Identity Formation and Perception in Culturally Different Online Matchmaking Environments

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Introduction:

Once while I accompanied an Indian friend who was registering on www.shaadi.com, an Indian matrimonial website, I noticed that the online registration system did not allow one to create a profile without a specification of a 'community'. Although, we noticed that it allowed one to search for a matrimonial match without that specification. This suggested that to be listed as a member on the website, one had to have a community stamp. It showed that a non-community adherent had no standing on a community-based Indian matrimonial website like the www.shaadi.com. To observe how one may search for a partner without any community allegiance, I did a search on www.google.com for American matrimonial websites. The search yielded very few results. Interestingly, a search on www.google.com for Indian dating websites gave very few results. These initial findings exhibit some of the fundamental differences in the customs of matchmaking in the two regions, namely India and the USA. The differences in the cultures of societies of the two regions are also reflected in their online matchmaking environment.

On further observation it showed that the online matchmaking on www.shaadi.com was similar to the concept of arranged marriages in India. Most marriages in India are arranged where the bride and bridegroom are introduced to each other by their respective parents or close family members or friends. In most families, it is the understood responsibility of parents to search for an appropriate match for their son or daughter through the means of word of mouth, marriage bureaus or now the more common newspaper matrimonial classifieds and matrimonial websites. Arranged marriages usually happen within the same community or in the more traditional and orthodox families, within the same caste. In an arranged marriage, family and cultural background of the prospective match is always known and the interaction between the two singles begins directly at the next level of social dating. In social dating, in most countries, more often than not the family and cultural background of the singles is not known on the first date. Similar to the customary introductions of the two singles in 'arranged marriages', the breadth of mandatory categories in the profile descriptions on www.shaadi.com makes the profile's communal and cultural background evident to all match seekers. This feature was not part of the American dating websites on the Internet.

This brings up an interesting question of how the Internet is used as an agent for matchmaking communications in different cultures. In this paper, I have attempted to study the community-bound nature of an online Indian

matrimonial website vis-à-vis a non-community based American dating website.

My aim in this paper is to illustrate and compare how identity formation and perception take place in the two different matchmaking websites, which are different from each other in their underlying cultural background.

Methodology:

For this paper, I have adopted an ethnomethodological research approach.

Design

The design of the methodology is based on the comparison of identity formation and perception in two online matchmaking environments common in their purpose of matchmaking, but different in their matchmaking goals and underlying cultural background.

To achieve the above-mentioned comparison, the paper is divided into three parts:

1. A comparison of the details to be specified for profile creation by the members on both matchmaking websites

2. A personal reading of information stated in the personal essays of eight sample member profiles on the two websites

3. Opinions and impressions of eight subjects on eight sample profiles

Subjects

Subjects were three individuals of Indian origin who lived in India for most of their lives but are now working in the USA and three American individuals currently studying as graduate students in a leading Eastern American university. The age group of the subjects was 25 years to 35 years. This was an appropriate sample for the research as a large number of users of dating and matrimonial websites are college students or working individuals who fall in the age group of 25 to 35. *(Bajaj, Sproull, undated)*

The nomenclature for the subjects is as follows:

Indian subjects –
1. Indian1 – female
2. Indian2 – male
3. Indian3 – male

American subjects –
1. American1 – female
2. American2 – male
3. American3 - male

Materials

For the purpose of the study, two match making websites were chosen:

a) www.shaadi.com, an Indian matrimonial website
b) www.match.com, an American dating website

www.shaadi.com, established in 1997, is an online Indian matrimonial service provider. It is strongly driven by the community-based criterion, the communities being the different communities of India.

www.match.com, USA, established in 1995, is an online dating service provider. Although most of its users are residents of the USA and Canada, it is free from the limitations of community specifications and bindings. The website is meant for date seekers and many testimonials on the website claim that many of the successful relationships initiated by www.match.com have resulted in marriages.

Both websites are very popular and frequently used in their respective domains.

Eight member profiles were chosen from the two websites. Four profiles were chosen from each. *(See Appendix 1 for sample profile details as they appear on the websites)*

The nomenclature of sample profiles from www.shaadi.com is as follows:
Shaadi1, Shaadi2, Shaadi3, Shaadi4

The nomenclature of sample profiles from www.match.com is as follows:
Match1, Match2, Match3, Match4

In the case of www.shaadi.com, the profiles were chosen based on the following criteria:

a) All the chosen profiles belonged to either 'Punjabi' or 'Hindi' communities. The community criterion was taken into consideration as the four Indian subjects belonged to either of the two communities
b) Two male profiles and two female profiles were chosen
c) One out of the four profiles chosen was without photographs

Following criteria were kept in mind while choosing the four profiles on www.match.com:

a) Two male profiles and two female profiles were chosen
b) One out of the four profiles chosen was without photographs

For part two of the methodology, the personal essays of all the eight chosen profiles were studied to gauge the additional information provided by members beyond the common profile categories on the two different websites.

For part three of the methodology, six subjects were shown the sample eight profiles to record their impressions and perception based on different cultural backgrounds.

Procedure

Part 1:
For the first part of the paper, the categories of information required to create profiles on the two websites have been compared. This information is required from all to-be-members and is listed upfront in the profiles.

Comparison chart of personal information required for profile creation -

Registration Fields	www.shaadi.com	www.match.com
Type of Service	Matrimonial service provider	Dating or making friends
Option of profile creation by other	yes	no
Age Group	1935 - 2004	1919 - 2004
Gender	Options: Male or female	Options: Male, female, gay, lesbian
Community	yes	no
Ethnicity	no	yes
Religion	yes	yes
Caste and Sub-caste	yes	no
Relationship status	Options: Single/widowed/separated/divorced	Options: Married/single/widowed/separated/divorced/attached
Mother Tongue	yes	no
Are you 'Mangalik'[1]	yes	no
Family Values	Options: Conservative/medium/liberal	no
Location	yes	yes
Have Children and number	Options: Yes, if once married /No, if single	yes
Want Children	No	yes
Height	yes	yes
Complexion	yes	no
Eye Color	no	yes
Special Case/handicapped	yes	no

Registration Fields	www.shaadi.com	www.match.com
Diet	Options: Vegetarian/Non-Vegetarian/Jain[2]	Options: Junk/chocolate/Veg/Non-Veg/Healthy/Meat&Potatoes
Smoke	yes	yes
Drink	yes	yes
Education	yes	yes
Profession	yes	yes
Annual Income	yes	yes
Astro Profile	yes	no
Have Pets	no	yes
Want Pets	no	yes
Interests	no	yes
Languages Spoken	no	yes
Political Views	no	yes
Personality Traits	no	yes
Body Art	no	yes
Essays	Required 2 - Minimum 100 characters each	4 Essays, Required 1- essay on self Minimum 200 characters
Photos	3 photos	Multiple photos
Profile Headline	no	yes

[1] 'Mangalik', a Hindu astrological term for the arrangement of planets that can be harmful for one's marriage bringing about many problems between partners and hardships in the married life
[2] A special vegetarian diet of 'Jain' community in India

Following is the comparison of details of preferred partner profile required from registering members on the two websites:

Registration Fields	www.shaadi.com	www.match.com
Age	yes	no
Height	yes	yes
Eye Color	no	yes
Hair Color	no	yes
Complexion	yes	no
Body Type	yes	yes
Ethnicity	no	yes
Caste	yes	no
Family Values	yes	no
Special Cases	yes	no
Religion	yes	yes
Caste and Sub-caste	yes	no
Languages Spoken	no	yes
Mother tongue	yes	no

Registration Fields	www.shaadi.com	www.match.com
Mangalik	yes	no
Education	yes	yes
Profession	yes	yes
Annual Income	yes	yes
Relationship status	Options: Single/widowed/separated/divorced	Options: Married/single/widowed/separated/divorced/attached
Have Children	yes	yes
Want Children	no	yes
Have Pets	no	yes
Want Pets	no	yes

These comparisons reflect some of the cultural biases and peculiarities on both the websites. For example, www.shaadi.com is not open to people above 69 years of age while www.match.com is open to people below 85 years of age. Being an online matrimonial service provider, www.shaadi.com does not provide its services to gays and lesbians unlike www.match.com. People can state that they are married or attached and yet look for dates or friends on www.match.com, an option not available on www.shaadi.com. Indian men are generally very picky about skin color and hence www.shaadi.com has provided the 'complexion' option. As an example that supports this fact - most Indian men, as observed in many Indian newspaper classified ads, look for 'tall, fair, English medium educated' women as life partners. The Indian matrimonial website also supports the posting of the profile by a parent, sibling or friend of the member, a custom of Indian arranged marriages where the family is responsible for searching for a partner for their children. Most Indians also prefer matching horoscopes of the bride and the bridegroom before the marriage to get an astrological confirmation of a successful marriage. This option is available on www.shaadi.com. As evident, www.shaadi.com does not provide for extensive personal essay writing as www.match.com does.

This comparison illustrates that American culture is more open-minded and flexible in terms of matchmaking as compared to the Indian culture, which tends to be restrictive in many areas when it relates to matrimonial alliances.

Part2:

(See appendix1 to refer to the sample member profiles as they appear on the websites.)

The personal essays on www.shaadi.com are divided into two categories - *More About Myself* and *My Family*. www.match.com has four categories of essays – *About me and who I 'd like to meet, favorite hot spots, favorite things* and *last read*.

An examination of the essays reveals that most members of www.match.com write longer essays as compared to the members of www.shaadi.com. On

observation, it reveals that members of www.match.com need to be more verbal about themselves because they do not have the advantage of stating their community, caste, sub-caste, mother-tongue, family values and sometimes an astro-profile in their profile details unlike that for members on www.shaadi.com. Many www.shaadi.com profiles also give details about their parents' and siblings' professions in the *My Family* section. For instance, Shaadi2 mentions, *'My father is a journalist and a nationally acclaimed hindi creative writer, (writes short stories) poet and art critic. In his three decades of professional life, he has worked with/for almost all leading publication houses. My mother is working for the university as an Upper Division Clerk. My brother is a Management professional. He works for bank as manager.'* By stating the social background in the profile details and giving an account of one's family's background in the essay, a www.shaadi.com member is under lesser pressure to prove his identity in the social context through the essays. These facts can further help the match seeker in understanding the personality and intellectual background of the person behind the profile. Also, as suggested by Spears and Lea (Spears, R. & Lea, M., 1992), the absence of face-to-face cues and prior personal knowledge about a partner, whatever subtle social context cues or personality cues do appear in Computer - Mediated Communication take on particularly great value. A lack of these website features and tendencies to reveal family's professional background, encourages www.match.com members to write more about themselves, their reading habits, likes and dislikes to project the desired social and personal image to date seekers. As a corollary to this, the member profiles on www.match.com with very little essay content or inarticulate essays, for instance, Match3's short, inarticulate essay, reflects very poorly on the member's personality.

An examination of the essays of the four Indian profiles suggests their preference for strong family values and ties, respect for Indian culture and tradition, honesty and integrity in their future life partners. This expectation is common across the members that live in India as well as abroad. For example, Shaadi1 states –*' Who I am looking for – …can love and respect my family (read. I just have my parents and its important that you gel with them)…knows and respects Indian culture and traditions and is spiritually inclined (because I am and would like someone who shares the same feeling).*
Shaadi2 writes – *'Further here, I am categorically looking for a person who is upright in virtues, intelligent, good homoured, witty, a bit creative, with good interpersonal skills. A caring guy who has close family bonds is the one am looking for!"*
Shaadi3 writes – *' I am looking for someone who has a sense of self and is together….so if you are the one for me…'*
Shaadi4 mentions – *' I am looking for a witty, classy young female that's confident…..Has a 'desi'[3] zest and enjoys 'family time' and 'individual time' to maintain equilibrium.'*

[3] 'Desi' is a Hindi slang term for 'being Indian'

Another difference between the information stated in the personal essays on the two websites relates to the inhibition on the part of Indian members to reveal one's past relationships and drinking habits. Contrary to this, members on www.match.com are very candid about their past relationships and their habits of visiting bars and night clubs.

For instance, Match1 states, *'The men I've dated in the past might describe me as outgoing, fun and warm.'* Match4 writes, *'I have a 20-month old son and I am living with him but I don't have any type of relationship with his father.'* Match2 states, *'School nights I try and maintain a blood level just below the legal limit unless the Lakers are playing and can't sink a shot. Weekends completely dedicated to supporting the local bar scene and foreign distilleries.'*

I observed that even though many of the www.shaadi.com profiles state a 'yes' in the drinking category of their profiles, they refrain from writing about their drinking habits in the personal essays. I would attribute these tendencies to the Indian society's cultural bias against alcohol consumption and pre-marital relationships. A member profile stating past relationships and pleasure in drinking would jeopardize the member's respectable image for many Indian partner seekers. They may reveal their habits later when they actually meet the prospective partner.

Part 3:

(See appendix 2 to refer to the impressions formed by the subjects on the sample member profiles.)

An examination of the profile impressions of the six subjects reveals certain interesting patterns in perception of the two groups of profiles. The following section details how the subjects perceived the four www.shaadi.com profiles.

Profile Shaadi1:
Indian1, Indian2, American1 and American2 thought that Shaadi1 was demanding/dominating or arrogant. The others, Indian3 and American3 thought he was either boring or had a bad sense of humor.

Profile Shaadi2:
The only person who considered the fact that Shaadi2 did not mind her preferred partner to have a child without marriage as interesting was Indian1. No other subject even noticed it. All the Indian subjects thought that Shaadi2 had strong family ties and values. Two male Indian subjects, thought that she did not make enough money. This was not observed by any of the American subjects, which I can attribute to the lack of knowledge of the currency exchange rate. American1 calls the family background information provided by Shaadi2 as 'biographical information'. This information confirms the profile's identity to her. On the other hand, the Indian subjects view this information as a proof of the person's family values and ties.

Profile Shaadi3:
The Indian subjects thought that Shaadi3 was 'cool', 'honest' and 'unconventional'. All the American subjects thought that she was a 'fun loving' and party hopping person. Two of the Americans thought that she was good only for short-term relationships.

Profile Shaadi4:
It was difficult for all the subjects to make a judgment about Shaadi4 without a photograph. All the subjects unanimously agreed that the profile was 'vague' and 'uninspiring'. Indian1 also thought that the person was a 'male chauvinist pig' because he did not want his preferred partner to drink although he himself drinks.

A review of www.match.com profile impressions on the subjects also reveals interesting patterns amongst shared common cultural understandings.

Profile Match1:
All subjects thought that Match1 was nice. Two male Indian subjects thought that she was 'attractive', 'talkative' and 'smart'. While American1 and American3 thought that she was 'boring' and 'insecure' respectively, quite contrary to what the Indian subjects thought.

Profile Match2:
Indian1 and Indian2 were of the view that Match2 was physically attractive with an athletic body. Only Indian1 and Indian3 commented on his lack of higher education. Indian3 along with other American subjects thought that he was pretentious, did not want a serious relationship and was lying to some extent. This result could be attributed to the fact that subject Indian3 has lived in the USA for the last eleven years and it is evident that now his perception about fellow Americans is similar to the perception of other American subjects.

Profile Match3:
All Indian subjects thought that Match3 (without photograph) was honest and simple, but all the American subjects thought he was dishonest. Most subjects, Indian and American, thought that his status of a single father with kids would be troublesome in finding an appropriate match. All subjects, except Indian1 and Indian2 suggested that he was unrefined. Regardless of these impressions, they all expressed their difficulty in making a judgment about his personality without a photograph.

Profile Match4:
All American subjects agreed that Match4 was boring and the person behind the profile seemed insecure. The Indian subjects varied in their statements. Indian1 and Indian3 thought that she was 'honest' while Indian2 thought that she was 'hypocritical'. Indian1 and Indian2 also thought she was 'cool' and 'bohemian' unlike the American subjects who thought that her profile was 'boring' without any comments on the person.

My other observation was that all Indian subjects questioned or commented on the family values of most of the profiles and American subjects did not seem to care about it.

The subject study can be summed up in the following ways –

1. All Indian subjects thought alike about the Indian profiles but they did not concur on their views about the American profiles. This could be attributed to them having the same Indian cultural background leading to similar judgments about Indian profiles. However, they had varied lengths of stay in the USA, which accounts for their varied perceptions of the American profiles.

2. All American subjects not only thought alike about the American profiles but also thought alike about the Indian profiles. This could be attributed to their common knowledge of the American culture and way of living and their common lack of knowledge of the nuances of Indian culture.

3. The common perceptions of the profiles within the American subject group were different from the common perceptions of the profiles within the Indian subject group.

4. Despite the cultural and community-based information stated in the Indian profiles, it was felt that it was important to have photographs of profiles to be able to make valued judgments. Availability of photographs proved to be an important factor for both subject groups to make a worthwhile judgment about a profile on the two websites.

5. Indians, more than Americans looked for nuances of member personalities by giving more importance to what was stated in the profile details instead of the personal essays on www.shaadi.com.

Conclusions

This paper attempted to study the differences in identity formation and perception of profiles on the culturally different matchmaking websites. It proved that while the basic underlying system format of both websites was the same, cultural factors and ways of living of the two different groups of people actually shaped the design of the websites.

One important finding of the observations was that www.match.com encourages the members to be more vocal about themselves. Well-written personal essays appear to have a better chance at gaining the attention of interested members on www.match.com. On the contrary, even though the system allowed them to be verbose, the members on the Indian website preferred to write less and fall back on the profile details that include indication of one's community, caste, family background, astrological details etc. to form their social and personal identities. These details also seemed more important in

perceiving the people behind the profiles as opposed to the personal essays on www.shaadi.com.

The emphasis on community-based search and profile description by www.shaadi.com can be attributed to the fact that the website is meant only for Indian matrimonial matchmaking where a common cultural and family background is usually preferred in a life partner. This is contrary to the flexible requirements for dating in the west, as is evident from the comparison of the registration details required for profile creation on the two websites.

Future studies should be aimed at getting more detailed understanding of the effects of shared common cultural background on identity formation and perception by conducting a more expansive subject study that would also include subjects residing in India or the region concerned. The research would require a larger number of subjects, who can provide more elaborate description of their profile impressions.

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