



## Reality TV and Real Ethics: *Love Island* and the Ethics of Relationships



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For those who don't tune into reality TV, a compelling new series has been attracting attention and provoking debate about the ethics of televised relationships. The hit series, *Love Island*, focuses on a group of attractive, young singles who are flown to an isolated villa in Mallorca to find love. In just a matter of weeks, contestants will seek a significant other among their cohort. If that wasn't challenging enough, the contestants must compete to stay in the game. If they successfully get through the series without being dumped or voted off, contestants are scrutinized by the audience who votes for their favorite couple at the end of the show (Martin, 2019). Some might find this show to be a recipe for disaster while others might find this to be nothing but a net gain for everyone involved—for both contestants and for viewers.

Many would argue that this show is ripe with demonstrable benefits for those who are daring enough to compete. Who wouldn't enjoy a free holiday at a booze-filled villa in the Mediterranean surrounded by beautiful singles? It is basically a month-long slumber party for adults with a chance to win a £50,000 prize. More than that, many contestants reap the long-term benefits of massive social media followings that allow them to make a living off of sponsoring brands. As noted writer Jenny Éclair of *The Independent* affirms, "This could potentially be your magic golden Willy Wonka ticket to Lamborghini land" (Éclair, 2019). Without question, being a *Love Island* contestant is a sure-fire way to get your day in the spotlight and benefit financially to boot.

Fans of the hit series also contend that *Love Island* invites open discussion about what it means to be in a healthy relationship. As audiences get to know the contestants, they can begin to relate to them and see commonalities in their relationships. By watching the dramas on the show, audiences can self-reflect and explore questions about relationships that may not have occurred to them outside this medium. In fact, in a recent blog post, famed actress Lena Dunham shared her experience of indulging in the show. In doing so, she explored important questions about the complexities of romantic relationships. Like many of the contestants on the show, she found herself asking, "Can you love again after the hurt? What does partnership mean? And what does it mean to know someone if you don't know yourself?" (Dunham, 2019). Raising such questions are valuable for coming to a better understanding of ourselves in our relationships.

Importantly, this show is an effective way to promote a national dialogue about relationships.



RAZZ Magazine writer, Charlotte Foster, explains that viewers can “point at the screen while saying ‘they should not treat another human being like this’” when they see psychological abuse” (RAZZ, 2018). By recognizing abuse, we’re in a better position to address it where it exists off-screen. Just as Lena Dunham was able to see the shortcomings of her relationships portrayed in the show, so too will millions of other *Love Island* viewers.

Even so, many would argue that *Love Island* may not be the most legitimate foundation for cultivating real-life healthy relationships. The show presents unhealthy examples of relationships and so cannot inform audiences about what is necessary to develop healthy ones. Since most viewers live such radically different lives from participants on the show, it is unlikely that they could come away from watching it with applicable lessons for their lives. As a case in point, the contestants are all incredibly fit, tan, and beautiful socialites in their twenties. The relationships that are represented are heteronormative and masculine-centric ones. Moreover, as Luanna de Abreu Coelho from RAZZ Magazine points out, “contestants are chosen and rejected by other islanders based almost entirely on appearance” (RAZZ, 2018). Of course, healthy relationships are not primarily motivated by physical attraction.

Another reason that many have found this show problematic is due to its unhealthy effects on the show’s contestants. The show achieves its supreme drama by effectively cutting them off from the outside world. The extreme isolation and the competitive nature of that social dynamic creates a unique and unnatural social environment. The show’s provocation of contestants under the watchful eye of cameras has recently led to serious public concerns about the contestants’ mental health. Following the suicides of two ex-contestants of *Love Island*, the English Parliament began an inquiry into the “production companies’ duty of care to participants, [asking] whether enough support is offered both during and after filming, and whether there is a need for further regulatory oversight in this area” (“Committee Announces,” 2019). After finishing their two-month stint in Mallorca, *Love Island* contestants come back to the real world as celebrities. However, that celebrity status quickly fades when the next stirring season of *Love Island* comes out. Contestants go from relative obscurity to fame and back again within a year. This instability would certainly be taxing on anyone’s mental health.

*Love Island* has captured the attention of millions of viewers in recent years. The show could spark much-needed discussion about relationships. At the same time, it is questionable whether this or any reality TV show can serve as a pedagogical tool for guiding viewers to cultivate healthy relationships.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Are creators of reality TV shows morally responsible for the psychological effects on their on-screen participants? Why or why not?
2. What are the ethical problems with reality TV? What values are in conflict in this case study?



3. Do the possible benefits of sparking a conversation about healthy relationships outweigh its possible harms for contestants? Explain your reasoning.
4. What principles would you suggest to someone who wanted to make an ethical reality TV series about relationships?

**Further Information:**

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**Authors:**

Nicholas Aufiero & Alicia Armijo  
The Ethics Project/Media Ethics Initiative  
Center for Media Engagement  
University of Texas at Austin  
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