Mediated Mate Selection And Courtship: The Lived Experience Of Muslim American Women In Using Online Matchmaking Websites

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MEDIATED MATE SELECTION AND COURTSHIP: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MUSLIM AMERICAN WOMEN IN USING ONLINE MATCHMAKING WEBSITES

by

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THESIS

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University

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MASTER OF ARTS

2015

MAJOR: COMMUNICATION STUDIES

Approved By:

________________________________________
Advisor

________________________________________
Date
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all of my sisters in faith who have struggled so hard to meet their compatible match in hope of following the Prophetic tradition and fulfilling “half of their faith”—may God give us all ease and facilitation, and take us gently by the hand. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to my loving parents, Ninin and Yayat Rochadiat, who have always been a tremendous source of inspiration and encouragement.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All Praise belongs to God, the Most Merciful and Most Generous.

I am deeply indebted to my advisors, Dr. Stephanie Tong and Dr. Julie Novak for the extraordinary mentoring, support and guidance they have given me throughout the making of this thesis, and for the continuous encouragement to excel in my studies and always give my best. I would also like to thank Mufti Musa (Steven) Furber for his invaluable insights on Islamic law and Muslim practices.
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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Online dating has generated significant popularity in recent years, following the advancement of the Internet and profound changes in the lifestyles of contemporary living. The increasing popularity of online dating websites is bolstered by three features that such systems offer: access to a larger pool of potential romantic partners than anybody could have access to in the offline context, new communication technologies that facilitate convenient interaction between individuals, and help with romantic matching through the assistance of computer algorithms (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012).

According to a study by Schmeeckle and Sprecher (2004), one of the most common ways to meet a romantic partner is through one’s network of family and friends (Sprecher, 2009). While the role of one’s network of family and friends is still important, with the rise of the Internet, online dating websites have become an increasingly popular way for many Americans to seek out compatible romantic partners and form relationships (Smith & Duggan, 2013). This is particularly true for individuals in immigrant communities found across the United States (Bunt, 2009; Tsunokai, McGrath, & Kavanagh, 2013).

With the increasing use of the Internet by religious groups, organizations, and individuals, information communication technologies (ICT) have redefined the ways in which religious communities exist online and offline and how their members share and propagate their views. The advent of new media technologies have also shaped how individuals interact with other members of the same faith and how they practice their religious tradition and spirituality, including how they seek romantic partners for marriage (Brasher, 2004). Muslim Americans, who are one of the fastest growing
religious communities in the country, are no exception (Bunt, 2009; Lo & Aziz, 2009; Soukup, 2012).

Uncovering how extant cultural and religious courtship practices influence and are influenced by online dating is important if we are to better understand how religious and migrant communities in the United States encounter popular new media technologies, more generally. The role of technology in shaping, circumventing, or even supplanting courtship practices that have existed in traditional offline contexts thus becomes an interesting phenomenon to explore. Muslims are one of the fastest growing religious communities in America (Bagby, Perl, & Froehle, 2001; Grewal, 2009; Leonard, 2003; Lo & Aziz, 2009; Peek, 2005), yet despite the increasing numbers, our understanding concerning their use of ICTs for mate selection and dating processes remains limited in scope.

Although some prior research has explored the Muslim online dating (Bunt, 2009; Lo & Aziz, 2009; Soukup, 2012), these studies tend to focus on either the experiences of Muslims as a collective, or Muslim men (Al-Saggaf, 2013). Very few studies have actually investigated the experiences of Muslim women. With mate selection, courtship, and marriage being intrinsically linked to sexual and gender norms (Hammer, 2015), narrowing the current study’s focus to the experience of Muslim women, known for their limited agency, would undoubtedly give us richer insights into how technology may be changing those norms. Furthermore, investigating the experience of Muslim women who use these technologies will allow us to understand the complex negotiations between culture and religious identity on one hand, and agency and technology use on the other. Therefore, the current research provides an exploratory investigation of Muslim women who use online dating
technology to examine the interplay between religious and cultural identity and ICT use in the American context.

This study focuses on how technology affects two major components of courtship among Muslim American women: (1) mate selection and (2) cross-gender interactions between Muslim men and women. The larger goals of this study are therefore to explore and investigate the Muslim online dating (MOD) phenomenon, and to expand the current body of literature on computer-mediated communication (CMC) and romantic relationship initiation. The findings from this study will contribute towards a deeper understanding of CMC within the online dating context, and the nature of technological change and adaptation in society more generally.
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In order for us to be able to identify how CMC maps onto traditional Muslim religious and cultural practices of mate selection and courtship, a review of existing literature and assessment on mate selection and courtship practices in Muslim communities is called for. In the literature review that follows, I provide an overview of Muslim courtship practices, focusing particularly on the criteria used and the role of the family, as well as the nature of cross-gender interactions.

Muslim Courtship Practices

The practices related specifically to Muslim romantic relationship formation are largely shaped by the Islamic worldview on the purpose of creation; and corresponding guidelines exist on interaction between unrelated members of the opposite sex. Islamic tradition places a strong emphasis on marriage due to the family’s role as the fundamental unit and building block of a society (see Al-Naqib, 14th century; Al-Asfahani, 15th century, for details on the rulings of marriage; Lo & Aziz, 2009). Therefore, the primary objective of marriage is a major defining feature of romantic relationship initiation—a cornerstone principle upon which many Muslim courtship practices, such as mate selection, are built.

Mate Selection Process: Partner Criteria and Role of the Family

Instead of relying on romantic attraction, mate selection among Muslims is largely a “no-nonsense”, rational practice that relies on a criterion-based process. Guided by the principle of “social pragmatism”, mate selection often consists of evaluating and comparing potential romantic partners on a host of desirable and undesirable features and attributes (Asamarai, Solber, & Solon, 2008). These attributes often include an individual’s good character and temperament, but many partner selection decisions largely rest upon the extent to which a potential partner
observes religious practices (i.e., religiosity or piety). The importance of religiosity is often attributed to the saying of Prophet Muhammad that although partners are often chosen based on the four qualities of beauty, noble lineage, wealth and piety, it is piety that is the best quality upon which to base the mate selection decision (Lo & Aziz, 2009).

A study conducted by Badahdah and Tiemann (2005) that looked at 500 personal matrimonial advertisements placed in magazines and newspapers had identified eight categories of human characteristics typically sought in a potential partner. Of these eight characteristics, both Muslim men and women tend to list religion, social skills, and education, as the top three most important traits (Badahdah & Tiemann, 2005). Women (86.5%), however, more than men (58.7%) were found to describe desirable potential partners by invoking religious adjectives and phrases, such as: “God-fearing”, “pious person”, “obeying God”, and Islamic terminology such as, “dīn” (religion) and “Ākhirah” (after-life) (Badahdah & Tiemann, 2005, p. 437).

Another significant feature of Muslim mate selection and courtship practices is the role of the family in the process. The mate selection process typically begins with parents and relatives making it publicly known that they are seeking suitors for their children at community events and gatherings. This is followed by an exchange of personal and family profiles and pictures between interested couples, and then by chaperoned meetings. The final phase is the official marriage proposal that is sealed with family approval (Al-Johar, 2005). Although self-initiated mate selection (where the potential partners initiate the selection process on their own) is also recognized, parents and relatives are always notified of the relationship’s development (Al-Johar, 2005).
Examples of family involvement in the mate selection process can be found across different geographical areas of the United States. Shyrock (2008) found family-arranged marriages to be common among Arab Muslim Americans in Detroit, Michigan. Al-Johar (2005) noted the same phenomenon in her study of Muslim Americans of South Asian parentage, such as Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, and Indians, in Houston, Texas. Generally, many young Muslim men and women expect that their family members will have great input—or sometimes total control—in their search for romantic partners. Allowing parents greater control over selection also shifts the consequences of decision making and blame from the individual to the family, particularly to the parents, in the event of a marital breakdown (Hammer, 2015).

**Gendered Relations and Male-Female Interactions**

Muslim courtship practices also govern the ways in which unrelated men and women interact with each other in public, face-to-face (FtF) settings. In terms of precepts governing interaction between unrelated men and women, Islamic scholars stress the prohibition of certain physical interactions before marriage as dictated by the *Shari`ah* (Islamic law and worldview). For example, unrelated men and women are advised not to speak with each other for purposes of socializing or to pass time, and it is considered unlawful for marriage prospects to indulge in long conversations with each other, unless there is a direct need, such as education or business (Larsson, 2011). Moreover, intimate conversations between males and females as well as the exchange of love letters are not permissible among those seeking marriage (Ahmed, 2013). Dating, in the conventional Western sense, is therefore not Islamically permissible.

In many conservative circles, in fact, gender segregation is not only considered essential, but also strictly imposed for the preservation of Islamic ethics,
such as moral uprightness, chastity, and modesty. This is why in traditional Islamic societies, a third-party, who is often a family member, is involved during the matchmaking process. The primary purpose of third-party involvement during such male-female interactions is to ensure that proper conduct is observed between marriage prospects, and that women (in particular) make rational, well-informed mate-selection decisions (Ahmed, 2013; Asamarai et al., 2008).

Thus these traditional mate selection process and FtF cross-gender interactions suggest very limited personal agency for young Muslim women. The restriction of individual agency is particularly amplified by the role of family members in the matchmaking process, as well as the pragmatic nature of measuring potential marriage partners against an ideal set of criteria, as opposed to allowing romantic attraction to organically develop between people. The advent of online dating technologies, however, may alter these practices to some degree.

**Relationship Initiation on the Internet**

To understand how CMC may affect courtship practices among Muslim American women requires an in-depth examination of the existing theory and research surrounding online relationship initiation. Regarding relationship initiation generally, CMC is thought to have helped circumvent many traditional communication barriers, such as physical proximity, as well as social anxiety and ineptness, thus facilitating the process of interpersonal contact and relationship formation (e.g., Parks & Floyd, 1996; Rice & Love, 1987; Scharlott & Christ, 1995; Whitty & Carr, 2006). Early scholarship examining mediated relationship initiation distinguished among the types of relationships that are initiated online, by examining factors such as different mediated channels, relational motivations, and goals (e.g., Parks & Floyd, 1996).
Baker and Whitty (2008) noted that the features of various types of online places could produce multiple patterns of romantic relationships—different online platforms may facilitate different knowledge conjured about the targeted partner. Similarly, McKenna (2007, 2008) identified three types of relationships formulated through the Internet: naturally forming relationships, networked relationships, and targeted relationships. While naturally forming relationships occur in venues where Internet users congregate around particular interests and hobbies (Parks & Floyd, 1996) and networked relationships are formed through users capitalizing on existing connections through social networking sites (boyd, 2006), targeted relationships develop through interactions taking place on online dating sites (McKenna, 2007; 2008). Further, Sprecher (2009) identifies internet-assisted relationship initiation, where interactions may have been initiated offline but then flourish through CMC before switching modes to FtF interactions again—a practice that has happened to a number of MOD participants as well, particularly those who claimed to have had a more successful experience using online dating websites.

Examinations of the utility of CMC for the formation of close relationships highlight certain unique effects of the medium, such as the disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) and the hyperpersonal effect (Walther, 1996; 2011), both of which provide explanations as to why relational partners may be more emotionally honest and open, disclosing more personal information about themselves online compared to offline (see Joinson, 2001). As a result, CMC partners can end up developing closer, more intimate relationships online as opposed to FtF (Walther, et al., 2001). Whitty and Carr (2006) have even pushed forth the idea that relating online can be playful, liberating and empowering, especially for those who have not had much luck developing offline relationships.
Romantic Relationships Online

Early on, Kelley and colleagues (1983) posited that there are certain barriers to meeting romantic partners offline, such as the lack of time to seek out potential partners through the traditional networks of families and friends and the lack of access to available partners. Certain personal characteristics, such as shyness and communication apprehension in FtF interactions, may also be a hindrance to relationship formation. These barriers may motivate people to use alternative ways of meeting romantic partners, such as online dating services (Sprecher, 2009).

McKenna and Bargh (1998) and McKenna et al., (2002) have proposed that limited social presence online can actually provide better opportunities for individuals to present certain aspects of themselves while simultaneously circumventing particular disabilities and challenges like visual impairment and social anxiety. Whitty and McLaughlin (2007) revealed how lonely individuals were naturally drawn to the Internet for social activities, such as making new friends and interacting with people who share similar interests. Whitty (2008), and Whitty and Carr (2006), further identified how mediated communication provides unique opportunities for people, especially those who are shy and socially inept, to establish real romantic relationships.

Several empirical studies have supported this claim; for example, Joinson’s (2004) work that discovered how individuals with low self-esteem had preferred emailing over FtF communication. Similarly, Scharlott and Christ’s (1995) study has highlighted the tendency for shy individuals to flock to online dating sites. Moreover, since communication in true virtual realm does not appear as “real” as FtF interactions, rejection may be easier to cope with in mediated contexts (Whitty, 2008).
The Advantages & Disadvantages of Online Dating Websites for Muslims

As the above discussion points out the appeal of online dating sites for relationship initiation, the unique qualities of CMC are particularly relevant to Muslim courtship practices as well. This is particularly salient given the current shift in the way younger generations of Muslims in the United States approach marriage. Two of the most identifiable processes that CMC has the potential to influence are: (1) the enactment of individual mate selection agency and (2) cross-sex interaction between unrelated men and women.

Mate Selection Agency & Access

McKenna et al. (2002) have previously posited that ICTs make it easier for individuals with specialized interests to find one another. This appears to be the case with Muslim online daters as well. Muslims looking for partners who share similar cultural backgrounds but happen to be living in different geographic locations can now connect and foster relationships (Armario, 2005). Muslim families have even drawn on Internet services to “upgrade” prospective marriage partners for their children, i.e., access to prospects that are of a better education level and higher social status. Considering the ease for users and their families to match specific educational, ethno-cultural and language preferences, and particular religious orientations on MOD websites, Muslims are increasingly drawn to computer-mediated mate selection due to sheer practicality and efficiency (Bunt, 2009).

The Internet allows for Muslims of various ethnicities and cultural backgrounds to establish relational connections with one another with greater ease but without violating Shari‘ah laws in the process (Armario, 2005). A Muslim chaplain at Georgetown University, Yahya Hendi, said he had received many requests to serve as an intermediary for Muslim couples who have gotten to know each other through the
Web—claiming that the websites allow people to meet and engage in courtship without violating Islamic gender interaction norms (Bunt, 2009). Additionally, Grewal (2009) found that younger Muslim Americans have resorted to Internet matchmaking and social networking services, such as naseeb.com and Facebook, which can provide greater access to potential Muslim mates who are beyond their parents’ social circles. Further, Muslim matrimonial websites not only encourage global citizenship, but also allow young people in conservative countries to choose potential matches with greater freedom (Green, 2014). This claim is also supported by previous research (Ahmed, 2013; Lo & Aziz, 2009; Mishra, Monippally, & Jayakar, 2013).

Peek (2006), on the other hand, suggests that a gradual change in marriage practices is currently taking place, one which reflects a more autonomous mate selection process for young, second-generation Muslim Americans—a process further elaborated through various first-person narratives within discourses of marriage and family (Abdul-Ghafur, 2005; Mattu & Maznavi, 2012, 2014).

**Communication Dynamics between Muslim Partners in CMC**

In addition to increasing individual agency, the ways in which online dating may affect interaction between partners is perhaps another example of how CMC may facilitate the development of online relationships. Finkel et al.’s (2012) review of mainstream online dating involved a nine-step “prototypical” online dating process, which begins with seeking information about potential partners on one (or more) dating sites, proceeds to initiating contact through the dating site, mutual exchange of mediated messages ends with an offline meeting. While similar sequences may occur in the MOD context, the role of the family and certain cultural-religious sensitivities may pose a different experience of this process altogether.
One-on-one communication. The absence of physical co-location between users of MOD web users may suggest that the Shari‘ah rulings governing male-female interactions may not necessarily apply to cross-sex interaction that occurs online. The advent of MOD sites may also pose new questions over the need for a third-party chaperone between potential marriage partners when the relationship is initiated online and courtship communications are exchanged in a computer-mediated context.

Some MOD users have claimed that online matchmaking can help reduce embarrassment during the introductions and screening process, which have traditionally been a stressful ordeal for the young people involved (Green, 2014). The stress associated with the traditional matchmaking process is typically due to the presence of a third party (usually a family member) who serves as an intermediary between male and female partners. In the online dating context, however, the Internet is seen as a means to bridge various existing divisions in Muslim societies, most notably strict gender segregation. CMC is typically thought to facilitate Muslims of the opposite sex to communicate privately before marriage without involving a third party in the process, therefore circumventing certain conservative Islamic and ethnocultural norms (Kaya, 2009).

Bunt (2009) further found that due to the sensitive nature of male-female interactions in conventional offline context, cyberspace’s affordances of anonymity and privacy allow men and women to transcend traditional cultural restrictions and religious values. In this way, cross-sex interactions over the Internet can be discreet and low-profile. MuslimMatch.com, for instance, acknowledges in their Islamic netiquette guide a clause that particularly highlights this very affordance of the Internet: “The beauty of meeting and relating online is that you can gradually collect
information and then make a choice about pursuing the relationship in the real world. You are never obligated to meet anyone, regardless of your level of online intimacy” (Bunt, 2009).

**Increased intimacy of online interaction.** While previous research on MOD has yet to examine the exact dynamics of actual mediated interactions between MOD users, existing theory suggests that CMC may have a profound impact on interaction during courtship. There are special qualities of CMC that not only draw users to the Internet, but also promote and foster greater intimacy and closeness between online partners, including greater self- and partner disclosure. Walther’s hyperpersonal model (1996), for instance, is commonly used to explain how CMC features work. Mediated communicators are able to utilize the asynchronous nature of CMC interactions to selectively craft and curate self-presentation and the messages that are crafted are often overly positive, thereby resulting in a level of dyadic intimacy that rivals—and often surpasses—FtF interactions (Walther, 2007). Other studies, such as the work of Tidwell and Walther (2002), have suggested how CMC’s anonymity feature can catalyze the extent and speed of self-disclosure among online daters by creating a perceived sense of spatial disconnect between their online and offline identities that are conducive to the process, as well as facilitate users’ interactive strategies in reducing uncertainty about another person’s attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, Hancock and Toma (2009) have found that online daters tend to not only disclose more personal information among each other, but also do so by projecting idealized self-portrayals in the process.

While the propensity for greater self-disclosure may have been demonstrated in early CMC work between unacquainted interaction partners that were not seeking romantic connections (Tidwell & Walther, 2002), this is also a clear possibility for
Muslim online daters. In the traditional offline context, the presence of certain rules governing cross-sex interactions between unrelated Muslim men and women might restrict the possibility for self-disclosure. Thus, CMC may facilitate greater openness and disclosure among potential partners.

**Merging Online Agency & Offline Identity**

While MODs may engage in greater self-disclosure and agency, it is also possible that this kind of highly intimate cross-gender interaction may produce other, less desirable effects. For example, if she were to engage in such disclosures; a Muslim American woman would perhaps gain greater communicative agency, but she would also potentially feel like she is violating more traditional rules regarding male-female interaction. Thus cognitive dissonance may result: On one hand, she is able to interact with potential romantic partners freely online. On the other hand, she might feel that her religious identity is called into question.

The interpersonal social distance that naturally occurs in CMC context, however, may be utilized; or even exploited, by Muslim users of online matrimonial sites and mobile applications as a way of directly establishing a more “impersonal” connection with the opposite sex. This would mean that mediated interaction allows cross-gender users to simultaneously engage in close dyadic interaction without the added concern of premarital intimate emotional attachments developing in the process—which is what Islamic norms regarding cross-sex interactions seek to prevent. Thus, a Muslim American woman would not only be able to engage in significant acts of self-disclosure necessary to illicit information from her partner and form a decision regarding the relational projection of such interaction, she may also maintain her observance of conservative Islamic gender norms.
The potential benefits and challenges that CMC poses on the overall mate selection and courtship practices of Muslim American women will be an interesting subject to observe. This is especially true in the digitized age where Muslim women’s attempts to enhance individual agency in their romantic relationships are simultaneously affected by individual concerns to conform to existing socio-cultural and religious values in their respective communities.

**Research Questions**

Based on the above literature review, three research questions are forwarded:

* RQ1: What motivates Muslim American women to use online dating systems?
* RQ2: How is CMC affecting or changing the experience and practice of romantic courtship among Muslim American women?
* RQ3: What are the issues that Muslim American women face when using online dating systems?
CHAPTER 3 METHOD JUSTIFICATION

The research questions above prompted a qualitative approach, which is inductive and interpretive. A qualitative method allows us to capture each participant’s experiences, perceptions, and experiences as it is. Semi-structured in-depth interviews, meaning that a general interview protocol was utilized as a guide, were conducted with Muslim American women across the United States. Despite the interview protocol, probes were also used to gain insight into areas of particular salience. The purpose of these interviews was to examine the experiences of Muslim women with regard to online dating. The interview protocol contained a set of questions that included a general query on MOD users’ initial process of using online dating sites and mobile applications.

Sample

A purposive sampling strategy was employed and the inclusion criteria were (a) female, (b) between the age of 18 and 40, and (c) have used matchmaking/matrimonial websites for approximately three months from the time of recruitment. Therefore, the sample had only included women who self-identified as Muslim Americans who use online matchmaking/matrimonial websites and mobile applications. Although all participants met sampling criteria, only seven responded to demographic information questions. Participants ranged between the age of 26 and 35, with the average age of 28.5. In terms of online dating experience, on average, participants claimed that they had been using dating websites for 2 years 4 months.
Table I. Types of Online Dating Sites used by Interview Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Sites</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. eHarmony</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. PlentyofFish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Match.com</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. OkCupid</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Naseeb.com</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. MuslimMatch.com</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Ishqr.com</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. CoffeeMeetsBagel.com</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Muslima.com</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. HalfOurDeen.com</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Minder app</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Other [Please specify.]</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sample collected was reflective of the larger demographic characteristics of the Muslim American population, with participants representing several different racial and ethnic backgrounds (i.e., African-American: 1, Arab: 4, South Asian: 2, Caucasian: 4, Mixed race: 1.) The sample also contained women who were born and raised Muslims (8) and recent converts (4).

Data Collection

First, an invitation to participate in the study was rolled out through the researcher’s personal social media accounts and through Wayne State University’s Pipeline blast. Recruitment messages through Twitter and Facebook were also reposted by followers and prominent figures in the Muslim American community on behalf of the primary researcher. Interested participants who responded to the call by filling out the online pre-interview screening survey received a confirmation email containing a link to a scheduling site. Those who did not respond to the request for scheduling then received a reminder email and follow-up text messages to confirm their interest in being interviewed.
Screening survey. The online pre-interview screening survey hosted on Qualtrics was comprised of five questions, which included the duration of usage of these websites/mobile applications, the types (mainstream, such as OKCupid.com or eHarmony, or Muslim-oriented, such as naseeb.com and singlemuslim.com) and the names of the websites/mobile applications used, as well as the frequency of participants “checking” their profiles and messages on the websites/mobile applications. The full list of the questions is available as Appendix D.

Out of a total of 49 completed survey responses, 32 interested participants had left their contact details. The researcher then selected and eventually scheduled 19 interviews of participants who were selected according to how active they were as users of the websites and their frequency in accessing their profiles, in addition to their last site log in to have been within the last month from the time they completed the screening survey. All of the participants were female.

Interview protocol. The semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix E) consisted of open-ended questions, which included two broad general questions, “Think back when you first became involved with online dating/matchmaking services and platforms. What was the starting/initial process like for you?” and “How do you communicate through the websites/apps?” Follow-up probes were also used to elicit the structural contexts shaping each individual’s experiences. Overall, 16 interviews were conducted between May and June 2015. Interviews were conducted exclusively through Skype. The interviews lasted an hour on average. Data saturation was met following 12 interviews, however, four more interviews were conducted to ensure that saturation was indeed met.
Data Analysis

All of the Skype interviews were recorded using the Ecamm Call Recorder for Skype software. They were manually transcribed and checked for accuracy by the interviewer. Twelve of the 16 protocols were transcribed, with rough notes taken for the remaining four interviews as further confirmation.

Once all 12 interviews were transcribed, the researcher then adopted the whole-part-whole data analysis (Vagle, 2014), which combines Van Manen (2001)’s hermeneutic phenomenology thematic analysis and Moustakas’ (1994) descriptive phenomenological approach, for the first phase of data analysis. The first reading or data analysis cycle attended to each interview transcript holistically in order to capture the overall essence of each interview. The researcher then read each transcribed interview three times, examining each for meaningful statements and phrases that were representative of respondents’ experiences.

The next phase of the data analysis involved using the ATLAS.ti software for coding. The researcher applied a two-level analysis scheme of both etic-level categories based on extant literature and more specific emic issues that emerged from the data and participants’ voices (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Employing Charmaz (2006)’s constant comparative method throughout the coding process, the researcher performed a detailed, line-by-line reading of every single sentence and sentence cluster. Several key themes of how Muslim American women use online matrimonial websites emerged during the analysis. By the end of this stage, the researcher was able to refine the data into major descriptive themes after visiting and revisiting extant online dating literature as a general sensitizing framework. Following this iterative approach, each interview transcript was compared and contrasted against other interview transcripts in order to refine the categories and narrow down the
conclusions. The researcher applied Braun and Clarke (2006)’s thematic analysis during the second level coding process while gathering all relevant data to each corresponding theme. A thematic map was generated through this process before the specifics of each theme were refined. Thematic analysis finally lead to several overarching themes being identified, some of which contained its own sub-themes.
CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The interviews provided insight into the experience of these Muslim American women as they embark on a journey to find their romantic partners online. These interview data shed light on the various elements that make up that experience, including the motivations and relational objectives driving women’s use of online dating services and mobile platforms, as well as their concerns and reservations prior to going online and also throughout the process of engaging in online dating. Lastly, the ways in which these respondents see technology’s role in the courtship process is analyzed.

Motivations for Going Online

The following section will highlight the motivations driving Muslim American women into “going online.” All 16 interview respondents of this study unanimously expressed their frustration in their inability to meet compatible romantic partners offline through the “organic routes” of families, friends, and the community. This became a major motivation for computer-mediated interaction and online dating. This supports the work of Kelley et al.’s (1983) study on some of the barriers of connecting with romantic partners offline. Participants spoke of various ways in which the difficulty in and failures of actually meeting compatible people through traditional networks have been the consistent motivational impetus for them to use online dating and matrimonial sites. Lack of access to “traditional” means of mate selection therefore became a “big push” for them to join online dating website and to create dating profiles. One participant, who lives in a small town in North Carolina where she is the only known Muslim, said, “it was either that I never meet anyone or try to meet someone online.” (S30)
**Geographical relocation.** Families that have migrated from the Middle East, for instance, do not necessarily end up relocating to an area populated by people of similar ethnic groups in the United States. In addition, women who come from “ethnic” Muslim backgrounds (e.g., Arabs), do not necessarily find the mate selection process any easier either, particularly when their families “…don’t really have strong ties with the Arab community…” (S20) in the new or current area of settlement.

**Recent converts.** Having limited or no access to traditional Muslim social networks, such as family members and friends, was an even more prominent motivation for users who had recently converted to Islam. Those women who recently converted found themselves without offline networks, or places to look for potential romantic partners. As a result, many converts went online, as the following account demonstrates:

I just moved back to the US. I know like my family isn't Muslim. I don't have a lot of connections to other Muslims. It's not really easy for me to find someone, so, that's how I kind of started asking and I guess trying to think of different ways to find someone and someone had recommended, “Oh, why don't you try online matchmaking site and so?” I think the first time I signed up was halfourdeen.com? I think was the one that I signed up and just created a little profile and said okay, I'll just see what happens. (S26)

Those who find themselves devoid of friends and family who might help them make connections turn to the Internet as an alternative. Such cases mirror previous research in the online dating literature, where daters increasingly rely on dating websites for access to, screening, and matching of potential partners due to inability of initiating romantic relationships offline because of factors such as limited social network and
access to desirable dating pool (Finkel et al., 2012; Sprecher, 2009; Whitty, 2008; Whitty & Carr, 2006).

**Shared cultural backgrounds.** Muslims looking for partners who share similar cultural backgrounds but happen to be living in different geographic locations can now—more than ever—connect and cultivate romantic relationships with individuals of their personal choice. For instance, one participant said online dating websites were useful because, “...there were natural social circles that I would never be in that I could tap into because of it.” (S09) Another participant highlighted how online websites circumvent geographical boundaries in a way “...that you really don't get in person most of the time.” (S23)

When a woman hails from a particularly “unique” demographic background, finding potential partners who are considered compatible matches can be an issue as well. One interview respondent, who is biracial of Persian parentage, said she found it “...really difficult to find practicing Muslims...” within her own ethno-cultural demographic because, “...they're more of the partying scene, the drinking scene—the stuff that I really don't associate with...It's very rare to find people that fit your compatibility.” (S23)

**Control over self-presentation.** Furthermore, in line with previous work on the selective self-presentation advantages of online dating websites (e.g., McKenna & Bargh, 1998; 2000; McKenna et al., 2002; Toma & Hancock, 2011; Whitty, 2008), this study confirms that some respondents take advantage of similar features. For instance, one participant, who is visually impaired, claimed that by resorting to online matchmaking websites, she was able to initiate contact with potential romantic partners and communicate with them well beyond the initial stages of a relationship. She noted that such communication would not have been possible otherwise since
visual impairment in certain immigrant communities “…could be a hang up for a lot of people, especially people with certain values that they grew up with, men that believed that they need to find a ‘perfect’ wife regardless of how imperfect they may be.” (S22) This particular subject, who gets “a little anxious” and “self-conscious” about her appearance and visible disability, added that online dating allows her to present her colorful personality when she interacts with others through CMC.

Mediation also makes rejection for her a lot easier because:

If they rejected me based on my personality, I actually have no problem with that, because I'm confident enough in what I am and what I believe and stuff like that…but if it was based on what I look, that could be really hurtful because the only way to get over that is to just have more confidence, because you can't really change the way you look. (S22)

This is in line with Whitty (2008)’s suggestion of the Internet being a potential space that is not quite “real” or not “as real” as the unmediated realm, there is the perception of rejection being easier to cope with. This finding also appears to support McKenna and Bargh (1998; 2000) and McKenna et al.’s (2002) proposition that the lack of social presence in mediated context provides opportunities for online daters to present aspects of themselves they would not have felt comfortable displaying in ordinary FtF interactions.

Mediated Interaction between Muslim Online Daters

Many scholars have highlighted the special qualities CMC has in promoting and cultivating greater intimacy and closeness between online partners, including greater self- and partner disclosure. As the presence of certain rules governing interactions between unrelated Muslim men and women might restrict the possibility
for “cross-sex interactions” in the FtF realm, interview data tell us that the online medium has affected the nature of communication in various ways.

First, it has allowed Muslim women the ability to initiate contact with the opposite sex, which would not have been possible in FtF settings. In fact, one interview participant said she engages in online matchmaking services because, “it makes the idea of messaging a brother (i.e., another Muslim man) feel like it's normal and not scary or intimidating in any way.” This same respondent claimed that she had initiated conversation with the opposite sex at least “60% of the time” in online settings (S07). This finding supports previous research on relationship initiation and formation on the Internet regarding the relative ease of goal-oriented or targeted relationships being formed through online dating websites due to certain disinhibition effects. That said, the ability for a Muslim woman to initiate contact with the opposite sex by herself with no intermediary involved in the process can be considered as an effect that has only been facilitated through CMC.

Regarding cross-gender interactions, online dating appears to have circumvented the need for chaperoned FtF meetings, since the medium serves as a platform that mitigates the emotional and physical connections and attachments that were commonly feared to develop between unrelated men and women in unmediated context. The limited cues and lack of physical immediacy on the Internet appear to work to the advantage of Muslim women who may wish to remain loyal to religious injunctions pertaining to male-female interactions. One interviewee hinted at the nature of online interaction as a factor that alleviates certain religious concerns:

Online is so weird, it's like, you just don't know what the hell the person is going to say, especially because you're not in person, so you don't—you can't see their faces, you can't read them, I feel like there's not an opportunity for
that [emotional attachment], when you're online for that [emotional] tension [to develop]. (S21)

Another participant mentioned how:

The whole purpose why you have to have someone, like a third person or chaperone, when you're meeting face-to-face with someone is to kind of break that physical connection—and online you don't really have that, like; yeah, you can see the other person talking but you can't do anything more than that and we have our own limits you know as Muslims…I would say that my emotional attachment was less than it has been with meeting guys in real life—there's that barrier just talking to people online and you can just step away from your laptop, from you computer, your phone and just go outside, you don't have to worry about it. (S22)

Related to this growing sense of declining necessity for a chaperone or intermediary in mate selection and courtship is the nature of the private communication taking place between romantic potentials. While some existing CMC theory would predict that people use CMC’s features for greater openness and self-disclosure, female Muslim daters actually described their mediated interactions as lacking social presence, therefore making it more difficult to establish a connection online than in FtF:

It's harder online. Like, you just try to go, like, a how—what expression are you going off of a picture? Like, that's kind…of how you can do it online. So, but then, you can't even tell…What if they're someone who never smiles or something? Like, in person you can just get an idea. There's some people that you just click with, like you can just be in their vicinity and you just click, so…I think it would be easier in person. (S02)
Another participant, referring to her use of Skype video calls during mediated courtship, added that:

Over the phone...and even through video Skype, you still do lose a bit of that sense of whether or not you are connecting to someone. Obviously because they're not there in person, that sense is lost somewhat, not even somewhat, maybe a little more than somewhat. So...because I felt like with that last guy...we connected so well even on video Skype, so I was seeing him, I was seeing his facial expression, but then when we met in person it was a totally different, a totally different experience...yeah. I don't know what it is exactly, but the experience is very, very different when you're online...There's still something lost...(S04)

This revelation suggests that Muslim women who use online dating websites and mobile apps have actually capitalized on the “interpersonalized” nature of CMC for initiating interaction, while also exploiting the “impersonal” nature of CMC as an effort to thwart off premarital romantic attachments, which are considered contrary to extant cultural and religious beliefs governing decency in cross-gender relations.

**Mate Selection: Criteria, Control, & Privacy**

Peek (2006) had previously suggested that a gradual change in current marriage practices reflecting a more autonomous mate selection process for young second-generation Muslim Americans is currently taking place, which is to a large extent supported by the current data. When discussing their use of online matrimonial and dating services, many participants mentioned the increased control and privacy over the mate selection and courtship process while seeking out a partner.

**Mate selection criteria.** If previous literature on traditional Muslim mate selection and courtship practices highlights a rational, “no-nonsense” criterion-based
selection process where religiosity and religious compatibility are emphasized parameters, the majority of the interviewees have actually reported typical mainstream search criteria to filter their selections, such as age range and location. For instance, one of the interviewees said she would “go for [those who are] 30-40 in age to ten years older. I'd limit it to that. It's pretty much the only limit I put…then I browse through the different profiles and based on their profile picture, if that looks interesting; I'd click on it. Then see if you know what they have to say is interesting” (S04). Additionally, one participant said her pool of potential romantic partners was narrowed down by “…where they're located,” (S02) in addition to also mentioning how physical attraction is a determining factor. Age as a selection parameter was also echoed by another participant, who had walked the researcher through her mental selection process, “…the first thing that I looked at was age and if they were too much younger than me or too much older than me—I wasn't really open to that…there's a power dynamic within the psychology of men and women.” (S09)

Much of the reasoning behind certain emphasis on age and location as prominent selection parameters appears to be grounded on a sense of sheer efficiency and logistical concerns more than anything else. For instance, one participant, who believed that, “…it’s usually better to be with someone around the same age, maybe at similar point in life,” had also mentioned how, “…location is probably the main thing…distance is also for me something I was like...I don't know if I really want to talk to someone really far away.” (S26) Another participant had mentioned some immigration concerns, including the difficulty of sponsoring a visa and green card, as a real deal breaker, “As long as he lives in the US and he's willing to relocate, it doesn't matter to me, but if he lives outside of the US, it's not even an option.” (S30)
These criteria echo previous online dating literature and suggest that Muslim online daters do use the search filters and features available in online dating websites to look for partners. Age and location appear to be the easiest criteria to help narrow a search from a vast pool of available profiles. These search parameters seem to follow the typical structure of dating websites and mobile apps, which are mainly designed and programmed to facilitate easily searchable attributes, namely demographic traits.

**Increased agency & choice during mate selection.** One participant, for instance, lamented how traditionally in her culture, “…the vetting process happens entirely between parents…growing up in the US has made me a little…has sort of distanced me from that traditional way of finding a mate, because…I would just like to meet the person, it's fine if we don't get along, but I would rather meet him rather than wait for the parents to decide whether this is a good match.” (S07) Another respondent, who has not been successful in finding a partner through her social circles, said, “online is nice because you have a little more say,” before adding that based on her experience of using online services, users get to meet people who not only “share similar interests”, but also “click”. (S21). Another respondent noted how online dating gives her “a lot more control over the situation. No one else involved in it. If it works, it works, if it doesn't, it doesn't, no one has to know, until you're ready to talk about it …” (S22)

However, despite the greater sense of agency, some women also noted that their families’ involvement in the courtship process was still present, if somewhat “delayed”. For instance, one participant said, “Online dating is just a kind of ‘start the process of finding somebody’ and then all the traditional marriage practices take place then. If you find somebody you're initially compatible, get to talk to each other for a little bit, and then say, ‘Okay, I'm interested in pursuing you for marriage’ then the
family gets involved then the people meet then all that other stuff happens.” (S23)

While CMC is perhaps giving women more agency in the earlier stages of romantic relationship formation (e.g., mate selection), many still adhere to more traditional religious courtship practices as the relationship’s development begins to progress. Such a pattern demonstrates how Muslim women are finding ways to blend their use of newer technologies with their existing religious beliefs and cultural practices.

Although increased selection was often mentioned as advantage, some women also noted the potential drawbacks of a bigger dating pool. One participant mentioned how, “In this world of the Internet, it's a lot easier to just kind of; like, go on website and search for what you're looking for, it's maybe less guaranteed to find someone who you trust because through family friends you already know everyone related to them and all their friends and that's a given.” (S20) In this case, the increased mate selection offered by online dating was both an advantage and a potential problem in that the men being sought were not “vetted” by any friends or family.

**Privacy & confidentiality.** Participants also noted that the sense of privacy or confidentiality afforded by online matchmaking websites saves them the embarrassment of having to deal with what was previously a very public mate selection practice. They were pleased by the ways in which the digital medium allowed a greater degree of confidentiality. For instance, one participant who questions the ability of community matchmakers, or “rishta (marriage) aunties”, to keep the information and details of active partner seekers to serious inquires said, “I think privacy is a huge plus for online dating—that little bit of confidentiality and knowing that you don't really have anything to lose, you're just seeing if there's a potential there. It's like going about it [the mate selection and courtship practice] in a smart way, especially if you're a girl.” (S23)
The impact of system design. Additionally, participants mentioned the design features of websites impacting their perceptions of privacy. For instance, one interviewee who had laid out a timeline of her online matchmaking experience, marking the progression of websites she used said, “Obviously; as you can see, the progression of the sites I got on, they're a little less private, and the order I gave them to you is the order that I joined each one, so ultimately in the beginning, halfourdeen over like Naseeb or Shaadi or like whatever other ones out there, it was halfourdeen because it's strictly private. You message over the platform so they don't have access to your contact information.” (S21)

Another participant, who is concerned about “creepers” lurking through her profile pictures, hinted at the perception of user control over self-disclosure through online matchmaking sites being a particular advantage, “…you can control how much privacy, you can control how much you expose, so I didn't really feel uncomfortable because I was limiting exactly what I was putting out there for the public to see.” These perceptions of control and privacy appear to boost women’s feelings of self-efficacy, which was previously noted as being minimal in conventional mate selection and courtship practices for many users of ethnic Muslim backgrounds.

Issues & Concerns of Online Dating for Muslim American Women

The interview data suggests that despite the fact that Muslim American women are increasingly open to the idea of engaging mediated communication technologies in their romantic pursuits, these women have also struggled with certain stigma and concerns of use attached to online dating. Previous research has identified a number of issues and stigma associated with online dating, more generally. For example, online daters have been perceived as “desperate” and using the Internet as a “last resort” because traditional social interactions have failed them (Cali, Coleman,
& Campbell, 2013).

Additional negative concerns about online dating include the beliefs that people on the Internet would lie, that meeting romantic partners online was unsafe, and that it would take longer to get to know someone online than in person (Donn & Sherman, 2002; Finkel et al., 2012). Similar concerns are reflected in the experiences of some of the respondents in the current study:

Well, before I ever joined that website that my brother mentioned, I've always had this negative view of meeting people online where everyone on there has probably have less—I don't know what the word is—like, this sounds really bad, but maybe lower standards to meet someone online and then bring that to real life. I don't know what I thought that…maybe because of things you watch on TV and people always end up being creeps on the other end. I never thought that I could meet someone who is very close in his heart to God and doesn't have any weird intention or flirting with girls online or making it completely like the American standard dating. Something...That's the kind of perspective I had personally and I never would have thought that I would join a website and find someone. (S20)

Another participant mentioned how she had struggled in overcoming certain concerns of going online, adding that, “...it took me so long to be okay and comfortable with getting online because amongst the Muslim community there's such a stigma of, ‘Oh, if she goes online, she's desperate.’ Well, no, we're just not meeting the people that are worthy of us or we're compatible with within our communities, so you need to look elsewhere, or all of your friends are married so you really don't have people to introduce you to people.” (S21)
In addition to privacy being a welcome feature of mediated mate selection overall, some participants mentioned the privacy feature offered by certain websites to be an important factor for users in selecting which websites to use, citing concerns over the control and confidentiality of their profile information, including picture privacy:

Some of the other websites, like Muslima.com, Shaadi.com, you put your picture up and also you put all the general statistics about yourself. For Ishq, the picture is private. Everyone's picture was private and you wouldn't see someone else's picture unless they "liked" your criteria and statistics and then actually accepted a connection with them. Then the picture would be revealed, which really helped on security, because if someone looks like a complete creeper and doesn't have pictures and you don't have a good feeling about them and you don't trust them, you have no obligation to show them your picture. (S23)

Privacy concerns are related to uncertainty reduction behavior and self-disclosure among online daters. The study conducted by Gibbs, Ellison, and Lai (2011), for example, found that personal security, misrepresentation, recognition (e.g., dating profiles being recognizable to friends, family, colleagues) and self-efficacy are variables that predict uncertainty reduction strategies mediating self-disclosure between users of online dating websites. Muslim American women are no different; many feel similar concerns over their personal privacy and the security of their virtual information.

Although the majority of respondents still claimed that marriage was their ultimate goal in going online, the frustration and disappointment of not being able to actually find compatible matches—both through the traditional offline route and also
through matchmaking websites—has led some respondents to adjust their relationship goals and expectations. As indicated by a participant, “My frustration of meeting quality people led me to become one of those people who are like, you know what, I don't have to be doing this for matrimonial reasons. I could be doing this just to meet people, and that's what it ended up with for me.” (S21) Another participant, a college student, even indicated that she was more open-minded and flexible as far as her relationship goals are concerned. She did not shy away from the idea of going online as a way of getting “comfortable” with the notion of getting married and finding “a steady boyfriend”:

I was just sort of hoping that in being on a website like this, I would just become more amenable to the idea of eventually meeting to get married. Or like just having a steady boyfriend to be completely honest...At this point, I'm; like, if I can even sustain a conversation with a brother for longer than ten messages—I'm very happy. (S07)

This theme seems to suggest that MOD website and mobile app users’ experience in utilizing the platforms for mate selection and courtship purposes, particularly when it is deemed an unsuccessful experience, has shaped their overall motivation for establishing romantic relationships and using online platforms in the process. Moreover, based on the interviews, a pattern seems to emerge whereby the longer [and therefore less successful] a user uses online dating websites and mobile apps, the less expectations she would have of initiating and forming future romantic relationships.

**Frustration with technology.** Interview participants who have expressed some degree of frustration with the overall online dating process have attributed their disappointment to certain design features of most Muslim-oriented online
matchmaking sites they have used. For instance, one participant, who argued that
gender segregation in many Muslim communities have somehow impeded the ability
for men and women to decently communicate and interact with one another claimed
that, “Muslim sites need to catch up and not just be kind of a platform. It needs to
offer guidance that's just not there right now. We already have a lack of understanding
on how to communicate with one another as men and women because of our
segregated societies—I'm generalizing, but I would say that's the norm—so if a site is
going to be actually useful, it's going to tell a person how to communicate with one
another. Not just, ‘here, put you two in a room. You're a boy, you're a girl.’” (S09)

The lack of algorithm use in most Muslim-oriented websites appears to have
added to the overall sense of frustration as well, as one participant mentioned how
while, “…online sites were supposed to offer this filtration process where you're
paired for a reason…” most Muslim sites “…are not able to do that right now”. This
sentiment is echoed by another participant who regretted how superficial most
Muslim-oriented online matchmaking sites are:

Muslim sites—they don't have as many questions regarding those [eHarmony]
types of questions. It's mainly your age, hair color, skin color, ethnicity, and
country of origin, do you have a visa or something, like citizenship status,
stuff like that…I think some of that isn't important much…with eHarmony,
they try to cut that out and they focus on what matters to you…the questions
are good—The questions are great, it takes forever, but it could be great, and I
think some of the Muslim websites; if they could just snatch some of those, it
will make it so much easier for us to actually find someone that you know is
actually looking for marriage. (S02)
Another participant made reference to mainstream online dating websites, such as eHarmony and Match.com, being representatives of the “ideal” dating website, since the two “looked authentic enough,” before adding how “…eHarmony seemed—just from the layout of the profile and the way that you engage of a person [through the website]—seemed a little more serious than the other ones out there that involved shallow stuff, like sending winks.” (S04) Extant online matchmaking sites, particularly those that are Muslim-oriented, may have to reconsider their current website user interface and systems design (e.g., adopting a more effective algorithm) and incorporate more sophisticated user-generated content in order to keep their clients satisfied with the online services offered.
CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

The current study demonstrates the complexities surrounding the experience of Muslim American women in online dating. While online dating can increase individual agency and sense of self-efficacy for the typical Muslim American woman, technology use challenges traditional mate selection and courtship practices, and daters must find ways to integrate the new with the familiar.

The data suggest that the increasing popularity and prevalence of online dating in recent years have allowed Muslim women a sense of agency in and control to initiate contact with romantic partners of their own choice. Interview data also suggests that although family involvement is still expected in some point of the progression of relationship in the run up to marriage, the point of the family’s entry has been significantly delayed. Dating websites are giving women more agency and sense of self-efficacy with regard to selecting a partner in the earlier stages of relational development; but many women still expect their families to participate in the courtship process during later stages.

An interesting finding emerged with regards to the mediated interaction itself. First, Muslim women appear to deliberately rely on the mediated nature of CMC communication to engage in cross-sex interactions without a chaperone. In addition, some women are simultaneously exploiting the impersonal nature of the channel to maintain the existing religious and socio-cultural norms of not establishing strong emotional connections and intimacy prior to marriage.

Although many studies of dyadic CMC interaction have demonstrated that online interaction facilitates increased intimacy between communicators relative to FtF interactions due to accelerated self-disclosure and intensified feedback (Joinson, 2001; Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 1996; Walther, et al., 2001), some
theoretical models also acknowledges early CMC research claiming that limited nonverbal and paralinguistic cues, and reduced interactivity, inherent in CMC communication, may lead to depersonalized interactions as well. If interactants use the technology in this way, mediated interaction can be impersonal rather than interpersonal or hyperpersonal (e.g., Walther, 1996).

Further, studies conducted by Walther (1996; 2011) and others have found that in actuality there are times when it is desirable for users to develop impersonal interactions, and such interactions are related to the need to complete certain tasks requiring more “focus” and “productivity”. It is possible that Muslim men and women approach mate selection and courtship in a more “task-oriented” way, where the ultimate goal is marriage, the procedure is heavily pragmatic and criteria-based (i.e., “task intensive”), and also seeks to avoid too much interpersonal premarital interaction. Future research may want to further investigate this claim to see how Muslim men and women approach courtship and mate selection, more generally.

The fact that Muslim American women are just as concerned about their privacy and personal security as mainstream online daters may not be a revelation in and of itself, however, it may be another area worthy of exploring in the future, particularly on matters of self-presentation and warranting. As identified in this study and as mentioned in the preceding sections, Muslim American women are just as concerned about misrepresentations and accuracy of self-disclosure and presentation, and have also lamented over the challenges of being able to properly vet matrimonial profiles.
CHAPTER 6 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The use of in-depth interviews as a method to explore the experience of online matchmaking and dating for Muslim American women was selected in hopes of identifying the overall essence of the experience. However, one particular limitation of this study is the purposive sampling of only Muslim American women due to certain cultural-religious concerns pertaining to cross-gender interactions and the researcher being female. Another considerable limitation is the self-selection bias of volunteer participants, which may be partial to certain experiences, either positive or negative. Considering these limitations, future studies could examine the actual extent of generational shifting that is taking place pertaining to variables such agency and control in the overall Muslim mate selection and courtship practices.

Another self-selection bias pertains to self-disclosed perception of individual Muslim identity. During the interviews, all 12 participants indicated that they considered themselves being “moderate” on the religiosity spectrum. Future studies may therefore look into the experiences of online daters who self-identify as being on the two extreme ends of the spectrum, i.e., “conservative” and “liberal” Muslims, for a fuller picture of the mediated courtship phenomena.

Future research may also investigate the self-presentation strategies and impression formation effects on Muslim-oriented matrimonial websites, including the actual structure and design of these websites in shaping users’ overall experience. Further research may help illuminate the possible ways of mitigating daters’ current frustration associated with usage of online matrimonial services.

Additionally, insights from the lived experiences of online daters of other faith-based communities may provide us with an even more holistic picture of how new media communication technologies intersect with issues of identity and
interpersonal communication. This explorative study has attempted to examine how a growing subset of the American population is utilizing technology in their romantic pursuits and how; in turn, technology has helped shaped the whole process. Since understanding how extant cultural practices shape mediated communication is important if we are to better understand the challenges and complex negotiations that religions and cultural communities in the United States encounter with affordances of popular new media technologies, it is hoped that this study has delivered and pushed this agenda a little further.
CONCLUSION

The interview data presented reveal how the advent of CMC technologies has in fact affected the mate selection and courtship practices for some Muslim American women, particularly by enhancing individual agency and control over the entire process. The narrated accounts of the 16 individuals interviewed for this study provide further validation and confirmation to the fact that the affordances of CMC have increased individual agency by allowing users to circumvent the practices that were previously limiting to them in traditional unmediated courtship context, such as agency in initiating relationships and control over relational and communicative progressions. These results further support Bunt’s (2009) earlier findings on the Internet’s affordances of anonymity and privacy allowing men and women to transcend traditional cultural restrictions and religious values. Privacy was in fact one of the determining motivational factors for Muslim American women in seeking out romantic partners through computer-mediated channels. Furthermore, the three main features that online matrimonial and dating systems offer, namely access to a larger pool of potential romantic partners, various forms of communication options prior to meeting FtF, and matching through the assistance of computer algorithm (Finkel, et.al., 2012) were also found to be true for some Muslim American women who use online services.

Nevertheless, despite the increasing agency of some Muslim women in the mate selection and courtship practice, participants have also spoken about the existence of other challenges that have altogether hindered them from achieving actual success in finding suitable partners and settling down. These challenges have lead to a shared sense of frustration, disappointment, and (to some degree) desperation, in the overall mate selection and courtship process. This frustration is
spurned by a number of factors, including a gap in expectations and capabilities of what online matrimonial and dating services can deliver, traditional “fault lines” mapping onto the online realm like racism and ethno-cultural prejudice, and particular vulnerabilities for Muslim converts. All in all, online matrimonial and dating websites seem to offer some potential as a “third space” where single marriageable Muslims can initiate relationships with greater flexibility and individual agency.
APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)

EXPEDITED REVIEW CATEGORY #7

NOTICE OF EXPEDITED APPROVAL

To: Anissa Meiata Rochiadat
Communication

From: Dr. Deborah Ellis or designee  
Chairperson, Behavioral Institutional Review Board (B3)

Date: May 06, 2015

RE: IRB #: 03721583E
Protocol Title: Muslim Online Dating
Funding Source: 
Protocol #: 1504013905
Expiration Date: May 05, 2016

Risk Level / Category: Research not involving greater than minimal risk

The above-referenced protocol and items listed below (if applicable) were APPROVED following Expedited Review Category (#7)" by the Chairperson/designee for the Wayne State University Institutional Review Board (B3) for the period of 05/06/2015 through 05/05/2016. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals that may be required.

- Revised Protocol Summary Form (received in the IRB Office 4/20/2015)
- Revised Protocol (received in the IRB Office 4/20/2015)
- A waiver of requirement for written documentation of informed consent has been granted according to 45 CFR 46 116(d). This waiver satisfies: 1) the research involves no more than minimal risk to the participants. Data are survey responses of a non-sensitive nature; 2) the research involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context. The only procedure is the survey administration which would not require consent outside of the research context; 3) the consent process is appropriate and 4) an information sheet disclosing the required and appropriate additional elements of consent disclosure will be provided to participants.
- Research Information Sheet (dated 4/20/2015)
- Interview Recruitment Email
- Data Collection Tools: Pre-Interview Intake Survey, and Interview Questions

4 Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. You may receive a "Continuation Review Reminder" approximately two months prior to the expiration date. However, it is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date. Data collected during a period of lapsed approval is unapproved research and can never be reported or published as research data.

5 All changes or amendments to the above-referenced protocol require review and approval by the IRB BEFORE implementation.

6 Adverse Reactions/Unexpected Events (AR/UE) must be submitted on the appropriate form within the timeframe specified in the IRB Administration Office Policy (http://www.irb.wayne.edu/policies-human-research.php).

NOTE:

1. Upon notification of an impending regulatory site visit, hold notification, and/or external audit the IRB Administration Office must be contacted immediately.
2. Forms should be downloaded from the IRB website at each use.

*Based on the Expedited Review List, revised November 1998
APPENDIX B

RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

Research Information Sheet
Title of Study: Muslim Online Dating Study

Principal Investigator (PI): Annisa Meirita Patimurani Rochadiat
Department of Communication, Wayne State University
(313) 244 7719; annisa.rochadiat@wayne.edu

Faculty Advisor: Stephanie Tong, PhD
Department of Communication
Stephanie.Tong@wayne.edu

Purpose: You are being asked to be in a research study of the Muslim online dating (i.e., online matchmaking) phenomenon because you have indicated that you are a Muslim woman, aged between 18 and 40 years, who is an experienced user of online dating website. This study is being conducted at Wayne State University. The estimated number of study participants to be enrolled at Wayne State University is about ten people. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

In this research study, we seek to understand the lived experience of Muslim American women in using online dating websites and mobile dating applications (mobile apps), and how various technological affordances affect the cultural practice of mate selection and courtship for marriage. We also seek to examine at length your experience in communicating with other users of the opposite sex on these websites and mobile apps. The goal of this research is to identify, describe, and explain the Muslim online dating (MOD) phenomenon and understand in particular how Muslim American women negotiate traditional courtship practices, expectations, and personal identity when utilizing MOD websites and mobile apps.

Study Procedures: If you agree to take part in this research study, you will be asked to complete an online intake survey and answer a series of questions in an interview that may take place in person or over Skype.

In order to make sure that you qualify for the study, you will first be asked to complete an online intake survey that asks for basic information about your experience in using Muslim online dating websites and mobile apps. This online intake questionnaire will include a section that will ask for your contact details and consent to be contacted for the interview. The online intake survey will take no longer than 5 minutes to complete. Once it is established that you qualify to participate for the interview, the principal investigator (PI) will contact you to schedule an interview appointment.

Each interview will last between 60 – 90 minutes and will take place at Wayne State University, through Skype, or a location of the interviewee’s choice. The interview questions will follow the following three research questions:
1. How do Muslim American women utilize online dating websites and mobile apps?
2. How do Muslim American women negotiate traditional courtship practices, expectations, and personal identity, when utilizing MODs?
3. How do Muslim American women experience communication with others in traditional (offline) courtship versus online venues?

We will be recording the interview, but we will destroy the file after it has been transcribed. Your online survey and interview responses will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we make public, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you.

**Benefits:** As a participant in this research study, there may be no direct benefit for you; however, information from this study may benefit other people, particularly within the Muslim community, now or in the future.

**Risks:** By taking part in this study, you may experience emotional risks (e.g., some of the questions about your experiences in using MOD websites and mobile apps may be sensitive in nature). Nevertheless, we do not anticipate any risks of you participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life and your use of online dating technologies.

**Costs:** Participation in this study will be of no cost to you.

**Compensation:** For taking part in this research study, 10 interview participants will be compensated for their time in the form of a $20 Amazon.com gift card. Payment will be arranged by the PI after the interview is completed.

**Confidentiality:** All information collected about you during the course of this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. You will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. Information that identifies you personally will not be released without your written permission. Research records will be stored securely (i.e., locked file cabinets and password protected computers) and only trained researchers will have access to the records. However, the study sponsor, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Wayne State University, or federal agencies with appropriate regulatory oversight [e.g., Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), Office of Civil Rights (OCR), etc.] may review your records.

If photographs, videos, or audiotape recordings of you will be used for research or educational purposes, your identity will be protected or disguised. The audio content will be kept for approximately three years and will be securely stored on the principal investigator’s password protected computer. After the data is collected and transcriptions are made, the tapes will be destroyed. When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity.
The data that you provide may be collected and used by Qualtrics as per its privacy agreement. Additionally, participation in this research is for residents of the United States between the age of 18 and 40; if you are not a resident of the United States and/or under the age of 18 or over the age of 40, please do not complete this survey.

**Voluntary Participation /Withdrawal:** Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in the study you can later change your mind and withdraw from the study. You are free to only answer questions that you want to answer. You are free to withdraw from participation in this study at any time. Your decisions will not change any present or future relationship with Wayne State University or its affiliates, or other services you are entitled to receive.

The PI may stop your participation in this study without your consent. The PI will make the decision and let you know if it is not possible for you to continue. The decision that is made is to protect your health and safety, or because you did not follow the instructions to take part in the study.

**Questions:** If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Annisa Meirita Rochadiat at the following phone number (313) 244-7719. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Institutional Review Board can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call (313) 577-1628 to ask questions or voice concerns or complaints.

**Participation:** By clicking on the link below, you are agreeing to participate in this study. To request a copy of this consent form, please email annisa.rochadiat@wayne.edu
APPENDIX C

RESEARCH STUDY PARTICIPANTS ADVERTISEMENT

Researchers at Wayne State University are looking for single, heterosexual women of Muslim background between the ages of 18 and 40 to participate in a study about online matchmaking. The purpose of this research is to examine the lived experiences of Muslim women who use online matchmaking websites and mobile applications for mate selection, and how such use may affect religious and cultural courtship practices. The confidential interview, which can be conducted in person or through Skype, will last approximately 60 minutes led by a non-judgmental Muslim female interviewer who will facilitate and engage conversations based on open-ended questions. The conversations will be recorded, but none of your personally identifying information will be released in any ensuing publications or presentations. The first 10 qualified participants will be compensated with Amazon.com gift cards valued at $20 each. Clicking on the link below will redirect you to a webpage that describes the study’s purpose and your rights and responsibilities as a potential participant:

https://waynestate.az1.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_eKymH1vknJbfVgV
APPENDIX D

PRE-INTERVIEW INTAKE SURVEY

(to be completed by participants prior to the interview)

The following online intake survey is meant to help us identify whether you qualify to be interviewed for our study.

Please answer/respond to each question as honestly as possible.

1. How long have you been using Muslim online dating websites and mobile applications (apps)? (select one)
   
   3 months  6 months  9 months  other_____

2. Which online dating websites/apps have you used? Please select all that apply (You may include “mainstream” websites/apps that are not Muslim-oriented):
   
   eHarmony  PlentyofFish  Match.com  OkCupid  Zoosk  Naseeb.com  MuslimMatch.com  Ishqri.com  
   Other: __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________

3. How many times a week do you “check” your account(s)? (select one)
   
   1x/week  2x/week  daily  other_____

4. If you “check” your account(s) daily, how many times a day do you do so?
   
   1x/day  2x/day  other_____

5. Have you ever used these online dating applications to communicate with romantic partners?
   
   Yes  No

If you would like to participate in the Muslim Online Dating research and be contacted for an interview, please provide us with your contact details (name, email, phone number) and the best times to reach you.
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Since the interviews are semi-structured, the interview questions will be tailored to addressing the following research question:

“What is the lived experience of Muslim American women in utilizing online dating websites?”

The following are some of the interview questions I intend to ask, in hope of answering the above research question. Further, I will be using probes and follow-ups inline with the interview questions. In the event that I significantly depart from these questions, an amendment will be submitted:

Q1: Think back when you first became involved with online dating/matchmaking services and platforms. What was the starting/initial process like for you?

Follow-up Probes:

• How did you learn about Muslim online matchmaking/dating service?
• What prompted you to start using Muslim online dating sites?
• What were your expectations and relational goals in utilizing MOD websites/mobile apps?
• How did you make the selection of which websites/apps to use?
• What have you found particularly helpful about using MOD websites and mobile applications, especially when compared to “traditional” face-to-face (FtF) practices?

Q2: What is your understanding of traditional Muslim courtship practices?

Follow-up Probes:

• What is it about being Muslim that sets the mate selection and courtship practices apart from conventional “Western” dating, if anything?
• In terms of religious identity, how does yours compare to the traditional Muslim identity for a woman your age?

Q3: How have your experiences been with traditional or “offline” courtship?

Q4: Referring back to your experience with MOD websites/apps, what criteria do you use when deciding which men to communicate with?

Q5: Now, think about your communication with potential partners through MOD websites/apps. What do you communicate about (content)? How do you communicate
through the MOD websites/apps (process/usage)? And, how would you describe the quality of the communication through a MOD website/apps (quality)?

Q6: Do you utilize other mediums/channels during the mediated courtship, for instance WhatsApp, Viber, Skype? If so, can you please tell me about them?

Q7: At the beginning of our conversation, you shared your initial experience and impressions regarding online dating. After reflecting back on our discussion, would you say that your expectations and relational goals in using MOD websites/mobile apps changed during the course of using the websites/apps?

Q8: Comparing FtF practices to Internet-mediated interaction, what is your personal preference, and why?
REFERENCES


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ABSTRACT

MEDIATED MATE SELECTION AND COURTSHIP: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MUSLIM AMERICAN WOMEN IN USING ONLINE MATCHMAKING WEBSITES

by

ANNISA MEIRITA PATIMURANI ROCHADIAT

December 2015

Advisor: Dr. Stephanie Tom Tong

Major: Communication Studies

Degree: Master of Arts

This thesis examines how technology affects two major components of courtship among Muslim American women: (1) mate selection and (2) cross-gender interactions between Muslim men and women. Sixteen individuals who self-identify as Muslim American women who are active users of online matchmaking websites participated in interviews conducted through Skype about their online dating experience.

Qualitative data analysis suggests that these women balance the perceived advantages of online dating (e.g., increased individual agency in initiating romantic relationships) with their desire to maintain traditional cultural and religious courtship practices. This study contributes towards a deeper understanding of CMC and online dating among Muslim American women, and gives insights into the nature of technological change and adaptation in society more generally.
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Annisa M.P. Rochadiat is a former journalist currently pursing a doctorate degree in Communication Studies. She holds a Master of Arts degree in International Relations and Diplomacy (Leiden University, the Netherlands) and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science and Southeast Asian Studies (National University of Singapore). Curious in examining the intersections between the interpersonal aspects of computer-mediated communication, culture, and identity, Annisa is particularly intrigued by the role of new media in shaping the formation and perpetuation of contemporary religious identities among Muslim diaspora. Currently serving as a Graduate Teaching Assistant, she teaches public speaking at the undergraduate level. Annisa aspires to always strive for excellence in all that she does, and she enjoys reading, traveling, good company, and great food in her free time.