

# ICTs, 'Confluent Love' and Global Intimacies

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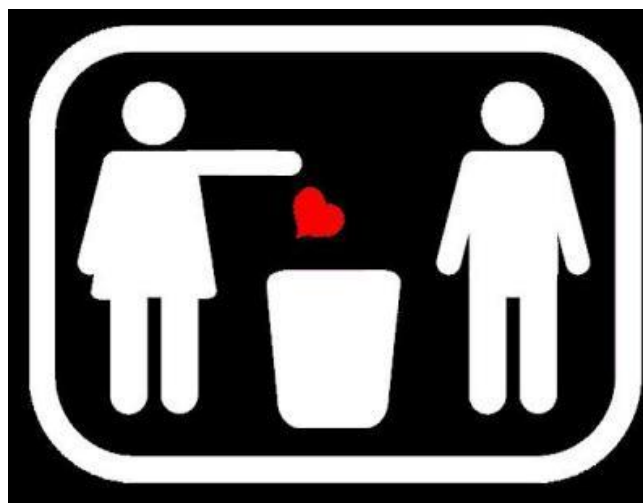
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In an ever changing world, globalisation and developments in Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) can be seen as having a profound impact on many aspects of contemporary society (Held, 1999 & 2000 and Castells, 2000). Arguably, one of the most important changes witnessed in today's world are those involving our personal relationships and the nature of intimacy (Giddens, 2002). The influence of globalisation and ICT's in creating opportunities for new and changing ideas of intimacy and relationships will be critically explored herein, in particular reference to the growth of sex tourism and the obtainability of internet brides.

Traditionally, relationships have been based on ideals of a nuclear family; a husband, wife and children, offering economic security and stability, a formula which arguably has been the 'main site of intimacy within capitalist societies' (Jamieson, 1998: 15). In contemporary society, Giddens proposes that there has been a shift from traditional relationships to the concept of a 'pure relationship' based on a model of 'confluent love'; an active love which is open, conditional and free from constraints (Giddens, 1992:61-62). Giddens argues that pure relationships are entered into for no other reason than for their own sake and are sustained only for

as long as the individuals involved see the relationship as being good. In this sense, relationships that are based on confluent love represent a lifestyle choice, a larger degree of self-reflexivity on one's feelings which allows individuals to facilitate a greater degree of choice in the fate of their relationships (Giddens, 1992). It can therefore be understood that expectations from relationships which were once based on longevity, security or a romanticised version of love have transformed as alternative ways of experiencing intimacy and relationships have emerged.

Globalisation can be understood as significantly contributing to this changing nature of intimacy and relationships. In today's global society lifestyles are continually de-traditionalised as new options and possibilities arise and people become ever more individualised through increased reflexivity (Lash, 1994; Giddens, 2002). Whilst Giddens sees this as a



positive change for intimacy and relationships, Bauman argues that the fluidity witnessed in contemporary relationships facilitates a fleeting approach which leads to the fragmentation and weakening of human bonds within society (Bauman, 2003), something which can be seen both in increasing divorce rates and in the declining sense of local community in a global world

(Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Beck, 2000 cited in Inglis & Donnelly, 2011).

Furthermore, globalisation has arguably contributed to a number of other significant factors which have impacted on personal lives; not least the fast pace of contemporary society which has led to increased work pressure, longer working hours and more unsociable working patterns (Schaeffer, 2009), all of which can be understood as contributing to the need for individuals to seek out alternative ways of meeting a partner, most notably online.

The rise of the internet and online communication technologies in particular have provided an essential tool for seeking out relationships and intimacy in alternative ways, and also across much broader geographical spaces (Castells, 1996 and Luongo, 2000); the use of online networking and a whole host of chat rooms, amongst other sites, offer an infinite source of information on how and where to buy intimacy and sex or seek out relationships across the globe (Luongo, 2000). In this sense it can be understood that a combination of globalisation and the development of ICT's has had a profound effect on the growing industry of sex tourism, facilitating unconventional methods of attaining a partner; illustrated by the increased obtainability of 'internet' or 'cyber brides'; women who can be bought online for the purpose of marriage (Jeffreys, 2009: 48-49).

Considering Giddens' concept that a pure relationship reflects emotional and sexual equality between partners (Giddens, 1992: 2), Beck (1992) argues that inequalities still persist. Beck's views can be seen as evident in the case of internet brides where women can be seen as part of an economic transaction, often marrying for economic gain (Jeffreys, 2009), thus parallels can be drawn with the inequality of gendered roles and economic security experienced in traditional relationships. Furthermore, radical feminist perspectives would propose that the availability of internet brides in a globalised world exemplifies inequality; through male domination, female exploitation and the commodification of women (Tong, 1993). It could also be understood that, as a result of globalisation, the emancipation of women in richer countries has led to the enslavement of women in poorer countries; where women in Western cultures are increasingly independent, more demanding of equality and have ambitions above the

traditional gendered role of home maker, men look towards women in many Asian cultures where gendered roles still exist and women fulfill their traditional role in relationships (Jeffreys, 2009; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002). As such, Giddens' belief that contemporary relationships offer equality between partners is evidently not true of all relationships.

In contrast however, it could be argued that Giddens' concept of a confluent love, which exists on the basis of two individuals getting what they want from a relationship, is never more apparent than in the case of internet brides. The purchasing of a wife online can be seen as a contemporary arrangement whereby both parties get what they want; the man gets to choose his wife, and the women gets, in many cases, the visa or economic security that she requires for a better life for her or her family (in many cases wives send regular remittances home to their family) (Ryan, 2000 and Bales, 2002). Considering the perspective of liberal feminists, it could be also argued that women are emancipated through their decision to sell themselves

and that in such circumstances, women are in fact exploiting men for the purpose of economic and self-gain (Tong, 1993). Therefore isn't everyone getting what they want from the relationship? Isn't everyone happy?



Whilst purchasing a bride online may be seen as an extreme method of finding a relationship, ICTs and the increasing number of social networking tools such as Facebook, MSN and chat rooms enable people from all corners of the world to get to know each other and build relationships without ever meeting face to face (Castells, 2000 & 2009). In considering Giddens' concept of a pure relationship which requires openness between partners, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) perspective is that not everyone in relationships are self-disclosing and in this sense it could be understood that the internet facilitates a lack of self disclosure and, in some cases, the giving of false, misleading or exaggerated information between individuals. The exaggerations communicated by many sites advertising sex tourism provide an example of this; alluring girls offering intimacy, sex and

companionship, yet in reality these girls are, for the most part, just doing a job which some may say is a perfect example of emotional labour (Hochschild, 2003: 7). It can therefore be questioned as to if the internet benefits individuals seeking partnerships or intimacy, or if it simply creates a fabricated world which can only lead to heartache and heartbreak.

The evolution of ICTs, which have enabled greater global communication and information sharing, coupled with advancements in transport; namely aviation, have certainly benefited the global travel industry and arguably, produced more opportunities for tourists to engage in sex tourism (Clift & Carter, 2000). An example of this is Thailand; known as the world's 'premier sex tourist destination' (Clift & Carter, 2000: 10). Ryan (2000) notes that sex tourism has brought Thailand 'several millions of overseas earnings' and as such can arguably be understood as an source of income which is encouraged by nation states who partly rely on sex tourism to maintain their national economy (Clift & Carter, 2000). In this sense, growth in sex tourism can be understood as a consequence of globalisation and whilst it could be argued that local conditions, such as poverty and a lack of work or opportunities, may have allowed for sex tourism to develop, arguably international relations, globalisation and the use of ICT's have allowed it to thrive (Clift & Carter, 2000, Bales, 2002 and Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002).

Conversely, sex tourism and internet brides as alternative methods of finding intimacy and forming relationships, can be seen not only as a result of globalisation and ICT's but also, in considering the demand for female sex workers in tourist destinations, a result of inequality between capital and labour (Clift & Carter, 2000). Thus it could be argued that capital is the overriding power in the changing nature of intimacy, something a neo-liberal perspective would suggest is a simple case of supply and demand in a global economy (Scholte, 2005).

On reflection, globalisation and ICT's can certainly be seen as creating new opportunities for relationships and the changing nature of intimacy. Yet out of this analysis, further questions can be raised which are certainly deserving of more in depth consideration; Do these new opportunities for relationships and intimacy

also involve increased risk for individuals? Do they actually enable people to get what they want, or do they create a false consciousness? and ultimately, are people in contemporary society aware of all of this and if so, do they even care?

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Picture 1:

<http://thereasonablebachelor.wordpress.com/2012/06/12/is-having-reservations-the-end-of-your-relationship/>

Picture 2:

<http://blogs.psychcentral.com/coming-out-crazy/2012/06/day-18-sherry-turkles-goldilocks-effect-and-the-myth-of-digital-intimacy/>