

The Computer as 'Middle Agent': Negotiating the Meanings of Marriage on a Sikh Online Dating Site

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we consider how virtual marketplaces are reshaping socio-cultural contexts by exploring how intergenerational meanings and expectations of marriage are being negotiated through consumption of an online dating site, Shaadi.com, a site that is used by the Sikh community to find potential life partners. First, the paper discusses relevant background literature on computer-mediated communications and online dating before giving an overview of Shaadi.com in relation to traditional Sikh marriage rituals. Then it describes our interpretivist approach which used participant observation combined with online and offline interviews. The findings show that key socio-cultural tensions around the question of Sikh courtship are being negotiated through the use of this medium. The paper concludes with a discussion of the role of the computer as 'middle agent', a role that is taken traditionally by a family friend in arranged Sikh marriages.

INTRODUCTION

Many communities of users flourish on the Internet, bringing people together that could not otherwise have connected across what are often extremely diverse and dispersed locations (Jones 1999). Interactive modes of computer mediated communication (CMC), such as bulletin boards, discussions lists and chatrooms, have facilitated the growth of many online communities that are devoted to particular product classes or brands. Online communities have thus gained increasing recognition in consumer research, both as a methodological tool to gather consumption-related information (Kozinets 2002) and as a site of enquiry in themselves for phenomena such as brand communities, consumer resistance and subcultures of consumption (Cova 2002 ; Kozinets 1997; Muniz and Schau 2006). Whilst these studies have produced many important insights for consumer researchers, the context of CMC and how the consumption of this medium permeates other facets of consumers' lives has generally not been the research focus. Yet, sociologists such as Slevin (2000) noted radical change in the way in which individuals within the virtual environment interpret and respond to the social world. In this paper we consider how virtual marketplaces are reshaping socio-cultural contexts by exploring how intergenerational meanings and expectations of marriage are being negotiated through consumption of an online dating site, Shaadi.com, a site that is used by the Sikh community to find potential life partners.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Increasingly it is being recognised that it is wrong to dichotomise the virtual and real worlds and that Internet users do not necessarily make such distinctions or compartmentalise aspects of their lives in this way (Argle and Shields 1996; Parks and Floyd 1996; Miller and Slater 1998). To this end, Jones (1999) suggests that there has not been sufficient research about the connections between life online and its meaning in relation to life offline. In this respect, one particularly interesting trend that bridges the two worlds of the virtual and the real is online dating, a phenomenon which has increased dramatically in recent years. Online dating occurs when

ever people use the online environment as a starting point to establish romantic relationships that then move into the offline environment.

One important socio-cultural function of these sites is their emergence as a response to contemporary transition in courtship. There are increasing number of single adults with very little time to date or meet potential partners and this has facilitated the development and expansion of relatively novel modes of establishing intimate relationship (Woll and Young 1989). The use of information technology to find and meet a new partner can be traced back to the mid 1960s when an attempt was made to match individuals by comparing data from questionnaires using a computer in the United States. Promoted as 'scientific' matching of people, the use of the computer gained rapid popularity (Hardey 2002). It is from this background that the current proliferation of online dating sites has evolved. Over 8 million people in the UK alone now use these dating sites (Choat 2000).

From a consumer behaviour point of view, the consumption of these sites is a particularly interesting phenomenon. As with traditional dating agencies, individuals self-market through profiles that are designed to attract potential partners. Internet dating agencies, however, facilitate social interaction in a way that their offline counterparts do not. This is through email, chat rooms and one-to-one synchronous communications prior to developing any relationship(s) offline. Because it is a medium that enables consumers to explore different personae and even multiple identities, there is no doubt that the Internet encourages fantasy consumption. In this sense it can also be a very liberating, playful space for consumers, a space where they can construct the 'myself-that-could-be' (Belk 1996). Not everyone shares this opinion, however, and Bauman (2003) highlights three indicators of the commodified process that he sees as inherent in online dating:

- 1) It is an environment that encourages multiple, and often, brief 'connections'.
- 2) Marketplace values are evident both in the way users market themselves, and in terms of how they look through profiles, and photos to identify an 'evoked set' of potential partners.
- 3) It may encourage restless and disacquiring behaviour on the part of consumers, as also identified by Campbell (1987) in relation to the romantic ethic in contemporary consumption.

However Bauman's dichotomous view of offline/online relationships has been accused of being simplistic. Previous work (Maclaran et al. 2006) shows that this medium is being used very satisfactorily to establish relationships that can move into the offline world. Their findings suggest that the online environment facilitates a more protracted communication and flirtation stage than in the offline environment, and that people often spend longer getting to know each other mentally, as opposed to physically.

Noted in the above brief review are some contrasting functions of online dating sites: on the one hand, as facilitators of social

interaction (Hardey, 2002), and their potential as romantic playspaces, (Belk, 1996); and, on the other, their role in the commodification of romance (Bauman, 2003), where contemporary users of such sites self-market themselves. However, online dating is a phenomenon that arguably represents more than each of these perceptions. In particular, past characterizations and past studies have failed, a) to acknowledge how the two environments (online and offline) complement each other in a defined social community context; and b) to seriously consider the sociocultural processes whereby relationships make the transition from one environment to the other. This study of Shadi.com seeks to explore both of these elements of a virtual dating service within the wider context of contemporary offline Sikh dating rituals.

THE RESEARCH SITE

Shaadi.com was founded in 1997 with the explicit aim of providing Indians around the world with a superior matchmaking service. They claim to have over 5 million members worldwide and over 500,000 success stories. It aims to give customers control over the selection process with easy functions that allow members to identify, filter and contact potential partners.

Shaadi.com is widely known within the Sikh community through both word-of-mouth and advertising on the Indian TV channels. It has gained acceptance amongst both parents and children as a way to find a marriage partner. Part of this acceptance is due to the fact that Sikh marriages are very much a family affair, with a long tradition of parents introducing potential partners to their children. Indeed, if a child reaches marriageable age and is not then married fairly swiftly, the parents actually feel they have failed in some way and that they have not properly fulfilled their role as a parent.

Arranged marriages are thus still commonplace, although there are many tensions between parents and their more westernised children. When a child reaches marriageable age, parents tell family and friends who then start to look and suggest potential candidates. Matching income, education, religious affiliation, ethnic background and caste are all extremely important. When a potential candidate is put forward, the two families involved usually request photos and, if these are acceptable to both sides, the couple will meet up in the presence of a middle person, often termed the 'middle agent', who presides over the occasion and acts as go-between for developing the relationship, or not. Often the couple will be required to make a decision with only one or two meetings, after which a wedding will be arranged if they have decided in the affirmative.

There is tremendous pressure on young Sikhs to go through these processes as otherwise they can be accused of bringing shame on the family. Shaadi.com is frequently regarded by Sikh parents as an efficient way to replace the role of the middle person. The fact that multiple potential partners can be screened, with extensive background information readily available, makes the site very attractive to them and they see it as assisting them in their parental duties. Although some young Sikh adults take the initiative to join the site, many are there because their parents have encouraged them.

RESEARCH METHODS

The overall approach was interpretivist, and data collection followed a multi-method design that combined netnography (Kozinets, 2002) with offline semi-structured interviews. Consistent with a netnographic research approach which requires an immersive combination of participation and observation, one of the authors of this study, herself a third generation British Sikh,

participated in the Shaadi.com community (see Kozinets, 1997, 2002; Maclaran and Catterall, 2001). In keeping with recommended research ethics for online research (Sharf 1999) and the ESOMAR code of conduct, she announced her presence prior to any direct interaction and guaranteed to protect the anonymity of all informants. The netnography resulted in fieldnotes that documented interactions between members on the site and the researcher's own thoughts and feelings about the processes taking place. Table 1 gives further details of the stages of the research and various methods used.

This study was carried out longitudinally over a period of two and a half years. The study adopted a theoretical sampling approach which involves continually comparing and contrasting the data being collected and seeking informants on the basis of the emergent constructs. For example, having talked online to several young Sikh users, in-depth interviews were conducted offline with young adults in the British Sikh community to explore in detail their 'lived' experience of using the site, their perceptions of its role in their lives, and their contemporary interpretation of Sikh courtship. In addition, the researchers felt it was important to undertake in-depth interviews with Sikh parents for comparative purposes to investigate their perceptions of the site, how it contrasted with their own courtship experiences, and the themes of cultural and intergenerational tensions that were emerging.

The data was collected in several phases due to the nature of this sampling method. The data collection, analysis and interpretation progressed in an iterative and interrelated manner between the online and offline environments, following the principles for the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data as recommended by Spiggle (1994) and others (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Arnould and Wallendorf 1994).

All the interviews were conducted with informants from the British Sikh community. The first Sikh families (i.e. first and second generation) came to Britain in the 1950s from India. The main informants for this current research are the children of the second generation of Sikhs that arrived. This third generation have all been born in Britain and raised as British Sikhs.

Our core research question for the study was how is consumption of the Shaadi.com website helping to reshape the socio-cultural context of its Sikh users? Three key themes emerged in answer to this question, namely: 1) facilitating changing boy/girl courtship expectations; 2) creating a space for parent/child negotiations; and 3) bridging east/west cultural divisions. We now go on to explore each of these in more detail, illustrating them with excerpts from our informant interviews.

FINDINGS

Facilitating Changing Boy/Girl Courtship Expectations

As already documented, the boy meets girl situation within the Sikh culture has long been a process associated with stress, pressure and a lack of options; a process governed by parents where young Sikhs have had little say in the decisions being made. This research found much evidence of change, particularly in relation to the increasing expectations of young Sikhs to have their own autonomy in relationships with members of the opposite sex. Most of our informants believed that they could find a 'soulmate', a person ideal for them and not just a marriage partner in the traditional sense. Many frequently described their quest for romantic love. In the following quote from Jatinder we see this clearly expressed:

My intention was to find someone that I could get to know and then eventually marry. And it sounds easy but it really isn't

TABLE 1
Overview of the Research

Time Period	Research Phase	Research Methods
Oct 04– Mar 05	<u>Exploratory Phase</u>	- observations of shaadi.com - Observation of competitors' websites - Participant observation
April 05– June 06	<u>Phase 1</u> Development of emergent themes Access to parents and young adults	- Online participant observation - Online Interviews (8) - Offline interviews(8) - Parental in-depth interviews (4)
July 06– December 06	<u>Phase 2</u> Development of core constructs	- Online participant observation - offline observations - Online interviews (7) - Offline interviews (7) - Parental interviews (6)

easy at all, in fact it's really hard work. See, I just wanted to find my Aishwariya Rai [Bollywood heroine] I suppose and I know that sounds sad and that I'm not exactly Vivek Oberoi [Bollywood hero] but she is my ideal woman or my Bollywood heroine, if you like, that I wanted to find for me. The thing is I thought I just wanted to have my own space to find a girl that was perfect, or ideal for me. (Jatinder, Sikh male)

In providing him with his 'own space', Shaadi.com gives Jatinder his freedom to search through a vast array of potential partners, thereby fuelling his expectations that he can eventually find his ideal. Simultaneously, this seemingly never-ending process of searching produces the 'restless dissatisfaction' that Campbell (1987) identifies in relation to the romantic ethic in contemporary consumption, a feeling that there may always be something better around the next corner. We can also see the domination of Bollywood in Jatinder's narrative. Bollywood is the Indian version of Hollywood, a multi-billion pound film industry that caters specifically for Indian tastes. Otnes and Peck (2003) have further illustrated the links between romance and consumption as epitomised by the global impact of the 'white wedding'. Similarly, Bollywood encourages the pursuit of romance with heroes and heroines that defy Indian tradition and seek true love.

Our informants often highlighted their wish to see the Sikh approach to marriage modernised, expressing their dissatisfaction with the ideals and expectations of traditionally arranged marriages. In order to be happy, they believe they need to experience emotion such as love, an emotion that previous generations did not require or anticipate within their formally arranged marriages. Indeed, one frequent saying, re-iterated throughout parental interviews, was that 'love comes after marriage'. This was seen as a somewhat heartless and very functional approach by their children as the following quote from Sarbjit illustrates:

They're [the parents] very clinical about marriage, it's all statistical to them. She has to be Sikh, the same caste, tall, educated, preferably a doctor, hospitable for all the guests that come over to the house, good family background, and the list goes on and on. The thing is I do agree with them, but for me marriage is for life and it's about how I feel about that person. It's very emotional and personal for me. (Sarbjit, Sikh male)

With its predisposition to encourage fantasising (Maclaran et al. 2006), the online dating environment fuels these expectations of love and romance. When people meet online they frequently have many conversations by email and telephone prior to meeting in the offline environment. Thus, considerable fantasies may build up, particularly to do with each others' physical attributes. This creation of romantic illusions can produce an emotional roller-coaster ride which ultimately may lead to disappointment:

I think because everything is done online it allows you to drift of into this fantasy land that everything will be perfect like in a Hindi film. But it doesn't always work like that. Because we build up these great expectations and she will do exactly the same, and when we meet we expect this great moment where we first meet and see each other. But how likely is it that it will be like that? We set ourselves up for disappointment, by having these unrealistic expectations. (Jatinder, Sikh male)

Despite the fact that Shaadi.com may encourage impossible imaginings, however, the very fact that these young Sikhs are thinking of romance at all represents a significant cultural change in their expectations. Significantly also, Shaadi.com encourages a courtship process that is much less formal than previously was the case, a process that is longer drawn out and incorporates both dating and flirting, two elements that did not come into previous, traditional Sikh courtship experiences:

When I meet a girl I suppose the first thing I judge is how things are between us and whether it feels right, whether I'm attracted to her. But then I would kind of mentally compare the stuff that she has told me online to know how she is in real life. I would expect her to behave in a certain way and be sensible, but at the same time I think it's nice to have that little bit of flirting. (Sarbjit, Sikh male)

Creating a Space for Parent/Child Negotiations

Sikh culture, customs and traditions originate from India. When the first two generations of Sikhs migrated to Britain they resisted complete acculturation into their new country of residence and sought to maintain their Sikh identity. However the third generation of Sikhs in Britain were expected to learn and assimilate two cultures simultaneously. So, as we have just seen in the previous section, although they belong to the same Sikh culture and family, there are major intergenerational differences that exist, especially when it comes to the issue of marriage. Issues such as how a boy and girl should meet, together with the characteristics that a prospective partner should possess, are issues that create much intergenerational conflict. As Harjit describes her lack of communication with her parents, the deep tensions in the relationship between them are evident:

It's a strain all the time because you're having to argue your way through things and getting them to see your kind of things. And sometimes, their way of thinking is, you just think, god it's just so old school and they're making their own lives miserable because of the way they think. And you just think, god if they could lose that mentality, they'd be a lot happier too. (Harjit, Sikh female)

Similarly, for Sarbjit too, this is a major conflict with his parents over each other's expectations of marriage. It is also a battle over who controls the process, his mother or himself:

They definitely think arranged marriage is the way I should get married and I think that's because that is the only way they have ever known, because it's also the only I have ever known until I watched some of my friends get married and I realised that different does not mean it's bad. Sometimes it causes so many arguments because I'm adamant that I do things my way, and my mum is adamant things are done her way. Sometimes I feel so torn about what I should do, but I have to be true to myself as well. (Sarbjit, Sikh Male)

Shaadi.com, being a space that is acceptable to both sides, becomes a way to resolve some of these tensions. As we have just seen, for the younger generation of Sikhs, Shaadi.com gives them an independent voice and freedom to romance, love and date. For parents, the site allows their children to seek matches in terms of income, education, caste and so forth, much like the choice criteria used for an arranged match. The website is a means to an end and the most important thing is the outcome, which is to have their child married and to have fulfilled their obligations as a parent:

It's like I was saying, my parents and myself don't actually argue about how I should marry or anything, but I think my parents have their different ideals, but essentially no one cares as long as I get married. (Harjit, Sikh female)

This apparent not caring on the part of her parents is, of course, dependent on her eventually marrying another Sikh. Parents are forced to accept that, as British Sikhs, their children have a more

limited range of marriageable partners in their day-to-day family and social networks than if they lived in India. Therefore the opportunity to access a larger number of suitable partners afforded by the website means that it gains respectability with Sikh parents as a means of achieving their desired outcome of a good marriage for their child. In many ways it is assisting them in their role of being a good parent and finding an appropriate match for their child. In a similar way to their children, they too are adapting their ideals as they witness the changing attitudes of the younger generation and as they seek to maintain good relationships with their children. Thus, in general, it seems that as long as the children seek parental approval and include them in their decisions over potential partners, then everything they do to this end is acceptable:

With my parents I think they have their ideals of how they would like me to get married and the kind of person they would like me to marry, but they also acknowledge that it's really hard to find people for me to marry. As a result of that they're a lot more flexible. My mum is always telling me to find someone to marry myself, but make sure I'm sensible about how I do it. (Harjit, Sikh Female)

Just as their parents strive to maintain good relationships with their children, so too do young Sikhs try to please their parents. Those we interviewed were reluctant to take any action with regards to marriage without parental approval. This is because honour and obedience for one's parents is a deeply rooted aspect of Sikh custom. It is the responsibility of parents to ensure that their children understand and fulfil Sikh cultural expectations. If children deviate from expected cultural norms this reflects negatively on the whole family, but especially on the parents. It is therefore the responsibility of children to ensure that they represent their parents well, and avoid bringing shame on them.

This is where Shaadi.com represents a middle ground where they can negotiate their respective needs. Several informants described how their parents, particularly their mother, would take a great interest in their activities on the website. In return, they would often consult their parents about potential partners they had viewed. Some mothers would frequently sit with their children at the computer, scrolling through potential partners on the website so that they can both assess them. Searching together in this way becomes a way to unite parent and their child during an activity that is very important for them both, whilst at the same time allowing them access to a deeper understanding of each other's needs. A significant aspect of this interaction facilitated by the website is that the selection process gives control to the young adult rather than the parent. It is in this way that they can begin to re-negotiate their differing ideas of love and marriage on a more equal basis.

Bridging East/West Cultural Divisions

Many tensions that arise between Sikh parents and children are less a conflict over tradition, and more a clash between eastern versus western cultural values. This clash was referred to constantly throughout the interviews with both parents and children. Third generation Sikhs have been born and bred in Britain but their parents and grandparents were not. Thus, each generation is at a different stage of acculturation (Peñaloza 1994) and this produces much intergenerational conflict and lack of understanding.

Many of the younger generation informants feel that they face a cultural struggle that impacts deeply on their sense of identity. Like Peñaloza's 'border consumers', they acknowledge the pulls of both British and Sikh cultures. Yet, they often feel as though they do not belong properly to either as they constantly try to reconcile the opposing cultural influences that they experience. Part of the

recurrent problem for them is that parents and grandparents often think that younger Sikhs are too westernised, as the following quote from Sabeena highlights:

But in some ways I do clash with my parents, or my grandparents, because I have my own opinions which they think are too westernized, or they have their ideas of how things should be done, or how I should behave. Like, if I laugh too much at Indian functions, my gran will tell me off and say it doesn't look nice, whereas I think 'if I'm happy then let me be happy!' (Sabeena, Sikh Female)

For the older generations, the western influence on their young is seen as a major threat to their Sikh identity. As we see in the quote above, they pass these anxieties on to younger Sikhs in an attempt to make them retain their cultural roots. This, then, has a significant emotional impact on their children (or grandchildren) who feel torn between different value systems. We see this clearly as Jatinder discusses his feelings:

Well I'm a bit torn, to be honest with you, because, while I do agree with them in that we shouldn't go on loads of dates or have endless girlfriends, at the same time I think we should have the opportunity to date someone and see what they are like, and get to know them if we are going to spend the rest of our lives with them. But it comes back down to the issue of cultural conflict doesn't it? Because Indian culture dictates that we should have an arranged marriage, but the western world in which we live encourages us to what suits us and makes us happy. So, again, I'm damned if I do, and damned if don't. (Jatinder, Sikh Male)

As we can see in the above quote from Jatinder, he feels caught between the opposing cultural values of East and West, between what is perceived as right and wrong, in terms of courtship, by each culture. Thus for young Sikhs, such as Jatinder, the continual struggle of not feeling totally Indian or totally British can generate an identity conflict that results in an overall sense of alienation.

The Sikh marriage process throws these tensions into high relief, encouraging what Giddens (1991) describes as 'the reflexive self', as young Sikhs start to question aspects of themselves in relation to the demands that are suddenly been imposed on them. Throughout the interview there was a recurrent narrative of comparing and contrasting the British culture they live in with the Indian culture of their parents and grandparents:

I think being within the British culture, kind of mixing in with that, I think it's kind of opened my eyes up a lot more, like the Indian culture is very narrow minded, it's very much, you must be like this, you must be like that and anything outside of that is wrong. And the western culture is almost opposite to Indian. (Jatinder, Sikh Male)

It seems that they weigh the demands made on them by each culture, especially their expectations versus those of their parents, and try to achieve a compromise between the two cultures, performing a type of balancing act. For example Harjit described it as 'a case of balancing what's required or expected of you from the western world versus your family from the eastern world'; and Sabeena confided that 'I have to find a way to balance it out but that's hard as well'.

Shaadi.com offers them a supportive community of other like-minded peers who can relate to the conflicts that they are experiencing over the question of whether they are Sikh, Indian or British. Yet

it is also a community that receives the approval of their parents. In this respect computer technology is assisting them as they try to find a balance between the two cultural forces. Although it is a western technology, by making a website such as Shaadi.com available that brings members of the Sikh community together, it is also assisting them to embed themselves more strongly in eastern culture. It is in this sense that the website acts as a bridge between East and West cultural divisions.

DISCUSSION

The findings show clearly the role of Shaadi.com as a middle ground where a younger generation of Sikhs can seek a compromise between the opposing worlds in which they find themselves. The site provides a liminal zone, a space between transitions (Schouten 1991) where they can negotiate their roles as mature Sikh adults. Their parents condone their use of such a site because for them it seems to be a logical extension of the role of the middle person, or 'middle agent', in the traditional Sikh marriage process. Like the middle agent, the website acts as a go-between to get suitably matched couples together and to allow them to develop their relationship. However the website also goes beyond this role by also acting as a catalyst for change through encouraging new rituals to emerge (i.e. dating and flirting) and giving more control over choice of partner to the parties involved and not their parents.

The interaction that takes place on the site between prospective partners and the accompanying discussions with their parents leads to an emerging Sikh narrative of modern courtship. Two key features of narrative highlighted by Elliott (2005) are: a) the encouragement of moments of recognition (or reflection) by narrators; and b) a sense of pointedness (the concept that within narrative you arrive at key focal points of meaning as the narrative unfolds). As these young people are using the website and sharing their experiences with friends, findings show that they are reaching moments of recognition in their own sense of understanding of Sikh courtship. In turn, the sense of pointedness emerges in the interactions between parents and children as they arrive at a shared meaning (a focal understanding) around the role and expectations of young Sikh adults in relation to contemporary courtship. The Sikh dating site is a catalyst for this emerging intergenerational narrative: at the same time, its processes are a material part of it.

Thus, arguably, in contrast to past studies, the consumption of online dating sites represents much more than a contemporary use of information technology for better social interaction (Hardey, 2002); or reductionist marketplace commodity thinking (Bauman, 2003); and also more than a valuable fantasy playspace (Belk, 1996). In this case, the 'lived' world of the virtual marketplace is making a fundamental contribution to both continuing and new socio-cultural structuring of consumer lives.

In a wider sense, that may be applicable to other contexts, the study reinforces Slevin's (2000) view that the virtual environment engenders changes in the way individuals interpret and respond to the social world. Overall the website brings the online and offline worlds together in ways that enable socio-cultural tensions to be made more explicit and ultimately to work towards their resolution. As such it is very much an extension of its users offline social interactions (McLuhan 1994), rather than being completely separate. Instead of being a fantasy world apart, the effects of CMC enable consumers to be grounded 'more firmly within their existing material communities and circumstances' (Jones 2002, p.1).

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