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IdealMatch.com: Passionate Love and the Internet

Passionate love has been defined as:

A state of intense longing for union with another.

Reciprocated love (union with the other) is associated with fulfillment and ecstasy. Unrequited love (separation) is associated with feelings of emptiness, anxiety, and despair.

Throughout history, poets, religious authorities, and storytellers have recognized the power of passionate love. As King Solomon said of love:

Love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like the very flame of the LORD. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away . . .
(Song of Solomon, 8: 6-8.)

Yet, in the Medieval world, religious, medical, and scientific authorities almost uniformly condemned passion. The early Catholic Church, for example, decreed that *all* passionate love and sexual pleasure was sinful whether or not couples were married, and whether or not marital sex led to procreation. The Church urged Christians to be celibate. As Reay Tannahill reported:

It was Augustine who epitomized a general feeling among the Church Fathers that the act of intercourse was fundamentally disgusting. Arnobius called it filthy and

degrading, Methodius unseemly, Jerome unclean, Tertullian shameful, Ambrose a defilement. In fact there was an unstated consensus that God ought to have invented a better way of dealing with the problem of procreation.

The only conceivable excuse married couples had for engaging in non-passionate, tepid, duty-bound sexual activity was the desire to produce children. So, for married couples, sex was grudgingly permitted.

The 13th century theologian St. Thomas Aquinas argued that sexual pleasure was always a sin. The Creator had designed the sexual organs for reproduction, and they should only be used for that purpose. Thus, the only acceptable position for sexual intercourse was in the man superior position (since that presumably guaranteed that there would be as little pleasure as possible). Oral and anal intercourse were deemed odious. Contraception was prohibited and homosexuality was taboo.

Secular authorities added to the fear-mongering about sex. Until the 18th century, physicians generally assumed that masturbation was unhealthy. A pamphlet by Daniel Defoe warned about the pitfalls of any kind of sexual excess: "Whence come Palsies and Epilepsies, Falling-Sickness, trembling of the Joints, pale dejected Aspects, Leanness, and at last Rottenness, and other filthy and loathsome Distempers, but from the criminal Excesses of their younger times?"

In about 1500 A.D., however, England and America began to show important change in *mentalité*. People began to question patriarchal and repressive attitudes and to evolve toward the more individualistic, egalitarian, and permissive attitudes toward passionate love and sexuality that are common today. Today in the West—and throughout most, though not all, of the rest of the world as well—people generally possess fairly positive views of passionate love and sexual desire, love matches (as opposed to arranged marriages,) gender and sexual equality, and the notion that both men and women are entitled to satisfying sexual lives. Increasingly, societies worldwide are rejecting the notion that passionate love and sexual desire are evil or sinful, and that those who feel such emotions ought to be punished.

Passionate Love and the Web

Whenever a new form of communication arises—the penny newspaper, Morse code and the telegraph, the ham-radio, the telephone, or TV—men and women find ways to use that technology to search for love. And now we have the computer: above all others, the computer and its offspring, the Web. By the 1950s, in the first days of the computer, social psychologists were already arranging “computer dates” and studying the factors that led to their success or failure.

Today, an amazing array of commercial matching services are available. Among the largest ones are: Match.com (and its related site, Chemistry.com), eHarmony, AmericanSingles.com, and PerfectMatch.com, which claim to offer

“scientific matching.” There are a plethora of specialty services, as well. Some are designed to appeal to various age groups (HookUp.com, SilverSingles.com); political groups (ConservativeMatch.com, LiberalHearts.com), religious groups (Catholic Singles.com, Jdate.com, ChristianCafe.com, HappyBuddhist.com), and sexual orientation (GayWired.com, superEva.com). There are groups for people who possess mental and physical disabilities, unusual sexual preferences, and so forth. Even people who wish to find dates for themselves and their favorite pets can sign on to a site (DateMyPet.com)!

There are, of course, some advantages in using the computer to search for the “perfect” date or mate. Many people have difficulty finding partners that who inspire passionate love and who might be suitable dates or mates. In a small town, for example, a creative, intelligent teenager might have trouble finding a romantic partner who shares his or her arcane interests. A gay teenager might be afraid to “come out,” especially if he lives in a conservative community; he may well fear becoming a social pariah. A man or woman who is unattractive, chronically shy, socially anxious, or homebound through age, illness, or disability may well have trouble finding people who wish to share their lives. Others are afraid to reveal their “true” or “inner selves” for fear of ridicule. For all of these people, the WWW may well offer salvation.

Since the 1960s, there has been a spate of research exploring what men and women yearn for in dates and mates—whether they are sought via traditional means or via the Web. Today, for most men and women in most

cultures, passionate and companionate love are the *sine qua non* of a serious dating or marital relationship. As people get to know one another, other variables—such as character, values, personality, agreeableness and warmth, ability to fulfill intimate and family obligations, and similarity of interests—generally turn out to be important as well. As people age and gain more experience with relationships, factors other than superficial charm and good looks may also increase in importance.

There is a dark side, of course, in searching for love via the internet and computer matchmaking groups. Imagine a person sitting in front of his or her Mac PowerBook, gazing at an ad for IdealMatch.com—which advertises “Find the love of your life!” What may make a potential user hesitate to click that arrow that says: “Count me in?”

1. *Trust:* Whether justified or not, people may worry that in posting an advertisement, they are risking their psychological or physical safety. Parents may worry that pedophiles will stalk their children *via* sites like MySpace. It is widely known that many people do indeed post playful descriptions of themselves or “ideal” rather than “actual” descriptions of themselves on matchmaker sites. (In a study of date-matching subscribers, scientists found that a sizable percentage of people admitted to posting false descriptions of themselves. Andrew Fiore, a date matching expert, once observed: “Everybody lies.” Men lie about their height and income, women lie about their weight, and both lie about their age while posting pictures taken years earlier.

Crooks, con men, charlatans use Matching services to prey on the lonely. Confidence tricksters court lonely widowers and widows, gain access to their pensions, and are never heard from again. In specialty sites, skinheads and white power groups advertise for soul mates. People advertise for partners who share their sexual peccadillos. One man, interested in “kinky sex”—namely murder and cannibalism—found several willing victims on the Web.

In recent years, some internet sites have been set up to “out” such cads. (See ManHaters.com or BadXPartners.com—a place where men and women can list the names of liars and ne’er do wells. There is also lovingyou.com—where men and women can recount their tales of disappointment and betrayal.)

There are other problems with the Web.

2. *Skepticism.* At the moment, social scientists simply do not possess adequate information as to how effective existing matching services are in finding appropriate dates and mates for people. Commercial services often make extravagant claims; yet scientists who have studied relationship initiation, maintenance, and termination can’t help but be skeptical. With many of today’s services, it is often a case of the blind leading the blind—or worse: of charlatans fleecing the credulous. As yet, it is impossible to predict which people will “click” with various others. Worse still, with the American divorce rate hovering between 40 and 50%, an initial attraction does not necessarily lead to “happily ever after.” In the world of PerfectMatch.com,

testimonials and extravagant claims trump careful scientific collection of data. Companies matching algorithms are private. How successful the most popular computer-matching sites are in arranging suitable dates and mates—regardless of the matching algorithms they use—has yet to be determined. Much more research is needed before social scientists can conclude that commercial matching services do indeed “work.”

For many men and women, then, computer matching services do open doors. Consumers must, however, be careful about what they will find when they step through those doors. These are the early days still of computer dating services, and many tales remain to be told.

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References and Further Reading

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