they see on TV:

> It's like it's all forced for the cameras so it's not real it doesn't influence me because me and my mates know it's not genuine you know what I mean? (FG year 9 age 14 F)

It also brought into question young people's understandings of what relationships are, and the perceived 'naturalness' of 'falling in love'. For the young people, Love Island´s relationships were not 'real' because they were constructed on, and for, TV:

391   *"Don't like it because it's kind of like make relationships in a place where it's just*
392   *like uncomfortable and not a place to make a solid relationship and you have to make*
393   *decisions about relationships in front of other people and that's bad because it's*
394   *unnatural like trying to grow food in a box . Relationships should just happen*
395   *naturally without being forced (FG age 17 F)*

396   However, there was little discussion of what the 'solid' relationship would be and how it
397   would form. The idea that relationships happen 'naturally', is linked to late modernity
398   concepts of romantic love (Giddens, 1992) , without a recognition of social and structural
399   constraints on relationships. This suggest young people did not necessarily have the language
400   and/or experience to frame their viewing within a wider context, or to question notions of
401   'true love'. As one respondent commented, it presents a false view of relationships to
402   younger viewers:

403
404   *"They trust many people who they don't really know and it isn't true love. In addition,*
405   *Love Island is seen by hundreds of teenagers who take an incorrect view of what a*
406   *relationship means" (FG age 16 F)*

407   As discussed earlier, adolescents and young adults are believed to be most susceptible to
408   media messages depicting domestic abuse because they are still learning what behaviours are
409   appropriate in romantic and sexual relationships (Arnett, 2000; Coyne et al., 2011). While
410   some argue showing domestic abuse on television can serve as a means of educating viewers
411   about the issue, it is also argued that the vast majority of portrayals on television make light
412   of, or normalize, domestic abuse within intimate relationships (Kohlman et al., 2014).

413   Whilst a number of respondents thought Love Island presented a problematic view of
414   relationships, many acknowledged it did enable young people to start conversations around
415   'healthy' and unhealthy' relationships, and this could be a positive move.

416   **4.4 Love Island as relationship education**

417   The popularity of the show, and the associated social media attention, enabled young people to
418   discuss relationships, and raised awareness of gaslighting and other early warning signs of abuse.
419   Focus group participants stated they felt social media debates could empower young people to
420   recognise and discuss abusive behaviour:

421   *when someone is trying to manipulate the others person or do gaslighting everyone*
422   *recognises it and sees it so everyone talk about it and brings awareness to unhealthy*
423   *relationships then the media all joins in so the emotional trauma is talked about (FG*
424   *age 17 F)*

425   Our research showed that some young people are engaging with current debates about both
426   the authenticity of Love Island and also recognised the examples of unhealthy relationships
427   shown by the programme:

428   *It's good it can teach young people about relationships what's good what's bad. It*
429   *gets us taking about relationships in school and it's lets us see bad personalities (FG*
430   *year 9 age 13 F)*

431   Young people therefore were not passive consumers of reality TV show but interacted with
432   social media to make decisions for themselves about relationships. However, whilst Love
433   Island opened up a space for discussion, the focus was on 'unhealthy' rather than positive
434   relationships, young people discussed the 'bad behaviour', more than the examples of healthy
435   relationships, highlighting a need to provide more education on this. Based on their
436   experience, some of the older focus group participants discussed how Love Island could be
437   used in schools to teach about relationships:

438   *Sex education for me was being told sex was all about rubbing and shaking a bit [...]*
439   *Love island would be good in schools teaching the kids about relationships the conversations*
440   *are a starting point, teachers could use the couples as examples when talking about things*
441   *like what is a toxic relationship and what is gaslighting (FG,F 21)*
442
443   Research shows that current RSE is not effective, is delivered too late and is focussed on
444   biology rather than relationships, consent and sexual agency (Nocentini et al 2010). As Peek
445   and Beresin (2015:178) state, "*Reality television is a stimulus for the ideals, values, behavior,*
446   *and emotional development of children and adolescents*" and teachers need to be better
447   informed about the impact of media exposure to young people. There is therefore potential
448   for Love Island to be used to build both media literacy, and in sex and relationship
449   education in schools. This has been raised by former contestants, commentators and sex
450   education organisations (Bateman, 2018), for example former contestant Eyal Booker says
451   that the programme is *"educational and can teach younger views about relationships,*
452   *particularly teenage boys"* and some organisations, such as Sexplain, have started running
453   Love Island workshops in schools. In the concluding section, we discuss the roles schools
454   play in providing PHSE, and if programmes such a Love island can contribute to relationship
455   and sex education in school.

456
457   **5. Conclusion : Love Island and relationship education**

458   .Reality TV and its associated social media is just one of these ways in which models of intimate
459   partner relationships are shown. The relationships shown on programme such as Love Island,
460   with its wide social media reach, are highly visible to young people, and present conversations
461   about sex, relationships and emotional abuse to a young audience. In our experience, young
462   people´s understanding of the relationships they see on reality TV are nuanced and complex; they
463   understand that the relationships are 'false' and constructed and edited for entertainment value
464   but also recognise that some relationships were 'bad' and unhealthy, and also engaged with and
465   questioned behaviours on social media. Young people's understanding of what healthy and
466   unhealthy relationships look like originate from many sources, including family, friends, peers
467   and the media. Notably absent from the discussions of sources of information for young people
468   was the role of schools.

469   Discussions of Love Island are carried over from online discussions on social media from their
470   bedrooms to face-to-face discussion in the school ground. Whilst Love Island does present some
471   positive models of relationships, and in particular, of male friendships, it also portrayed elements
472   of 'toxic masculinity' and heteronormative gender roles and sexual relationships. Whilst young
473   people recognise many behaviours are not 'healthy', and contestants´ behaviour is being
474   questioned online by viewers themselves on social media, and by domestic abuse organisations,
475   they may not have the skills and information to recognise the signs of unhealthy relationships,
476   and speak out against abuse (Barter, 2009). The young people we worked with in schools often

477 lacked an awareness of what romantic and sexual relationships entailed, and what the early
478 warning sign of abuse are, and had limited reliable sources from which to gain information, often
479 looking for information from social media and the internet.

480 Currently, relationship and sex education (RSE) is not compulsory across the UK, however, from
481 September 2020, will be a statutory requirement in all schools in England. Quality of provision
482 varies widely, with Pound et al's (2016) systematic review finding more than a third of UK
483 schools lacked good-quality RSE in 2013. In addition Ringrose (2016) argues RSE in England
484 is 'currently organised around sexual risk and danger in highly gendered and sexist ways', which
485 reflect, and play into, moral panics around the sexualisation of girls and young women. However,
486 despite its lack of status and variable quality, school-based RSE is seen as vital for safeguarding
487 young people against domestic abuse and sexual exploitation.

488 Schools thus are environments where young people are socialized into gender norms and where
489 significant amounts of gender-based harassment and IPVA goes unchallenged. Adolescence is 'a
490 crucial time when young women and men are developing their sexual identities' (Mahony &
491 Shaughnessy, 2007: p.1) and gender abuse emerges (STIR, 2015a) Policy and interventions in
492 this area are underdeveloped and under-resourced (STIR 2015). However, evaluations of school-
493 based domestic/sexual violence prevention interventions to date have suggested they enable
494 children and young people to change their attitudes and perceptions of equality, respect and
495 consent and have a role in preventing relationship violence among young people (Barter, 2015;
496 Wolfe et al., 2009). Likewise, evidence shows that media literacy interventions may also be an
497 effective component in IPVA prevention efforts (Jeong, Cho, & Hwang, 2012,) and violence
498 prevention efforts have acknowledged the importance of being critical consumers of media

499 Given that the media plays a crucial role in sexual socialisation the inclusion of media literacy
500 into relationship education programmes would help young viewers understand how the media,
501 including reality TV, influences expectations about appropriate behaviour (Rodenhizer et al
502 2019). Bringing discussions of contemporary programmes such as Love Island into the classroom
503 may be one way of engaging young people in discussions about healthy relationships and
504 enabling them to be critical consumers of media.

505   In this context Love Island has the potential to be a starting point for discussions for relationship
506 and sex education in schools using age and ability appropriate workshops with well trained staff,
507 which focus on identifying early warning signs in unhealthy relationships, can encourage young
508 people to question dominant media portrayals and challenge their current norm.

509 Twitter (2019) Data was collected from Twitter in compliance with the relevant terms and
510 conditions.

511 AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

512

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