

# Mobilizing the *Hijab*: Islamic identity negotiation in the context of a matchmaking website

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- *This article explores the intended use and meaning of the hijab as a personal branding tool for Muslim users of an online matchmaking service. We analyze the motivations of male and female Muslim consumers for mobilizing the symbolism of the hijab as they construct online identities. We ask whether including information about 'willingness to wear the hijab' is motivated primarily by a desire to comply to normative rules of conduct or by an instrumental attitude driven by a desire to effectively build and communicate a personal online brand. Our results indicate that the meaning of the hijab is not fixed and uncontested but is dependent on the historical and social context of insertion. In the context of an online matchmaking site, the motivation to mobilize the hijab is predominantly instrumental. In addition, women are more likely to use the hijab for personal branding than men, whose motivation to mobilize the veil's cultural and traditional symbolism prevails. In accordance with previous research, we find that a higher degree of education reduces the likelihood of men and women to use the hijab in order to conform to community norms.*

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## Introduction

Conservative Muslims living in Western societies face a unique set of challenges as they attempt to conserve a sense of cultural and ethnic identity in a world characterized by change, high mobility, and multiculturalism. Close-knit, traditional communities like the Shia Muslims in North America directly

experience the dissolving effects of modernity as their young members are either no longer able to easily locate and meet partners for marriage within their own population or sometimes prefer to find them outside the community (Mawjee, 1998). Mobility and spatial dispersion typical of modern urban life add another layer of complexity. The matchmaker—the traditional facilitator of love in Shia Muslim communities—has either disappeared or lost its monopoly status as the means for finding a life mate among Westernized Muslim youth. Like for their non-Muslim peers, the Internet has gained widespread

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popularity among urban twenty-something Muslims of marriageable age.

The new medium, however, has its problems. Conservative communities such as the Shia have elaborate and highly scripted customs that govern the development of social relationships between men and women. Online matchmaking sites must be able to reproduce a generally acceptable environment for socializing that honors the community's cultural and religious statutes and norms. With respect to the love seekers, the new medium requires a whole new language with which to construct a desirable and marketable digital persona.

In this paper, we explore the use and meaning of the hijab<sup>1</sup> as a personal branding tool (Spillane, 2000) for Muslim consumers participating in an online matchmaking service. Specifically, we examine the motivations of male and female Muslim consumers to mobilize the symbolism of the hijab for the construction of a desirable and 'marketable' digital identity. We pursue two main research questions. First, we examine whether including information about 'willingness to wear the hijab' is motivated primarily by a desire to comply with normative rules of conduct or by an instrumental attitude resulting in a desire to effectively communicate a personal online brand? In real life, dating among Shia Muslims is governed by entrenched cultural directives spanning a normative framework that the website and its consumers cannot simply ignore or overwrite. On the other hand, the virtual matchmaking site presents a competitive cultural script, *the culture of the market*. By encouraging an individualistic pursuit of wants and needs, competition, and commodification of the self, the online matchmaking site promotes efficient and effective spouse searching rather than adherence to cultural conventions. Second, we examine whether motivations differ across demographic

(gender, education), and psychographic characteristics reflected in the motivation to use the matchmaking website itself (interest in spouse seeking vs. change seeking).

### Study context

France's controversial new law banning the overt display of religious symbols in school, directed at the wearing of the hijab, brings to the forefront the enormous contemporary significance of the veil as a historically and culturally constructed symbol of female Islamic identity (see e.g., Brenner, 1996; Mernissi, 1987). The practice of hijab among Muslim women is based on religious doctrine, although the Qur'an does not mandate it (Kandiyoti, 1991). A range of opinions exists among Muslims regarding the times and places—ranging from prayer only to all the time—that women are expected to be veiled. Westerners often regard the hijab as a symbol of backward cultural and gender politics and even fundamentalist extremism (Brenner, 1996). Yet, in societies where women are not required by law to wear a veil, some Islamic groups have mobilized the hijab to represent a traditional sense of Islamic identity characterized by moral superiority, virtue, and modesty in women (Franks, 2000; Taraki, 1995). Thus in the North American context, the veil and other religious objects are means for women to 'make Muslim spaces' (Metcalf, 1996) within a largely non-Muslim homeland.

This study was conducted as part of a larger project investigating the challenges and complex negotiations of a traditional Muslim community in North America with the values, meanings, and capabilities of new information and communication technologies. We will report a few quotes from our informants, but the study reported here is the survey research part of the project. Concerned about the reproduction of the community's cultural and social coherence, relevant stakeholder groups including clerics, parents, and children have turned to the Internet to supplement the increasingly waning traditional matchmaker. Yet, a matchmaking website changes the rules

<sup>1</sup>Hijab generally refers to a style of clothing that may cover the woman's entire body but usually excludes the hands and face. In everyday language, 'the veil' or 'head scarf' is often used as shorthand for hijab.

of the game. Within communities still glued together by regular face-to-face encounters of its members, the body remains at the center of identity construction. In the age of wired communities and cyberlinked individuals, disembodied socialities become more common and the signifying power of the body recedes (Hayles, 1993; Turkle, 1995). In the symbolic space of the Internet, identities have to be constructed through language and pictures and cultural symbols of identity such as the hijab take on enormous significance (cf. Dholakia and Zwick, 2001; Schau and Gilly, 2003).

Constructing a digital persona requires overcoming the *decontextualizing effect* of the Internet by generating a virtual face-in-action, an online brand. Creating a convincing brand requires symbols with strong signifying power. Hence, the hijab is mobilized as a brand attribute in the postmodern marketplace of signs and symbols, segmenting the market, targeting consumers, and positioning the wearer (cf., Brown *et al.*, 2003; Holt, 2002). This positioning includes a reaffirmation of the anticipated gender role of the male and the female in the traditional Shia family (Gentry *et al.*, 2003). In addition, the use of religious symbolism serves as an element for the construction of identity and adds legitimacy to the Internet as a site for young people to meet.

### ***Modernity versus tradition in web-based matchmaking: Reconciling motivations***

Matchmaking sites are among the most successful business models on the Internet. Brands like Lavalife, udate.com, Yahoo Personals, and Match.com have attracted large member bases. Estimates suggest that about one fourth of America's 98 million singles are taking their search for dates, relationships, sex, and spouses to the Internet (Yin, 2002). The popularity of online dating rests on its efficiency to bring together a relatively large dating audience, improve (initially anonymous) knowledge exchange, and speed up socializing among members. For example, eHarmony.com

boasts that its scientifically designed Compatibility Matching Systems enables the provision of 'more marriages per match than any online dating service.' The creation of performance measures specific to the online matchmaking industry, such as the ratio of marriages and matches, exemplifies an instrumental focus on efficiency, and on the capacity to find a spouse in a quick and reliable manner.

However, this instrumental advantage of the medium can be a cause for concern for conservative and culturally normative identity groups that have strict, detailed, and historically anchored matchmaking rituals in the real world. To Shia Muslims, the prospect of men and women engaging in multiple, unmonitored online (and possibly offline) relationships over different time spans, with several possible partners at once before making a choice is highly disturbing. Typically, marriages are arranged in various, closely monitored rituals like the 'tea-method.'<sup>2</sup> Spaces where unmarried men and women can meet without supervision do not exist. In the mosque, the central place for communal gatherings, men and women are kept separate and at a distance from each other, not only during times of prayer but for all mosque-related activities.

To make online dating a viable option for conservative identity groups, it must not only prove efficient in making matches but maintain the 'religious tone' of the dating process. With

<sup>2</sup>Typically, within the Shia community, the arranged marriage method involves a matchmaker (usually female) who would be contacted by the groom's side to promote the qualities of the groom (usually education, occupation, age) to suitable females and their families. The matchmaker is essentially retained by the groom's family to recruit a pool of 'suitable' brides and assess their interest level regarding the potential groom. If the families of a potential bride and groom agree to a meeting, it is typically held at the female's house where tea and appetizers are served—hence the tea method. The potential bride and groom usually have a chance to talk to one another in a separate room to determine compatibility. Based on the outcome of the first meeting, subsequent meetings can be arranged including, albeit rarely, unsupervised dates. Usually the decision process is a short one. After a few meetings the parties either get engaged (announced at the mosque) or move on to new prospects.

respect to the context of the Shia Muslim community, this religious tone means first and foremost continued control over the movement and dating behavior of women (Kandiyoti, 1995). Shia culture, just like its conservative Christian counterpart, is characterized by pervasive asymmetrical power structures between men and women, and androcentric visions of the nature of marital relationships (Vuola, 2002). In addition, the community harbors a strong fear of ethnic dilution, socially and culturally justifying in the eyes of the clerics and parents some form of jurisdiction over their children, or more accurately, their daughters. This longstanding convention does not go unchallenged anymore. As one female informant explains during the interview:

There is a longstanding joke criticizing the existing mentality of the community with regards to marriage. The joke describes a father who drops his daughter off at university. The father points towards a group of non-Muslim males and says, 'See those boys over there, Peter, Michael, and John, you can interact with them and be friends with them, but you can't marry any of them.' The father then drops his daughter off at the mosque, points to a group of Muslim males and says, 'See those boys over there, Ali, Muhammad, and Jaffer, you can't interact with them, or make friends with them, but you must marry one of them' (Kaylana,<sup>3</sup> age 26).

Younger female Shia, while recognizing the concerns of the other parties, also see a need for innovation with respect to dating and spouse seeking. The hijab is capable of supporting both: higher search efficiency (instrumentality) and recognition of cultural gender norms. Hence, we argue that the decision by Muslim women to mobilize the symbolism of the hijab in the Internet matchmaking context illustrates their desire to

negotiate the Internet's instrumental benefits and the community's normative cultural expectations.

In the context of online matchmaking sites, we consider normative and instrumental motivation to be two distinct dimensions, not opposing views. Put differently, providing information about the hijab and the willingness to wear it after marriage as part of the personal online profile can be motivated by a need for both normative integration and efficiency. A matchmaking website can satisfy normative requirements for a socially and culturally adequate dating procedure and also provide expedient success finding love. According to semiotic theory (cf. Derrida, 1970; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Mick, 1986), the hijab is not a fixed signifier with one natural meaning. Instead, the hijab can signify social and cultural normativity (conformity to external expectations) *and* marketing instrumentality. It can be mobilized to mean different things, depending on the motivation and the context in which it is used.

One motivation of the participants of the matchmaking site is to ensure that online dating is normatively integrated with the communal traditions of spouse selection. In this context, providing information about hijab observance symbolizes a willingness of the site and its participants to conform to these communal norms and to submit the self to external expectations. We thus state our first hypothesis:

*H<sub>1</sub>. Normative motivation about the matchmaking website is positively correlated to interest in including information on 'willingness to wear hijab after marriage (WWHAM).'*

Finding an appropriate spouse is a process similar to shopping (cf. Greenwald, 2003). Traditionally, Shia men and women appraise potential candidates based on their benefits and attributes like wealth, beauty, pedigree, family name, and taste. Attributes can be traded off for others—for example, reputation and good name can make up for lower wealth (Mawjee, 1998). In a traditional face-to-face

<sup>3</sup>All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the informants.

setting, love-seeking parties rely on the services of 'market intermediaries' such as older family members and professional matchmakers. In addition, the families of men and women of marriageable age often belong to related social circles providing information through their network of acquaintances.

Younger members of Muslim immigrant communities situated in large urban centers of the West are no longer able or willing to adopt the spouse selection mechanisms of their parents, sometimes openly rejecting the mediating force of the elderly or close-knit social networks. Often the young question the validity of spouse selection criteria used by older relatives and thus discount their advice. Says one female informant:

Sometimes the love of a mother or father blinds them to the actual personality of their child. Parents don't really know their own children. Also a guy may be interested in the type of girl that his mother doesn't like (Selany, age 29).

The Internet replaces traditional selection tools because it lowers search costs for a large and dispersed consideration set (Peterson and Merino, 2003). However, the medium creates a new set of challenges for users because it stresses the importance of personal branding in the absence of visible and tangible cues, and traditional reputation mechanisms. Brands work best when they communicate a clear and distinct message to the target market (Fournier, 1998; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). From the screen name to the listing of personal characteristics, participants must embrace the logic of the market and accept commodification within the confines of the website design. Thus, the hijab becomes a brand component providing a shortcut for the potential target market by directly communicating the desired brand message. Of course, this brand message also *excludes* market segments that dislike hijab observance, but whatever the final outcome of the branding effort, the meaning of the hijab is determined by the desire to define the pool of potential spouses in an efficient and clear-cut manner. We thus hypothesize:

*H<sub>2</sub>. Instrumental motivation about the matchmaking website is positively correlated to interest in including information on WWHAM.*

### Moderating effects

We expect that normative and instrumental motivations for providing information about the hijab might not be the same across various demographics or psychographic factors. For example, older people tend to be more conservative and traditional which would indicate a greater support for wearing the hijab. However, studies done in the French Algerian immigrant community indicate that younger people, born in France, are more interested in using the hijab as a sign of cultural identity than their parents, who see it as a 'lack of discretion by immigrants living in a host country' (Killian, 2003, p.573). Given that our study focused on young people as prospective users of the matchmaking website, analysis of age differentials is not possible. We look, however, at two demographic variables—gender and education.

### Gender

The gender literature is not clear about the source, magnitude, and existence of gender differences and if any differences indeed exist, between men and women and whether they are natural, learned, or socially constructed (e.g., Bohan, 1992; Eagly *et al.*, 2004; Hare-Mustin and Marecek, 1990). A consensus, however, has emerged suggesting that gender differences are conditional on people's specific life circumstances and therefore can be discerned only when social structural variables are taken into account (Fritz and Helgeson, 1998; Prince-Gibson and Schwartz, 1998).

With regards to religion and gender, the literature seems to indicate that women tend to be more religious than men, as reflected in higher levels of attendance of Bible study (Batson *et al.*, 1993) and religious involvement (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle, 1997). However, past studies have focused primarily on

Christians and the gender effect might be culturally specific. For example, Jewish and Muslim women's attendance of places of religious worship might be less frequent than that of Jewish or Muslim men. More recent studies found support for the premise that Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim women were less religiously active than men (Loewenthal *et al.*, 2002). In addition, the Muslim religious structure erects a firm patriarchal base from which men dominate women in many, albeit not all, spheres of life (Manji, 2004). Hence, men have more to gain by conserving and conforming to exiting social and cultural structures. We therefore argue that the hijab is mobilized by the male population as a religious symbol signifying traditional community values and a cultural and social status quo.

*H<sub>3</sub>. The relationship between normative motivation about the matchmaking website and interest to include information on WWHAM is stronger for men than for women.*

Females tend to be more pressured than males to select a spouse speedily and get married fairly early (Bernal, 1994). Thus females seek efficient ways to find and connect with males and to provide a representation of oneself that can quickly be communicated to, and interpreted by, potential husbands. At a marriageable age, Muslim women have internalized the community's—and more importantly most Muslim males'—expectations of their role and conduct as spouses. From the woman's perspective, the use of the hijab as a branding instrument signaling understanding and espousal of these norms will therefore be more important than for males. We thus hypothesize:

*H<sub>4</sub>. The relationship between instrumental motivation about the matchmaking website and interest to include information on WWHAM is stronger for women than for men.*

#### *Education*

Higher levels of education are correlated with achievement and self-direction. Education is

inversely related to conformity and submissive self-restriction, two value types promoted by religiosity (Schwartz and Huismans, 1995). Against the prescriptive framework of religion, education fosters a desire to rely on one's own judgment. In particular, education has been linked to relativist attitudes towards religious authorities and tolerance about alternative lifestyles (Hoge *et al.*, 1994). Furthermore, the more and the longer individuals are exposed to education, the less susceptible they are to attempts by the community to pass on its religious values (Myers, 1996). Finally, exposure to education as a young adult (i.e., college and university) has a strong liberating effect from conservative religious attitudes learned during childhood and adolescence from parents and the community at large (Rosenhouse-Persson and Sabagh, 1983). Hence we hypothesize:

*H<sub>5</sub>. The relationship between normative motivation about the matchmaking website and interest to include information on WWHAM is stronger for people without a college education.*

We do not hypothesize any differences in instrumental motivation across different levels of education. Regardless of the level of educational attainment, young Shia are equally likely to see the provision of information on WWHAM as instrumental in the matchmaking website capacity to help them find a spouse in a quick and reliable manner.

#### *Motivation to use the matchmaking website*

Whether a woman is likely to provide information about her willingness to wear the hijab after marriage, and whether a wife-seeking man values this information may depend on the user's motivation when using the matchmaking website. Hoffman and Novak (1996) distinguish between two main motivations impacting consumer behavior in computer-mediated environments (CMEs). Extrinsic motivation applies to activities that are characterized as purposeful and task-oriented, and are performed in order to achieve a valued outcome (Hoffman and Novak, 1996). In other

words, the individual is motivated by a desire to solve a problem such as in the case of a matchmaking website finding a spouse. Intrinsic motivation applies to activities performed 'for no apparent reinforcement other than the process of performing the activity' (Davis *et al.*, 1992, p. 1112), as an end in itself, and is characterized as undirected, experiential, and pleasure seeking. In this case, the individual is motivated by a desire to experience novelty, variety, and change.

Importantly, task-oriented and purposeful consumer behavior is more likely among highly involved consumers (Celsi and Olson, 1988) because of intrinsic self-relevance, whereas exploratory and experiential conduct in a CME is more likely among consumers with a higher need for variety and change (Ghani and Deshpande, 1994). Hence, high involvement may lead to a more instrumental attitude toward the matchmaking site while change seekers may regard the site as a place for finding excitement, experimentation, and new experiences. Consequently, we use two variables—spouse-seeking interest and change seeking—to account for extrinsic and intrinsic motivation to use the matchmaking site. In the following section, we investigate their moderating impact on the motivation to include information about hijab observance on the matchmaking site.

#### *Spouse-seeking interest*

Interested consumers are more involved in the decision making process (Bhate, 1993; Kapferer and Laurent, 1993; Laaksonen, 1994), search for more information, consider fewer alternatives, and form attitudes that are more resistant to change (e.g., Beatty and Smith, 1987; Maheswaren and Meyers-Levy, 1990; Petty *et al.*, 1991). In addition, interest and commitment in a product class is a function of personal relevance (Higie and Feick, 1988; Mittal, 1989). Thus, in the case of online matchmaking, higher interest implies that finding a spouse has gained higher personal relevance for the searching parties and that increased levels of involvement and commit-

ment for pursuing that goal can be expected. A higher level of interest therefore encourages the participant to adopt a more goal-oriented and active attitude towards the search objective, and to abandon many elements of the process that might hinder or defer the achievement of their goal. In other words, for an individual who is highly involved in—perhaps even 'desperately'—seeking a spouse, the fact that the website conforms to religion and convention is less important. Hence, highly involved spouse seekers are hypothesized to be more willing to try methods that are not validated by religion and tradition as long as they satisfy the instrumental criterion and increase efficient goal achievement. Accordingly, as stated in Hypothesis 7, for an individual highly involved in seeking a spouse, the information on WWHAM has great diagnostic value and it makes the website more instrumental. We thus hypothesize:

*H<sub>6</sub>. Higher spouse seeking interest will weaken the relationship between normative motivation about the matchmaking website and interest to include information on WWHAM.*

*H<sub>7</sub>. Higher spouse seeking interest will strengthen the relationship between instrumental motivation about the matchmaking website and interest to include information on WWHAM.*

#### *Change seeking*

Change seeking is 'the need for variation in one's stimulus input in order to maintain optimal functioning' (Garlington and Shimota, 1964, p. 919; Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1994) and closely related to consumer innovativeness (Cotte and Wood, 2004). Consumer innovativeness, the tendency to want to embrace change and try new behaviors or products, leads to variety-seeking behaviors and increased information gathering (Menon and Kahn, 1995). Hence, openness for change fosters a need for stimulation and self-direction, which is either cognitive- or sensory-oriented, and expressed in a desire to explore

new ideas and novel products (Cotte and Wood, 2004).

Innovation, embracing change, and the desire for exploration is in conflict with the normative rule of religion (Schwartz and Huisman, 1995). It has been argued that the relationship between ideological pluralism and religious vitality is a negative one, that pluralism undermines vitality (Chaves and Gorski, 2001). The argument suggests that pluralistic ideas, changing and competing worldviews, and ideological innovation challenges religion through its effect on plausibility: the more worldviews there are, the less plausible each seems, and the less religious belief and activity there will be (Berger, 1969). Having a varied and exciting life dominated by a thirst for creativity, independence of mind, and gratification of individual needs is in many respects antagonistic to any ideology that values obedience, acceptance of one's position in the world, moderation, and respect for tradition. We thus hypothesize:

*H<sub>8</sub> Higher change seeking tendencies will weaken the relationship between normative motivation and interest in provision of information on WWHAM.*

## Methodology

Data collection took place in the spring of 2003 in a large metropolitan area in Canada, as part of a larger study on the consumption of technology among Muslims with a specific focus on identifying key social and cultural dimensions of its adoption. Data collection was undertaken by members of the community who also served as gatekeepers between the two authors and the community. Having the data collection performed by 'insiders' improves response quality and limits bias, especially for sensitive questions about religion, tradition, and marriage (Hox *et al.*, 1991; Hyman *et al.*, 1954; Weeks and Moore, 1981; Williams, 1964).

The first stage of the data collection consisted of eight open-ended, one-on-one interviews (McCracken, 1988) with male and female members of the Shia community, as

well as one focus group session with 10 mothers of a Shia parenting workshop. The interviews were conducted by a female member of the Shia community, transcribed verbatim, and organized into themes, which were validated by the process of triangulation during which the two researchers and the Shia interviewer continuously compared their interpretations of the data until an agreement on the themes was reached (see Belk *et al.*, 1989). The insights gleaned from the qualitative research were then used to create a questionnaire, which was evaluated by several members of the community. The questionnaires were then distributed during several community events to potential users of a matchmaking website. From 250 questionnaires, 103 questionnaires were returned, leading to a response rate of 41%. Sample characteristics are summarized in **Table 1**. While our sample size is not large, it reflects the small numbers in our population of interest (single youth, aged 18 and over, from a particular Shia community) and it is consistent with similar studies (see e.g., Adelman and Ahuvia, 1995; Scharlott and Christ, 1995).

A set of questions asked respondents to indicate their agreement with including various elements in the description of the user of the future matchmaking website. These elements included personal appearance information, demographic aspects, family plans, and

**Table 1.** Sample characteristics

Demographics	Percentage
Gender	
Males	56.9
Females	43.1
Age	
Under 21	65
21-25	25.2
25-35	9.8
Marital status	
Single	96.1
Engaged	3.9
Education	
Some high-school	19.8
High School	8.9
Some college	47.5
College	17.8
Graduate studies	5.9



religious observance information, such as willingness to wear the hijab after marriage (WWHAM), halal observance, and prayer observance. The present study uses 'interest in including information on willingness to wear hijab after marriage' (WWHAM) as a dependent variable. Following the logic of matchmaking as a market mechanism (Scharlott and Christ, 1995), including this piece of information on the website has several implications. First, the hijab provides a salient signifier, whose role in the construction of a clear personal identity for women and a risk reduction mechanism for men is as intriguing as it is complicated. Second, the hijab becomes a brand attribute of the online matchmaking site itself because featuring the hijab as a personal characteristic and search criterion would be preferred by the larger Muslim community. Third, including information related to religious practices (e.g., hijab observance, halal observance, prayer) aids the process of transforming a potentially problematic technology (encouraging unmonitored and unrestricted communication between members) into a culturally acceptable spouse seeking-method.

### Data analysis and results

Instrumental motivation, normative motivation, and interest in spouse seeking were

measured with one-item measures developed specifically for this study. Change seeking was measured using four items from the Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1994) scale. The Cronbach-alpha for the scale was 0.88, exceeding the 0.7 reliability threshold suggested by Nunnally (1978). Measurement items used in the study are presented in Table 2.

The estimation of direct and moderator effects was performed using the multiple regression procedure in SPSS. The moderator effect of discrete variables such as gender and education was assessed using the subgroup procedure recommended by Jacard and Choi (1995) and Sharma *et al.* (1981). This procedure involved splitting the sample in two subgroups according to the values of the hypothesized moderator (male/female, no college education/some college education). The model is then estimated for each group and the moderator effects are indicated by significant regression coefficient differences among subgroups (Ping, 1995)

The moderator effect of spouse-seeking interest and change seeking was assessed using product term regression analysis. The procedure is recommended for continuous variables and it involves regressing the dependent variable on independent variables comprising of predictor(s), moderator, and the product of the predictor(s) and moderator (Ping, 1995).

**Table 2.** Construct measures

Construct	Measure
Instrumental motivation (1 = Not at all important, 7 = Very important):	The method used for meeting a spouse should allow you to find a spouse in a quick and reliable manner
Normative motivation (1 = Not at all important, 7 = Very important):	When deciding on which method you will use to meet a spouse, how important are the following considerations to you?
Spouse seeking interest	How interested are you currently in meeting a potential spouse?
Change seeking (1 = totally disagree, 7 = totally agree)—Cronbach Alpha = 0.88	I like to experience novelty and change in my daily routine I am continually seeking new ideas and experiences  I like to try new and different things rather than to continue doing the same thing I prefer an unpredictable way of life, full of change, to a routine one.
Interest in including information about WWHAM (1 = Totally oppose, 7 = Totally Support)	Willingness to wear hijab after marriage

**Table 3.** The moderating effect of gender and education<sup>a</sup>

	Normative motivation		Instrumental motivation		R <sup>2</sup>	F-value	Significance
Overall sample	0.166	(1.642)	0.372*	(3.685)	0.222	13.667	0.000
Males	0.307*	(2.196)	0.163	(1.166)	0.167	5.395	0.007
Females	-0.016	(-0.113)	0.646**	(4.619)	0.408	13.102	0.000
College education	0.038	(0.301)	0.384**	(3.015)	0.163	6.428	0.003
No college education	0.388*	(2.279)	0.343*	(2.017)	0.359	7.004	0.004

<sup>a</sup>The regression coefficients are standardized with t-values in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

#### Direct effects

Hypotheses 1 and 2 predicted a positive correlation between normative and respectively, instrumental motivation, and interest in including information about hijab observance on the website. Our results, shown in **Table 3**, indicate that hypothesis 1 was not supported ( $t = 1.64$ ) while hypothesis 2 was supported ( $t = 3.685$ ): Interest in including information on WWHAM is motivated by the desire to find a spouse in a quick and reliable manner and is not motivated by the need to make the matchmaking website more conforming to tradition and religion.

#### Moderating effect of gender

Hypothesis 3, predicting that the normative motivation to include information on WWHAM is stronger for men than for women, is supported (**Table 3**). Normative motivation is significantly related to our dependent variable for men ( $t = 2.196$ ), but not for women ( $t = -0.113$ ). We also found support for hypothesis 4, predicting that instrumental motivation to include information about WWHAM is stronger for women than for men (**Table 3**). The regression coefficient for instrumental motivation was significant for women ( $t = 4.619$ ) but not significant for males ( $t = 1.166$ ).

#### Moderating effect of education

Hypothesis 5 predicted a stronger impact of normative motivation on the interest to include

information about WWHAM for people without a college education (**Table 3**). Our results indicate support for hypothesis 5, since the corresponding regression coefficient for the low education group is significant ( $t = 2.279$ ) while that for the higher education group is not significant ( $t = 0.301$ ).

#### Spouse-seeking interest versus change seeking

To test for the moderator effect of spouse-seeking interest and change seeking we used the product term analysis with hierarchical regressions after mean centering the variables to avoid multicollinearity problems (Ping, 1995). We found support for hypothesis 6 (**Table 4**), predicting a smaller impact of normative motivation on interest in including information about WWHAM, as interest in spouse seeking increases ( $t = -2.29$ ). However, we found no support for hypothesis 7, which predicted that higher interest in spouse seeking leads to a higher instrumental motivation to provide information about WWHAM. In terms of the moderating impact of change-seeking tendencies, hypothesis 8 was supported (**Table 5**). As predicted, the impact of normative motivation on interest to include information on WWHAM will be weaker for individuals with stronger change-seeking tendencies.

#### Discussion of results

The meaning of the hijab is not fixed and uncontested but dependent on the historical

**Table 4.** The moderating effect of spouse-seeking interest

Main effects	
Normative motivation	0.187 (1.956)
Instrumental motivation	0.254* (2.507)
Spouse-seeking interest	0.265** (2.908)
Interaction terms	
Normative Motivation × Spouse-seeking interest	-0.220* (-2.290)
Instrumental motivation × Spouse-seeking interest	-0.032 (-0.332)
Incremental $R^2$	0.054
$F$ Change	3.786
Significance of $F$ change	0.026
Full model	
$F(5, 89)$	10.109
Significance	0.000
$R^2$	0.362
Adj. $R^2$	0.326

<sup>a</sup>The regression coefficients are standardized with  $t$ -values in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**Table 5.** The moderating effect of change seeking

Main Effects	
Normative motivation	0.191 (1.866)
Instrumental motivation	0.373** (3.724)
Change seeking	0.050 (0.552)
Interaction terms	
Normative motivation × Change seeking	-0.196* (-1.983)
Instrumental Motivation × Change Seeking	0.153 (1.546)
Incremental $R^2$	0.037
$F$ change	2.329
Significance of $F$ change	0.103
Full model	
$F(5, 93)$	6.518
Significance	0.000
$R^2$	0.260
Adj. $R^2$	0.220

<sup>a</sup>The regression coefficients are standardized with  $t$ -values in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

and social context in which it is inserted. Within the context of an online matchmaking site, the mobilization of the hijab by Shia youth is predominantly instrumentally motivated. Conforming to cultural conventions of the community is less important. In other words, within the context of an 'electronic shopping mall' for men and women, the hijab becomes first and foremost an element of personal

branding strategy (Kirmani and Rao, 2000), akin to the way a brand symbol or logo operates in the market place. For example, an indication of a woman's willingness to wear the hijab after marriage in her personal web profile implies conservative attitudes, religiosity, and Islamic values to a potential husband. Conversely, by indicating a refusal to wear hijab after marriage, the young woman can signal a more liberal, modern, individualistic, or acculturated identity. In turn, male suitors looking for shortcuts to assess the suitability of a potential wife use the hijab as a way to reduce social risk. Thus, the hijab represents a rich signifier of 'personal brand identity' (Spillane, 2000), and it can be mobilized to signal a complex set of meanings.

On the other hand, our results show that the hijab is not used to lend greater cultural acceptability to the matchmaking website itself. This is not to say that the online matchmaking site becomes a space for carnivalesque dating behavior among Muslim youth. In fact, the site as a whole provides a quite definite structure for interaction that is closely aligned with the processes and rules that govern dating of young Shia Muslims in the real world. This might in fact account for the non-significant impact of normative motivation. As long as the structural characteristics of the matchmaking site assure a general level of adherence of all parties to a conventional set of communal laws<sup>4</sup> (for example, dating only one person at a time), the presence of other religious identifiers does not contribute to making the site more culturally acceptable.

There are differences, however, between men and women regarding their strategies of mobilization. Women are more likely to use the hijab in an instrumental, branding sense than

<sup>4</sup>In this Shia matchmaking site, participants can seek out potential spouses by searching through profiles. Participants are required to reveal their identities and email addresses to a moderator and receive a profile number. Participants can view profiles and email the moderator for more information and ask to exchange contact information. A match is made only when both parties agree to exchange identities and email addresses. Once a match is made, participants cannot search other profiles and can gain access to the site only if both parties email the moderator indicating that the match was unsuccessful.

men, whose motivation to mobilize the veil's cultural and traditional symbolism prevails. These motivational dispositions reinforce existing gender structures, which pressure young women to marry early and young men to find a wife accepting of a conservative gender role. Therefore, a Shia online matchmaking site merely *appears* to be a radical and potentially subversive technology of dating. In reality, however, it reproduces the dominant Shia value system by maintaining among other things a gendered framework of signification (see Schroeder, 2002; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004).

In accordance with previous research that suggests an inverse relationship between educational level and religiosity (see e.g., Hoge *et al.*, 1994; Rosenhouse-Persson and Sabagh, 1983; Schwartz and Huismans, 1995), we find that a higher degree of education reduces the likelihood of men and women to use the hijab in order to conform to community norms. To be sure, traditional cultural resources such as the hijab remain critical for the construction and reaffirmation of Muslim female identity in contemporary Western societies. Yet, these resources become semiotically malleable and flexible in the hands of educated young Muslim women who no longer see a contradiction in imbuing the hijab with both religious and brand meaning at the same time, mobilizing one over the other depending on the specific communicative context in which they find themselves.

Finally, our results indicate that both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations to use the website weaken the impact of normative motivation. For website users highly interested in finding a spouse, the method used is less important than achieving results, and close adherence to tradition is likely to be seen as a hindrance. For the change seekers, a matchmaking website might seem an interesting way to break away from tradition and try a different method to find a spouse.

Several limitations of our study should be taken into account when assessing our findings. First, from an external validity perspective, our sample represents the Shia youth from a large urban center in Canada, a setting where

maintaining and manifesting one's ethnic and religious identity is not only tolerated but encouraged. Also Canada has not been exposed to politically charged situations, such as the 9/11 events in US, the 3/11 events in Madrid, or the recent hijab controversy in France. Therefore, it is possible that replications of the present study in a different Western setting would generate different results.

Another limitation of the study is the use of several one-item measures. Previous studies in ethnically similar populations have reported lower response rates associated with longer questionnaires (see e.g., Alkhazraji *et al.*, 1997). While reducing the size of the questionnaire was one of our concerns, it is important to mention that we derived our measures from a number of phenomenological interviews conducted with Shia youth as part of our exploratory research, and the resulting instrument had been reviewed by members of our population of interest.

### Conclusion

Information and communication technologies are not value-neutral. Marketers must understand the cultural norms and social assumptions embedded in and promulgated by technologies like the Internet and how they interact with consumers' existing cultural and social frameworks (see Dholakia and Zwick, 2004). Especially in niche markets with highly particular consumer characteristics, marketers play a critical role in co-constructing the meaning of technologies and determining their value for consumers. To successfully do so depends on the ability of the marketer to develop a high degree of cultural sensitivity towards the target group and to merge the value structure of the technology with the group's expectations.

The case of the Shia matchmaking site is instructive in this respect. In this complex environment success depends on the ability of the marketer to provide tools to users that allow them to negotiate the tensions generated by inserting a new technology into established processes. Adopting any popular matchmaking

platform like Lavalife or Match.com would fail because they do not deliver the specific semiotic resources that allow Shia Muslims to construct communally acceptable virtual identities and negotiate Islamic directives with modern rationalities. The case of the hijab shows how important it is to identify salient cultural signifiers that play a leading role in socially constructing the new technology in a way that makes it palatable for relevant social groups (cf. Dholakia and Zwick, 2004).

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