



LOVE ISLAND'S SUCCESS

A Tale of
Cultural Tension

A vibrant pink inflatable flamingo is the central focus, floating on clear turquoise water. The flamingo is depicted in profile, facing right, with a long, curved neck and a black beak. The water shows gentle ripples and a reflection of the flamingo. In the background, a clear blue sky is visible with a few soft, out-of-focus light spots. The horizon line is low, showing a hint of a green, forested shoreline on the left and distant hills on the right.

UNPREDICTABLE

Written by Lamberto Ferrara and Lucy Irving

Summer 2018 has been an exciting period for TV audiences. During this typically hot British summer, more than 3 million of us are foregoing the sunshine in favour of the fourth season of Love Island, making it ITV2's highest overnight rated show ever.

What is surprising about Love Island is not only its viewership, and powerful earned media, but its ability to reverse a common trend amongst reality TV shows that often start with a positive first season, followed by a drop in viewers and interest. Love Island instead seems to become more and more popular every year.

In the last few months, the show has been avidly followed and discussed by many different audiences, from teenagers to academics. This success has been attributed primarily to its voyeuristic style, i.e. glimpses of sexual content amongst scantily clad, good-looking, young people. This, however, does not fully explain its popular cultural power. There must be a different hook rousing

interest and engagement, especially if we consider other similar reality formats don't have the same level of resonance and popularity.

So, what makes Love Island so different? We would argue that the success of Love Island lies in its ability to tap into some of the key cultural narratives in society that are currently being contested. Love Island works on tensions related to our identity, desire and gender representation in a period dominated by discussions about feminism, gender recognition, toxic masculinity and definitions of physical beauty. All these topics are used to create conflicting narratives in the show, which then inspire discussions, resonance and, therefore, relevance within the wider cultural landscape.

There are four key cultural tensions at play in Love Island that are worth further examination:

- **Format:** Rigid vs. Fluid
- **Characters:** Hyper-masculine/feminine standards vs. Complexity

of individual identities

- **Values:** Puritanism vs. Hedonism
- **Romance Narratives:** Courtship vs. Tinderification

An unpredictable format for unpredictable times

What Love Island offers is an additional component which, even if visible, is never clearly explained: challenges, new competitors and surprises are constantly organised following what is happening in the villa to shake the status quo and to test participants' "feelings". Love Island's malleability enables relationships to form "spontaneously" and to work around them to create and increase the drama. In this way, once the audience has suspended their disbelief about participants' spontaneity, the life in the villa becomes a mirror of everyday life, where nothing is sure and new challenges constantly arise.

At the same time, unlike many reality shows, Love Island doesn't seek to

The image features a vibrant sunset sky transitioning from a deep orange at the bottom to a dark purple at the top. Silhouettes of several palm trees of varying heights are scattered across the scene, with some reaching towards the top of the frame. The text 'INTER-MEDIA' is centered in a large, white, sans-serif font, with a hyphen between 'INTER' and 'MEDIA'.

INTER-MEDIA

Love Island creates and leaves ambiguities for audiences to debate.

dominate and control the conversation around it, but aims to spark the conversation. It creates and leaves ambiguities for audiences to debate over, rather than adding judgements of value to participants' choices. This explains where some of its popularity lies. The lack of certainty it creates means viewers feel the need to affirm their opinions with others, rather than their opinions being affirmed by the narrative of the show.

Love Island feeds into these by setting itself up to be the ultimate inter-media experience. The content is merely a springboard for the multitude of other ways of keeping the viewers engaged, from posting teaser summary clips, feeding into memes designed for different platforms (with Instagram being a highlight), having a unique tone of voice, through to the highly relevant and targeted brand and merchandise partnerships.

All these elements enable the show to avoid stagnation and to scope and pace 'the drama' well, keeping the audience thrilled and curious.

Characterisations of gender identity

It is easy to spot representations of stereotypical and 'toxic' gender identities in Love Island's participants. Visually participants appear hyper-masculine/feminine and editing around key conversational moments (such as this season's 'What's Brexit?' discussion) embodies the cultural trope of the 'beautiful, yet superficial' character.

However, and here probably sits the difference between Love Island and other dating reality formats, the protagonists go beyond sexist tropes. In particular, men gather together to discuss their feelings and, even if embarrassed, share their insecurities with the others. Attention has been drawn to behaviours which are deemed to be the product of toxic masculinity (such as 'gaslighting'); feeding into a newsworthy conversation about interactions between the sexes.

Participants 'packaging' may be fake, but their feelings and dramas are authentic. Love Island displays the prototype of stereotypical beauty but, day after day,

A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of several palm fronds against a clear blue sky. The fronds are green and yellow, with some showing signs of wear or damage. The word "CONFLICT" is overlaid in the center in a large, white, sans-serif font.

CONFLICT

makes it more human and complex. The shock, caused by the discovery that the characters are deeper than how they are depicted, adds a layer of complexity to their hyper-sexualised bodies, enhancing the drama and our empathy. The audience can recognise themselves in some of the participants' behaviours, insecurities, and decisions, establishing a sympathetic bond with them.

Conflicting romantic narratives

What does love mean in 2018? We live in a period of apparent sexual freedom nestled in traditional Puritan values, with younger audiences celebrating the traditional Royal Wedding while having multiple accounts on dating apps. There is a constant riddle between real behaviours and the ones people consider socially sharable.

This tension plays out on Love Island. A space where participants have been selected to flirt and create dramas, but also where "official girlfriends" are celebrated, where everybody has been instructed to be strategic and is

Love Island zooms in on the tensions which are shaping our values around romance.

authorised to cheat and let the partner down, but where "loyalty", "trust", "faithfulness" is constantly discussed. Where sexual encounters are allowed and promiscuity is promoted, but where participants also confess to feeling stupid for having kissed someone they barely know.

Love Island zooms in on the tensions which are shaping our values around romance. It talks about the complexity of contemporary relationships using old narrative models which are culturally rooted in our society – think of the romantic trios of Sense and Sensibility or Shakespeare's Anthony and Cleopatra for example.

Hidden behind the reality format, emerges the narrative structure typical of romantic stories. A young man – or woman – finds a partner and needs to prove to her, the others and himself to be trustworthy and that he chose the right person. To do so, he needs to overcome some challenges – external such as other men flirting with his beloved, or internal such as the toxic masculine imperative

A vibrant tropical beach scene. The foreground is dominated by clear, turquoise water with gentle ripples. In the middle ground, a small white boat with a black outboard motor is beached on a white sand shore. To the right, a dense line of green tropical trees, including a prominent palm tree, borders the beach. In the background, a small, tree-covered island sits in the water under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The overall atmosphere is serene and idyllic.

#GRAFTING

to fly from one lover to the next. If the couple proves themselves to be strong enough to win over all the challenges, they deserve to be acknowledged by the audience and to have the possibility to win the final prize and, naturally, to be in love.

Behind a façade of modern dating practices, we can spot traditional romantic tropes and highly conventional values which guarantee continuity with previous generations and can work as a bridge to understand new romantic dispositions.

Spotting cultural tensions for zeitgeist content

Love Island has captured our imagination because of its ability to communicate the complexity of our society through confronting some of the contradictions we experience in our everyday lives. In a landscape saturated by alternatives, designing content able to communicate the right cultural tensions and to articulate them in compelling narratives and formats is a recipe for success.

For all of us working in the media and comms industry; tapping into the right cultural tensions with our content is the holy grail. It takes a deep understanding of the cultural and competitive landscape which changes depending on context, topic and target audience. As a Love Islander would say; it requires #grafting; but with the right insight and determination, it's possible to capture the hearts of your audience.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:



KATHERINE JAMESON ARMSTRONG
Head of Media Qualitative
Katherine.J.Armstrong@ipsos.com
+44 (0)77 6853 7929



LAMBERTO FERRARA
Research Executive
Lamberto.Ferrara@ipsos.com
+44 (0)20 3059 5134



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