



The Reality of Gender: Analysing the Construction, Perception and Reinforcement of Gender in Reality Television, Using *Love Island* as a Case Study

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"I declare that this research was approved by the SPAIS Ethics Working Group"

Abstract

This dissertation investigates the construction and performance of gender in contemporary reality television, using *Love Island* as a case study. While media representations of gender are well established in sociological research, reality television offers a distinctive space where real-life behaviours are produced and edited for entertainment. This hybrid media text creates a unique environment for the reinforcement and negotiation of gender norms. Drawing on Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity and Connell's (1995) framework of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity, the dissertation explores how *Love Island* produces a narrow, binary representation of gender. The data reveals that while some viewers critically engage with the show's stereotypes, their consumption and participatory discourse of *Love Island* often contributes to a cultural feedback loop that reinforces these norms. The participatory nature of media consumption emphasises that the audience is not passively receiving but has influence in its meaning. *Love Island* functions as a reflection and a reproducer of dominant gender ideologies, constructing societal understandings of masculinity and femininity through its content and the viewer discourse it generates.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	1
Acknowledgements	2
Introduction	3
Literature Review	5
<i>Gender Construction and Performativity</i>	5
<i>Audience Interpretation and Engagement with Gender Norms</i>	7
<i>Viewer Participation in Shaping Gender Narratives and Cultural Norms</i>	8
<i>Identifying the Gap and Justifying My Research</i>	10
Methodology	11
<i>Love Island Episode Analysis</i>	12
<i>Focus Groups</i>	13
<i>Netnography</i>	16
<i>Data Analysis</i>	17
<i>Ethical Considerations</i>	18
<i>Reflexivity</i>	19
Findings and Discussion	20
Gender Construction and Performance	20
Audience Interpretation and Participation	23
Conclusion	29
Bibliography	32
Appendix A: <i>Love Island</i> Episode Analysis Coding Sheet	37
Appendix B: Focus Group Transcript	39
Appendix C: Images of Netnographic Data	43
Appendix D: Proof of Ethical Approval	47

List of Tables

Table 1. *Focus Group Participants' Characteristics*. Pg. 14.

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To my parents, thank you for your unconditional support and belief in me, even when it seemed like I was just binge-watching reality television. I hope this dissertation is proof that all those years I've spent watching *Love Island* weren't wasted after all.

Introduction

While scholarship on media representations of gender is a saturated area of sociological study, reality television offers a distinctive site of analysis (Gauntlett, 2008). Reality television is a unique media format due to its hybrid nature, where elements of real life are produced for entertainment purposes (Couldry, 2008). In a time where reality television dominates popular culture and social media blurs the line between private life and public performance, programmes like *Love Island* allow for more than entertainment (Nabi, et al., 2003; Rachmad, 2023). They can be understood as influential cultural texts that shape and reflect gender norms (Gill, 2007). *Love Island* in particular merges unscripted interactions with strategic editing to produce a social space where gender norms are displayed but also actively constructed (Gray, 2004; Grumbein and Goodman, 2013). As a popular reality show, *Love Island* acts as both a reflection and influencer of contemporary gender ideologies. The show can be viewed as a cultural template where idealised masculinity and femininity are produced and circulated through the show itself and the social media discourse surrounding it (Connell, 1995; Wood, 1994).

This dissertation investigates how gender is constructed and performed in reality television, with *Love Island* serving as a case study. I explore how stereotypical gender norms are either reinforced or challenged through the show's portrayals, and how these gender depictions are interpreted, internalised, but also challenged by the young adult audience. I aim to unveil the social and cultural implications of these representations, particularly focusing on how they influence societal understandings of masculinity and femininity. Therefore, the research is guided by the following specific questions:

- How are gender roles portrayed on *Love Island*?
- To what extent do these portrayals reflect and reinforce societal attitudes about masculinity and femininity?
- How do the young adult viewers interpret and engage with the show's gendered representations?

These questions are especially relevant in a time when young people are constantly consuming media and are active participants in the digital world (Anderson and Jiang, 2018). Their engagement with shows like *Love Island*, in watching and through social media such as

Instagram and X (formerly Twitter), extends the reach of the programme beyond the television screen and contributes to the ongoing negotiation of gender norms in daily discourse (Gauntlett, 2008; Gill, 2007; Grumbein and Goodman, 2013).

The dissertation is situated within a broader sociological interest in media's role in identity construction. Drawing on Judith Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity, my research builds upon the notion that gender is not a fixed trait but is continually produced through repeated performances that align with dominant social expectations. These socially conditioned gender performances are visible in how *Love Island* contestants' express gender through their appearance, behaviours and emotions. Butler's theory is complemented by Connell's (1995) framework of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity, which highlights how particular gender expressions are privileged whilst marginalising others. Men are expected to be physically dominant and emotionally restrained, while women are encouraged to be highly groomed and emotionally expressive. This gender binary is repeatedly reinforced in *Love Island*, with certain types of men and women celebrated, while those who deviate from these expected norms are often criticised. These portrayals play a role in shaping audience expectations and reinforcing societal standards around attractiveness and emotional conduct (Frevert and Walker, 2014; Grumbein and Goodman, 2013). The show's influence goes beyond its production by building upon Hall's (2003) encoding/decoding model and Jenkins' (2009) theory of participatory culture. My dissertation explores how the viewers decode the messages embedded within the show's production, identifying how the reinforcement and challenging of gender norms can coexist in the audience's interpretation. The audience engagement in real-time discourse can either reproduce or question the gender norms on display on *Love Island*. The interplay between *Love Island* and its audience creates a cultural feedback loop, suggesting viewers are not just passive consumers but co-constructors of meaning making (Livingstone, 2004; Marwick, 2015).

Ultimately, this dissertation contributes to sociological debates on media and gender. It furthers understanding of how contemporary reality television contributes to the reproduction of gender norms. It also demonstrates how audience engagement with hybrid media is complex because it reflects a simultaneous awareness and complicity in the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. The research comes to do this by employing a

triangulated methodological approach. A content analysis of selected *Love Island* episodes identifies recurring patterns of gender representation. This is accompanied by focus group discussions with young adult viewers in the UK which give intel into how these portrayals are received and interpreted. Finally, a netnographic analysis of online discourse reveals how public commentary further negotiates or resists these gender narratives. By integrating these methods, the research captures the relationship between contemporary media, audience and identity construction.

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to critically analyse the existing research on the construction, performance and reception of gender representation in contemporary reality television. By examining how gender roles are presented in the media and interpreted by audiences, this review aims to contextualise and support the arguments of my dissertation.

The literature review is structured to follow the progression of three main themes: construction, interpretation and reinforcement. Firstly, the construction of gender roles and expectations within media, highlighting the portrayal of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity. Secondly, audience reception and the decoding of these gender roles, exploring how viewers perceive gender portrayals in reality television. Thirdly, the role of social media as a feedback loop, where online discourse either reinforces or challenges these constructed gender norms. This structure enables a logical exploration of how gender is constructed, received and perpetuated in media, specifically *Love Island*, and its wider social impacts.

Gender Construction and Performativity

As gender is the sociological focus of my dissertation, I began my literature research broadly on foundational gender thinkers (Butler, 1990; Connell, 1995), before slightly narrowing my focus on theorists that intersect these core gender concepts with media studies (Gill, 2007). This seemed logical as the theme of gender construction and performativity is central to understanding how media portrayals shape societal perceptions of masculinity and femininity.

The key scholars across gender theory and media studies (Butler, 1990; Connell, 1995; Gill 2007), explore how gender is not inherent or static, but instead are social constructs reinforced through the repetition of behaviours and cultural norms. Their studies reveal debates on how gender is constructed, performed, maintained and sometimes challenged.

Raewyn Connell is a renowned gender sociologist, specialising in hegemonic masculinities. Her concept of *hegemonic masculinities* (1995) and emphasised femininity provides a foundational framework for understanding gender construction and its application in a media context. Connell states hegemonic masculinity as the portrayal of men as physically strong, dominant and emotionally restrained. This is contrasted with emphasised femininity, where women are expected to be nurturing, emotional and fixated on appearance (Hochschild, 1983). Scholars like Gill (2007), argue that media narratives tend to reproduce these binary gender expectations, and therefore reinforcing the idea of masculine and feminine roles being natural. Media sustains gender ideologies by portraying these archetypes and subtly guiding the audience to internalise and subconsciously reproduce gender norms.

Additionally, Judith Butler offers another foundational gender framework in her theory of *gender performativity* (1990). She introduces a critical perspective on gender construction, emphasising that gender identity is not innate, rather the result of repeated performances of socially sanctioned behaviours. She clarifies, ““The repetition of gender exposes the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance. As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an ‘act.’” (Butler, 1990, p.200). Building upon Butler (1990) and Connell (1995), this suggests that by enacting on behaviours associated with masculine and feminine traits, individuals constantly construct and reinforce their gender identity. Within media, this performativity can be seen in how characters engage in behaviour that either reinforces or challenges societal expectations of gender. Media theorists (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Wood, 1994) agree that repeated portrayals have a normalising effect, influencing constructed gender roles to appear as inherent. Gill (2007) and McRobbie (2009) continue the expansion of Butler’s theory by arguing that media can act as an arena in which gendered behavioural traits are amplified. In doing so, allowing audiences to view, internalise and replicate these performances.

Foucault’s (1977) concept of surveillance and self-discipline is another influential approach to understanding gender construction in media. He theorises that an awareness of being

observed can shape an individual's behaviour, driving them to conform to societal norms. In unscripted media, like reality television and social media, this self-surveillance leads individuals to perform gendered behaviours that align with societal expectations. Couldry (2008) furthers this argument by repeating that media contexts where participants are constantly observed encourages them to embody socially approved behaviours. Surveillance and observation reinforce traditional gender roles through self-discipline. Wood (1994) also discusses media's role in cultivating self-surveillance among viewers, who then adopt these societal expected gendered behaviours in their everyday lives. In turn, further entrenching normative ideals of masculinity and femininity, as conceptualised by Connell (1995). It is this internalised gendered behaviour from self-surveillance that I will be observing during the episode content analysis in my methodology. Using this method of primary data collection will allow the concepts presented by these key sociological thinkers to be connected and exemplified in my case study of *Love Island*.

Audience Interpretation and Engagement with Gender Norms

Building on the concept of gender as socially constructed (Butler, 1990; De Beauvoir, 1949) and performed (Butler, 1990; Connell, 1995), the second theme of audience reception examines how viewers interpret and engage with these portrayals. This theme of interpretation extends the previous focus by analysing how these constructed gender roles are received and discussed by the audience. This is especially relevant in interactive media spaces like social media or audience participation reality shows (Deller, 2019). This section explores the decoding process, where viewers unravel gendered representations and expectations based on their personal experiences, beliefs and identity.

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model (2003) provides the foundational framework for understanding audience interpretation. His decoding concept argues that viewers do not passively accept messages and ideologies through media, but instead interpret them through either a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional position. Gill (2007) and Wood (2004) have applied Hall's model onto gendered media, discovering that while some viewers accept the dominant gender portrayals of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity (Connell, 1995), others negotiate these performances based on their own identity and experiences.

These scholarly studies suggest that audience interpretation is not simply acceptance of its encoded message, but a complex process influenced by personal experiences, social context and discourses. My use of focus groups has been chosen to further explore this concept of audience interpretation and decoding of gender portrayals in media, focusing on how gender performances are perceived by young *Love Island* watchers.

Social media platforms provide a unique space to examine how viewers decode and discuss gender representations in media, with the benefit of observing real-time responses (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). Social media enables individuals to express opinions, challenge expectations and suggest alternative interpretations of gender portrayals (Felton, 2015). The interactive relationship between media and audiences can be described as part of a feedback loop in which gender representations in media shape audience expectations, which can then influence future media content (Livingstone, 2004). In the context of reality television, platforms like X and Instagram allow viewers to comment on the behaviour of contestants on the show. Particular commenting on issues of masculinity and femininity can reinforce or resist the portrayed gender roles (Connell, 2007). Hence, why I have chosen netnography as part of my methodological triangulation, to understand how the *Love Island* audience is decoding the gendered messages encoded in the episodes, and how the social media feedback loop influences how gender is perceived.

Viewer Participation in Shaping Gender Narratives and Cultural Norms

The third theme continues to examine how audience engagement can reinforce or challenge gender norms portrayed in media (Radway, 1984), specifically reality television. This theme focuses on the interactivity of media platforms as key factors in shaping gender discourses. Progressing on from previous themes, encoding and decoding of gender narratives in media; this theme explores how social media engagement plays a dual role in perpetuating and contesting gender stereotypes. The real-time feedback loop created by audience participation allows viewers to consume gendered expectations but also actively respond to and influence them (Felton, 2015; Deller, 2019).

Platforms like Instagram and X offer a space for individuals to respond to media content (Felton, 2015). Interactions between social media users and reality television often reinforces

gender norms rather than challenging them (Couldry, 2008; Radway, 1984). Jenkins's (2009) concept of a participatory culture highlights how social media enables viewers to become active participants in discussions that shape and perpetuate certain media narratives. Livingstone (2004) states that this participatory environment creates the feedback loop, as discussed previously. Viewer's comments and reactions are integrated into the ongoing discourse, often reinforcing the dominant construction of gender that tends to be encoded in media.

Gray (2004) and Gauntlett (2008) demonstrate how online discussions on reality TV participants often focuses on whether they adhere or deviate from traditional gender expectations. Male contestants, on shows like *Love Island*, who exhibit hegemonic male traits are usually praised. Similarly, women who present as the conventional ideals of femininity tend to receive positive reinforcement (Gill, 2008; Hochschild, 1983; Tiggemann and Slater, 2013). My data analysis will either contest or affirm these ideas; and whether audience engagement through social media amplifies traditional gender constructions, with viewers either policing or rewarding participants for conforming or deviating from these expectations.

Social media discourse often amplifies and perpetuates gender stereotypes (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). However, they can also offer opportunities for critique and re-interpretation of these societal norms. Gauntlett (2008) states that while reality TV participants may embody some gender norms, social media users often discuss these gender behavioural performances, either reinforcing expectations or challenging them with critique and satire. This is evident in discussions around televised personalities, where audiences may question gender portrayals, sometimes using humour to subvert traditional gender stereotypes. Gauntlett (2008) notes how online platforms can become sites for feminist critique, allowing discussion on the limitations of binary gender expectations. These conversations often arise as a counternarrative within the larger discussions, with hashtags and posts challenging the stereotypical performances of masculinity and femininity (Gauntlett, 2008). This is where my social media analysis will come in to play. To explore this further, I will be investigating how users critically engage with discussions challenging gender performance in *Love Island*.

However, these critical comments often remain marginal compared to the mainstream discourse, which tends to uphold traditional gender norms (Wood, 1994). While social media provides the space for critical voices, these critiques do not necessarily have a lasting impact

on general societal norms, as the universal narratives continue to dominate public perception (Denby, 2021 and Livingstone; Lunt, 1994). Therefore, audience engagement on social media acts as both a site for marginalised critiques, but primarily as reinforcement for existing societal constructions. This illustrates the complexity of modern media consumption (Jenkins, 2006).

Identifying the Gap and Justifying My Research

In sociological academia, it is largely agreed that media has a foundational role in constructing and perpetuating gender stereotypes. Connell's (1995) hegemonic masculinity and Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity are cited as frameworks for understanding how gender is performed and reinforced through society and culture. They provide a basis for analysing gender in reality television, where stereotypical performances of masculinity and femininity are often exaggerated for entertainment purposes (Spencer, 2014). Gill (2007) and Wood (1994) interject that media serves as a site for both reinforcing and challenging gendered expectations, meaning shows like *Love Island* reflect societal power dynamics.

However, there is debate as to the extent to which the audience internalises or resists these expectations. Hall's (2003) encoding/decoding model has been applied to explore this interaction. Yet, scholars remain divided on whether viewers adopt the dominant hegemonic ideals or engage in the oppositional reading and add to the discussion on critiquing these norms. Gauntlett (2008) suggests that they are more varied and fluid, while McRobbie (2009) argues that gender portrayals in media risk subtly re-entrenching patriarchal norms even in seemingly progressive contexts.

Most scholars are agreeable on these themes, but the controversy lies in the role of social media. While Gauntlett (2008) and Livingstone (2004) emphasise the potential of media platforms to challenge dominant societal narratives, others (Wood, 1994; Denby, 2021) argue that these platforms often just amplify the mainstream discourse. Audience engagement through social media tends to oscillate between reinforcing and challenging gender norms, creating a complex and sometimes contradictory feedback loop (Livingstone, 2004).

Despite the plethora of literature on gender and media, several gaps remain. Whilst feminist media theory has extensively examined traditional forms of media, there is less specificity on reality television as a site of gender performance. Studies fail to explore how the hybrid nature of reality TV, blurring fiction and reality, complicates interpretations of gender norms.

Additionally, there is substantial research on audience reception, however, the role of social media in shaping and perpetuating gender narratives remains weak. Existing publications lack focus on examining the dynamic interplay between media producers, audience reception and the participatory nature of social media platforms. This is reflected in the under-researched intersection of young adult viewers, reality television and gender performance. Studies often generalise viewer behaviours without considering how specific demographics, such as young adults, navigate and negotiate media portrayals within social and cultural contexts.

These gaps directly inform the focus of my dissertation. My research addresses these by applying the well-established theories (Butler, 1990; Connell, 1995; Gill 2007; Hall, 2003) to the context of *Love Island*, bridging the gap between gender theory and its application in hybrid media formats. My focus on young adult viewers and their engagement with gender performances in reality TV, responds to the need for further exploration of demographic specific responses. By analysing these dynamics in a case study of a popular reality TV show, my study will provide insights into the nuanced ways young adult audiences contribute to the ongoing construction of gender roles, both reinforcing traditional stereotypes and engaging in resistance to these ideals. By combining content analysis with focus groups and netnography, my research aims to address these gaps.

Methodology

Building on the gaps I identified in the literature review, the methodology outlines the research design I employed to examine how *Love Island* constructs, performs, and reinforces gender norms, and how these portrayals are received and interpreted by the young adult viewers. By using episode content analysis, focus groups and netnography, my dissertation applies the foundational gender theories (Butler, 1990; Connell, 1995; Hall, 2003) to a hybrid media format. With my choice of methods, I aim to bridge theoretical insights with real-world gendered performances in media and the simultaneous audience interactions. Each method

was chosen for its ability to address specific aspects of my research questions. The combination of these methods ensures methodological triangulation, strengthening the reliability and depth of my findings by analysing from multiple perspectives (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017). By integrating methodological triangulation into my research, I will conclude with a well-rounded understanding of gender dynamics within the hybridity of reality television.

Love Island Episode Analysis

Given the prominence of reality TV shows influencing and reflecting on contemporary social norms (Couldry, 2008), analysing the *Love Island* episode content is vital in understanding the show's role in shaping gender perceptions. I selected content analysis to ensure the systematic examination of *Love Island* episodes and the identification of recurring patterns in gender representation. This method provides a structured and replicable approach to exploring how gender norms are constructed and performed both visually and verbally (Neuendorf, 2017). By focusing on contestants' behaviours, emotional expressions, and physical appearances, the episode analysis allows for a nuanced investigation of whether *Love Island* reinforces or challenges traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

A total of twenty episodes of *Love Island* were streamed on ITV Hub, allowing for consistent access to the source material. Episodes were selected from across all seasons to ensure a diverse representation of gender portrayals. To capture a comprehensive range of gender depictions, key episodes including pilots, finales, recouplings, and heated confrontations were purposefully chosen. These episodes are moments of high audience engagement, making them valuable for understanding how gender is performed and received by the viewers (Digital Spy, 2024). This sampling strategy also warrants that the analysis covers a spectrum of gendered themes. Using guidance from Krippendorff (2018) and Braun and Clarke (2006), the episode analysis focused on the following gender themes:

- Physical appearance – How contestants are praised or objectified for their appearance, emphasising societal beauty standards and gendered expectations.

- Emotional expression – How contestants express emotions, aligning or challenging stereotypical gender portrayals. Do they reflect Connell's (1995) hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity?

These episodes were analysed using a coding sheet to ensure that observations were systematically recorded (Appendix A). The coding was conducted manually to promote a close engagement with the source. Themes were initially identified using an inductive approach, highlighting themes organically emerging from the material (Thomas, 2003). This allowed for insights into new and unexpected gender dynamics, whilst minimising researcher bias. A deductive approach was then taken to refine the data. Key theoretical frameworks from feminist media studies (Gill, 2007) and gender performativity (Butler, 1990) guided this process to ensure alignment with existing scholarship.

Episode analysis provides a systematic and replicable method for identifying patterns in gender portrayals (Neuendorf, 2017). Importantly, it offers concrete evidence of recurring themes of gender in *Love Island*. It allows for the identification of both overt and subtle gender performances, which contribute to a deeper understanding of how media reinforces or challenges these societal norms and expectations. However, content analysis of episodes is inherently interpretive and researcher bias may influence the identification and categorisation of themes (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991). To prevent this, the findings from the *Love Island* episode analysis were triangulated with focus group discussions and social media analysis.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were chosen to delve deeper into audience interpretations of *Love Island*. By encouraging interactive discussions, this method allows participants to reflect on their perceptions of gender in *Love Island* and compare them with others' views (Acocella, 2012). The discussion groups allowed for a nuanced exploration of how gender portrayals in the show intersect with participants' perceptions of societal expectations and their lived experiences (Wood, 1994). Focus groups were selected over interviews so that both collective attitudes and personal insights were revealed (Morgan, 1997). Focus groups provide a dynamic setting where participants can challenge, validate, and expand upon each other's thoughts, allowing

for a much more in-depth understanding of how media representations influence and reflect societal norms.

Two focus groups were conducted, each consisting of five participants recruited through snowball sampling (Parker, Scott, and Geddes, 2019). This strategy utilised personal networks to identify *Love Island* viewers aged 18-28, aligning with the show's target demographic (Smith, 2019). The recruitment process involved reaching out to my network through social media platforms, such as Instagram and WhatsApp, and encouraging existing connections to expand the participant pool. Both male and female participants were included to ensure diverse perspectives on gender portrayals. *Love Island* draws in more of a female audience and this was reflected in the participants of the focus groups (Smith, 2019). While snowball sampling may introduce some homogeneity, efforts were made to include participants from various backgrounds and identities to capture a broader range of opinions (Parker, Scott, and Geddes, 2019). This approach ensured that participants had different life experiences and social contexts that could influence their perspectives on gender performances in *Love Island*. Table 1 presents the participants' characteristics.

Table 1. Focus Group Participants' Characteristics

Participant	Gender	Age	Occupation	Focus Group
A	Female	22	Student	1
B	Female	21	Student	1
C	Male	19	Hospitality	1
D	Female	20	Unemployed	1
E	Male	21	Nurse	1
F	Female	23	Sales	2
G	Female	25	Hospitality	2
H	Female	21	Student	2
I	Male	22	Student	2
J	Female	26	Charity	2

The focus groups were held in university rooms to ensure the environment was neutral and accessible. Each discussion session lasted approximately 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Open-ended questions guided the discussion and addressed topics such as:

- How participants perceive male and female contestants' roles and expectations on *Love Island*.
- Whether the show's portrayal of gender reflects or challenges their real-life experiences.
- How gender performance influences contestants' success on the show.

The group dynamic encouraged thoughtful discussions revealing insights and collective reflection that may not have emerged in individual interviews (Morgan, 1997). Group participants were encouraged to build upon other's responses, which facilitated a deeper analysis of how reality television shapes and reinforces gender norms (Appendix B). The presence of multiple participants made it possible for opinions to shift and evolve as individuals engaged in discussion and were able to reconsider their initial viewpoints (Morgan, 1997). The semi-structured nature of the discussions allowed for spontaneous debates, leading to the emergence of themes that were not initially anticipated (Acocella, 2012). The open-ended questions allowed the discussions to be flexible and responsive to participants' perspectives and prevented the analysis from being limited to preconceived thoughts.

For the most part, focus groups allow for interactive, meaningful discussions, generating an in-depth understanding of audience interpretations (Morgan, 1997). However, group dynamics can sometimes lead to issues with vocally dominant participants (Acocella, 2012). To mitigate this, as the interviewer, I ensured equal participation and created a safe environment for all opinions to be shared. This involved encouraging quieter participants to share their views and diplomatically steering discussions away from individuals dominating the conversation. Fortunately, this was not a significant issue as participants were avid *Love Island* viewers who engaged passionately and allowed all voices to be heard.

An additional limitation is the snowball sampling for the focus groups. Due to my familiarity with some of the discussion participants, there is a possibility that responses were influenced because of my presence. Participants may have overshared or withheld information and opinions compared to what they may have disclosed with an unknown interviewer (Parker, Scott, and Geddes, 2019). This was considered throughout the analysis to maintain data integrity and minimise potential bias. Reflexivity and acknowledgment of my positionality and

the potential influence on participants' responses were maintained throughout the research process (Bourke, 2014).

Netnography

Social media analysis, or netnography as coined by Kozinets (2010), complements episode content analysis by capturing how viewers engage with gender portrayals on *Love Island* through social media. This method exposes the digital interactions and reveals real-time audience reactions and interpretations of the show (Kozinets, 2010). Netnography is especially effective in capturing unfiltered and spontaneous reactions, which may not emerge in focus groups or interview-like settings (Bowler, 2010). Social media platforms serve as a space where viewers express their immediate opinions, challenge depictions and reinforce societal norms, making this method invaluable for researching gender representation in media (Felton, 2015). X and Instagram are highly active platforms for *Love Island* discussion (Bond, 2019). They offer a wealth of data on reactions to *Love Island*, particularly the themes of gender I am interested in. By exploring audience interactions and conversations on social media, netnography offers a dynamic understanding of how consumers engage with gender portrayals in real time.

The netnography focused on social media posts from X and Instagram, platforms where *Love Island* viewers generate significant discussion (Bond, 2019). A total of 100 posts were selected using hashtags such as #LoveIsland and #LoveIslandUK during peak moments across all seasons (Appendix C). These moments of high engagement included pilot episodes, eliminations, and plot twists. Capturing data during these peak moments ensured an established dataset reflective of audience discourse. To ensure a range of perspectives, fan accounts, general viewers, and the official *Love Island* account were analysed. Although, the inclusion of fan posts allowed for a more nuanced understanding of audience discourse, as dedicated followers often engage in deeper, more critical discussions of contestants' portrayals (Bowler, 2010).

The social media posts were manually categorised into themes, allowing me to identify patterns in audience engagement and their discourse on gender. The thematic approach is synonymous with the other approaches in my methodology and is aligned with Braun and

Clarke's (2006) framework, which emphasises identifying, reviewing, and then refining themes. The following gender-related themes emerged:

- **Body Image:** Commentary on contestants' physical appearances and societal beauty standards. Many posts reflected on the unrealistic body expectations perpetuated by the show.
- **Emotional Expression:** Discussions on how male and female contestants navigate emotional vulnerability and communication. Viewers debated whether the show reinforced traditional gender norms that discourage men from openly expressing their emotions while encouraging women to be emotionally available.

Netnography provides access to authentic, real-time audience reactions that offer insights into how viewers interpret gender portrayals on *Love Island* (Kozinets, 2010). This approach allows for the analysis of naturally occurring discussions without influencing participant responses, unlike the focus groups. However, social media posts are selective and may not represent the broader audience. Online discourse often skews towards more vocal or engaged viewers, and more passive watchers with differing perspectives may be underrepresented because of their lack of engagement with *Love Island* on social media (Bowler, 2010).

Data Analysis

My methodology applies a combined inductive and deductive research approach, allowing for both the data-driven generation of themes and the application of existing theoretical insights (Thomas, 2003; Reyes, 2004). The inductive approach allows for the emergence of patterns and themes from the data, making it suitable for analysing evolving content (Thomas, 2003). This is particularly useful in netnography with the fast-paced nature of social media discussions and media representations. Unlike a purely deductive approach that tests predetermined hypotheses, the inductive component enables the discovery of trends and themes embedded in the data that may not have been predicted. Incorporating an inductive method also reduces researcher bias by allowing the themes to emerge organically rather than my familiarity with *Love Island* to overrule the collection and analysis of the data (Baxter, 2000).

A deductive approach was then incorporated to engage with the existing literature and theoretical frameworks (Reyes, 2004). In this way, the findings would be reflective of (Butler, 1990; Connell, 1995; Hall, 2003) and contribute meaningfully to scholarly discussions. The duality of an inductive and deductive approach enhances the ability to capture both expected and unexpected findings. By maintaining theoretical alignment and allowing themes to develop naturally, encourages a more comprehensive understanding of gender portrayals and audience reactions in media discourse. This methodological strategy ensures a balance between empirical exploration and theoretical grounding.

The methodological triangulation employs thematic analysis for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within the data generated from the three methods (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018). Thematic analysis is particularly suitable for my research, as it enabled me to uncover underlying meanings, recurring themes, and social narratives within media and viewer responses. To ensure methodological consistency and analytical thoroughness, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework was applied throughout the methodological process. This approach enabled the study to systematically explore gender portrayals and audience reactions. By applying thematic analysis across all three methods, the emerging and refined themes could be cross-referenced and analysed collectively. In doing so, the research produces reliable and insightful interpretations of gender portrayals in *Love Island*.

Ethical Considerations

My research adheres to ethical guidelines to ensure integrity, confidentiality, and the well-being of all participants and data sources (Israel and Hay, 2006). Ethical considerations were carefully addressed across episode analysis, netnography, and focus group discussions to uphold responsible research conduct.

Both episode content analysis and netnography were conducted using publicly available data, which reduced potential ethical concerns (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). As social media content is usually generated within a public or semi-public space, careful measures were taken to respect user privacy. To safeguard anonymity, all identifiable information from social media posts was removed. No direct interaction occurred with social media users on X and Instagram

(Markham and Buchanan, 2012). This was carried out to ensure minimal disturbance and invasion into online discussions and communities.

Ethical protocols were strictly followed to protect focus group participants' rights and well-being before, during, and after the discussions (Sim and Waterfield, 2019). Prior to participation, all individuals were provided with detailed information regarding the research purpose and written consent was obtained. Participants were fully aware of their rights, including the right to withdraw from the research at any time (BSA, 2017). Confidentiality was a priority, particularly given the sensitive nature of discussions on gender stereotypes and body image. Participants were encouraged to share their perspectives with sensitivity and a respectful environment in mind, to minimise any discomfort (Hesse-Biber & Leaby, 2011). To protect the identities of participants, no identifiable information was included and pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and analysis (Israel and Hay, 2006).

Ethical approval for all methods was obtained from the University of Bristol's ethics committee to ensure compliance with the institution's ethical standards (Appendix D) (University of Bristol, 2024). The research adhered to best practices in research ethics (BSA, 2017). For my study, this included fostering a safe and inclusive discussion space, maintaining transparency, and handling data securely (Israel and Hay, 2006). By prioritising ethical considerations in all aspects of the research, I have ensured the responsible handling of both publicly available and participant data and maintained commitment to academic ethics guidelines.

Reflexivity

As a researcher and a fan of *Love Island*, my familiarity with the show and its audience provided valuable contextual insight, particularly when interpreting netnographic data and engaging with the focus group participants. This insider perspective allowed for more open and meaningful discussions and enhanced the depth of my analysis. However, this positionality introduced the potential for bias during data collection. To reduce the possibility of researcher bias, a reflexive approach was implemented throughout the research process (Bourke, 2014). Reflexive journaling was used to document personal assumptions and preconceptions. This ensured critical self-awareness and allowed for continual reflection on how my opinions and experiences might shape the data collection and analysis. By

acknowledging my positionality, the study maintains analytical consistency and accuracy by subsiding researcher bias (Bourke, 2014; Hesse-Biber & Leaby, 2011).

Findings and Discussion

The findings present the key data collected from my triangulated methodology. The findings continue the focus on how *Love Island* constructs, performs, and reinforces gender norms, and how these portrayals are received and interpreted by the young adult viewers. As identified in the methodology, there is a particular emphasis on representations of beauty ideals and emotional expression. These themes were selected due to their prominence in the show, significance in shaping gendered expectations, and were key discussion points for the engaged audience. Physical appearance plays a foundational role in *Love Island*, as contestants are typically selected based on their attractiveness (Storey, 2023). Emotional expression is equally central to contestant interactions and dynamics, particularly in the ways men and women are expected to display emotions and react in specifically gendered ways (Brody, 2010). By examining these themes, the findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the gendered narratives within *Love Island* and how viewers interpret and respond to them.

The findings section is structured in alignment with the identified themes of beauty ideals and emotional expression, whilst maintaining the overarching research question themes of gender performance, and audience interpretation and participation. Each theme is examined through the methodological triangulation of episode content analysis, focus groups and netnography. The discussion then integrates these findings into published scholarship established in the literature review, offering a critical reflection on how *Love Island* constructs and performs gender portrayals, and how audiences engage with these representations. In this way, I ensure a cohesive and nuanced analysis of gender within reality television.

Gender Construction and Performance

Love Island episode content analysis serves as the foundation for exploring how gender is constructed and performed on the show. The findings illustrate how *Love Island* reproduces and emphasises existing societal gender narratives (Gill, 2007; Gray, 2004; Grumbein and

Goodman, 2013). The discussion further solidifies this claim, drawing on strong connections between the findings and key theories of gender performativity (Butler, 1990) and hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995).

Findings from the *Love Island* episode content analysis indicate a strong emphasis on conventional beauty ideals. The selection of contestants contributes significantly to the reinforcement of these ideals. The show predominantly features individuals who adhere to Eurocentric, heteronormative beauty standards with an apparent absence of body type diversity. Female contestants are overwhelmingly petite, slim, and stereotypically feminine, while male contestants are typically tall with muscular physiques. Contestants are frequently shown in revealing swimwear, which highlights their perfectly sculpted bodies. The emphasis on physical appearance is further perpetuated by camera work that prioritises body shots in these revealing outfits; with the women often depicted in suggestive poses and the men in a dominant, confident manner. These portrayals reinforce a narrow definition of attractiveness and leave little room for any diversity. *Love Island* reinforces the idea that attractiveness and conventional beauty are paramount.

While gender is overtly performed through physical appearance and beauty ideals, it is equally constructed through emotional expression (Brody, 2010). Emotional performance is another influential site where gender norms are enacted on *Love Island*. Content analysis of *Love Island* episodes revealed distinct gendered patterns in the presentation of emotional expression. Female contestants were consistently portrayed as more emotionally expressive and tended to engage in open discussions about feelings and insecurities much more often than male contestants. Episodes frequently included scenes depicting women articulating emotional distress, comforting each other, and sometimes crying. These depictions contribute to a scripting of emotion that aligns femininity with heightened emotionality, vulnerability and sensitivity (Paechter, 2018).

In contrast, male contestants were mostly portrayed as emotionally stoic and reserved. When the men had moments of expressing emotions it was treated as significant and rare. These occurrences were framed as narrative turning points that presented male vulnerability as exceptional and authentic breakthroughs. In doing so, *Love Island* decides that male emotion is powerfully significant because of its infrequency. This entrenches a dichotomy of gendered emotional expression (Denby, 2021). Male contestant's emotions are shown with a serious

and reflective attitude. While the frequent exposure to emotional expression from women has resulted in these moments being framed as dramatised or even humorously pathetic reactions. This opposing depiction of emotions in men and women contribute to the reinforcement of a double standard, wherein women's emotions are expected but dismissed, and men's emotions are occasional yet validated and praised (Denby, 2021; Kelly and Hutson-Comeaux, 2000).

The emphasis on beauty and emotion is reflective of Connell's (1995) concept of emphasised femininity and hegemonic masculinity. Her framework acknowledges how society categorises aspects of gender to legitimise specific gendered bodies and behaviours. This is mirrored in *Love Island* with women constructed as attractive, sexualised and emotionally expressive, while men are seen to be athletic, dominant and emotionally restrained. This binary is not incidental but performative, according to Butler (1990). She argues that gender is not a stable identity but an ongoing repetition of performative acts that are shaped by cultural expectations and performed under the observation of society, resulting in the categorisation of gender. *Love Island* exemplifies this understanding of the societal reward system that celebrates performances of emphasised femininity and hypermasculinity. However, it acts in opposition to Butler's knowledge of gender fluidity and pushes a narrative that gender is a static binary. *Love Island* positions its portrayals of gender as authentic and aspirational, naturalising a very narrow display of behaviours and appearances as representative of what is socially rewarded and so the norm.

The objectification of the contestants is synonymous with what Gill (2007) describes as the commodification of gender, where Connell's (1995) idea of emphasised femininity and hypermasculinity are aestheticised for the entertainment and consumption of viewers. On *Love Island*, gender is transformed into a consumable product, with contestants cast and styled in ways that appeal to dominant cultural ideals of attractiveness and desirability. The continual reproduction of these performed, stylised visuals encourage the internalisation of narrow beauty ideals and emotional expression that are performed in alignment with the societally generated gender binaries (Gray, 2004; Tiggemann and Slater, 2013). These portrayals are naturalised to an extent to which contestants and viewers come to understand what kinds of gendered behaviour are considered most desirable (Wood, 1994). The show is produced within a capitalist framework and media economy that rewards those who closely

align with these stereotypes (Hochschild, 1983; Roberts, 1998). Instead of offering a space for gender fluidity to be represented, it reproduces recognisable and profitable stereotypes, which are repeatedly curated for viewer consumption and societal validation (Ward and Grower, 2020). In doing so, the show commodifies identities through highly structured, ritualistic gender performances (Butler, 1990). By aestheticising and rewarding certain performances, the show turns gender into a spectacle. It highlights how commodification is not passive but has influence in shaping viewer expectations and broader cultural understandings of gendered success (Gill, 2007). The visual display of *Love Island* reaffirms a gender binary where deviations are marginalised (Connell, 1995). As such, the programme not only reflects but actively reproduces dominant ideologies. Through its display of gendered appearances and behaviours, *Love Island* impacts perceptions of contestants and viewers in the consumption and performance of rigid, commodified gender roles, reinforcing their desirability within contemporary popular culture (Gauntlett, 2008; McRobbie, 2009).

Audience Interpretation and Participation

Focus groups and social media analysis were used to gain a deeper understanding of how audiences interpret *Love Island's* gender representations, particularly in relation to beauty and emotional expression. Unlike content analysis, which reveals how gender is constructed through the show's visual and narrative choices, focus group discussions and online discourse provide insight into how these gender constructions are received, internalised, and challenged by viewers (Acocella, 2012; Gauntlett, 2008; Felten, 2015; Wood, 1994).

The focus group discussions reflected on *Love Island's* emphasis on visual aesthetics and its role on reproducing societal narratives on gendered beauty ideals. Their perspectives revealed a shared perception that the show promotes unattainable beauty ideals. Focus Group 2 participants noted that female contestants are required to maintain a flawless, hyperfeminine appearance at all times. Participant H remarked, "When we see the women, we see them as polished, perfect versions of themselves." The expectation for female contestants to wear bikinis and makeup pushes the narrative that their physical appearance must remain flawless at all times. This reinforces the notion that women must adhere to a standard of beauty that prioritises perfection, which can contribute to unrealistic expectations in real life (Mills,

Shannon and Hogue, 2017). This constant portrayal of hyper femininity establishes the narrative that beauty is not just expected but required on the show (Denby, 2021). All focus group participants agreed that *Love Island* seems to frame perfectionist beauty as a central aspect of a woman's identity and value.

Focus Group 1 had similar discussions, expressing that *Love Island* emphasises society's idea of the most attractive, sexually appealing body. Participant B commented that "the women are expected to be very sexual. I remember when Mal refused to participate in the sexy challenge and she received so much hate on social media for not performing." The participants passionately discussed this example, arguing that it demonstrates the rigid expectations placed on female contestants and how it reinforces the belief that women's desirability is linked to overt sexualisation (Denby, 2021; Gill, 2012). The backlash Mal faced highlights the pressure on female contestants to conform to hypersexualised portrayals, suggesting that their value on the show is intrinsically tied to their willingness to perform sexual desirability. This expectation becomes a prerequisite for success and popularity on *Love Island*, enabling the acceptance of undermining female agency and encouraging conformity to gendered sexual norms (Gill, 2008).

While the group discussions largely remained on beauty expectations of female contestants, there was mention of physical ideals being implemented onto the male contestants. The conversation around male contestants on *Love Island* revealed that while they are expected to have toned, athletic bodies, the standards imposed on them tend to be less rigid than those for women. Many male contestants display hypermasculine traits, aligning with traditional ideals of strength and dominance (Connell, 1995). However, variations in male body types are more permissible. It was noted that contestants with leaner physiques or less defined muscles are still considered attractive. Participant G, from Focus Group 2, stated, "Not to say that there's a lot of body variety, but there's guys that come on that don't have six packs and look like you're more average man." Despite this, male contestants are still held to unrealistic beauty standards, with Participant C, from Focus Group 1, saying, "They look like Calvin Klein models", and Participant D agreeing with, "I'd say in terms of body image, both men and women are held to a very high standard". While men may experience some flexibility in appearance standards, they remain subject to rigid masculine ideals that emphasise physical fitness and hypermasculine aesthetics over more diverse representations of male beauty.

Both groups strongly concluded that *Love Island* presents an unrealistic portrayal of beauty, with carefully curated appearances that do not align with the diversity of real-world body types. The overwhelming consensus from all participants was that the show perpetuates a beauty hierarchy where only those who fit into the narrow and highly curated aesthetic are deemed desirable.

A netnographic analysis of audience reactions, on social media platforms X and Instagram, reveals parallel discourse around *Love Island's* beauty standard to that of the focus group discussions. Both praise and critique coexist in the online discussions, highlighting the show's reaction inducing portrayal of physical appearance. While some viewers admire the contestants' appearances, with one fan on Instagram commenting, "Absolutely BEAUTIFUL" and another posting on X, "Every guy on this season is insanely fit!"; others criticise the lack of diversity. There was reoccurring criticism on the unrealistic portrayal of bodies on the show in online discussions on both X and Instagram. One critic argued, "I'd like to see a more normal sized girl represented this year". Another commented under the *Love Island* post of the new season's contestants expressing frustration with the show's casting choices, they stated, "Every year this whole cast is just the same like we need something different". This polarised reception underscores the tension between aspirational beauty and demand for greater inclusivity and diversity. While admiration for the contestants' appearances reinforces the desirability of these idealised bodies dominated social media discourse, the presence of critiques indicates a growing awareness of the exclusionary nature of these beauty standards (Mills, Shannon and Hogue, 2017; Tiggemann and Slater, 2013). The demand for greater representation of diverse body types suggests that audiences are increasingly rejecting the homogenised aesthetic presented by *Love Island* (Engeln-Maddox and Miller, 2008). However, despite discussions on inclusivity that spans across multiple seasons of the show, *Love Island* continues to prioritise a narrow beauty ideal.

While physical appearance was a central theme in audience reflections, participants also observed how emotional expression on *Love Island* is just as influential in gendered expectations. Discourse on emotional expression adds to the dynamic of the reinforcement of gender performativity in societal norms (Brody, 2010). When contestants' express emotions in line with the gendered expectation, they are received with validation and empathy (Paechter, 2018). However, when emotional expression deviates and challenges these

stereotypes, as seen with confrontational women or vulnerable men, they are judged entirely differently (Denby, 2021). Focus group discussions clearly grasped this contradiction. Participant A from Focus Group 1 commented, “Everyone was really taken aback because she was so forward,” in reference to a female contestant who openly asserted her emotional needs. Rather than being seen as confident, her behaviour was deemed shocking and somewhat inappropriate, purely because it did not conform to the expected emotional passivity and containment expected of women. The other participants in Focus Group 1 echoed this observation of the invalidation of women’s emotions when they deviate from the anticipated stereotypically feminine behaviour. Participant B stated, “I feel like a lot of the girls excuse guys’ behaviour, but when women do stand up for themselves, they get absolutely dragged through the mud.” This statement highlights an ingrained double standard in how emotional assertiveness is received (Denby, 2021; Hochschild, 1983; Kelly and Hutson-Comeaux, 2000). Men are afforded leniency for emotional insensitivity, while women are ridiculed for refusing to tolerate such behaviours (Connell, 1995). Participant J in Focus Group 2 summarised this inequality, arguing, “Men could say the most disgusting thing or do the most disgusting thing, but the whole focus of it will be on the girl’s reaction.” This emphasises how the emotional responsibility of maintaining self-restraint, composure, and overall peace is disproportionately placed on women, while men are often excused from similar scrutiny (Connell, 1995; Hochschild, 1983).

The disciplinary response to female emotional expression strongly opposes with how male vulnerability is treated, both in *Love Island* and amongst viewers. Analysis of social media discourse revealed that when male contestants expressed sadness or insecurity, audiences mostly interpreted it as commendable and inspirational. A fan on X responded to a vulnerable moment from a male contestant by *posting*, “Really felt for him here, was definitely refreshing to see him show that vulnerable side.” The praise centres not just on the emotion expressed but emphasises the bravery for breaking the norm of reserved emotional expression expected in masculinity (Connell, 1995). The positive response transforms vulnerability into a moment of character development. Meanwhile, female contestants expressing vulnerability, hurt or frustration are more likely to be met with dismissal (Connell, 1995; Hochschild, 1983). For example, in response to a woman’s emotional reaction on the show, another social media user wrote, “Not feeling sorry for her unfortunately.” This post demonstrates a common lack of

empathy toward female emotional openness. This binary of gendered emotional expression reinforces a hierarchy in which male expression of deviant emotions from the expected norm is deemed more positively significant than if it were from a woman (Denby, 2021; Hochschild, 1983; Kelly and Hutson-Comeaux, 2000). When nonconforming, assertive female expression is frequently criticised and male vulnerability is celebrated, it encourages conflicting meanings about what emotions are acceptable. It results in the reinforcement of an emotional policing in which women are punished for deviating from expected emotional compliance, while men are rewarded for breaking the perceived stereotypical reserved nature (Kelly and Hutson-Comeaux, 2000).

Focus group participants were understanding of these gendered emotional norms and society's imposed consequences for deviating from them. Participant E from Focus Group 1 reflected, "I think it's so ingrained in people's brains, how to behave as a man or a woman." This acknowledgement encapsulates the cultural conditioning that underlies these expectations (Heise and Manji, 2016). They inform the editing and production choices of *Love Island*, but also the audience's interpretations and the contestants' own performances of gendered behaviour (Gill, 2007). This comment demonstrates how these emotional norms have implications beyond the confines of the show.

Overall, the responses observed in the focus groups discussions and online discourse demonstrate that audiences participate in the ongoing construction of gender norms. *Love Island* viewers contribute to a discursive space where dominant societal norms are upheld despite frequent criticism. The interpretations by the audience reflect a negotiated reading of the show. The findings suggest that while *Love Island* perpetuates traditional gender performances, the audience is not a passive recipient to these encoded norms (Hall, 2003; Marwick and Boyd, 2011). Instead, they engage critically with the gender portrayals, challenging some depictions whilst unintentionally reinforcing others. This highlights the active role of the audience in influencing gendered media narratives (Livingstone, 2004).

While analysis of episodes established the relevance of Butler's (1990) and Connell's (1995) concepts on gender performativity, emphasised femininity and hegemonic masculinity, the analysis of audience responses further solidifies their applicability and relevance. These findings demonstrate how other theoretical frameworks, such as Hall's (2003) encoding/decoding model and Jenkins's (2009) participatory culture, can be applied to

engagement with a contemporary media case study. Hall's (2003) framework proves particularly insightful when analysing how *Love Island* audiences interpret gender performances. Rather than passively watching the show's dominant narratives of idolised hyperfemininity and masculinity, the audience displayed a range of interpretations. Most recognised the embedded gender ideals in the show's production while simultaneously expressing criticism of the portrayed gender narrative. While some viewers accept the encoded gender message, admiration is often accompanied by critical awareness of its exclusionary factor. These responses demonstrate the coexistence of both reinforcement and resistance and emphasise that media consumption is not entirely passive, that engagement is a participatory action (Hearn, 1989; Jenkins, 2009). The viewer's capacity to decode these encoded messages in relation to their own cultural knowledge, as theorised by Hall, highlights the relevancy of his model in a time of excessive media consumption (Nabi, et al. 2003).

The duality of confrontation and reinforcement aligns with Gill's (2007) and Wood's (2004) applications of Hall's theory to gendered media content. They discuss how audience interpretations of gender do not always comply with the intended encoded message of binary femininity and masculinity. This is echoed in my findings, highlighted in the audience both participating in and challenging the conventional beauty and emotional standards presented by *Love Island*. The dominant reading is clearly visible through the celebration of these implied desirable societal norms. However, the oppositional and negotiated interpretations within the same discourse complicates the idea of audience passivity (Rubin, 1993). The application of Jenkins's (2009) participatory culture concept provides further understanding of how social media users do not simply view and interpret but they actively engage with it. This participatory process is a feedback loop, where the active decoding of media feeds into its production (Livingstone, 2004). Audience reactions, whether supportive or critical, filter into discourse that influences future representations (Rubin, 1993). The findings from social media discussion surrounding *Love Island* demonstrates this feedback loop. Reactions to the contestants' appearances, behaviours and emotions illustrate how viewers use discourse spaces to collectively negotiate meaning (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). The findings emphasise that participatory media can function as a site for both reinforcement and critique of gender norms presented in media (Gauntlett, 2008).

In the end, the continued popularity and consumption of *Love Island* underscores its value as profitable entertainment, regardless of the criticisms of its gender portrayals (Rubin, 1993). The commercial success of the show cannot be disconnected from its commodification of stereotypical, binary gender performances, which are produced in aesthetically pleasing presentations (Roberts, 1998). Even when viewers adopt a critical opinion towards the show's depiction of gender, their participation, through watching, engaging and discussing, contributes to the reproduction of the norms they seek to challenge (Gill, 2007; Jenkins, 2009). This illustrates that critique alone does not disrupt this continual representation, but that audience engagement sustains *Love Island's* cultural relevance and economic success. As long as the show continues to generate mass attention, the repetition of narrow, static gender portrayals will persist (Roberts, 1998; Wood, 1994). Therefore, while viewer discussions reveal complex and oppositional interpretations, the act of participation, whether celebratory or critical, reinforces the show's ability to reproduce dominant gender ideologies (Gauntlett, 2008; Hall, 2003; Jenkins, 2009).

Conclusion

My dissertation set out to explore how *Love Island*, as a case study, constructs and reinforces gender norms, with a particular focus on beauty ideals and emotional expression, and how the young adult viewers interpret and negotiate with these portrayals. Through a triangulated methodology, it became clear that *Love Island* not only reflects existing societal expectations of gender, but it actively constructs them. Through its curated portrayals of femininity and masculinity, the show produces a rigid presentation of gendered appearance and behaviour that is popularly consumed and rewarded. The show privileges hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity and positions them as the most desirable performance of gender (Connell, 1995). It presents a very specific depiction of masculinity where men are muscular and emotionally restrained, and femininity where women are petite, overly sexualised, and emotionally expressive. These depictions serve a performative function, reinforcing the binary that undermines dominant ideologies of gender (Butler, 1990). By rewarding certain aesthetics and behaviours, *Love Island* promotes a narrow vision of gender that marginalises alternative displays.

The show is established in the commodification of these identities which are shaped to conform to cultural expectations, rather than offering a platform to highlight diversity and gender fluidity. It influences societal norms through their depiction of gender as consumable and aspirational, presenting the audience with curated, stylised performances. The profitability and popularity of *Love Island* are directly correlated to its ability to aestheticise and commodify gender. In this way, *Love Island* is a reflection and constructor of societal gender norms. The show acts as a gender template influencing the audiences' understanding of femininity and masculinity, shaping cultural understandings of what it means to be a desirable man or woman. *Love Island* does not simply reflect societally dominant gender ideologies but is actively participating in their reinforcement.

The show has generated a gender template that is reinforced not only within *Love Island* but also through the audiences' participation in online and in-person discourse. Drawing on Hall's (2003) encoding/decoding model and Jenkins's (2009) theory of participatory culture, the findings reveal a complex and dynamic relationship between media text and audience. The show and the viewers have a symbiotic relationship, meaning that they do not simply consume these gender representations but they play a role in reinforcing them. The show's viewers become complicit in this reproduction process by engaging with and internalising the gendered narratives the show broadcasts. The audience perpetuates a feedback loop in which gender norms are policed, either rewarding or scrutinising gender portrayals depending on whether they comply or deviate from the expected binary performance. Although many viewers were critically aware of the gender stereotypes perpetuated by the show, often voicing frustration about the unrealistic beauty standards or emotional expression double standards, their engagement with the show nonetheless reflected an underlying investment into these depictions. In this way, regardless of the admiration or criticism of the gender portrayals, they reinforce the binary they claim to reject. The engagement with the show is a cyclical process, where audience responses feed into wider conversation about gender, but rarely disrupt the binary framing. This cycle of consumption and reproduction sustains ideological dominance. This duality underscores the need for more reflexive media engagement and a more conscious interrogation of the ideologies embedded within popular culture.

While these conclusions are significant, the dissertation was not without limitations. The focus on a single reality show and a relatively specific demographic, young adult viewers of *Love Island* in the UK, inevitably offers a partial view of the broader sociological subject. This narrowed scope of research was an intentional methodological choice that prioritised depth rather than breadth. The aim was not for general applicability but to offer insight into a highly influential media text and its audience relationship with gender. However, it is important to acknowledge that gender is not experienced universally. It is felt and understood in complex ways that are influenced by intersecting identities such as ethnicity, class and sexuality (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality differentiates how gender is lived and perceived, yet multidimensional identities are often marginalised in the narratives presented by media texts like *Love Island* (Charlery and Toulza, 2024). An intersectional approach would offer a deeper understanding of how gender norms are reproduced, negotiated and policed across different identities (Crenshaw, 1991). In doing so, academia could progress beyond the limited singular framing of gender to understand the diversity of experiences that influence contemporary media engagement. Therefore, I suggest that future research should explore through a more intersectional lens, investigating how multiple identity categories interact within the context of reality television.

In conclusion, my dissertation does not aim to offer a solution to issues in gender representation in media, nor does it claim that *Love Island* is a uniquely problematic text. Instead, I highlight the show as a case study through which to interrogate how and why contemporary gender norms are constructed, reproduced and adopted within popular media. I emphasise the complex consumption of media where admiration and critique are not mutually exclusive but coexist. The dissertation addresses the gap in understanding the portrayal of gender in the intricate relationship between hybrid media and the audience.

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Appendix A: Love Island Episode Analysis Coding Sheet

Episode (S/E)	Key Moment	Gender Performance Focus	Physical Appearance	Emotional Expression	Notes/Examples
S3E1	Pilot	Emphasised Femininity	Heavy makeup, styled hair, bikinis	Flirtatious giggling, excitement, self-objectification	Women emphasise aesthetics to attract male attention.
S3E7	Recoupling	Hegemonic Masculinity	Gym-toned, smartly dress	Confident speech, not very emotional	Males compete for female attention.
S3E30	Confrontation	Hegemonic Masculinity	Posturing, direct eye contact	Raised voices, verbal aggression	Dom behaviour between Jonny and Theo.
S3E43	Finale	Emphasised Femininity	Full glam, evening gowns	Crying, emotional declarations	Camilla's tears seen as noble femininity.
S4E1	Pilot	Emphasised Femininity	Revealing dresses, tanned skin	Smiling, shyness, anticipation	Female arrivals framed through the male gaze.
S4E19	Recoupling	Hegemonic Masculinity	Shirtless males, swaggering walk	Confident, dismissive comments	Adam's control over multiple women.
S4E23	Confrontation	Hegemonic Masculinity. Deviated from emphasised femininity	Assertive female posture; defensive male stance	Men: avoidance Women: direct and confrontational	Rosie's confrontation with Adam.
S4E57	Finale	Both	Suits and gowns	Joint emotional expression	Public vulnerability becomes performative.
S5E1	Pilot	Emphasised Femininity	Revealing bikinis and swim trunks	Excitement, laughter	Women describe ideal men in traditionally gendered terms.
S5E14	Recoupling	Hegemonic Masculinity	Groomed, confident male presence	Bravado, nonchalance	Michael's dominant approach to choosing Amber.
S5E25	Confrontation	Hegemonic Masculinity	Muscular display, standing close	Intimidation, lack of reflection	Danny vs. Anton tension.
S5E57	Finale	Emphasised Femininity	Romantic styling	Sentimental tears, love confessions	Emotional capital for Amber and Greg's win.
S6E1	Pilot	Both	Males: cocky energy; Females: styled looks	Women: demure excitement; Men: confidence	Immediate gender performance upon villa entrance.
S6E13	Recoupling	Emphasised Femininity	Elevated styling, "done up"	Anxiety, fear of rejection	Shaughna's vulnerable expressions.
S6E27	Confrontation	Both	Direct eye contact, assertive posture	Women: upset; Men: gaslighting tone	Callum's emotional avoidance after Casa Amor.
S6E42	Finale	Both	Coordinated formal outfits	Open emotions, shared vulnerability	Paige and Finn's journey framed as mature love.

S7E1	Pilot	Emphasised Femininity	Full glam, classic flirtation poses	Reserved excitement, body language over speech	Women wait to be picked; passive femininity.
S7E12	Recoupling	Hegemonic Masculinity	Relaxed confidence, open shirt look	Dominant language ("my type"), emotional distancing	Liam downplays connections.
S7E32	Confrontation	Deviation from Emphasised Femininity	Arms crossed, performative sadness/anger	Crying, emotional appeal	Faye's confrontational meltdown with Teddy.
S7E57	Finale	Both	Ultra-styled appearance	Balanced emotional displays	Millie and Liam's redemption arc tied to vulnerability.

Appendix B: Transcript from Focus Group 2

Participant H

I feel like the feminine roles within *Love Island* particularly, and like, what's it called, reality TV in general, are just amplified to another scale. And when we see women, we see them as their perfect versions of themselves. Like, we never see any fault. They're not allowed to have any faults. And when they do, they are portrayed as like, the crazy one, the bitchy girl. Like, they have these, like, the labels thrown onto them and it's like perfection is the standard and anything other than that is not accepted.

Participant G

I do think that some of the games and stuff in *Love Island*, like, how they initially bring it in. Originally, wouldn't it be that the girls would be lined up and then the men would come in and pick them and then they swapped it round. But then I still feel like, it's like picking people, even though the girls still get to pick their man. Like, it still feels a little bit like weird. Like they're kind of like very old fashioned. Yeah, it's like, even if someone doesn't want to be picked, if they pick them, then they have to be chosen.

Participant I

Yeah, exactly.

Participant J

I think also in terms of like the actual contestants who are brought on, like, it's very stereotypically girl feminine girls, masculine men. There's no in between. Like, you don't have more feminine men or more maybe masculine presenting.

Participant F

There's no room for like any gender variety.

Participant G

No, there's no gender fluidity within it. It's very much like feminine women, masculine men, and there's just a lot of emptiness around.

Participant H

And also like the walking around in bikinis and things like that all day. Like, I think some of them have actually complained about the fact that, like, they're cold or they don't want to put on makeup today. I don't want to do my hair today. And it's like, well, you have to. Yeah, you have to walk around in a bikini. Even though it's like, if it would be like 15 degrees.

Participant I

Yeah, give them, their oodies. This is what they need.

Interviewer

The next question is, do you think the show reflects real life attitudes about masculinity and femininity?

Participant F

No, no, not really.

Participant G

I feel like, to a certain extent, yes. Because there are a portion of it. There is a part of the population that, like, would definitely say that, like, the way that masculine, feminine roles are presented are, like, are true to what that is. Because there are quite a lot of people within relationships that do follow those, like, very stereotypical roles.

Participant J

Right. I mean, that's why it still exists within society. But it doesn't represent where we're going in society. It doesn't represent the future. It doesn't represent younger generations really at all. It just feels really fake.

Participant H

I don't want to say it doesn't represent real people because I don't want to say that people on *Love Island* aren't real people, obviously. But it's kind of like if a Calvin Klein ad.

Participant J

Yeah.

Participant H

And a boohoo ad. You know what I mean? It's very much the beauty standard.

Participant J

Yeah.

Participant F

Like, rocking in. It's more like surface level society, like, beauty, six pack, whatever. Not actually, like, the emotional.

Participant H

Well, no, I think it's kind of what works with what I said about, like, the clothing thing. You wear a bikini all day in the sun, and then you go and get dressed up for as if you're partying in the evening. But, like, we also know that that's not true because they're only allowed, like, one drink. They get told where to go. Like, and you can kind of tell the conversations are very staged. And it's almost like every single night there has to be someone will all these people be, like, round the fire pit. And then, like, two people, like, go and have a chat and it's like. But they make it seem like it's real life when obviously the older you get, you realise it's not.

Interviewer

How do you feel about the way female contestants are presented compared to the men?

Participant G

I'd say in terms of body image, they're both held to a very high standard. Like, both men and women definitely are expected to be your Calvin Klein, Victoria's Secret models. But it feels as if there is no, like, I feel like there have been, like, a few men to come on the show that then don't have. Not to say that there's, like, body, like, variety, but, like, there's guys that come on with that don't have six packs and maybe look like you're more average, man. And then they

don't seem to have had the same level of criticism and say, I remember Shauna coming on the show.

Participant I

Oh, yeah.

Participant G

And I can't remember what season it was, like, 2,020. And she was like, what, like a UK size 12, 14.

Participant H

And like, yeah, they had Alexandra as well.

Participant J

And like, to this day, she even still has a platform on, like, Instagram and stuff. And it's still, like, people still send her hate comments every single day.

Appendix C: Images of Netnographic Data

Image 1. Source: Instagram

Nahh Bruh love island is going so downhill who's
dr office did they find these ppl?? 🤔🤔👁️

Image 2. Source: Instagram

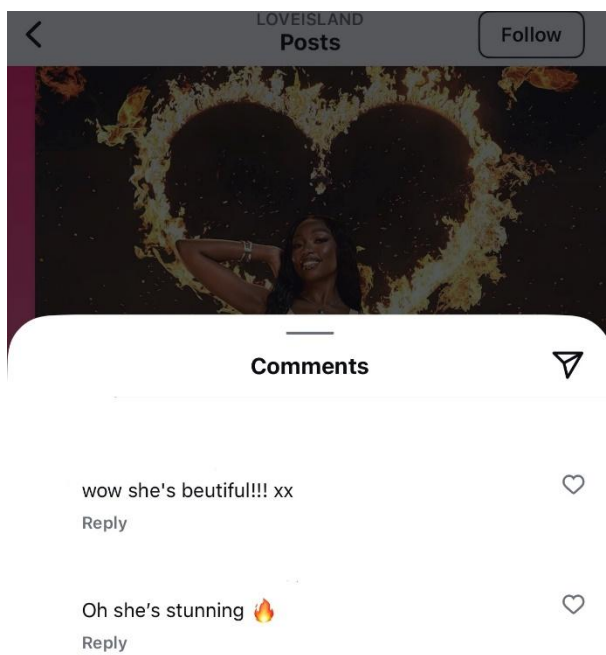


Image 3. Source: Instagram

Every guy is insanely fit!



Image 4. Source: Instagram

I'd like to see a more normal sized girl represented this year



Reply

every year this whole cast is just the same like we need something different



Image 5. Source: X

She's a nasty piece of work.



Image 6. Source: X

Not feeling sorry for her unfortunately



Glad that bully has left the villa. It's going to be such a better place for the rest of them now



Image 7. Source: X

Nope, hideous person


 2   3 

Image 8. Source: X

Sorry but Anna isn't my cup of tea


   3  

 Haha bye 🙌 Anna! Karma at its best. Mean girl

   3  

 🙌 good riddance

   3  

 No way, nasty piece of work

   3  

Image 9. Source: X

A moment we needed to see on Love Island why I hear people ask I'll tell you why as it shows people young men his age do get vulnerable emotional too

   19  10K  

Poor Luca. Hope the dudes OK.

 1   10  4.4K  

really felt for him here, was definitely refreshing to see him show that vulnerable side

   9  7.4K  

Image 10. Source: X

I hope Luca's ok, he hasn't seemed himself all series so far. But I love that the guys in the villa not only supported him but also didn't judge him for crying. 🤝🤝❤️ [#LoveIsland](#) [#AllStars](#)

 1   106  10K  

Hope he is ok, he hasn't seemed ok since day one, hope he is being checked upon.

   106  14K  

I actually think he's being genuine here. Glad he has someone familiar like Ekin-Su in there ❤️

   105  10K  

Appendix D: Proof of Ethical Approval



06/11/2024

Dear Miss Hannah Mills

Ref: 22680

Title: Mills - UG Sociology Dissertation

Thank you for submitting your ethics application for the above-named study. The School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your ethics application and we can confirm that your ethics application has received a favourable ethical opinion.

Please note that the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies Research Ethics Committee expects to be notified of any changes or deviations in the study.

If you have any queries regarding your research ethics review please contact spais-ethics@bristol.ac.uk

Yours sincerely

School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies Research Ethics Committee