

DIGITAL HUMANITIES IN THE INDIA RIM

CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARSHIP IN AUSTRALIA AND INDIA

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15. Online dating: Transformations of marriage arrangements through digital media technologies in Australia's Indian community

Asha Chand

Abstract

Marriage and migration are twin global forces that have reshaped Australia's identity from a white nation to a multicultural melting pot. India has become the largest contributor to immigration in Australia, with 710,380 permanent migrants. Indians are Australia's second largest migrant community (after England), equivalent to 9.5% of Australia's overseas-born population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). This study, built within the context of a postmodern society that is networked, mobile and global, examines the use of new media technologies in finding a marriage match, known to the Indian diaspora as a way of life. The research seeks to understand the sociological impacts of hyper-communication, especially the use of dating sites and social media platforms such as Facebook, in forming intimate relationships online. This chapter evaluates the aspirations among the Indian diaspora to maintain cultural identities through marriage (which also feeds migration) by seeking life partners with similar background via online dating websites. Globalisation, while opening a world of possibilities, simultaneously helps to lock the Indian community into its own cultural cluster through online dating and marriage. Using Information and Communication

Technologies (ICT), the community is basking in this newfound freedom to pick and choose, reinforcing the centuries old tradition of ensuring compatibility when forming relationships. Levels of education, professional status and family values stand out as key attributes being sought by men and women who engage on the dating sites in this study. This study builds on earlier research (Chand, 2012) that presents the fabric of family as vital to the Indian social structure. This study is important as it attempts to understand the cultural negotiations specific to the Indian diaspora, which is vibrant and growing in the Australian landscape. The influence of Bollywood, which has enraptured Western societies, coupled with India's resurgence as a superpower, adds value and significance to this research which provides an understanding of the importance of marriage to Indians. This research is timely and relevant to the public, including Western societies, which not too long ago saw 'matchmaking' as backward.

Keywords

Marriage; matchmaking; new media technologies; online dating; Indian diaspora; weddings; Bollywood

Introduction

The landscape of modern romance has undergone a significant transformation with the advent of digital technologies. In an era when education and career pursuits often dominate our lifestyles, millions turn to the digital highways in search of love and marriage. Scholars like Schmitz and Schmitz (2017) have explored this phenomenon, framing online dating as a digitally unified marketplace where symbolic goods are exchanged as individuals engage in a process of digital partner choice. This perspective underscores the role of technology in facilitating connections and shaping romantic narratives within contemporary society.

Reinforcing this notion, Sautter, Tippet, and Morgan (2010) argue that online dating has transitioned into a mainstream tool for meeting potential partners. Their research highlights that the primary predictors

of engaging in online dating are one's single status and internet usage habits. This indicates a widespread acceptance and integration of online dating platforms into the fabric of modern relationship-seeking behaviours. Cacioppo et al., (2013) introduce the access hypothesis, which offers insight into the demographic factors driving the adoption of online dating. According to this hypothesis, individuals who face challenges in meeting potential partners face-to-face due to constraints such as limited time, demanding careers, or other commitments are more likely to turn to online dating platforms.

The role of convenience and accessibility in shaping the preferences and behaviours of digital daters has thus become important, and hence the convergence of technology, societal shifts, and individual preferences has led to the proliferation of online dating as a prominent avenue for seeking and forging romantic connections, redefining the landscape of contemporary romance. Conceptualising online dating as "relationship shopping", Heino, Ellison, and Gibbs (2010) argue that daters see the platform as a virtual market where numerous potential mates are available and desired ones can be found by simply entering partner specifications. It has also been speculated that the shopping mentality negatively affects commitment and satisfaction with dates.

The 21st century is a blessing and a curse, where a robust environment for online dating sites has attracted people from all walks of life and from all over the world. Several niche sites specifically target ethnic or religious groups. Among Indians, for whom arranged marriage has been a part of their social, cultural, and religious fabric for centuries, online dating sites provide a high-tech means of matchmaking. India is the world's second-largest market for dating apps behind the US. Sites such as Shaddi.com, IndianDating.com, IndianCupid.com, iMilap, and Matrimony.com are popular among Indian users of dating sites. Some of these were established before many of the current users were born. Each site has enhanced user capabilities, such as introducing video technology, expert matchmaking services and different dialects common among the diaspora, to remain competitive in the market. Many of the sites allow initial free access with personality and algorithm-based matching quizzes. To go to the next step of 'meeting' prospective partners, clients are required to pay fees. Online dating was a US \$40 million business in 2001 and by 2008 it had grown into a \$600 million industry, involving

more than 800 businesses (Epstein, 2007).

Using the theoretical framework of selective self-presentation, Walther (1996) argues that online communicators have at their disposal an arsenal of technological affordances that enable them to exercise more control over their statements than in face-to-face communication. The asynchronicity of the internet enables daters to take time to construct their profiles, editing and refining statements to strategically present themselves, but these opportunities also afford an optimal amount of deception in portraying the self. Researchers such as Ellison, et al., (2006) say that impression management (in presenting personal profiles), is appealing because it can help daters stand out and gain attention from potential mates. Daters also manage tensions by presenting elements of their ideal self, an enhanced, yet attainable version of self.

Research objective

The central aim of this research is to understand why and how the digital media environment is the new platform for finding partners for Indians who have been accustomed to traditional arranged marriage through matchmaking. Historically, this was done by the village matchmaker and more recently by parents, families, and acquaintances. The other objective is to understand why online dating is replacing and extending the traditional methods of introducing couples. The significance of marriage from traditional and modern perspectives is presented to evaluate how online dating impacts the institution of marriage in a modern, western society where affluence also dictates the elaborate wedding ceremonies, which are mostly influenced by Bollywood celebrity weddings, and weddings of the rich and famous, such as the 2024 wedding of Anant Ambani and Radhika Merchant which Australian media report as having cost \$600 million, an eye-watering sum that accounts for only 0.5% of the Ambani fortune (Ellis-Petersen, 2024). The public display of the glitter and glamour from such weddings (Bollywood) on the silver screen and private ones on the multitude of social media sites feed the ideals of marriage and wedding.

Photos and videos taken by professional photographers at engagements and weddings are regularly posted on social media by both women and men. These photos enhance the look of the couple

and comments via the “like” columns include positive and flattering remarks. Online exposure through video and photo sharing enables even those who may not know the couple to copy fashions from such photos, which in turn, at a psychological level feeds the imagination of idealistic trends in Bollywood and silver-screen celebrity marriages, as well as other fashion trends.

This research brings out the level of matchmaking and compatibility by detailing what people seeking partners post on their profiles, for example, the presence of columns with the kinds of attributes being ‘sought’ and ‘presented’ by participants. This research thus aims to provide an understanding of the role of online dating sites in the modern era of sharing private information in public spheres to find a partner for marriage.

Methodology

This investigation focuses on the use of new media technologies in finding matches for marriage through five online dating sites as well as Facebook, which facilitates the ‘posting’ of personal profiles and the first secret meeting online. The sites evaluated for this study include Shaadi.com, IndianDating.com, IndianCupid.com, iMilap.com and Matrimony.com.

The study explores the types of profiles being posted to understand the common criteria, values and attributes presented and sought by marriage partners. This exploration helps to frame an understanding of values and priorities that are important in relationships to modern-day Australian Indians. A comparative study, through literature reviews, seeks to present what the common ideals are when marriage partners are being sought. This work records the influence of new media technologies in dictating descriptors about private and personal aspirations in public media spaces.

The dating sites were accessed online and evaluated for the services they offer, statements they make about their business, and their target markets (people from various language backgrounds within the Indian diaspora). The study involved examining key personal descriptors by those seeking partners, focusing on how women described themselves and what they sought in their ideal partners. Similarly, the research

considered how men described themselves and their preferences in their partners. This focus is an extension of the author's PhD research (Chand, 2012) which evaluated matchmaking within the Fijian Indian community in Sydney (2008–2012) when newspaper advertisements seeking partners were popular in the ethnic media. The research found the use of similar descriptors, although skin colour, which was one of the most common descriptors in advertisements, was missing in the online profiles.

Studies by Gibbs, Ellison and Heino (2006) found that 80% of online daters registered concerns that others misrepresented themselves, and research by Brym and Lenton (2001) note that fear of deception is the biggest perceived disadvantage of online dating. To this end, this research has focused on the personal descriptors and attributes being sought in prospective partners. The aim was to see if there is a common aspiration among the Indian diaspora when choosing partners. Goffman (1959) defines self-presentation as a process of packaging and editing the self to create certain impressions upon the audience. Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs (2006), Schlenker (2003), Toma et al., (2008), argue that online daters make choices regarding the information they present to attract desirable potential mates. The latter argue that the daters' choices are guided by two underlying tensions. The first is self-enhancement, or the desire to appear as attractive as possible to be noticed. The second is to be authentic, with the need to appear honest in their descriptions of themselves.

The theoretical framework of selective "self-presentation" (Walther, 1996) has also been explored in this research. This theory posits that online communicators have at their disposal an arsenal of technological affordance that enables more control over their statements than face-to-face communication. The asynchronicity involved in online interactions affords them time to construct, edit, revise and refine claims until they are optimal, and develop a strategic self-presentation that draws upon their actual and ideal selves.

This study has not considered the use of profile photos, which is a central component of online self-presentation, especially on social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram. Research by Humphreys (2004) found that profiles containing photographs were contacted approximately seven times more than those without a photo. The focus of this research is

to understand the characteristics being sought in a partner.

A comparison with the popular Australian dating site RSVP.com.au adds new perspectives to this work. The comparison helps to provide an understanding of the Indian-specific attributes being sought in dating or prospective marriage partners, further helping to understand the cultural continuity of seeking a 'match' in Indian marriages in the digital age.

Indian diaspora and weddings

The Indian diaspora is destined to continue its upward trajectory of migration to Australia, given the increased political connections Australia has developed with India in the last few years. This is noted in the Parkinson review of Australia's migration system (Parkinson, Howe & Azarias, 2023) that offers a blueprint for increasing migration which is much needed with the post-COVID-19 skills shortage, Australia's aging population and the need to attract international students to study and work in Australia to fill the gaps. Indian migrants therefore play an important part in this strategy.

The Indian diaspora celebrates major cultural events, including weddings, in bold and unique ways. Indian weddings in Australia breathe fun, pomp, and ceremony with many replicating wedding scenes from Bollywood movies. Affluence in Australia, and the trend of sharing wedding photos online via Instagram or Facebook, also mean that many brides and grooms copy what Bollywood stars wear during their weddings. The mass circulation of Bollywood celebrity wedding videos, clips, and photos, as well as on-screen weddings from movies, add to Indians' desire and anxiety for marriage.

The diaspora of mostly Hindu Indians legitimises its social structure through marriage as a sacrament. New generations of Indians copy Bollywood stars and weddings to add 'masala' (spice) to wedding rituals. Weddings in Australia are choreographed events featuring the expert work of wedding planners and DJs. Each wedding ritual, such as the henna night, is captured on video and loaded onto Instagram and Facebook, personal websites, and other Social Networking Sites (SNS) instantaneously and shared/reshared across all media and personal online sites. Easy access to Bollywood, television soaps, and other forms

of media including Zee TV, Netflix, YouTube, home wedding videos circulated among families and friends around the globe via mobile phones, and multiple other forms of digital media, has spawned newer and high-tech additions to wedding ceremonies. Professional wedding planners combine old, new, borrowed and invented ideas to make each wedding unique and special.

The yearnings of a community sharing a common culture, identity and values are thus maintained through the institution of marriage and marrying within its cultural cluster. Indian weddings represent a new epoch, characterised by flux, change, modernity, affluence, globalisation, and the use of information technology to transform the once humble home event into an occasion to be viewed across the globe through multimedia platforms. Presenting a range of discussions with viewers, Pfleiderer (1985) sees Hindi films as stabilising the social system by repressing new needs and, at the same time, mythologising tradition. Dwyer (2004) also sees weddings as grand events, arguing that:

The wedding is a major spectacle, Indians being known for the grandeur and splendour of their weddings even within families of modest means. These views [of the Indian community] are further reinforced through the Indian movies where weddings are also presented as a grand spectacle. It is rare for a Bollywood film not to have a wedding scene for the hero and heroine or for another couple. Cinema is interpretative art and expands our sense of the possible (Dwyer, 2004, p. 66).

Songs give an 'intravenous shot of adrenaline' to those watching Bollywood movies. These are then replayed in real-life weddings. Songs like "chote bhaiyon ke bade bhaiya aaj bane kisi ki saiya chote—the oldest brother of small brothers is today becoming a husband" from *Hum Saath Saath Hai* (1994) is replayed as the groom arrives for the wedding ceremony in real life (personal observation since 1998 in Sydney). Like the fanfare the families and friends enjoy at weddings on screen, such forms of entertainment have become an integral element of social and cultural continuity for those 'on the ground'.

Raheja and Kothari (2004) say that the language and lyrics of Bollywood are not abstract critical theories, but a living, breathing reality providing depth and unexpected synthesis, enriching the consumers' day-to-day lives. The community's fascination with Bollywood-style

weddings in Australia is fulfilled largely by the commercial activities of wedding planners, caterers, invitation card manufacturers, fashion houses, DJs, photographers, and videographers. While those involved in establishing such businesses capitalise on the available opportunities, members of the community mostly feed their fascination and desire for grand weddings by copying Bollywood, how Bollywood stars and the rich and famous from the diaspora, get married. Many choose 'destination weddings' and share photos online, adding to the cycle of copying from others. Distributing wedding video links among families and friends and posting engagement and wedding photos online via Facebook, Instagram and other sites, enables the couples and their families to 'show and tell'. All these are linked to the aspirations and dreams of the Indian diaspora when finding a marriage partner.

Matchmaking online

According to a BBC poll of 11,000 internet users in 19 countries, 59% of Indians and 60% of Pakistanis use the internet to search for a potential partner (Asian News International, 2010). As a society, Australian Indians rely heavily on social media platforms to receive and deliver social happenings. The extremely fast rate of delivering information and communicating means that social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp create a virtual world that is seen by many as replicating their 'real world' existence. The explosion of SNSs in the early 2000s ushered in the internet as a 'social space' for users, who use technology to create content such as videos, text, and pictures to share. Nentwich and König (2012) see such technology as the "catalyst" for social engagement on the internet. They argue that Web 2.0 developers tried to take advantage of the interactive functions of their tools (2012, p. 6), giving context to "user-generated content". For Indians in Australia, and indeed individuals around the globe, social media and social networking have become an integral part of their social lives and personal expression.

Research findings

The online dating sites that were evaluated for this study present insights into the ways technologies have enabled the choice and selection of partners for marriage in the Indian diaspora. The process used for the evaluation included accessing the site, reading company statements, taking note of the services provided and the steps involved in uploading profiles and checking for matches. All the sites evaluated for this study claimed to be the 'go-to place' to find a match. Two of the sites have branched into several other lucrative wedding businesses. One site launched an Elite Matrimony site in 2008, an invitation-only, fee-paying section for rich people who are time-poor but are seeking matrimonial alliances via a matchmaking service (matrimony.com).

Shaadi.com

Shaadi.com is owned by People Interactive (I) Pvt Ltd, which is an internet-based company that provides a range of internet-based services to the Indian diaspora all over the world. The services range from Shaadicentre (matchmaking and wedding planning), to Shaadilive, which is an official blog for shaadi.com. It features an "Ask an Expert" section which is a relationship counselling service. Shaadi.com was founded in 2006 by Anupam Mittal, who says in a message online that his objective was to provide "superior matchmaking by expanding opportunities to meet potential life partners." The website claims to have helped millions of people across the world find marriage partners. It is the "world's largest online matrimonial site" and has won several awards. The site allows each member to search for partners in their country or according to the language spoken (Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Marwari, Punjabi, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu). Members are asked to state their gender, DOB, religion, mother tongue, the country they live in, their mobile number, if they are creating this profile for themselves or someone else (son, daughter, brother, sister, relative or friend), marital status, height, diet, if they smoke and drink alcohol, personal values (traditional, moderate, liberal), complexion, body type, medical conditions, country/ies they grew up in, the state/city in which they are living, residency status, education level, education field (tourism, engineering, architecture

etc.), type of company they work for, industry they work in, annual income, a description/ mini-biography, and to upload a photo, which is mandatory. On average, the mini biographies were only several sentences long and often used abbreviations and text message spelling.

The phrases that women used to describe themselves were much more detailed than those used by men. Also, more profiles were created by family members for females than for males. When searching for a partner, members are asked to specify the following criteria: looking for bride or groom, age bracket (ranging from 18 to 71), mother tongue (52 options, mostly for languages spoken in or around India; also the choices of “doesn’t matter” or “other” is an option). The list of attributes being sought and presented shows the top mother tongues searched for, caste/sect, country, height range for partner, education, diet, partner’s marital status, *manglik* (birth sign) complexion, industry, type of company they work for (private company, defence, government, civil service, self-employed, non-working), residency status, whether they smoke or drink alcohol, any special cases (people with disability), HIV status. In 2023 the site claims to facilitate 10 meetings in an hour with prospective partners.

Clicking on the site takes one to a happy photo of a couple. The home page has a set of questions: I am looking for, age range, religion, and country living in. After these questions are answered, one must answer who the profile is for; options include me, son, daughter, brother, sister, relative, followed by information on the person seeking a partner, such as name and date of birth, religion. One must sign up (register for free and load a profile) and connect with the matches. However, to interact, one must become a premium member.

Three couples share their testimony of how they met on the site, fell in love, got married or are marrying in 2023. A digital wedding album of a beautiful bride and groom is used as a backdrop.

IndianDating.com

IndianDating.com is operated by Cupid plc. It is not exclusively a matrimony website and states that it helps Indians find “love, friendship and romance” (IndianDating.com, 2012). It also states that it helps members find “local” matches and asks for their postcodes. Members

are asked to state personal details. Age, gender and date of birth are mandatory. Non-mandatory information includes drinking/smoking status, religion, interest in children, education, and occupation.

Users are also asked to upload a photo, fill in an “about me” section (mini biography), write a short section about “what I am looking for” and score themselves on a Likert Scale about how loving, confident, successful, faithful, flirty, compassionate, extroverted, caring, patient, adventurous, and healthy they are. There is a lifestyle setting where they are asked to state three activities for the following categories: entertainment, hobbies, favourite music genres, favourite food, sports watched, sports played, and favourite TV genres. Users can also record a video greeting.

The mini biography sections were more likely to be left blank than those of the Shaadi.com site. As with Shaadi.com, there was a tendency towards ‘text message’ spelling, and almost 100% of the profiles in the random sample had no regard for grammar. When searching for a partner, members are asked to specify the following criteria: gender of partner, what they are looking for (friends, email, nothing serious, marriage), partner’s orientation, smokes or drinks, relationship status, ethnicity, height, eye colour, build, hair colour, and/or their location in Australia.

IndianCupid.com

IndianCupid.com is owned and operated by Cupid Media Pty Ltd, a company that “specialises in ‘database-driven dating sites’” (indiancupid.com). It offers a site tour and testimonials from happy customers. Members are asked to provide the following information about themselves: gender, date of birth, the country they are living in, ethnicity (non-Asian ethnicities are also listed), complexion, occupation, income, residency status, parents’ occupation, siblings and if they are married, *nakshatra*, *manglik* (birth sign). Users are asked if they are creating this profile for someone else, to provide a mini-biography and to write a little about what they are looking for in a partner.

Most profiles for males and females did not have photos. The female members of this site are the most likely to list specific criteria when describing themselves and their ideal match. Members are asked to

specify the following: gender and age they are interested in, the country their partner should be living in, state, city, what radius of the city they are in, the option of only showing matches who have pictures on their profile, and the last time the member was active in searching for a partner.

The website says the company is based in Southport, Queensland and has a revenue of \$11.8m.

The following dialogue from the movie “Bride and Prejudice” (Chadra, 2004) captures the feelings of Indian mothers, aunts and grandmothers who have a similar off screen ‘talk’ with their daughters and female relatives.

“Hurry up, you silly girls! We must make sure Jaya meets this Mr Balraj from London before anyone else”.

Lalita: All mothers think that any single guy with big bucks must be shopping for a wife.

Jaya: I am embarrassed to say, but I hope he is.

Lalita: What, shopping or loaded?

Jaya: Well, both.

In response to her younger daughter wanting to wear a low cut blouse, Mrs Bakshi says: “But we want Balraj to look into Jaya’s eyes, not your mames. She is our only hope ... if we do not get the eldest married first; we’ll never be able to marry the rest of you for the shame.”

When the scenes switch to the wedding hall, the bride’s friends run onto the dance floor in their Indian finery and dance to pulsating bhangra (Punjabi music), teasing the men from the groom’s party. The two groups tease and dance. The lyrics are:

“Oh these pretty girls ... fluttering temptingly like kites without string. These girls are like naked live wires. If you get too close, you’ll get an electric shock of love.”

iMilap.com

iMilap is operated by BroadLink LLC and seeks to connect millions of Indian men and women all around the world (imilap.com, 2012). It stresses that matrimonial/dating relationships are its prime focus,

and that its service allows its members to get in touch with their “soul mates” (imilap.com, 2012).

When creating a profile, members are asked to provide the following information about themselves: gender, country, state, city, date of birth, if they are creating this profile for themselves, marital status, number of children, height, complexion, hair colour, eye colour, if they have a disability, country of birth, looking for dating or marriage, country of birth, religion, caste, mother tongue, *manglik*, cultural values, education, profession, employer, diet, smoking habits, drinking habits, living situation, type of housing, phone number (optional if displayed publicly), immigration status, citizenship, do you believe in horoscopes, time of birth, place of birth. Then members are asked to fill in “about me” and “partner expectation” sections.

When searching for a partner, members are asked to specify the following: Searching for a male or female, what kind of relationship they are looking for, age and height range, country of birth, residency, citizenship, marital status, religion, caste, cultural values, education, profession, diet, smoking and drinking status.

This site does not have an “about us” section and does not provide any information about its history or objectives.

Matrimony.com

Matrimony.com says its flagship brand is BharatMatrimony—a network of matchmaking services employing 4000 people across 20 offices in India, US, Dubai, and Bangladesh. It claims to provide personalised matchmaking services for busy professionals. It launched its premium service, Elite Matrimony, in 2008, which caters to wealthy individuals or their families seeking matrimonial alliances. Services are available to invited members who must pay a matchmaking service fee ranging from 60,000 to 2,220,000 rupees (\$1,117 to \$41,364 Australian). In 2012 the company started a matrimony directory with a wedding-vendors-classified portal featuring over 50,000 wedding-related services such as creating designer wedding invitation cards, outfits for bride, groom and family, venue hire and catering services. In 2021, Matrimony.com launched a *jodii* (match) app—a vernacular app in Tamil for lower-income and blue-collar workers. It claims to provide services to 7.5 million people monthly.

The home page says, “Take first steps to your happy marriage” and offers an online registration form. The form asks “Matrimony profile for” with options to choose myself, son, daughter, relative, friend, brother, sister. Other questions are name, gender, date of birth, religion, mother tongue, caste/division, country living in, mobile and email. The next step is to create a password and register.

The site claims to be India’s first Consumer Internet Company to be listed on the Bombay Stock Exchange. It says that its “flagship brand BharatMatrimony is India’s largest and the Most Trusted Matrimony Brand (as per the Brand Trust Report 2014). Over 3000+ associates serve millions of active members. The company has a market capitalisation of over Rs. 2,300 crores”.

The company provides both matchmaking and marriage-related services through websites, mobile sites and mobile apps and is also complemented by 110+ company-owned retail outlets. Its flagship matchmaking services are BharatMatrimony, EliteMatrimony and CommunityMatrimony. Besides this, *Jodii*, a matchmaking service for non-graduates, is available in 10 Indian languages. Their home page describes them as follows:

With strong leadership in online matrimony, the company has been expanding into the highly unorganised \$55 billion marriage services industry. The goal is to build a billion-dollar revenue company and a long-lasting institution with a legacy for generations to come (Bharat Matrimony.com).

Their offerings in the marriage services business are WeddingBazaar and Mandap.com.

RSVP.com and comparison with US data

RSVP.com.au is a partially free dating website that operates in Australia. Members can create their own profiles and browse other members’ profiles as well as contact them via “kisses” for free. Beyond this, members can pay to have their profile appear at the top of all searches and control whose searches their profile shows up in. It is the only site evaluated in this research that allows the user to search for bisexual partners.

When creating a profile, members are asked to specify the following: if they are seeking a male or female, their current relationship status (including if they are currently married), a “headline” (a sentence-long summary of themselves), height, body type, smoking status, upload a photo of themselves, relationship status (including whether they are currently in a relationship), if they have children, if they want children, personality, eye colour, hair colour, nationality, ethnic/cultural background, religion, political persuasion, zodiac sign (automatically shows according to one’s birthday), drinking habits, diets, if they have pets, education, industry, job, type of music they listen to, type of books they read, favourite TV shows and movies, sports they are interested in and other interests.

In the aggregate, all the websites had more male than female users. 80% of the aggregate profiles were for males. The group most likely to have a profile on one of these websites is men aged 21–40. Men aged 21–30 make up 47% of the aggregate profiles, and men aged 31–40 make up 22% of the aggregate profiles. 51% of the Indian website users are in the 21–30 age categories.

The median age of the Australian population is 37, while the median age for new arrivals (immigrants who came to Australia after 2007) is 27 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). This is partially due to the criteria set for skilled migrants, stating that a migrant should not be older than 50 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

Under each website’s heading, tables show how members describe themselves and their ideal partners. Figures 15.1 and 15.2 below show the results of all these tables. Some people did not fill this section of their profile, and some phrases were used only once so they were not included in this graph. This data was not included for RSVP.com as it is not an Indian-specific site.

These results show the most used phrases and expressions in a random sample of 50 men from the websites.

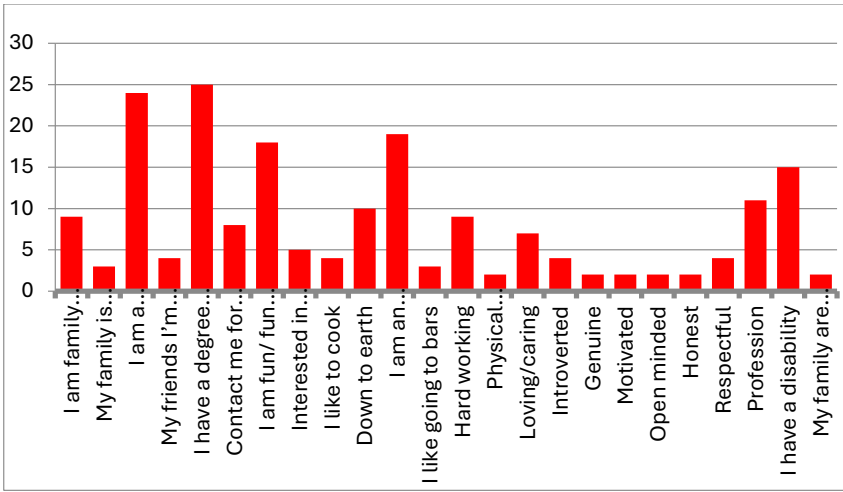


Fig. 15.1 How men describe themselves in their mini biographies.

These are the aggregate results from a random sample of 50 female profiles from the five Indian dating and matrimony websites. Some people did not fill in this section of their profile, and some used unique phrases that have been omitted from this graph.

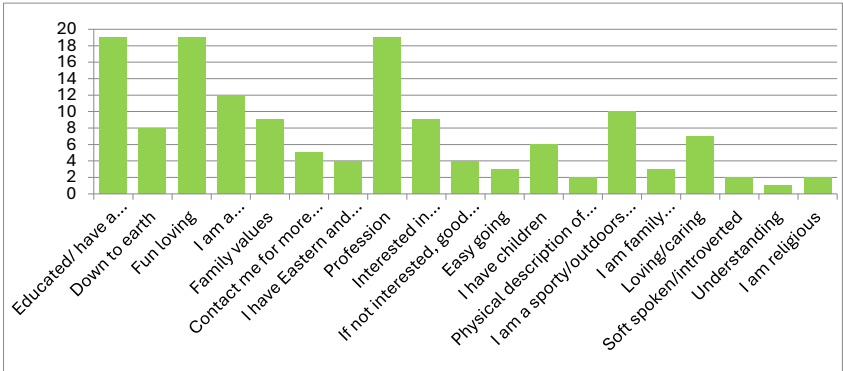


Fig. 15.2 How women describe themselves in their mini biographies.

Education, profession, and fun-loving top features of dating sites

As shown in the tables above, having a degree, education, and being in a profession as well as being fun-loving are characteristics women value and use to describe themselves. The new digital environment where they easily express such attributes has given them a new status and sense of purpose, where they have the power to make choices from a wide range of available men. Busy lifestyles filled with work and study mean that women, like men, have limited or little time to socialise. As most Indians living in Australia work outside the home, finding a match for marriage in social settings is less common than for their Australian counterparts, mainly because Indians (generally) tend not to participate in the evening socialising culture in pubs or clubs, something that is common among younger Australians. Engaging with new media and social networking sites (SNS) provides other opportunities and fills any gaps.

The research indicates that men have resorted to online dating in much larger numbers than women. Their profiles show that they too prioritise education and work, as indicated by their tertiary and higher qualifications and skilled positions. The other common descriptor used by men is “simple, average, normal guy, fun-loving, outdoors/sporty person”. For women, profession and education are top of the list while they also describe themselves as fun-loving and average, normal people. It is important to also note that, although these women are educated and working outside the home, many still rely on parents and families to find them a match. This view is confirmed by Nancy Netting (2010) whose study of arranged marriage in India demonstrates the duty to marry daughters remain the responsibility of the father. Appadurai (1996, p. 44) describes marriage as “the meeting points of historical patterns of socialization and new ideas of proper behaviour.”

The above descriptions are based on the aggregate data from the websites evaluated for this study. These research findings demonstrate that dating, especially online dating, has become a new steppingstone to marriage among Indians in Australia. The new high-tech communication environment ushered in by globalisation has allowed individuals more control when seeking a partner, while demoting the role of the village headman who traditionally enjoyed the status of key matchmaker for people reaching puberty.

Like all people around the globe, Indians have become discerning in taste and seek out the maximum personal advantages in dating relationships and marriage. Indian women are now more empowered and no longer confined to the role of homemaker. Joshi and Kumar (2012, p. 58) argue that the online matrimony market is “a popular and efficient way for busy singles to find love interests”. They say that the amount of “valuable” information that can be uploaded onto the site about a prospective partner could potentially reduce divorce rates and “other types of unsuccessful relationships” (p. 58).

The age at which community members marry is increasingly delayed: women are waiting until their late 20s–early 30s while men are delaying until their early to mid-30s. Although this is consistent with the Australian statistics on marriage (30.8 for men and 29.4 for women) (ABS, 2021) delaying marriage also means that many people end up seeking partners online, in many instances as a last resort. Also specific to online dating is the easy method of viewing photos as a first option before reading profiles. Many use Facebook to search for other photos and information about the person posting a profile on the online dating site. Previous unsuccessful attempts at meeting a potential partner face-to-face may cause a person to feel lonely, and therefore seek a partner online. Lawson and Leck (2006) found that using the internet to contact potential partners increased the self-confidence of those who were self-conscious about their appearance. This would be in line with Lawson and Leck’s (2006) finding that all the research participants felt lonely.

One nationally representative sample of US adults shows that 22% of heterosexual couples who met between 2007 and 2009 did so online (Rosenfield & Thomas, 2010), making the internet the second most likely way to meet a partner, after meeting through a friend. Another study shows that more than one-third of Americans who married between 2005 and 2012 had met online (Cacioppo, Gonzaga, Ogburn, & VanderWeele, 2013).

Importance of marriage

Jones and Ramdas (2004) argue that alongside the physical intimacy of marriage, the deeper intimacy of daily sharing and living together in marriage makes it a most profound way of ever knowing another person

as well as oneself. As a result of this knowledge, Singer (2009) presents marital love in a different category from romantic love. Cavell (1981) argues that marital love, presented through film, demonstrates a way to happiness.

Since this happiness is expressed as marriage, we understand it as simultaneously an individual and social achievement. Or rather, we understand it as the final condition for individual and for social happiness, namely the achieving of one's adult self and the creation of the social. The achievement of human happiness requires not the perennial and fuller satisfaction of our needs as they stand but the examination and transformation of those needs (Cavell, 1981, pp. 4-5).

Hindu traditions and the community's social structures create important sites for the ideological transformation of the Indian culture, values, and morals of marriage into the modern world; in the face of popular culture which gives the Indian diaspora a new reality on its identity. Conservatively constructed, the family values presented in this research are indeed a reflection of the ambivalence and anxieties of the community, juxtaposed in a complex multicultural setting, having to choose between love and arranged marriage, western cultural markers, and their own value system, all challenging their everyday existence in Australia's physical spaces. Marriage also feeds migration as the online daters also aspire to migrate (from India and other parts of the world to Australia and vice versa). This research has not explored the aspects of migration.

Seeking cultural similarity in matchmaking

A significant finding of this research is that the those participating in the online dating sites prefer a same race partner with similar status(homogamy). The sites also facilitate an efficient selection by the cultural, language and other descriptors that are important for the diaspora, in keeping its identity. Kilminjin (1998) says that expectations for cultural similarity and the advantage of being matched to someone with similar values such a lifestyle and interests present an individual's predilections for the members of their own group, making cultural capital highly dependent on racial background.

Chiswick and Houseworth (2011) posit that selecting a culturally competent partner enables an 'effortless' attainment and transfer of cultural practices to the next generation. Much earlier works of Bogardus (1947) presents an argument that a strong sense of community and identity within one's racial group produces feelings of separation from other groups, and a hesitancy to engage with them.

Based on the stated preference on the sites under study for this chapter, racial preferences seem to prevail when seeking partners. However, further detailed research in this area is needed to gauge a deeper understanding on online dating scene in relation to race identity in multicultural Australia where there are opportunities to meet people from other races and cultures.

In providing an understanding on this situation, Chand (2012) argues that young adults from the Indian diaspora are caught in between stages of change where they do not hold clearly defined positions within their social system or network. They therefore feel marginalised, excluded and without identity and influence. For them assimilation into a new environment poses many challenges.

While outsiders can be located outside a social structure and may not have the intention or ability to re-enter the space, marginals, according to Turner (1969) are "simultaneously members of two or more social groups whose social definitions and cultural norms are distinct from, and often even opposed to, one another" (p. 233). Stonequist (1965; 1937) describes a marginal as an individual who through migration, education, marriage, or some other influence, leaves one social group or culture without making a satisfactory adjustment to another and who finds himself or herself on the margin of each but a member of neither.

Pundit Narayan Bhatt, a marriage celebrant in Sydney, said he is "constantly inundated" with requests from Indians to match kundalis (birth/zodiac sign) with prospects of marriage. "I get an average of about 50 requests per month" (Bhatt, 2013). Birth date compatibility is also checked online discreetly, with priests practising in Australia and internationally. This method of matchmaking is common among the Indian diaspora. Bhatt says that Indians see marriage as an important milestone in the lifecycle of a family and the community. In the context of the extended family as well as the community, the young married couple is expected to maintain family unity as well as fulfil filial obligations.

This chapter reiterates the general view in the community that women are past their 'use-by date' if they are not married by age 25 or 28. Men are expected to be married by age 28 to 32. This is also in keeping, although moderated in view of the dynamics of modernisation, with the traditional Hindu beliefs and cultural norms about the stages of life.

Social scientists have for a long time recognised the importance of networks, especially among migrant communities. Such networks are sets of interpersonal relationships; sometimes deep ties based on friendship, kinship and shared history or nationality which provide a connection among migrants and members of other communities in host countries and former homelands (Massey et al., 1993). As a result of creating this network such migrants contribute significantly towards an important source of social capital (Portes, 1995). In the case of the Indian diaspora living in Sydney, this level of social capital (Bourdieu, 1990) is developed and maintained in a closely networked environment in the online spaces as well as their cluster-style living in physical spaces.

Downsides of online dating

With the internet giving access to anyone, there is always the possibility of people creating fake identities, enhancing photos, and losing money through scams. The lack of monitoring of such sites also presents the possibility that the owners of the site itself might generate "hits" to demonstrate traffic flow. This is similar to sites offering free searches whereas paid subscribers may end up paying large amounts for a service that might not lead to a satisfactory outcome or result in a mismatch, although the latter is possible irrespective of the means engaged. Most websites visited for this research included warnings and advice for staying safe when online and when arranging to meet someone for the first time. The advice sections caution users to be wary of those asking for money.

Dating website executives agree that online platforms make it quicker and easier for members to connect with a larger pool of potential partners than they'd encounter offline (Slater, 2013). This abundance of options can make people less inclined to commit to a life partner, as they are always exploring other possibilities. Moreover, Paumgarten (2011) notes that in environments with plenty of choices, like online

dating, people are more likely to engage in “trading up”—i.e., switching partners once they find someone who they think is better. The problem is that this cycle is potentially endless. With more people joining dating sites, there is a constant pool of new potential partners, which could contribute to higher divorce rates and ultimately challenge traditional views of marriage (Slater, 2013).

Conclusion

This study delves into a worldwide phenomenon where busy lifestyles are prolonging the period of singledom for individuals. Social media platforms have adapted to offer diverse choices when individuals are ready to explore romantic options. However, within the Indian community, marriage remains deeply ingrained as the societal norm. In the past, Indians heavily relied on familial networks to arrange matches, but with the diaspora dispersed across the globe, technology has replaced the traditional village marriage broker, with online dating emerging as the predominant method. This shift has given rise to numerous business opportunities, turning marriage into a multi-billion-dollar industry on a global scale.

For the Indian diaspora, globalisation has broadened the scope of potential marriage partners who share similar cultural, religious, and physical backgrounds. The parental role in matchmaking has evolved, with parents utilising online platforms to search for suitable matches for their children. Those unable to navigate these sites seek assistance from businesses specialising in online matchmaking services. Interestingly, the stigma associated with being single or without a partner is diminishing, partly due to the tailored profiles crafted by date coaching specialists.

Marriage dynamics among Australian Indians are significantly shaped by the influences of globalisation, new media platforms, and the glamorised portrayals of celebrity weddings in Bollywood films. The Indian-specific dating sites analysed in this study showcase individuals’ expressed preferences and life priorities. Drawing from the notion of racial homogamy in dating, which suggests strong preferences for partners of the same racial background within racial groups, this research also underscores assimilation theory. This theory suggests that shared racial identity strongly influences in-group marital preferences.

The affluence of, and myriad opportunities available to the Indian diaspora in Australia afford them a broader spectrum of choices in terms of who to date, when, how, and where within their community.

Despite the evolution of online dating platforms, the attributes being sought when matchmaking remains largely unchanged, albeit with a major shift in setting due to the advent of online dating. Marriage continues to be a cornerstone of the Indian social fabric, with young adults, their families, and the broader community holding it in high regard. New media has injected fresh energy into this cultural cornerstone, presenting innovative and captivating platforms that facilitate dating as a precursor and pathway to marriage. Platforms like Facebook exemplify this new community-driven approach to matchmaking, enabling members to involve friends and family in the process by browsing profiles, evaluating potential matches, and providing feedback. This modern twist on matchmaking reflects a reinterpretation of traditional practices within the context of contemporary digital culture.

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