

Get her off my screen – female reality contestants prove unpopular with viewers

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Female contestants in the reality show *Big Brother* are unpopular among viewers in countries across the globe, according to a new study.

The findings could have important implications for the existence of gender [discrimination](#) in the entertainment industry.

Women contestants proved particularly unpopular in the UK, where being female roughly doubled a housemate's probability of losing any given audience vote during the show's 18-year life-span.

This was just one of the findings of the study – "Get her off my screen: taste-based discrimination in a high-stakes popularity contest," by Dr. Tom Lane from the School of Economics at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China.

The study tested for taste-based discrimination in *Big Brother* in six different countries, a setting where statistical discrimination can play no part. Taste-based discrimination occurs when people treat groups differently because they believe they can extract higher economic benefits by doing so.

"The extent for discrimination of women is striking, and it cannot be said whether the discrimination identified in the study is driven by men or women," said Dr. Lane. "Anecdotal evidence suggests *Big Brother* viewers are disproportionately female, which might suggest favoritism towards the opposite gender behind the results.

"The results suggest viewers have a greater tendency to dislike women on television than men. A taste for discrimination against women may also be behind society's apparent disparaging treatment of particular female celebrities. It could also partially explain [economic inequality](#) between men and [women](#) in society more generally."

To analyse the results of the show, data was collected from the websites Wikipedia and Wikia on the historical results of audience eviction votes in versions of *Big Brother* from Australia, Brazil, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK (both the regular and celebrity versions), from 2000 -2016.

For each audience vote, Dr. Lane recorded, of all the nominated housemates, which one lost the vote (i.e. was most unpopular with the public).

Dr. Lane then analysed how three variables affected housemates' likelihood of being most unpopular. These variables were the housemates' race, gender and age.

Key findings were:

- Being female made an eligible contestant significantly more likely to lose an audience vote in five of the seven versions of *Big Brother* analysed.
- Being female in the UK doubled a housemate's likelihood of being evicted
- There was evidence of racial discrimination towards black and minority ethnic contestants in Germany, Italy and both of the UK versions
- There was little evidence of age discrimination across the board, other than in the Italian version of the show

Dr. Lane said: "An important motivation for this study comes from the

fact that, as the audiences don't have anything to gain from their views, the setting is one where statistical discrimination cannot happen and any discrimination is identified as taste-based. *Big Brother* is a popularity contest, as are other similar shows such as *Love Island* and *I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here*, where viewers are voting solely on the basis of who they like.

"It is also important to bear in mind that this type of discrimination has substantial economic consequences on the housemates, because *Big Brother* is a high-stakes environment with a cash prize and the potential for a 'celebrity' career after the show.

"Whilst we can't say precisely why, in this case, certain groups are considered more likeable than others, this research is a step in the right direction for future work in this area."

More information: Tom Lane. Get her off my screen: taste-based discrimination in a high-stakes popularity contest, *Oxford Economic Papers* (2018). [DOI: 10.1093/oep/gpy069](https://doi.org/10.1093/oep/gpy069)

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