

Misogyny in the Love Island Public Votes

August 17, 2022

Explicit misogyny and gender-based double standards in Love Island both reflect and are reflected by prejudices in the show’s audience

For eight weeks each summer, several dozen young men and women jet off to a villa in Majorca to find love, thus gripping a significant portion of the UK TV viewing audience. In the 7 years since Love Island was revived in its current format by ITV2, it has grown steadily in popularity to reach 100 million monthly streams¹, breaking records for the channel and engaging young people in daily television viewing at a time when the format has sharply declined in popularity².

Under the surface of Mediterranean glitz, however, the show has hit headlines for negative reasons due to a sustained lack of care for islanders after leaving the show³ and, particularly in the latest series, signs of abusive behaviour in the islanders’ relationships. Among the expected break-ups and infidelity that are part of the format, online commentary agreed that some islanders overstepped the line: there were over 5000 complaints about both misogyny within couplings and bullying of female contestants in Series 8⁴, while specific male behaviour sparked public statements from Women’s Aid and Refuge⁵, following previous public statements over male gaslighting in the villa⁶.

To what extent does online commentary around the show reflect toxic behaviour in the villa? Looking at tweets commenting on Love Island⁷ across the latest series, the proportion of tweets containing toxic keywords⁸ (Figure 1) grew from a baseline of 3.95% in Week 1 to a high of 5.93% in Week 4, remaining over 5% for the rest of the show’s run. Frequent viewers of the show might be surprised to see that negative comments are not exclusively reserved for male islanders, given that they were responsible for most of the toxic behaviour on display.

¹<https://www.itv.com/presscentre/press-releases/love-island-hits-heart-pumping-100m-streams>

²<https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/insights/industry/technology/technology-media-and-telecom-predictions/2022/tv-viewership-decline.html>

³<https://metro.co.uk/2019/03/17/love-island-stars-divided-shows-aftercare-wake-mike-thalassitis-death-change-needs-happen-8917622/>

⁴<https://screenrant.com/love-island-uk-network-5000-complaints-misogyny-bullying/>

⁵<https://graziadaily.co.uk/life/in-the-news/womens-aid-statement-love-island/>

⁶<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/womens-aid-responds-to-love-island/>

⁷For each day of Love Island Series 7 and Series 8 (the 2021 and 2022 summer editions of the show), we mined 25,000 random daily tweets mentioning the keywords ‘Love Island’ or ‘Loveisland’ using a Twitter API. These tweets were filtered to any tweets containing each islander’s name (or common misspelling thereof). Vote results were aggregated from publicly available data on fan wikis. We have made this data available on our GitHub to motivate further research. Data is filtered to episodes in the first seven weeks of the show, after which there are no new entries to the villa controversial events tend to relent

⁸Negative sentiment was mapped onto tweets by searching for frequently occurring toxic keywords in each tweet: ‘problematic’, ‘red flag’, ‘sexist’, ‘abuser’ etc. For each public vote, the negative sentiment from the day of the vote and previous three days was considered relevant

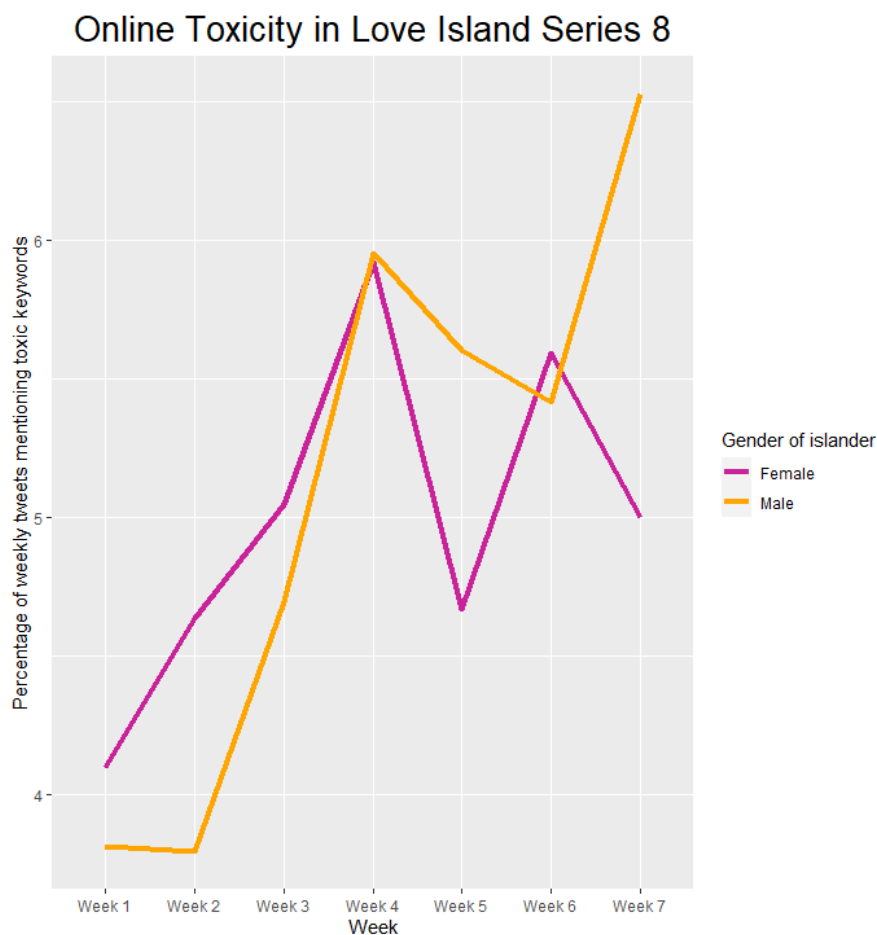


Figure 1: Volume of online negativity directed at Love Island contestants in the 2022 series, by gender

Roughly once a week, the viewing public is given a chance to exercise their ire by voting to save their favourite islanders, voting for either individual men and women or couples as a unit. Islanders with the fewest votes are then at risk of leaving the island. Looking at data from Series 7 and Series 8, does online criticism of individual islanders translate into fewer votes?

It depends heavily on the islander's gender; viewers are far more forgiving of male transgressions than female errors. Figure 2 considers islanders among the n^9 most criticised of their gender leading up to a vote, and shows the probability that the female (red) and/or¹⁰ her partner (blue) in each relevant couple actually ends up being at risk:

⁹i.e. if $n = 3$ islanders are at risk after the vote, we consider the 3 most negative males and females

¹⁰"and" if the public is voting to save their favourite couple, "or" if they are saving their favourite islander

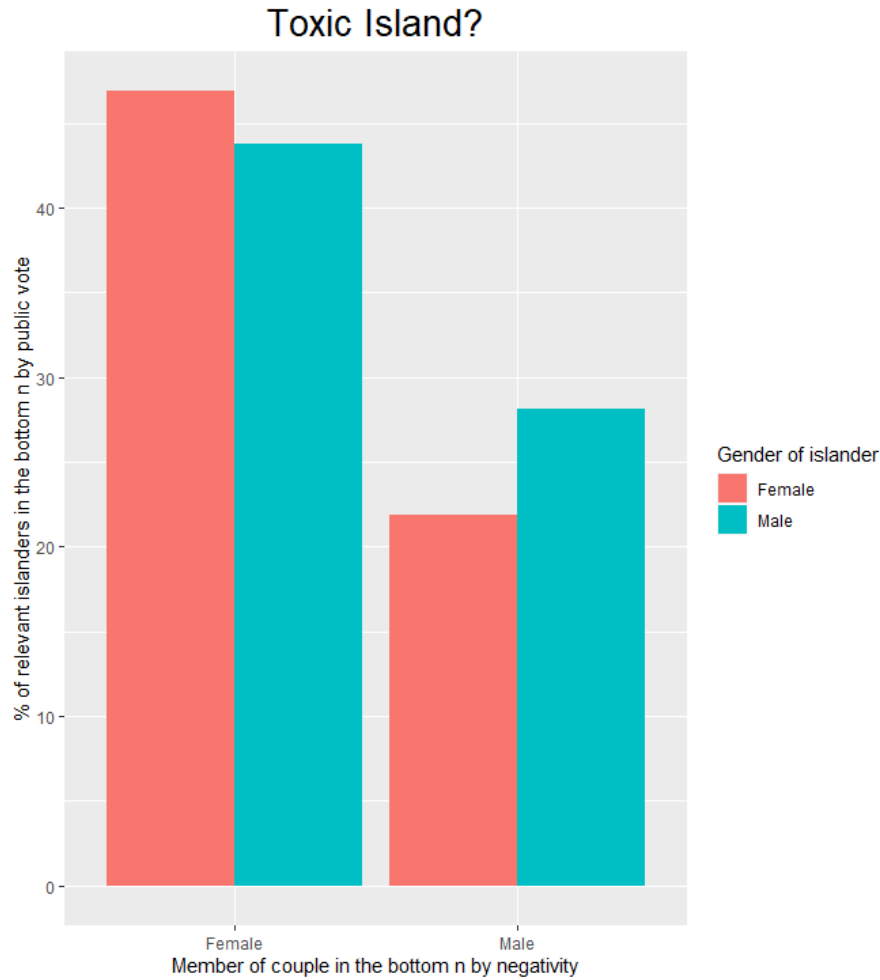


Figure 2: The effect of online criticism on islanders' performance in Love Island public votes

Problematic male behaviour does not have an impact on how the voting public treat the contestants. In the tracked public votes across both series, 110/324 of contestants (34%) are at risk after a public vote, so when the male in the couple is generating a lot of criticism online (right of the graph) both the offender (28%) and his female partner (22%) are actually less likely to end up at risk than any islander picked at random - to this end, the public are actively rewarding poor male behaviour. On the other hand, at the first sign of criticism for a female islander, both she (47%) and her partner (44%) are significantly more likely to be voted off the island. These trends hold across Series 7 and Series 8 individually, as well as on aggregate, as well as if we look at votes in which individual islanders or couples are voted for.

We can only speculate as to why this is the case. The viewership of Love Island traditionally skews significantly more female than male¹¹, so there could be an element of viewers projecting onto other female contestants and having a more visceral reaction when they misbehave. In evidence of this, online negativity is higher for females than males in 5 out of the 7 weeks of Series 8, despite male toxicity driving the headlines, indicating that the audience holds women to higher standards. It could also be the case that poor male behaviour has been a feature of the show for many years, so episodes of cheating and problematic behaviour have come to be expected from male islanders; female misbehaviour, even when slight, is greeted with more surprise and thus more online negativity. It is also worth remembering that the voting process is a positive one, where viewers are asked to save their favourite rather than vote off their least favourite, which could reward perceived drama rather than punish negativity. However, this does not explain the discrepancy in gender, as it appears viewers are

¹¹<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8022790/>

only rewarding controversial behaviour for the male islanders. Finally, we acknowledge that Twitter is not the world, and there may be elements of the voting public who are not captured here. However, the Twitter audience is large - over 25k tweets are posted every single day of the show's run - and the Twitter/Love Island relationship is so established that there has been a 'Tweet Challenge' in previous series where contestants are shown a selection of tweets about the show. Thus, although there are other social media platforms where potential voters discuss the contestants, Twitter remains the most relevant, large, and reflective of the demographics that the show aims to represent.

Regardless of why, there is no escape from the fact that toxic masculinity in the Love Island goes largely unpunished from either the producers or the voting public, with only female contestants affected by their (arguably much less toxic) negative actions. The parallels with the world outside the villa, where women are generally held to much higher standards than men in all walks of life¹², are especially clear. Following largely empty platitudes to the #BeKind mental health hashtag in the wake of previous contestants' suicides, is this something the producers could take on board before the next series, or will we get another 'rinse and repeat' of the format?

¹²<https://www.npr.org/2016/06/02/480487259/women-held-to-higher-ethical-standard-than-men-study-shows?t=1660668298671>; <https://www.lse.ac.uk/News/Latest-news-from-LSE/2021/f-June-21/Women-held-to-higher-standards-across-financial-services>; <https://phys.org/news/2019-02-female-held-higher-standards-males.html>