'Love Island': The Reality of Reality TV

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Love Island is a reality TV dating gameshow, which sees men and women, flying to Majorca looking to find love over a course of eight weeks in the summer. With £50,000 standing as prize money, couples must win over the audience to be in for a chance of winning. Contestants can either apply or be scouted through social media, normally through the social sites such as Instagram and Twitter. Contestants throughout the duration of the show gain followers and 'fans' across social media apps, which are later used for the purpose of advertisement and promoting different things. Reality TV can be seen as a guilty pleasure (Skeggs, 2009) however, is a huge influence on individuals' choices and the nature of today's society. Arguably our reality has been distorted by reality TV, affecting society and how it functions.

The first episode of *Love Island* 2022 had five million viewers, the highest number of viewers the show has had since the 2019 season (Reboot, 2022). Reality tv shows, such as *Love Island*, have a theme of surveillance (Beaty, 2021). Foucault (2008) explores the idea of panopticon surveillance as "permanent visibility", exploring this through a prison setting; a watch tower would be central to all prisoners so they could be

watched at all time; therefore, they would constantly be monitored and under surveillance. (Foucault, 008).

Furthermore, the behaviour of the watchers would be influenced by the watcher. This is the same as *Love Island*, as cameras monitor them all hours of the day, therefore their behaviour on the show may be influenced by this. The idea of constantly being under surveillance questions whether contestants on *Love Island* are genuine (Beaty, 2021) or whether they're acting up to win over the audience. Furthering from the idea of the panoptic, synoptic surveillance is also key (Mathiesen, 1997). Synoptic surveillance is the monitoring of the few by the many (Mathiesen, 1997). Contemporary society has been distinguished by these parallel surveillance's, creating a "viewer society" (Mathiesen, 1997).

The growth of media has allowed media personalities to be created (Beaty, 2021), that shape and spread information to the rest of society. This makes the 'few' have power over the many, where they can be extremely influential and evoke a culture of control (Lyon, 2010; Mathiesen, 1997). *Love Island* represents this as the contestants gain viewers throughout the period of the show, which turn into followers. Behaviour by the few, which is the *Love Island* contestants, is then mimicked by the many – the viewers at home.

This power dynamic switches through the show – at the start the few have power, however, at the end of the show, the power reverses onto the many. *Love Island* contestants rely on the many to win the show and to keep them in through 'dumpings'. Furthermore, the switch in power dynamic defines how successful the contestants will be post show.

Consequently, surveillance within *Love Island* helps reinforce its culture in society by influencing the
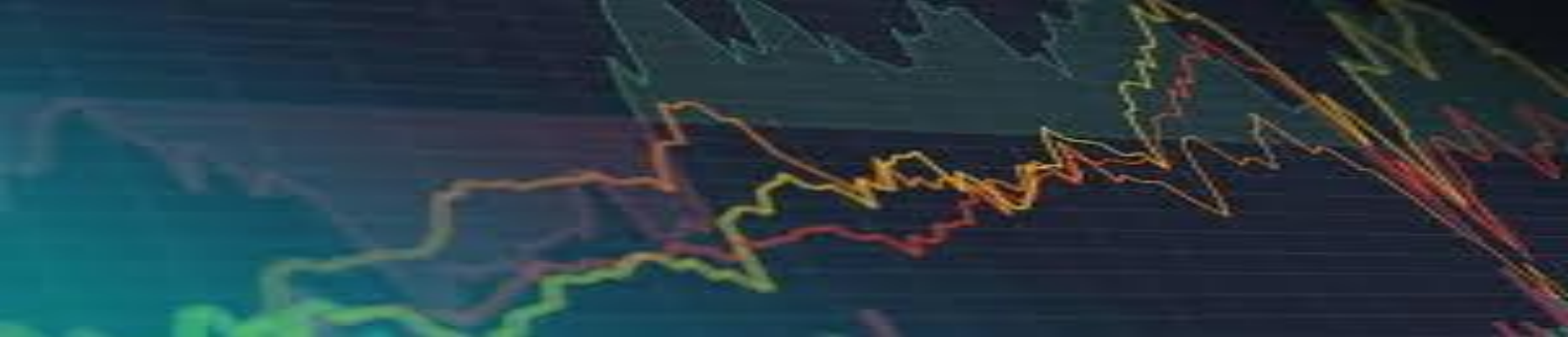
many. Viewers thus lose control over their opinions and start to adapt their lifestyle in order to be like the few contestants. This shapes what we see as 'normal', thus affecting the way we see ourselves and others.

Over the past decade social media has grown rapidly, which has seen a growth in an interactive economy (Andrejevic, 2004) and consequently a growth in a consumer society (Featherstone, 1990). *Love Island* is one of the biggest reality TV shows that has created many 'influences', which embraces surveillance (Pecora, 2002).

As the show runs throughout the eight-week period, contestants gain thousands and in some cases millions of followers across all social media sites from watching the show. These social sites create 'fans' for contestants throughout the show, however, more importantly, after the show (Lyon, 2010). These 'fans'/ followers become fixated with the contestants, adapting their lifestyles to be like them. Through this, *Love Island* helps enforce consumer culture into society.

Love Island commodifies the contestants, as they sell to the audience through watching the show every night to buying merchandise through advertising. However, this commodification is multidirectional as contestants, after the show is finished, come out and sell to their 'fans' through marketing and advertising. Lyon (2010) argues this enforces a culture of control in society; social sites create 'fluid friends' (Lyon, 2010), however, these 'friends' are used for consumer purposes, in order for *Love Island*ers to earn a living, after the show.

Thus, contestants are reliant on their 'fans' to create income after the show. This highlights how consumer habits and culture are affected, shaping

who we are in society (Lyon, 2010; Webster, 2014). Arguably, the contestant appearances are commodified through aesthetic labour (Mears, 2014). *Love Island* profit from a set image, which they portray through their contestants. However, in order to win the show, contestants must win over the audience, therefore they may use aestheticization to their own advantage in order to become fan favourites; this means more popularity, thus better promotion deals when the show has finished.

Due to a cultural shift in society (Webster, 2014), mass media has been a key source in projecting 'beauty standards' and body surveillance as we live in a media saturated environment (Pecora, 2002; Rollero, 2022; Webster, 2014). Through aesthetic labour on *Love Island*, there's a defined way of how to look. Culture reinforces this through, 'beauty apps' (Elias and Gill, 2018) as they encourage the aestheticization that *Love Island* projects. Women are major targets of these apps (Elias and Gill, 2018; Lupton, 2015), in which they are under scrutiny by a mobile phone, a non-human device (Lupton, 2015).

However, men's attitudes towards physical appearance are changing, increasing men's body surveillance as well as women. (Pecora, 2002; Rollero, 2022). This can be supported by *Love Island* as men always attend the gym more intensely before entering the villa in order to look their best as they are aware of people under surveillance for eight weeks. Furthermore, this leads to further self-surveillance, more specifically body surveillance. (Lupton, 2015; Rollero, 2022). Ultimately, creating a hyper-reality (Baudrillard, 1988).

Baudrillard (1988) explains hyper-reality where culture cannot distinguish between what is real
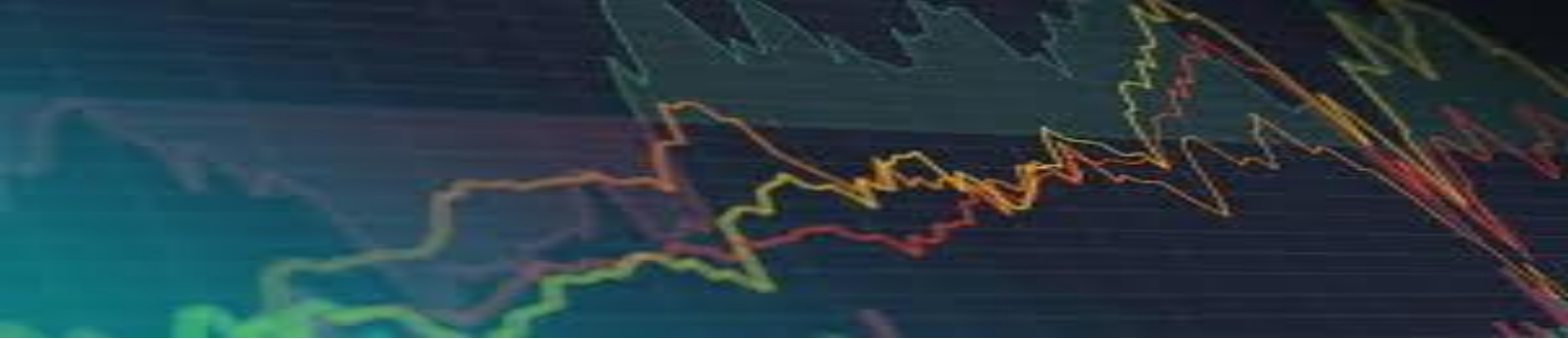
and what is not. In contemporary society, culture has become superficial, where authenticity has been lost (L'Hoiry, 2019). Reality TV, like *Love Island*, helps reinforce this hyper-reality into society, blurring distinct lines of what real life looks like. Lacking body diversity and image, this creates an unrealistic view of people in the world, in which there is no accurate representation.

However, *Love Island* has immersed itself into society. Therefore, self-surveillance is bigger than ever, as people want to categorise themselves to fit the aesthetic of *Love Island*. The hyperreality of *Love Island* is further reinforced after the show has ended through social media, continuing to create a distorted view on 'beauty' thus continuing to shape people's identities. (L'Hoiry, 2019). Furthermore, people change and adapt their looks to fit into a hyperreal world.

Giddens (1991) highlights how individual choices, in society, cause and create different risks. Therefore, different individuals have different risks, which they take on (Beck, 1992). The creation of this *Love Island* culture has undeniably surfaced a risk society.

There is now an objective factor to beauty, with set guidelines on how to achieve the 'perfect look'. However, this isn't always authentic (Elias and Gill, 2018), therefore cannot be achieved without risks. Such risks include cosmetic procedures or surgery, in which bodies can be "fixed" or adjusted in order to achieve the *Love Island* aesthetic. Beck (1992) argues that the more risks taken on the more likely an individual will struggle.

It can be questioned how much these risks are controllable. Body surveillance can be associated and cause risks such as eating disorders, body dysmorphia, depression, anxiety, sexual dysfunction and low self-esteem (Dakanalis et al., 2014; Rollero, 2022). By individual choice of watching *Love Island*, however, is a viewer's own risk, as they are immersing themselves into a risk environment by choice, thus creating many personal risks to themselves.
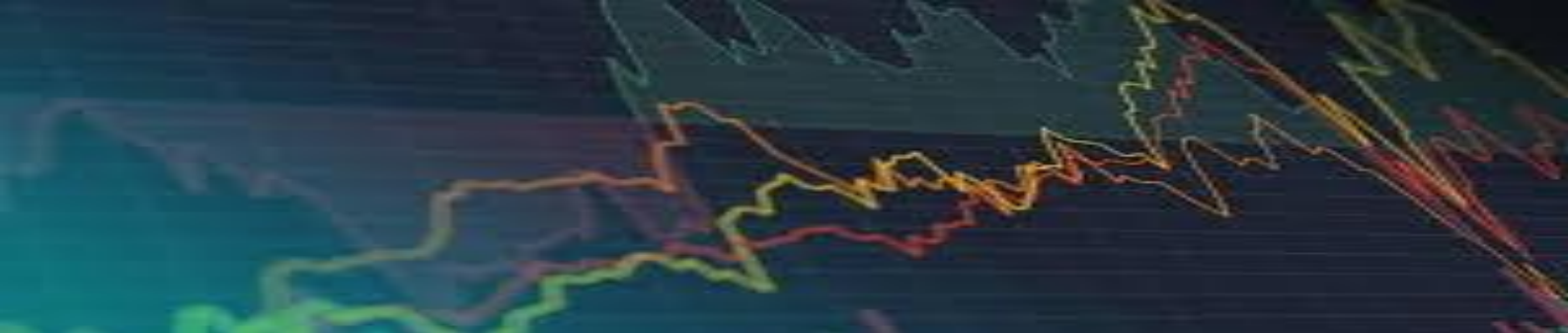
Whilst there are obvious risks to the viewer, there are also risks to the contestants of *Love Island*. From death threats to negative comments, *Love Island*ers expose themselves to risks from the real world. There is also a huge lifestyle change for the contestants, in which there may be pressure to keep up aestheticization on the outside world; it questions whether people lose their authentic self from being a part of the show (Beaty, 2021).

In addition to this, following the show, many contestants live their life online, through social media. Arguably, this creates risks as this 'job' is only upheld by relying on their 'fans'. When contestants are no longer under surveillance every night, they lose power and control over the many, which may affect how popular they on social media, thus affecting consumer habits. Furthermore, this highlights that there is risk of the fragility of life online.

Ultimately, this reflection has highlighted how the growth in reality TV, with the focus being on *Love Island*, has shaped the nature of today's society, both contestants and watchers. It has become an integral part of contemporary society, restructuring culture (Lyon, 2010; Webster, 2014). Admiring those who are used purposely for surveillance allows exposure to the world of reality TV, which has distorted the real-world, creating a bigger risk society.

Surveillance is key to society, occurring both subconsciously and consciously. Consequently, we are influenced by those with power, which are few,

(Mathiesen, 1997) thus shaping our choices, interests and likes determining who we are in society. *Love Island* is just one of the producers creating 'the few', that controls the way we live our lives (Lyon, 2010), from consumer habits (Featherstone, 1990) to the way we look. Consequently, what we see as a guilty pleasure (Skeggs, 2009) can determine and shape our lives more than we believe it does.

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