

Race, Social Media, and Representation in Modern Dating Reality TV
Dating Shows as Cultural Blueprints for Desire

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Introduction

Reality TV dating shows are not just entertainment. They are a mirror of our society. Shows like *Love Island*, *Love is Blind*, *Temptation Island*, and *The Bachelor* all display microcosms of reality through these shows. Dating standards and expectations are set through hierarchies and bias. *Love Island* actually works as a perfect example of this since part of the show is the forced pairings called couplings, which make desirability really public and easy to measure. In every recoupling we can tell who is desired and who is left out, and as a result, it is an incredible reflection of the racialized dating patterns in modern America. As Nick Couldry explains, “reality television does not simply reflect social reality; it actively organizes and structures it for consumption” (Couldry 43). *Love Is Blind* may not reflect racial hierarchies as much since, for the most part, you are unable to see your partner; however, class structures are extremely visible. *Temptation Island* displays racial hierarchies and tropes, as Black women in this show are primarily sexualized and seen and portrayed as a minuscule version of their true identity. Sarah Ahmed argues that dating reality shows “manufacture couples who overwhelmingly reflect white heteronormative standards of attraction,” while women of color are often cast to “fill diversity quotas rather than be taken seriously as romantic contenders” (Ahmed).

Reality dating TV is a cultural force and phenomenon. This past season of *Love Island* has absolutely taken over not only the internet and public discourse but also shaped the way people have seen relationships and commitment. Dating reality TV shows normalize these hierarchies and norms and biases. The shows are escapes from reality for people, part of their dystopian fantasy to get away from the real world and watch something that requires less brainpower, but people are subconsciously learning these prejudices and unjust representations. Research notes that dating shows are “instruction manuals for modern dating,” especially since most viewers often forget “how constructed these relationships really are” (Zurbriggen and Morgan 1). Unfortunately, these representations many times are reality when you think about Black women and desirability. At its core, the issue with reality dating TV is how they claim to prioritize diversity, yet they still center romance around whiteness. While women of color are included in these shows, they are not positioned as romantic leads. They might be positioned in the show as a lead character, but not because of their romantic connection, likely because of the drama or controversy around her, not simply because she will get the happy ending.

Audiences learn from this hierarchy that they see, and it gets repeated online and memed and commented on and becomes a part of the social media discourse. Dating reality TV is an ideological text that encodes racialized desirability hierarchies through casting and editing, and the audiences then decode those messages in ways that normalize and reproduce misogynoir while also shaping the influencer careers of those Black women after the show. Denby explains that these shows act as ideological texts that “teach audiences who deserves love and whose stories matter” (Denby). It's important to note that reality TV isn't just a show; it is a brand

pipeline for many, and it can start careers. The edit decides who not only gets screen time and gets to be the center of the storytelling but also who gets sympathy and all of those things. This can determine whether you see followers or brand deal success or achieve long-term visibility after the show, which is part of the ultimate goal of going on the show even if you are looking for love. Couldry asserts that “participants are simultaneously subjects of narrative and objects of economic value,” making visibility itself a form of capital (Couldry 52). If Black women are often given less romantic depth or shown as more villainous or even framed through stereotypes, it limits their perceived marketability, which then affects the type of opportunities that they can receive afterwards. Influencer economy research shows that “race was the strongest predictor of influencer income disparities,” with Black women receiving the lowest brand-deal offers relative to their audience size (MSL U.S. and The Influencer League).

Stuart Hall’s encoding and decoding framework here helps show how dating shows construct racialized meanings about desirability. This happens through production choices, and audiences in return interpret these messages based off of their unique social positioning and identity. Encoding and decoding define the struggle between the meaning that producers intend and the actual experiences of the viewers around race and gender. Hall argues that “media messages are produced within frameworks of knowledge that encode preferred meanings,” but “the act of decoding is never guaranteed to follow the intentions of the producer” (Hall 2-3). This paper will examine how reality dating TV encodes racialized sociability through casting and editing and general production choices. Then it will analyze how audiences decode these representations. Finally, it explains how these hierarchies extend into the influencer economy and post-show visibility and economic opportunity.

Reality TV as a Constructed Reality

Reality TV shows construct reality instead of simply reflecting it. It means that shows don't show or document reality in a neutral way. Producers create a new version of reality by deciding who gets screen time, the specific conversations that are shown, how scenes appear, the order of the show, and even the music in the confessionals. A clear example is when you see producers cut scenes together from two different conversations or add in reaction shots, tense music, or even a confessional that makes somebody look dramatic. As a result, the audience looks at that person as unstable even if the full interaction was normal and just wasn't shown accurately, and this is exactly how the show can create truth through narrative assembly, not just recording and sharing exactly what happened.

Character Tropes, Editing, and Moral Judgment

There are many specific character tropes that are repeated across dating shows, such as the villain, the sweetheart, the player, the jealous girl, the underdog, comic relief, wife material, etc. White contestants who are reality TV stars are positioned most times as a romantic lead

universally. They're playing the sweetheart, and their vulnerability is interpreted as depth. On the other hand, contestants of color, specifically Black women, are more likely to be pushed into roles that are seen as more undesirable, confrontational, and intense, even the backup option, which makes them useful to the production's narrative without giving them the full romantic storyline, which in turn affects their perception after the show and the discourse during the show. Denby argues that dating reality shows “routinely depict contestants of color through tropes such as aggression, irrationality, or hypersexuality,” while white contestants are framed as emotionally complex and relatable (Denby)

These tropes are not accidental. These tropes are a specific result of casting and editing and production choices influenced by bias within the media industry and continue to attach specific meanings to certain people. Production and editing create sympathy for some contestants through giving certain people more confessionals and better music and even more context behind their feelings. Skeggs and Wood describes this process as one where “participants are produced as moral subjects whose value is continually assessed” through narrative framing (Skeggs and Wood 212). This is giving the audience access and pacing and even showing scenes of them being cared for, which works to build sympathy. But on the other hand, suspicion is built by cutting out that context and only showing the harshest moments and keeping the camera on tough facial expressions and granting fewer humanizing scenes. The edit can at times even assign moral value because, on one hand, a contestant's mistakes might be seen as part of their growth or even character building, but another contestant's actions might be seen as a defining characteristic of who they are. Skeggs and Wood note that editing “amplifies particular performances while disciplining others,” shaping which forms of femininity are rewarded or punished (Skeggs and Wood 41).

Reality TV produces moral subjects, which results in the show turning into public case studies of human worth. The contestants are being evaluated throughout the whole show as to whether they're good or bad, trustworthy or fake, or even respectable or untrustworthy. The audience is a jury, and the show sends cues to point the viewers towards specific moral verdicts. Skeggs and Wood argue that reality TV “creates a hierarchy of personhood by rewarding those who perform the ‘right’ kind of self” (Skeggs and Wood 219). It's more than just contestants on a dating TV show. TV shows profit from the judgments that the audience comes to. It turns humiliation and emotion and even conflict into entertainment, engagement, and revenue.

Racialized Desirability and Dating Hierarchies

Racialized desirability in dating markets places heterosexual conventionally attractive whiteness at the top of the hierarchy, with white people treated as the default romantic lead. Near the bottom of that hierarchy are people and groups that are seen as less desirable, which is especially true for Black women on these shows, as they are often positioned as the least chosen or the least romantically centered in many formats. We know this because these patterns repeat

across different shows and throughout the years of who gets picked last, who's pursued the most, who gets the most romantic screen time versus dramatic screen time, and even who gets public sympathy. Analysis reveals that Black women on Love Island face consistent early rejection in coupling ceremonies, demonstrating racialized dating hierarchies that mirror real life (Press).

Many times, discussions about racialized dating and race-based intricacies in dating TV shows are swept under the rug because many times people will just say that's not that person's type or their cup of tea, but racial bias appears consistently across millions of interactions, not just within one person. NPR reports that racial dating outcomes “persist even when users describe their choices as neutral preferences” (Brown). These outcomes show up at scale in different regions and for all different types of users, and eventually at some point this must become evidence. This is a system; it's no longer just a few random choices. A lot of times people will say that they have a preference in order to get away with having some type of bias. That preference is normally trained by their social influences shaped by stereotypes in the media, and then it's also reinforced by platforms that turn race into a category on dating apps. NPR describes dating apps as “a marketplace where racism becomes measurable”; this exposes how preference is socially trained (Brown).

The producers who cast the show set conditions of the show by deciding who's going to be on it and if the people that they include actually desire Black women genuinely in a romantic way. The recouplings show attraction as a ranked ceremony, which makes desirability very public. Porter and Standing note that coupling rituals “replicate Western heteronormative values” and expose racial politics embedded in dating formats (Porter and Standing 6). The editing, on the other hand, can decide to tell a story that makes the connections either look real or weak and the people look worthy or unworthy. The audience is then allowed to react online, and public discourse leads to these storylines being amplified, and audiences also get the opportunity to vote as well. This is a controlled environment that reproduces many racialized and gendered power dynamics while also enforcing a racial hierarchy of love.

Being picked last isn't just something that happens on a dating reality TV show; it symbolizes something culturally. It's almost a symbol of a lifetime pattern. NPR Code Switch explains the feeling Black women often describe as the fear of being “picked last,” which is grounded in repeated exclusion rather than isolated experiences (Code Switch). Because it's not just about it happening once or at one recoupling. It's more about publicly affirming love for a Black woman, allowing Black women to feel as though they are compatible and beautiful and enough. And even if they are all of those things, they will still be treated as the least desired options at times. It very much mirrors offline experiences in dating, but the show documents this as some type of form of entertainment that turns rejection into a recurring storyline. And audiences are expected to watch this without questioning.

Misogynoir is the mix of anti-Black racism and sexism that is targeted specifically at Black women. This shows up a lot on dating reality TV shows when Black women are judged more harshly for the same behaviors as their white counterparts. They're often edited into the roles of being seen as too much, too aggressive, and too angry. They're often not seen as soft romantically, and they're blamed at the end for their own exclusion most times. This also happens in audience discourse as well, where the same bias and stereotypes are prevalent online and can be seen through moral policing, dismissing the contestants' feelings, and even trolling.

Influencer Culture and Platform Capitalism

Reality TV contestants are commodities not only through bringing viewers onto the show, but also because the entertainment industry turns people into products that generate money. Their relationships, personalities, and even the emotional breakdowns that they have get sold, monetized, and packaged all over again. Couldry argues that “the transformation of ordinary people into media commodities is central to the reality television format” (Couldry 54). The contestants provide the content, the raw material, and then the producers shape it into something that's a marketable story. Media industries are able to convert human experiences and feelings into entertainment that they are able to profit from, and as a result, branding opportunities as well.

Dating TV shows are no longer about just finding love or even winning the show. For many people, it's a launchpad into the attention economy. Screen time is a marketing asset in this case, and the popularity is reflected through their follower base. Duffy et al. describe influencer labor as "shaped by precarity, uneven access, and structural inequality," especially for underrepresented creators (Duffy et al.). A strong edit helps to build that brand connection and credibility that converts directly into money that they can receive through brand deals, sponsored posts, appearances, and stable long-term influencer careers. A great example of this is Molly Mae, a *Love Island UK* contestant who was able to turn her post-show influencer career into a chief creative officer role at one of the biggest brands in the world, Pretty Little Thing. Following her time on the show, Molly Mae's social media presence led to her being named a creative director for Pretty Little Thing UK for over two years before she started her own brand. She was able to leverage her influencer status to move into the corporate fashion world.

So the real reward is not even the couple or the prize money on the show. It's the platform that comes after and the visibility that comes with it. There is a pattern where Black creators can have strong engagement and cultural impact, but they still will receive fewer deals, lower pay, and struggle to be discovered. There is a pay gap and even a visibility ceiling for Black creators. Many creators are undervalued and receive lower earnings, and there are even brands that sometimes will choose the aesthetic fit as a way to purposefully exclude Black creators. This is a racialized economy where platforms and brands see whiteness as more marketable, so those are the people that profit.

Initially, the show creates edited storylines that determine who matters and who's seen as lovable and who's seen as problematic. The algorithm continues that sorting process by boosting some content from contestants and suppressing others. Mitchell explains that platforms create systems fostering what researchers describe as a "consistent undertone of anti-Blackness," which extends the hierarchies of reality dating TV into the online space (Mitchell). This happens especially when Black creators talk about racism they might be facing or topics related to identity that might just be flagged as biased through moderation systems, similarly to how these kinds of conversations might be cut out in the edit of a TV show. Representation sets the narrative hierarchy, and the platform then scales it. Both producers and the social media algorithm together decide who gets long-term visibility, who sees audience growth, and even whose career can become profitable afterwards. Lewis describes this as a "dual burden of racial bias and platform precarity" faced by Black creators (Lewis).

The dating reality TV show contestants' influencer trajectory is so common that there is a cycle that continues to repeat. First, it starts with the onscreen narrative and the screen time that they receive, which then the audience receives, and they talk about it on social media, which leads to follower growth and engagement. And then brands and PR teams will start to frame them and decide if they are fit partners, which leads to brand deals and paid partnerships. And then as a result, hopefully long-term career outcomes for these contestants, including management, press, and sustained monetization. Race shapes every step of this. It shapes who gets the best edit, how audiences will receive the content, the visibility on each platform, and even who gets paid and how much.

Encoding and Decoding in Dating Reality TV

Encoding and decoding explain how producers do the encoding and audiences do the decoding. Producers, through the edit and casting and representations, imply that love is publicly measurable, tied to social validation, and competitive. On these shows, love is presented as something that needs to be earned, earned through being chosen rather than just showing up as yourself or being something mutual. Femininity is seen as desirable but only when it is in an emotionally expressive and agreeable way. It must be aligned with Eurocentric beauty standards in terms of aesthetics, and also, on these shows, being seen as confrontational reduces how feminine you are seen. Masculinity is seen as being decisive, dominant, and even emotionally avoidant at times. Men are really positioned as the selectors, and women are the ones who want to be chosen. Cossey and Martin note that "women are expected to perform emotional labor while men are rewarded for withholding vulnerability" within dating reality formats (Cossey and Martin 7).

Desirability is encoded in these shows through repeated selection, popularity, and even screen time. These shows make attraction appear objective rather than subjective and as if love could even be ranked. Preferred meanings are encoded throughout the shows through production

decisions. We see it through recouplings, confessionals, and even editing. One of these meanings is that if you are chosen early, you have a higher sense of worth, and on the other hand, being chosen late means you are worth less. Another is that all conflict originates from the individual contestant's flaws, rather than anything structural such as racialized casting, limited romantic options, or simple bias and prejudice. A third preferred meaning is that love is best proven and authenticated through public validation, and competition shows frame jealousy, surveillance, and even comparison as natural parts of romance rather than products of the show's design, so they continue to pop up in our real life as well. Couldry and Hepp describe Love Island as operating within a “monitoring ecosystem” where intimacy is birthed in a space of constant observation and judgment (Couldry and Hepp).

A dominant reading for a *Love Island* recoupling would simply accept the show's framing at its face, coming to the outcome that if a Black woman was picked last, it is simply based on personal preference or just natural chemistry. A negotiated reading might acknowledge the racial bias that exists in these shows but still argue that some men just follow their hearts, questioning the fairness of the show while still accepting the structure. Completely on the other side of things, an oppositional reading would completely challenge and reject the premise entirely. An oppositional reading would argue that the outcome is a result of a racialized desirability hierarchy that's produced by cultural norms and production choices instead of individual attraction. Hall explains that “dominant readings occur when audiences accept the ideological position encoded in the message,” while oppositional readings actively challenge it (Hall 4-6).

Ideology, Representation, and “Normal” Love

These shows focus only on showing what “normal” love is supposed to look like. Heterosexual, monogamous, emotionally avoidant, and aesthetically pleasing, highly visible romance is seen as the norm. Romance and love are seen as goal-oriented and linear, and especially on these shows, incredibly fast-moving. It's expected that romance on these shows will result in exclusivity, engagement, or long-term relationships. Denby argues that reality dating shows “exaggerate traditional gender roles while presenting them as organic and authentic,” reinforcing narrow expectations of what intimacy is (Denby). The ideology behind the shows assumes that romantic success looks the same for everybody, and that if you deviate from that, anything else is seen as incompatibility or failure, even personal deficiency.

Heteronormativity is a part of this structure. It's a part of the rigged pairing systems that we see; even the sleeping arrangements are separated by gender. Even the coupling segments assume that men and women will pair off. There is an absence of queer storylines on shows like *Love Island*, and lots of gendered expectations are placed on what emotional expression looks like. Even the language around stealing partners is often gendered as well. Even when LGBTQ+ contestants have been on the show, they're often forced into the structure that relies on heterosexual norms around visibility and composition.

As previously discussed, the show communicates that whiteness is the default when it comes to romance. Contestants of color are most times framed as exceptions who need to prove their worth or assimilate in order to be desired. When contestants of color are positioned as risks, secondary options, or even surprises, the show signals that love is not equally available to everyone. This makes love no longer universally accessible and makes it become something that is granted selectively.

Political Economy of Reality Dating Television

Networks and streaming platforms profit from these shows through subscriptions, advertising revenue, and syndication. Dating reality TV shows are very low cost to production companies but very high engagement in terms of the content. It can be franchised and seen across seasons and countries, with *Love Island* having many spinoffs, as seen in the UK, Australia, France, and others. Sponsors and brands profit through doing influencer partnerships and product placement on these shows. Platforms profit from the post-show boost that contestants get in the influencer and attention economy. The contestants generate content, engagement, and ad revenue that these platforms benefit from. Contestants may profit through influencer careers, but this profit is uneven and often shaped by race, gender, and production choices.

Reality dating shows use cheap labor, minimalistic sets, and unscripted content, which results in producers attempting to manufacture drama and intrigue through casting incompatible personalities and limiting the number of romantic options. Care is a lot more expensive than conflict is. Conflict is a lot more profitable. Bradley describes reality TV as profitable because it “trades expensive actors for unpaid contestants,” relying on emotional labor as content (Bradley). Producers find manipulative ways to develop content that becomes cost-effective through breakdowns, humiliation, and emotional labor. Casting decisions often lead to people who will produce good drama being chosen over people who might be a good romantic possible option.

The post-show monetization of contestants allows the show to keep generating value even after filming ends. The influencer content that contestants make keeps the show and brand relevant, which continues to drive discourse online and feeds the platform algorithms. It also serves as a roadmap for other possible contestants, which makes them want to apply and keeps the show running. All of the brand deals, appearances, podcasts, and social media controversies are free promotion for this show.

Black Feminist Thought and Controlling Images

Controlling images are so critical for Black women to understand because they limit how they are seen and understood. It shapes expectations of Black women on these shows before they even speak. Patricia Hill Collins explains that “controlling images shape Black women’s

oppression by justifying inequities in gender, class, and race” (Collins 72). Dating shows rely on visual storytelling and quick judgments, which makes them the perfect ground for people to come to rapid conclusions based off of these images that are normalized and reproduced. Controlling images limit the range emotionally and romantically that is available to Black women on screen. Boylorn explains that reality television “recycles controlling images of Black womanhood, packaging caricature as entertainment while silencing complexity” (Boylorn).

Hyper-sexualized edits of Black women frame them as physically attractive but not romantically attractive, and this is consistent with the Jezebel. The angry Black woman is a trope that appears over and over again when being assertive is seen and framed as being aggressive. Additionally, the matriarch appears often when Black women are viewed as emotionally strong and emotionally intelligent but still not deserving of care or softness. These images control who is chosen most times and who is criticized.

Love as Practice Versus Love as Performance

Love is an action. Love is a practice that requires active care, accountability, trust, and growth. Dating reality TV doesn't exactly reflect this version of love. On those shows, love is treated as a performance and a spectacle and part of a competition. Romance is ranked, rewarded publicly, and literally surveilled 24-7. bell hooks reminds us that “love is an act of will—both an intention and an action,” not a performance for validation (hooks). It strips love of all of the private and ethical elements and commitments. Reality TV strips love of the potential to be liberating and freeing and instead creates a market-friendly version of intimacy that lacks depth. Couldry argues that reality television “collapses the boundary between publicity and privacy in ways that benefit media institutions” (Couldry 61).

Casting and Editing as Racialized Desirability Cues

Reality TV doesn't just reflect reality, as the title of reality dating TV claims. It trains audiences, systemizes desire, disciplines Black women, and feeds a racialized influencer and attention economy. Casting and editing act as racialized desirability cues. In *Love Island USA* season seven, white women were repeatedly chosen early, while Black women were often left unchosen or chosen last during early recouplings and when bombshells would come in. The season always opens with a racially diverse cast of women and men, but most of the time the men on the show have dating histories and types that skew white. The initial couples happen pretty fast, and they establish who the romantic leads are pretty early.

In season six, we saw a Black woman named Jana be chosen last. In season seven, we saw Olandria struggle to be chosen as well. Black women like Serena, Jana, Chelley, Olandria, and Amaya have been left single on these shows many times. Producers framed this on the show as awkward but inevitable rather than simply a structural issue. The first couplings in the first

two weeks of the season set the emotional landscape and economy of the rest of the season. Those early choices determine who gets screen time and sympathy, who gets dates, and who receives storyline support.

Before rejection even happens, the show sets the conditions for it. The casting ratios are unfair. Many times fewer men who explicitly desire Black women are chosen than there are Black women on the cast. Oftentimes the showtime bombshells, featuring new men who might be open to Black women, arrive late, after desirability hierarchies are already set. Denby argues that “casting practices reveal whose stories producers believe are marketable,” and that Black women often enter the villa “at a structural disadvantage regardless of compatibility” (Denby 2–5). Instead of placing these men at the beginning of the show, they are reserved for later once the show has already secured its content.

Statistically, white women are disproportionately given first dates and romantic storylines. Black women are often shown reflecting alone, questioning themselves, or showcasing disappointment in their confessionals rather than romance. Denby says that “editing shapes public reception by controlling whose stories are deemed worthy of empathy,” reinforcing racialized hierarchies of attraction (Denby). Meanwhile, other contestants are framed as loved up and seen as feminine for showing emotion. This creates a racial hierarchy of love before explicit rejection even occurs. Rejection on these shows feels deeply personal because it mirrors the experiences of many Black women, but it is structurally designed.

During rejection scenes, the camera lingers on Black women's faces to emphasize discomfort or sadness. The music shifts toward awkward or tense sounds, framing rejection as uncomfortable rather than unjust. The TAPE Collective observes that “the camera lingers on Black women’s reactions in ways that position them as spectacles rather than subjects” (TAPE Collective). This framing isolates Black women physically and emotionally. The show gives grace to the men and frames them as conflicted and sympathetic. This is moral subject production. The audience is invited to judge who handled rejection well rather than questioning why rejection occurs repeatedly across racial lines.

Across dating shows, Black women are framed through overlapping tropes. They are often seen as too emotional, and when they express hurt, it is framed as excessive. When they assert boundaries, it becomes controversial, falling into the controlling image of the angry Black woman. Overall, they are positioned as undesirable. The lack of romantic attention they receive becomes naturalized rather than questioned. Editing exaggerates conflict and minimizes vulnerability, positioning Black women as deserving of rejection rather than sympathy.

This pattern appears in *The Bachelor* as well. Black women are always cast, but unless they are the Bachelor or Bachelorette, they are rarely positioned as endgame romantic leads. They are cast into dramatic or supportive roles, while white women receive full emotional storylines. This is not unique to *Love Island*. It is genre-wide. NPR Code Switch explains that

these series “naturalize Black women’s exclusion in the dating world by repeatedly sidelining them from the central romance narrative” (Code Switch).

Audience Decoding and Online Discourse

Audience discourse no longer happens in coffeehouses. Shows like *Love Island* and *The Bachelor* are digitally native and social-first. Dating reality TV is produced for a social media generation that craves quick communication and conversations that lack nuance. Producers limit interpretations so audiences lack the space to engage with deeper racialized structures behind what they are seeing. Ferković Pašić affirms that “social media extends the life of these narratives, allowing audiences to participate in the reinforcement of stereotypes” (Ferković Pašić).

Audience discourse now happens through Twitter or X threads during episodes, TikTok reaction videos, Reddit discussion forums, college newspaper critiques, podcasts, and recurring reaction series. Within this discourse, dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings emerge. A dominant reading makes excuses for the show and contestant behavior, saying not everybody will be chosen and that attraction is personal preference. This reading fully accepts the show's encoding and frames repeated rejection as coincidence.

A negotiated reading acknowledges that race may play a role sometimes but still believes the men were just being honest and following their hearts. It recognizes structural bias while still relying on the individual preference argument. This reading prioritizes maintaining the legitimacy of the show while acknowledging inequality. Skeggs and Wood emphasize that audiences “simultaneously reproduce and resist dominant ideology,” allowing inequality to be recognized without being challenged (Skeggs and Wood 38).

The oppositional reading is most often voiced by Black women viewers. Because of their social positioning and lived experience, they decode the show differently. Denby argues that “reality television constructs racial meaning by positioning whiteness as normal and other racial groups as deviations,” which makes oppositional decoding a form of resistance (Denby). They name misogynoir and argue that the show casts Black women without casting men who desire them, then frames rejection as personal failure rather than structural exclusion. This reading rejects the encoded meaning entirely and calls out the system behind it.

Sousveillance means people watching themselves being watched. After the show, contestants see audience reactions in real time. Viewers collectively judge and archive moments. Social media extends the show because rejection no longer ends on screen. It becomes viral, follows contestants into real life, and shapes their public reputation, career outcomes, confidence, and sense of self-worth.

The Influencer Pipeline and Who Profits After the Show

Seasons six and seven of *Love Island USA* represent a shift in influencer trajectories for Black women. Contestants like Serena, Olandria, Amaya, and Jana have seen unprecedented levels of influencer success. Previously, white women finalists were the primary recipients of beauty, fashion, and lifestyle brand deals. Molly Mae and Laura Higgins are examples of contestants who leveraged the show into long-term careers and hosting roles.

There is always a face of every season. This person fits dominant beauty standards, receives a favorable romantic edit, and benefits from algorithmic amplification. This is not accidental. It reflects narrative priority backed by platform reinforcement. Black women often receive slower follower growth, fewer high-value brand deals, more racialized backlash, algorithmic suppression, and greater pressure to appear brand safe.

Olandria experienced racialized attacks after the show, including a controversy involving a co-contestant laughing after she was called a racial slur on a livestream. While that co-contestant lost brand deals, she remained popular. Olandria faced sustained harassment. Chelley had a similar experience when an entertainment publication joked about feeding her a knuckle sandwich, normalizing violence against Black women. Swinton reports that “social media trolling disproportionately targets women of color, amplifying the humiliation they experience on the show” (Swinton).

For white women, these shows often launch careers. For Black women, visibility does not always translate into equal profitability. Platforms such as TikTok are not neutral distributors of fame. Black women must overcome both algorithmic suppression and unfavorable show edits to succeed. Contestants like Olandria, Chelley, Amaya, Jana, and Serena represent progress, but barriers remain. While casting has improved, there is still little progress in narrative protection, citability, or economic benefit. Lewis concludes that “true equity in influencer marketing requires structural change, not just diverse casting” (Lewis).

Dating Reality TV as a Cultural Blueprint for Desire

Reality TV dating shows teach viewers that romance is competitive, racially influenced, and hierarchical. They do not show love or romance as mutual or deeply emotional. Instead, they normalize the experience many Black women go through, where desirability is something that must be won and individuals are judged and ranked based on attractiveness. Desirability is framed as one-sided rather than negotiated or reciprocal. Men are positioned as evaluators and choosers, while women become contenders who must prove their worth to be selected.

In this structure, whiteness is encoded as the default desirable candidate for romance and safety. It is treated as inevitable that the white woman on the show will find love. This is particularly influential for young audiences because these shows act as blueprints for what

normal dating is supposed to look like. Rejection is framed as personal failure rather than structural exclusion, shaping how Black women experience the general dating market. These production choices do not simply reflect dating culture. They actively train it. Media does not mirror dating culture. It influences it and can completely overhaul it. Zurbriggen and Morgan found that frequent viewers of reality television are more likely to adopt its norms as realistic models for social behavior, especially when the shows are perceived as authentic (Zurbriggen and Morgan).

Repeatedly seeing Black women chosen last becomes a cultural lesson about who is deserving of love and who love is meant to be for. Black women are taught that their lack of selection is expected and justified through editing and production choices. These lessons leak into offline dating experiences, reinforcing the belief that exclusion is natural rather than systemic.

Influencer Culture and Monetized Rejection

Influencer culture intensifies this harm because rejection does not end when filming wraps. It continues online and becomes content, data, and currency. In the current landscape of reality TV, rejection determines screen time, screen time determines follower growth, and follower growth determines influencer careers. This process affects brand deals, income, and career mobility. Exclusion becomes economic rather than purely emotional.

Black women are not only less likely to be chosen as onscreen partners or love interests. They are also less likely to be chosen by brands after the show. As a result, they are less likely to benefit from the post-show influencer pipeline that their white counterparts often enter. Platform capitalism extends the same racial hierarchies reinforced on screen. Even when Black women gain visibility, turning that attention into profit is harder due to algorithmic suppression, prejudice in brand partnerships, and visibility ceilings.

The harm experienced by Black women is doubled. They are publicly rejected through staged and televised moments, and that rejection directly limits their future economic potential. This is monetized rejection. The emotional pain becomes profitable content, and the economic consequences linger long after the season ends.

Social Cost, Emotional Labor, and Racialized Surveillance

The social cost for Black women on these shows is multidimensional. While rejection may happen to one Black woman on screen, it symbolically happens to all Black women represented by her. Limited representation leads to tokenization, where one person is treated as representative of an entire group.

Black women on these shows are performers. They are expected to show emotional restraint while being publicly rejected. They must appear grateful for minimal romantic attention and composed while being humiliated. This is racialized emotion management. Black women regulate their reactions to avoid being labeled angry, bitter, or aggressive. Olandria from *Love Island USA* season seven spoke about feeling negatively perceived and adjusting her reactions. Chelley described the same unwritten rule. Cossey and Martin point out that *Love Island* rewards women who suppress anger and punishes emotional expression, framing restraint as a requirement to be desired (Cossey and Martin).

Regardless of how well they manage emotions or decision-making, Black women still face misogynoir, harassment, public scrutiny of their looks and desirability, and viral commentary that treats their pain as entertainment. Collins writes that controlling images are hegemonic because they shape “commonsense understandings of Black womanhood,” restricting how Black women can respond without being penalized (Collins 70). Audiences use these shows as escapes, consuming Black women’s suffering to feel better about their own lives. The consequences extend beyond discourse into reduced economic opportunity, fewer brand deals, limited partnership categories, increased pressure to be brand safe, and stalled influencer growth.

Ethical Production and Structural Accountability

Dating reality TV has become a space where Black women’s dignity, emotional labor, and intimacy are extracted and treated as products while their white counterparts find love and influence. Ethical production would require structural change rather than surface-level diversity. Surface-level diversity has primarily increased viewership without addressing harm.

Contestants like Olandria, Jana, Chelley, Serena, and Amaya achieved success in spite of the *Love Island* system, not because of it. They received villain edits and negative discourse but were uplifted by Black and queer audiences who recognized their value and worked to position them for economic opportunity.

Ethical production must begin with casting men who genuinely desire Black women and name them as their type. Editing must move away from racialized tropes and portray the full emotional and romantic range of Black women rather than focusing on reactions to harm. Narrative care must be applied equitably. Mental health support and public statements addressing harassment should be standard. Responsibility also lies with platforms and brands to address algorithmic bias and ensure equitable compensation. Reality TV may never be perfect, but current practices are harmful and economically extractive, particularly toward Black women.

Conclusion

This paper outlined how reality TV dating shows are not neutral entertainment but powerful cultural systems that construct reality through racialized hierarchies of desirability. Through casting, editing, and recouplings, these shows encode whiteness as the default for romance while positioning Black women as undesirable or unwanted. Audiences decode these narratives differently based on social identity. While some viewers, particularly Black women, challenge the misogynoir embedded in these shows, dominant readings largely accept the framing.

These inequalities extend beyond the screen into influencer economies and post-show career trajectories. Romantic rejection influenced by race becomes reduced economic opportunity through algorithmic suppression, unequal monetization, and visibility prejudice. When watching dating shows, it matters who is chosen first, who receives sympathy, what music plays during rejection, and whose pain becomes content. These moments are not accidental. They are profitable and patterned.

Dating reality TV continues to profit from racialized rejection while shaping real-world expectations of love, intimacy, and worth. The question is no longer whether these shows reflect society. They define it. The question is whether we are willing to keep learning how to love from systems built on exclusion.

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