

## eHarmony.com: A Single's Salvation or Society's Damnation?

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Sex, Love, and Romance in the Mass Media

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The following is an analysis and criticism of the portrayals of Mass Media Myths 1 (Your perfect partner is cosmically predestined), 2 (There's such a thing as "love at first sight"), 3 (Your true soul mate should know what you're thinking or feeling), and 10 (The right mate "completes you"—filling your needs and making your dreams come true) found on the online dating website eHarmony.com.

### THESIS

It is the goal of this piece to prove that eHarmony.com perpetuates several of the Mass Media Myths outlined by Dr. Mary-Lou Galician. The site also reinforces unrealistic expectations of love, relationships, and marriage.

### DESCRIPTION

Author and clinical psychologist, Dr. Neil Clark Warren, launched the internet dating website eHarmony.com in 2000, in an attempt to "move beyond 'traditional' online dating" (eHarmony). The site claims to use a "scientific approach" to matching potential mates using the patented "Compatibility Matching System." As of 2005, eHarmony was the fourth largest dating site on the internet (Kornblum). According to the site, they are responsible for "thousands of marriages and engagements" and as many as "90 eHarmony members get married every single day" (eHarmony). Despite the site's huge success in recent years, critics have uncovered several flaws. In Katherine Mangu-Ward's Reason article, "Dating Discord," highlights the fact that the site caters only to straight, unmarried couples (7-8). A lesbian, whose application was rejected, filed a complaint. On that same day, the site won a lawsuit that had been filed by another rejected applicant who was "legally separated" from his wife at the time. The article also mentions that the site had been rejecting applications filled out by "short men" (7-8). In fact, 16% of applications are rejected, deeming the applicant

“unmatchable” (Romance 43). It should also be noted that Dr. Warren “emerged from the Christian community...marketing [eHarmony] primarily to Christian sites [at first]” (Kornblum). Although the site welcomes potential members from all religious backgrounds, it strongly stresses the importance of spirituality (eHarmony) and Warren, himself, “recommends against premarital sex because it can ‘cloud decisions’” (Kornblum).

According to the information provided by the website itself, Dr. Warren’s purpose in creating eHarmony.com was to “help millions of people find their Soul Mate and fall in love for all the right reasons” (eHarmony). The nobility of Dr. Warren’s personal mission aside, the motivation for financial gain cannot be ignored. The site offers its famous compatibility test for free but members must then begin payments, starting at \$49.95 a month, to receive their results and the list of potential matches. It has also been alleged that the reason for the site’s rejection of short male applicants was because they were “unlovable, or at least unprofitable” (Mangu-Ward 7-8).

## MYTHS/STEREOTYPES

eHarmony.com reinforces and perpetuates several of Dr. Galician’s Mass Media Myths. The primary myth found on the site is #10—“The right mate ‘completes you’—filling your needs and making your dreams come true.” Everything on the site embraces the ideal that one must be married to be a happy person. It encourages the finding of the right person through use of personal introspection and meaningful connections, but it still portrays marriage as something towards which one should build their life. Some of the real couple testimonials mention that the other person has made them feel things like never before and do things they had not been willing to do in past relationships. This is suggesting that, until they had met their significant other, they were not truly themselves and did not know of what they were fully capable. Meeting each other via eHarmony.com, therefore, “completed them.”

Myths 1-3 can also be found on the website. Many of the “Success Stories” talk about “love at first sight” and the feeling that “we were meant to meet.” A lot of the couples also mention being each other’s “soul mates” and knowing they were destined for each other. Even the site itself claims that “It is possible to find your Soul Mate” and that the matches are determined using “a pool of people who have been scientifically evaluated to be uniquely compatible” (eHarmony). That seems to be saying that even science can help find that “one and only.”

It must be mentioned that the site also contains several instances of realistic portrayals of love and relationships (although they are buried fairly deeply within the site). Found in the “About” section, the site clearly recognizes that there are several potentially compatible mates for every applicant. This small bit of clarity, however, is overshadowed by the countless mentions of “soul mates” and “love of your life.” Also, in one of the testimonial accounts by a happily matched member, the woman remembers the fact that she cannot change her mate and must accept him for who he is now, “not [who he is] in ten years.”

## SIGNIFICANT OMISSIONS

One of the most glaringly obvious omissions from eHarmony.com is a statement asking applicants to keep in mind that there is a possibility of the site not working or their applications being rejected. The site goes so far as to offer a “Match Guarantee” with the promise of a full monetary refund if should a compatible match not be found. The site is open to diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds but rarely highlights interracial relationships. They do not allow homosexuals because they do “not know enough about gay and lesbian relationships to do same-sex matching” and, as Dr. Warren says; same-sex marriage is illegal in most states and “we don’t really want to participate in something that’s illegal” (Kornblum).

## INTERPRETATION

The incredible success and widespread accepted credibility of eHarmony.com means that millions of people around the world are buying into the site’s messages about marriage and relationships without hesitation. The examples they use and the beliefs they are spreading are often contradictory to realistic examples of love and romance. This site is saying that everyone needs love and marriage to be truly happy. The right soul mate can complete their mate in ways never thought possible. When two people are meant to be, they can just feel it. The list goes on. The 45 minute, 436-question “Relationship Questionnaire” is supposed to provide members with compatible, possibly life-long mates but only allows them to browse through matched profiles, denying them access to other potential mates that the site deemed a non-match (Romance 44). eHarmony wants to play ultimate matchmaker, taking the responsibility and excitement of choosing an appropriate mate out of the applicant’s hands and placing it in the care of a supercomputer. One would think that such an incredibly personal decision should be made by just that—a person.

## RATIONAL MODELS

Rational models of love and relationships would agree that finding “true love” on eHarmony.com may not be the most probable of outcomes. Katz and Liu’s “false love syndrome” perfectly describes what could potentially happen to an online dater that has become desperate for love. Logic is going to be replaced by the willingness to believe anything could become a loving relationship. They could get caught in an “illusion so powerful that it becomes difficult even to imagine any more realistic kind of love” (qtd. in Galician 56). Arnold Lazarus credits the idea that marriage can fulfill someone’s dreams to “social conditioning” arguing that “mature love [should never turn someone] into ‘emotional oxygen’” (59).

## POTENTIAL HARM

There are several negative consequences that can result from believing in the Mass Media Myths that eHarmony.com and creator Dr. Neil Clark Warren glorify.

Assuming one is accepted into membership, a single man or woman browsing this website is bombarded with notions of “soul mates” and “true loves” and life-partners. They are force-fed the belief that marriage will complete them and the right person will make them happier than ever thought possible. The commercials and testimonials from matched couples ask rational thinkers to throw caution to the wind and let a computer and its generated responses choose the person that is right for a life-long commitment. However, that is once they have been accepted. What about the 16% that gets rejected? There is a great potential for emotional devastation. That is not saying that everyone applying for membership is of unsound mind but for those that wholeheartedly buy into the notion of marriage completing them, a rejection could be overwhelmingly upsetting. Even for those that are not so emotionally invested, not being accepted can make for feelings of defeat and insecurity.

## REALISTIC REFRAMING

A lot of good can come from internet dating sites. Millions of people have found compatible mates with the help of such websites. eHarmony is such a harsh offender because they build marriage up to be the best thing a person can do for themselves. What they should do, first and foremost, is feature a clear disclaimer stating the possibility of the site not finding perfect matches. It should also be made public that only site-approved mates are viewable and there are probably plenty of other singles on the site that are compatible. Also, Dr. Warren should develop a new advertising campaign stressing the importance of loving and accepting oneself before trying to find a marriage partner. A healthy relationship will not flourish if the people within it do not know how to first love and care for themselves, independent of romantic influence.

## PERSONAL IMPACT AND HARM

It's hard to admit but like most people, I'm sure, I used to believe that there was a one and only for me. I know now that there are tons of potentials out there—I just have to be willing to give them a chance. I still like the idea of finding the “right person” but I now I see that lots of people can be that person and I have to be open to that. I thought myself to be a pretty educated feminist and activist but the Mass Media Myths opened my eyes to a whole new world of thought. It is interesting that in such a short amount of time, my thoughts on love, romance, and relationships has changed so drastically, and for the better! Never having been much of a “relationship person,” I have always known that marriage is not right for everyone and that it is not necessary to lead a happy and fulfilling life. For that, I am grateful and proud of myself for realizing that fact early in life. I now hope to be able to relay more healthy thoughts and ideals about relationships to those that may need some good advice.

## PLAN OF ACTION

The strongest weapon the advocates of Media Literacy have is education. Becoming aware of the messages surrounding us and the meanings and motivations behind them is building a stronger society. The more the public knows, the less we can

be manipulated by big money and absurd ideals. Learning what I have about sex, love, and romance has enabled me to critically look at website such as eHarmony.com and uncover some of the truths behind it. In doing so, I have armed myself with the knowledge needed to reject harmful and unrealistic portrayals of relationships and help others discover the truth as well. My goal in having investigated this site is to be able to intelligently inform others about more realistic media representations of love. I can only hope that others may read this, learn from it, and form their own educated opinions.

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