



TV

The Bi Life is everything we need after Love Island's biphobia

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After non-heterosexual couples were discriminated against on Love Island, Megan Wallace says The Bi Life is a much-needed antidote



By Megan Wallace

Bisexuals constitute *the largest subgroup* within the LGBTQ+ community, but still remain the least understood. According to popular consensus, bisexuals are out to cheat on you and break your heart, before promptly realising it was all "just a phase". The tired clichés attached to bisexuality almost don't bear repeating – they seem *that* stale and outdated – yet they continue to dominate perceptions within both the straight and LGBTQ+ communities.

Perhaps this is because bisexuality continues to be viewed alternately through the lenses of gay and straight culture and has, up till now, never been allotted a distinct cultural space. Programmes like Desiree Akhavan's *The Bisexual*, however, are changing that; shedding light on the bi experience and disentangling it from a matted web of prejudice. For those who've binged Akhavan's off-kilter comedy and are looking for more queer

representation, look no further than the (considerably lighter) *The Bi Life*. The reality dating show, which premiered last night on E!, sees nine (soon to be 10) British singletons decamp to a villa in Barcelona to live their best life and date both men and women over the course of 10 hour-long episodes. While the series also comes along at just the right time to soothe those Love Island cravings, it couldn't be further from its ITV competitor – and most other dating shows, for that matter.

The *Bi Life* has had its predecessors, sure. Who could forget this year's Vietnamese version of *The Bachelor*, where two female finalists chose one another over the titular bachelor? Significantly earlier, there was also MTV's *A Shot At Love With Tila Tequila*, which saw both men and women vie for internet personality Tequila's attention. However, *The Bi Life* provides a platform for community-building and education in a way that few dating shows have attempted before. Rather than pitting contestants against one another – encouraging women, in particular, to openly compete – the participants are only dating people *outside* of the villa. What the contestants do is spy on one another's dates. The audience also partakes in this communal observation, with the complexities of bi dating playing out for whoever's sitting at home; whether they be straight, gay or anything in between. Herein lies *The Bi Life*'s stunningly simple, yet, almost revolutionary, premise – the intricacies of queer dating are presented in a tried-and-tested format, to confront the misconceptions held by straight and gay people alike.

For the likes of 23-year-old Kyle, who's only recently began exploring the possibilities of queer dating, *The Bi Life* could also be a journey towards knowing his own self-identity. Within the positive, queer-friendly space of the show, bisexuals are given a place to belong. No struggling to contain themselves within a single box, no backhanded remarks, no feeling like your sexual orientation is invisible to the naked eye. It's also worth noting that the show is marketed as being bisexual+, an umbrella term encompassing identities such as bisexuality, sexual fluidity and pansexuality. By acknowledging the wealth of sexualities contained beyond the gay/straight binary, *The Bi Life* goes a long way towards demonstrating that, for many, sexuality operates on a fluctuating spectrum.

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What if Love Island had functioned in a similar way? Would its contestant, Katie Salmon, one half of the mega-hit's first same-sex couple, have been saved from discrimination after leaving the villa? Salmon recently claimed that sceptics from within the LGBTQ+ community have claimed her romance with Sophie Gradon was a *mere ploy for media attention*, rather than a sincere example of bisexuality. Rejecting Salmon's orientation as "fake" feeds into the constant dismissal of female bisexuality as insubstantial or transitory, making comments like these blatant examples of biphobia. However, the overwhelmingly heteronormative format of the show no doubt encourages this kind of intolerance.

Unless it's subject to a radical overhaul, the blossoming of a queer romance in Love Island will always be the exception to the rule; a deviation from the heterosexual ideal and an unwelcome challenge to the "boy meets girl" narrative. Coming from a bisexual+ perspective, The Bi Life neutralises both queer and heterosexual relationships, and in doing so, removes the implicit hierarchy enacted by Love Island and its peers, which privileges heterosexual pairings.

This isn't to say that The Bi Life is perfect. It might be more feel-good than standard reality-TV fare, but it is just another show looking to get bums on seats – except, this time, producers are capitalising on a portion of the LGBTQ+ community that is starved of representation. In some ways, it is a narrow representation of bisexual+ communities, sadly lacking in trans and non-binary diversity.

But, for people who are too scared to embrace the big B, The Bi Life could truly help combat internalised stigma and the preconceptions of a society unaccustomed to bi pride. For all its flaws, it's a necessary step in the right direction.

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