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“He Is a Total Sweetheart”: UK Reality TV and Technologies of Populist Publicity

by Francesca Sobande

The relationship between celebrity culture, politics, and reality TV is a complicated one that plays out on screens around the world—from the depiction of political disagreements on throwback shows such as *The Real World* (MTV, 1992–2017) to the controversial inclusion of politicians in competitions including *I’m a Celebrity . . . Get Me Out of Here!* (ITV, 2002–). Although the pairing of politics and entertainment media is well established in the twenty-first century, the collision of these worlds still sparks fears. Namely, moral panic continues to be catalyzed by the prospect of politics, celebrity culture, and reality TV as functioning in many co-dependent ways. Then again, there are also legitimate societal concerns about the socio-political implications of reality TV, such as the harmful effects of who such programs platform and how those people who are platformed are positioned and promoted. It is helpful to consider how these matters are impacted by an insidious gendered and reductive oppositional binary of serious/sincere (politics) versus silly/trivial (reality TV), which masks the messiness of how both politics and entertainment media unfold. Ultimately, the politics of reality TV is entangled with the politics of gender (e.g., narratives of femininity and masculinity) *and* the gendered nature of politics (e.g., framings of governmental politics as masculine and reality TV as contrastingly feminine). As such, reality TV and its marketing features myriad representations that reflect societal norms and power dynamics concerning gender and politics.

Politics is a term that encompasses a wide array of activities and organizations that involve promoting an ideological position. Although political endeavors are present in many different domains of both public and private life, the term *politics* is often most associated with

the people, political parties, and processes that are involved in the governance of a country or another geographically defined area. Despite gradual changes to the demographics of politicians over the decades, politics continues to be an area of work predominantly associated with the worldviews and powers of cisgender men, who are the most represented gender in many political spheres—particularly in leadership roles. Thus, political campaigns are inextricably shaped by gender politics and power dynamics, including the pervasiveness of patriarchy and the marketability of certain framings of feminism. Cue the mediatized construction of Boris Johnson.

In his 2019 Conservative Party leadership contest in the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson brazenly identified himself as a so-called feminist. This claim might be perceived as an attempt to strategically draw on ideas about gender and inequality to gain a political advantage while still centering the perspective of a Conservative man.¹ Although politicians undoubtedly face numerous contestations and critiques, the world of politics maintains a degree of societal respect and reverence that appears to be tethered to perceptions of politics as a masculinist domain. In contrast, reality TV is a genre of media that is often associated with a feminized gaze and, accordingly, is often trivialized and dismissed as mere frivolity and nonsense.

It would be an oversimplification to suggest that politics is universally viewed as masculine in nature, and reality TV (including the broader celebrity culture that it is part of) is unequivocally viewed as feminine. However, it is important to take seriously the impact of gendered and sexist assumptions about both politics and reality TV. It is also important to recognize the risk of disregarding reality TV's potential to push ideological perspectives and promote people who become the face of such views. Far from being the “fluff” that it is sometimes framed as, reality TV is a media format that is rife with the promise of partaking in different political discourses and power dynamics. For these reasons, this essay focuses on an

element of the UK reality TV program *Love Island* (ITV, 2005–2006; ITV2, 2015–), a British dating game show. I reflect on the capacity for such reality TV to operate in ways that yield forms of populist publicity—public relations and marketing activity that simultaneously promote a reality TV show and promote populist figures and the right-wing ideologies that they embody.

The checkered relationships of *Love Island* contestants present much material for analysis as part of the study of the intermingling of media and politics. As I explain here, the promotion of the show and the pre-show narrativizing of its stars are also filled with such analytical fodder. Focusing on a 2021 viral moment from the lead up to *Love Island*, in which a contestant describes Johnson (a blond-haired man in his fifties, who was the UK prime minister at the time) as a “total sweetheart,” I consider how such TV and its digital remixing reflects aspects of the overall image of contemporary British politics—an image that is increasingly framed as farcical, to the point that it might distract from the very harmful, hateful, and right-wing ideologies that have taken force. Before discussing this example, it is important to contextualize it by considering more of the conventions of reality TV.

As Brandeise Monk-Payton outlines in “Introducing the First Black *Bachelorette*: Race, Diversity, and Courting without Commitment,” “In reality TV, casting generally operates by way of categorizing individuals according to established types. Participants have defined roles based on their presumed identities and the behavioral assumptions or stereotypes that come with such identities.”² Mindful of this, my analysis accounts for both the gender and racial politics of populist publicity aided by reality TV. Specifically, I consider what meaning-making might have occurred in the process of a South Asian woman and reality TV contestant professing her admiration of a “cuddly” and “blond” Boris Johnson. Informed by extant analyses of reality TV

and “the intersections of race, gender, and the cultural politics of desire,” I discuss some of the ways that populist politics seeps into, and through, this rich genre of television.³

Love Island is a TV show with a contentious history. It has been critiqued for numerous reasons, including the mistreatment and misogynoir faced by Black women reality TV contestants.⁴ Like many UK reality TV shows, *Love Island* has often featured a predominantly white cast. Additionally, until 2023, the TV show (unlike its aftershow, *Love Island: Aftersun* [ITV2, 2017–]) was solely hosted by white women and men. Hence, *Love Island* is a pop culture text that, arguably, tends to reflect the whims of whiteness (e.g., it foregrounds white people and white beauty ideals) and is impacted by the intersections of gender, racial, and desirability politics. This is the backdrop of *Love Island* contestant Priya Gopaldas’s claims about her crush on former UK prime minister Boris Johnson—claims that were inflected with allusions to the desirability of whiteness and its proxies: “I also love his blond hair; that does it for me.” Gopaldas’s words were perhaps little more than throwaways, but they pointedly portrayed Johnson (as “blond,” “cuddly,” and “driven”) in a way that emphasizes the relationship between politics and reality TV.

Writing for *The Independent* in August 2021, Annabel Nugent reported that “*Love Island* newcomer Priya Gopaldas reveals her celebrity crush is Boris Johnson: ‘He’s a cuddly bear.’”⁵ After entering the *Love Island* villa, Gopaldas was captured on-screen again describing why Johnson appeals to her: “Like his hair . . . it’s just the hair for me.” At that time, Conservative Party member Johnson was the prime minister of the United Kingdom. He would go on to resign in June 2022, following a litany of scandals amid the COVID-19 crisis, which resulted in members of his own government voicing their lack of confidence in him for mishandling the pandemic. It was amid such a political environment that Johnson—then fifty-six years old—was

framed as the crush of a twenty-three-year-old *Love Island* contestant. To claim that Gopaldas's portrayal of Johnson was potent might be an overstatement, but particularly given the viral nature of her disclosure of this crush, there may be much to glean from critically considering the political implications of this digitally circulated moment.

Before even entering the infamous Casa Amore villa on *Love Island*, Gopaldas caused a stir by naming Johnson as her crush. Speaking about the reasons why she named him, Gopaldas said, "It's the confidence but he is a total sweetheart on the inside and that's what I like in a boy."⁶ Alluding to the boyishness of an older leading political figure nurtures an infantilizing narrative that can make it all too convenient for politicians to absolve themselves of their responsibilities and to deny their role in bringing about harm. Often referred to as an old (white) boy's club, the terrain of party politics is rife with destructive power relations and actions that are swiftly swept under the rug via the idea that "boys will be boys." In other words, harm yielded by male political figures is sometimes reframed as mere mischief and the allegedly uncontrollable nature of "boys" rather than the outcome of the clear-eyed decisions of grown men.

Of course, it would be wild to imply that Gopaldas referring to Johnson as a crush has the capacity to position him as a harmless boy in the minds of many. But, it would be equally misguided to write off the words of Gopaldas as nothing other than clickbait content. It is common for political figures—even fascists—to be painted as affable and admirable by those who support them. As the scholarship of Phoenix Andrews illuminates, some people "heart politics" and are fans of politicians.⁷ Although Gopaldas on *Love Island* may not have been the first person to frame Johnson as being harmless and humorous (e.g., "a cuddly bear"), her doing so in the context of promotional activity surrounding the show is symptomatic of the state of the

contemporary relationship between celebrity culture, politics, and reality TV. Specifically, the admission of Gopaldas, and the many online commentaries that it catalyzed, signal that shows such as *Love Island* perhaps play a part in populist publicity and desirability politics.

Discussing politics and politicians in a genre of TV often associated with a sense of relatability and the lives of allegedly ordinary people can have the effect of portraying the hierarchical world of politics as accessible to so-called everyday individuals. That is, framing political figures such as Johnson as a cute and charismatic “cuddly bear” can be both laughable and a way to portray politicians as “one of us” rather than as an elitist ruling class. Although some may perceive Johnson as embodying elitism, by becoming *Love Island* gossip fodder and being referred to as an amenable object of affection and desire, his public image may have morphed (even if *slightly*) in ways that aid strategic efforts to promote him as a politician of “the people” and a fun figure, rather than a fascist one.

In my previous work with Maitrayee Basu, I have analyzed “the meme-ification of Home Secretary of the UK and self-proclaimed feminist Priti Patel” by researching “the creation and circulation of memes and digital discourses that manage to establish some of the boundaries of who and what constitute diasporic feminist perspectives.”⁸ The digital remixing of the Gopaldas/Johnson *Love Island* moment differs from Patel memes, but both examples reflect how people use digital tools and the playfulness of pop culture to critically comment on (right-wing) politicians and to push back against media framings that might seek to sanitize the image of such political figures (e.g., by ridiculing Patel’s professed feminist identity or by mocking the concept of Johnson being a “cuddly” crush). Jokes aside, reality TV remains fertile ground for populist publicity to be repackaged as mere entertainment gossip.

By “populist publicity,” I mean forms of public relations activity that promote a position that is predicated on a Conservative concept of preserving the rights and values of the so-called common (and, often, blond, a.k.a. *white*) people. Essentially, populist publicity pushes media representations and overall framings that favorably portray populism, including by portraying Conservative politicians as innocuous and, even, *cuddly*. The coupling of reality TV and populist publicity may be particularly beneficial to political strategists invested in orchestrating public appeals beyond the more traditional channels of political campaigns and communications. Such an approach may also aid attempts to platform political figures in a way that targets a particular demographic (e.g., millennial reality TV viewers).

Extant research has elucidated “the ways in which ‘ordinary people’ enter the television frame” through their participation in reality TV programs, but changes to reality TV during the first quarter of the twenty-first century include increasing emphasis on people who are already famous, including politicians who became associated with specific shows.⁹ While tuning into reality TV and the promotional content that markets it, people may be confronted by the creep (and outright display) of populist publicity, including the portrayal of anti-immigration politicians as sweet. Although this piece has focused on the example of Johnson being named as a *Love Island* contestant’s crush, there are many other examples of politicians—including political leaders—being positioned in proximity to the relatability and everydayness that imbue certain reality TV shows. Further research could explore how the rise of meme culture is implicated in the ways that politics and politicians are invoked via reality TV shows that they do not feature in as participants.

As the opening of this essay suggests, despite decades of entanglements, politics and reality TV are still often treated in dichotomous ways that obscure their inherent connections.

Both politics and reality TV are rooted in forms of fame and representation that involve individuals gaining access to platforms with public audiences. Both politics and reality TV are propelled by public relations agendas, including soft power communications strategies that are intended to cultivate positive perceptions of people. Thus, reality TV may be a prime site of populist publicity that does the work of promoting and rehabilitating political figures, including in the form of invoking a UK prime minister as part of narratives that aid *Love Island* marketing. Blink and you might miss the moment that a potentially persuasive populist positioning presents itself on reality TV, and this is precisely why such activity may be powerful.

¹ Diretnan Dikwal-Bot and Kaitlynn Mendes, “‘Eight Tory Leadership Candidates Declare Themselves Feminists’: Feminism and Political Campaigns,” *Feminist Media Studies* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2080751>.

² Brandeise Monk-Payton, “Introducing the First Black *Bachelorette*: Race, Diversity, and Courting without Commitment,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 12, no. 2 (2019): 247–267, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcz019>.

³ Monk-Payton, “First Black *Bachelorette*,” 247.

⁴ Ebony Purks, “If You’re a Black Women Who’s Put Off by How ‘Love Island’ Mishandles Diversity, Try ‘Too Hot to Handle’ Instead,” *Insider*, July 26, 2021, https://www.insider.com/too-hot-to-handle-treats-black-women-better-than-love-island?utm_source=copy-link&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=topbar.

⁵ Annabel Nugent, “Love Island Newcomer Priya Gopaldas Reveals Her Celebrity Crush Is Boris

Johnson: ‘He’s a Cuddly Bear,’” *The Independent*, August 9, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/2021-love-island/love-island-priya-gopaldas-boris-johnson-b1899752.html>.

⁶ Daniel Welsh, “Love Island Newbie Priya Names Boris Johnson as Her Top Celeb Crush and . . . Sorry, What?!” *Huffington Post*, September 8, 2021, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/love-island-priya-boris-johnson-crush_uk_6110eebde4b075592c7e27c5_.

⁷ Phoenix Andrews, *I Heart Politics: Why Fandom Explains What’s Really Going On* (London: Atlantic Books, forthcoming).

⁸ Francesca Sobande and Maitrayee Basu, “Beyond BAME, WOC, and ‘Political Blackness’: Diasporic Digital Communing Practices,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 16, no. 2 (2023): 91–98, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcad012>.

⁹ Bethany Klein and Stephen Coleman, “Look at me, I’m on TV: the political dimensions of reality television participation,” *Media, Culture & Society* 44, no. 3 (2022): 497–513, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/01634437211036979>.