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# Is There Life on Adult FriendFinder? Sex and Logic with the Happy Dictator

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates web users and their sexual behaviors and pornographic self-representations as observed on the sex and dating site <http://www.adultfriendfinder.com>. The website is a social network and encourages members to find real-life partners for sex whether it be casual sex affairs between singles, swinging couples, or polyamorous extra-marital affairs between “aba” (“attached but available”) individuals and their lovers. The analysis is based on theories of ethnography and social networking and analyzes the effects of corporate networks and homogenizing “sex scripts” on sex lives and Internet culture in Hong Kong.

## Keywords

Internet sex, Pornography, Web 2.0, Chinese Internet Culture, Hong Kong sexuality, Impression Management.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The paper is based on an extensive case study carried out over two years, in which I functioned as participant observant and interviewer, or “coaxer”, of selected AFF.com members. Their words and actions will be quoted, though they wished to remain anonymous for this study. They shared their sex experiences by means of online communication, online story-telling, and face-to-face encounters, some of which were recorded on audio tape or video tape.

Besides analyzing these dialogues with members, the paper looks at a sample of member profiles to discuss self-representations as “impression management,” or the way web users manipulate and tweak texts and images to make a good impressions on others. The aim is to observe impression management in relation to the site’s unrelenting promotional campaigns suggesting sexual conquest through technological competency. The profiles were sent to the author’s email account over a two-month period, more particularly between July 15 and November 15, 2008.

## 2. THE HAPPY DICTATOR OF SEX AFFAIRS

Internet sex can be seen the epitome of a new type of “media intoxication,” as predicted by early media theorists Walter Benjamin and Guy Debord. Web users are happily exploring daily activities and friendship networks such as Facebook and Xanga, while also using the Internet to arrange sexual affairs. In the

recent trends of Internet sex and porno 2.0, people are using social networks to articulate and share sexual sensations and to retain memories of encounters. Benjamin’s philosophy predicted a loss of feelings of “authenticity” or “satisfaction” in such mediated encounters, while Debord defined our craving for sensations as one of internalizing media spectacles.[1] Debord predicted that the modern individual would become intertwined with compulsive mass media scripts that would mostly portray the visions of an economic ruling class. [2]

AFF.com users in Hong Kong are driven towards blissful networking and digital subjectivities, yet their actions and discourses also reflect the racial divisions and gender inequalities that are typical of 21<sup>st</sup> relationships. Who are the winners and losers of the Internet sex conquest and how are Chinese people using the website to at out or go across homogenizing sex scripts? First of all, in conjuring up the economic foundations of Friendfinder Inc., I reference the work of media activists Alessandro Ludovico and Hans Bernhard, who used the notion of a “Happy Dictator” to question the monopoly of the giant of e-commerce, Google, in their project Google Will Eat Itself (GWEI) As they write:

How can a dictator be funny for the people? One chance is to know how to entertain people, while continuing to influence every decision they make, so invisibly maintaining the totalitarian power untouched. Google’s management knows very well how to entertain surfers...On the Google planet everything works and is funny. Everything is light (as the interface) and tasty (as the images search), resource-rich (as Gmail) or fast and updated (as Google News) [3]

Just like Google, Friendfinder Inc. tries to be the funny dictator of Internet sex, even though sex in itself is a life-style and perhaps not even as vital to contemporary web users as the Google search engine. Nor has Friendfinder Inc., managed to launch those very slick and tasty applications that have seduced the masses on Google or Facebook. But Friendfinder Inc. is a crude business venture that so far has mastered the game of social-sexual networking, while primarily making revenue through its membership programs along with Internet advertising campaigns

## 3. AFF.COM FACT SHEET: COME FUCK ME OR PERISH

Friendfinder Inc. was founded in 1996 by a Silicon Valley company called Various that pioneered different sites for sex and

dating. In December 2007 the site made news through a ground-breaking 500 million dollar sale to Penthouse, making a successful adjustment from traditional pornographic media to “porno 2.0”-- the era of digital media and social networking. Before the sale took place, Various already employed about 300 employees and had launched twenty-five spin-off sites. After the sale to Penthouse, it became the world’s largest adult entertainment network, owning a booming family of sex sites and a combined membership of more than forty million members. The network caters to multi-lingual communities based on various demographics such as age: *seniorfinder.com*, religion: *BigChurch.com*, *JewishFriendFinder.com*, ethnicity or nationality: *AsiaFriendFinder.com*, *IndianFriendFinder.com*, *Amigos.com*, *GermanFriendFinder.com*, *FrenchFriendFinder.com*, *KoreanFriendFinder.com*, *FilipinoFriendFinder.com*, or dating preferences: *Passion.com*, *Alt.com*. The membership rates range between USD 25 to USD 45 per month, depending on the type of membership (standard, silver, or golden) or the length of the service. Standard members are non-fee paying members who are allowed to create site profiles but have very limited privileges, They do not get access to the AFF applications, including photography albums, voice and video introductions, astrology matchings, games, featured listings, rating systems, chatrooms and blogging areas. All these services are presented to fee-paying members through daily messages and ad campaigns.

In Hong Kong the site is available in the Chinese and English language. It became very popular with Chinese and non-Chinese women and men around 2005, individuals who were eager to enter the sex conquest as porno 2.0, despite a prevailing sex-phobic climate amongst religious groups and the traditional Chinese culture. The site had 60,000 listings when I started my research in August 2006 and almost tripled its membership by the time I ended it in August 2008. Other Western cultures that have a population size similar to Hong Kong have attracted larger memberships, but the Hong Kong site has nonetheless spawned a substantial group of web users. The site is primarily a heterosexual sex site for men and has attracted only a small percentage of female members. In December 2007 there were about 100,000 male members in Hong Kong versus 8000 females. This gender ratio remains constant in most other cultures, as there still is a shortage of women globally who wants to sign up for this kind of website. Any woman who opens a profile is automatically swamped with massive amounts of requests from males, while males may be starving for a reply for weeks on end.

#### 4. LIZZY KINSEY’S QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

In August 2006, I created and uploaded a profile for one Lizzy Kinsey, a 40 year old Caucasian bi-sexual woman. Alongside my scholarly ambitions to get the research done, I also wanted to experiment with my own pornographic self-presentations. I wanted to show some “real flesh” to attract people and I took a range of pictures of my naked body. The picture I selected shows a close-up of my naked torso and breasts, while I am sitting down on my knees with have a pen lying on top of my legs. I have scribbled a written text on my stomach that reads “Are you Ready?” I meant to cast Lizzy as an outgoing sexually active female who uses a pen as a reflective tool. The pen could be seen as an instrument to play with or to record stories, but it was mostly ignored by my suitors who directed their gaze towards my

stomach and breasts. Lastly, I followed the AFF.com fashion of the day disguising my identity by cropping the picture and not showing my face.



Figure 1. Aff.com profile picture Lizzy Kinsey

In the written part of the profile, I asked people to send me their erotic secrets and stories, or to come meet with me and write some words on my body. The response was overwhelming. I received about five to six invitations on a daily basis. People sent me messages that contained extensive written profiles, one or two photos, and an initial introductory messages. Some also attached their sex stories. I changed Lizzy Kinsey’s profile a couple of times but I always kept it generic and ambiguous so that I would not get too attached to it and people would not understand its motivations at first glance. I would interact with people who appeared to be friendly and interesting. I slowly revealed to them that my real identity was that of a researcher who wanted to meet them for an interview concerning their experiences using the AFF.com website.

Most people simply disappeared at that point, but some remained and were willing to share information and engage in a face to face meeting. Even though I told them that I did not want to have sex, most people ignored that part of the message and still assumed that we would end up in the bedroom after the interview. I would usually arrange a preliminary meeting, conducting most of the interviews in public spaces. People kept asking to meet with me in quiet hotel room so that they could not be overheard. Some were more honest and suggested that we could do an interview while have sex. I did consider this 50/50 deal, but I realized that I just could not motivate myself to have sex for personal reasons. I do agree with my interlocutors that I might have assembled richer data and more fulfilling dialogues if a sex session had been part of the encounter and methodological framework of this project.

The online exchanges were all conducted in English. 45% of the respondents came from Chinese people or ethnically mixed couples, while 55% came from Caucasian individuals and couples. I also kept a record of selected messages and stories and archived a sample of one hundred messages received between July 15 and November 15, 2008. When dissecting this sample, I found I had received about 75 invitations to go on a sex date, 5 of which were sent by white or racially mixed couples, 38 by Caucasian males and 32 by Asian males. Many of the invitations

came from Asian and Caucasian business travelers who would be visiting Hong Kong and wanted to go on a casual date. Additionally, there were Hong Kong-based expatriates and Chinese locals who wanted to date me. Since I received about five sex invitations per day, I immediately realized that there was a surplus of males and a real shortage of women the site. Even though my profile also requested dates with females, I received very few responses from women, but I did manage to get to know Ning of the duo “Double Trouble”.

Most members sent me compliments about my body or my profile in order to request a date. Some members made great efforts to sell themselves by writing self-aggrandizing profiles. For instance, about 30% of males describe themselves as “very handsome” in their profiles, which is a description rarely used in female profiles. Males also happily self-objectify themselves by sending a picture of their cock rather than their face or full body. About 50% of males used an image of their erect cock in an attempt to seduce Lizzy Kinsey. Additionally people took on clichéd alter-ego names like “EndlessFun”, “HK juicy lover,” “Black Stud”, or “HK\_puppy\_dog.” People seemed inclined to use the full clichés of sexual potency in pornography and used the penis image as the prevailing signifier of hungry masculinity, even though it was represented in a variety of shapes and skin colors, and in the many states of arousal from flaccid to fully erect.

Peter Lehman has argued that user-generated images of the penis on adult sites have significantly impacted representations of the male body and the penis. The male body and the penis have been excluded in the history of pornography, controlled by porn industries and focused on the representation of female bodies and vaginas. Lehman applauds a trend towards autonomy and diversification, where everyday web users define male sexuality. As he writes: “... it gives people who normally have no voice in these profoundly important issues, no conferences to go to, no journals in which to publish, no university presses vying for their next book, no students trying to get into their next class, a place to participate in this process.” [4] My sample of images would endorse Lehman’s point, as 50% of profiles contain an image of the penis, but members do make an effort to show the genital in unusual angles and colors to make the viewer more aware of the fact that there is no such thing as an ideal penis shape. Nonetheless, the surplus of cock images in my mailbox also made me feel alienated from actual persons.

## 5. INTERVIEWING PEOPLE: GENDER TROUBLE AND CROSS-RACIAL THRUST

During my years as Lizzy Kinsey, I also managed to conduct in-depth interviews with three AFF members, one Caucasian male, one Chinese male and one Chinese female. The first person who decided early on to be interviewed was **Damon Lust**, a Caucasian male in his late thirties who had lived in Hong Kong for several years. He was the person who made me aware of the popularity of the AFF.com zone in Hong Kong and encouraged me to join the site. He told me that he had some amazing encounters through the web site and wanted me to have look at it. He was aware of the fact that I am sex researcher and also wanted to wish me well on a personal level. He talked to me extensively about his sex encounters as we became friends and mutually shared our thoughts.

I was mostly interested in talking to him about his relations with Chinese women and couples. Damon confirmed that there was indeed a lot of traffic between Caucasian males and Chinese females on AFF.com. Since there is a real shortage of women, Chinese females play on different versions of the Oriental *femme fatale* stereotype and can afford to be very demanding and picky. One way in which they expressed their demands to him was by specifying the required penis size. As he explained further:

There is a Chinese revolution of sorts going on this site, but it is a female revolution. The Chinese men do not seem that interested, even though many of them have extra-marital affairs by visiting sex workers or taking on mistresses from mainland China. The *gwailo* population like myself takes advantage of this situation as there are a high number of sex starved Chinese women who are relatively easy to get. But there is some kind of revolution in that these women are starting to take control of this situation and take pleasure in it, by talking about it and showing it off. They have more lovers than you think they do. And of course the Internet has made it is much easier for these women to participate. You’d be surprised to see how many respectable women are actually out there.

Even though AFF.com requires a membership, Damon believes that overall it has had a democratizing effect in Hong Kong society. He himself was able to go out with Chinese and white people from very different class backgrounds. He saw a clear difference between “the AFF.com class” and the traditional high society of Hong Kong. As he explained: “The site is perhaps still expat-dominated but it is very different from the social upper crust of Hong Kong. Hong Kong is a very money-driven city, not just for those very rich people. The upper crust have sexual affairs with each other, but they really don’t need the Internet or digital technologies. They have the extremely high-class prostitution and escort networks.” The large presence of male Caucasians shows that the business class in Hong Kong is now using Internet sex to arrange casual affairs, when in previous times they may have resorted to entertainment with commercial sex workers.

After I interviewed Damon, I checked out the profile of the Chinese girl-girl duo **Double Trouble**, two Chinese women who also call themselves Nin and Ning. The profile read as follows:

We welcome overseas applicants, Caucasians only...For those who have short concentration span: All emails without a recent face pic and cock size will be banned immediately ... Ning has 34D bra size and her nipples of course are delicious. She is 5'2" and has the smoothest white skin. She hates being spanked! Nin is the naughty younger sister, 30 years old. She is 5'6", has small tits, keen nipples and a nice tan. She loves being spanked during doggy.” Ning and Nin both love young hot white guys between 25 and 38, but not young at heart. They must be athletic and very tall and they must not have saggy asses. They specify that the penis they were looking for has to be a “Rock hard average cock (hump the magic seven ...): 7 inches. Not too thick as we both have tight pussies. We will update our profile accordingly if they want to venture into huge black cocks or nine inchers.

I met with Nin for the first time in a restaurant and she was very friendly and articulate. Her partner Ning had decided not to participate in my research. Ning talked over dinner and she agreed to be further interviewed. We first had an email exchange and then I carried out an in-depth interview while she sat in front of a computer and explained how she browses and uses the website. I asked her about her relationship with Ning and why she had decided to team up with another female. She replied that she liked bonding with Ning and that it was also an excellent way of catching males:

Having two girls at the same time is almost every man's fantasy so what better way to lure them out than having a group profile? I wanted to use the profile to see if there were other handsome members out there who did not email my individual profile.

When I pointed to the racial clause in her profile and asked her why she did not like Chinese men, she denied having a racial preference and brought it down the issue of penis size:

I don't have a racial preference but I do like men who are tall and relatively well-endowed (around 6.5 to 7 inches) so most of the guys I date are Caucasians. Of course not all Caucasians are well-endowed but on average they are slightly bigger/ thicker than Asian men. I have not been out with a black man yet. I haven't been approached by one in real life. ... I found out many women on the site (either from their blogs or their comments on others' blogs) say size does not matter, but I disagree. I can feel the difference between having a 6-inch and 7-inch cock. I do like slightly bigger one but 8 inches are my maximum. Before I joined the site, I thought 6 inches was a below average size for white men but it turns out they are average.

In her second interview Nin confirmed that she preferred Caucasians because Asian men have smaller penises, but she added that she thinks Indians are an exception and have slightly bigger penises.

When I tried to bring back the interview from her preference for penis size to racial preference, she qualified her attitude by pointing to historical-cultural factors:

I think it's also a historical problem. Some people tend to think white men are better in bed because they are more experienced. They know how to please women etcetera. But you also have to consider the fact that all the expats have their own apartment but local men do not. How often can you have sex if you do not have your own place? It's bound to be difficult, isn't it? I also wonder if there are Chinese women who think it is OK to be promiscuous or sexually open in front of white men but not in front of Asian men, especially those who think they will marry an Asian man in the end.

In the second interview, Nin added that her attraction to Caucasians had something to do with the movies that she grew up with, the education she received and her major in English literature. She showed that her desire for Caucasian males grew out of complex individual desires and historical factors and that she ultimately acted out clichés to her own benefits. Her construction of a hyper-active feminine force also subverts the

discursive practice of casting Chinese women as squeamish or passive sexual objects.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The AFF web site in Hong Kong is part of an expansive American business venture that tries to cater to web users from different cultures and demographics who are interested in finding sex partners and who use sexual self-representations to seduce each other into encounters. The web site uses aggressive ad campaigns to convince web users that their chances will increase once they perk up their technological competencies and learn how to upload and fine-tune suitable "sexy" profiles. But how are these generic guidelines interpreted and actualized by web users in Hong Kong and do they actually lead to consumer satisfaction? Even though it is known that the company Friendfinder Inc. has managed to expand its business and attract members, what can we conclude about the success of heterosexual dating rituals in Hong Kong?

As explained before, the analysis is not based on a statistical sample or large-scale survey, but on a longitudinal ethnographic case-study where I gradually gathered stories and interviews by interacting with people online and in face-to-face encounters. These encounters were difficult to establish at first, but they highlighted people's values and growing attachments to social networking and Internet sex. The case study highlights a group of cultural diverse women and men in Hong Kong, who are highly computer-literate and sexually active, and who help each other formulate new identities. The desire for AFF members to create online profiles and engage in alternative relationships confirms their power as competent web users and sexualized subjects. They use sexual self-representation to seduce each other, while supporting each other's dating strategies in a search for visualized sexual subjectivities. Chinese and non-Chinese web users alike are exploring alternative relationships by uploading sexually explicit photos or videos.

Does this type of self-representation actually help people to have satisfying sex encounters and who are the winners and losers in the hunting game? It became clear that both women and men were feeling trapped by the boundaries of traditional monogamic relationships and were using the site to arrange escapades such as threesomes, gangbangs and extra-marital affairs. These stories reflect on the findings of sociologists that Hong Kong people are getting progressively dissatisfied with the monogamous marital system. The annual number of marriages is declining, while divorce cases are on a rapid increase. In recent years, the high numbers of males who engage in extra-marital affairs or take mistresses in mainland China, have caused a number of serious inter-familial tragedies and wider social concerns. My case-study also shows that a small percentage of women are also willing to create online profiles and experience alternative relationships or extra-marital affairs. Since women are underrepresented on the site, they can actually be picky and exert more power over men who are trying to seduce them into sex dates.

As far as gender relation is concerned, the shortage of women on the site has created a grid-lock between male and female hunters, where Chinese males are ignored by Chinese females, who sometimes act out orientalist fantasies to catch non-Chinese males. Chinese women often use AFF profiles to engage in cross-racial affairs rather than to pursue relationships with local Chinese men. Even though Chinese men suffer from this their treatment from local women, they use other channels find sex partners. As

several of my interviewees testified, Chinese women have become competitive hunters on this cosmopolitan network and can now have their own discreet pleasures.

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