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The Business of Matchmaking in Social Media in the Middle East[1]

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Abstract

In this chapter, we will discuss what is known about a new phenomenon in the Middle East—the use of social media in matchmaking and chat rooms. We will begin with a discussion of what social media and computer matchmaking sites are like and how common they have become in the Middle East. We will discuss emerging attitudes about such matchmaking and chatting sites and regional differences in attitudes toward such sites. We will find that although currently men are the primary users of most Middle East marriage sites, increasingly women are becoming interested. We will review what Middle Eastern men and women desire in chat room partners and mates. Next, we will discuss reasons why such sites are gaining in popularity—interestingly, the sites have a particularly Middle Eastern flair—and review the barriers to the use of such sites. We will compare internet services to other matchmaking techniques—specifically parents, friends, and families; traditional matchmakers,

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[1] In this paper, we will include Afghanistan, Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, and the UAE, in our definition of "Middle East."

and casual meetings. We will conclude with a discussion of the effect that the innovation in such sites might be expected to have on Middle Eastern societies. Despite the potential political, social, and legal ramifications often associated with online dating/matching sites, the industry continues to flourish. It is expected that these innovations may alter the ways in which Middle Eastern young men and women perceive, understand, and relate to one another. Will the social media engender wider and deeper social changes in the culture and politics of the Middle East? Will it contribute to greater individualism, more freedom, moves to gender equality, and growing harmony in the long run? No one knows but we suspect it might.

I. Introduction

Anytime a new form of communication is invented—the "penny dreadful" newspapers, Morse code and the telegraph, the ham radio, TV, or computers—people find ways to use that technology to find love. There is a long tradition of arranged marriages in the Middle East. Given this tradition, it is not surprising that many parents, matchmakers, and young people have added Web matching and the social media (video dating, online bulletin boards, chat rooms, and so forth) to traditional matching strategies—supplementing family contacts, matchmakers, newspaper ads, and the like. Let us begin by defining computer matchmaking and discussing its prevalence.

Method

Our first step was to conduct computer searches of the terms: "social media Middle East" and "social media" paired with the names of all of the individual countries listed in Footnote 1. We then replaced "social media" with "date and mate matchmaking," "chat rooms," "instant messaging," "speed dating," and so forth (again paired with names of the individual countries), utilizing the PsycINFO database (American Psychological Association, 1967-2010) and MEDLINE (National Library of Medicine, 1966-2014) and search engines such as Google, GoogleScholar, Safari, Explorer, Firefox, and Netscape. When all was said and done, we were able to identify a number of papers that assessed people's attitudes toward computer match making, it's prevalence, its unique forms in the Middle East, it's pros and cons, and the impact that it has had and is expected to have on the Middle East. On occasion we wrote to the authors themselves, asking if they had done more work or knew of more work on this topic that had not appeared on our list. Surely more studies exist, but we have been unable to find them. On occasion, when no studies were available for a given country, we were forced to rely on popular magazine and newspaper articles.

II. What is "Computer Matchmaking" and How Prevalent Is It?

Long before the existence of Match.com, eHarmony, Zoosk, Badoo, Tinder, and all the other mega-dating sites, computer matchmaking got its start back in 1965 when two Harvard undergraduates, Vaughn Morrill and Jeff Tarr, decided to "take some of the blindness out of blind dates" by creating Operation Match (Sprecher, et al., 2008). For a one-time fee of $3, college students could submit a profile of themselves along with a description of their ideal match. A computer then went about the business of matching students according to their attractiveness and common interests. While Operation Match was obviously very small and technologically crude by today's standards, Morrill and Tarr foresaw something much bigger for the future of computer matchmaking. They were right (see also Hatfield, et al., 1966).

Computer matchmaking has now become a very big deal indeed. Whereas some sites, such as eHarmony.com and Match.com, are for the general population of singles, worldwide, other sites target special niches in the population. In the West, for example, there are sites designed to appeal to various age groups (e.g., HookUp.com and SilverSingles.com), political groups (Conservativesonly.com and LiberalHearts.com), religious groups (CatholicSingles.com, Jdate.com, ChristianCafe.com, Muslima.com, and Buddistconnectt.com).   Dating sites also exist for people who possess mental and physical disabilities. Even people who wish to find dates for themselves and their favorite pets can sign on to a site (DateMyPet.com)! Currently there are three billion internet users worldwide, over one hundred million of whom are in the Middle East (Internet World Stats, 2014). There are 8,000 matchmaking sites

with over a billion subscribers worldwide (Zwilling, 2014). And, whereas Operation Match was not technologically advanced enough to permit members to communicate directly with each other, today's matchmaking or internet dating sites typically offer several ways for members to virtually connect with one another, including both synchronous (e.g., instant messaging, texting, video chat) and asynchronous (e.g. email) modes of communication.

Here is a typical profile, taken from one Middle Eastern dating site, www.muslima.com (see Figure 1.)

Member Overview

English Translation:
Moslem young, ...qui loves Allah and his prophéte. ....

Original French:
jeune musulmane , ...qui adore Allah et son prophéte..........

Gender:	Female
Age:	23
Marital Status:	Single
Has Children:	No
Lives in:	Kenitra, Gharb-Chrarda-Beni Hssen, Morocco
Nationality:	Morocco
Appearance:	Attractive
Height:	168 cm (5 ft 6 in)
Weight:	57 Kg (126 lb)
Hair Color:	Black
Eye Color:	Brown
Ethnicity:	Arab (Middle Eastern)
Religion:	Islam - Sunni
Star Sign:	Aquarius
Education:	Bachelors degree
Occupation	étudiante/sociologue
Languages spoken:	Arabic
English Ability:	Some
Smoking:	No
Relocate:	Maybe
Last active:	23-Mar-09

Enlarge Photo

Show Interest
Send Mail
More Photos
Add Favorites
Block User
Send Profile

Insert Figure 1 here

A typical Middle Eastern Web matching profile. Courtesy of Dana Diminescu & Matthieu Renault, (2011). The matrimonial web of migrants: The economics of profiling as a new form of ethnic business. *Social Science Information*, *50* (3-4), p. 685.

II. Regional Differences in Attitudes Toward Computer Matchmaking

Sometimes people talk as if the Middle East were a single, homogeneous entity. Yet, throughout the Middle East there is great diversity in religion (ranging from Baha'i, Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and more, to Islam in its many varieties). There is diversity in ethnicity, economic status (ranging from $103,000 GDP per capita in Qatar to $2,500 GD in Yemen and the Gaza Strip), in age, level of educational, and the like (Paige, 2014). Sometimes, in the Middle East, one can encounter people from the first, second, and third worlds within a few feet of one another in the bazaars. The use of the internet by young people in the Middle East is influenced by gender (men often have more freedom to make decisions about their life than do women), class, education, access to city life, country of birth and residence, and the like. Thus, in this chapter, although we will draw some general conclusions, in our specific examples we will always try to make it clear which of the Middle Eastern groups we are speaking about.

Middle Eastern parents tend to be more involved in youthful mate selection than are Western parents. It is typically the parents who arrange the meetings between potential couples. Parents take into account religious, personality, and monetary compatibilities.

In some Middle Eastern countries, consanguineous marriage (cousins marrying cousins) is commonplace. In places such as Qatar, Yemen, and the United Arab Emirates, the prevalence of consanguineous marriage is currently greater than it was a generation ago, hovering near 50% (Sandridge, Takeddin, Al-Kaabi, & Frances, 2010). There are many

reasons why such marriages persist in the Middle East: tradition, culture, status, preservation of family honor, name, wealth, and other benefits. Since it is thought that such marriages are particularly stable, women receive larger inheritances, enjoy greater control over financial assets, dowries are lower, and monetary exchanges are lower than in in exogamous unions (Weinreb, 2008.) In Qatar, some children are "reserved" for each other before they are even born.

Not surprisingly, then, the attitudes toward online dating are complex, to say the least, in the Middle East. Consequently, young men and women in more restrictive Middle Eastern countries are often willing to risk governmental sanctions for the chance to socialize with potential romantic or chat partners. There are several popular Web matching sites (such as Muslims4marriage.com, LoveHabibi.com, Singlemuslim.com, Muslima.com, MuslimLounge.com, and MeetIsraeliSingles.com).

Many youth in some Middle Eastern countries view the Internet as one of the few ways in which they may freely interact with the opposite sex. In Saudi Arabia, for example, there is strict segregation of the sexes. (A couple caught engaging in illicit activities may be sentenced to stoning and lashes, and unmarried couples who share a meal in a restaurant or spend time together alone risk being arrested.) In such communities, paradoxically, online social networks, such as khtabh.net, are booming. Currently, more than 200 Twitter sites and dozens of other Internet forums offer services for Saudi men seeking mates for traditional marriages (first or

second marriages) and women seeking prospective mates or simply someone of the opposite sex to chat with. A few sites offer an Arab type of "marriage," a *misyar* or "visitor's marriage," which enable men to meet women for brief intimate encounters. (Only "ruined" women, who cannot hope for a traditional marriage, would accept such liaisons.) These encounters are comparable to the short, illicit encounters available in the West, for people who seek intimacy without commitment. Such sites are cheaper than traditional matchmakers, who charge about 2,000 riyals ($530) for a traditional marriage and 5,000 riyals ($1,300) for a *misyar* marriage—in which the man pays the entire bill (Abboud-Riyadh, 2013).

In Kuwait, most university students are comfortable using the Internet. A full 75% of them are active Internet users (Abbas, 2001). More than 30% of them (more women than men) use it regularly to chat with and even to arrange meetings with members of the opposite sex (Wheeler, 2003).

In Cairo, in a sample of American College students, 50.3% of men and women said they had met at least one member of the opposite sex through the MSN site, a general site owned by Microsoft network, which recently added a free personal profile/dating section. (It should be noted that AUC is one of Egypt's most prestigious and expensive universities.) The MSN site includes an instant messenger section, which enables instant online conversations. Also popular are ICQ and #IRMC, which are instant

chat rooms. Only a small sliver of students experimented with specialized dating sites, namely cupidjunction and one2onematch (Galal, 2003).

Jewish men and women in Israel face political and economic challenges that may complicate the dating process. In Israel there are, of course, large differences in the customs of orthodox Jews, more liberal Jews, and the Arabs. In modern-day Israel, for example, among liberal Jews, men and women are allowed to meet in public places. There are also numerous online dating sites that connect daters. In Israel, these include MeetIsraeliSingles.com, Jmatch.com, Jdate.com, seeyouinisrael.com, SawyouatSinai.com, and Jwed.com (Bokek-Cohen, et al., 2007; Bryant, 2013).

III. Profiles

Men are the prime users of most Middle Eastern marriage sites. In a survey of subscribers to muslima.com, by country of residence, for example, Diminescu and Renault (2011) found that in Middle Eastern countries virtually all the users were men (see Figure 2). This means that the few women who dare the new will have a wide selection of potential mates while men will have very few matches.
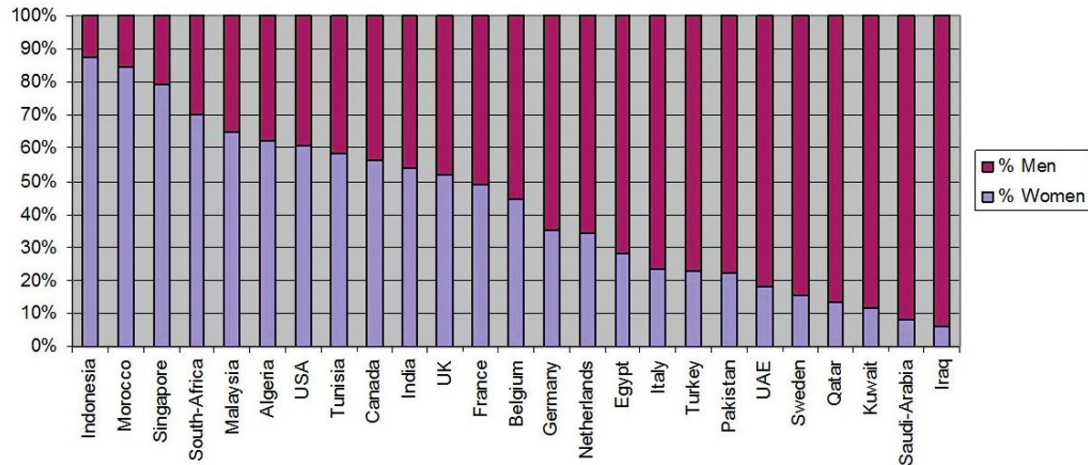
Insert Figure 2 here

Figure 2: Percentage of men and women on Muslima.com by country of residence.

Courtesy of Dana Diminescu & Matthieu Renault, (2011). The matrimonial web of migrants: The economics of profiling as a new form of ethnic business. *Social Science Information*, *50* (3-4), p. 693.

Insert Figure 2 here

According to sociologist Ali Fahmi, in modern-day Egypt, both men and women seek a marriage "based on love, personal fulfillment, and mutual understanding" (Shahine, 2004, page 2; see also Levine, et al., 1995). Of course what young people want, what they can get, and what they are willing to settle for are very different things.

In today's Middle East, similarity of religion is generally of primary importance as well. The Middle East is mostly comprised of Muslims (Shia and Sunni's), with the exception of Israel (which, of course, has a majority Jewish population) and Syria (which includes a considerable population of Christians). Religion is generally of critical importance within the Muslim and Jewish communities. Most Middle Eastern cultures tend to be far more conservative than are Western cultures. Men and women are sometimes forbidden even to meet before marriage. The relations between single men

and women are tightly controlled and tightly monitored. In some Muslim communities, polygamy is still accepted.

Should liberal Middle Easterners choose to date someone with a different religious affiliation, they will face numerous obstacles. Online dating complicates this issue. As we said, Middle Easterners are normally constrained by their social circles to potential partners with the same religious affiliation. However online dating and chat rooms allow young people to communicate with others belonging to different religious groups. Most Middle Easterners do not approve of inter-religious dating or marriage. Such an act may cause one's family to disapprove or even provoke physical attacks from those who disapprove of such relationships.

Recently, a few critics have begun to object to the excessive focus on religious orthodoxy in matching. One website in Israel, End the Madness, was created to critique current matchmaking approaches, including undue attention to superficial Jewish religious customs, rather than to qualities necessary for a fulfilling marriage. One Israeli matchmaker, Daniella Rudof, who has a popular website titled "Marriage Architect," observes:

> All sorts of arbitrary external practices have become divisive
> 'standards' by which the Jewish nation has splintered, each tiny
> faction holy unto itself, with people's religious worth—and marriage
> eligibility—based on such things like tablecloths used on the Jewish
> Sabbath . . . The dating 'scene' is replete with this insanity (Bryant,
> 2013, p. 5).

Still, for most people religion remains important.

Social psychologists have long documented that, worldwide, several additional factors affect what people yearn for, or at least expect in the marriage market:

(1) People seek partners whose level of social desirability closely approximates their own (Hatfield, Rapson, & Aumer-Ryan, 2008). Specifically, researchers find that the more socially desirable young people are (the more attractive, personable, famous, rich, or considerate they are), the more socially desirable they will wish a mate to be. Dating couples are more likely to fall in love if they perceive their relationships to be fair and equitable. Couples are likely to end up with someone fairly close to themselves in social desirability. They are also likely to be matched on the basis of self-esteem, looks, intelligence, education, and mental and physical health (or disability). Equitable relationships are satisfying and comfortable relationships; inequity is associated with distress, guilt, anger, and anxiety. Equitable relationships are more stable than are inequitable relationships.

(2) In general, women wish for more from marital relationships than do men (Bokek-Cohen, Peres, & Kanazawa, 2013). Based on his study of 37 cultures in 33 countries around the world, Buss (2003) found that typically women list more than three times as many traits as "important" in the selection of their long-term mates than do men. (In addition to the traits we have previously mentioned) women tend to list 10 traits as critically important in a mate: economic resources, good financial prospects, high social status, older age, ambition and industriousness,

dependability and stability, athletic prowess, good health, love, and a willingness to invest in children. In contrast, most men seek only three traits in a long-term mate: youth, physical attractiveness, and an appealing shape.) In that study, religious affiliation was far down on the list of traits people cared about. Perhaps men and women just took it for granted that they would only consider someone of their own religion as a possible mate (Buss, 1999).

 (3) In most countries, men care somewhat more about physical attractiveness in selecting a mate than do women, while women are more concerned with a man's level of education, socio-economic status, and willingness and ability to support a wife and family (Buss, 2003).   Of course, in many Middle Eastern countries it is *parents* who are looking for an appropriate match, not the young people.

 (4) In marriage markets, the ratio of available men and women matters. If there are more eligible men than women in a given society, women can afford to be unusually choosy. On the other hand, if there are more women than men, it is men who feel free to demand more from the relationship (Hatfield, Forbes, & Rapson, 2012).

 What do men and women in, say, Egypt look for in a potential mate? Interviews with mate seekers at two agencies found that there were six major categories for selection: age, level of education, marital status, financial status, character, physical appearance, and "chemistry" (Abu Hashish & Peterson, 1999). These preferences shape the kind of profiles

men and women craft (i.e., their strategic self presentations) as well as the

potential mates that will attract their interest when they are presented with

a variety of profiles on a computer matching site (Ahuvia & Adelman, 1992;

Bokek-Cohen, et al., 2007). Egypt may be a bit of an outlier, compared

with the more religious nations of the Middle East. For typical profiles in

Saudi Arabia see Abboud-Riyadh (2013). For typical profiles throughout

the Middle East on *Muslima,* see Diminescu and Renault (2011). Again, in

reviewing these studies, we should remember that in many communities

parents craft the profiles and they may simply be looking for potential

partners whose family status is compatible with their own.

<div align="center">IV. Reasons for Using Matching Services</div>

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of men and

women who are single. People are living longer and marrying at a later age, if

at all. In addition, in many societies, more women are getting an education and

joining the workforce. As a result, the context within which people date and

mate has changed, and for many, online dating and chatting have become

more appealing.

Single men and women may be attracted to online dating for a number of

reasons. The most obvious reason is to find dates or mates. Online dating is a

time and cost-efficient way of accessing a large number of potential mates. In

addition, daters may be exposed to individuals they would not normally meet:

for example, potential mates in different geographic locations, or those who are

in different social circles. Online dating is also flexible and accommodates any

schedule. It is a quick and easy way of matching daters based on mutual interests that may promote deeper and longer lasting relationships. Lastly, daters are spared the embarrassment of the face-to-face rejection they could conceivably experience in person. For a detailed discussion of all of the reasons men and women are attracted to online matching, see Sprecher, et al. (2008). In a study of Cairo university students, Galal (2003) provides a detailed list of the reasons students mention for using the Web to find romance.

As a consequence, online matchmaking is finally catering to Arabs (who comprise a variety of religious groups) and Muslims. Recently Al-Azhar's Mufti Ali Gomaa issued a religious edict allowing marriage through computer matrimonial services on condition that the girls' parents are kept informed. Today, the most popular sites for Middle East matching are the U. S. based www.zawaj.com (with Web traffic at 2,800,000 page views per month) and www.MuslimMatch.com (which has attracted 47,649 members) (Shahine, 2004). Other dating and marital matching sites are the Egyptian Arabic-language website El-Nos_El_Tani and the Turkish site, turkishpersonals.com.

For a detailed discussion of all of the potential advantages associated with online matching, see Finkel, et al. (2012) and Sprecher, et al. (2008). However there are also inherent challenges to online matching.

V. Barriers to Online Matching

Harkness and Khaled (2014) have observed that:

> Research from a variety of international settings indicates that as countries undergo modernization, arranged and consanguineous matrimony decline and love marriages increase (. . . Fox, 1975 [Turkey]; Givens & Hirschman, 1994 [Iran]). . . . In the rapidly

modernizing MENA region, consanguinity is decreasing in countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Bahrain . . . but persists in others (p. 587).

In the various Middle Eastern countries, the "rules" differ by social class, urban/rural status, age and marital status (single versus divorced.) Nonetheless we will hazard some generalizations. In Qatar, public dating is illegal and relatively rare. In Pakistan and other Gulf nations, couples rarely if ever have an opportunity to meet in private before marriage. In many places, such meetings are a violation of customs and laws. According to Islamic Shariah laws, young Muslims who meet in private places can be charged with *khalwat*, or "close proximity," which carries a fine and/or a prison sentences of several months. For young women in the Middle East, pressures to preserve reputation are especially intense. Writing of the values of the northern Egyptian village of Nazlat al-Rayyis, where he conducted his fieldwork, Schielke (2009) observed:

> In the complex interplay of different moral registers around love, sexuality and marriage, young men have much more space to maneuver than women do . . . While men can more easily balance between different ethical ideals, women experience much more pressure to fulfill conflicting ideals of chastity and attractiveness. Various forms of flirting, courting and dating have become increasingly common, especially in the institutions of higher education. Young men expect girls to be attractive and willing to meet them in cafeterias, promenades and other such spaces that have become preferred sites for potential couples to meet, lest they risk being seen as 'backward' (*mutakhallifa*). At the same time, however, young women's status of being respectable (*muhtarama*) is essentially linked to the virtues of virginity and seclusion, with the paradoxical result that romantic love itself can become an obstacle in the way of marriage. A girl who goes out with boys is 'bad' (*wihsha*) and not respectable (regardless of her virginity), and thus not suitable for marriage in the eyes of young men and their families. Or, as a friend of mine put it: 'The girls you go out with are not the girls you marry' (pp. 169-170).

In Saudi Arabia a young woman can get arrested, not to mention lashed, for being alone with a man, given the state-sponsored religious police who enforce strict segregation of the sexes (Parssinen, 2009). Given the ubiquity of arranged and consanguineous marriages, it is not surprising that in these countries, family is more important than social networks in the arrangement of marriages.

Most Middle Easterners who participate in online matching risk sanctions. Consequences may range from social stigma to possible imprisonment. In Baghdad, Layla Ahmad, a retired teacher said:

> We are a conservative society. . . we don't accept that our daughters meet boys through the internet. It's dangerous, and you can't observe your children and what they are talking about.

> Three months ago, I discovered that my daughter was chatting with somebody online. . . I took her computer and sold it (Sabah, 2006, p. 1)

Online matchmaking has been stereotyped as a solution for individuals who lack self-confidence, physical attractiveness, or social skills and thus are unable to find partners in the "normal" way (McKeena, 2002, p. 12). Countries such as Iran or Saudi Arabia may have political and legal punishments for those who engage in online matchmaking. Lastly, online dating may pose real difficulties if daters do not verify the status of potential partners. More specifically, participants must be wary of online predators who disguise their identity or intentions. In a study of Cairo university students, Galal (2003) interviewed men and women, asking them for the reasons they had for avoiding matching sites and meeting people they met online, face-to face.

Women were most concerned about family disapproval and whether they could trust a potential suitor. Men, on the other hand, were most concerned about rejection and concerns that their partners would find out that they had lied to them about themselves.

For a detailed discussion of all of the potential difficulties and dangers associated with online matching, see Finkel, et al. (2012) and Sprecher, et al. (2008). Nonetheless, the world is changing, and a few more Middle Eastern men and women are beginning to use cell phones, social media, visit nightclubs, and to access computer matching sites to meet potential romantic partners (Peter, 2009). Today, many "how to" guides advise Middle Easterners on how to avoid potential problems. For a comprehensive list of the problems many Muslim parents and *ulama* (religious leaders) see in use of the internet, see Larsson (2013).

VI. Internet Services Compared to Other Matchmaking Techniques

In a review of marriage practices in Turkey, Yildiz, Deneçli. & Deneçli, (2011) observe:

> All societies have its own ways of getting married. That is why there are various ways of getting married all over the world. In Turkey, family arrangements, kidnapping the girl, marriage for money (money paid to the family of the woman) berder (exchanging the boys and girls of the same ages between two families), marriage by coincidence, meeting and getting married through the television (Sezen, 2005), finding a partner via the Internet and getting married are some of the 30 different ways of getting married (p. 5).

It is this last technique that is rapidly gaining popularity in Turkey. In this section, we will consider only a few modes of mate selection and contrast those with computer matching procedures:

A. Parents, Families, and Friends

Traditionally, in most Middle Eastern communities, parents arranged their children's marriages. However, as people moved from small villages to cities this became more difficult. Many parents began to consult matchmakers. Then, in the 1960s, advertisements searching for mates started to appear in newspapers and magazines (Abu-Lughod & Amin, 1961). Then came other opportunities for parents—such as social media opportunities. These new technologies enabled young men and women to have a stronger voice in their fates.

Frayser (in press) surveyed all the societies worldwide that have arranged marriages. Today, in most societies (52%), the parents and families of the bride and groom still play a critical role in the initiation of marriage. The factors that parents consider to be of critical importance in arranging marriages include considerations of kinship (86% of societies), status (8.5%), age (2%), locality (3.4%), and tribal affiliations (1%). The fact that a marriage is arranged does not mean that the prospective couple has no say in the selection. The young people's opinions are usually taken into account for both men and women (men = 83%; women = 72% of societies). However, an individual's consent is *necessary* in only half of these societies. Men's opinions generally matter more than a woman's, however (Frayser, in press.).

In Middle Eastern cultures (see Drew, 2001, and Wikipedia, 2014), it is traditional to favor the opinions of men. However, when it comes to marriage, mothers are generally consulted. The father often asks to meet with the suitor alone in order to give his consent and approval of the union. Middle Easterners tend to have strong kinship bonds. Family members such as aunts, uncles, often have significant influence on the progress of various potential unions. Thus, it is very unlikely that a Middle Eastern marriage will occur without the approval of both families involved in the union. In these matches, family status, wealth, education, and urban-rural residence play an important role.

Regardless of how the couple meets—and family and friends, matchmakers, the web, and newspaper advertisements may play a role—the process of meeting is typically commenced following the introduction of the families. The term "family" in this case may include extended members such as aunts, uncles, and/or cousins. Ultimately, key members of both families must give their approval for the progression and further development of the relationship.

In places like Iran, once the man or his family have decided on a potential bride, a formal meeting of the families occurs—a process referred to as a modern day *Khastegari*, (خواستگاری) For this ceremony, one or more representatives of the groom's family pay a visit to the woman's family. The first visit is designed to get acquainted and to discuss the possibility of a marriage. As yet, there is no formal proposal, and the couple is not yet committed to marry. After the *Khastegari,* the couple is permitted to go on a few supervised

dates, so they can decide how they feel about one another. In most Middle

Eastern countries people date for the sole purpose of attaining a spouse. This is

particularly apparent within Middle Eastern cultures where men and women are

not permitted to freely interact in public (e.g. Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, etc.).

In Iran, if things go well, at the second *Khastegari*, the suitor and his

family make a formal proposal. Typically, the bride's family serves tea, and a

number of sweets (*zulbia bameeyeh*, persian tea with cardamom, pistachio,

fruit [oranges, grapes] cucumber, water, ghaz, almonds, walnuts, *noghl,*

dried mulberry, and sugar cubes). It is traditional that the couple's families

describe their son and daughter's virtues. At the end of the meeting, the

young couple is left alone to talk about their future together.

Today, in modern-day Iran, the first two Khastegari are combined into

one step, since the man and woman generally are acquainted and in fact

have generally instigated the ceremony (Drew, 2001; Wikipedia, 2014).

In Westernized Israel couples' courtship and marriage may follow the

traditions common in the West? What about traditional Middle Eastern

Jewish families. Here, the potential husband's mother plays a significant

role. Similar to other Middle Easterners, Jewish mothers prefer (and

sometimes require) that the potential bride have precisely the same religious

affiliation as her son. In some cases the mother has final approval of whether

or not a marriage can take place. The practice dates back to the belief that

one's identity as a Jew is inherited from the birth mother. Today, it is parents

who often consult matchmaking sites in the hopes of finding suitable mates for their children.

B. Matchmakers

Mention the word "matchmaker" and many Westerners will immediately think of Yenta in *Fiddler on the Roof*, the imperious villager who tried to push Teyve's daughters to marry drunkards and men three or four times their age. Today's matchmakers are generally more sophisticated.

In Israel, for example, an organization called B'Yachad (Together) is comprised of a network of nearly 200 matchmakers. It charges 600 shekels ($170) per client and a bonus of 8,000 shekels per couple ($2,260) for matches that result in marriage. Jewish sites, such as sawyouatsinai.com, use matchmakers to help clients find suitable partners. The site is free for Israeli men and women; for Jews in America, the site costs $11 to $19 per month (Bryant, 2013).

In addition to providing clients with introductions, the matchmaker is an important source of social support. Matchmakers often provide reassurance, tips, and a sympathetic ear for clients' concerns. This gives clients increased self-esteem and hopefulness that a match will be found (Ahuvia & Adelman, 1992).

C. Casual Meetings

In this chapter, we will *not* consider a number of ways men and women can meet that are common in the West—for example, via video-dating, on online bulletin boards, in chat rooms, e-mail, and instant

messaging. They also meet in singles events—such as speed dating, religious singles groups, dinner clubs, social groups, mixers, parties, and casual encounters. That is a topic for another chapter, however.

D. Social Media and Online Matchmaking

Within many Middle Eastern cultures, elders are responsible for introducing potential spouses. Should persons find a potential partner on their own, they must approach the elders in the family for approval to initiate the matchmaking process. In the Middle East, as elders are entrusted with this task, couple initiated unions are not so common. However, couple initiated unions are the primary context within which the internet is utilized. Middle Eastern mate-seekers may utilize online dating and matchmaking websites to establish their autonomy, exercise their freedom, and seek out love marriages.

Initiating communication online is a way in which young Middle Easterners may dissociate from older traditions and create their own identity and way of doing things. It is also one of the few forums in the Middle East where men and women are able to communicate without significant censorship. Lastly, Middle Eastern daters may feel that by personally choosing their dates, the likelihood of entering a marriage based on love increases. Online chatting and matchmaking are resources for Middle Easterners who do not wish to meet or wed partners chosen by elders. Traditionally, elders choose matches based on political, social, religious, and economic compatibility. This method of matching may at times (not always)

neglect personality incompatibilities or intangible components, such as chemistry. The idea being that those things may develop later on or are not necessary for a successful marriage.

When young men and women use social networking sites, they often do so with a uniquely Middle Eastern flair. Abu Hashish and Peterson (1999), for example, describe a graduate student at the University of Cairo who met her match on an Internet chat room.

> After extensive e-mail discussions, the American man flew to Egypt to meet the student and her family. Subsequently, she flew to the United States, accompanied by an older male relative . . . While there, she examined her potential spouse's house, interviewed his neighbors, met with an official at his bank to see that his financial situation was solid, and generally made sure that he was as he represented himself to be. They married and, as far as anyone has heard, are living happily ever after (p. 7).

What most Egyptians find exotic in this story is the idea of using the internet to find a mate. What most Americans find exotic is the woman's intrusive investigation of her fiancé. But in either case, computer *khatbas* (matchmaking services) are used in a particularly Egyptian style.

Ahuvia and Adelman (1992) point out that Middle Eastern singles seem to be comfortable with metaphors that invoke not romance but market conditions when describing the process of cybermating. Some examples:

> . . . One female client described the service as "buy-a-boy," and a male client cast himself as "the right product" in describing an increase in his self-esteem: "There was a time in my life that I would have felt that anxiety [about dating' because I didn't feel I had very much *worth to sell.* But . . . that isn't my feeling now . . . I [have] a *good product,* so I'm not anxious about that. And I [know it's not] the right product for everyone, but I [know it is] a good product for those who were *in that market"* (p. 458).

VIII. Conclusions

The computer, the Internet, and social media have changed the modern-day world in remarkable ways. Today, in the Middle East, advances in the use of social media are probably greater than anywhere in the world. Usage of the internet ranges from a full 90% of the population (in Bahrain), 88% (in UAE), and 85% (in Qatar) to a low of 9% (in Iraq) and 6.7% (Internet World Stats, 2014, Open Net Initiative, 2009). When we examine attitudes toward social media in the Middle East, its use by men and women, reasons why men and women search for love and friendship in the social media, what we discover are two things: enormous diversity combined with a strong current sweeping all peoples toward a greater use of social media. Wherever it occurs, however, we see the power of culture: In all places, its usage seems to be shaped by local customs, as well as the desires of modern day men and women and their families. In the next section, we will see what social changes we might expect to be provoked as social media become an ever-increasing presence in the lives of men and women.

IX. The Future: The Impact of Computer Matching on Middle Eastern Society

Despite the potential political, social, and legal ramifications often associated with online dating/matchmaking in the Middle East, the industry continues to flourish. The impact of this technology on social life has arguably been, and will arguably continue to be, notable in several important ways.

By creating venues for men and women to engage in anonymous, one-on-one, communication, internet dating/matching cites are altering the ways in which Middle Eastern men and women perceive, understand, and relate to one another (Larrson, 2013), thereby changing how they approach relationships and mate selection. What has long been all but unattainable for most young Middle Easterners is now readily available with the click of a button: direct male-female dialogue. Referring to the influence of internet dating on Kuwaiti society, Wheeler (2003) explains, "[W]e are seeing important signs of experimentation which cannot help but stimulate processes of change over time as young people redefine norms and values for future generations" (p.2). The advent of computer dating and matchmaking is clearly changing how and the sexes communicate with each other in most of the Middle East. In discussing the sweeping changes within the region, de Muth (2013) notes that "…with thousands of young, single Muslims signing up [with internet dating/matchmaking sites] every day….there is little chance of putting this particular genie back in the bottle" (p.2)

Some Middle Eastern parents are willing, albeit reluctantly, to permit their marriage-aged children to engage in *supervised* web dating. Still, most parents prohibit it entirely (Sabah, 2006). These conservative views will likely soften over time, since those who are now meeting their spouses through online dating/matching—with or without parental permission and/or knowledge beforehand—will eventually raise a new generation of young people who will likely find online dating/matchmaking to be much more quotidian (Hatfield, Rapson, & Martel, 2007).

Transgressing gender lines pre-maritally challenges most of today's Middle Eastern sociocultural norms and religious laws. There is a vociferous debate amongst prominent Muslim scholars as to how "Islamic" even the most conservative online matching services are (de Muth, 2011). Still unknown is whether adherence to the traditional practices of a 1,400-year-old-religion will soften over time. Polygamy, a tradition condoned by Quranic scripture, was once much more popular than it is today. While still legal in much of the Middle East, the feminist movement has made the practice of polygamy considerably less socially acceptable and less common (Talhami, 2013). Thus, history does suggest that the popularity of long-standing Islamic laws concerning mate selection can erode over time (Ahmed, 2013).

There currently exists a sizable gender difference with respect to the "appropriateness" of using online dating/matching sites. That is to say, it is more acceptable for men to be online, whereas women are viewed more harshly. But since gender-lines are increasingly being breached privately, and since dating sites presumably need both male and female members in order to function, we may expect this disparity in perceived appropriateness to wane publicly over time, as well.

What about the bigger picture? Will the expansion of computer matchmaking engender wider and deeper social changes in the culture and politics of the Middle East?   Will it contribute to greater individualism, more freedom, moves toward gender equality, and growing harmony in the long run? No one knows the answers to those questions, but it does not require a huge

intellectual stretch to imagine such a possibility. The emerging global culture is based—for better or worse—on those Western values, and perhaps someday the Middle East will be more of a part of that global society. Maybe Internet communication and matchmaking will be seen to be an early sign of that development.

VIII. References

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