Cross-cultural cyber-marriages: a global socio-economic strategy for young Jordanians

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(Received February 2008; final form 22 September 2008)

The Internet is fast becoming a factor in international migration. Industrialized countries use the Internet to control immigration by checking immigrants’ statements and weeding out false information. But would-be immigrants also use Internet technology. Chat-room visitors from the Third World contract marriages with citizens of the highly industrialized countries, obtain visas, and migrate to the First World to join their cyber spouses. To build cross-cultural marriages, Internet users create new, culturally hybrid identities. The new medium requires new strategies for solving an old problem: how to establish a relationship of trust between members of very different societies. In this case study from Jordan, we explore the connections between cross-cultural marriage, migration, and the Internet.

Keywords: cross-cultural marriage; Internet; hybrid cultures; Jordan

Issues in the study of Internet-mediated cross-cultural marriage

Michael Hardey (2004) has observed that communication technologies are supplementing or replacing traditional routes to marriage in many European societies. He builds on Giddens’ (1992) suggestion that, in the ‘modern’ construction of European cultures and values, intimate relationships must be ‘pure’ – that is, untainted by considerations of ascribed rank and economics – for there to be trust between fiancés and spouses. He argues that Europeans who seek marriage partners via the Internet must adopt an interactional style that embodies these ‘modern’ values if they are to succeed in finding partners. There is, however, empirical evidence – some of which will be presented in this paper – that not all Europeans and Americans insist on these ‘modern’ expectations. We have in mind those Europeans and Americans who choose marriage partners from developing countries, where ‘modern’ values co-exist with ‘traditional’ – non-Western – values and attitudes. As we will illustrate, the Internet provides a context for re-negotiating ‘modern’ ideals and expectations about intimate relationships. Thus not all cases of marriage in the United States and Europe fit the paradigm presented by Hardey and Giddens.

More specifically, in this paper we explore what is happening to Internet users in Europe and the United States who find marriage partners in Jordan and who do not completely share these ‘modern’ values. We proceed from the Jordanians’ perspectives, describing Jordanians’ motivations for marrying foreigners and their

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ISSN 1350-4630 print/ISSN 1363-0296 online
© 2009 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/13504630902778578
http://www.informaworld.com
strategies for overcoming barriers to cross-cultural marriage via the Internet (Appadurai, 1996).

Another important issue is the question of power differentials between men and women during these re-negotiations of ideals and expectations. Because Internet communication tends to filter out much of the contextual information that is present during face-to-face interaction and even telephone conversation, it can be used for deception more effectively than speech. For this reason, if one partner in an Internet exchange is less empowered than the other, this partner may hesitate to verify the information being conveyed and, as a result, may be deceived and victimized. The current literature on Internet marriage, in fact, focuses on ‘marriage agencies’ and the role of the Internet in trafficking in women. Such studies document the exploitation by American and Western European men of Eastern European and Asian women who are searching for husbands. Foreign women who patronize ‘marriage services’ often end up in prostitution, very much against their will (see Cengel, 1999; Giddens, 1990; Hughes, 1999, 2005). Of course, not all women who use the Internet to contact foreigners become victims. Many Eastern European women, for example, have leveraged their Internet relationships with Germans and North Americans during the past fifteen years to make short-term labor migration possible (Morokvasic, 2006, p. 13; Nedelcu, 2005). In such cases, Internet communication has helped some women liberate themselves from stagnant local economies and improve their economic positions.

To our knowledge, however, no research has been done on American women who use the Internet to find foreign husbands. In such cases, we would argue, the power differential between men and women is offset by the power differential between America and the non-industrial countries. American women who seek foreign husbands usually reside in the United States after marriage. Thus these women do not leave their homes and support networks. It is the foreign men, rather, who become vulnerable when they leave their countries and have to adjust to new social and cultural environments (Constable, 2003). Furthermore, the American women have American law enforcement agencies at their disposal. In these situations, foreign men are not in a position to exploit their American wives. We ask, then, why Jordanian men seek American and Western European wives via the Internet, despite these disadvantages, and whether the marriages that result are stable and mutually satisfying. We will address some of these questions in this paper.

**Cyber-marriages in Jordan: background information**

Jordan is a small Arab country with inadequate supplies of water and other natural resources. Debt, poverty, and unemployment are fundamental problems in Jordan. To solve them, many Jordanians have turned to labor migration. From 1980 to 2000, Iraq and Saudi Arabia attracted significant numbers of labor migrants from Jordan. Now, however, there is no longer any demand for Jordanian workers there. This means that Jordanians – particularly young men – now want to work in the United States or Europe and establish their own families there. To make this possible, they seek to marry overseas spouses and obtain legal visas, residence permits, and full citizenship by means of marriage.

The notion of solving economic and political problems by means of marriage is not new in Jordan. Most Jordanians still regard marriage as a multi-dimensional bond between families as well as a personal relationship between two individuals.
They do not have all of the ‘modern’ expectations described by Giddens and think that wealth and social position are two of the elements that a man or woman can bring to a marriage. This is not to say that ‘love’ is not included in the marriage relationship. But this is not the only point that Jordanians consider when they decide who to marry. Thus when Jordanians court Europeans or North Americans, they must learn how to deal with a different set of expectations about marriage.

Jordanians also must learn how to use the Internet in order to search for foreign spouses. This is not a great obstacle. In fact, young Jordanians have made the Internet a part of their lives and use it on a daily basis. By 2003 Jordan had 457,000 Internet users. Many of these create their own websites. In 2004, for example, 3,160 Internet hosts were registered in Jordan.

**A community of Internet users in northern Jordan**

The particular Internet users examined in this study live in the city of Irbid, in northern Jordan. They are patrons of the Internet cafés that line a street near Yarmouk University, locally known as University Street. There are over 100 cyber cafés on University Street. According to the Jordanian press, it has the largest number of Internet cafés on any street in the world.

We carried out preliminary interviews with 35 males and 15 females who had all found spouses via the Internet. Our next step was to conduct in-depth interviews with a smaller sample of 22 males and six females. We met research subjects in the cyber cafés or in their own homes and tape recorded their interviews. The interviews were conducted in Arabic by the author and three of his research assistants – one male and two females – and then transcribed.

To obtain deep insight into cyber marriages, we wanted to see whether the males and females in our sample had different goals, motivations, and techniques. Power differentials between men and women in Jordanian society made it difficult, however, to interview some of the female subjects. Nine of the 15 females who had actively sought marriage through the Internet were unwilling to cooperate. The author himself was able to interview two females in the presence of their family members and interviewed four others in the company of his female assistants.

The women who were interviewed only agreed to talk to researchers when they were accompanied and protected by family members or when they were in the company of respectable women. Since the author of this paper is Jordanian, he understood – without having to ask – why having a male family member present during the interview helped to reassure the female subjects. The presence of a male relative insured that the researcher would not ask embarrassing or humiliating questions. It also provided the interviewee with a witness who could certify that she had said nothing dishonorable. Having a female member present ensured that the interview itself could not be characterized as voyeuristic or an invasion of the woman’s privacy. In short, it gave the interviewee an important guarantee that her reputation would not be harmed.

We asked the interviewees about their motivations for involvement in cyber marriages, how they selected their spouses, and how they actually managed to bring the marriage negotiations between the two spouses to a close. We also conducted short follow-up interviews with some of the couples to see whether their marriages lasted in the long run.
With respect to the 35 marriages between Jordanian men and foreign women, 27 of the marriages were still stable two years after the initial interview. Only 6 of these Jordanian men, however, had succeeded in leaving Jordan permanently and joining their wives overseas; the remaining 21 were still waiting for visas. Despite this, their marriages were still stable, and some of them had been visited in Jordan by their foreign wives. Eight of the 35 men, however, had been divorced after living overseas with their wives for some time and had returned to Jordan.

As we mentioned above, we had more difficulty tracking the marriages of Jordanian women to foreign men. We met only 6 of the 15 Jordanian women who had contracted marriages via the Internet. All of them were still married and had children.

Given that the sample is relatively small, our objective is not to generalize about the entire Internet community in Jordan. This is an exploratory study that aims to produce a preliminary description of the strategies that some Jordanians adopt to create cyber marriages.

**Distinctive demographic characteristics of the sample**

**Age**

The males in the sample ranged in age from 22 to 32 years, while the age range of the females was from 27 to 35 years. In other words, the average age of the females in the sample was higher than the average age of the men. This is the opposite of the norm in Jordanian society, where husbands are on the average a few years older than their wives. In 2007, for example, of the 60,548 Jordanian men who got married, only 1,163 (1.92 percent) were under the age of 19, while 16,620 (or 27.45 percent) of the women who got married were under the age of 19. Roughly similar numbers of men and women between the ages of 20 and 29 get married, however. The grooms in this age range in 2007 numbered 39,466 (i.e. 65.18 percent of the total), while the brides in this age range numbered 37,141 (i.e. 61.34 percent of the total number of brides) (Department of Statistics, 2008a, p. 15). This means that 88.79 percent of the women who married in 2007 were 29 years old or younger, while 67.1 percent of the men were 29 years old or younger.

The fact that all 15 of the women in our sample were 27 years old or older is significant. If our sample had been representative of the general population, some 88 percent of these women would have married before they reached 30 years of age. We should ask, then, why Jordanian cyber brides tend to be older than Jordanian women who take more traditional paths to marriage. From a Jordanian perspective, most of the women in our sample were past the prime years of life for getting married. We believe that these women resorted to the Internet because they were feeling the passage of time and were worried that they might end up unmarried. Their families had proved incapable of arranging a suitable marriage for them and so they were taking matters into their own hands.

We should also note that the age range for men marrying for the first time in our sample closely resembles the age range of new grooms in the general population of Jordan. In this respect, our sample is not exceptional. Generally, Jordanian men tend to marry somewhat later in life than Jordanian women because the groom and his family bear most of the initial expenses of the wedding and housing. Thus males take
many years to accumulate the money they need to marry, while females are ready to marry as soon as they complete their education.

Education and employment

There was also a difference between the men and women in our sample with respect to their education levels. Most of the males were either attending college or had finished their secondary school educations. Most had studied English for at least ten years and were very familiar with American and British music, films, and publications. Females, on the other hand, were more often enrolled in vocational courses and less often working toward their Bachelor’s degrees than the males (although a few women in the sample had Bachelor’s degrees). In general, females were less skilled in English than the males. Four out of 16 females interviewed admitted that they could communicate only in simple English sentences; therefore, they usually used Arabic transcribed in English characters for communicating. Obviously this limited their choice of Internet correspondents; most females could communicate only with other Arabic speakers, while the males had the option of looking for either Arab or non-Arab marriage partners.

A majority of the males in the sample were either full-time students, full-time employees, or self-employed in their own small businesses (for example, by having partnerships in a jointly-owned Internet café). Most worked at cyber cafés or had friends in cyber cafés who gave them access to the net at a low price. Most of the females, by contrast, were not full-time students and were jobless. This difference between the sexes is significant, because in Jordan a girl who has a secure job has a better chance of getting married than a girl who is unemployed. For this reason, the majority of the unemployed females were attending vocational programs in the hope of securing their futures.

We should point out, here, that the greater wealth and/or higher rate of employment among the men does not necessarily indicate that the males in the sample belong to a wealthier social class than the females. Jordanian families from all social classes tend to devote more money and effort to the education of their sons than to their daughters. They do this because they know that the economic demands on their sons will be much greater than those faced by their daughters. Jordanian culture assigns financial responsibility for weddings, child support, and the expenses of elderly parents to males. This means that a young man must have an education and a job to avoid being regarded as a failure. An unmarried man without a job or an income is unmarriageable. Females, by contrast, are only held responsible for unpaid labor: child care, domestic work for parents and parents-in-law, and household work (cooking, cleaning, and decoration). A young woman who remains at home without paid employment is not stigmatized; a good paying job is not regarded culturally as a requirement for her transition from child to adult status but is merely a positive asset when she enters the marriage market (Department of Statistics, 2008b, p. 14). For these reasons it is not surprising to find more unmarried men with jobs in this sample than unmarried women with jobs. This would be the case for any sample of unmarried Jordanians, whether they belong to a single social class or to different social classes.
Motivations behind Jordanian cyber marriage

The motivations for seeking cyber spouses for the Jordanian men in our sample were very different than for the Jordanian women. For the men, marriage to non-Jordanian women is an economic strategy; it provides them with a legal method for obtaining visas and residency permits in First World countries. Economic considerations play a much larger role in men’s cyber relationships with foreigners than in women’s. More than 79 percent of the men state that economy is a major cause of their interest in cyber marriages. Numerous males indicate that they find the idea of getting married by means of the net to a woman from a foreign country – especially Europe or the US – very attractive because it offers them a ‘better situation’. One stated: ‘When you are married to a Westerner you have a secure job and a passport to the world. This marriage is the security of my future and a passport to a better job than I will ever find here’. Note that these men seldom are concerned about their foreign spouses’ incomes. They assume that, once they arrive in the foreign country, they will be able to find good-paying jobs that will enable them to support their new families and, in addition, their natal families in Jordan.

For the Jordanian women in our sample, marriage to foreigners via the Internet is a social strategy. Their position in the international marriage market may be better than in the local, Jordanian marriage market, especially if they are unemployed and over the age of thirty. In Jordan, if a girl has reached her late twenties or even thirties, is unemployed and is not exceptionally attractive, it is difficult for her to find a Jordanian husband. By seeking husbands outside of Jordan, women widen the circle of potential suitors.

In most cases, the Jordanian females expressed no economic motive for seeking marriage with men living overseas. They had no aspirations other than marital happiness and stability. Unlike the Jordanian males, these women encouraged their cyber husbands to live in Jordan or, if this was not practical for the men, in a neighboring Arab country or elsewhere in the Islamic world. They were willing to accept whatever income their husbands could provide by working in these countries and did not want to move to highly-industrialized countries despite their higher standards of living. We assume that the desire to live relatively close to their families of origin predisposed them to seek husbands near Jordan, so that occasional visits to their parents and siblings would be easier and less costly.

Failure to recognize that cultural differences might undermine marriages

The more successful males say that it is always good to know about the female’s country and be able to discuss its norms and traditions. Such knowledge can be used to demonstrate open-mindedness and genuine interest in other ways of life. It can also come in handy later, if the initial chatting turns to romantic involvement and leads the foreign woman to visit Jordan. However, it became clear during our interviewing that Jordanian males do not really take cultural differences into account when they start relationships with foreign women. They assume that ‘romance’ means the same thing for foreign women that it does for Jordanian women. They know nothing about the unspoken expectations and assumptions about marriage that foreign women have and are sometimes shocked and surprised, after actually
getting married, to find that their views of marriage and the foreign woman’s views of marriage do not coincide.

Both husband and wife know that they entered the international marriage market for different reasons. The husband sought an American wife at least partly to gain access to the American labor market, while the wife sought a Jordanian husband for non-economic reasons. She might complain, then, that her husband is not offering the ‘sharing, caring, mutually supporting’ relationship that she thinks should come with marriage. The Jordanian husband, on the other hand, may feel that he has been honest and sincere in his dealings with his wife and has met his responsibilities as a provider and parent. If misunderstandings persist, the wife accuses the husband, saying that he only married her in order to get a visa. He might respond that he married her for the same reasons that apply in Jordan: to find a life partner and to have children. He might admit that he came to America to find a better life, but will point out that it is his job that enables him to support his wife and raise and educate his children. Cultural differences complicate the marital relationship.

The males in our sample gave no consideration to the possibility of problems arising due to cultural differences when marrying a foreigner. Most reasoned that if their marriages did not turn out happily they would be able to divorce easily after having achieved financial security and a better standard of living. Thus, even if their marriages did not last, they would still be better off financially and would be able to provide a future for their children. But they did not expect that they would get divorced and did not anticipate that, if they got divorced, they might not automatically be awarded custody of their children. They assumed that custody laws overseas would favor the father, as they do in Jordan and the rest of the Arab world. And they thought that foreign women would have roughly the same expectations of marriage that Jordanian women have.

Cyber marriage as a break with Jordanian tradition

For readers familiar with anthropological studies of marriage in Jordan and, more generally, in the wider Arab world, these marriages to foreigners are unexpected. Such studies give the impression that Arabs rarely marry outsiders and even prefer to marry close kin (Holy, 1989; Jurdi & Saxena, 2003; Khuri, 1970). In fact, lineage-endogamous marriages are very frequent in a few Arab societies. In one Bedouin community in Lebanon, for example, 47 percent of all marriages are lineage endogamous, which is twice the rate of such marriages in Lebanon as a whole (Joseph, 2007, p. 758). Such high frequencies are not typical of the entire Arab world, however. Demographic research suggests that lineage endogamous marriages in the Arab world range from 3 to 30 percent of a given community’s total marriages (Barakat, 1993, p. 109), with rural communities having a greater tendency toward lineage endogamy than urban communities. Nevertheless, lineage endogamy is fairly common in Jordan, where matches between first cousins during the 1970s represented some 32 percent of all marriages (Khoury & Massad, 1992). Even Jordanians who choose not to marry relatives still tend to marry other Jordanians. In 2007, for example, 94.73 percent of the 60,548 Jordanian men who married chose other Jordanian citizens as wives. An even larger percentage (99.5 percent) chose wives who were living in Jordan (Department of Statistics, 2008a, p. 17).
These generalized attitudes toward marriage with foreigners appeared in our sample. In one case, for instance, the parents of a thirty-year-old man prevented him from marrying an American woman who he had met via the Internet. He had become emotionally involved with her after sending her his photo. When we asked him how important the relationship was for him he said, ‘It’s the best thing in my life’. But his parents refused to give their consent because she was three years older than him and because they believed that ‘a man should marry a woman from his own country’.

These data strongly suggest that marriage to foreigners is highly unusual in Jordan. And, as we will see, arranging a marriage with a foreign spouse via the Internet, without the active involvement of close relatives in marriage negotiations, is an even more significant break with tradition. Whether or not cyber marriage becomes a recognized and normal option for Jordanians depends, of course, on its frequency. The economic and social factors referred to above do seem to be pushing an increasing number of urban Jordanians in that direction.

Technological, social and cultural barriers to cyber courtship

Traditional attitudes about marrying foreigners are not the only obstacles to cyber marriage. Technological and social barriers to Internet use also had to be removed to make this phenomenon possible. The technological barriers fell in the mid-1990s, when Internet cafés spread rapidly. Social barriers remained, however, and had to be overcome. That is to say, social conventions about pride (for men) and modesty (for women) had to change (Wheeler, 2003).

Jordanian men hate to admit that they must become citizens of a foreign country in order to find employment and feed themselves and their families. This is a blow to their pride. Bowing to economic necessity, however, they cover their hurt pride by representing their search for visas and residence permits as if it were a search for women. When they go to the Internet cafés to chat with foreign women, they say to each other ‘Let’s go hunt for a girl over the net’ (xallna inruu nSiid wa bi-l-intirnet). This masculine rhetoric of hunter and hunted is a cover for their feelings of anxiety and failure as breadwinners. It is not to be taken literally. In fact, they usually hope to establish long-lasting and decent relationships with their foreign wives.

For Jordanian women, the social barrier to Internet use is the modesty code. It is considered shameful for women to invite men to pay attention to them. A woman who wants to correspond with unrelated men is considered shameless. She is expected to allow her mother (and, secondarily, her father) to do the talking for her and search for a spouse. However, women whose parents have failed to find husbands for them feel justified, as they approach an unmarriageable age, in taking matters into their own hands. But to begin their searches, they have to find opportunities to enter cyber cafés without their families’ permission.

Employment provided the pretexts and opportunities for the women in our sample to use the Internet. Many met their cyber husbands while on their way to work or school. They could visit cyber cafés on an irregular basis while going from home to school or work. Their leaving home on a daily basis gave them some independence from the close observation of their families.

In addition to the technological and social barriers described above, there are cultural barriers to Internet communication. That is, the language of the Internet
and the cultural conventions connected with Internet communication (representa-
tions of individual identity, style, topics of conversation, and conventions about
privacy) are different from the cultural codes typical of Jordan. Both men and
women had to learn how to communicate with non-Jordanians in order to find
appropriate spouses. Although in some cases foreign females initiate cyberspace
conversations, it is usually the cyberspace male who initiates the relationship. When
approaching a woman via cyberspace, the male gives her a pleasant welcome and
tries to maintain as long a chat as possible with her. His hope is that this first chat
will lead to others.

From searching to courting: the second phase in cyber romances

Once the initial contact between a cyber couple has been established it can develop
into a serious courtship. Our male informants told us that, at this stage, they were
not embarrassed about letting their families know about their romantic involve-
ments. A man might even describe himself as his girlfriend’s ‘knight in shining
armor’ or, to put it in a Jordanian idiom, as faaris ahlaam-ha ‘the knight who
appears in her dreams’. The males felt comfortable being identified as ‘virtual
knights’. Some would even invite close friends to read the responses they received
from women. Only after really falling in love they would consider it a more private
matter.

Most of the females, on the other hand, tried to keep this information secret from
their families until their suitors actually came to visit their homes and presented
themselves to their families. They pretended, of course, that they had never intended
to actively engage in a search for a husband via the net. They claimed that their
initial involvements were only driven by curiosity and were not deliberate searches
for spouses. Some admitted, however, that they initiated a cyberspace relationship
in secret in order to circumvent the relatively strict social customs concerning
heterosexual relationships.

How Jordanian males select their targets

Our interviews with men indicated that their decisions about which relationships to
pursue after making initial contact depend largely on their advantages and
disadvantages in the foreign marriage market. If a man has a good command of
the target country’s language and is attractive, he concentrates on young and
attractive females. But if his knowledge of a foreign language is limited and if his
appearance is only average, he admits that his dream of marrying a beautiful girl is
only a dream and focuses more on achieving his socio-economic goals: migrating to
western countries and having children there. He tends to look for women who are
past the age of thirty-five or who he assumes have other disadvantages in the
American or European marriage market. He believes that such women are often
willing to contribute financially to wedding arrangements and help defray the costs
of their husbands’ emigration.

We should note that the Jordanians’ ideas about marriage markets overseas are
based in the assumption that marital goals in Western countries are the same as
those in Jordan. For Jordanians, marriage is an absolutely essential step in a person’s
life cycle. Only marriage can permit a Jordanian to make the transition from
dependent adolescent to full adult status. This means that the overwhelming majority of Jordanians want to marry at a relatively early age. Very few men or women want to postpone marriage past the age of thirty-five. Of course, this is not the case in America and Western Europe, where many men and women freely choose to postpone marriage in order to pursue professional careers. In addition, some Western women choose to have children out of wedlock or adopt children without getting married, options which are at least marginally acceptable in the US but which are inconceivable in Jordan. Thus the Jordanian male’s strategy of targeting foreign women who are in their thirties is to some extent based on culture-bound assumptions about their motives and place in the foreign marriage market.

Another cue used in selecting a woman is her skill in managing the chat room and the type of language she uses. If a woman is a very capable chatter and uses short cuts for words, she is considered an expert and difficult to engage for a long-term process. Such long-term, sophisticated users, of course, are likely to have had more negative experiences with Internet communication and may be suspicious of all cyber suitors, no matter how sincere. Thus the males hope to find a less sophisticated correspondent who has fewer negative preconceptions and is more trusting. They look for women who use formal language with no abbreviations when chatting and who are slow when taking turns in conversation. These are signs that the chatters are inexperienced Internet users and easier targets.

The content of the messages they receive from foreign women is a decisive factor in determining how long Jordanian men will continue a particular conversation. During the initial chatting process, cyberspace suitors are more likely to work with a woman who says a great deal about herself and her feelings. However, those women who immediately start to ask personal questions about education, income, and sexual mores are usually believed to be unsuitable candidates for marriage. Jordanian men think that these females have no real interest in a serious, long-term relationship and generally do not waste their time chatting with them.

During the initial phase of chatting, then, cyber suitors focus consciously on winning the other party’s feelings as soon as possible. They believe that little time should be wasted on merely factual discussions because a long-term chatting process that is empty of emotion will eventually be broken off. To prevent such an undesirable end, emotions have to develop fast. This is considered an essential ingredient in a successful cyber-marriage process.

If all goes well, a long-term chatting process starts and the correspondents have daily meetings via the web. Finally they fall in love and proceed to the next step, which is usually a visit to Jordan by the foreign woman. Jordanian females use a similar approach with potential husbands, however. Long-term conversations lead to love and then the male is persuaded to come to Jordan to start the marriage process.

**Hosting foreign marriage candidates in Jordan**

When the cyberspace male first invites the female to visit Jordan, he provides her with a list of tourism sites which reflect the beauty of Jordan and its rich history. If she finds them intriguing and decides that a trip to Jordan might be an exciting adventure, she is encouraged to come to visit. Often the male offers to let the woman stay with his parents and expresses his readiness to be her guide during her stay in
Jordan. If she develops an interest in travel and adventure, she will become a good target.

Flattery – *il-mujaamala* – is an important social strategy in Jordan. Jordanians frequently compliment new acquaintances and guests on their intelligence, good taste, and other personal attributes. Thus it is no surprise to find Jordanian men using the same strategy for attracting a wife. When the cyberspace male feels it is appropriate, he uses different forms of flattery to demonstrate his respect, interest, and romantic feelings. For example, he may make flattering comments about the woman’s appearance or the freedom and liberty she enjoys in her country. He usually incorporates these comments into his romantic speech. One cyberspace male said ‘I always say nice things to the woman when I start to chat to her. For example, I say that she is a very intelligent and stylish’. Even before the man begins to approach the female one-on-one, he will invite her to take part in a general conversation in a chat room. This gives her a chance to observe what is going on and judge the character of the cyberspace male. If she decides to answer or participate in the general conversation she is later invited to use a private chat room.

When the cyberspace female starts to ask specific questions about the male correspondent, he recognizes that she is interested in him. Often the foreign woman starts asking for more information about Jordan and its history. Finally, she starts asking about the cyberspace suitor’s family and other more personal matters.

One of the sensitive topics that the correspondents begin to discuss at this point is the Jordanian male’s economic situation. It is likely that the foreign female will want to know at least a little about the Jordanian’s economic prospects. The cyber suitor must be honest. At the same time, he does not want to create the impression that economic motivations dominate his attitudes about the foreign woman.

The males discuss their financial difficulties in a variety of ways. A man may indicate that he has no job or income and is dependent on his family. If he is employed, he might mention that he has financial responsibilities such as an obligation to support a close relative who is a student. He might express his hope for continuing his education and mention that he has no money for that. Despite these problems, the men describe their futures optimistically – as they do when speaking with other Jordanians, in conformity with Jordanian and Islamic values – saying that they will not allow any difficulties to defeat them and asserting their strong belief that God will provide. They do not admit to any depression about their situation and stress that they are working very hard to find solutions to their economic problems.

Most foreign females show little concern for the economic condition of the male once they establish beyond doubt that the males are truly interested in marriage. So the subject of money is only discussed occasionally and is not stressed continually during the chatting process. Only about a third of the cyberspace males reported that they discussed their financial situation every time they had a matrimonial conversation with their cyberspace females.

Jordanian males almost never ask the foreign females about their economic situation during the initial phases of their correspondence. Most males believe that all of the foreign females who correspond via the internet are in a financially comfortable condition and think that it is safe to continue their targeted chatting without discussing the subject of money immediately. Some of the males interviewed felt very confident about their ability to guess the female’s economic circumstances by the type of language and style she uses when chatting. Others thought that
showing an excessive concern about the female’s financial situation is an error that stems from the male’s ignorance about how to approach a female properly. Most stressed that their main concern was to develop a durable relationship with a woman and get married. This, in turn, would provide them with a new citizenship, a second passport, and most probably a good job. They generally did not think it necessary to consider the foreign female’s economic status, since they expected to earn their own income once they had immigrated to the cyber wife’s country.

Once these frank discussions of economic issues have taken place, the cyberspace male often invites the female to come to Jordan for a visit. He may elaborate on this invitation by escorting the lady on a virtual tour around Jordan, taking her to the various websites that describe the country. This prepares her for the actual visit. Once she actually arrives in Jordan, her visit will give the suitor an opportunity to flatter the female and accelerate the development of an emotional relationship.

The extent of the foreign woman’s romantic involvement is often revealed when the time comes for her to choose when to come to Jordan and where to stay while she is there. If she asks the man to help her find a hostel or hotel, he will not hesitate to offer his home for no charge. From a Jordanian perspective this is an honorable offer, since most unmarried men live in their parents’ homes. Thus by offering the woman a place in his parents’ home, he is also offering her chaperones – his mother and sisters – and safety. If the foreign woman refuses this offer, the Jordanian man assumes that she does not want to meet his parents and siblings. That is, he assumes that she does not want to explore the possibility of building a relationship with his family and becoming related to them as a daughter-in-law. If she insists on staying at a hotel, the Jordanian man assumes that she is most probably an adventuress who has come to Jordan with no other intention than having a good time. Jordanian men say that such foreign females usually return to their home countries soon after their visits and are never seen again. No serious relationship ever develops.

The pace of courtship by Jordanian males

The conservative society of Jordan only encourages legally sanctioned relationships between adult males and females. Thus the cyberspace male needs to make the transition from being a mere friend to a husband rather quickly. Social values and family/tribal institutions in Jordan pressure young people to make quick decisions concerning their relationships. Usually friends and relatives of the male are eager to introduce the girl to his family and announce an official engagement. If this does not happen quickly, the male must terminate the relationship.

Another aspect of the courtship process is the foreign female’s dependence on the Jordanian male during her visit. He is knowledgeable about his country and provides the visitor with information about it. He also tries to teach her some basic Arabic vocabulary so that she would be able to communicate a little. An alternate strategy, used by the more experienced cyberspace males, involves working hard to improve their English, particularly if the visitor is from America or Australia. Males are also eager to learn about the female’s home country and culture. At times, males show the foreign females that they are saving money to travel to their countries. This demonstrates their seriousness and shows how eager they are to go abroad. The information about the male’s economic preparations is presented as a sign of their willingness to stay and settle in the foreign country if an opportunity is offered.
In the overall courtship scheme, the males aim to provide a diverse package of experiences such as touring the country, going to wedding parties together, attending large parties hosted by the male’s relatives, etc. If the relationship develops, the male will dedicate all his time to the visitor for the whole time while she is in the country. The more experienced cyberspace males do not give the foreign female much freedom and independence while she is in the country so that she will not have the chance to meet other males. He is anxious to prevent another Jordanian suitor from reaching her. The males also present themselves as open-minded and willing to adapt to western ways. Cyberspace males often advise each other on how to socialize with western females to be most successful in the relationship.

The pace of courtship by Jordanian females
Jordanian cyberspace females make their initial contacts with males in a different way. Occasionally they discover that the male correspondent is a Jordanian who is working or studying abroad. This can be a positive development, in the sense that the cultural and social gulf between the correspondents is not large in such cases, which makes marriage easier. But it can also be negative, since a Jordanian correspondent can make private inquiries about the woman through his social networks and, perhaps, betray her private correspondence to other Jordanians in order to embarrass or humiliate the woman and her family. Females must handle such cases very carefully.

When speaking with non-Jordanian men, most females are direct and to the point and explain to the male the Jordanian norms and customs related to marriage. Females are usually eager to know whether the cyberspace male is a Muslim and/or an Arab. They might also ask whether a given man is a citizen of the country where he lives or is just residing in the country temporarily for work or study. If he is living there temporarily, they ask how long he will stay abroad, what type of job he has, and – if he is a student – what branch of learning he specializes in. The typical cyberspace female usually asks a student how he supports himself while there. All these questions are usually answered during numerous short chats. If the female senses any interest from the cyberspace male, she will make a date with him on the next day for a long session.

Next the female asks questions that are more personal: is the correspondent liberal or conservative? Does he have a girlfriend? What type of wife does he want? If she likes his responses to these questions she will ask him what he knows about Jordan and whether he would like to visit the country. This is a hint that she would like to meet him ‘as a friend’. If he responds positively she considers the cyberspace male ‘hooked’. The two correspondents exchange photos and e-mail addresses and begin a long friendship. He will give her his address and telephone number. The woman may not reciprocate with her own address, especially if she is carrying on the correspondence without the knowledge of her family. But if she has her own personal cell phone she will provide him with her cell phone number. They promise each other to meet in person. If the male is not very serious about this relationship, he will refrain from writing her for a while during this process. It is then up to the female to decide to continue or to search for another interested male.

When they were interviewed by the male members of the research team, all Jordanian females asserted that they chatted with the same person for almost a year.
and never had any other virtual relationships. We discovered, however, that sometimes these claims were made as protective measures. Some of the female research subjects later admitted to our female research assistants that they had maintained simultaneous cyberspace relationships with a number of males within Jordan and abroad. They underscored the fact that it was because of their hard work and daily dedication that they were able to get married to one of the males. They emphasized, however, that they did not want this information to leave the interview and be linked to them.

Jordan is still a very conservative country and has numerous honor crimes which appear on the front pages of newspapers frequently. The fear of the women interviewees shows that they feel they are taking a big risk when they approach cyber-cafés regularly. Even if a woman finds her virtual fiancé, she still feels that she is gambling with her life when corresponding with him, at least until she has become safe from criticism, punishment, or execution for violating family honor. Only an official engagement or actual marriage can provide her with safety.

Another factor differentiating the cyberspace female from the cyberspace male is that her freedom to interact with strangers is almost always controlled by her family and by the male members of her immediate family, her lineage, and her clan.

From virtual to real relationships

Jordanian cyberspace males believe that most cyberspace females who take the decision to come to Jordan are interested in getting married to Jordanians. They also believe that most foreign women perceive Jordanian males as respectful, honest, and attractive; in other words, potentially good husbands. According to the Jordanian interpretations of Islam and Christianity, pre-marital sexual relationships are prohibited. Socially, sex outside of marriage is severely punished. Thus Jordanian males usually do not view the arrival of a foreign friend as an opportunity for an extra-marital affair. Instead, they think of it as the first step toward marriage.

Good intentions are not quickly translated into reality, however. Marriage in Jordan is a very long process that requires the approval of family members from both sides. Without their help and approval the marriage cannot take place. This means that the Jordanian male must instruct his foreign visitor in the local marriage process and encourage her to keep it going through its many complicated phases.

In Jordan the first step would be for the groom’s parents to visit the bride’s family to learn more of their circumstances, their character, and their mentality. During this first visit the groom is not present and future matrimonial plans are usually not discussed. It is mainly a get-to-know-each-other visit during which the bride and her parents are carefully observed. After this initial visit, the groom’s family members (his parents, brothers and sisters) discuss their first impressions and decide whether they want to continue with the process. They describe the female to the groom, and if she is to his liking the family proceeds to make a formal request for her hand.

During the second visit the groom’s parents start some polite negotiation about the size of the dowry (Arabic: the mahr). This is a marriage payment made by the groom’s family to the bride’s family, most of which is later transferred to the bride herself. If these negotiations go well, the two parties may decide on the time and place of the engagement and engagement party. After both parties agree to the terms and consent to the marriage, they begin the rather costly process of buying the
bride’s marriage gold and other personal and household necessities (for use after she
moves into her new home). Finally, they work out the details of the engagement
party, the wedding dresses, and the invitation cards. The groom alone is responsible
for these expenses, which usually run into thousands of dollars.

This entire process is both time-consuming and very expensive for the groom and
his parents. With the average income of around US$300 per month for a government
employee, most Jordanian men are unable to marry while they are still young. They
must save their money for years before they can afford the dowry and wedding
expenses. For this reason, the average age of Jordanian men at first marriage is
approaching 35. Many take loans in order to be able to get married and are indebted
to banks for many years. If parents are not able to aid their sons financially in this
process, young males have no other choice than wait or look for a well-paying job
abroad in order to gain financial independence quickly.

Young cyberspace males know that their foreign female counterparts are in most
cases not aware of Jordanian marital traditions and expenses. Therefore, males
consider themselves lucky if they can find a suitable foreign woman who is interested
in marriage and is, at times, willing to share any expenses incurred by the
engagement or wedding. Despite the fact that most marry locally in front of an
Islamic judge, the foreign females do not insist upon the same conditions as local
people would – namely, an expensive dowry and demanding financial and legal
conditions in the marriage contract that protect the wife in case of divorce. They
approach marriage with a western mind which relieves the groom’s family of many
expenses required by local tradition.

When asked how long it had taken them to get engaged and marry, the
cyberspace males said that the average time ranges from one to two years. Seven
males chatted for more than three months about the subject, and three discussed it
for from six to eight months. One said that he chatted more than eighteen months for
one to two hours daily until his foreign spouse finally agreed to marry him. Seven out
of the 34 males interviewed confessed that the females they had contacted came to
Jordan after some time of chatting but left after one to two weeks. It turned out that
they were not interested in marriage but only wanted an adventure and an
opportunity for tourism. Two of the males confessed that they met the females
and had brief affairs with them.

When the cyber husbands were asked how soon they got engaged to their
cyberspace wives, about one third said that it happened with one year after their
initial contacts, one third said it took eighteen months, and the final third said it
happened after two years and a few months of conversation and visiting. All of males
agreed that it is time consuming to get engaged with a decent woman via cyberspace
but underscored that it was worthwhile. ‘Foreign females usually don’t ask for
anything and they are willing to pay your trip to her country’, said one. ‘They are
more than happy to do so’. One cyberspace male explained that he got engaged in
Jordan and signed the marriage contract in front of a local Islamic judge before his
fiancée left the country. The signing of the marital contract in Jordan is usually not
done on the day of the wedding but on the day of the engagement. So legally the
couple is married as soon as they are engaged. In the eyes of the society, however,
they are not married socially and culturally because the marriage has not been
consummated yet. ‘After only two weeks’, he said, ‘my wife sent me the matrimonial
papers, certified by the Canadian government, for me to present to the Canadian
embassy in Amman when I applied for a visa. Soon after that, I was with her in Canada’.

The cyberspace males have mixed feelings about this kind of marriage. Most say they like this marriage because it is not very expensive. But they were also somewhat anxious about the process, at least initially. Some were worried that they might unintentionally get involved with foreign women who were working at pornographic sites. Most, however, were confident that the women they chatted with were legitimate. They think that if a female is willing to spend long periods of time contacting foreign males via cyberspace she is very unlikely to be involved in pornography or prostitution. For this reason, males usually do not inquire about the females’ social life. Males emphasize that finding an acceptable wife via cyberspace is ‘really a long process’ because they have to get connected to a person first and then they have to find the ‘right’ woman. That is, although these males conduct their courtship in a post-modern way, they keep many of their traditional values about the importance of pre-marital chastity and female modesty.

With regard to the topic of marriage, males and females differ considerably in their approaches to the topic during their chatting process. The Jordanian cyberspace males are more direct and daring than their female counterparts. They report that they are always very direct in explaining to their cyberspace fiancées what papers they would need in case of marriage at an Islamic court (*mahkama shar’iyya*). Females are rarely this direct. They use different strategies to verbalize their desire to get married. If the Jordanian woman’s male counterpart is a Muslim, she asks him if he has thought about ‘completing the second half of his religion’. This is a reference to a well-known Arabic-Islamic saying, *al-zawaaj nuSf al-diin* ‘marriage is one-half of religious practice’. That is to say, pious Muslims should marry, to make sure that their sexual needs and desires are channeled in legitimate directions. Therefore, marriage is referred to as ‘half of one’s religion’ or as an elemental part of one’s faith.

If the woman’s cyber friend belongs to another religion, however, she asks him whether he has ever thought about conversion. Islamic law forbids a Muslim woman from marrying a non-Muslim male. The insinuation that the friend might consider conversion should make him aware that the woman has reached the point where she is willing to marry him.

It should be noted here that not all the males are able to go to their new wives’ countries immediately. Some wait for a long time to get their papers approved. In some cases it takes so long that males tire of waiting and ask for divorce because they are not able to live a happy marital life far away from their wives. However, 75 percent of the males married to foreign women report that they are very happy, even if they have not yet moved to the foreign country. They have children and their wives and children come to visit them in Jordan. This situation continues until the man is able to obtain a visa and join his family. Some males are already in the target country with their wives and have good jobs.

Cyberspace males say that they seldom, if ever, cheat on their wives. The men in our sample passionately defended their honest intentions and said that such behavior would be against their moral principles. All of the cyberspace spouses, female and male, said that they wanted a very long and quiet family life with the people they had courted via the Internet.
Conclusion

Young Jordanians’ interest in cross-cultural marriages has increased as economic conditions in Jordan have deteriorated. The high rate of unemployment makes it impossible for many young men to marry at all before they are thirty. Many dream of escaping the country and fulfilling their economic and romantic aspirations by marrying foreigners. Internet communication has provided them with the means to do so. For these young people, the Internet has become a tool for finding a ticket to the industrialized world.

Jordanian cyber marriage is only one of the many new forms of marriage that are part and parcel of new patterns of international migration. The social sciences are only now beginning to describe and analyze them. For example, a new collection of studies edited by Palriwala and Uberoi (2008) documents the many forms of ‘marriage migration’ that are appearing across the globe. Like our study of Jordanian marriage migration, this work questions the conventional dichotomous constructions of emotional versus material considerations in the choice of marriage partner. We do not share Giddens’ confidence that material calculations in marriage will universally diminish as all of the world’s societies ‘modernize’. Although we agree that industrialization and globalization are unstoppable forces, we are not certain that these forces will eliminate all of the ‘traditional’ attitudes to marriage that Giddens thinks are incompatible with an industrialized, globalized world.

On the contrary, the millions of labor migrants in Asia and the Middle East (where Dubai is now becoming the Arab equivalent of Hong Kong) bring with them ‘traditional’ attitudes and values that affect national and international marriage markets. The shift away from ‘tainted’ material calculation to ‘pure’ emotional bonding that Giddens found in Western Europe may turn out to be very much a minority point of view. We must not mistake this local development for a universal trend. Granted, our small sample of Jordanian cyber marriages may also turn out to be unrepresentative; it is far too early to know. But we must be open to the possibility that ‘traditional’ attitudes may persist even as the economic and demographic structures of our globalizing world morph into previously unimagined new forms.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Fulbright Commission for the financial support I received for my Sabbatical year 2005–2006 at the University of Arkansas, Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice. During my research period there the argument of this article developed. I am also grateful to my friend Dr William Charles Young at The University of Maryland for the care with which he reviewed the manuscript and for his invaluable comments and suggestions.

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