

Confiding in strangers: Lovestruck pay 'agony aunts' to offer advice

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Your friend is head over heels in love with a man you consider hopeless, a man you are sure will ruin her life. You try to talk some sense into her, but she turns a deaf ear. What to do?

Well, you might try some digital assistance.

On e-commerce platform Taobao, a type of "lovestruck scolding" service is becoming extremely popular. Vendors claim online chatting with strangers can pull the lovesick out of the mire of a toxic relationship.

"This is actually more helpful than I thought," said Michelle Wang, a college student in Shanghai. "I have a friend who's been moaning to me about her on-again, off-again boyfriend for nearly a year. I'm tired of it. So when I heard about these services, I bought one for her. I didn't expect her to get over this guy completely through a half hour's chatting, but I thought I might finally get some peace of mind."

But lo and behold! The chat format was effective. With harsh truths, a request for a short essay on why exactly this man was so desirable and a warning that the woman would "die with him if she couldn't leave him," the chat partner succeeded in getting the woman to ditch her boyfriend for good.

On Taobao, search results show hundreds of such so-called "mood consumption" services, provided both by individuals but also companies that employ chat partners. Clients can select the partner's gender, voice — "sweet" or "deep," and personality — "tender," "mature" or "stern."

The service can be a one-time activity that last for 20



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minutes to two hours, or can be a daily, weekly or monthly subscription. Charges range from about 20 yuan (US\$2.74) to 300 yuan.

Talking on a phone is more expensive than communicating through texts or voice messages. Once the service is bought, the client is requested to provide a WeChat or QQ ID, the booked chatting partner sends a "friend" request, and the service begins.

So who exactly are these online agony aunts?

A kindergarten teacher who uses the screen name "Fleeing" told Shanghai Daily that she wanted to earn some extra money and enlisted as an online chat partner for a company that goes by the name Baitao Trouble Relief, which had at least 400 orders within the last month.

Fleeing said her work as a teacher gives her patience and valuable communication skills to listen to clients and dispense advice.

"Most of the clients don't know who they can turn to with their problems," she said. "They find it awkward to discuss some intimate issues with people close to them, so they choose to talk to an impartial outsider. Our prices are much less costly than professional therapists after all."

Mood consumption services go beyond advice for lovestruck people. They also provide general chatting partners covering all aspects of daily life, including morning wake-up calls, study supervision, gaming and good-night calls.

College student Yang Wenyi, who is preparing for her third-year at postgraduate qualifying

exams, signed up for a virtual study room online. The "room" is based on an app that costs 19 yuan a month. The rooms are typically open from 6am to 10pm.

Upon entering the study room, which is like an online meeting room, users are required to focus their devices so that the supervisor can see what they are doing. If their minds stray from studying to, say, playing with their smart phones, the supervisor immediately steps in to bring them back to the matter at hand.

"Such rooms are extremely popular," Yang said. "A room with a capacity of 30 people may be filled seconds after it is open. I find it useful because I am a hopeless procrastinator. The supervisor keeps me focused on my studies for at least an hour."

However, Yang said such rooms also come with some problems.

"Users are often required to join chatting groups, and supervisors often promote paid curricula, sometimes 20 times a day," she said. "Many of the users are underage, and they may not know if these promotions are legitimate or just scams."

Xu Peng, a psychological therapist based in Shanghai, told Shanghai Daily that "mood consumption" concerns him because it could be sign of a society being "atomized."

"Generally, when we become bigoted or paranoid in a relationship, only close family or very good friends really have the right to tell us uncomfortable truths or 'scold' us," he said. "But now people are trusting total strangers with these roles, which represents a significant change in our interpersonal relationships."

Xu said the Chinese society was — and in some remote areas, still is — traditionally based on lineage, and most social problems are handled within a circle of close acquaintances.

However, with the development of technology and rapid urbanization, such a lineage society is slowly collapsing, especially in big cities, he said, and solving problems is passing to "professional strangers."

Xu also cautioned that many chatting partners online may be ill-suited for helping people sort out problems and could cause harm to the mentally vulnerable.

"Many lovestruck people are vulnerable, and 'scolding' may be too harsh an approach to helping them," he said.

"When they are 'scolded,' they may turn from one extreme to another, losing all faith in loving relationships."