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**“It’s Love Island, Not Friend Island”: Authenticity and Surveillance in Reality TV, a
Literature Review and Content Analysis**

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ABSTRACT

Reality TV is a ubiquitous form of entertainment with many sub-genres that explore and address a variety of sociological issues. However, the meta-narrative of reality TV is not without its own issues. The present project addresses one such theme at the heart of reality TV: constant surveillance and the culture of surveillance it fosters. Surveillance is a key factor in reality TV and shapes many aspects of the genre, such as the creation of parasocial relationships, how reality and authenticity are constructed within reality TV, and how contestants interact with each other. The implicit and explicit acceptance of continual surveillance permeates reality TV and informs how viewers approach surveillance culture in their lives. This essay investigates the creation of surveillance culture, how it functions within reality TV, and the impact of its side effects on the lives of those involved with the genre. This inquiry is part literature review (regarding sociological theories of surveillance and previous sociological insights into reality TV) and part content analysis (analyzing seasons one and two of the UK reality TV show *Love Island*). Together, the sections highlight how the constant surveillance within reality TV shows reifies surveillance culture and its impacts, both on and off the screen.

Keywords: reality TV; surveillance; authenticity; literature review; content analysis

Literature Review: Sociological Research on Reality TV

What does a scanner see? he asked himself. I mean, really see? Into the head? Down into the heart? ... I hope it does, he thought, see clearly, because I can't any longer these days see into myself. I see only murk. Murk outside; murk inside. I hope, for everyone's sake, the scanners do better. Because, he thought, if the scanner sees only darkly, the way I myself do, then we are cursed, cursed again and like we have been continually, and we'll wind up dead this way, knowing very little and getting that little fragment wrong too.

—*Philip K. Dick, A Scanner Darkly*

Reality TV has flourished in recent decades and is produced to suit almost all demographics and network specifications. Though often disregarded as a 'guilty pleasure' or 'low-taste' form of entertainment (Skeggs 2009), it is crucial to examine the impact of the genre given its wide reach. Many people tune in to reality TV because they perceive the contestants and their reactions to be authentic or even relatable. However, the outrageous scenarios or over-the-top drama belie the inner workings of the reality TV industry. Core elements of reality TV are surveillance, constructions of oneself and one's communities, parasocial relationships, and neoliberal ideology. These factors are both directly and indirectly emphasized on individual reality TV shows and the genre as a whole.

This literature review will discuss theory on modern surveillance, surveillance culture, and how they connect to reality TV. In viewing reality TV through a lens of surveillance culture, literature on its effects will also be examined. The effects of surveillance culture are wide-ranging, though this paper focuses on the realms of social media (including parasocial relationships and social capital) and how reality TV show contestants create microcommunities during their tenure on their show in which perceptions of authenticity are paramount. It will conclude with the current state of reality TV, and how surveillance ties into the genre's guiding principles.

While much of the literature base presents important connections between reality TV and a specific phenomenon, the aim of this project is to analyze how all factors under the umbrella of surveillance culture impact reality TV and those involved. As characteristics like race and political economy are under-researched when it comes to reality TV, this study will hopefully provide a more intersectional analysis on the effects of surveillance.

STANDARDS FOR LITERATURE USED

While the literature referenced here is primarily sourced from sociological journals or books intended to establish a link between academic sociology and reality TV, I also sought out materials more specific to my content analysis. Said content analysis is a case study of the first two seasons of the UK reality TV show *Love Island*. As such, interviews with former contestants and forms of cultural analysis focusing on docusoaps (the reality TV subgenre that *Love Island* falls under) were especially pertinent.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Genre Overview

Reality TV spans a wider array of formats and topics than most other television genres, making it difficult to define when it began and what the limits of the genre are. As Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said concerning what constitutes pornography, one “know[s] it when [they] see it.” The same goes for reality TV; though *Deadliest Catch* and *America’s Next Top Model* may not overlap in terms of subject, watching either one for five minutes is enough to categorize it as a reality TV show. But beyond a surface-level analysis, the lines begin to blur.

The popularity of daytime talk shows in the 1980s and 1990s with enigmatic hosts and salacious topics set the foundation for reality TV today (Montemurro 2008; Grindstaff 2012).

However, many refer to the first season of *The Real World* in 1992 as the beginning of contemporary reality TV (Montemurro 2008; Grindstaff 2012; Wayne 2015; Graham 2016; Kühne and Oprea 2020). *The Real World*, *Big Brother*, and other early shows in the ‘gamedoc/docusoap’ (Montemurro 2008) subgenres popularized the format of contestants living and building relationships under one roof. Within a context of continuous surveillance, even the most mundane activities become plotlines (Montemurro 2008). Corner locates reality TV shows of this structure in the realm of the ‘postdocumentary’ wherein participants “perform the real” (2002/2009:58) for the judgment of the audience. Those who grew up with reality TV and become participants themselves acquire knowledge of the system from both sides of the screen. Awareness that one is under constant surveillance in order to entertain others can affect the way contestants portray themselves during casting and filming (Grindstaff 2012; Mast 2016; Williamson 2018). Paradoxically, it is crucial to portray the authentic, ‘ordinary’ self on reality TV whilst heightening one’s personality and mannerisms. The greater implications of surveillance on participants and their relationships will be explored in more detail throughout this paper.

Surveillance

Reality TV and sociological theories of surveillance. Surveillance is a recurring theme throughout sociological literature in general and extends into the analysis of reality TV. Foucault’s (1975/2008) metaphor using Bentham’s panopticon serves as an entry point into the literature on surveillance. The panopticon is a hypothetical tower in which all rooms would face each other, ensuring a “state of conscious and permanent visibility” (Foucault 1975/2008:6). In the center is a smaller tower which holds a supervisor who monitors every inhabitant (see Appendix A). The panopticon functions by ensuring that everyone in the outer tower watches

each other while knowing they too are under surveillance. Though Foucault describes its inhabitants as “inmates” (1975/2008), the panopticon is not limited to carceral discourse. Rather, the concept of the panopticon is a striking corollary to reality TV. There may not be a single figure managing each show, but reality TV participants are monitored without fail by strategically placed cameras and microphones. The format of docusoaps (e.g., *The Bachelor*, *Love Island*) is key in facilitating panoptic surveillance of oneself and one’s fellow participants. These shows sequester their participants and encourage the formation of romantic and platonic relationships as well as a tight-knit community. In the absence of familiar people or surroundings, such relationships form quickly under the watchful eyes of their fellow inhabitants.

While Foucault’s ideas on panopticism were pivotal, more recent scholars have bolstered it by addressing surveillance as it ties into related subjects. In the panopticon, power is diffuse despite a central supervisor. As life becomes increasingly mediated by algorithms and computer databases, then, some have argued that modern surveillance is an “electronic panopticon” (Lyon 1993). Though Lyon referenced “barcoded library books or...telephone caller IDs” as daily trappings of the electronic panopticon, it has progressed significantly in the recent decades (1993:665). As information technology became increasingly sophisticated, so too did the panoptic realm of reality TV (Pecora 2002; Dubrofsky 2011; Siddiquee 2020). For example, the activities of *Big Brother* ‘houseguests’ are broadcast on a 24-hour live Internet feed (Pecora 2002) in addition to thrice-weekly TV episodes. Whether or not they do so consciously, a contestant’s every action becomes a performance for the camera (Dubrofsky 2011). As a form of the modern electronic panopticon, reality TV does not limit surveillance to its immediate effects as a library book barcode or caller ID would. Instead, surveillance often has far-reaching consequences for reality TV participants if they fail to adequately “perform themselves”

(Dubrofsky 2011:117). Regardless of their artificial settings and constant surveillance, contestants will often be voted off (by the public or their fellow participants) if they do not seem sufficiently authentic. The panopticon of reality TV makes spectators not only of the audience, but of the participants themselves, who must portray authenticity while surveilling their new community members (Pecora 2002; Dubrofsky 2011).

Self-surveillance and negotiating authenticity in reality TV. Talk shows, the spiritual predecessor to reality TV (Montemurro 2008; Grindstaff 2012), are notable for how their hosts construct a persona to better connect with audiences. Participants on reality TV shows often do the same, though they have less contact with an outside audience. However, while the celebrity talk show host purposefully creates a persona, a reality TV contestant may do so without realizing it, as more of a self-defense mechanism. One's perceived 'authenticity' (or lack thereof) is often a contentious topic on reality TV shows that audiences and contestants alike feel apt to judge (Montemurro 2008). Reality TV participants must carefully balance the effects of the panopticon with how they are perceived by their audience and fellow contestants. Should contestants consciously perform surveillance given their familiarity with reality TV (Grindstaff 2012), to acknowledge that awareness would appear to the audience as if they were 'playing the game' (i.e., purposefully attempting to appear sincere in order to outlast other contestants and win the show's prize; Montemurro 2008:98). Although the goal of signing up for a reality TV show is ostensibly to win, outwardly 'playing the game' and acknowledging the panopticon breaks reality TV's 'fourth wall.' Even those familiar with the contrived nature of reality TV are more likely to root for a contestant who appears "'honest, open,'" (Montemurro 2008:98) and authentic than one who appears to be openly 'playing the game' (the ways contestants 'play the game' and their reactions to others who do so will be investigated in greater detail in the content

analysis). In this sense, surveilling oneself while appearing ‘natural’ under said surveillance (Dubrofsky 2011:117) is key to reality TV success.

It is worth noting that the expectations for authenticity and ‘playing the game’ differ depending on the subgenre of reality TV. For example, explicit strategizing in gamedocs (e.g., *Big Brother*, *Survivor*) is not only expected by the viewer, but a necessary element of the format. Essential to these programs are alliances between contestants, competitions, and the ensuing TV-worthy drama (Montemurro 2008; Grindstaff 2012). Ample airtime is devoted to strategizing between contestants. Given the amount of footage that is condensed into each episode, the focus on rival alliances and their schemes reifies the importance of ‘playing the game’ in the audience’s mind. These aspects are in contrast to romance-oriented docusoaps, where outwardly ‘playing the game’ is frowned upon (Montemurro 2008). The prize money of gamedocs is often higher than that of docusoaps; though this is likely not on purpose, it may communicate to younger viewers that a competitive nature is to be more highly valued than the romance one would seek on *Love Island*. Both subgenres emphasize a certain type of mutualistic relationship—alliances in gamedocs and romance in docusoaps. One is not necessarily a better form of entertainment than the other, they simply illustrate two similar uses of the panopticon in entertainment.

Often, the presence of surveillance serves to confirm or deny a contestant’s professed authenticity (Dubrofsky 2011). For instance, to make a statement about oneself in front of other contestants but later retract it in a confessional or ‘talking head’ segment (see Appendix B) may imply that the contestant is less authentic than their persona suggests. Pecora (2002) theorizes that the increase in reality TV programs is indicative of a human desire for surveillance. The modern, post-9/11 “surveillance culture” (Pecora 2002) fosters an environment in which reality

TV thrives. The panopticon of reality TV is presented as a tool that can uniquely determine a person's authenticity (Siddiquee 2020), as though the medium portrays contestants' unscripted truth. While a show's participants may be unaware of their fellow contestants' true intentions, audience members feel that they have an objective view of the show, having witnessed it on crystal-clear video footage from multiple angles. Viewers are often encouraged to interact with reality TV shows through voting (Montemurro 2008; Grindstaff 2012) and social media (Stewart 2019), which can influence the direction a show takes. Devoted *Big Brother* fans have even gone so far as to hire planes to fly over the house with messages warning contestants of producers and houseguests they believed to be manipulative (Montemurro 2008).

However, extensive outside intervention shapes reality TV's 'postdocumentary' (Corner 2002/2009) style, casting doubt on the idea that a program's audience has much control or knowledge of the narrative. Behind the scenes, producers heavily edit footage—creating narrative arcs, portraying certain characters as one-dimensional archetypes, and essentially using any means to keep viewers tuned in (Mast 2016). For all the discussion of authenticity on a show, selective editing can result in contestants who do not recognize their on-screen selves (Mast 2016:13) when the season airs. Be it the producers and crew members (Mast 2016), contestants (Grindstaff 2012:29; Mast 2016), or audience (Montemurro 2008), everyone who engages with reality TV does so with some amount of cognitive dissonance. As Montemurro (2008:98) notes, viewers who sought authenticity in contestants had to actively “suspend their disbelief” to do so. The idea that surveillance enables the expression of one's 'authentic self,' on reality TV or elsewhere, proliferates surveillance culture without regard for those embroiled in it (Pecora 2002; Dubrofsky 2011). Though the surveillance of reality TV is portrayed as the

viewer's ultimate source of objectivity, its real purpose is to allow the narrative to be more easily edited in order to increase profit.

The formation of parasocial relationships as aided by surveillance. For better or for worse, reality TV has the ability to make anybody famous. Though these “ordinary celebrities” have long been a fact of the genre (Grindstaff 2012), recent developments in social networking have changed the nature of fan-contestant relationships. Social media sites are widely used, and celebrities often utilize the sites' informal nature to post pictures, share their opinions, and generally establish a sense of community with their fans (Chung and Cho 2014). While most fans of a media figure will casually interact with their posts, a certain percent will develop a less-realistic view of the interaction. First described by Horton and Wohl, the “illusion of intimacy” between a media persona and fan can lead to a one-sided, or “parasocial,” relationship (1956:217). Despite the term ‘relationship,’ the interactions are inherently non-reciprocal; celebrities, even ordinary ones, are unlikely to initiate conversations with fans (Jahng 2019:330).

Fans of reality TV appear to be particularly prone to the parasocial. Social media use combined with the perception of reality TV as realistic is positively correlated with formation of parasocial relationships (Chung and Cho 2014:52). This makes sense, given the fact that self-identified “heavy viewers” of reality TV were also more likely to develop parasocial relationships with cast members via social media (Jahng 2019:330). The surveillance inherent to reality TV lends itself to showing the minutiae of a contestant's daily life, albeit heavily edited. Contestants who appear personable or engage in relatable activities are more likely to come across as someone the viewer would like to befriend (Horton and Wohl 1956; Chung and Cho 2014). While relating to a reality TV contestant is not an issue in itself—many shows want their audience to root for certain contestants—it can become troublesome when the boundary between

‘contestant’ and ‘friend’ blurs. Reality TV surveillance that shows viewers a contestant’s values, mannerisms, and character over a prolonged period can give fans the sense that they “know” a certain contestant more than others do (Horton and Wohl 1956:216). Having seen much of the contestant’s life during their stint on reality TV, viewers who develop parasocial relationships may seek to continue this sense of intimacy and friendship via social media (Chung and Cho 2014). Though former reality TV stars are free from the panopticon of the entertainment industry, their fans may become just as strong a means of surveillance.

Given the obvious disconnect between a celebrity and their fans, the question seems to be what one gains from a parasocial relationship. Horton and Wohl (1956:222) theorize that in identifying with a media figure they admire, a parasocial spectator can vicariously inhabit the social role of the person they admire. In the case of reality TV, where the contestants match the societal standard of beauty and post-show fame seems all but guaranteed, it is understandable that impressionable audience members would have similar aspirations. However, on the rare occasion that an audience member becomes a reality TV contestant, the parasocial element becomes more apparent. Often, reality TV shows will start out with an ‘original’ cast, adding and dropping contestants as the season progresses. Contestants who enter later in the season but have been watching the show as it airs are in a rare position. In a matter of minutes, they transition from a fan who feels that they “‘know’ [the] media characters” (Chung and Cho 2014:48) to part of the cast. The experience of reality TV is likely to be entirely different for the contestant and the audience, as the audience only sees a heavily edited “performance of everyday life” (Grindstaff 2012:23). As the content analysis will explore in greater depth, new contestants often come to reality TV with preconceived notions of their soon-to-be housemates. These narratives, which they glean from watching the program in which they will star, may cast other contestants

as rivals and create tension in their household. On the other hand, new contestants are just as likely to positively identify with their fellow contestants due to a sense of perceived kinship (Chung and Cho 2014). Both of these parasocial contexts may stunt the development of the new contestant's burgeoning relationships, given the misleading editing of reality TV. To cross the Rubicon from fan to contestant seems to be the logical conclusion of surveillance culture, at least as it pertains to reality TV. Having learned the ropes of reality TV over years of casual exposure, a fraction of audience members cultivates their own desire for surveillance (Pecora 2002) into reality.

Parasocial relationships as a financial incentive. The companies that produce reality TV shows also put stock into parasocial relationships, albeit for different reasons than the viewers of their programs. The effects of parasocial interactions on consumer behavior are well-documented. Parasocial relationships are a strong predictor of increased TV viewership, as well as one's likelihood for making program-related purchases (Labrecque 2014:137). If one is unable to affirm their relationship to the persona in-person, the second-best option may be to do so in the marketplace. Seeing that the relationships viewers form with contestants are a "key factor that determines consumer behavior," production companies may lean into parasocial interactions to pad their bottom line (Zheng et al. 2019:3). In their research of online marketplaces, Zheng et al. (2019:10) concluded that parasocial interactions were an important determinant of how users spent their money. Production companies, who would be keen to capitalize on future parasocially-motivated purchases, would likely wish for a viewer's loyalty to extend beyond a single persona. They may instead position the show as an extension of the perceived relationship to maintain steady economic engagement across seasons. In other words, a viewer may feel that they are able to support a contestant (for whom they have developed a sense of loyalty and trust)

through purchases related to the show on which said contestant appeared. Like Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, this process seems to be a type of 'commodified friendship'—redefining the bonds between people as economic rather than social.

The literature explores several mechanisms through which production companies attempt to profit from parasocial interactions. Of course, not every fan who interacts with these goods or services is necessarily in a parasocial relationship, nor does every person in a parasocial relationship express their affection for the persona through purchases. However, as people grow increasingly alienated in various areas of life and turn to parasocial behavior as an outlet (Horton and Wohl 1956), those interactions may determine a greater portion of commerce intention (Zheng et al. 2019). TV-adjacent activities (e.g., streaming shows, buying limited-edition DVD sets) are the initial areas of contact between company and consumer, given their proximity to the medium. Today, many reality TV shows also have official social media accounts that keep fans engaged with the program (Stewart 2019). Social media has complicated the relationship between brands and consumers to the extent that a majority of consumers now “anticipate brand responses to consumer comments” left on social media posts (Labrecque 2014:134). Like a parasocial relationship, the concept of a personable brand that engages with its followers gives a false impression of a mutual connection.

There are different levels of parasocial interaction, most of which have neutral or limited positive affects for audience members (Horton and Wohl 1956). Parasocial relationships are not inherently problematic, but what they represent—the far-reaching effects of the panopticon and the willingness of corporations to co-opt those effects—warrants further research. The companies that create reality TV have commodified and profited from parasocial interactions,

but this is not a unique situation. The neoliberal mode in which reality TV is produced dictates the financial decisions and ideology of many programs.

The Status Quo of Reality TV

Neoliberalism as the guiding ideology of reality TV. Neoliberalism is the ideology of many Western capitalist nations today. Broadly speaking, it seeks a freer market through deregulation, privatization, decentralization, and self-reliance as opposed to state intervention in social or economic policy (Shah 2010). Reality TV that is produced in a neoliberal environment will necessarily take on many of these qualities, especially as it is a venture meant to generate profit. Some of the literature regarding reality TV discusses how the tenets of neoliberalism shape reality TV, both onscreen and behind the scenes.

Since its inception, reality TV has been irrevocably shaped by market dynamics. A major factor in the development of reality TV was the attempt of networks to “avoid negotiating with organized labor” (Montemurro 2008:101). During the 1980s and 1990s, strikes threatened the viability of scripted programming (Grindstaff 2012). Rather than acquiesce to unions, networks sought a more viable form of programming. Reality TV was not bound by studio or union regulations and decentralized to the extent that it needed little scripting, yet quickly came to dominate mainstream television (Montemurro 2008; Grindstaff 2012). Even before the first episode of *The Real World*, reality TV irrevocably operated with a neoliberal political economy, the ideals of which would carry over into its narratives.

The neoliberal narratives of singular ‘great men’ who change history and a meritocracy that unfailingly reward those who deserve it are reified for viewers through shows like *Survivor*. This is not often the case in real life, where structural factors such as generational wealth or bigotry

play larger roles in determining one's life chances (Wagmiller et al. 2006; Brady et al. 2020).

Rather than address this incongruity, certain reality TV programs purposefully perpetuate neoliberal ideologies to alienate their participants. For example, *Judge Judy* and *Dr. Phil* promote "personal responsibility and individual effort as necessary for self-fulfillment," often ignoring the systemic issues that lead people to seek help on their shows (Montemurro 2008:95). The participants on these shows are often 'othered,' their situations dramatized to keep the audience interested (Grindstaff 2012). Though the audience may be experiencing similar issues, they are told to laugh at the guest rather than empathize. In portraying the participants as at fault for their own actions, reality TV shows "establish in-groups and out-groups," creating a rift between people who might otherwise have solidarity (Montemurro 2008:95). The audience is encouraged to align themselves with the host as part of the "in-group," though they are more likely to share class interests with the participants. It is also of note that the participants on these shows are often working-class or people of color, while Judy and Phil are symbolic of hegemonic power structures. In another environment, these shows might be a positive force, or at least benign. However, individualistic ideology diverts attention away from the structural conditions that lead people to turn to reality TV for help in the first place (Skeggs 2009; Graham 2017).

David Arditi's (2020) research of NBC's *The Voice* illustrates how a neoliberal economic mindset affects the treatment of prospective contestants. Non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) are common in a variety of industries, but their pervasiveness in reality TV is especially dangerous, as contestants often enter the industry not knowing what labor conditions they should expect. In the excitement of potentially starring on a TV show, performers on *The Voice* sign away all rights to their own likeness, record a contract, or perform concerts while on the show (Arditi

2020). Wage labor in capitalism is, by definition, exploitative as workers are paid less than the value of what they create (Marx 1867/2019). Shows like *The Voice*, where workers are not even allowed partial access to the fruits of their labor, typify the entertainment industry's precarious work environment. NDAs, as a form of "silence upheld by the law," alienate contestants not only from their labor, but from each other as well (Arditi 2020:140). As Arditi found, *The Voice*'s season nine confidentiality agreement forbade contestants, whether or not they made it past the auditions, from "discussing 'Producer's business methods and practices'" (2020:143). Those who sign the agreement wager the slim chance of moving on in the competition against not being able to network or discuss work conditions with others in their position.

NDAs, seemingly furtive in nature, are based in "contractarianism," which assumes that if one voluntarily enters into a contract, they consent to all possible interactions stemming from said contract. All "autonomy [is with] the individual who signs a contract," regardless of any power imbalances that may be at play (Arditi 2020:145). Should a contestant beat the odds and make it past the audition stage, they are essentially only paid in exposure, as the show does not provide a salary during production (Arditi 2020). As contestants sign away the rights to their likeness for marketing purposes, they cannot even use their appearance on *The Voice* for celebrity perks. In contrast, the show's celebrity coaches Adam Levine and Blake Shelton earn \$13 million per season (Arditi 2020:146). Twice a year, a new crop of optimistic performers falls prey to the precarious nature of labor on *The Voice* and similar performance reality TV shows, unaware that their unpaid labor "allows for the obscene wages of [their] coaches" (Arditi 2020:146). Though not always recognized as such, NDAs are a decidedly neoliberal mechanism in their prioritization of profits over workers.

Stephen Graham's (2017) case study of *The X Factor* combines the economic and social aspects of reality TV's neoliberal orientation. In reality TV, especially performance-centric shows like *The X Factor* and *The Voice*, contestants "struggl[e] between poles of individuation and homogeneity," balancing their portrayal of a down-to-earth persona and a memorable performer (Graham 2017:13). As television is a for-profit endeavor, it necessarily plays into the most profitable market paradigms (currently, what Graham refers to as "marketised, individualised neoliberal capitalist culture" [2017:13]). This process, combined with skillful editing, converts a contestant from the unique person their friends and family know to a commodity bound by NDAs and archetypes (Graham 2017:17). If, for instance, community talent shows reflect a carefree, collective mindset, the precarious and individualistic nature of reality TV reflects the deep entrenchment of capitalist culture in daily life. This is not to say that reality TV is the problem; rather, it blindly reproduces the problem as aspirational entertainment.

Neoliberalism is also linked to reality television through surveillance culture. As Allen and Mendick (2012:472) write, reality TV often espouses an ideology of worth and authenticity, related to viewers through "neoliberal mechanisms of surveillance." As discussed earlier, authenticity negotiation is an "active discourse" for contestants which can have extensive implications as to how they are perceived by the audience. However, a focus on self-actualization can overshadow how reality TV "directly legitimat[es] surveillance" (Allen and Mendick 2012:472). The neoliberal lens of reality TV prefers the self-contained, archetypal "emotional journey" format, which is easier to produce and sell (Mast 2016). From a production point of view, this is understandable. However, it emphasizes the lack of agency contestants have in their portrayal. Returning to the idea of contractarianism, at the heart of reality TV is a buyer-seller relationship: contestants are sold the prospect of love, fame, and success at the price of

surveillance (Allen and Mendick 2012; Grindstaff 2012; Siddiquee 2020). Inherent to this relationship is the incredible power imbalance between the buyer (the contestant) and the seller (the network and producers). Though the buyer willingly enters the contract, they are unlikely to understand the extent of surveillance, editing, and economic precarity it entails (Mast 2016; Arditì 2020).

There are many factors at play here, and one cannot fully do all of them justice in an overview of the literature. Neoliberalism is a notoriously difficult to define subject, made more difficult to critique when it is reified through mass media (Shah 2010). However, the diverse elements involved speak to the pervasiveness of neoliberalism today, in reality TV as well as its centrality to many countries. The narratives that reality TV employs perpetuate an atomized, individualistic culture in which one's worth depends on their economic viability. In so many words, reality TV is neoliberalism as entertainment—the genre would be completely different in another economic landscape. Worker disenfranchisement, distaste for organized labor, and individualism to the point of ignoring structural barriers are pillars of both reality TV and neoliberal ideology (Montemurro 2008; Arditì 2020). Television, like any other industry, is shaped by its broader economic and sociopolitical context. However, the descriptor 'reality' in the moniker 'reality TV' implies the scenarios and ideology depicted are truthful, or how the world should work (Siddiquee 2020). The content of these shows is not formed in a vacuum, and their ramifications should be more carefully scrutinized.

How reality TV approaches race and racial diversity. In reality TV, people of color are usually reduced to a token or archetype, which deprives them of a substantial character arc (Montemurro 2008). As with scripted TV, the reality TV audience is more likely to become attached to an individual who develops over the program's course. However, reality TV

contestants have significant stakes associated with their character growth, unlike fictional TV characters. If a contestant ingratiates themselves with the audience through recounting their personal narrative, they have a greater likelihood of winning the contest, or at least lasting another week (Mast 2016). By reducing contestants of color to stereotypes or sidekicks to white contestants, their potential for on-screen development is reduced. At the same time, people sometimes go on reality TV with the express purpose of representing their race or ethnicity in a positive light (Grindstaff 2012:30). Paradoxically, this may end up limiting the contestant to a narrow, racially focused narrative that much of the audience may not resonate with.

Across reality TV programming, patterns emerge as to how contestants of color can represent themselves. As mentioned, contestants of color are often the ‘token’ person of color on a reality TV cast. The process of tokenization is explicit in that most reality TV contestants are white, and a lack of editorial imagination can result in contestants of color being portrayed as stereotypes (Montemurro 2008:97). Perhaps more insidious is the implicit tokenization that occurs once people of color are cast (if they are cast at all). When the majority of a show’s cast is white, it communicates to the audience that not only are those stories the default, but they are also the only ones society deems worth telling (Siddiquee 2020).

A few scenes in the first episode of *Big Brother* season six (which aired in 2005) succinctly depict how tokenization occurs in reality TV. Upon hearing that the season’s first two houseguests would be nominated for eviction, contestant Kaysar Ridha summed up his anxieties:

“I definitely stand out in this house, I’m different from the other houseguests. I’m Muslim, I’m Arab...specifically, I’m Iraqi. That’s a problem” (Season 6, Episode 1).

Ridha was nominated that week, though his fellow contestants did not vote him out. Another contestant, Ashlea Evans, said this regarding Ridha and his ethnicity:

“You—kind of have a biased opinion going in for the first time—because of the whole war with Iraq. But y’know, getting to know him [Ridha] as an individual...you get through those judgments and those biases. I really like him as an individual” (Season 6, Episode 1).¹

Evans’ monologue illustrates how racism and xenophobia on reality TV are relegated to individual-level problems that can be solved in a thirty-minute episode (Montemurro 2008:97). Because contestants of color stand out in their majority-white casts (four of the fourteen *Big Brother* season six contestants were people of color), it is assumed that they will devote their screen time to convincing the white audience that they are ‘normal,’ as if it is their duty to assuage any of the viewer’s underlying racist anxieties.

A person of color may enter the reality TV sphere for any number of reasons—to win prize money, provide representation, or leverage their TV appearance into celebrity status—instead, they are treated (to use Ridha’s words) as a “problem” to edit out (Grindstaff 2012). Tokenization stunts their on-screen character development, which in turn affects the extent to which the audience will connect with them. If the audience does not positively identify with a certain contestant, that may limit the contestant’s chance of winning given the emphasis on audience interactivity in reality TV (Skeggs 2009; Grindstaff 2012). The lack of realistic, three-dimensional portrayals of people of color in reality TV perpetuates a cycle in which only some stories are seen as valuable.

Reality TV and the Formation of Community

Reality TV facilitates the formation of communities among contestants and fans alike. The content analysis will focus more on how contestants form strong bonds and community during filming, but this section aims to illustrate the theoretical underpinnings of these relationships.

¹ The em-dashes here indicate audio that sounded spliced together. Though this is present in virtually all reality TV shows, *Big Brother* is particularly egregious in its audio editing.

Moreover, as the coming pages will center those directly involved in the creation of reality TV, this section will paint a broader picture of reality TV communities.

As former *Love Island* contestant Chris Williamson described, contestants bond early on over their unusual living situation. Of his roughly three weeks on the show, Williamson (2018) recalled that contestants had “no idea of the time...the clocks on the wall all ha[d] the wrong time on them.” He theorized that “by breaking up the routine, it allowed them [the production team] to determine the schedule of the day.” Though the show was unscripted, contestants were not allowed to discuss topics unrelated to the show’s events. These conditions, as well as being cloistered for weeks or months with little outside interference, quickly turned strangers into a tight-knit group.

From the audience’s perspective, the strong bonds that contestants form on reality TV may as well be those of characters on a particularly realistic sitcom. In either scenario, the ‘cast’ performs their emotional state for the camera in accordance with a narrative structure that viewers have come to expect (Grindstaff 2012; Mast 2016). However, through interaction with other fans, audience members may also draw a sense of kinship from reality TV. Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s book of the same name, Stewart (2019) describes these fan interactions via social media as ones of “imagined community” predicated on a mutual interest. Consider two Twitter users discussing *The Bachelor* who do not know each other, yet are united by a common pastime. Like a parasocial relationship, the two are unlikely to meet, but the crucial difference in this scenario is the power dynamic. In the case of the Twitter users, there is no power imbalance or wish to vicariously inhabit the other’s social role. The fans are aware they do not know each other and simply share an interest.

There is a wide variety of relationships facilitated by reality TV, in filming locations as well as TV-adjacent communities (e.g., social media). Some, like the bonds Williamson formed on *Love Island*, are more tangible, while others might be described as “imagined.” Similarly, the relationships exist on a spectrum of how well those involved know each other. Though reality TV often relies on narratives of individual “identity work,” (Allen and Mendick 2012) its formats rely on group cohesion and community.

CONCLUSION

Reality TV and surveillance are inextricably intertwined. The former would not exist without the latter, and reality TV’s prevalence today is representative of society’s deeply entrenched surveillance culture. The present literature provides a detailed narrative of the panopticon’s relationship to reality TV, but one need not look further than the title of *Big Brother* to reach a similar conclusion. Synthesizing experiences via television is one way people make sense of the world. Reality TV is no different, as it also reflects societal trends that impact the stories producers choose to tell (Siddiquee 2020). However, as this review has endeavored to show, the ‘reality’ in the name reality TV does not imply value-free programming. Unfortunately, the hegemonic form of reality TV betrays a lack of care for contestants, especially contestants of color.

Despite the negative tone this paper has taken at points, I have a soft spot for reality TV. I want the best for the genre and its contestants; unfortunately, the profit motive of a TV venture often thwarts any good intentions. As social media, parasocial relationships, and neoliberalism remain fixtures of our lives, it becomes all the more important to critically examine the roles they play (intentional or not) in the stories we tell.

Content Analysis: *Love Island* Seasons One and Two

At least, you know what, I might be a fucking bitch to the heart, but at least I don't smile in all these girls' faces because you fucking are a wolf in sheep's clothing. I'm not, I'm a fucking wolf, you see me coming.

—Tiffany “New York” Pollard, *Flavor of Love* Season One

Love Island is a British dating reality TV series which aired for two seasons in 2005 and 2006 and was revived in 2015. This content analysis focuses on the revival version, which has since inspired an entire international franchise. The series' format is similar to other dating reality TV programs: contestants (“Islanders”) are isolated in a tropical Villa and “couple up” with other contestants over the course of the season in an attempt to find love. Islanders who are not in a couple are at a higher risk of being “dumped” or voted out, be it by their fellow contestants or the show's audience. They are continuously monitored on personal microphones, stationary video cameras, and multiple hidden camera operators throughout the Villa. Islanders can also opt to speak privately and directly to the camera in a confessional or “talking head” segment. This content analysis examines the mediated version of the Islanders that the audience is presented in relation to five salient themes that relate to the preceding literature review.

METHODS

My units of analysis were seasons one and two of *Love Island*, which aired in 2015 and 2016. The seasons had twenty-nine and thirty-seven episodes respectively, not counting recap episodes, which were not included in the analysis. Each episode was roughly forty-five minutes without commercials. I felt that I had reached a point of saturation (Glaser 1965) with two seasons. The later seasons also involve new plot elements that complicate the show's structure, and I wanted to avoid possible sources of spuriousness. I took an inductive approach, as I did not have a complete theoretical framework going into the coding process. I had some themes in mind having seen previous seasons of *Love Island* but relied mostly on phrases and sentiments that

contestants often repeated to get a sense of what would be the most important subjects to watch for.

I focused on analyzing manifest more than latent content due to concerns about editing. The illusory nature of reality TV editing made me wary of seeing connections where there were none, so my data is primarily based on direct statements of or interactions between contestants. Of course, as an analysis of reality TV, my data consists of surveilled and edited interactions, so I cannot completely factor out the impact of editing. On the subject of reliability, I am unable to provide a measure of inter-coder validity, as I was the only coder. However, the prominent themes were consistent throughout the data in both seasons, as well as from episode to episode.

I came to notice five emergent themes that were invoked by contestants in similar ways. These were authenticity and selfhood, surveillance (in its various forms), trust, creation of a community, and the passage of time. I did not use a comprehensive coding scheme—it was more that contestants used certain phrases that mapped on to different themes. For example, with regard to authenticity, contestants frequently accused each other of “playing the game” or only being in it for the money. For surveillance, I found that they often mentioned “the outside world” or “the public.” As I noticed these phrases and converted them into a coding scheme, they converged with my developing theoretical framework to create the basis for this inquiry.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Often, contestants would invoke two or more themes during a conversation or sentence, which resulted in their being coding into multiple categories. Such is the nature of social interaction, so I have not taken great pains to attempt to fit each occurrence into a single theme or subtopic. Certain statements are more representative of their given code than others, but the

multifaceted nature of these conversations paints a good picture of which themes co-occurred most frequently and how they were invoked.

Authenticity and the Self

Authenticity and surveillance were, as one may imagine of a dating show, probably the most common themes in my analysis. Most seasons of *Love Island* even include a lie detector test as a couples' challenge. Polygraphs themselves may lack accuracy, but the truths or falsehoods they represent in *Love Island* are symbolic of the show's larger preoccupation with authenticity.

As alluded to in the section on self-surveillance and authenticity, 'playing the game' is a phrase often invoked on *Love Island*. Often, it carries a negative connotation, as with this exchange between contestants Daniel and Zara:

Daniel: "I don't play games," to which Zara responds, "you learn the hard way" (Season 2, Episode 3).

Or how Tom, in branding Adam a 'game player' implies that he will soon be voted off:

Tom: "Let him [Adam] play the game, see how long he's gonna last" (Season 2, Episode 11).

In these instances, 'playing the game' is dishonesty with malicious intent. However, Islanders will advise their fellow contestants to 'play the game' under certain circumstances:

Rachel: "I cannot help but think [Olivia] is playing the biggest game in the villa," to which Rykard responds Olivia "has to" in order to stay on the show (Season 2, Episode 15).

As Rykard alludes to, Islanders are aware that their place on the show is in constant jeopardy. Nathan makes this point more bluntly:

"If you ain't coupled up in here, you're a goner" (Season 2, Episode 24).

To this end, it is okay to ‘play the game’ and misrepresent oneself if one is well-liked and trusted otherwise. Says Kady (an original Islander), advising Liana (who has recently arrived):

“You're just got to, like, play the game, almost. Like, if you wanna stay, obviously” (Season 2, Episode 23).

Again, one contestant explicitly endorses ‘playing the game’ as a means to an end.

Islanders differ on whether one can fake self-expression or a relationship in the Villa. To some extent, everyone is playing up some parts of their personality for the camera, but there are many references to “being myself” and new Islanders being able to “be different people” because their fellow contestants do not know them yet. In the latter half of season two, Adam J makes several comments to this effect.

In a confessional: "No one knows me yet, and I can be different people" (Season 2, Episode 35; three days after entering the Villa). The next day, he says to fellow new Islander Katie: “Today, I’ve been more myself” (Season 2, Episode 36).

It is notable that he made the first statement in the confessional, as it gives contestants a semblance of privacy and may encourage them to speak more truthfully. That does not necessarily mean his latter statement to Katie was completely false, but the contentious nature of authenticity means Islanders are better off at least faking sincerity. Adam J’s conflicting comments may be a function of his short time in the Villa, but experienced contestants make similar statements:

Olivia: “You can't fake it in there [a relationship in the Villa], it's too obvious” (Season 2, Episode 11).

Tina: “You can't [be someone else] in here because you get caught. Gotta be yourself” (Season 2, Episode 36).

The prior comments are clear that sincerity in self-expression and relationship development

are key to Villa success. However, a well-received persona may be the next best thing. In a podcast about his time on *Love Island*'s first season, Islander Chris Williamson described the experience of playing a 'character' in the Villa:

“If I was to go on [*Love Island*] again, what I'd do differently is I'd be myself. I don't regret how I acted on there...I lied through my teeth to get myself on there to play a role of someone that I wasn't particularly, but someone that I knew I could play the role of. ... [But] the lack of authenticity shows through really, really starkly, because you run of things that you can *think* to say, and situations you can *think* to create. ... Like, 'what would *Love Island* Chris say now?' Like, that's not the way it would [normally] work” (*Modern Wisdom* Episode 16).

Furthermore, to be perceived as authentic by the public and the rest of the Villa comes with benefits. If the audience votes for a couple as their favorite, which often translates to “those they see as the most ‘real,’” said couple can receive immunity from being voted off. Those who are voted off may still receive social capital (in the form of social media followers, which can translate to financial sponsorships) if they are well-received on the show.

It seems that while one can put on a front, there is the sense that other Islanders—not to mention the many cameras—will inevitably uncover their ‘true self’ over the course of the show. In general, Islanders experience cognitive dissonance about forming real relationships in such a contrived setting. As Malin notes, “it [developing a relationship] shouldn't be like [playing a game], it should be natural” despite how “everything is magnified in here” (Season 2, Episode 16).

One interesting case study on authenticity in the *Love Island* environment are the season two contestants Sophie and Katie, the show's first same-sex couple. Over the course of episodes thirty-three and thirty-five (thirty-four being a recap episode), many Islanders comment on Sophie and Katie's date. While most are happy for Sophie and Katie, others feel as if the women are threatening their chances of winning:

Terry: “Do you reckon they [Sophie and Katie] would win it through that [being the first same-sex couple]? I don’t reckon they’d win it through that...fair play to them *if they’re actually attracted to one another*...don’t do it just to get a reaction.”

Alex, in response: “I don’t think Katie would [do it just to get a reaction]” (Season 2, Episode 36, emphasis added).

As Siddiquee (2020) notes, the idea that reality TV is ‘unscripted’ means producers feel less liable to educate audiences or apologize for remarks contestants make. In this case, Alex and Terry questioning the veracity of Sophie and Katie’s feelings for each other can be played off as simply their opinion, not the view of the network that chose to broadcast it. The insinuation that Sophie and Katie may be stealing a win from more ‘deserving’ heterosexual couples cannot be interrogated in the show’s framework: “the makers of the show are easily let off the hook since they can say: We’re only showing you what the person actually did” (Dubrofsky quoted in Siddiquee 2020:46).

As Sophie and Katie’s relationship progresses, obstacles they encounter are portrayed as problems with Sophie rather than their unnatural environment:

Katie: “She’s [Sophie’s] given me so many mixed signals”

Olivia, in response: “She did with Tom [her former partner on *Love Island*] as well”

Katie: “She did, seeing it from the outside” (Season 2, Episode 38).

This conversation has many interesting facets. It shows the difficulty of pursuing romance in *Love Island*’s restrictive and unnatural environment, an ironic recurring motif shared by all couples. Katie also explicitly avows her belief in the edited version of the show, which she had been watching prior to her Villa entry. However, neither Katie nor Olivia considers that the “mixed signals” from Sophie may be a result of their stressful surroundings. It may be that the constant contact with and speculation about one’s fellow contestants results in high tensions and

difficulty communicating, a line of inquiry that will be further pursued in the ‘Community’ section of this analysis.

Surveillance

Multiple Islanders express that “everything’s magnified” in the Villa, by the cameras and their fellow contestants. Each episode of *Love Island* is roughly twenty-four hours of footage condensed into an hour of the most scandalous moments, so even the smallest upset is blown out of proportion in editing. This literal magnification parallels the metaphorical magnification of Islanders surveilling themselves and their fellow contestants to ensure no one is ‘playing the game.’

Newer Islanders seem more aware of the cameras (or are at least worse at ignoring them). They more frequently reference surveillance and ‘break the fourth wall’ of TV. Emma, Katie, and Adam J, who entered the Villa towards the end of season two, are emblematic of the differences between ‘old’ and ‘new’ Islanders. Their feelings are particularly clear on the subject of the Villa’s surveillance:

Emma to new partner Terry: “I told you, no sex on TV” (Season 2, Episode 30).

Adam J, during his second day in the Villa: “There’s 8 cameras in the bedroom!” (Season 2, Episode 32)

New Islanders are also wont to reference what they saw of the current season before they joined the Villa, creating a sense of parasocial tension between them and the older Islanders.

For context, Emma and Tom had dated and broken up before they entered *Love Island*. In a conversation with Emma, Tom asks if she felt uncomfortable watching him date other people, to which she responds, “Well, I’ve been watching you and Sophie [with whom Tom had just

broken up] on TV for however long” (Season 2, Episode 30). In other conversations, new Islanders invoke similar ideas, though they are not informed by past relationships:

Adam J to Tina: “When I was with the lads back home [and I saw you on TV] ... I can kind of feel that I relate to you” (Season 2, Episode 35).

Katie to Sophie: “I know [you're nice], I've seen you [on TV]...on the outside world, everyone's talking about how gorgeous and stunning you are” (Season 2, Episode 33).

It is compelling that multiple would-be Islanders felt that they knew their fellow contestants before stepping foot in the Villa. While Tom and Emma’s conversation is understandable given their prior connection, new Islanders were not shy in mentioning how their fellow contestants had been portrayed on TV to that point. Again, Nathan accentuates this point:

Nathan [original Islander] to Katie [new Islander]: “Do you feel a bit star-struck seeing us [the rest of the original Islanders]?” (Season 2, Episode 33)

An interesting case of an Islander getting to see multiple sides of the situation is that of Malin in season two. Typically, Islanders enter the show one of two ways: as an ‘original’ Islander who is a contestant from day one, or as a late arrival who enters days or weeks into the show. Malin, an original Islander, was voted off roughly three weeks in (episode twenty-four) but returned shortly thereafter for a special appearance (episode thirty-six). Though she was not allowed to rejoin the contestants, she had not been sequestered since her departure and as such had knowledge of current public opinion on the Islanders. In the week and a half since Malin left, her ex-Villa boyfriend Terry had since “coupled up” with new Islander Emma. As one may expect, her surprise appearance was a great moment in reality TV drama as well as implicit commentary on surveillance and the public opinion. The following phrases were all said by Malin in her single comeback scene and many key themes are present:

Malin to Terry: “I’ve been watching everything [since I left],” “you’re playing a massive game, everyone can see it,” “I can see everything,” “The whole of England has seen it,” “You just want to win...that’s what everyone thinks” (Season 2, Episode 36).

Regarding public opinion, the audience (most often referred to as “the public” or the “outside world”) is almost a contestant in their own right. To win dates or other prizes, Islanders compete in challenges, the subject matter of which often draws on social media posts or articles about the show. Audience members watching these seasons as they aired were able to vote on a variety of matters and affect the contest accordingly. For example, when the audience was asked to vote for the Villa’s “best girl,” Malin received the fewest votes and was thus voted out. In reference to Malin’s eviction, new Islander Liana commented that Malin being voted off as opposed to herself or another new Islander, Tina, “gives us more time to show what we’re really like” to the public (Season 2, Episode 25). Unlike other elements of the show, old and new contestants alike agreed on the public’s power over the competition and frequently mentioned it:

Adam, after not being voted off: “The public have...given me another chance to find someone in here. It means a lot and I really do appreciate it” (Season 2, Episode 32).

Adam J, after unsuccessfully flirting with Tina: “I ain’t gonna graft [flirt] more than that to mug myself off [make a fool of himself] to the nation” (Season 2, Episode 36).

At this point in season two, Adam has been in the Villa roughly three weeks and Adam J only a few days. Nonetheless, they are similarly aware of the power they believe the audience to have. Before she was voted off, Malin referenced this as well:

“None of the girls here are safe. At all. Nobody knows what the public are voting for or who they like...we don’t have a bloody clue, and it’s horrible” (Season 2, Episode 24).

To this end, developing a persona under surveillance may be an attempt to wrest some of this control away from the audience. Others are keen on proving their authenticity under surveillance, as mentioned in the previous section:

Liana: “I just wanted to prove to the public and everyone who I was...I wanted to show that I was real” (Season 2, Episode 32).

However, whether or not they construct a persona for the cameras, many Islanders expressed concerns about how they would appear to the public:

Zoe: “I would never ever behave like this in the outside world” (Season 1, Episode 25).

Cally to her partner Luis: “Just because everyone else is displaying the sex, we don’t want everyone to see that. You’ve got people watching, I’ve got people watching...but there’s so much pressure [to have sex]” (Season 1, Episode 28).

It is important to note that the anxiety around surveillance is mainly a gendered phenomenon. Often, female Islanders are more apprehensive about expressing their sexuality; Zoe’s quote above is in the context of regretting having had sex a few episodes prior. While any reality TV contestant might worry about how they will be portrayed in the edited version of events, women’s sexuality is policed far more readily than men’s throughout society. As Williamson notes, the men’s greater openness may have been a function of their employment status:

“Of the guys on my season, I think, if you discount me...I think there were only two other people who either didn’t work for their family or were self-employed...[Being self-employed] is more protective for the brand” (*Modern Wisdom* Episode 16).

In other words, as most of the men on his season were self-employed or employed by their families, they had greater leeway in expressing their true selves without societal or workplace backlash. The female finalists, in comparison, were more likely to work at larger companies which hindered their possibilities of self-expression.

Trust

Like their oft-negotiated authenticity, contestants’ sense of trust in others was frequently in limbo. Trust and loyalty were greatly desired traits and at the same time closely guarded, which

created much tension when partners would not compromise. Islanders made contradictory statements on trust and loyalty similar to their conflicting opinions on personas. In season one, for example, Naomi says both “I don't think loyalty should be a thing in here” (Episode 10) as well as “Trust is hard to find in a place like this” (Episode 16). Other Islanders often extolled the virtues of loyalty and trust though they conflicted with the program’s framework:

Dan: “Loyalty is a really big thing for me” (Season 2, Episode 8).

Scott: “I’m used to doing whatever I want...In here you have to think about who you're with” (Season 2, Episode 8).

Terry: “If I didn't care about her [Malin] I wouldn't give a fuck [about being eliminated from the show] ...what makes it worse is that we’re not in control of the situation” (Season 2, Episode 10).

Alex: “I believe in loyalty” (Season 2, Episode 31).

This moral conflict may be why some find it more difficult to ‘play the game’ in a concerted effort to win the prize money. As Malin notes, “you don’t truly know somebody in [the Villa]”—surveillance and financial motivations must be factored into the equation (Season 2, Episode 16).

Creating a Community

All members of the reality TV process are aware of the genre’s unspoken tropes. Editing teams can transform contestants into characters by creating a “narrative arch,” contestants may attempt to perform certain tropes to gain audience empathy, and audiences acknowledge these performances and cheer on contestants accordingly (Mast 2016). These archetypes are prevalent and consist of clear-cut schemas (e.g., ‘the party girl,’ ‘the alpha male’) so both Islanders and audience members attempt to fit contestants into archetypal tropes. It is the combination of the archetypal contestant and their authentic self which creates a unique aspect of their reality TV microcommunity. A positive archetype is the ‘underdog,’ whom audience members empathize with and wish to see prevail. In a live episode of *Love Island*, a panel of reality TV stars (from

other shows) discussed their opinions of the contestants that season. Said panelist Fern McCanne:

“They’re [Max and Jess] the underdogs...I think Max and Jess are gonna win it” (Season 1, Episode 29).

Max and Jess, who had not been in a couple long by the show’s standards, ended up winning season one. In bestowing ‘underdog’ status upon them, McCanne may have inadvertently swayed public opinion in the couple’s favor.

Archetypes are also implicitly invoked in Islanders’ judgements of their fellow contestants. About halfway through season two, two new Islanders, Tina and Liana, are introduced the same day. Liana is leered at for being a stripper, though it is a relatively common job among the contestants. “Butler in the buff” Adam rarely receives sexualized comments regarding his job, but he and other male Islanders feel comfortable talking down to Liana or making derogatory remarks behind her back:

Adam: “I think [Tina] will fit in here more” than Liana, who “is a bit feisty” (Season 2, Episode 23).

Terry: “You can’t take Liana home to your mom” (Season 2, Episode 23).

These comments come from the different conversations on the same day. Liana has barely interacted with anyone up to this point and mentions in a confessional segment that she “feel[s] so lonely” (Season 2, Episode 23). She has had the master status of “feisty” stripper conferred on her in contrast to “prim and proper” Tina, which significantly impacts her relationships in the Villa (both quotes from Adam, Season 2 Episode 23).

Perhaps in part because of these volatile relationships, Islanders quickly develop a narrative of “family.” As Josh says on the subject:

Josh: “We’re a family in here [the Villa], there’s no interrupting this family” (Season 1, Episode 2).

Note how early the idea of Islanders as “family” is invoked. By episode two, their second day in the Villa, contestants have formed intense bonds (superficial though they may be). At the end of the season, host Caroline Flack reinforces this idea, saying:

“You’ve turned into a real little family now” (Season 1, Episode 29).

As the following section will explore, the speed with which relationships develop on *Love Island* is intimately linked to a sense of time distortion in the Villa.

Despite the Islanders’ close bonds, tensions are always high in the Villa. Arguments between couples are perceived as relationship progression in the sense that because normal, non-*Love Island* couples also fight, arguments between *Love Island* couples must be a marker of normative romantic development. This logic is flawed for several reasons, not least of which is that the many arguments are more likely the result of many strangers living in a manufactured environment that they are not allowed to leave. As if that were not enough, contestants are also constantly performing authenticity for the ubiquitous cameras. It is no small wonder that, as Max says, “any little comment, people are ready to jump on” (Season 1, Episode 16). Petty, heated arguments may be good for entertainment, but they are detrimental to the Islanders’ relationship stability and mental health.

The Islanders’ aggressive reactions to seemingly unimportant infractions are consistent with Stearns’ (1994) “hydraulic model” of emotions. Stearns argues that contemporary American emotional culture is rooted in Victorian standards, which conceived of emotions as generally irrational and dangerous to the social order. “Being” emotional, or acting based on how one feels, is inferior to approaching situations in an analytical manner. The hydraulic model draws on this antagonistic attitude toward “bad” emotions, like anger and jealousy, which “must be

ventilated to be defused, lest...[they] fester and corrupt” (Stearns 1994:104). Though these seasons of *Love Island* are UK-based, it is not too much of a stretch to imagine that a similar emotional culture took hold there as well. Though this template of emotions is a construct, it nonetheless affects those who are socialized into its expectations. For example, in episode fifteen of season two, Terry and Malin get into a heated argument over a grilled cheese. As another Islander notes:

Olivia: “It's [a fight] over something really silly, but it's obviously not about that” (Season 2, Episode 15).

The subject of the fight is “silly,” but the emotions involved are serious. Reifying these concepts through language about emotions (e.g., ‘pent-up’ emotions ‘explode’ if they are not properly released) affects how they are expressed. Because the Islanders have been socialized to view emotions as needing to be ventilated, they seek outlets for their stress and anger. As *Love Island* profits from drama and intense emotional displays, it offers no such outlets. This is a pattern across both seasons I coded (and from anecdotal experience, every season I have watched); the setup of the show is not conducive to good communication.

Ironically, despite the aim of the show, all these tensions can make it hard to pursue a relationship. There is pressure from one’s fellow contestants “when you’re trying to have a relationship and everyone’s involved,” as well as the shared sense that “no one’s safe” from being voted off by the audience (Sophie Season 2, Episode 19; Terry Season 2, Episode 10). Given this tense and uncertain atmosphere, the Islanders clamor for the chance to leave the Villa whenever possible:

Sophie to Tom: “I want to have some time out[side]. I'm sick of everyone” (Season 2, Episode 31).

Life in the Villa is generally a very intense and specific experience. Even for the original Islanders who enter together at the same time, adapting to Villa life is difficult and can cause relationship struggles:

Kady: “Everyone's adapting to the Villa in different ways”; “Does he [her partner Scott] not think we're struggling to adapt?” (Season 2, Episode 16)

Sophie, in response to the latter quote: “This villa affects everyone in different ways...you've just got to work with each other” (Season 2, Episode 16).

Even after one adapts to the Villa, life inside is bewildering:

Jordan, after being voted off: “In there [the Villa], it's so intense...they're [the rest of the Islanders] the only ones who can relate to our experience” (Season 1, Episode 29).

Zoe, same scene: “[The Villa] is such an intense bubble” (Season 1, Episode 29).

The restrictive nature of reality TV can also be an obstacle in adjusting to one's new circumstances. Contestants must relinquish control to the producers, editing team, and audience for weeks as they attempt to find ‘the one’ among a group of strangers:

Kady: “This is torture, for someone [normally] so in control of everything in their life, to be in a situation like this” (Season 2, Episode 21).

As noted, Kady's partner Scott experiences a similar conflict (“I'm used to doing whatever I want...In here you have to think about who you're with”). This is a sentiment shared by many Islanders, though most frequently expressed by Kady and Scott, as their relationship spanned nearly the entire season.

Though these elements of Villa life are frustrating, they bring the Islanders closer together because of their intensity and specificity; as Jordan says, only his fellow Islanders “can relate” to his experience.

Time

Time has little to no meaning on *Love Island*; as Williamson attested to, even the Villa's clocks are meant to confuse the Islanders' sense of time. The artificial nature of *Love Island*—cut

off from the outside world, stuck in a single location with strangers, Islanders constantly arriving to and leaving from said location—only contributes to this lack of temporality. As Kady says, “It’s [*Love Island*] like being in a little bubble for six weeks” (Season 2, Episode 42).

Together, these factors create a sense of time distortion. As the Islanders have nothing to do but talk to each other, relationships form and develop more quickly, leading to a sense that they have known each other longer than they actually have. Josh’s early invocation of family rhetoric in season one is a good example of this dynamic, but it is much more visible in how it affects couples’ romantic development:

Naomi to Josh: “We were a couple for nearly 2 weeks, and even that felt like 2 years [in Villa time]” (Season 1, Episode 23).

Sophie: “Can’t believe how fast things move in here, it’s like we’ve [she and Tom] been in a relationship for 6 months” (Season 2, Episode 11).

Scott: “We’ve [he and Kady] been together, like, pretty much five weeks in here now, nearly six. And that on the outside world is at least about four, five months [of a relationship]” (Season 2, Episode 37).

As Sophie summarizes, “In the Villa, a day is like a week” in terms of relationship progress (Season 2, Episode 24). Perhaps the most telling example of this comes at the end of season one, when Jon proposes to Hannah, whom he had known for forty-one days at that point. An early engagement is not necessarily a sign of a turbulent relationship, but one can assume that the couple would have taken more time in getting to know each other had they been introduced in a non-reality TV setting. Alas, Jon and Hannah split shortly after leaving the Villa.

Not every *Love Island* relationship is doomed to fail; season two’s Cara and Nathan are married with children, and many former Islanders maintain friendships with people they met in the Villa. However, the show’s modus operandi of simultaneously sowing drama and romantic connections means contestants remain in perpetually heightened emotional states.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

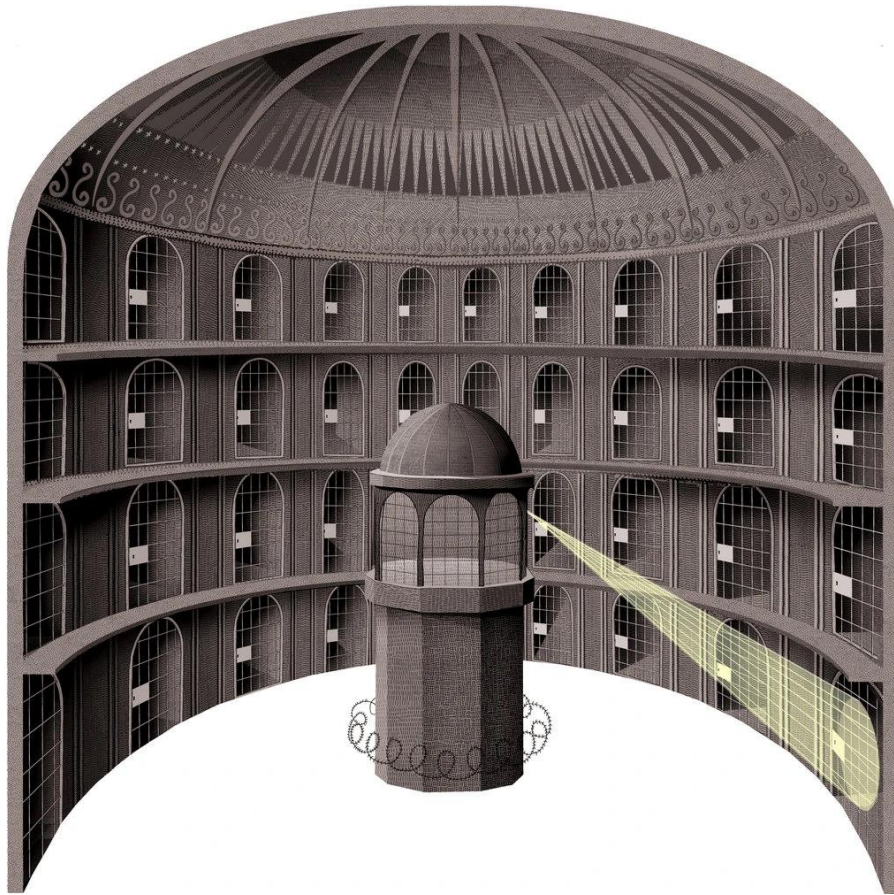
When it comes down to it, *Love Island* is simply a high-stakes trust fall. Contestants must relinquish control to the producers, editing team, and audience, trusting that they will be portrayed as they see themselves and received well as a result. The most salient of these trust exercises is the process of coming to trust their partner over the course of the season in hopes that they are not ‘playing the game.’ To be fair, beneath its dramatized veneer, ‘playing the game’ is a valid concern; people have gone on reality TV dating shows expressly for monetary gain, which has devastating emotional implications for the other person in the relationship. Grant Crapp, for example, won season one of *Love Island Australia* under the pretense of dating fellow Islander Tayla Damir, while outside the Villa he had a “secret girlfriend” and allegedly entered the show solely to promote his clothing line (The Sunday Times 2021). He was the game player the Islanders warned us about. The recurring discussion of authenticity is like a defense mechanism to ensure that the Islanders ‘true’ selves are portrayed ‘correctly’ (i.e., how they see themselves) and received well by the public.

The panopticon may be dramatic in its portrayal of surveillance, but it is nothing if not an apt metaphor. Foucault, writing in the mid-twentieth century, characterized societies that engaged in this type of surveillance as ones of “discipline” which engendered obedience by way of paranoia. In 1990, Gilles Deleuze built on Foucault’s concepts and hypothesized that contemporary and future societies were ones of “control,” decentralized but nonetheless constant:

“Control is short-term and of rapid rates of turnover, but also continuous and without limit, while discipline was of long duration, infinite and discontinuous. Man is no longer man enclosed, but man in debt” (Deleuze 1992:6).

Discipline imposes thresholds and barriers, but control modulates: our attention, how we behave, blurs the lines in ways disciplinary societies did not (Brusseau 2020). Societies of control are both Liana saying she wanted to “prove to the public...that [she] was real” as well as how we internalize neoliberalism’s restrictive social norms and use them to police ourselves and others. In a control society, you may have the choice of whether you spend time on Facebook or Instagram, but the corporation sells your data either way. More central to this discussion, societies of control invoke the ever-present electronic panopticon as opposed to its brick-and-mortar rendering. Today’s societies of control combine aspects of neoliberalism, surveillance, parasocial relationships and performed authenticity. After all, what is the *Love Island Villa* if not a society of control optimized for panoptic voyeurism? Despite their many contrivances, each iteration mirrors the society from which it was derived.

APPENDIX A: CONCEPTUAL DESIGN OF THE PANOPTICON



Artistic representation of the panopticon, provided for ease of visualization (Simpson 2013).

APPENDIX B: EXAMPLE OF THE 'TALKING HEAD' SEGMENT



A confessional or 'talking head' scene, where a contestant privately addresses the camera and provides commentary (ITV2:2015). Pictured here are Luis Morrison (L) and Cally Beech (R), two season one *Love Island* contestants.

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