

Online Dating Checks By Qualified Pls are Important

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The dangerous side of online dating

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// With as many as 40 million single Americans using online dating services or web-networking sites such as MySpace to look for love, it would seem that there has never been an easier time to find a soulmate online.

But experts, law enforcement officials and private investigators warn that the world of internet romance is fraught with peril, ranging from liars to sexual predators and even murderers, who hide their motives behind seemingly innocuous virtual identities.

“When we pushed for more stringent background checks on online dating sites, one company told us the idea of asking for disclosure was creepy,” said Bill Noble, the director of the Safer Online Dating Alliance. “But what is actually creepy is having these creeps on your site.”

The numbers are worrisome – and horror stories abound. In February, MySpace was forced to cancel 90,000 accounts on its site that authorities revealed were linked to registered sex offenders. It was a fraction of the 130 million users of the site, but a significant percentage of the more than one million registered sex offenders in the United States.

In April a Boston medical student, Philip Markoff, dubbed the “Craigslist killer” by the media, was arrested and charged with murdering a masseuse who advertised on the popular website’s erotic services section.

Two months later Craigslist was hit with another scandal when it emerged that a North Carolina man used the site to hire

a man to rape his wife while the husband watched.

Bill Warner, a Florida private investigator who offers on his website to “sort out the winners from the losers” for a flat fee of US\$169 (Dh620), says running background checks on potential internet dates now constitutes more than 50 per cent of his business.

“Usually the problem is that the man is married or he turns out to be one of these crazy stalker people that follows a woman for months,” he said in a telephone interview.

In many cases, Mr. Warner said he would discover that men had joined a site using a false name, a prepaid, throwaway cell phone and a phoney e-mail address from free services such as Yahoo or Hotmail.

“There are a lot of people out there who get jazzed up by disguising themselves,” he said, adding that nearly 100 per cent of his cases involved women being victimised by men.

Industry experts say the website True.com is unique in the field for warning on its home page that criminals and married men who come hunting “will be sorry if they do”.

The site recently sued a convicted sex offender in California who tried to register himself as an eligible bachelor.

But True.com is one of the few online dating websites to actually run background checks on its members, even though a recent survey found that a majority of people visiting online dating sites believed that most did.

“It’s shameful because it lulls women into a false sense of security,” said Mr. Warner. “You get young naive women or the over-50 year olds who are recently divorced, they are often excited about meeting a new man and they make easy prey.”

In some instances, the first date ends in violence. Last October, for example, police in Minnesota charged a 39-year-old man with raping a woman he met through the internet, after he slipped drugs into her drink that caused her to pass out.

In other cases, the motive is financial. Police in Tampa, Florida last January arrested a Tennessee man who was wanted for swindling a woman he met online out of tens of thousands of dollars and leasing a Mercedes in her name that he wrecked, leaving her with more than \$60,000 in liabilities.

There are stories that are even more sinister. The Safer Online Dating Alliance warns women on its website never to post photos of their children, nor to describe them in detail, saying that single mothers who openly say they seek partners who like children have inadvertently attracted paedophiles.

Although it is less common, men have also been victimised, usually by other men who are posing as women.

Law enforcement officials and advocacy groups say they are not trying to shut down the online networking world, but to teach people how to navigate it safely.

“A lot of couples have found each other on the internet and not everyone is a predator,” Mr. Noble said. “But it is also possible to develop a false sense of familiarity with someone you have only met on chat sites and through picture exchanges. But at the end of the day you have not met the person. Whereas meeting in a bar, you might immediately feel the hair on the back of your neck stand up, with internet dating you have let your guard down by the time you interact face to face.”

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