

Two Social Layers, One Screen: Co-Viewing Loyalty and Discourse Amplification Among Love Island Viewers

Deya Raghavan,¹ Chanel Kim,¹ and Nicole Zeng^{2,*}

¹*Dialogue AI*

²*The Observatory*

*Corresponding author: Nicole Zeng, gnezelocin@gmail.com

Abstract

Reality-television scholarship often treats "the online community" as a single force that shapes and sustains viewing. Drawing on fifty AI-moderated qualitative interviews with United States viewers of Love Island (mean interview length 21.6 minutes; mean Interview Quality Score 79.1 of 100), we find that viewers maintain two functionally distinct social layers. Co-viewing and talk with people they already know (a partner, friends, family, group chats) is load-bearing for loyalty and is frequently the reason viewers begin and continue watching. Anonymous online discourse (Reddit, TikTok, X) is separable and non-essential for most: asked whether they would keep watching if the online community vanished, the dominant response was that they would still watch, with reduced enjoyment. Online discourse performs four jobs when used (validation, sense-making of the edit, keeping the show top of mind, and gossip and belonging), while its principal cost is spoilers. We further find that parasocial attachment fades for most in this sample but is genuinely load-bearing for a minority who describe it as their most private admission, and that "guilty pleasure" is a gendered meaning-split rather than a uniform stance, one that cultural saturation is visibly dissolving. The contribution is descriptive: a conceptual separation of co-viewing loyalty from discourse amplification, grounded in a transparent interview-quality instrument.

Keywords: reality television, parasocial interaction, second-screen viewing, co-viewing, audience studies, AI-moderated interviews, qualitative methods

1. Introduction

Love Island and its franchise siblings are routinely described as "social" television: shows that are watched with others, discussed online, and voted on in real time. A common assumption, in both the trade press and parts of the scholarly literature, is that the surrounding online community is what makes such shows compelling and what keeps audiences loyal. This paper questions that assumption using interview evidence from fifty viewers.

The gap we address is conceptual. Studies of second-screen and social-television behavior frequently bundle every form of social activity around a program (a partner on the couch, a work group chat, an anonymous subreddit) into one construct. If those forms are not functionally equivalent, then claims about "the community" sustaining viewership may attribute to anonymous discourse an effect that actually belongs to co-viewing with known others.

Contribution statement. This paper contributes a descriptive conceptual distinction: among these viewers, co-viewing and talk with known people is load-bearing for loyalty, whereas anonymous online discourse is an amplifier of enjoyment that is not a condition of continued watching. We state this at the level the data supports (a cross-sectional, single-franchise qualitative sample) and make no causal or population-level claim. A secondary methodological contribution is the use of a documented Interview Quality Score to make the credibility of an AI-moderated corpus inspectable.

The remainder of the paper positions this against prior work on parasocial interaction and self-presentation, details the AI-moderated method and the quality instrument, presents the findings organized by theme, and discusses implications and limitations.

2. Related work

The concept of the parasocial relationship originates with Horton and Wohl (1956), who described the illusion of face-to-face intimacy that mass media create between performer and audience. Giles (2002) reviewed and modeled the construct, and Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) revisited it empirically, foregrounding the viewer's sense of being addressed. Our parasocial findings are read against this tradition: attachment is real but unevenly distributed, and load-bearing only for a minority.

The gendered management of taste and the concealment of "low" preferences is illuminated by Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical account of self-presentation, in which people curate a front-stage self from which certain pleasures are hidden. We extend this to a specific, observable shame map that differs by gender.

On second-screen and social-television viewing, content analyses such as Giglietto and Selva (2014) document how audiences use a second device to comment on and participate around a broadcast, but tend to treat that social activity as a single construct. On the appeal of the genre, Nabi, Biely, Morgan, and Stitt (2003) and Reiss and Wiltz (2004) locate reality-television enjoyment in motives such as voyeurism, status, and self-importance rather than narrative investment, consistent with the "guilty pleasure" framing. The gap these leave, and that this study fills, is the failure to separate anonymous discourse from known-person co-viewing when assessing what sustains viewership.

3. Methods

3.1 Design

We conducted fifty conversational interviews administered by an AI moderator ("Mia," Dialogue AI). The moderator followed a four-part guide (television preferences; Love Island habits and

investment; community, discourse, and social media; and projective prompts about guilty pleasures and surprises) and probed responses conversationally.

3.2 Sample and recruitment

Participants were United States residents aged 18 to 45, screened as current Love Island viewers and recent reality-television watchers. The realized sample was near-evenly split by gender (woman 24, man 25, other 1) and centered on the 25 to 34 age band (24 of 50), spanning 24 states. Mean interview length was 21.6 minutes (range 14.3 to 31.0).

3.3 Analysis

Transcripts were coded bottom-up. Following a priors-ledger discipline, the study's going-in assumptions were written down and quarantined before coding, then scored against the evidence at the end, so that confirmation of a prior had to survive an initial blind read. Open codes were collapsed into six axial categories (Appendix B).

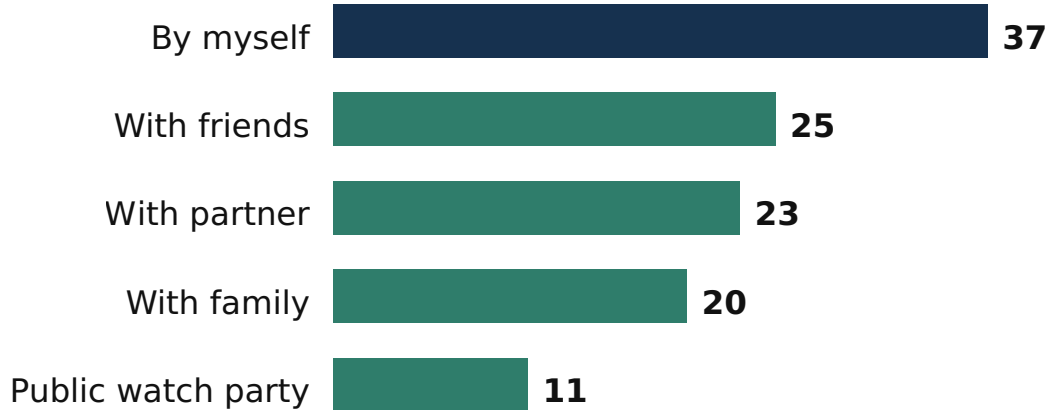
3.4 Quality and credibility

Each interview received an Interview Quality Score (IQS) composed of Signal (weight 0.50), Moderator effectiveness (0.30), and Usability (0.20), each rated 1 to 5 and combined to a 0 to 100 composite. The study mean was 79.1. Two interviews were flagged: one for an authenticity tell (a participant who referenced the incentive and said she was "experimenting"), treated as corroboration-only, and one for a connection breakdown that produced terse answers. The moderator's tendency to over-summarize with leading restatements is noted as a source of medium-confidence framing where it occurred.

4. Results

4.1 Two social layers

The clearest structural finding is that viewers distinguish co-viewing with known people from anonymous online discourse, and weight them differently. For co-viewing-dependent viewers the known-person layer is the show: one viewer said that without it the experience would "absolutely lose its spark" (P22), and another watches "only because my friends are watching it" and would consider stopping if they stopped (P23). The anonymous layer, by contrast, is separable, and some viewers treat it as harmful, actively avoiding it because "communities by default ruin shows" (P35).

Figure 1. Watch settings (multi-select, N = 50).

"By myself" (navy) leads, but known-person co-viewing settings (teal: friends, partner, family) collectively dominate, consistent with the qualitative finding that the known-person layer is load-bearing.

4.2 Discourse as amplifier, not condition

Asked the study's literal question, whether they would keep watching if the online community disappeared, the dominant answer was that they would, with reduced enjoyment. Where the online layer is used, it performs four jobs: validation of one's reaction (a viewer re-checks Reddit "to see if my views on the show or the episode are consistent," P10), sense-making of the edit, keeping the show top of mind between episodes, and gossip and belonging. Its chief reported cost is spoilers rather than toxicity, though identity-salient toxicity (racism directed at cast members) is a real harm for some viewers.

4.3 The engine: chaos and decompression

Enjoyment centers on spectacle and decompression rather than rooting for romance. One viewer gave the mode plainly: "if you turn off your brain and you watch it, it is enjoyable" (P11). Layered atop this is a set of justification frames that make watching respectable, most vividly the "social experiment" ("the greatest social experiment to ever exist," P17). This is genuine enjoyment of chaos, not ironic distance; the "genuine versus ironic" axis did not fit the data.

4.4 Attachment: fades for most, load-bearing for a few

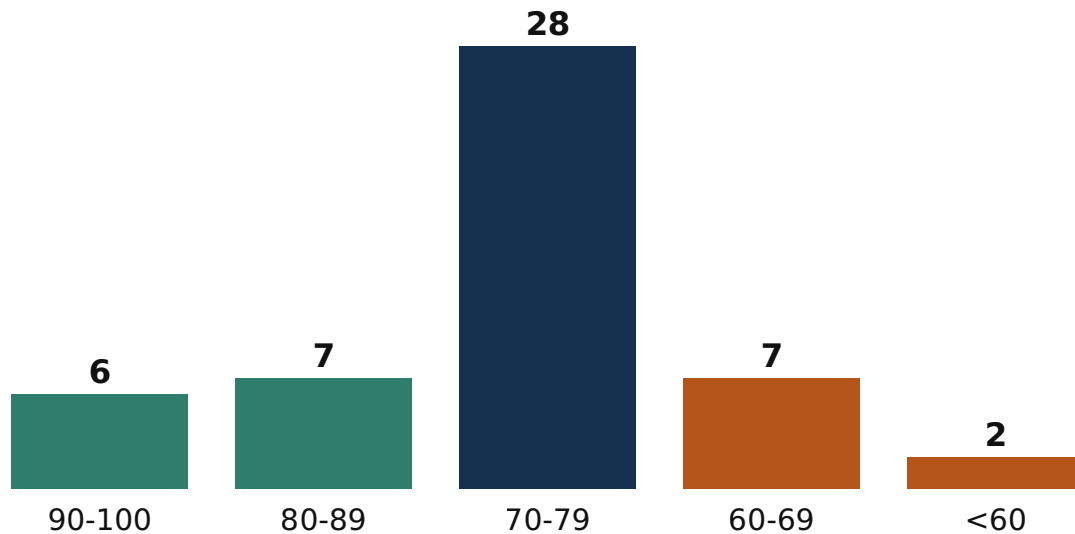
Most viewers disengage when a season ends ("I just move on," P01). A minority hold genuine parasocial bonds and describe them as their most private admission; one stay-at-home participant said reality TV "really makes me feel connected to people" and later that the cast "fill that gap" in her day (P28). For these viewers the guarded secret is the attachment itself, not the show's low status.

4.5 The shame map is gendered and fading

Three stances coexist: owning it ("I own that I watch it, and I am not embarrassed," P06), keeping it quiet, and genuine shame. Men frame shame as a gender rule ("there is a stigma around it for

males," P25); women more often frame it around quantity of viewing or comparison with the cast. Cultural saturation is dissolving the guilt ("everybody watches," P15).

Figure 2. Interview Quality Score distribution (N = 50, mean 79.1).



Bands are 0 to 100 composites. Two interviews fall below 60 and are flagged (Section 3.4).

5. Discussion

If co-viewing with known people and anonymous discourse are functionally distinct, then a body of claims about online community "sustaining" reality-TV viewership may be mis-specified: the sustaining force, for many, is the known-person layer, while anonymous discourse amplifies enjoyment and reach. Practically, this suggests that efforts to retain viewers should engineer co-viewing occasions rather than invest solely in discourse platforms, and that anonymous discourse is better understood as a distribution and enjoyment channel. The parasocial result refines the Horton and Wohl tradition for this genre: the illusion of intimacy is available to all viewers but load-bearing only for some, and its concealment follows the self-presentational logic Goffman described.

6. Limitations

The study is cross-sectional and cannot support causal claims. It samples a single franchise in a single national market, so it does not generalize beyond its sample. Evidence is self-report, subject to the say-do gap, and collected by an AI moderator whose leading restatements occasionally imposed framings, which we flag as medium-confidence where relevant. Qualitative prevalence undercounts (absence of a mention is not evidence of absence), so coded counts elsewhere in the package are treated as floors rather than rates. Two interviews were flagged and handled with caution.

7. Conclusion

Among these fifty viewers, one screen carries two social layers. Co-viewing with known people is load-bearing for loyalty; anonymous online discourse amplifies enjoyment without being a condition of watching. Stated at the descriptive level the evidence supports, this distinction offers a cleaner way to ask what actually sustains social-television audiences.

References

- Giglietto, F., & Selva, D. (2014). Second screen and participation: A content analysis on a full season dataset of tweets. *Journal of Communication*, 64(2), 260 to 277.
- Giles, D. C. (2002). Parasocial interaction: A review of the literature and a model for future research. *Media Psychology*, 4(3), 279 to 305.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Doubleday.
- Hartmann, T., & Goldhoorn, C. (2011). Horton and Wohl revisited: Exploring viewers' experience of parasocial interaction. *Journal of Communication*, 61(6), 1104 to 1121.
- Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, 19(3), 215 to 229.
- Nabi, R. L., Biely, E. N., Morgan, S. J., & Stitt, C. R. (2003). Reality-based television programming and the psychology of its appeal. *Media Psychology*, 5(4), 303 to 330.
- Reiss, S., & Wiltz, J. (2004). Why people watch reality TV. *Media Psychology*, 6(4), 363 to 378.

Appendix A. Interview protocol (probe areas)

Four sections, probe intent only: (1) television preferences and viewing routines; (2) Love Island habits, impressions, emotional investment, and parasocial connection; (3) community, discourse, and social-media participation, including the counterfactual "would you still watch without it"; (4) projective prompts on guilty pleasures, surprises, and describing the show to one's younger self.

Appendix B. Codebook summary

Axial category		Representative codes
WHY THEY WATCH		brain-off / decompression, chaos & spectacle draw, drama as engine, downward social comparison / esteem repair, justification frames
THE TWO SOCIAL LAYERS		co-viewing with known people, show-as-social-glue, online discourse as amplifier, validation / social proof, sense-making / media literacy, keeping-top-of-mind / ambient reminders, gossip & belonging, community avoidance / protect experience
THE COST LEDGER		spoilers as main cost, toxicity shrug, identity-salient toxicity (racism)
ATTACHMENT		parasocial – fades, parasocial – genuine bond, parasocial need / loneliness, follow post-season, couples/character investment
THE SHAME MAP		guilty pleasure – own it, guilty pleasure – quiet, guilty pleasure – shame, male stigma, taste-hierarchy shame, quantity/addiction shame, comparison to the beautiful, cultural saturation
AGENCY REALITY	&	voting = agency / control, late-catcher can't vote, authenticity paradox (real+scripted), representation as genuine draw

Qualitative codes; prevalence is not sized as a rate (see Limitations).

Appendix C. Priors ledger (scored)

ID	Prior	Verdict after coding
P1	Online community materially enhances and shapes the viewing experience.	PARTIALLY CONFIRMED / REFRAMED
P2	Without online discourse the show loses its spark and viewers watch less (discourse is load-bearing for loyalty).	LARGELY DISCONFIRMED (quantity) / PARTIALLY CONFIRMED (enjoyment)
P3	Viewers form parasocial connections that extend beyond the screen.	MOSTLY DISCONFIRMED (majority) / STRONGLY CONFIRMED (minority, and it is their most hidden material)
P4	Consumption is balanced between genuine (rooting for love) and ironic (here for chaos).	REFRAMED: the genuine/ironic axis is the wrong frame
P5	Love Island is experienced as a guilty pleasure marked by shame and hiding.	MEANING-SPLIT (gendered), not a single stance
P6	Projective questions surface deep hidden or subconscious feelings.	PARTIALLY CONFIRMED

Appendix D. Interview Quality Score summary

Component	Weight	Study mean (1 to 5)
Signal	0.50	4.06
Moderator effectiveness	0.30	3.48
Usability	0.20	4.4
Composite	1.00	79.1 / 100

Flags: P02 (authenticity tell, corroboration-only), P30 (connection breakdown, low signal). Full per-interview rows are carried in the canonical package bundle.

Appendix E. Representative verbatims (curated selection, exact and located)

A curated selection spanning the findings. Every quote is exact and located to a participant and timestamp; the full bank is withheld here, and raw transcripts are withheld to protect participant confidentiality.

Participant	Locator	Verbatim
P22	16:27	"It would absolutely lose its spark for me."
P35	20:35	"I tend to think that communities by default ruin shows."
P11	05:17	"It's more or less just like how you turn off your brain and you watch it, and if you turn off your brain and you watch it, it is enjoyable."
P17	06:58	"I would say it's the greatest social experiment to ever exist."
P28	01:08	"It's a bit sad to say, but I'm a stay-at-home mom, so I don't have much friends or interaction. So seeing reality TV really makes me feel connected to people."
P01	10:41	"I move on once the show is over because it doesn't really bring into effect of, "Okay, what's happening with this or this person or this islander now that the show is done?" No, I don't really care. I, I just move on."
P20	02:34	"The fact that they're scripted, but they're funny."
P06	11:54	"I'm pretty proud to watch it. It's an experimental thing in a way and... the people know they're on it, so I don't feel bad about being voyeuristic. I own it. I own that I watch it, and I'm, I'm not embarrassed."
P25	10:22	"Cause there's a stigma around it for males."
P15	12:07	"Everybody watches."

Appendix F. Demographics

Cut	Distribution
Gender	man 25, woman 24, other 1
Age band	18-24 11, 35-44 13, 25-34 24, 45-54 2
States represented	24
Interview duration	mean 21.6 min (range 14.3 to 31.0)