Buying Love Online: The Commodification of Intimacy in a Technological World

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The concept of paying huge amounts of money and traveling half way around the world in order to find a partner may be bewildering to some. However, the increasing popularity of a modern form of intimate international relationships, for instance between Western men and Thai women, could be considered a sign of the times. This Reflection will delve into the connections between several critical sociological concepts, including globalisation, technology, and commodification, through the examination of these contemporary relationships. It is important to examine these modern relationships as, it can be said that the state of intimate relationships is indicative of society as a whole, and thus exploring these unions may provide a critical insight into society today (Barraket, 2006).

First and foremost, this piece is not explicitly in opposition to the concept of interracial relationships. Even the internet can be instrumental in bringing many people happiness by finding a partner they may not have otherwise met (Barraket, 2006). There is however, a dubious element to Western men exclusively searching for young, beautiful women abroad, and willing pay any price. Furthermore, the concept of paying for love online and internationally can take many forms and locations. This piece will specifically examine the relationships between Western men and Thai women, due to their increasingly public controversial nature (Theroux, 2000).

“Hundreds of thousands of Western men travel here each year for the Eastern promise of a Thai woman.” (Theroux, 2000)

Referred to as Anglo-Thai relationships, in a compelling documentary on the subject by esteemed documentary filmmaker Louis Theroux, the pursuit of these relationships is apparently big business (Theroux, 2000). The initial starting points for the majority of these relationships are introduction agencies, often accessed online (Mally,
Theroux focuses on one of these introduction agencies in particular, in order to unravel the appeal behind the Thai women who are seeking a relationship with a Western man, often referred to as Thai brides (Theroux, 2000). The concept of a Thai bride is often an idealised and simplified model of what these men are seeking: essentially, a physically appealing and subservient woman who is eager to please, including in a sexual sense (Theroux, 2000).

Key to globalisation is global capitalism, which is primarily an economic system seeking constant growth and the accumulation of profit (Wallerstein, 1990). The way in which the world interacts in this economic sense has had a significant impact on other features on contemporary society. In a money-orientated world, the commodification of every aspect of our lives was bound to follow suit, including the commodification of people.

As with all capitalist business ventures, the primary goal of these agencies is the accumulation of profit, rather than everlasting love (Mally, 2015). In this sense, when signing up to an international introduction agency, you are searching for a product in return for your hard-earned cash. There is no escaping, therefore, the commodification of Thai women, and consequently the reduction of their individuality to an idealised commodity. This is not only dehumanising and objectifying, but may be indicative of sense of ownership these Western men seek to exert over Thai women, which is evocative of racist and sexist undertones.

The monetary aspect of these relationships takes the form of an initial sign-up fee to these agencies, along with the cost of travel abroad in the hopes of finding love (Mally, 2015). More importantly, however, it would appear that an unspoken but crucial agreement is achieved during the matchmaking process which dictates that the men will take care of the women financially in return for the emotional support of the women (Theroux, 2000). The men in the documentary appear critical of the financial liberation of many Western women from their spouses, as the men no longer feel needed or able to have financial dominance in order to ‘provide’ for their wife (Theroux, 2000).

All concepts accumulated within this piece in order to critically assess the social phenomena of Thai Brides are underpinned with the wider concept of globalisation. We’re all familiar with the phrase “it’s a small world”, but with the increasing ease at which one is able to find an eligible partner to marry on the other side of the world at the click of a button, it is apparently getting smaller. Globalisation plays a key role in this process, in which global interconnectedness is rapidly increasing (Held, 2004). The process of globalisation is multifaceted, and influences various aspects of contemporary life, which consequently affects the way in which we conduct intimate relationships.

Facilitating the process of globalisation is the immense growth in technology. Arguably the most influential aspect of contemporary society is the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs). With a significant impact upon seemingly every aspect
of our lives, technology could be said to be truly symbolic of contemporary society (Webster, 2006). A simple internet search will reveal a vast array of websites in which one has easy access to these introduction agencies (Mally, 2015). This is demonstrative of the proliferation of information sources, in which instant gratification in terms of communication with a potential partner can be achieved (Barraket, 2006).

Critical sociological theory gives us an insight into the ways in which relationships have changed over time, alongside the evolution of societal concepts surrounding intimacy. Bauman’s theory of Liquid Love states that in this modern era, intimacy is a commodity to be bought and sold like any other (Barraket, 2006), demonstrating the saturation of capitalism in even the most private aspects of our lives. Giddens’ theory of the transformation of intimacy, on the other hand, professes a shift towards more organic relationships being formed on the basis of reflexivity (Barraket, 2006), which shines a positive light upon the evolution of intimate relationships.

Why is it, then, that despite the progress that has occurred towards equality between the sexes within heterosexual relationships, this contemporary concept of the Thai brides appears to be a bleakly archaic throwback to the 50’s housewife? Within Theroux’s documentary, one Western owner of a Thai introduction agency professed his love for the ‘traditional’ and subservient qualities of his Thai bride, in contrast to the independent and “equality crazed” Western woman (Theroux, 2000). It may be the case that patriarchal values are so ingrained within society that if Western women have become liberated, and therefore too independent, then Western men will simply seek out these characteristics in women elsewhere around the globe. Is the future of intimacy simply a warped and more sinister version of the past? Or should we feel positive towards harnessing the power of technology, and the increasing ability to communicate globally, in order to find love?

Having been to Thailand myself, I have been fortunate enough to experience this cultural phenomenon first hand. Roaming the streets of Thailand, seemingly everywhere you look, are white British men with their Thai girlfriends and wives. Undoubtedly, a significant proportion of these unions were formed through an introduction agency, similar to those Theroux investigates within the Thai Brides documentary (Theroux, 2000), which may be explained by the tourism aspects of sociological theories surrounding global movements. This may be demonstrative of the shift that has taken place within the tourism industry towards postmodern tourism (Uriely, 1996), which seeks an authentic experience (Uriely, 1996). Furthermore, Urry discusses the element of often unnecessary consumerism within the tourist gaze, a constructed vision of a desired experience as a tourist (Urry, 2002). This may be extended in the sense of Anglo-Thai relationships to mean that an authentic experience of Thai women is desired, and an introduction agency will aid in this creation (Urry, 2002) in order to fulfil their capitalist agenda of profit accumulation as a corporation (Mally, 2015).
Global migration has been instrumental in the ability to maintain the relationships created through Thai introduction agencies. In this instance, the norm appears to be Thai women marrying non-Thai men and gaining spousal settlement following the formation of the couple through international introduction agencies (Home Office, 2012). Laws surrounding spousal migration enable co-habitation in the Western man’s home. Statistically, Thai Wives constitute 93% of Thai spouses who have migrated to the UK having been granted spousal settlement in order to live here in the UK with their British partners (Home Office, 2012). This indicates the dramatic effect that a social development can have globally, and the interconnected nature of elements of globalisation.

Despite obvious reservations one might have about the nature of these relationships, they certainly appear to be mutually beneficial. Not necessarily in the pursuit of true romance, but in the case of the Thai women for economic security, even a home to move to in the UK, and for the Western men a housewife to take care of them. This may negate Bauman’s liquid love theory, which suggests that relationships have transgressed the co-dependency of the nuclear family era (Bauman, 2003), and indicate instead that the ‘traditional family values’ of a woman’s place within a marriage, essentially beneath the man, is still alive and kicking. Despite this, however, the contemporary concept of Thai Brides is in line with Bauman’s assessment that intimacy has become commodified (Barraket, 2006), proving indefinitely that you can indeed find love online, but it will cost you.

Bibliography


Images

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