



online

HEIDELBERG JOURNAL OF RELIGIONS ON THE INTERNET



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Le religieux sur Internet / Religion on the Web

Proceedings of the Conference by the French
Association for the Social Sciences of Religion

Volume 08 (2015)

Institute for
Religious Studies

University
of Heidelberg

Table of Contents

- 01 Introduction
Fabienne Duteil-Ogata, Isabelle Jonveaux, Liliane Kuczynski, Sophie Nizard
- 11 New Funeral Practices in Japan - From the Computer-Tomb to the Online Tomb
Fabienne Duteil-Ogata
- 28 Virtuality as a Religious Category? - Continuity and Discontinuity Between Online and Offline Catholic Monasteries
Isabelle Jonveaux
- 42 At the Helm of the Number One French-Language Protestant Network, *Jesus.net*
Pierre-Yves Kirschleger
- 56 Gaia, God, and the Internet - Revisited - The History of Evolution and the Utopia of Community in Media Society
Oliver Krüger
- 88 Virtual Religious Meetings, Actual Endogamy ... - The Growing Success of Affinity Dating Sites
Pascal Lardellier
- 98 Going Online and Taking the Plane. From San Francisco to Jerusalem - The Physical and Electronic Networks of "Jewish Mindfulness"
Mira Niculescu
- 115 When Virtuality Shapes Social Reality - Fake Cults and the *Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*
Lionel Obadia

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Online – Heidelberg Journal for Religions on the Internet

Volume 8 (2015)

Le religieux sur Internet / Religion on the Web

<http://online.uni-hd.de>



Virtual Religious Meetings, Actual Endogamy ... The Growing Success of Affinity Dating Sites

Pascal Lardellier

Abstract

Dating websites aiming to help singles find romantic and/or sexual partners have grown very rapidly over the last fifteen years. They bring together millions of single people –on average between a half and a third of a country’s singles use or have used them.

A look at the history and evolution of these sites shows us that the first-generation “generalist” sites have given way to sites with an increasingly targeted “offer”, be it on ethnic, religious or sociocultural criteria. These sites are now widespread, allowing singles to search one another out, on pre-established, explicitly communitarian grounds which are often religious. In France (the country where this study has been carried out), sites devoted to the Muslim community are very popular. For example, the Inch Allah and Mektoub websites are used by several hundred thousand people.

This evolution and the success of such websites raise a number of sociological questions. Based on a long-term study carried out by the author, looking into the dynamics of romantic encounters (2 books published in 2004 and 2012), this article will review the major findings and lines of enquiry (methodological, theoretical) into online romantic encounters on these dating websites, showing the respective positions of the sites, the strategies of the individuals online, and the societal questions involved.

Keywords

Internet, dating sites, sentimental and sexual relations, multiculturalism, endogamy

1 Does a multicultural society necessarily lead to mixed couples¹?

It seems logical to imagine that multiculturalism and social mixing in our society lead to an increasingly strong heterogamy. Cross-cultural openness, tolerance, political and media condemnation of all racist discourses and postures all carry a strong ideological burden. And it is easy to think that our societies, which we like to think of as “melting pots”, foster the increase of “cross-cultural couples”. Ideally, these couples should be at the forefront of a “dialogue between cultures”, the ultimate embodiment of an open society. Of course, cross-cultural couples are now numerous, and increasingly visible. But should one look a little further, a survey of singles looking for their “other half” and a structural analysis of the marriage market tend to show that endogamy and homogamy are still pre-eminent, as regards the motivations of those willing to be part of a couple. What do we mean here by endogamy? According to the classic definition, it is a sociological “law” by which we select partners belonging to the same social group, be it religious, social, professional, or ethnic.

We here present the results of two studies conducted on the same field, the “sentimental Net” (a term coined by Pascal Lardellier to encompass the plethora of heterosexual romantic and conjugal dating sites), the first conducted between 2002 and 2004, and the second between 2010 and 2012 (Lardellier 2004 & Lardellier 2012). The process of “computer-assisted endogamy” we witnessed on the Internet shows couples forming “online” by pairing singles who share ethnic and religious affinities (renamed “cultural affinities”), and more generally socio-economic and socio-cultural affinities. In the formation of couples, these endogamous criteria tend to prevail over choices which are never multicultural at first reading.

In fact, interracial couples who met on the Internet are the result of “intercontinental strategic alliances”, which are profitable for both sides. On the one hand, upward social mobility (emigration towards a prosperous area, whatever the loss in terms of family and identity); on the other hand, the assurance of having a satisfying partner in terms of appearance. To put it bluntly, Western white males in their forties or fifties might “comb” Africa, for example, deliberately looking for youth, beauty and docility².

1 In this article we refer to mixed couples from the social, cultural, religious, or ethnic (etc.) point of view.

2 In *Sex@mour* (Armand Colin, 2010), Jean-Claude Kaufmann devotes a rather alarmist chapter to such transcontinental matrimonial migrations, made possible by online dating. These migrations throw off the conjugal balance and the system of values in place, while “merchandising” the actors (and especially the actresses) as well as the institution of marriage. In 2004 (*Le cœur Net, op. cit.*) we revealed this phenomenon that we qualified as the “Celibacy International”. Furthermore, this has been exemplified by many press/TV reports and documentaries on the “Love cybercafés” of Africa.

Let's now go back to our studies, which were meant to question the part played by technological mediation in the evolution and reconfiguration of social relationships, and more precisely of sentimental and sexual relations. Of course, sociologists are now aware that a revolution is at work in digital networks, towards which former social logics are migrating, all the while adopting features specific to the technosphere. Taking this process as a postulate, a combination of methodologies has led us, since 2003, to survey this new field through participant observation. We also met and comprehensively interviewed some of the actors of this field, and collated these data with their relational and identity strategies. Very soon, the “microsociological” dimension of their accounts revealed the “macrosociological” dimension of the findings and of the major trends identified³.

2 A still present and even pressuring endogamy

We can easily distinguish two different periods in the evolution of the online dating market: the first one, from roughly 1997 to 2006, is characterized by a kind of endogamy intuitively organised “upstream” by the clients themselves. As I noticed from 2002-2003 on, “intimate strangers” corresponding online on generalist dating sites tended to select by themselves people like them. For lack of a better term, I used to call this process the “ticking all the right boxes syndrome”. Indeed, on dating sites we are represented by a “profile page” gathering marital status and sociocultural criteria, “the ASL” (age, sex, location), but also by a self-presentation explaining cultural tastes. Its style, spelling, references, etc., are all clues about one's personal status. For example: a secondary school teacher, passionate about the classics and Korean cinema, a vegetarian, animal lover and alter-globalization activist, would like to meet a man with exactly the same traits and as similar to herself as possible. Elisabeth, a 29 year-old teacher, registered on a dating site, bluntly puts it this way: “Online, I first look at the spelling. It may seem silly and unfair, but I immediately delete messages written in SMS language or emails full of spelling mistakes! Since I'm looking for someone with a certain cultural level, and the spelling really expresses the education level, as well as certain standards; it also expresses one's regard for other people, although they are still strangers. On the other hand, a man who uses a particular style and writes well in terms of form and content, attracts me and makes me want to go further, by writing back for a start.”

3 The interviews referred to in this article were conducted in 2001, with the heads of the websites *Points-communs.com* and *Attractive World*; these interviews focused on their positioning, development strategies, public image (marketing, advertising and press) as regards their partners and clients. The article also refers to questionnaires to the users of these sites (130 online questionnaires). For further information on methodology and accounts, see *Les Réseaux du cœur: Sexe, amour et séduction sur Internet, op.cit.*

We are dealing here with an almost perfect symmetry in terms of sociocultural affinities. Thanks to its millions of profiles the Matrix, was calmly and mechanically able to regurgitate thirty or forty people corresponding more or less to the very specific request, all potential and virtual princes.

With regard to the second period, from around 2006 on, endogamy has been implemented by the economic actors of the market, i.e. “downstream” industrial managers and their marketing staff, in charge of the positioning of the websites. They simply answered a demand for dates “shortlisted” within cultural frameworks, which are thus still ethnic, sociocultural and religious. Cultural dating sites developed especially in the mid-Nineties, mostly denominational in nature. Examples include *Mektoub*, *Inch Allah* (for Muslim people), *Theotokos* (for Catholics), and *J Dream* (for Jews). Their growing success corresponds to a return to – or a retreat into – values related to one's ancestry and/or education. People openly admit the segregation process, and the argument for this is that the members gather and meet around “common values”, which are meant to facilitate the formation of new couples. Thus, dating sites that gather together a majority of Muslim people have thousands of members in France alone, drawing on and speeding up the process of identitarian closure around one's religious and/or ethnic community, currently at work in France. Malika, 33, says: “A single, unmarried, woman of my age, that's not normal for my parents, brothers or sisters. I devoted time to my studies, enjoyed my youth, and now, what am I supposed to do? And how? As with all of my friends, I had to resort to the Internet. I soon ran away from *Meetic*, for a whole bunch of intolerable reasons! Then, you try more selective sites, like *Points-communs* or *Attractive*. And finally you realise that while you're at it, you may as well put the emphasis on cultural values, thanks to which you will understand each other, agree on food, relations, celebrations, etc. That's why I chose *InchAllah*. It means that, there are fewer misunderstandings and fewer disappointments.” Atef, 32, agrees: “You're young, you live in France, you have a dual Franco-Tunisian culture, and then comes the time to “settle down”. Once you've had your fun, you think about founding a family, and here come family pressures as well as your own aspirations. And you realise that meeting a woman with the same references, the same culture and the same values as yourself, makes it much easier to understand one another. You save time and share something strong, you've actually got the same roots. That's why, after trying non-specialist websites, you naturally (and logically) register on websites visited by people of your own religion”.

Cédric, a 42 year old widower, registered on *Theotokos* for the same reasons: “After living through that terrible tragedy, there was the long and painful mourning period. And once I thought about family and marriage again, I really didn't want to flirt around or enjoy myself and try to forget, as people advised me to. That's the reason why people go on sites guaranteeing seriousness and shared culture and values”.

Endogamy has always been powerful, but with the “industrialisation” of dating and the hyper-targeting made possible by the Internet, it is further strengthened. We know that the republican model is stretched, torn between the will to recognise and respect “cultural” disparities (with specific claims on their behalf as backdrop) and the basic principle that nobody should be different in terms of rights and obligations.

But new specific websites have also emerged, now allowing vegetarians, right-wingers (or left-wingers), the elderly, single parents, etc., to meet someone within their community of interest or their social segment. Designers of such dating sites always keep in mind that the registered members wish above all to meet people like them, sharing their values and concerns.

The online dating supply is thus evolving more and more towards a niche logic. We witness a hyper-segmentation of the market, with websites based on cultural, professional, ethnic (e.g. websites gathering people of colour with an African background), or political affinities, as well as websites where the only point of mutual interest between members relates to an eccentric way of life.

It is a tell-tale of our times that there are websites specifically targeting good-looking people, such as *BeautifulPeople*, or rich people, such as *Match Platinum* or *A Small World*.

3 Social interference from “match-makers” to Meetic

Speaking about endogamy and matrimonial mediation, it would be a mistake to believe that the Internet opened the age of sentimental and conjugal intercession. The Internet goes a long way towards mechanising former practices. In fact, in most societies and at all times, in different contexts, some people had the occupation of pairing lonely souls, like the “*marieuses*”, matchmakers in *Ancien Regime* France. Clearly, societies have always had efficient go-betweens, like the *marieuses*, or notaries, or family friends playing the role of wise mediators. Similarly, balls and upper-class parties inculcated specific codes of behaviour, such as by initiating people into social ballroom dancing. All this was meant to bring young people of the same social standing closer together. For a long time, the aim of this pairing logic has been a question of pragmatically maintaining familiar and notarial interests, “working things out in the best possible way”. Love came (or not), and we all well know that literature is full of tales about marriages of convenience. In some way, love is the surprise guest of contemporary couples.

But in view of the outburst in the number of singles and the advent of a mass individualistic society, the Internet is a relationship Eldorado, making up for a crisis in the relationship area. Some

of the traditional contexts for dating have declined, and have recently been replaced by a new generation of technical and commercial intermediaries, such as speed-dating.

4 Dating sites, a short but rich history

In the French-speaking world, the first era of online dating (1997-2004) was embodied by *Netclub*, *Amoureux.com*, *Match* and then *Meetic*, which, from 2003 on, played a huge part in legitimizing and encouraging computer assisted dating. During the first years of social and technical experimentation, dating sites used to be general in nature, and many of them remain so ten years later. But we must not forget that we are dealing with a market, and that designers and investors want to meet the expectations upstream, at the supply level. Of all the basic rules governing the marriage market, what we are focusing on here is endogamy, and this “homophily”, which consists in “loving people like us”. This was not taken into account by the first era of dating sites, and generalist sites still look like “Walmart of the lonely hearts”. But we realised that even there, love may be masked but is certainly not blind.

Dating sites were born in the US where, traditionally, there is no shame in placing ads in newspapers in order to meet new friends or to strike up acquaintances when arriving in a new town. Since 1995 (with *Match.com*), they naturally perpetuated this American tradition using the new means offered by the Internet. Dating sites for singles developed experimentally while the Internet was in its infancy. They are based on a simple principle: you register on a site of your choice, men pay monthly fees, while women rarely do, in order to counterbalance disparities between genders⁴.

You then choose a “nickname” (often conformist and mediocre, acknowledged or not), fill in your profile with civil data and photos, you list your hobbies and interests, topped by a short personal text that is supposed to express who you are and what you want. After that, your digital self can now be sought, and you can join in the fun.

5 Online, Cupid is anything but blind

Once registered, you can take advantage of a range of services, like consulting thousands of profiles, among which you choose potentially interesting people, according to predefined personal

4 It is important that the number of men and women (we are here talking about heterosexual sites) be more or less equal, in order to give the impression that, in this case, men are not over-represented. It is clear that this is a strategic element for these sites, which officially announce a strict balance of “present forces”.

criteria like age, region, and declared expectations. And that is when – to return to the topic in hand – an inclination toward endogamy comes to the fore. For even on generalist sites, when the search becomes “serious” and the approach “committed” (i.e. sentimental and conjugal, and not only sexual), users have a propensity to “spontaneously” contact people like themselves, from an ethnic, religious and sociocultural point of view. There are two means of contacting people. Asynchronous communication means writing emails they will receive in their mailbox, and to which they can answer (or not). Synchronous communication, means contacting potential partners directly by live chat, trying to start an ongoing exchange with somebody online among thousands of requests for live conversations. During “chat sessions”, the webcam definitely plays an important role, as users can see each other, and thus judge whether the person corresponds to their quest, depending on physical and sartorial (when clothed) criteria, or sometimes their tastes in interior design, depending on the domestic environment visible in the shot.

Potentially, everybody can reach out to everybody. And nothing stops you from writing simultaneously to dozens or hundreds of people, thanks to features like “copy/paste” and “sample messages”, which can be duplicated and sent to many potential partners. This frequently happens, and many users complain about it and warn the readers of their profile about their dislike of “an industrialisation of first contact”. In any case, in this virtual “non-place” traditional and social rules (interaction rituals, politeness rituals, etc.) are abolished. Disembodiment allows all freedoms and removes all inhibitions. Nevertheless, implicit sociological laws operate on the Internet, so that you would not foolishly message just “anybody”. To repeat, first contact and approach logics are sociologically organised. Despite disembodiment and anonymity, and despite the fact that marital status is momentarily suspended, everything is organised by the market and the actors themselves so that each person meets “people like him/herself”. The Internet reproduces and even accentuates social stratification. To recall an obvious point: digital networks essentially contain written text. Now, these texts definitely and mercilessly say who we are and from where we speak, through their style, spelling, language registers and the way they deal with shared (or not) cultural references. The “sentimental Net” is a discriminatory device, as it forces people to write, to find the words, to spell correctly, to master different language registers as well as implicit and explicit categories, etc. Now, through the writing test, many users guess who they are dealing with. Of course, cultural references, passions and hobbies listed on the profile page help to determine what kind of person “the masked interlocutor” is.

6 Digital writing as a powerful sociocultural discriminating factor

As often in real life, meeting “someone to love on the Internet” brings us closer to people who are sociologically similar to us. Far from the pipe dream suggesting that the Internet is a tool for a new form of social mixing, we are actually witnessing a process of “computer assisted endogamy”, from an ethnic, religious, social and professional point of view. A survey carried out between 2005 and 2008⁵ shows that, in one year, only 7% of users met new people on the Web. Concerning relationships that develop on the Internet, 91% are from the same country, and 22% from the same town. Moreover, people usually studied similar things, are the same age and have the same cultural references. We then return to the concept of “computer assisted endogamy”.

The Internet is a carnivalesque space, where everybody can freely speak to people whose mask they like. Anonymity, role plays and identity strategies determine self-presentation. And yet, when dealing with these dating sites, Eva Illouz (2006) refers to a Cartesian and “ontic self.” This forces users to take a step back from what they are, and to define a profound and permanent identity, i.e. an “essence” dissociated from the body. Of course, this absent, virtual “online” body is paradoxically of great importance. As the economy of appearances, ruling users' presence on these websites, means that all personal photos must be attractive in order to attract visits, buzz and comments. This leads to an over-enhancement of self, thanks to photoshopped pictures, or at least pictures that are somewhat more attractive than reality. But such photos not only show bodies, but also lifestyle in the form of clothes, personal grooming, environments framed in the background and sets of poses and postures. Combined with textual self-expression, such images help define “from where we speak” from a social point of view.

We know that powerful sociological filters are at work on the Internet, and they are at the heart of the dating stage actors' strategies. Another survey, commissioned by the website *Attractive World*, confirms that the education level is an important search criterion⁶. Women and men interviewed are unanimous: for people with high education level, this latter criterion is determining in the search for The One (85% for women and 69% for men). Both genders would prefer partner with the same education level (72% for women, 61% for men), and they would all more easily accept a partner with higher qualifications than lower. Women graduates even think that they “scare” men: two in five explain that they are still single because of their educational level. To come back to the topic in hand: digital networks mainly contain writings, which reinforce social stratifications, with respect to implicit and explicit discrimination generated by this content. The market for dating sites is continuing to evolve in this direction, resulting in hypersegmentation. In

5 Survey conducted by Virginie Lethiais and Karine Roudaut, from Télécom-Bretagne (France).

6 Internal study, entrusted to the researcher in strict confidence and for information purpose.

love, people have long looked for their other half; now it seems that we are rather looking for our double, as if reflected in a mirror.

7 To conclude, “birds of a feather....”

The purpose of this survey is to recall that dating sites are “socio-technical devices” which are more likely to produce endogamy than to encourage a hypothetical social mixing. In any case, they constitute the epitome of a “liquid” modernity (Bauman 2003). And after all, the Internet is for surfing! We must also remember that this is a paradox in a world that advocates multiculturalism as a cardinal social value. In fact, the process of identitarian closure at work in our society is perceptible in the players' and users' strategies, but also upstream, in the positioning of the owners and marketers of these sites. Behind the sharing of “cultural” values extolled as a commercial argument hiding a (mainly religious) basic axiology, an active endogamy is at work, now “computer-assisted”. Of course, a process of social mixing is also perceptible on the fringe of the market and is basically the result of international social mobility strategies. Here at the fringe, we can see the kind of multiculturalism described at the beginning of this article; it allows mixing (from the social and cultural point of view) in transcontinental matrimonial migrations, but these do not, however, represent a norm. And this mixing is only possible when the members of the couple are not attached to their original culture, or when one of the two is willing to adopt the other's culture, in the manner of a religious conversion.

But the reality is that even online, former logics remain and become stronger: homophily, endogamy and a primacy of “sociocultural affinities”. So, to recall an old proverb, on the Internet the saying “birds of a feather flock together” makes much more sense than “opposites attract”.

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Biography

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