

Enjoy Your Jouissance!

Joanne Conway

Dating sites are part of the cultural milieu – a digitised capitalisation of the “love market”. Feeding off the dreams and desires of the romantic, the lonely, the hopeful, even liars and cheats. Make a good impression, say the right thing – no red flags showing. It’s tiresome investing in chat, being one’s “best self”. But what if there is a place where it’s real, where it’s not a question of love but rather pleasure for its own sake? A *no-strings* arrangement for those married or in relationships. Indulge one’s fantasies without leaving one’s relationship, find another with whom to play this out. Real transparency. Upfront – no deception. An elegant solution to the problem of finding love and sexual satisfaction in the same partner, as Freud points out.¹ Too good to be true?

Founders of Ashley Madison, a Canadian platform² realised that over 60% of those on dating sites were “cheating”. So, in the entrepreneurial spirit of *give the customer what they want* they created a site for this demographic, the tag line: “When monogamy is monotony”. Set up in 2002 the site jumped to 36 million users by 2015 and launched in 53 countries worldwide. Taglines targeted in culturally appropriate ways. In India for example “Your parents arranged your marriage. Let us arrange your affair.”

Membership required detailed personal and financial data with intimate sexual fantasies in order to *match*. Intimate photographs were also the currency exchanged. All guaranteed by images of gold standard data protection. Suspicious partners and spouses were well handled by trained staff to allay any fears about strange items on credit card bills. Here is created the perfect platform, transparency and deception in one fell swoop!

Then came the cyberattack.³ All customer data extracted and a demand by the hackers to shut down the site in 30 days or the data will be released publicly. The promise of data security was a lie. Panicked attempts to find the hackers fruitless. The data was released. The response a salacious frenzy – a witch hunt. Names released and broadcast. Radio, News and TV shows exalted in shaming celebrities, civil servants, politicians. Local communities partook. My neighbour is even more enjoyable! They should not enjoy what I am not permitted. The consequence? Marriages and relationships ended, jobs lost and worse, suicides.

¹Freud, S., “On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love” (1912), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XI*, London: Hogarth Press, pp.177-190.

² Cf. Netflix documentary entitled *Ashley Madison: Sex, Lies and Scandal*, 2024.

³ This cyber-attack was the largest at the time in 2015. It occurred just before the company was to float on the Stock Exchange.

The hackers self-named as *The Impact Team* had no moral objections to the site users but rather to its capitalistic stance. Yet in its *cause* had no care for lives lost and destroyed in its wake. How to think of this? The self-professed *cheaters*, those who became members did so via their trust in an Other that guaranteed their jouissance was safe guarded, protected. They paid for that. Users became victims of a fantasy of a promise. A belief in an Other of jouissance of which they became the object. A capitalised commodity.

Where the reality of sexual freedom is turned into the nightmare of an encounter with one's own jouissance, returned in the form of a dollar sign. *Pay!* For what does not exist. The “cheaters” cheated, duped by the idea that they do not have to lose anything and can enjoy without a cost.

Ashley Madison remains a thriving site world-wide with 60 million members by 2019 – capitalism knows very well how to put our jouissance to work for it!