Online dating and courtship among Muslim American women: Negotiating technology, religious identity, and culture

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Abstract
This research examines how online dating technology affects the experience of mate selection and courtship among Muslim American women. Sixteen individuals who (1) self-identified as Muslim American women and (2) were actively using online dating websites participated in interviews about their experiences. Qualitative data analysis suggests that these women balance the perceived advantages of online dating (e.g. increased individual agency in initiating romantic relationships, increased control over interaction, greater confidentiality and privacy) with their desire to maintain their cultural and religious courtship practices. Additionally, participants identified challenges they faced with online dating, including social stigma, fear of others' misrepresentation, and frustrations with technology. This study contributes toward a deeper understanding of how new technologies integrate with existing religions and cultures and gives insights into the nature of technological change and adaptation in society more generally.

Keywords
Computer-mediated communication, courtship, culture, marriage, Muslim Americans, online dating, qualitative methods

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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 and Duggan, 2013). This is particularly true for individuals in immigrant communities found across the United States since online dating platforms facilitate networking by connecting ethno-cultural group members with each other, both domestically and across the globe (Bunt, 2009; Hammer, 2015). The increasing use of the Internet has redefined the ways in which religious communities exist online and offline and how their members share and propagate their views. Information communication technologies (ICTs) have also shaped how individuals interact with other members of the same faith, including how they seek romantic partners for marriage (Brasher, 2004).

Although Muslims are one of the fastest growing religious communities in America, there is not much research examining this group. Furthermore, many Muslim Americans consider family to be the most important institution and marriage a religious duty (Alshugairi, 2010), yet our understanding concerning the use of ICTs for mate selection and dating processes within religious and cultural communities remains limited in scope. Current research needs to keep up with the changing landscape of practices in courtship and marriage, including the use of online matchmaking, to offer better understanding of recent developments and insights into the interplay between American mainstream discourses and specific Muslim dimensions of the topic.

Prior research exploring the Muslim online dating scene tends to focus on the experiences of either Muslims as a collective (Lo and Aziz, 2009; Soukup, 2012) or Muslim men exclusively (Al-Saggaf, 2013). Very few studies have actually investigated the experiences of Muslim women, let alone those residing in the United States. This bias is perhaps because the intrinsic link between conservative Muslim courtship practices and norms for gendered behavior (Hammer, 2015) limits Muslim women's activity in the dating and courtship process. Mir (2009) has also highlighted the reductionist tendencies of existing research which seeks to present the lived experiences of Muslim American women in a rather homogenized way, thereby congealing the Muslim identity into a seemingly unified perspective.

While previous research may have overlooked or misrepresented their experiences, this study focuses exclusively on Muslim American women and the various facets of experiences in their usage of online dating technology. The goal of this study is to investigate the experience of Muslim American women who voluntarily use ICTs in their search for romantic partners. Three central questions drive our investigation: First, what motivates Muslim American women to use online dating systems? Second, how is computer-mediated communication (CMC) affecting or changing the experience and practice of romantic courtship among Muslim American women? Third, what are the issues that Muslim American women face when using online dating systems? Investigating the experience of women who use these technologies will allow us to understand the complex negotiations between culture and religious identity, on one hand, and technology use, on the other.

Below, we provide a sketch of mate selection and courtship practices that can be found in Muslim communities based on available research. Although the intention of this overview is to serve as an entry point for readers, it is important to note the following. First, the review is not comprehensive, and so it is limited in its ability to capture the

wide range of discourses and practices found in different Muslim American communities. Second, much of the existing literature has put forth a very conservative view of Muslim religious and cultural practices; in reality, like all religions, perspectives on Islam and its practice fall along a wide spectrum ranging from strict, conservative observance on one end and a more open independence on the other end. Mir (2014), in a way, touches on this potential bias in the literature by suggesting that although Muslim cultural groups do feature a broad variety of interpretations and behaviors, scholarly representations tend to project Islamic homogeneity rather than diversity, further noting that Muslim representative status is often held by those with more conservative views.

Additionally, we want to emphasize the fundamental significance of the constructed discursive triangle of (universalized) Islamic norms, (generalized) American values, and attachment to ethnic cultures (Arab, South Asian, African American, etc.) as distinct entities through which Muslims negotiate religion (Islam) vis-à-vis culture(s) and vis-à-vis American societal norms regarding mate selection and marriage (Hammer, 2015: 37). These dynamics are in perceived and constant tension and animate Muslim American marriage practices and surrounding discourses. In the overview that follows, we highlight in particular the nature of cross-sex interactions, the selection criteria, the role of the family in the decision-making process, as well as the role of chaperones in face-to-face (FtF) meetings between unrelated members of the opposite sex. A brief overview of the literature examining the potential impact of online dating technology on Muslim courtship practices is then presented. We proceed with our interview method and data, along with analysis and final interpretation of how our findings both parallel and extend existing knowledge and literature.

Muslim courtship: processes and practices

To identify how ICTs map onto *dominant majority discourses*[1] that often project conservative Muslim religious and cultural processes of mate selection and courtship, we must first understand what those processes are and how they are practiced in Muslim communities. Below, we provide a brief overview of Muslim courtship practices, focusing particularly on the criteria used during mate selection and the role of the family during the process. Second, we discuss the norms that guide how men and women communicate with one another during courtship.

Mate selection process: partner criteria and role of the family

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-Asfahani, 2013, for details on the rulings of marriage; Alshugairi, 2010; Lo and Aziz, 2009). The emphasis of marriage as being "half of religion" is perceived as a continuous expectation, with emphasis being placed on the desirability of marital tranquility (*sakinah*), love (*mawaddah*), and mercy (*rahmah*)—all of which are principles derived from the Qur'an (30:21) (Hammer, 2015: 39). Because of the importance of the family's role, there is a great emphasis in the Muslim tradition on pursuing romantic relationships, with the ultimate goal being marriage. It should be noted that the importance placed on marriage is not necessarily unique

to Islam; indeed people in many cultures, societies, and religions prioritize marital partnership and the institution of family—and the Muslim tradition is no different (Ahmed, 2013; Hammer, 2015; Lo and Aziz, 2009).

Views on marriage among Muslims vary from "love marriages" on one end to "arranged marriages" on the other end, with "transitional marriages" operating somewhere in between. Muslims who subscribe to these different perspectives also differ in the criteria they use when judging compatibility. Those who subscribe to a love marriage view believe that mates should be selected based on the attraction and feeling developed prior to marriage. Among Muslim Americans, the love marriage approach is gaining popularity; Alshugairi (2010) surveyed 750 Muslims about their opinions regarding marriage, and 25% of the sample said they were not yet married because they "had not found their soulmate," indicating that love before marriage was important to them. In Zaidi and Shuraydi's (2002) study of Pakistani Muslim women, respondents who supported love marriages stated that a marital union should be based on emotion and affection and defined marriage as personal fulfillment, in addition to piety and familial duty. Such trends indicate that there is a variety of views regarding the institutions of marriage and the family.

In contrast, mate selection in more conservative circles can be a "socially pragmatic" process where potential romantic partners are evaluated and compared on attributes such as an individual's good character, temperament, and religiosity (i.e. the extent to which a potential partner observes religious practices) (Asamarai et al., 2008). While many attributes can be considered, the importance of religiosity within the conservative view is often attributed to the saying of Prophet Muhammad that piety is the best quality upon which to base the mate selection decision (Lo and Aziz, 2009).

Those subscribing to a transitional view of marriage often blend the two sets of criteria described above. For example, one study on mate selection and marriage among Muslim Americans (Killawi et al., 2014) found both male and female participants considered a variety of factors when deciding whom to marry, including ethnicity, family reputation, personality, educational goals/plans for the future, religious beliefs and practices, family structure, attractiveness, and chemistry. Participants were found to have based their decisions to marry after some form of interaction and correspondence (similar to love marriages), yet many also claimed it was a spiritual decision as well (similar to conservative practices). Some described engaging in a special decision-making prayer (*salatul istikhara*) to help them decide whether they should move forward with the marriage, with most reported to have consulted with family members, trusted friends, and *imams*.

Another significant feature of Muslim courtship practices is the role of the family. Within the existing literature, the picture of Muslim courtship is often presented as "blind marriages" in which parents arrange the marriage and allow no contact between the betrothed couple. Such arrangements are the exception rather than the norm, yet research suggests such stereotypes are alive and well: In one study examining Muslim women's experiences in college campuses, it was reported that dominant majority (i.e. middle- to upper-class White American) students usually admit to knowing nothing about Muslim courtship (simply "not dating") or conjure up a binary opposition of dating versus parental-arranged marriage (Mir, 2009: 240).

In conservative circles, it is more likely that the mate selection process typically begins with parents and relatives who make it publicly known that they are seeking partners 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 between potential partners. The final phase is the official marriage proposal that is sealed with family approval (Al-Johar, 2005). Notably, in other circles, self-initiated mate selection (also called self-choice) is also recognized, with parents and relatives being notified as the relationship develops (Al-Johar, 2005). Zaidi and Shuraydi (2002) have also reported a hybrid approach to courtship called a "joint venture" in which parents and their daughters are both involved in relationship formation. In summary, many young Muslim men and women expect that their family members will have input—or sometimes total control—in their search for romantic partners.

Gendered relations and male–female interactions

Muslim courtship practices may also govern the ways in which unrelated men and women interact with each other in public, FtF settings. From a religiously conservative standpoint, unrelated men and women are advised not to speak with each other for purposes of socializing, and it is considered improper for marriage prospects to indulge in intimate conversations with each other, unless there is a direct need, such as education or business (Ahmed, 2013; Larsson, 2011).

In constructing gendered discourse about their interaction with men, some Muslim women will conform to stereotypes about chastity, modesty by frequently projecting the Muslim difference in their self-identity to their Muslim peers (Mir, 2009). Within many conservative circles, gender segregation is imposed during the courtship process for the preservation of Islamic ethics. This is why in conservative 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).

Although gender differentiation and segregation is the norm in many conservative families, gender dynamics vary considerably among Muslim people in the United States (Haddad and Smith, 1996). For example, some Arab Americans feel that maintaining traditional gender roles is fundamental for preserving their ethnicity and reproducing Arab culture in America, while others pride in their Arab heritage yet discard such customs and perceive them as inhibiting their integration and achievement in the US society (Haddad and Smith, 1996). Furthermore, these attitudes about gendered interaction can vary by social class and generational status, with stronger attachments to traditional values being more common among foreign-born or rural individuals (Read, 2003).

Regardless, conservative courtship practices suggest very limited personal agency for young Muslims, and women more specifically. The restriction of individual agency is particularly amplified by the role of family members in the process, as well as the pragmatic nature of measuring potential marriage partners against an ideal set of criteria, as opposed to the development of romantic attraction. The advent of online dating technologies, however, may alter these practices to some degree.

Romantic relationship initiation on the Internet: the impact of online dating technology on Muslim courtship

Early work examining online relationship initiation demonstrated that CMC helped facilitate interpersonal contact by circumventing factors such as physical proximity, geo-temporal divisions, and social anxiety (e.g. Parks and Floyd, 1996; Rice and Love, 1987). In terms of mediated romantic relationships, Kelley (1983) posited that the barriers to meeting romantic partners offline, such as the lack of time to seek out potential partners and the lack of access to available partners, can be mitigated by CMC. Online dating has been shown to provide greater convenience and control, as well as increased access to potential partners (Finkel et al., 2012). Certain hindrances to relationship formation, such as communication apprehension in FtF interactions, may also be ameliorated in CMC. This brief review points out the appeal of online dating sites for romantic relationship initiation, but online dating may be particularly salient given the current shift in the way younger generations of Muslims in the United States approach marriage.

Efficiency, connectivity, and access

McKenna et al. (2002) have previously argued 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, ethnic, or racial backgrounds but happen to be living in different geographic locations can now connect more easily (Armario, 2005). Muslim families have even drawn on Internet services to "upgrade" prospective marriage partners for their children (i.e. access to marriage prospects that have more education and higher social status). Considering the ease for young Muslims and their families to seek out or search for specific preferences, Muslims are increasingly drawn online due to sheer efficiency (Bunt, 2009).

Grewal (2009) found that younger Muslim Americans have resorted to social networking services, such as naseeb.com and Facebook, which can provide greater access to potential Muslim mates who are outside of their parents' social circles. This is in line with findings from Peek (2006) that have suggested a gradual shift toward a more autonomous mate selection process for young, second-generation Muslims in Western nations like America.

Mediated communication between Muslim partners

In addition to increasing efficiency and access, online dating may affect interaction between Muslim men and women. 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 dating sites, proceeds to initiating contact through the dating site, mutual exchange of mediated messages, and ends with an offline meeting. While similar sequences may occur in the Muslim online dating context, the role of the family and certain cultural–religious sensitivities may pose a different process altogether.

One-on-one communication. Lack of physical co-location between online daters may suggest that the conservative rules governing male–female interactions may not necessarily apply to cross-sex interactions that occur online. The advent of Muslim online dating sites may also raise 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 mediated context.

When a chaperone is present, introduction and matchmaking process can cause embarrassment among young Muslim men and women, as they must not only deal with the stress of meeting potential romantic partners but the third party (usually a family member) as well (Green, 2014). CMC may then 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 cultural norms (Kaya, 2009) and ushering in a more transitional or blended approach to marriage.

Bunt (2009) further found that due to the sensitive nature of male–female interactions in conventional offline context, CMC's affordances of anonymity and privacy allow men and women to transcend conservative cultural restrictions and religious values. In this way, cross-sex interactions over the Internet can be discreet. 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 Muslim online dating has yet to examine the exact dynamics of mediated interactions between daters, existing theory suggests that CMC may have a profound impact on interaction during courtship. Walther's (1996) hyperpersonal model, for instance, is commonly used to explain how CMC features work to create greater intimacy. Communicators are able to utilize the asynchronous nature of CMC to selectively curate their self-presentation. The messages exchanged are often interpreted through an "idealized" lens, thereby resulting in a level of dyadic intimacy that rivals—and often surpasses—FtF interactions (Walther, 2007). Hancock and Toma (2009) have found that online daters tend to not only disclose more personal information with each other but also project idealized self-portrayals in the process. Furthermore, CMC's features can catalyze the extent and speed of self-disclosure among online partners 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 (Tidwell and Walther, 2002).

While the propensity for greater self-disclosure may have been demonstrated in early CMC work described above, such experiments were often conducted between unacquainted interaction partners that were not seeking romantic connections. Thus, it is not yet known whether Muslim online daters view CMC as an advantage or disadvantage during courtship. On one hand, the presence of certain rules governing cross-sex interactions between unrelated Muslim men and women in the conservative context might

restrict the possibility for intimacy; on the other hand, CMC's features may prompt greater openness and disclosure.

This possibility suggests that the process by which Muslim women merge their use of online dating technologies with their religious identity may be more complex than meets the eye. For example, while Muslim online daters may want to engage in greater online self-disclosure, it is also possible that this kind of intimate cross-sex interaction may produce other, less desirable effects. If she were to engage in such disclosures, a Muslim woman would perhaps gain greater intimacy with her partner, but she might also feel like she has violated more conservative rules regarding male–female interaction. Such a dilemma may produce a feeling of cognitive dissonance: While she is able to interact with potential partners freely online, she might also feel that her religious identity is called into question.

How Muslim women view the impact of ICTs on overall mate selection and court-ship practices remains unknown. 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 concerns to conform to existing socio-cultural and reli-gious values in their respective communities. Whether and how Muslim online daters negotiate their use of online dating technologies with their own religious identities remains to be seen.

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 dat-ing systems?

Method

To investigate the research questions stated above, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with Muslim American women across the United States. The interview protocol contained a set of questions that included a general query on Muslim users' initial process of using online dating sites and mobile applications.

Sample and procedure

A purposive sampling strategy was employed and the inclusion criteria were (1) female, (2) between the age of 18 and 40, and (3) have used matchmaking/matrimonial websites for approximately 3 months from the time of recruitment. Therefore, recruitment criteria included women who self-identified as Muslim Americans who used online matchmak-ing/matrimonial/dating websites and/or mobile applications. An invitation to participate

Table 1. Respondents' reported online dating site usage.

Type of sites	Response	%
1. eHarmony	3	43
2. PlentyOfFish	1	14
3. Match.com	1	14
4. OkCupid	3	43
5. Naseeb.com	1	14
6. MuslimMatch.com	1	14
7. Ishqr.com	5	71
8. CoffeeMeetsBagel.com	1	14
9. Muslima.com	2	29
10. HalfOurDeen.com	2	29
11. Minder	1	14
12. Other	1	14

in the study was rolled out through social media (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) and through email blasts. Recruitment messages were also re-posted by followers and prominent figures in the Muslim American community on behalf of the primary researcher.

All interviews were conducted through Skype and were recorded using the Ecamm Call Recorder for Skype software. After 12 interviews, the saturation point was met, but four more interviews were conducted as additional confirmation. Overall, 16 interviews were conducted between May and June 2015, with most interviews lasting approximately 1 hour. Participants ranged between the age of 26 and 35, with the average age of 28.5 years. In terms of online dating experience, on average, participants claimed that they had been using dating technology for 28 months. 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: 3, Arab: 6, South Asian: 2, Caucasian: 4, Mixed race: 1). The sample also contained women who were born-and-raised Muslims (10) and recent converts (6). All participants reported using some form of online or mobile dating technology (see Table 1 for detailed list).

Data analysis

All interviews 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. Using ATLAS.ti software, data analysis consisted of 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 and Huberman, 1994). Employing Charmaz's (2006) constant comparative method throughout the coding process, a detailed, line-by-line reading of every single sentence and sentence cluster was performed. Several key themes of how Muslim American women use online dating websites emerged during the analysis. A thematic map was generated through this process before the specifics of each theme were refined.

Thematic analysis finally led to several overarching themes being identified, some of which contained sub-themes.

Results

These interviews shed light on the various elements that comprise Muslim women's experience with online courtship and dating. With regard to RQ1 asked above, results indicated Muslim women had two primary motives for going online—access to partners and control over the courtship process. With respect to RQ2, several themes emerged that demonstrated how ICTs have affected Muslim women's courtship experiences, including changes to cross-sex interaction patterns (e.g. freedom to initiate and increased privacy of courtship communication) and changes to the mate selection process (e.g. criteria, misrepresentation, and control over selection). Finally, key issues that arise in Muslim women's online dating practices, or RQ3, include social stigma, frustration and fear of misrepresentation, and changing relational goals, all of which reflect the challenges of merging religious identity with online dating practices. We discuss these aspects below.

Research question 1: motivations for going online

Increased access to dating pool. 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 and how this has 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). Muslim women 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).

The benefit of increasing access to the dating pool is particularly prominent among recent Muslim 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, as they found themselves without offline networks or places to look for potential romantic partners. As a result, many converts went online: "I just moved back to the US … 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" (S26). These data mirror Alshugairi's (2010) survey results in which 16% of the 750 participants indicated that they were not yet married because they had "difficulty in meeting prospective spouses." Our respondents' movement toward online dating mirrors larger trends where romantically single American adults report increasing reliance on dating

websites due to the inability of initiating romantic relationships offline because of factors such as limited social network (e.g. Finkel et al., 2012). For Muslim Americans, the inaccessibility of potential partners may run deeper than limited networks; lack of access can be compounded by other factors such as ethnic backgrounds and (perceived) incompatibilities between religious values and Westernized cultural and social norms of America (Zaidi and Shuraydi, 2002).

Control over self-presentation. In line with previous work on selective self-presentation in online dating websites, these data indicate that some Muslim women also engage in similar self-presentation behavior. For instance, one participant, who is visually impaired, claimed in online matchmaking websites that she was able to initiate contact with potential romantic partners and communicate with them well beyond the initial stages of a relationship. This particular respondent, who is "a little anxious" and "self-conscious" about her appearance, added that online dating allows her to present her colorful personality instead of her disability.

In another example, a respondent reported how the increased control over self-presentation in online dating allowed her to decide how and when to disclose personal information to prospective partners. In particular, she noted how CMC allowed her to be very up-front about her recent divorce:

> I got divorced in April and went online in September … it hadn't been that long since my divorce … I just laid out the works in terms of, "Oh, you know, *I am divorced*" and exchanged a little bit more about our background. (S04)

While not unique to the Muslim experience, this theme demonstrates that all online daters—Muslim women included—take advantage of the features of ICTs and use selective-self presentation and strategic self-disclosures (e.g. Ellison et al., 2006).

Research question 2: the impact of online dating technology on Muslim courtship

Increased agency. Online dating platforms have allowed Muslim women greater freedom to initiate contact with the opposite sex. 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" (S07). This same respondent claimed that she had initiated conversation with the opposite sex at least "60% of the time" in online settings. Such experiences seem consistent with previous work that highlights the Internet's ability to facilitate relationship initiation by reducing inhibitions. 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 been enabled by CMC.

Going online can also increase a Muslim woman's overall agency during mate selection. One participant explained why she preferred online dating as opposed to more "traditional" forms of courtship in which "… the vetting process happens entirely between parents." For her,

growing up in the US … 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 said, "online is nice because you have a little more say" (S21). Online dating has given another participant "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).

Interview data also suggest that although dating websites are helping women gain more agency in the earlier stages of relational development, many still expect their families to participate in the courtship process during later stages. Yet, women's increased control combined with the delay of familial involvement occasionally led to conflict. Reflecting on her experience, one participant mentioned some of the challenges she faced from her parents after she initiated contact with a man online:

I'm so down for inter-racial stuff completely … but immediately my dad caught on and it was like a week of how it's not good to marry someone of a different culture because there's so many cultural problems … and [how] it's just not going to work out. I didn't even say that I wanted to marry him—that was just the first meeting. It's difficult in my family. (S23)

In these cases, respondents described how greater control was not only liberating but also created new problems. Their accounts underscore the messiness that often accompanies the blending of novel ICTs with extant cultural and religious norms and further demonstrate that the effect of technology is not uniformly advantageous among all users.

Another theme that emerged was how online dating circumvented the need for chaperoned FtF meetings. CMC serves as a platform that mitigates the emotional and physical attachments between men and women that conservative Muslim women might seek to avoid. The lack of physical immediacy on the Internet appears to work to the advantage of those women who may wish to maintain physical or emotional distance during the courtship process out of personal religious conviction or cultural sensitivities:

When it comes to talking and stuff, because you're not face-to-face online, it also compensates for if you were talking to somebody one-on-one but in a public place, because it's just text. If you're getting information from someone, responding back, I don't really think there's a need for a chaperone for that if you have your own set of standards. (S23)

Agency and control represent changes in conservative courtship behavior among Muslim women. And while the Internet did not create such changes, technology has certainly facilitated their progress by making new avenues available for Muslim women to seek out potential romantic partners. Such options may have been more difficult to access prior to the widespread use of ICTs.

The duality of CMC: distance, confidentiality, and privacy. As noted above, existing theory and research might predict that people use CMC's features to foster intimacy in online dating, but respondents in this study reflected a more strategic use of CMC. Some respondents said they used the mediation of CMC to maintain social distance rather than

intimacy: "I make sure that our conversations aren't flirty in any way" (S20). Another respondent noted that online communication acted as a boundary, allowing her to decide how and when to develop emotional connections:

> 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 your computer, your phone and just go outside, you don't have to worry about it. (S22)

This suggests that while Muslim women may capitalize on the nature of CMC to initiate interaction, once they make contact with potential partners, they may hold communication at a more impersonal level, rather than attempting to increase closeness as previous CMC work would suggest.

Interestingly, one participant noted that while one-on-one, unsupervised cross-sex interactions are made possible by technology, the gender segregation in many Muslim communities have somehow impeded the ability for men and women to communicate and interact with each other. As a result, placing Muslim men and women together in the same mediated space without a third party can create new, unforeseen problems:

> 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)

As courtship practices evolve among younger generations of Muslim Americans, frustrations are being felt among both men and women. In interviews with 33 Muslim Americans, the majority of participants had described their courtship period as being short and lacking guidance from their parents/legal guardians (*wali*) and families, and many described feeling either confused or frustrated with the courtship process (Killawi et al., 2014). It seems that although the potential to engage in cross-sex interactions may increase with online dating, lack of knowledge or guidance regarding such communications may end up creating frustration. In this way, online dating platforms may alleviate existing problems and generate or contribute to new ones.

Participants also noted that the sense of confidentiality afforded by online matchmaking websites saved them from the embarrassment of having to deal with what was previously a very public mate selection practice. One participant who questions the ability of community matchmakers, or "*rishta* (marriage) aunties," to keep the information and details of active partner seekers confidential 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 [mate selection and courtship] in a smart way, especially if you're a girl. (S23)

In this sense, the notion of keeping their courtship activities private from third parties was a noted advantage of online dating platforms. The ability to regulate who has access

to their personal information and their relational information gave some respondents a greater sense of control over the courtship process as a whole.

Moreover, increased confidentiality offered participants control over the information they shared with their family. Confidentiality provided them the ability to disclose their relational status whenever they feel appropriate, and this is done as a protection mechanism vis-à-vis family's expectations and hopes:

> I've never really introduced anyone to my parents … I've always been extremely cautious about who I choose to introduce to them and I want to be 110% sure that this is right … I can't just tell my mom I'm talking to a random guy online that I'm not even sure of. (S20)

Another participant claimed that

> For Muslims, to online seek somebody [sic], you see initially if they're compatible, and then the family gets involved. For me, it's more like I'm expecting it to be somebody I definitely already know I'm very, very serious about…if I got to that point with introducing to the family and stuff, I would already be very … very certain and careful that I did my research and I was certain that would be somebody that I would be interested in. (S23)

At least in this sample, perceptions of control and privacy appeared to boost women's feelings of self-efficacy regarding the disclosure of their relationship's development.

Shifting mate selection criteria. Previous literature on conservative Muslim mate selection and courtship practices highlights a rational, criterion-based selection process where religiosity and religious compatibility are emphasized parameters, yet the majority of the interviewees actually reported different search criteria to filter their selections, such as age and location. One interviewee said she would "go for [those who are] 30–40 in age to ten years older" (S04). Additionally, one participant said her pool of potential romantic partners was narrowed down by "where they're located," (S02) in addition to physical attractiveness. 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 literature in that Muslim online daters report using the search filters available in 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 results seem to follow the literature describing well-established search behavior on other, well-established online dating apps and sites (Finkel et al., 2012), which are designed and programmed to facilitate easily searchable attributes, namely, demographic traits.

Research question 3: the issues of online dating facing Muslim American women

Social stigma. Despite the fact that Muslim American women are increasingly open to the idea of using ICTs for romantic pursuits, these women have also struggled with certain

concerns attached to online dating. Previous research has identified a stigma associated with online dating. For example, using the Internet has been characterized as a "last resort" for daters whose traditional social interactions have failed them (Cali et al., 2013). As mentioned by one respondent, "… 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'" (S21). This concern is consistent with previous research examining the stigma that surrounds online dating more generally (Finkel et al., 2012).

Frustration, fear of misrepresentation, and changing relational goals. Although increased agency during selection was often mentioned as an advantage, some women also noted the potential drawbacks. One participant mentioned how

> In this world of the Internet, it's a lot easier to go on a 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)

The increased agency offered by online dating was seen as both an advantage that provided greater control and a problem that prevented family and friends from giving their approval prior to Muslim women meeting or interacting with a potential partner. Furthermore, while many respondents noted that online platforms provided greater agency during initial selection, it did not necessarily limit their families' involvement in the process. Some respondents noted that their families' presence was still there, just somewhat delayed:

> 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 ICTs are giving Muslim women more agency in the earlier stages of mate selection, many still allow their families to have some input during the process. Such a pattern demonstrates how Muslim women are finding ways to blend their use of newer technologies with existing religious and cultural practices.

Considering the aforementioned fact that religiosity is a salient criterion for Muslim women in selecting potential suitors for marriage, some respondents noted that the two-dimensional nature of dating profiles made the selection process harder online than offline:

> I think—online—people can make stuff up about themselves … you can definitely tell on profiles when people are kind of putting on a show of either they're very pious or they try to appear way more interesting or clever than they're actually are. It's very superficial. (S26)

In an effort to vet these profiles, one participant would probe a potential suitor's religiosity by phone: "If their 'About Me' section seems to be sending off [certain impressions]— I will assess religiosity based on certain questions … when you talk to them on the

phone, you really get some answers" (S22). Interestingly, these comments parallel previous work in online dating that mentions the fear of others' misrepresentation; however, while existing research illustrates daters' concerns over misrepresentation of physical attributes like height, weight, or age (Toma et al., 2008), for Muslim women, misrepresentation of religiosity is also a main concern. Deception regarding a self-presented characteristic like piety can be very difficult to detect and yet remains a salient issue for these respondents.

Another theme that emerged pertains to changing relational goals. Although the majority of respondents still claimed that marriage was their ultimate goal in going online, the frustration of not being able to actually find compatible matches—offline and online—led some respondents to adjust their relationship goals and expectations:

> 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 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, 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 Muslim women's 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. Moreover, based on the interviews, a pattern seems to emerge whereby the greater amount of time (and therefore less successful) a woman uses online dating platforms, the less expectations she would have of successfully initiating and forming future romantic relationships. As a result, some women seemed to adjust their overall relational goals from marriage to short-term partnership or friendship. The feeling of disappointment and the lowering of expectations are not new findings among online daters (Ramirez, Sumner et al., 2014), but given the importance placed on the institution of marriage within Islam, Muslim American women as a group may face a particular set of tensions between their perceived religious identity, familial duty, and the process of dating online.

Discussion

Within the multifaceted context of the Muslim American experience, this study highlights the variations in individual understandings and practices of religion, culture, mate selection, courtship, and technology use among Muslim women. The narrated accounts of the individuals interviewed for this study reflect that Muslim women must find ways

to integrate the new with the familiar. These findings shed light on the various tensions surfacing between professed religious ideals and actual practices within the context of computer-mediated courtship (e.g. Abdel-Fadil, 2015).

In particular, the current research can be seen as contributing toward the study of Islam and online communication by demonstrating how the "duality" of the Internet can create unique advantages and disadvantages that transform the contemporary courtship/dating experience of Muslim American women. Interview data revealed how affordances of ICTs provided several perceived advantages for dating and courtship while simultaneously complicating other aspects of respondents' lives.

One advantage mentioned by many respondents was how increased privacy and anonymity of the Internet reduced the embarrassment associated with traditional matchmaking. Other notable advantages identified in previous online dating research—namely, access to a larger pool of potential romantic partners and greater control over self-presentation—were also found to be true for some women in this study. Yet even though online dating systems allow users unfettered access to the dating pool, the majority of the Muslim American women interviewed here still expressed their innate desire to initiate and establish romantic relationships with their coreligionists. For our sample, this tension may hark back to the gendered religio-cultural normative scripts that dictate a Muslim woman's choice of spouse should be Muslim (Cila and Lalonde, 2014; Peek, 2006; Piela, 2011).

Use of dating technology also created another juxtaposition by increasing Muslim women's sense of individual agency during courtship. Prominent themes emerged in which many respondents indicated feeling greater efficacy in initiating relationships. This supports Bunt's (2009) findings on how Muslim women (as well as men) used the Internet's affordances to transcend certain religious and cultural restrictions. Nevertheless, this same advantage sometimes created challenges within participants' online experience. For example, many participants described a shared sense of disappointment and, to some degree, a compromise or shift in their initial goal of matrimony. This exasperation seemed spurred by a number of factors, including fear of social stigma and a gap in expectations and capabilities of what online dating services can deliver to their users. Thus, while online dating websites seem to offer some potential as a "third space" where single marriageable Muslims can initiate relationships with greater flexibility, they may also inadvertently trigger feelings of ineptitude, exasperation, or defeat.

The stigma associated with online dating reported by respondents in this study seems at odds with other studies that have reported the normative use of online dating among Muslim immigrants, citing practicality and flexibility driven by pragmatic religious and cultural norms (Bunt, 2009; Hammer, 2015; Lo and Aziz, 2009). However, upon inspection, this previous work is predominantly survey-based or observational in nature (e.g. Lo and Aziz, 2009) and seems to focus on parents' or aunties' use of dating sites on behalf of their children (e.g. Bunt, 2009), on men's use of online dating sites (e.g. Al-Saggaf, 2013), or on the experiences of Muslim minorities abroad (e.g. Ahmed, 2013). In contrast, this study was among the first to document how Muslim American women experience and use online dating technology. As a group, they may be experiencing the phenomenon of online dating differently, including their experience of social (dis)approval and—to some extent—confusion "against the backdrop of seismic shifts in gender discourses and marriage practices" writ large (Hammer, 2015: 35).

Other themes emerged in which women had to merge their newfound personal agency with that of their families and parents. Learning how to assert their own control while also keeping their families involved in the relationship's developmental process was a difficult balance for some of the respondents. The desire to maintain existing courtship traditions while also integrating new practices created conflict between daughters and their parents. Future research may explore this familial dynamic in more depth.

With regard to the mediated interaction itself, themes emerged that again highlighted the duality of online dating for Muslim women. First, many appear to deliberately rely on the mediated nature of CMC to engage in cross-sex interactions without a chaperone. But although CMC created greater opportunities to engage in unsupervised cross-sex interactions, some women also noted feeling unsure of how to pursue such communications, thereby creating new feelings of frustration. Additionally, Muslim women noted a strategic use of mediation as a means to control the pace and speed of emotional connections with men prior to marriage. When interactants embrace the reduced cue environment of CMC in this way, reduced interactivity in CMC may lead to impersonal rather than interpersonal or hyperpersonal interaction (Walther, 1996). Interestingly, many women embraced the advantage of greater individual agency in courtship communications, but they also tempered the full extent of such advantages by selectively using technology to enhance the impersonal nature of such interactions.

As noted by Walther (1996, 2011), there are times when it is desirable for users to engage in impersonal rather than interpersonal interactions—typically such interactions are related to the need to complete certain objectives, and thus, a task-oriented approach to communication will result. It is possible that online, Muslim men and women approach mate selection in a more task-oriented, strategic way. Elsewhere, online daters' accounts suggest that the procedure can be heavily pragmatic and strategic (see Lenton and Stewart, 2008). Given the importance placed on marriage as the ultimate goal for many Muslims, future research may assess the impact of these values on their approach to online dating and whether that approach may vary for Muslim men versus women.

Additionally, an important issue raised in this study is how one's self-identification regarding religious views affects dating and courtship behavior. We allowed all respondents to gauge and describe their own level of religiosity, and almost all interviewees for this study claimed they were "moderate" in their practice—here defined as the middle ground between a liberal and a conservative understanding of the religion. Being of "the middle path" is often associated with being cultured, enlightened, and lenient (Kamali, 2015), so this may be one of the reasons why most respondents identified themselves as such. All in all, the interview data further reflect a range of perspectives and understanding of Islam—a range that is not always reflected in the existing scholarly literature (Hammer, 2015; Lo and Aziz, 2009; Mir, 2009), and certainly not in the popular media (Behm-Morawitz and Ortiz, 2013; Tukachinsky et al., 2015). Future work should try and take into account the distinct influence of individuals' perceptions of religiosity (e.g. conservative, moderate, and liberal). Furthermore, considering that previous work has demonstrated that online technology helps promote the plurality of religious opinions within Islam (Anderson, 2003; Mandaville, 2002), the effect of technology on other areas besides courtship and dating is an important issue to consider.

Future research

Future studies of online dating and courtship might include family systems approaches which look at the family as a decision-making unit, as opposed to the individual. Expanding our lens to incorporate both parents and children of Muslim families could also provide interesting insights into generational differences in how younger Muslim's use of online dating technology differs from their families' views on courtship. Future research may also investigate how the structure and design of these websites shape users' experience to help illuminate the possible ways of mitigating daters' current frustrations and disappointments.

Conclusion

The collective experience of technology—particularly the adoption and adaptation to new ICTs—too can be a nuanced dance between rigidity and flexibility among its users. This study can only represent a partial range of voices among Muslim American women who have decided to resort to using online dating systems for mate selection and courtship practices. While we consciously avoid a deterministic view of technology's effects on and in society, it is difficult to ignore the ways in which it has facilitated unique changes within the Muslim experience. Examples in this study include greater access to social networks, increasing connectivity and control over courtship; however, it is useful to keep in mind that while such effects did not originate with ICTs, they are indeed supported by its use. A sustained effort to parse out this collective experience of technology in society writ large requires constructive dialogue across diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds in American society. The current research gives a voice to Muslim American women by examining how a growing subset of the American population is utilizing technology in their romantic pursuits and how, in turn, technology has helped shape their experience of that process. Such knowledge is important if we are to better understand the challenges and complex negotiations that religious and cultural communities in the United States encounter in today's modern world.

Note

1. Mir (2014: 238) talks about the presence of *dominant majority discourses* as referring to Orientalist stereotypes of Muslims that are often constructed, internalized, and deployed in the media, in educational and other public spaces. This stereotyping is often done by Americans of a variety of backgrounds, including Muslims themselves.

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