

“Do you want to be with someone? Do you want to find your soulmate? Think about it, where else are you going to find millions of Fish in the Sea<sup>SM</sup> looking for someone? If you are serious about finding that someone special sign up today!”

*Plenty of Fish*

It's Friday night and I'm home alone in front of the computer with nothing to do again. So what could I do to alleviate these feelings? I could join one of the many internet dating websites in hope of meeting that 'special someone'. Plenty of Fish (POF) for example, a free online dating website with 1.2 million average daily visitors<sup>1</sup>, suggests there are plenty of singles<sup>2</sup> who “use POF to find that someone special”. This appears a laudable service, connecting people in the hope of finding love. As I logon to POF I wonder why it is so popular and as I do I cannot help but question my life in terms of contemporary society.

A good place to begin is by considering how technology has enabled the provision of online dating. Information and communication technologies are important

distinguishing features of the modern world, gaining increasing prominence and prioritisation with no sign of diminishing. Whilst beyond the scope of this paper it is worth noting



that this rapid adjustment has divergent opinions; “to some it heralds the emergence of a highly educated public which has ready access to knowledge while to others [...] it represents a tightening of control over the citizenry” (Webster, 2006, p2).

This information age propelled by information and increasingly sophisticated technologies has transformed society and the social circulation of information into a global information economy (Castell, 2000). For POF this means a penetrative service easily accessible; for social theorists this emphasises the intimacy with which information constitutes our lives. Castells identified “large-scale shifts from industry to information... to underscore the changing dynamics of space in the constitution of identity, power and society” (Elliott, 2009, p275). These fundamental shifts, particularly the internet and mobile telephony, emerged not in a vacuum but rather as a series of social and economic developments that powerfully transformed global structures and networked the economy.

The rise of the ‘network society’, as Castells (2000) suggests, is increasingly restructured by an accelerated ‘space of flows’ that links people and places worldwide into spatialized social relations organised by ‘timeless time’ and ‘placeless space’. This ‘social intercourse’ as Webster (2006) explains requires global flows of information, carried by images and symbols within a media-saturated environment. This symbolic bombardment marked by a plurality of voices vying for acceptance as legitimate expressions has led to a state of ‘social saturation’ (Gergen, 1991). As Gergen argues,

<sup>1</sup> This figure is published by Plenty of Fish.

<sup>2</sup> Singles is an assumption; people may be disreputable!

the multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected messages has fragmented and eroded the identifiable self, transforming human self understanding and related patterns of social life.

Online dating can be seen as one of those many messages vying for our attention but how it manages to do so requires considering Max Weber's bureaucratic model of rationalisation; "dominated by efficiency, predictability, calculability, and nonhuman technologies that control people" (Ritzer, 2011, pp24-25). Ritzer extends Weber's model by using McDonalds as an example of the principles employed which increasingly dominate society. McDonaldization is a model for "education, work, health care, travel, leisure, dieting, politics, the family, and virtually every other aspect of society" (Ritzer, 2001, p198). Efficiency is the first of four dimensions referring to the quickest and optimum method to an end. The internet is fast and easily accessible for connecting single people complimenting the fast-paced mobile lifestyle of its customers.

In Britain 6.3 million people every month<sup>3</sup> are looking online furnished with fast and efficient stream-lined services for satisfying their needs and desires. Calculability refers to quantitative aspects such as the number of customers or how quickly the product is sold and in this sense, fast delivery equates to good quality (Ritzer, 2001). For POF, online informational content quantifies your personal attributes such as height, body shape, hair colour, ethnicity, etc. facilitating 'chemistry predictor' algorithms that employ self-rated psychometric tests of personality "essential for building a romantic relationship" (POF) and for marketing. Predictability offers assurances for online dating that develops high confidence in the scripted behavioural patterns of customer interactions. For example it is acceptable and normal to contact someone you have never met before on POF and ask

them personal questions. The control of customer's behavioural patterns are to some extent regulated by POF, however it is possible for deviation as some women<sup>4</sup> explicitly state 'no one night stands'. As Ritzer expounds, "rational systems inevitably spawn irrational consequences... [which] serve to deny human reason" (2001, p201). For POF this unreason may manifest in the ability of individuals to control how they appear to others by creating a carefully edited profile; an online identity that they think you would like to be with.

The aforementioned features of contemporary society highlight the global transformations that shape the nature of relationships and society. Zygmunt Bauman's sociological critique of postmodernist culture emphasises social transformations as an increasingly seductive mix of hedonism and libidinal intensities promoted by late capitalism (2003, in Elliott 2009). The fetishizing of commodities, inaugurated by advanced capitalism, is fast transforming identities through the signs and images they consume and display to others i.e. buying an Apple iPhone or Nike trainers.

This symbolic exchange, Baudrillard (1994, in Elliott, 2009) notes, transforms consumer societies particularly media culture highlighting the intimate relationship of people's identities based on media images and signs. This 'hyperreality' of ambiguous simulations with 'no grounding except in their own production' is not merely superficial but bears political power and consequences for the experience of subjectivity.



Postmodernists portray a schizophrenic and fragmented mentality embedded in a culture of uncertainty and ambiguity experienced as unstable, decentred, and fluid. Ulrich Beck's (1992) 'risk society' characterises uncertainty and questioning of expert truths,

respecting no boundaries, as inescapably bound to "the development of instrumental rational control [...] from individual risk of accidents and illnesses to export

<sup>3</sup> The Guardian.

<sup>4</sup> Whether this is gendered or merely based the male subscriber referred to here remains to be seen. It is quite plausible that men are equally harassed with one night stand requests.

risks and risks of war” (in Elliott, 2009, p285). This fragmented and unstable culture is central to identity in contemporary society as Bauman (2003, in Elliott 2009) argues, liquidity and fluidity distinguishes individual life, not just social and economic changes.

Drawing upon social theories of individualisation Bauman elucidates “the complex ways in which identity is becoming disembedded from social structures [...] with social responsibility for self-determination now falling ‘primarily on the individual’s shoulders’ (in Elliott, 2009, p300). Contrary to this view is the traditional, rigid relationships based on the romantic complex of obligation and responsibility providing security and stability - ‘till death do us part’ - but contains within it potential consequences for destruction to the self.

In ‘Liquid Love’, Bauman (2003, in Elliott 2009) presents individuals without these permanent bonds but rather loose ties that reflect individuated and flexible relationships. The detraditionalised individual is torn between freedom and security and left with a need for belonging, which may reflect the popularity of online dating. This confluent love is a loose, contingent relationship, where two<sup>5</sup> individuals flow together and into each other, able to move in and out of the relationship. This fluid and dyadic confluence is much more reflexive than assumed in traditional relationships, requiring effort to keep the momentum going whilst actively working towards staying together in an equal relationship and arguably the break of ties with that person would not have the same amount of destruction to the self.

The rise of the internet and mobile telephony has transformed society economically, politically, and socially and the extent to which they constitute our lives. Online dating compliments a fast-paced and mobile lifestyle, reflecting the embeddedness of capitalism in society and how we identity ourselves through the multiplicity of signs, symbols, and images. Gergen (1991) argues this ‘social saturation’ fragments the self, similar to postmodernist’s notion of an uncertain and ambiguous identity. Bauman (2003, in Elliott 2009) highlights an individuated self that is more flexible and self-determining existing in a liquid and

fluid society and this certainly supports the online dating culture which is much less rigid than more traditional notions of romantic love.

I have been on a few dates with women I have met on POF but I have not met that ‘special someone’. It seems quite feasible considering the ‘success’ stories advertised on online dating websites but perhaps it’s just another lottery. Some women I have met uphold traditional values whereas others are more inclined to a confluent relationship able to move in and out more freely. I will continue to use POF as an adjunct method for meeting people, and with a positive attitude i.e. “I’m open to new experiences but not expecting miracles”, I can enjoy a drink or a walk with someone I have only just met and maybe, just maybe, I’ll meet that ‘special someone’. Until then I’m free most Friday and Saturday nights so if you do know a single woman, between 28 and 38 years, who would like to meet an adventurous guy who likes red wine and Van Morrison, then please get in touch.

---

<sup>5</sup> There is no reason to assume two individuals could not be three or four or however many.

## **Bibliography:**

Castells, M. (2000) **The rise of the network society**. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Elliott, A. (2009) **Contemporary social theory: An introduction**. New York, NY, Routledge.

Gergen, K. J. (1991) **The saturated self: Dilemmas of identity in contemporary life**. BasicBooks.

Plenty of Fish (POF) [Internet] <<http://www.pof.com>> [Accessed on 25 November 2012].

Ritzer, G. (2001) **Explorations in social theory: From metatheorizing to rationalization**. California, SAGE Publications Inc.

Ritzer, G. (2011) **The McDonaldization of society 6**. California, SAGE Publications Inc.

The Guardian [Internet] <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/nov/27/online-dating-britain-hadley-freeman>> [Accessed on 28 November 2012].

Webster, F. (2006) **Theories of the Information Society**. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. London, Routledge.

Picture 1:

[www.datelessndallas.com](http://www.datelessndallas.com)

Picture 2:

[www.singleswarehouse.co.uk](http://www.singleswarehouse.co.uk)