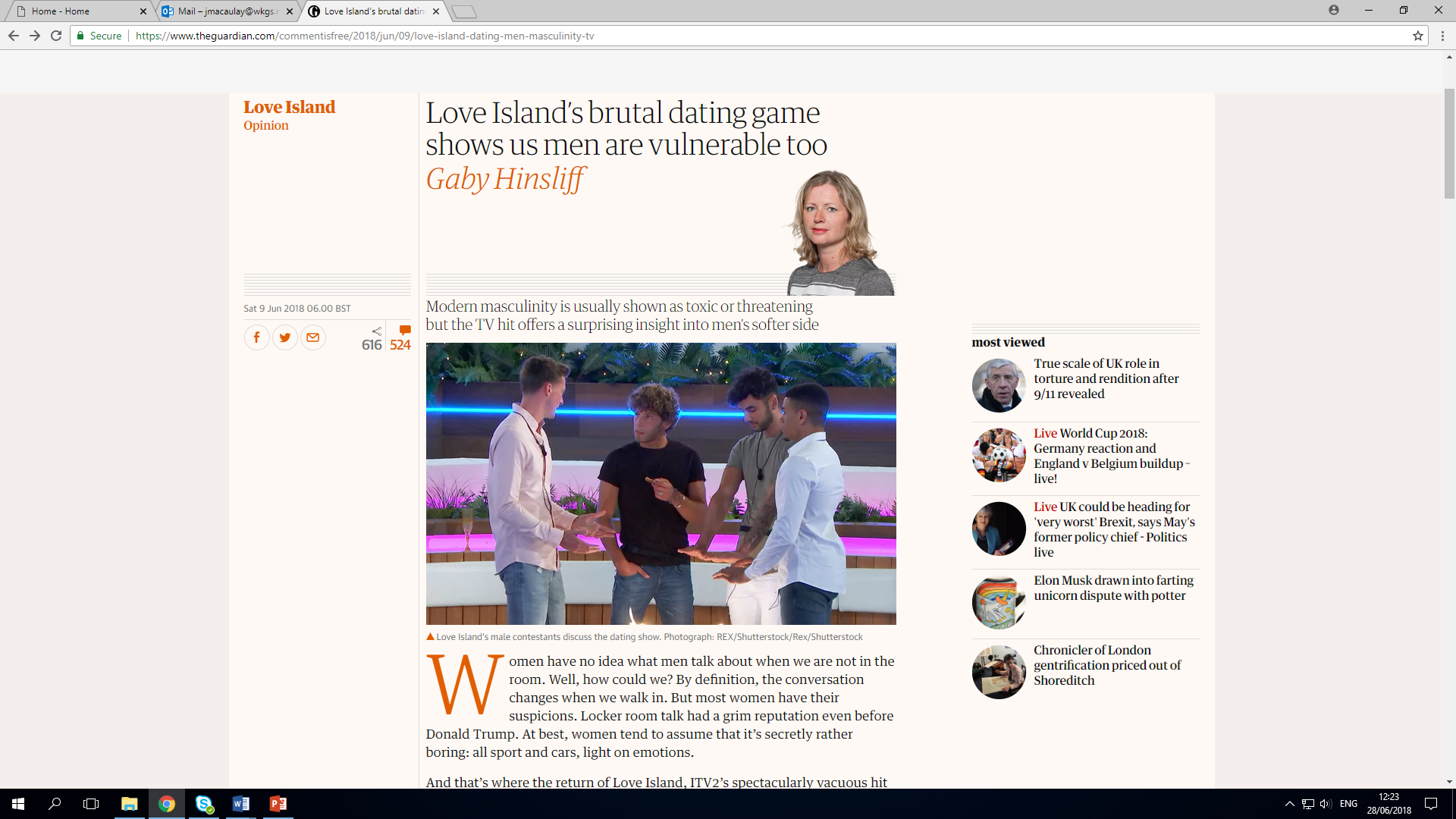


Love Island’s brutal dating game shows us men are vulnerable too

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Modern masculinity is usually shown as toxic or threatening but the TV hit offers a surprising insight into men’s softer side

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Love Island’s male contestants discuss the dating show. Photograph: REX/Shutterstock/Rex/Shutterstock

Women have no idea what men talk about when we are not in the room. Well, how could we? By definition, the conversation changes when we walk in. But most women have their suspicions. Locker room talk had a grim reputation even before Donald Trump. At best, women tend to assume that it’s secretly rather boring: all sport and cars, light on emotions.

And that’s where the return of Love Island, ITV2’s spectacularly vacuous hit reality show, has proved unexpectedly interesting. For those readers sadly unfamiliar with the oeuvre, imagine [Big Brother](https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/big-brother) minus most of the clothes and all the intellectual pretensions. What’s left is a bunch of swishy-haired young women in skimpy bikinis and heels, thrown together somewhere around a swimming pool with a bunch of improbably muscled hunks in trunks. It’s about as deep as a puddle in a summer drought, the last place on Earth you’d expect to find men’s innermost feelings laid bare. But while the rather seedy hook is the prospect of people trying to cop off with each other while under 24-hour surveillance, the TV gold here is in the endless conversations.

The boys (for some reason they’re always boys, never men) huddle in one corner and the girls in another, earnestly swapping advice as they pick over the entrails of what can barely be called relationships yet. It’s the all-boys-together exchanges that are oddly revelatory. We are not used to seeing young men portrayed as vulnerable and insecure. Parents of sons see the hidden uncertainty in their own boys – the older my son and his friends get, the easier it is to recognise the softness still buried inside hulking great teens hanging out on street corners – but not always in other people’s. And while, rightly, there is much debate about how a porn-influenced culture promoting wildly unrealistic ideas of beauty hurts girls, or how dating apps such as Tinder have poisoned their relationships, we talk rather less about the impact on boys. [Love Island](https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/love-island) is a reminder that it can be brutal for them too.

Cheesy old Blind Date, the dating show my generation grew up with, at least paid lip service to the idea that personality mattered. Hidden behind a screen, contestants had a chance to win over their potential dates with terrible chat-up lines before the big reveal. But Love Island’s format is the horribly unforgiving swipe-left culture of online dating made flesh.

[](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/09/love-island-dating-men-masculinity-tv" \l "img-2)

Eyal Booker chats with Niall Aslam on the third episode of Love Island. Photograph: ITV/Rex/Shutterstock

It opens with the men being paraded one by one, like beefy show ponies, in front of the women, who are instructed to step forward if they fancy anyone. If the attraction’s mutual, you’re now a “couple”. If it isn’t, rejection is swift and crushingly public: the sexual equivalent of being picked last in PE, in front of millions. There’s no pretence that choices are made on the basis of anything other than “Well, would you?” since contestants barely exchange a sentence before matching. Those who don’t fit a certain, narrow definition of beauty are vulnerable. Samira, the sole black woman in the show, was last to be picked despite being gorgeous while Alex, an A&E doctor adrift in a sea of spray-tanned models, was rebuffed by all the women. So far the standout theme is the rawness of rejection, and the way the men in particular cope.

No doubt all the contestants are conscious that survival depends on charming voting viewers at home. They’d be mad not to be; previous winners made six-figure sums from their overnight celebrity, helping explain the [oft-quoted statistic](https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/shortcuts/2018/jun/06/wheres-best-for-an-ambitious-young-person-love-island-or-oxbridge)that more people applied for Love Island this year than Oxbridge.

But you’d need a heart of stone not to be moved by the sight of the lads earnestly comforting a distressed Alex, telling him he’s got a “great personality” and that it’s good to be smart even if it’s doing him no favours right now. There was something poignant, too, about watching laddish Jack pretending to the woman he was evidently falling for that he’s thrilled she only wants to be friends. How often do mass media portray young men putting a brave, rather than angry, face on sexual rejection? Yet it seems an important thing for teenage boys to witness, and to see rewarded.

When young men hit the headlines, it’s so often in a threatening context: as sexual predators and perpetrators of violence, gang members and radicalised terror suspects, internet trolls and violent incels. Toxic masculinity evidently is a problem, one we too often shy away from naming.

But there is another story that isn’t told enough, because it’s the kind of story the media are badly equipped to tell: the one where nothing much happens. Stuff doesn’t go dramatically wrong. Nobody dies. There is no news. Perfectly nice boys make mistakes but grow up into perfectly nice men, capable of dealing maturely with disappointment, with lives every bit as real as those that make the news. It’s ironic, obviously, that it should take a show as fake and exploitative as Love Island to put these lives on screen.

But just like love, maybe reality sometimes hides in the last place anyone would ever think to look.