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Abstract

The trend towards globalization has been under intense observation for a lengthy period and there remain to be new statistics and studies about this phenomenon released daily. Theorists and researchers alike have attempted to not only define the term, but also to determine the consequences of this trend upon all spheres for human social life. The effects of globalization appear to have a wide reach and more recently the general public have also become more familiar with the term, using it as a framework to understand new more global experiences in their lives. Globalization broadly refers to "the growth and acceleration of cultural networks which operate on a worldwide scale and basis" (O'Sullivan, 1994), resulting in "a convergence of lifestyles and ways of viewing the world seems to be underway" (Taras, 2001), this indicates that global citizens are coming to hold similar values to one another.

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The trend towards globalization has been under intense observation for a lengthy period and there remain to be new statistics and studies about this phenomenon released daily. Theorists and researchers alike have attempted to not only define the term, but also to determine the consequences of this trend upon all spheres for human social life. The effects of globalization appear to have a wide reach and more recently the general public have also become more familiar with the term, using it as a framework to understand new more global experiences in their lives. Globalization broadly refers to "the growth and acceleration of cultural networks which operate on a worldwide scale and basis" (O'Sullivan, 1994), resulting in "a convergence of lifestyles and ways of viewing the world seems to be underway" (Taras, 2001), this indicates that global citizens are coming to hold similar values to one another.

The mass media's involvement in the development of new structures, to guide citizens who have been displaced from their homeland, is reflected in the creation of numerous online South Asian matrimonial websites. In order to establish whether these matrimonial sites truly are an example of a new cultural structure for South Asian communities it is necessary to analyze the content of these sites and then establish any prominent themes between sites. This evaluation will determine whether South Asian matrimonial websites are an example of a new cultural structure to replace the age-old traditional marriage and partner selection rituals.

Cultural networks continue to develop within the globalization trend, and they are strengthened as the public become increasingly mobile. Therefore "communities become liberated from geography" (McKie, 2001) and immigration patterns are a reflection of this. Canada, for example, attracts a vast number of immigrants each year, and as one of the world's most culturally diverse nations have a "population drawn in significant parts from immigrants from many countries" (Nancoo, 1996). Citizens have come to realize that they do not have to remain in one habitual location their entire life, and with this new sense of mobility, relocation within a nation's borders as well as internationally seems to be a valid and attainable option for many. This key shift from the local to the global there "comes proximity to other cultures, traditions, peoples and ways of living" (Kamalipour, 2002). Ultimately citizens become "disconnected from the traditional local supply chain and the limitations of convention-grounded local social life" (McKie, 2001).

The process of relocation and reorientation of one's life can, however, create some disorientation for an individual and this may become expressed in the development of diasporas, where individuals are displaced from a homeland or cultural setting with which they identify. The traditions, rituals and old cultural practices citizens once highly valued and adhered to, often do not translate into the new cultural setting after relocation and therefore some reorientation and adjustment is required. South Asian communities in particular have become incredibly mobile in the world, and they currently represent approximately 20.24% ("Facts and Figures 2002") of the total number of immigrants to Canada, a significant percentage in comparison with other cultural groups. The globally widespread

South Asian traditional societies and cultural practices are therefore experiencing a breakdown; an instance of this would be the transformation of the traditional marriage and partner selection ritual.

From this breakdown in traditional marital rituals comes the need for new cultural structures that are sensitive to the new cultural setting and because the "mass media constitute a society's meeting ground" (Taras, 2001) they can aid citizens in this process. It is important to highlight that the "mass media are institutions in their own rights in constant interplay with other structures, institutions and the public creating change and recreating change" (Nancoo, 1996), therefore they are very much involved in the reorientation of cultural practices after the breakdown of age-old traditions due to immigration or relocation.

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For the purpose of this study nine South Asian websites were randomly selected for analysis. The analysis of these websites was completed according to an informal schedule, which required the examination of the structure, the length of operation, user statistics, the mission statements, privacy statements (terms and conditions of use), and finally the success stories of each site. The findings of the analysis were insightful and presented a great deal about not only the nature of these websites, but also about the users. These websites play the role of mediator, introducing potential marriage partners to one another in a way that an actual person would have done in a traditional South Asian village context.

A majority of the sites require users to register or acquire a membership ID; this entails creating an account within each site. However an ID is only needed if you wish to post information about yourself or "create a profile" ("Indian Matrimonial Website"), and most websites allow users to browse freely though existing profiles, making it relatively easy to access matrimonial profiles. Most sites allow users to search the profiles with a "quick search" ("The Central Matrimonial Site on the Internet") available as soon as you enter the site. If users should want to carry out a quick search, they are asked to define the gender, culture, language, religion and age of the desired profiles. Users are frequently given the opportunity to specify whether they want to see profiles with pictures attached. The culture option allows the user to differentiate between regional cultures e.g. Punjabi, Gujarati, Tamil or Malayalam as a method of filtering through profiles. This indicates what the most important characteristics of a prospective partner are to most South Asian users. The fact that culture or language is included in the search criteria is not insignificant, and it indicates that most users maintain their cultural values even after immigrating and to a certain extent this online process of seeking a marriage partner reinforces the traditional structure of marriage partner selection.

Interestingly wherever there was a quick search option there was also a link provided to an "advanced matrimonial search" ("Shaadi.com Matrimonials") option. Having explored the further ways in which a user can define a search of all the available profiles it is clear that cultural background or ethnicity continues to carry weight in the selection of a partner. The advanced search is compiled of approximately ten further categories including "ethnicity, general cultural values, spiritual values, immigration status, country of residence, family origin, alcohol and smoking, education, diet (vegetarian or non-vegetarian), and mother tongue or language" ("MatrimonialLink.com"). The search definitions of family origin, mother tongue and other questions can indicate an individual' s level of commitment to the culture or religion and indicates the level of maintenance of their original culture or religion after moving out of the traditional South Asian setting. Browsing through profiles according to the alcohol, smoking or diet habits of the individual allows users to determine religious and cultural commitment, as many Eastern Religions e.g. Hinduism and Sikhism, expect devout followers to be vegetarian and abstain from alcohol and tobacco. Most of these distinctions are based upon the cultural, religious, or ethnic characteristics of an individual and evidently they allow the users of these matrimonial websites to filter through all of the available profiles and determine levels of compatibility not only on a one to one basis, but also compatibility of families. The notion of compatibility of families is very much embedded the traditional structure of partner selection, where

individuals are introduced to one another primarily because the mediator believes the families are of similar background and hold similar values.

Glancing over some of the profiles it becomes clear that they are popular with people of South Asian origin all over the world, indicating that immigration has displaced individuals far and wide across the globe, away from the traditional village setting. Of the sites examined the earliest establishment of a website was "1996" ("Matrimonial Online") and the length of operation of such matrimonial websites indicates the well-established nature of this service within the widely dispersed South Asian community. The primary areas of settlement of the users of matrimonial websites appear to be United States, United Kingdom and Canada ("MatrimonialLink.com"). One website claims "6 million visitors per month" ("Matrimonial Online") and another claims "1 million plus members, 200,000 photos 30,000 success stories" ("Shaadi.com Matrimonials") highlighting that these websites are indeed a popular way to find a marriage partner.

Overall statistics about the users can indicate what kind of a clientele these matrimonial websites draw and one site draws attention to the statistics of their profile database. There are generally more men than women using the online matrimonial services, and a majority of users are aged 20 to 35. ("1st Place Indian Matrimonial"). However the same user statistics also show that there are a higher proportion of users browsing through the existing profiles rather than creating their own profiles. This implies that South Asians, although highly comfortable exploring their marriage options online, do not feel the same degree of ease in creating a profile and posting it online within a matrimonial website.

Five of the nine sites analyzed in this study report on success stories and allow current users to read through short statements from past users who successfully met marriage partners though the matrimonial website. Some websites even feature a "Congratulations" ("Bharat Matrimony.com") panel on the opening page of the site, including wedding pictures of couples who were introduced to one another through the site and then went on to marry. The role of the website as a mediator in the traditional South Asian sense is accentuated further where family members of the couple send statements to the website organizers, thanking them for their efforts to unite individuals for the purpose of marriage. For example, one father even states, "The service you have rendered to me will be kept in mind up to my last breath." ("Bharat Matrimony.com"). These statements of thanks and appreciation would traditionally have been directed towards the human mediator or matchmaker who knows the families of the bride and the groom. These success stories are meant to convey the reliability and validity of the online matrimonial service, and reassure users that they are making a good decision in using this site to meet a marriage partner where they are unable to use more traditional methods.

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South Asian matrimonial websites refer to themselves as "matchmaking agents" ("MatrimonialLink.com") and in doing so many claim their aim is to "unite marriage minded individuals" ("Matrimonial Online"). The mission statements of these online marriage mediators emphasize the fact that they are able to allow users to distinguish the differing cultural, regional and religious characteristics of potential marriage partners. For example one site under analysis states " we aim to serve the broadest spectrum of the Indian community…we also cater for all religions […] we strive to reach Indians in all corners of the world" ("1st Place Indian Matrimonial"), acknowledging that the South Asian community is currently very dispersed across the globe, and displaced from the more traditional cultural setting.

All of the sites emphasize their commitment to maintaining the privacy of users, and one in particular declares "[we are] committed to protecting the privacy of your personal information on our websites" ("The Central Matrimonial Site on the Internet"). This analysis established that a majority of the matrimonial websites do aim to allow users to conceal their full identity, which does not correlate to the more traditional South Asian marriage matchmaking procedure. The element of privacy,

and the ability of the user to withhold information about their identity online, means that the more traditional matchmaking method, where the prospective bride and groom are not able to conceal their identity from one another, is being replaced. It is also important to note that within the user agreements of many sites, the website organizers do not take responsibility for the material posted within the website, stating, "[we] will not be responsible for the misuse of this information" ("MatrimonialLink.com"), therefore the website managers do not monitor the content of profiles. This implies that these apparent online matchmakers do not really mediate in the traditional sense where a mediator (matchmaker) takes full responsibility for the entire introduction process, instead the role has been adopted up to a certain extent but the duties within that role have been dramatically altered by the Internet technology.

According to Paul Virilio the Internet introduces a "loss of orientation" (Virilio, 2001), where an individual feels a sense of disconnect from reality, however the popularity of the South Asian matrimonial websites demonstrates that a reorientation of reality can occur instead. This reorientation of reality is evident in the analysis of the matrimonial websites, which attempt to allow South Asian's all over the world simply reorient their cultural values and traditions in the selection of a marriage partner within an online environment. Clearly Virilio' s notion of "non-orientation" (Virilio, 2001), does not apply to the case of matrimonial websites that take the traditional structure of marriage and matchmaking in the South Asian community and adapt it to make it more relevant to the more global lifestyles many South Asians lead, due to their movement away from the traditional village setting.

During the continued use of matrimonial websites age-old traditions regarding marriage and marriage partner selection become adapted into a new cultural context or environment, and communications scholars agree, "social structures found in the 'real' world are inscribed in online networks" (Halavais, 2000) implying that the Internet initiates a reconciliation of traditions into a new cultural climate. The results of this analysis suggest that South Asian matrimonial sites are indeed forms of new cultural structures. Terry Flew a cultural theorist also suggests "Culture seeks its authorization in technology" (Flew, 2002), this perspective would propose that the South Asian marriage practices are attempting to gain approval from the Internet technology and therefore these matrimonial websites generally are a reproduction of South Asian marital cultural practices, within a technologically-mediated environment, which constitutes a new cultural structure.

The Internet is a malleable technology and as this analysis attempts to prove that it is capable of providing support for many different cultural structures. Ultimately South Asian matrimonial websites interpret the existing cultural norms and reinforce what is culturally important or highly valued. It has been claimed, "we are all born and raised into a nation, a community and a family. And what we learn to value in these cultural environments stays with us for life. Even if we leave our family, community and our nation we never fully leave their cultures behind" (Kamalipour, 2002). This implies that it would be difficult to create a South Asian matrimonial website without any cultural or traditional element. Since cultural appears to be so deeply embedded in all humans, the entire South Asian community expects websites offering matrimonial services to recreate traditional cultural norms online. Traditions and culture are then inescapable during the online marriage partner selection process, and it is widely accepted that the procedure of seeking a marriage partner should reflect many aspects of traditional methods of matchmaking.

However "interactivity, virtuality and globalization […] have promoted new forms of social interaction, new possibilities for the construction of identity and new forms of community" (Flew, 2002), and opening traditional structures to being altered or distorted when reoriented to fit in with the trends of globalization, such as increased mobility and the introduction of Internet technology. The analysis of South Asian matrimonial websites demonstrates that only the early stages of the selection of a marriage partner reflect elements of the age-old traditions. In other words the users of

these websites appear to maintain South Asian traditions in their early experiences with seeking marriage partners, however at some point the experience shifts and becomes more relaxed and less emphasis is placed upon marriage and the idea of dating is introduced. Dating is not a part of the South Asian tradition but because these matrimonial websites act as relaxed representations of the traditional matchmaker, the traditional practices and procedures can become blurred and so dating becomes acceptable once two individuals have met. The displacement of South Asians from the traditional cultural setting to many western nations also influences the cultural values of users, "we never totally abandon the cultures into which we were socialized. Rather, we learn to value new cultures and add them to the mix of what we already know" (Kamalipour, 2002). So matrimonial websites do reflect some traditional values however the procedure of seeking a marriage partner is altered to accommodate the new cultural values and practices many South Asians become exposed to. Given the observations made in this study, it is tempting to conclude, that the South Asian community are somewhat forced into utilizing the Internet to seek marriage partners in order to ensure that the culture remains relevant to its peoples.

> "Progress is impossible without change. Those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything."
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> -George Bernhard Shaw

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