

WEEKEND

SOULMATES

On social media, we are bombarded by the lives of others and the details of their romantic lives, and we experience a similar effect. A friend’s partner does something special for them, and we begin to question the quality of our own relationships, inventing an entirely fictitious deficiency.

Humanities professor Ellen Handler Spitz co-teaches a course called “Love, Marriage, Family: A Psychological Study through the Arts” and says these modern-day “love-tests” echo a centuries-old storytelling tradition.

“One of the big problems in our present society is that people are not encouraged to look inward,” she told me over coffee in Atticus Café. “People are married to their screens, where all is performance, and there is consequently a tendency to mistake performance for authenticity.”

Social media allows users to be selective about what they post and present an idealized image of their lives.

Professor Igor De Souza, whose research investigates the origins of romantic love, also commented on social media-inspired groupthink’s impact on relationships: “You think, well, if they are having a good time, then maybe I would have a good time doing that too. And they look pretty happy, so maybe that’s going to make me happy as well. On the one hand, it can sort of stop people from asking if that’s something that they really want.”

So what are human relationships really about? For Handler Spitz, it is the intimate realm between partners wherein both feel the freedom to be completely authentic.

“Our present culture values speed and ease. But human love relationships take time, have many ups and downs, and are not fast or easy or always pretty,” she mused.

Still, it is hard not to compare our experiences to those we perceive others to have. Just as social media complicated this season of “Love Island,” it has also destabilized love in the real world.

‘How much more exploring do you need?’

If there is one thing that contestant Ace made clear during his time on the show, it’s that he does not believe in love at first sight. While he expressed interest in fellow islander Chelley from the very start, he meandered for weeks through other couples before investing in their relationship.

To an extent, he is correct that the ethos of the show is exploration. Flirting with other people is an essential aspect of the villa experience; How else can one be sure of the strength of their couple?

De Souza notes this as an intriguing departure from the monogamous tradition.

“Those shows do reflect our modern way of living, in the sense that I can open an app like Tinder or Hinge, and I can find a lot of options. That is really different from the past,” he shared. “I think it is an outgrowth of a culture of individualism and choice, where for any decision that we make, we expect to have a lot

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of choices, and if we don’t have a lot of choices, then there is something wrong with the ways in which we’re making that decision.”

De Souza points to how this leads to the social phenomenon of the paradox of choice. On the one hand, an abundance of options can be overwhelming and cause people to cling to relationships that are comfortable, even if they are not the right fit for them. Ace saw Huda and Jeremiah as victims of this choice paralysis.

De Souza identifies the simultaneous reality of choice anxiety, wherein individuals are tormented by the possibility of better alternatives and are incapable of making a long-term commitment to their partners.

What characterizes this mercurial behavior is a belief in “the one,” a soulmate who constitutes one’s perfect partner. De Souza and Handler Spitz differ in their beliefs on whether such aspirations are realistic.

De Souza considers “the one” to be a fabrication generated by societal expectations. “We will get frustrated if we take lifelong, monogamous, long-term relationships as some kind of goal or gold standard for everything else. That does lead to frustration, because not everyone will get that. It’s just the reality,” he asserted.

Conversely, Handler Spitz believes in true love and in the idea of a soulmate.

“I know and believe there are couples who find rare beauty and unique rapport with one

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another,” she said. “I know too that this state is surely not the goal for everyone.”

So, when do you resist the temptation of greater potential happiness, and when do you cut yourself loose and explore options?

“I’m not gonna have a sugar rush anymore from the word candy you’re feeding me.”

A frequent accusation hurled at this season’s islanders claims they entered fake relationships, pretending to have interest in the other person to remain on the show and have a shot at winning the \$100,000 prize awarded to the couple voted “America’s favorite.” Viewers point to Zak’s change in behavior towards Amaya after learning she was popular among fans, Ace and Chelley’s prior relationship history, and the suspiciously quick sparks that formed between couples like Nic and Olandria after their previous partners left the show. These islanders seemed keen to game the system and capitalize on their appearance.

While most viewers understand that dating show contestants have ulterior motives, the backlash “Love Island” Season 7 received indicates there is a limit to what is acceptable. Reality dating shows demand a certain suspension of disbelief. The draw of these shows is their promise to present their audience with real people grappling with real emotions. This illusion dissipates when fans are confronted with the show’s highly produced environment. There must be love on “Love Island,” and sometimes that love is inauthentic.

Just as finding love, or at least searching for it, is an expectation for “Love Island” contestants, De Souza argues it is a societal expectation as well.

“That’s a really modern way of looking at romance, this notion that it’s something that you’re supposed to feel, that you’re supposed to have, that maybe there’s something wrong with you if you never experience it in your lifetime. That puts a lot of pressure on people to think about romance and their sexual lives and marriage as almost like a type of work,” he explained.

“So if it doesn’t work out the way that we want, it’s such a personal catastrophe, in addition to being the dissolution of a relationship, you feel bad about yourself.”

De Souza’s comments suggest that modern society has transformed dating into a social game, wherein external perspectives determine the value of one’s relationship. In this mindset, love becomes an item on a checklist necessary to lead a successful life.

If we criticize the contestants on “Love Island” for entering performative relationships, we should also consider to what extent we, when entering relationships, are merely fulfilling societally prescribed roles. In an era when anonymity is a fading luxury and the private and public spheres continue to converge, we must pay attention to whether our actions are motivated by a sense of personal meaning or consumption by others.

Real love is not a game to win. There is no \$100,000 prize awaiting a quintessential couple. The grievances viewers expressed with “Love Island” Season Seven indicate the dating world must re-center internal validation and issue an imperative for us to seek happiness, not status, in our relationships. If the love present in our lives does not match up to some incorporeal paragon, that does not make us failures. Love is intimate and personal, and that is what makes it precious.

Love is not to be televised, but to be lived.



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