Relationship Markets

I am using Plenty of Fish (http://www.plentyoffish.com/), a free online dating site, as my reference point for the following questions.

What are the costs of writing a profile?

Plenty of Fish (PoF) is a free site, so the barrier to participation is financially low. The registration process involves providing information about gender, age, ethnicity, and country of residence:

The user then provides additional details about location, physical appearance, habits, and personal interests. The user also indicates what sort of relationship s/he is hoping to establish:
Beyond the array of drop-down lists, there is an opportunity for the user to describe him/herself in an open-ended manner, by listing interests and writing a personal description:

As is visible in the previous screenshot and in the PoF documentation, users are advised to be as detailed and expressive as possible in these sections to improve response rates. This has a cost to the writer in terms of effort and time.

**What are the costs of including a photo? What is the function of the photo? Is physical appearance a signal or a quality - and is that different than its function in the face to face world?**

Most obviously, the function of the photo is to signal appearance, which is a particularly important signal for women to manipulate (and important for men not to manipulate) when seeking relationships, according to the Buss (p. 110) and Fisman et al. (p. 674) readings. In the case of both men and women, it seems important to not be excessively deceptive in the photographs, but there is an expectation of self-flattering optimization. The process of photograph optimization seems to be an opportunity to promote the ideal or ought self, rather than the actual self, which would be the dominant self functioning in face-to-face interactions (Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs, p. 4). (With respect to Buss’s discussion about gender representation and advertising, I recently came across the National Organization of Women (NOW) Foundation presentation *Sex, Stereotypes and Beauty: The ABCs and Ds of Commercial Images of Women*, which provides visuals for many of the issues that Buss discussed, and may be found at: http://loveyourbody.nowfoundation.org/presentations/SexStereotypesBeauty/flash.html) There is a privacy cost associated with posting a photograph, as photographs enable individuals to be publicly identified. With respect to privacy, the function of the photo is then used to signal commitment, as it makes the provider vulnerable.
What are the costs to the receivers? What are the assessment signals in these sites? What signals denote qualities mainly by convention?

On PoF, the cost is the time of the receivers who are perusing profiles. The costs will increase as the relationship between signaler and receiver is promoted beyond voyeurism. Potentially there are physical, psychological, social, and financial costs associated with pursuing relationships through and beyond the site. The predominant assessment signal on PoF is language facility. Numerous individuals who participate in the PoF forums (and other dating sites) describe the importance of reading profiles for grammatical errors.

The profile components serve as intentional signals of convention. As described by Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs, given the dearth of reliable information in profiles, users rely extensively on acts of micro-interpretation, which in turn encourage them to carefully craft their own profiles. One of my favourite PoF stories involved a friend of mine, who, when initially introduced to PoF by another friend, was being shown how many “desirable” men were participating on the site. When pointing to the picture of an attractive man, the friend performing the demonstration failed to notice the user’s tag line, which read “misogynist looking for receptacle”. Desirable, indeed!

What are some kinds of deception that could occur (if you can't think of any, try searching for "online bad dates")? What mechanisms are in place now for minimizing this?

Reading Internet Dating Stories (http://www.internetdatingstories.com/) for several hours comprehensively demonstrated the various kinds of deception that can occur. The potential for both the signaler and the receiver to (either intentionally or unintentionally) mislead the other is great. Many of the tales of deception were concentrated in the qualities described as important in the readings: appearance, considerateness, interaction intention. The consequences of deception from misrepresentation are mitigated in several ways on PoF. First, profiles that are known to be dishonest are deleted by the administrator. Second, advice about protocol for profile development and initial contact is provided on the site. Third, profiles can be augmented with personal testimonials, which are costly to fabricate.
Choose an attraction strategy discussed by Buss or Miller (e.g. creation of impressive artwork, denigrating rivals, etc.). Can you find examples of this on an online site? If not, why not? How does the design of the site support or make difficult this strategy? How could a site be designed to allow different strategies than the current ones do? (Think broadly - a site could incorporate tasks, games, etc - what would make a difference in terms of signaling and reliability?)

On PoF, I was able to find generalized examples of individuals denigrating rivals. Both men and women make claims of differentiation in their personal profiles, although in an informal survey of profiles, I found more men who engaged in this practice. For example, Vinnie1982 claims that “I'm not your typical guy” and Satiatingsatyr claims that “Hey, I am a guy, and just like most of my fellow gender, I want to ‘get off’ as much as I can, whenever I can. But, unlike far-too-many of my sexual satyriasis brothers, I cannot be happy [without reciprocating]”. I could not find examples where denigration of rivals was targeted to particular individuals, which I found unsurprising given the potential sanctioning associated with public defamation. (Targeted denigration could be sustained if the denigration could be maintained privately, similar to what we saw with private reputation systems and gossip.) Since the connections between individuals are not crisply articulated in the PoF framework, I think it is difficult (or at least mostly counterproductive) to single out an individual, given the sheer magnitude of competitors. If displaying persistence/commitment is an important task for men and displaying enhanced appearance is an important task for women (as described by Buss), I could imagine sites being designed to showcase those particular activities. The effort that would be required for men and women to engage in their respective tasks would improve signal reliability, as it would become costly to generate the signal.

Could information be shared among the participants? Would this be helpful? How could you redesign the system to allow for this? Think about the reputation systems we discussed in class. How would this impose costs on deception? What would make it reliable? What would motivate people to use it? Sites such as http://www.dontdatehimgirl.com/ and http://www.greatboyfriends.com/ provide warnings and recommendations (respectively) - What motivates people here? Are these reliable?

Testimonials on PoF allow information about a particular user to be shared; the profile thus becomes a socially negotiated construction. This is helpful, inasmuch as it bolsters the credibility of the user’s positive qualities. Given that testimonials are indirectly managed by the user her/himself through management of who they associate as a “favourite” fellow user, it is not an effective mechanism for sharing negative reviews. A reviewing system such as EBay’s could be employed where individuals who interact are enabled to provide feedback about each other. As we learned about EBay, although the system may not accurately report user satisfaction, it may serve as a mechanism of control via assumed surveillance.

Both DDHG and GBF are fascinating examples of audience-oriented information sites. Participants seem to be motivated by a need to impede (DDHG) or promote (GBF) the individual who is being profiled. Even assuming that the profiles are not constructed to be intentionally deceptive, I question the profile reliability, as the profiles tend to be overly pessimistic (DDHG)
or overly optimistic (GBF). The minimal participation of the person profiled is problematic, given the variability of characteristics demonstrated in differing social contexts.

**How is dating similar or different from other types of "people markets"?** Any employment situation is potentially such a market, as is the market for tennis partners, book club members, etc. The costs of deception differ in these cases, as do the structures of the markets. (Are there repeated interactions? Is information likely to be shared? What is the relationship among competitors?)

Fisman, Iyengar, Kamenica, and Simonson asserted at the beginning of their article that “the choice of a marriage partner is one of the most serious decisions people face” (p. 673). The near hysteria surrounding the significance of this decision and the trajectories that potentially lead to the decision make dating a significantly different type of “people market”. Not only is there a sociocultural construction of difference, there is an inherent difference in the negotiation of the decision. While the aspired outcome for a book club is obvious and unproblematically shared, the ambiguity of desire makes interaction/dating a complicated process. Intimate relationships (and their associated expectations) are not concrete or bounded, making information transferral extremely challenging.