

SPECTATOR LIFE

CULTURE



Love island is great entertainment but is it exploitative?

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10 JUNE 2019

For years, the Jeremy Kyle Show publicly ridiculed its troubled guests for TV entertainment. No doubt many of us rolled our eyes in horror each time Kyle made yet another pseudo-moralistic chant of “Grow a pair!” at one of his

victims. All of the guests took part of their own volition but it was difficult to escape the feeling that their personal circumstances were being taken advantage of for the sake of audiences.

And yet why is the Kyle show being singled out as immoral ahead of other more recent reality TV shows? When a recent guest committed suicide after an appearance on Jeremy Kyle, the show was banished from the airwaves immediately, whereas Love Island – which has seen double the deaths, with two contestants taking their lives in the aftermath of the show – has emerged unscathed and launched a new series to booming audience figures last week.

The new series kicked off with its now well-worn opening premise. Islanders casually select partners as if they were meals on a restaurant menu – and if they refuse to “perform” by pairing up, they are disqualified from the show. Dating another contestant is often part of a calculated strategy to remain in the game. With hook-ups often being scripted, nothing about this type of “reality” show resembles normal life.

And yet those who take part are not actors. Nor are they paid well. Last year’s contestants reportedly received far below the minimum wage for their time in the villa. Those who have sex on screen effectively become poorly paid versions of soft-core porn stars, trading in their privacy for a fleeting taste of fame. Of course lucrative opportunities may appear after the show, but is it worth the total loss of a private life?

In past series, demeaning challenges have involved appraising cardboard cut-outs of each other and rating them on who has the most desirable body parts – when this sort of behaviour is normalised, both for the contestants and for the audience watching, it can be difficult to revert back to the real world.

Harley Street cosmetic surgeon Julian De Silva has spoken of the “Love Island effect”, referencing the large increase in patients seeking surgeries to emulate their TV idols. For their part, contestants apparently believe that cosmetic work will increase their chances of sponsorship and so the vicious cycle continues.

The only concession Love Island has made to ethics is to ban lie detector tests but should we not also be concerned about the consequences of someone metaphorically “waking up” after a stint on Love Island and realising they hadn’t intended to be so public after all? It’s not about passing judgement on the contestants for choosing to take part. Rather, it’s about their ability to cope in the cold light of day when they’re off the paradise island and plunged back into their real lives, with all the public scrutiny that will inevitably await.

Kyle’s show came under fire for its treatment of contestants but it was an outdated format which had been superseded by other forms of reality TV: the decision to fold the programme wasn’t hard or costly. Love Island, on the other hand, is one of ITV 2’s biggest offerings and we all keep tuning in to watch. But there’s no reason why Love Island shouldn’t receive the same scrutiny as the Jeremy Kyle Show just because it is popular with viewers.

Ultimately, it makes little difference whether reality guests are shaking their fists at each other in fury on Jeremy Kyle, having a farcical fight over booze and benefits, or whether they seem hedonistic and happy, prancing around in designer swimwear and grading each other’s bodies. Either way, the impact of reality TV on those who take part deserves a closer look.