

by Antonia Hoyle

AFTER her marriage broke down, Jenny Beard knew finding love again wouldn't be easy. Not only was she 42 and the sole carer of her six-year-old son Will, but her demanding career as an accountant left her with precious little time to socialise.

Nonetheless, she didn't want to be alone forever, so when she heard about an internet dating site for single parents like herself, she joined without a second thought, Jenny told Channel 4 News in a programme that will be aired tonight.

Describing her interests as 'going to the theatre and restaurants, enjoying country walks as long as they feature a tea shop', she was hopeful she would meet mature, like-minded men who understood the difficulties of bringing up a child alone.

What she didn't expect was to find herself posted as a 'hot date' on cheesy lads' magazine sites, and bombarded by spam emails from people who didn't even exist — or if they did, had anything but a country walk in mind.

Over the course of the four years Jenny has been on the site, not one of the men she met has been a member of *justsingleparents.com* where she originally posted her profile. Not one of them had even heard of it. Alarming, half were not parents at all and only one had a child the same age as her son.

Worse still, her picture and profile have been plastered across tawdry dating websites belonging to 'lads mags' such as Nuts and Loaded that are more associated with scantily-clad girls in semi-pornographic poses than professional, middle-aged women like Jenny.

She is just one victim in an extraordinary dating scam exposed by two industry whistle-blowers.

Unbeknown to Jenny, *justsingleparents.com* is run by a parent company called Global Personals — a legitimate company most members never will have heard of, but which passes members' details freely between the 7,500 sites it owns, meaning they are inundated with unwanted and inappropriate advances.

The company has also created 'fake' profiles, by lifting photographs off the internet, and ordering staff to flirt with unsuspecting members, outrageously flattering them into renewing their subscriptions.

Disturbingly, their deception has proved an unqualified success. Global Personals — whose headquarters are in Windsor, Berkshire — makes £40m a year, employs 130 staff and is believed to take a 40 per cent cut of every membership subscription, with the remainder going to the spin-off company.

BUT it is at the expense of women like Jenny, now 46, who is astounded by the way in which she has been duped.

'Internet dating seemed the best way of meeting people,' she says. 'But I'm shocked by how many sites I've ended up on. It's upsetting and annoying. I'm nobody's idea of a Nuts hot date. It's the last place you would expect to find me and a waste of time and money.'

'I'm not surprised they're making up people. I've received no end of emails from men who say they like my smile, but clearly haven't seen my profile. I won't be renewing my subscription.'

Certainly, Jenny's experience serves as a cautionary tale to those tempted by the increasingly popular world of online romance, said to be worth £2 billion globally. She first started internet dating in September 2008, eight months after her seven-year marriage ended.

'I have a serious job. My options for meeting men are limited,' she says. 'This seemed the best way.'

She began by joining a site called Plenty of Fish, but, within weeks she realised it was unsuitable. 'It's hard to say without sounding

Accountant Jenny hoped internet dating would find her a man to share country walks with. Instead she was plastered across sleazy lads' mag sites



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snobby but I'm a professional person with a degree,' she explains. 'It was very good for meeting dustmen, builders and mechanics who are perfectly nice but not right for me.'

'Apart from anything else, it's free and attracts people with less money. I thought finding a paid service would be more appropriate.'

So she researched online and came across *justsingleparents.com*. With membership costing £20 a month and members all purportedly having experienced single parenthood, she was more likely to meet like-minded people, she reasoned.

'I wanted to meet people with children because they understand that anyone else in my life won't be my top priority,' she says.

Her son Will, who's now ten, also was keen to see his mum with someone nice 'to look after her'.

But what Jenny didn't realise was that when she joined *justsingleparents.com* that she would be exposed on websites she'd previously never heard of.

Worryingly, the practice, while misleading, is perfectly legal. It is called 'white-labelling' and happens when a product produced by one company, such as Global Personals, is rebranded by other companies — in this case dating websites.

Also, in a bid to boost their revenue, the company was specifically employing staff whose sole job it was to set up and run fake profiles on the dating sites, to keep members interested. Within weeks, Jenny got her first

warning signal: She'd begun emailing a fellow single parent from her area and the pair had swapped phone numbers:

'I texted him and said "it's Jenny from Just Single Parents" and he replied "what?"' she recalls. 'He'd never heard of the agency. I was put on the back foot and so flummoxed I didn't contact him again.'

It was another member, Jenny recalls, who explained that their details were passed around various dating sites: 'I felt put out and rather stupid,' she says.

Nonetheless, as the months passed, she was sent three emails a day from unlikely suitors, who ranged in age from 22 to 73. 'I deleted them before reading,' she says. 'I can't remember any being particularly crude, but maybe they were and I never saw them.'

Jenny says she quickly suspected some of the identities were fake. 'I know I got emails that weren't from real people,' she told Channel 4 News. 'You'd ask a man a question, such as how many children he had, and would get a reply tell you how happy they are they've met you.'

She adds: 'You don't realise to start with that these companies they have "ice breaker" messages saying "I like your profile" or "you've got a lovely smile" that

are sent to all the women in East Sussex between the ages of 35 and 55. You'd reply and wouldn't hear back. After a while you realise a lot of the messages you get are sent to hundreds of people, not just you.'

Yet Jenny — fuelled by hope that she would meet someone genuine — carried on using the site. At times, however, she became so exasperated with the process that she cancelled her membership.

'Cancelling was a fuff — you couldn't do it online and would have to call someone in working hours,' says Jenny, who spent hundreds of pounds on subscription fees.

'I remember one email I got that persuaded me to re-join was from a good-looking, wealthy single father who ran his own building business,' says Jenny.

'Part of me suspected it was too good to be true, but I replied anyway.' And, surprise surprise, she never heard back.

Over the course of four years, she met up with just eight men in person. Not one of them was from *justsingleparents.com*, half didn't have children at all.

'I only met most of them once, for a drink,' she says. 'One, a store manager, had joined a website called Old Flirt. He was my age but, had I known the site he was on, I would have hauled him out on the grounds that it was a ridiculous name.'

'Another was a bus driver. There were two retired people. They came from geographical and rock music dating sites. One came from a site called

Derbyshire Singles. One didn't even know I had a son, which was the whole point. It made me think my profile might have been edited. I was perplexed.'

As Jenny had suspected, she was not the only one being duped — and not the most vulnerable.

Channel 4 News investigators spoke to whistle-blower Ryan Pitcher, who joined the company in 2008 and a second, unnamed, employee, who detailed the suspicious way in which they were recruited, when they warned they were not to discuss their duties with family and friends.

FINDING fake profiles was a secretive and calculated process, with the team scouring social networking sites and stealing people's photos to use on their fake profiles: 'You'd take Helga from Iceland and make her into Helen from Manchester and write a profile,' says Ryan. 'You'd use her features and invent a whole new person.'

The role of the fake profiles — or 'pseudos' as they were called by employees — was to email members flirtatious messages to entice them into continuing their subscriptions. Up to 400 messages an hour were sent by the team who frequently coerced their victims into intimate text conversations.

'You're talking about thousands of messages which means millions of pounds in subscription fees,' says Ryan. It seems they were targeted specifically at the sites' most vulnerable members.

'A lot of the people on the site aren't the most attractive people,' he admits. 'If they're not getting replies from real people after a month, they're going to sign off. The pseudo team could string

Who knew?

Internet dating among those aged 50-plus has risen by 40 per cent in the last year

by Tessa Cunningham

Is the new 12-minute washing machine a marvel – or just spin?

A SUPER-FAST washing machine that truly delivers has always been the holy grail for manufacturers. Now Servis claims to have produced the swiftest wash yet – just 12 minutes.

The rapid 30c programme of the HydroDrive (£279.99 at Argos) is designed to cope with a maximum load of 3.5kg (around 13 T-shirts) that is only slightly grubby, although any load over 2kg may take longer.

It's faster than conventional machines, says its maker, because it has two jet-nozzles to wash clothes instead of the usual single one.

So is the new machine really a dream come true or a dirty disappointment?

LOAD 1: Two white towels

THESE towels are big and grimy, with splodges of mascara and foundation on them. My daughter – back from university for the weekend – has forgotten her make-up wipes again. I'm fuming. Will my towels ever be the same again?

TIME TAKEN: 15 minutes. But Servis does say if the load is over 2kg, it may take longer, depending on the clothes' absorbency.

RESULT: I expect the cycle time to vary depending on how heavy the load is, the type of fabrics I'm washing and how long they need to spin for, so I'm not concerned about the extra three minutes. I'm just impressed that two thick towels wash so quickly. They come out squeaky-clean and smelling fresh. The make-up stains have vanished. Fantastic result.

9/10

LOAD 2: Two cotton cardies and two pairs of tights

I'M always running out of tights because putting on a full load to wash a few smalls is such a waste. So a machine that gives me clean tights in a jiffy seems perfect. Add two tops – worn only once but in need of a bit of freshening up – and I'm ready to go.

TIME TAKEN: 13 minutes. The cardigans must have slightly pushed the load over the 2kg limit, which surprises me.

RESULT: Fantastic. The tops and tights are every bit as fragrant and clean as if I'd used a normal cycle.

8/10

LOAD 3: One top with an oil stain and pyjamas

HELP – I've splashed some olive oil on my cotton top during cooking. Oil is notoriously difficult to remove but the sooner I tackle it, the more chance I'll have. It should be perfect for this machine. I also add a pair of pyjamas. They're not dirty but I might as well freshen them up.

TIME TAKEN: 17 minutes. The extra time is down to washing a mixed

load of light and heavy cotton. **RESULT:** The pyjamas have washed a treat but the oil mark is still evident. To be fair, when I wash the top again on a conventional 40°C programme in my usual machine, the stain still doesn't shift.

7/10

LOAD 4: Three filthy white shirts

IT'S time to give the machine a bigger challenge. I dirty some white shirts – one with ketchup, one with mustard and one with mud.

TIME TAKEN: 12 minutes. **RESULT:** The only time the cycle takes exactly 12 minutes as promised. The mud has disappeared altogether, the ketchup has faded dramatically but the mustard has left a nasty yellow stain. And the shirts are all sopping wet and need an extra 15-minute spin. Admittedly, Servis says the machine is only suitable for light stains but I'm disappointed the clothes don't come out drier.

4/10

LOAD 5: Two cotton coats

WEIGHING at least 2kg each, the coats are grubby and need a wash before I put them away for winter. The collars are slightly greasy and there are marks around the pockets. They need a quick spruce-up rather than an in-depth clean. Will the 12-minute wash be sufficient?

TIME TAKEN: 24 minutes. Twice as long as 12 minutes.

RESULT: Despite the extra time, the result is still pretty impressive for a wash under half-an-hour. The marks have gone and the coats smell fresh. I can put them away without any worries.

7/10

LOAD 6: One pair of jeans

WALKING the dog on a wet day in my favourite pair of jeans is definitely a mistake. There are filthy marks all over the legs where Milo – fresh from mud-wrestling with a stick – has hurled himself at me. The jeans are my fail-safe outfit, and I want to wear them to the pub tonight. Normally I'd wait to wash them until I had

a full load. Instead, I pop them in. **TIME TAKEN:** Ten minutes. This is incredible – obviously I'm way under the 2kg limit.

RESULT: There's not a trace of mud left but the jeans are sopping wet because they haven't been spun for long enough. I have to do another 15-minute spin to get them dry enough to hang up.

8/10

AND FINALLY: A normal 40°C cotton wash...

AS well as the 12-minute programme, the machine has conventional programmes for heavier loads. I can't wait to try it out on my usual family wash – a mix of underwear, socks and shirts that weighs around 7kg (the maximum recommended weight is 8kg).

I know this will take more than 12 minutes but when I set the dial I'm stunned to see the cycle will take three hours, five minutes. I could do 15 super-fast washes in that time.

My Bosch machine would take 1½ hours to do the same load.

This is going from the sublime to the ridiculous.

TIME TAKEN: 185 minutes. **RESULT:** When the machine finally stops, the clothes are damper than I'm used to. I've waited so long, I hang them up anyway, rather than waste more time with another spin. This is seriously disappointing.

2/10

VERDICT

THE super-rapid cycle may be fast but the 12-minute boast doesn't always hold true. The average time it took was 15 minutes because each load time was calculated by the machine based on weight and the clothes' absorbency.

Even when I thought I had put in a load that would qualify for the 12-minute treatment, the machine calculated something different, and some of the washes were twice as long.

Plus, for a normal wash, who wants a machine that seems to be set on go-slow? Although I tried the 40°C wash three times, I could never get the time under two hours, 50 minutes.



Getting into a lather: Tessa tests the HydroDrive

Picture: PAUL HANSLY

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along a girl or guy for up to 24 months. It is all about money, all about greed. With fake profiles you can get 50 per cent more revenue, sometimes even more.'

If the member wanted to pursue a relationship with a pseudo, or even have a telephone conversation, they would be brushed off before being replaced by another pseudo.

'It's all about stringing them along on tenterhooks with that pretence that eventually they'll meet up or swap telephone numbers,' says Ryan.

'But as soon as that comes into play you move on. There were loads of cop-outs you could use. Most people were talking to more than one pseudo. Some people were only talking to fake people.'

All of which is incredibly unpalatable. Ryan admits the deception started to

trouble his conscience: 'After a while you'd see the same old men and women; widows, for example, who wanted to find love. You're just stringing them along to get money out of their pensions. That did play on my mind.'

Meanwhile, his bosses grew richer and ever omnipresent in the dating industry. They have a database of 2.2 million people – every one of whom is believed to be accessible across its network of sites.

It is the sheer variety of websites Jenny has been made available to that shocked her the most when Channel 4 contacted her a fortnight ago to tell her their findings – and which finally persuaded her to cancel her subscription.

A spokesman for Global Personals told the Mail: 'When members subscribe to one of our sites, they are advised in the terms and conditions that their details will be made available to members of

different sites on the relevant shared database.'

'Our job is to get our members in front of as many other members as possible. Members on any of these sites can apply filters to ensure they are not contacted by anyone they don't want to be. Global Personals was one of the first online dating companies to stop using pseudo profiles. For almost three years we have actively encouraged other online dating businesses to also stop this practice.'

But Jenny doesn't believe sufficient warning was given. 'It should be made a lot clearer how many sites you're getting in to,' she says. 'It's upsetting and annoying that you don't know where your picture is going to end up. Clearly someone who is reading Nuts is not going to be interested in me, just as I am not going to be interested in them. You should be able to opt out.'

Trading Standards in Windsor say they

have 'on-going dealings' with Global Personals regarding their alleged use of fake profiles. Yet the company remains unrepentant.

They told the Mail: 'Global Personals was one of the first online dating companies to stop using pseudo profiles. Global Personals scaled down pseudo profiling throughout 2009 and all pseudo profiles were removed by February 2010.'

For Jenny, it is too little too late. Still single, she has cancelled her subscription with *justsingleparents.com* and will be more cautious about internet dating in future.

'You've got to be emotionally strong as you're set up for an enormous amount of disappointment,' she says, adding: 'I don't know how I'll meet a man. The odds are stacked against it.'

■ FOR the full report, watch Channel 4 News at 7pm tonight.