IRANIAN DATING SITES IN THE AGE OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON MUSLIM MARRIED WOMEN

Dariush Boostani, Naima Mohammadi
and Fattah Hatami Maskouni

ABSTRACT

This study uses a phenomenology method to investigate the experiences of married Muslim women while having romantic conversations via online dating sites during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sixteen participants were selected via purposive sampling, and the data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. The results confirm that resistance to Islamic marriage limitations is the underlying reason accounting for Muslim women's romantic chat. However, "premarital experiences in virtual space" and "chat as a remedy for loneliness" create the causal conditions of romantic chat, and "experience of family restrictions" and a "sense of freedom" provides the foundation for an online romantic chat. It is worth noting that those who voice a sense of "unhappy marriage" and "husband's sexual coldness" are more likely to turn to sex chat during the COVID-19 pandemic. The consequences of digital romantic conversations for married Muslim women are "chat addiction" and "feeling a sense of betrayal."

Keywords: Romantic chat; Muslim women; online communication; COVID-19 pandemic; married Muslim women; dating site

INTRODUCTION

Habermas' concept of the public sphere has emerged in new forms of social relations in virtual spaces (El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2012b). Social networks could be considered an alternate pathway for meeting, establishing relationships, and even lovemaking (Sotoudeh, Friedland, & Afary, 2017). This fact becomes more appreciable (it becomes a more appreciable fact) when the normal family relationships of the participants are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The role of social media in the life world of Muslim women is important in several ways. The most important reasons behind Muslim women's presence in virtual spaces are political activation, personal affairs, and socialization (Elmasry, Auter, & Peuchaud 2014; Wackenhut, 2020). Some studies have shown that the online activities of Muslim women are some sort of resistance against gender-based traditions. Online activities include going on online dates, establishing cross-gender friendships, and having romantic and sexual encounters (Hatfield & Rapson, 2015; Hetzel-Riggin & Pritchard, 2011).

In the cultural and religious context of Muslim countries, premarital relationships between men and women are strongly forbidden. Muslim communities do not tolerate intimate relationships between the opposite sexes (Wheeler, 2007). According to Shariah law, making a date in a private environment is considered *Khalwat* or "close proximity," which suggests shame and dishonor and could be punishable by prison, or stoning (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2003). Interfaith marriages and lesbian, bi-sexual, gay, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LBGTQIA) relationships are forbidden. Meeting in public is also risky since governmental and parental punishments can follow. In such an oppressive setting, social media can alter the situation by creating venues for men and women to engage in anonymous and private relationships (Larsson, 2016). Although the online environment has many restrictions in the Middle East, the use of social media has gained momentum among young and educated women (El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2012b; Kenney & Moosa, 2013). According to the survey by Internet World Stats (2019), between 2012 and 2017, the use of social media increased significantly among Muslim women (Newman, Fletcher, & Kalogeropoulos, 2019). The significant increase in the use of online space from 2019 to 2021 became an undeniable reality among families in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic-related communication crisis affected the couple's relationship in terms of sexual satisfaction and created a kind of dissatisfaction and feelings of anxiety in sexual relations (de Pedraza, Guzi, & Tijdens, 2020; Osur, Ireri, & Esho, 2021). In Iran, despite the existence of Islamic penal law, filtering, censorship, and cyber police, social media plays a critical role in people's lives especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hatfield & Rapson, 2015; Piela, 2010; Sotoudeh, Friedland, & Afary, 2017). Studies show that people in countries with more limitations and penal laws are more interested in online relationships and cybersex. They chat to express their identities which cannot be otherwise expressed in their daily lives (Abbas & Al-Bahrani, 2016). They form a "new identity" by disguising themselves with fake accounts. They often choose a false

name, gender, age, marital status, location, and photo to get rid of traditional relationships and prosecution (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Cohen, Kromann, & Reeve, 2008). In fact, having online dialogues with men is only one click away from them (Morgan, 2010). Although the sexual relationship between married women and other men, besides the husband, is considered adultery, these types of relationships can be established through the virtual space.

This study was conducted to investigate the image of married women on dating sites and to analyze the semantic implication of online users in a small city located in the southeast of Iran during the COVID-19 pandemic. People in this city have a deep appreciation of traditional and religious marriages, similar to other conservative societies. The most important purpose of this study is to describe the context, content, and strategies that married women use while chatting online. The research also focuses on the motives of women who establish romantic relationships with men on dating sites at a specific time. It is worth mentioning that the authors are cautious not to generalize the research findings to large populations of married women. Considering the points mentioned above, the present study attempts to respond to the following question:

How did Muslim married women establish online relationships on the dating sites during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RESEARCH METHOD

Given the sensibility of the research topic and context, the phenomenology method was utilized (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Hermeneutical phenomenology describes research as oriented toward lived experience and interpreting the "texts" of life (Van Manen, 2016). To analyzes the procedure and guidelines for assembling the textual and structural descriptions, the approach of Corbin and Strauss (2008) is adopted because it has systematic steps in the data analysis. The procedures consist of identifying, bracketing, and collecting Muslim married women's experiences in dating sites.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants were 16 Muslim married women who lived in Iran and had an account on the dating site (Table 1). Purposive sampling was the main sampling strategy used in this study. As a subcategory of purposive sampling, maximum variation (Emmel, 2013). Sampling was used to select participants with diverse characteristics.

DATA GATHERING

In this study, 50 accounts were created by eligible men for marriage to provide more conversation chances. The users were invited to participate in the study

Table 1. Demographic Detail of Participants.

Entry	Pseudonymou	Age	Level of Education	Duration of Being Online	Occupation
1	Fatemeh	38	Master's degree	6 years	Medicine
2	Farzaneh	20	High school degree	1 year	Student
3	Lyli	28	Associate degree	3 years	Homemaker
4	Elham	21	High school degree	3 years	Student
5	Zohreh	31	Bachelor's degree	7 month	Vendor
6	Sahar	47	Master's degree	8 month	Nurse
7	Shokuh	25	Bachelor's degree	1 year	Homemaker
8	Arezu	39	Associate degree	2 years	Vendor
9	Hadis	33	Bachelor's degree	6 month	Employer
10	Jaleh	43	Associate degree	1 year	Vendor
11	Sima	34	Master's degree	5 years	Employee
12	Maryam	25	Bachelor's degree	6 years	Student
13	Nushin	27	Associate degree	2 years	Homemaker
14	Puran	35	Bachelor's degree	5 years	Teacher
15	Nazanin	41	High school degree	5 years	Homemaker
16	Zahra	45	Associate degree	10 years	Homemaker

when some evidence showed that they were already married. All participants were interviewed with respect to the individual's freedom to leave the study at any time and for any reason. Therefore, the participants were interviewed in their own choice online or offline so that they could safely describe their experiences. Each semi-structured interview lasted for 45–60 minutes, and some participants were interviewed twice.

After the initial interviews and coding process, the main questions were created. The data were analyzed by reducing the information to significant statements or quotes and combines the statements into themes. Following that, the researcher develops a textural description of the experiences of the persons (what participants experienced), a structural description of their experiences (how they experienced it in terms of the conditions, situations, or context), and a combination of the textural and structural descriptions to convey an overall essence of the experience. Based on the open coding, the data were broken into separate parts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Different concepts and categories emerged during the microanalysis in the open coding process, and then the relationship between the categories and the subcategories were identified by axial coding (Glaser & Holton, 2004). In the axial coding phase, 14 categories were revealed and at the third stage (i.e., selective coding).

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Study rigor refers to the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods. This concept is used to ensure the quality of a study. In the present

study, all emerging categories were adjusted according to the interviews. Moreover, the participants were given a brief summary of the findings. This strategy is referred to as "member checking." In qualitative studies, it is essential to ensure the credibility of findings. "Auditing" was used to review the process of coding, conceptualization, and the categories. Subsequently, the analysis and findings were verified by an assessor. The third strategy was a comparative analysis through which the researchers "double-checked" the raw data and compared them with the theoretical scheme.

FINDINGS

The present study analyzes the findings according to the accounts given by the participants. It primarily focuses on the common experiences of the participants, including causal, contextual, and intervening conditions and strategies used in online romantic chats.

CAUSAL CONDITIONS FOR ONLINE CHATTING BY MUSLIM MARRIED WOMEN

Chat as a Remedy for Loneliness

What many users in the chatting platforms have in common is the fear of loneliness (Boonmongkon, Ojanen, & Samakkeekarom, 2013; Drouin, Miller, & Dibble, 2015). And, painful distress (Akuta, Ong'oa, & Jones, 2011). Some studies have referred to the fact that some women chat in order to find a partner in the real world as a solution to this pain. According to research reports, many introvert users suffer from depression and a feeling of failure (Buchanan & Whitty, 2014). This was how Zahra described her loneliness, "when loneliness puts too much pressure on me, I resort to chatting on the Internet; many of those who are here [*suffer from loneliness*]." In search of a confidant to share her feelings with, Elham stated that "I have been enduring a lot of problems…solitude has taken its toll on me, and that is why I am here to find a friend to open my heart to." The participants believed that when they chatted with other users, they did not feel the passing of time. Accordingly, Hadith stated that "The time we spend on the internet soothes us; time passes more quickly this way."

The interest of married women with no child as well as non-native citizens or users from minority backgrounds in chatting as a solution to loneliness is an important and common element among dating chat users (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). For Jaleh, having no children is the most important reason. She mentioned that: "I have no kid, and [*I feel sad*] when I have to spend my time alone at home from the morning till the afternoon." Maryam also believes that homesickness is the major reason for her presence on the Internet stating, [*I don't know anyone in this city*], and "I come here to find a confidant and overcome my solitude."

Premarital Experiences in Virtual Space

A great majority of the participants referred to their experience with chatting when they were single on the dating sites. Martens (2016) points out gender differences in digital activities; women are more inclined to maintain past online relationships and have more feelings of nostalgia (Martens, 2016). According to recent studies, women save their accounts for longer periods of time and return to them after some gap (Wagner, Gainous, & Abbott, 2019). For a group of participants, it is often difficult for users to put an end to the emotional bonds they have built on the Internet. Therefore, insatiable curiosity makes them check on their old friends (Ben-Ze'ev, 2003; Rollero, Daniele, & Tartaglia, 2019). For instance, Hadith said: "when I was single, I had so many online boyfriends on the internet that it was very hard to break up with them." Shokouh and Jaleh also noted that they started to know their husband on the dating sites, and their user accounts are still active. Zahra stated "I am still tempted to chat," and Leili believed that "sometimes, abandoning a habit may kill you …[*I am still in love with the excitement of chatting*] during the college days in the dormitory."

THE CONTEXTUAL CONDITIONS OF ONLINE CHATTING BY MUSLIM MARRIED WOMEN

Experience of Family Restrictions

The expansion of communication technologies has caused some paradoxical and controversial conditions for traditional Muslim families in terms of the relationships between men and women (Hatfield & Rapson, 2015; Sakr, 2004). In fact, one major reason for using the Internet is having online dates with the opposite sex. For instance, Sahar complained about the limitations inside her family and explained that "it's a disgrace to talk about men of our family let alone dating them in private." Sima also stated that "whether single or married, we have the obsession of having a relationship with the opposite sex."

In some cases, the experience of family restrictions is related to the social traditions that violate the rights of women after marriage (Boonmongkon, Ojanen, & Samakkeekarom, 2013; Piela, 2010; Sotoudeh, Friedland, & Afary, 2017). Fatemeh expressed her feelings about this limitation, stating, "after the marriage, I was doomed to stay at home since my husband did not allow me to get in touch with my single [*female*] friends." Regretting her marriage, Shokuh said, "after the marriage, I only had a relationship with my sister and mother-in-law." Another limitation married women face comes from Islamic Law, which assumes that men have the right to be the guardian. According to that, any type of relationship for women should be approved by men. Thus going out and having relationships with strangers (*Na Mahram*) is an unforgivable sin (Koka-bisaghi, 2018). Lacking decision-making capability and strict Sharia laws have turned married Muslim women into passive subjects. Hadis expressed her

complaints bitterly about these limitations, "single girls have a greater freedom in the society to have relationships with men…At least, they need permission from their own family…but when you are married, you need to deal with [*sharia laws*], and you have no authority as a woman."

In reference to discriminating laws against married women, Elham stated that: "If a married woman is seen with a man, she is sentenced to [*stoning*], but if a single woman is in a relationship with a man, she is only criticized for having a boyfriend. Married men can legally date single girls. They can also marry them [*temporarily or marry more than one wife at the same time*]. There is nothing wrong with any of them."

Given the circumstance, online dating sites provide a secure and convenient environment to keep women away from any sort of judgment (Lawrence, 2005; Wheeler, 2007).

Sense of Freedom

Anonymity is a key factor for the users whose identity remains a mystery on the Internet. On the one hand, they are able to form a self-fabricated identity, and on the other hand, they can talk without any shame and fear of their real self (Cali, Coleman, & Campbell, 2013). On the Internet, they feel free to talk about their private issues and fantasies (Helsper & Whitty, 2010; Parker & Wampler, 2003). They are also able to talk about issues that can't be discussed publicly in Islamic communities due to gender segregation policies (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008). It seems that online interactions have given way to "Ideal speech situation" as introduced by Jürgen Habermas, which holds true for this group of users (Habermas & McCarthy, 1985). Maryam confirms that freedom comes with anonymity. She said, "on the dating sites, you can speak your mind, and no one sees or knows you." Nooshin describes this freedom in making sexual jokes and rude comments. Hadith feels comfortable sharing her sexual curiosities on the dating sites: "one important point of chatting is that you don't feel ashamed of sharing your sexual needs with others."

In addition, cyberspace makes prohibited conversations more attractive due to "technological facilities." This is a great opportunity to get in touch with and track down several online users with whom you would like to spend more time. Elham said: "the good thing about chat is that I can chat with you, and at the same time, three other online users are sending private messages to me."

INTERVENING CONDITIONS BEHIND CHATTING OF MUSLIM MARRIED WOMEN

Unhappy Marriage

Many full-time users who spend hours online are those who have fear, anger, and suffering in their marriage relationship (Bird, 2006; Manning, 2006; Schneider, Weiss, & Samenow, 2012; Zitzman & Butler, 2009). Some of the participants in this study highlighted forced or child marriage as the reason for online romantic

conversations. For others, the routine relationship after marriage provided romantic chat in cyberspace. Leili indicated: "my family thought that I was getting too old to get married … [I just chat to find my true beloved]." Farzaneh also pointed to her early marriage and said that "at the age of [16], I had no idea about marriage, I have just found out I am not a good match with my husband I strongly regret that I am ruining my life with him."

Some clinical studies have focused on how partners get used to each other after marriage. Electronic devices have created a variety of intimate online relationships as a replacement for the boring relationships between couples (Schneider, Weiss, & Samenow, 2012). In traditional Islamic societies, the marital relationship becomes boring faster, which is generally due to conservative decisions (marriages without love and based on the pressure from families), child marriage, institutionalized patriarchy, etc. (Mills, 2000) and (Papp, Danielewicz, & Cayemberg, 2012). In this study, many participants described how their marital relationships became boring. Arezu believes that "in general, only [the first days] of marriage are good, and the rest is not worthy." In some cases, the participants referred to the dating sites to alleviate the frequent tensions and monotonous life. One of the participants believed that "after a while, the relationship becomes boring, but there are still expectations, and this lack of attention puts me where I am right now." Sahar said, "[everything] was about me at first, then I was boring to him; my sex, my body, my words…."

Husband's Sexual Coldness

The intervening role of this subtheme in enhancing women's online activity is of great interest to researchers since one of the key functions of dating sites is to remove the limitations that users experience in the real world. Dissatisfaction with sexual relationships leads to searching for an online partner (Schneider, Weiss, & Samenow, 2012). Fear of COVID-19 transmission can adversely affect people's desire for sexual relationships, which subsequently leads to a marked reduction in marital satisfaction. Marital distress and dissatisfaction were higher among couples who thought their spouses are irresponsive to their situation. Conversely, couples believing that their spouses are responsive to their situation reported less marital distress and conflict and higher marital satisfaction (Epifani, Wisyaningrum, & Ediati, 2021). For instance, Maryam justified her being sexually frigid, stating, "my husband works at a hospital, and I am afraid of having sex with him because he may have contracted the COVID-19."

The situation becomes more complicated in the context of Islamic society, where the sexual drive is characterized by granting special privileges to men's sexual desires and ignoring that of women (Tijdink, de Graaf, Hehenkamp, & Laa, 2020). Elham describes her sexual life in this manner: "I just get online to satisfy my sexual needs…since I work for a bank with a high risk of Coronavirus contraction, I have not had sex for 4 months. I need online users to give me sexual satisfaction!… he (my husband) doesn't sleep with me."

THE STRATEGIES USED FOR CHATTING BY MUSLIM MARRIED WOMEN

Chat in Husband's Absence

In traditional societies, any extra-marital relationship can lead to the loss of honor for the woman and her family. Indeed, on certain occasions, some Muslim women have been killed for staining the family reputation. They call these murderous acts "honor killings," done to revive the family's standing within the society (Chesler, 2010). The participants usually chatted when their husbands were absent since they were not willing to take such a risk. The absence of their husbands allowed them to more comfortably catch up with online partners. Zahra said: "I treasure the moment when he is absent, and I chat as much as I can. Unfortunately, my husband almost always stays home because of the pandemic, and this has greatly increased the possibility of divulging my secret online chatting."

Hadith, Maryam, Sima, and Elham all spoke about their strategies of chatting in dangerous situations. "When my husband goes to sleep, I begin to do my thing secretly under the blanket." "It is so exciting, but I am careful; I have set a password for my laptop and mobile, and no one has access to it."

Disguise the Fact of Being Married

Hiding the marriage is one of the most common strategies used in online dating environments to maintain a secret identity, keep in touch, and enjoy a live chat (Abbas & Al-Bahrani, 2016; Alim & Islam, 2019). The users' insistence on disguising their marital status is also due to the importance of piety in Islamic societies (El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2012c). Fear of disgrace and severe Islamic punishments awaiting adulterous women and men are the most important reasons the participants conceal their identities (Piela, 2010; Sotoudeh, Friedland, & Afary, 2017). Some participants in this study sought to hide their marriage with the following arguments. "I did not say I was married; he would have escaped," Maryam said. Some participants also concentrated on social disgrace and fear attached to the relationship with a married woman in Iran. Fatemeh described her experience: "once I told a guy I was married, his behavior suddenly changed, you can guess what happened next."

Avoiding Face-to-Face Meeting

People in traditional countries with chastity norms have more restrictions due to fear of disclosing (Larsson, 2016). Muslim married women have enough reasons to postpone their appointments with their online partners; however, for younger users chatting means meeting in person (Helsper & Whitty, 2010). In the present study, the participants underlined the importance of anonymity and avoiding public exposure. They used different strategies, such as making fake profiles, sending their single friends over, avoiding face-to-face meetings, and minimizing the risk of contracting the COVID-19 to remain anonymous. Sima said: "When it comes to meeting in person, I somehow run away and look for an excuse." Leili

stated: "I have a single friend whose job is to date boys instead of me in order to collect information." Sahar and Elham also noted that "married women don't go out to see their partner because they're scared… these days, Covid-19 provides a convincing excuse."

Sex Chat

It may be argued that in traditional societies where sex education, sexual health, facilitation, and even sexual debates are often neglected, virtual space becomes a platform for establishing a sexual relationship involving cybersex (Boonmong-kon, Ojanen, & Samakkeekarom, 2013). Cybersex also grants online married Muslim women a type of corporeal safety, which reduces the dangers of having physical intercourse (Benotsch, Snipes, & Martin, 2013; Crimmins & Seigfried-Spellar, 2014). In the present century, due to unlimited technological options, cybersex has become ubiquitous through webcam, video streaming, adult chat rooms, online rooms, online porn sites, online bulletin systems, pornography download sites, live video recording (Daneback, Ross, & Månsson, 2006; Jewitt, Price, & Mackley, 2020), unlimited access to sex, sex with multiple partners (Benotsch, Snipes, & Martin, 2013; Thomann, Grosso, Wilson, & Chiasson, 2020), and online sex chatting with strangers (Crimmins & Seigfried-Spellar, 2014).

In the present study, all participants chatted with the opposite sex and considered the dating site a seducing environment to drive pleasure from their online partners. The findings show that the existence of such a private space at home tempted the participants to experience different types of sex chat. Arezu said, "I don't come with the intention of having sex, yet as I talk to my partner I am tempted to do it; it is so hot, and I get satisfied somehow." Another participant stated: "The chat environment is where you are sexually aroused and get into sexual behavior, whether you want it or not."

Some participants did not consider cybersex as a sexual activity. They rather saw it as a way to compensate for their husbands' sexual dysfunctions. Maryam said, "I don't want to have real sex. I just have a sexual behavior; well, I need sex." In contrast, one group described it as a strategy to counteract and avenge their unfaithful husbands. Hadith said, "if he is legally allowed to have a girlfriend, I can also meet countless boyfriends here; However, no one is able to prove it?"

Online Entertainment

The emergence of smartphones has particularly created a fluid entertainment among young people who have become one of the most loyal customers of these amazing services. They mostly use it for the purpose of leisure and communication (Pitt, Ewing, Teo, & Phau, 2015) and (Jaiswal & Bahedia, 2016). In fact, ordinary family meetings, travel, shopping, etc., have been replaced by online activities (Grant, 2019; Žumárová, 2015). The majority of participants described online chat as a fun, inexpensive, exciting, diverse, andaccessible phenomenon, so

much so that some participants mentioned "we just want to spend time and enjoy." Shokuh also had the same understanding: "I spend my time here to laugh with crazy users."

THE CONSEQUENCES OF CHATTING BY MUSLIM MARRIED WOMEN

Finally, building romantic conversation on the dating site had a few consequences for participants, as described in the following.

Online Chat Addiction

Researchers believe that the overwhelming interest of online users to make romantic conversations may contribute to cyber addiction (Zhang, Yang, Tu, Ding, & Lau, 2020). Cybersex addiction also plays an important role in breaking family bonding and family connectedness, which refers to a sense of belonging and closeness to the real partner (Schneider & Kenny, 2000) and (Dew, Brubaker, & Hays, 2006). Studies show that addicted users are rarely able to manage their real communications with their partners (Kratcoski, Kratcoski, & Kratcoski, 2020). They are often interested in getting in touch with those afflicted with the same addiction (Helsper & Whitty, 2010; Shaw, Forbush, Schlinder, Rosenman, & Black, 2007).

The narrative analysis of participants in this study referred to the strong reliance on romantic chat with online partners as a habit that has gone out of control. "I can't stand living a life lacking onling chat with my virtual friends" said Maryam. Zahra also described her addiction: "When Mahdi (my husband) comes home, I have to suffer again." The participants spoke of the curiosity that came after chatting and believed that this feeling was addictive. Shokufeh said: "I'm just waiting for a brief opportunity to escape from everyday conversations and resort to my online partners in the dating site."

Feeling a Sense of Betrayal

The overwhelming majority of participants expressed a sense of shame and betrayal after sexual and romantic chatting (Schneider, Weiss, & Samenow, 2012). Although they had a justification for their online betrayal, they ultimately felt a sense of guilt and deep shame toward their family members, especially their husbands. Elham describes her feeling this way: "I have no excuse to chat after marriage. I just hate myself. I feel like I'm a mean person, but it is really out of my hand." Sima said, "the feeling of guilt never leaves me alone. I can't assure my husband that I am faithful and honest; I am ashamed of myself." Another participant stated, "I had no feelings for my husband, and I had no sense of betrayal, but I was disappointed when I met him [remembering my sexual words or actions]."

DISCUSSION

Based on the participants' lived experiences, those under strict control for communicating with the opposite sex before marriage used the romantic chat to break free from the traditional male hegemony. They also used the Internet as an alternate space, especially if they had escalating feelings of low satisfaction with marriage during the COVID-19 pandemic. Romantic chat has given the users a sense of freedom due to the pervasion of hopelessness. New social networks let young Muslim women live under Islamic laws, and at the same time, communicate in order to meet and engage in forbidden relationships in more conservative Middle Eastern countries (Abu-Lughod, 1998; Hatfield & Rapson, 2015; Wheeler, 2007). The narrative analysis of romantic relationships between online partners in conservative communities has also been considered among Indian Facebook users who tried to find romantic partners anonymously and interact with the opposite sex outside of the circle of people they knew. They broke the boundaries of morality (Sotoudeh, Friedland, & Afary, 2017). In this study, the Iranian participants used online platforms to create an alternative public space that allows for restoring unfair norms and disrespectful interactions.

One of the most important aspects of online romantic chat as a form of resistance refers to women's desire to be equal with men, which is doomed to fail in radical Islamic countries where Muslim women live in a very unfair environment (Larsson, 2016; Piela, 2010). The participants criticized the culture of modesty that has defined the role of married women in maintaining family honor. Although the punishment for adultery (*zina*) is the same for men and women, Islamic legal jurisprudence allows married men to have temporary marriages under the name of nikahmut'ah. This same law also allows men to marry, with at most, four legal spouses at the same time (Mir-Hosseini & Hamzić, 2010). In this study, the participants that were sexually reluctant and regretful about their marriage referred to the role of safe sex chat as an emancipating way, without transgressing physical boundaries, which are strictly controlled by social and religious norms. El-Nawawy and Khamis (2012a) have described the emergence of Islam in the online environment as the "international Islamic public sphere." Olivier Roy also depicted a "globalized Islam," which clearly shows that the online environment is beyond religious laws, as manifested by users. Although the online environment has been known for creating venues for suppressed women under the hegemony of a hierarchal system in Islamic countries such as Iran (Hatfield & Rapson, 2015), they indicated a sense of shame and betrayal as a result of sex chat and marriage under the Islamic law.

Participants also raised their voice against the unilateral male divorce right that has restricted Muslim married women in the matter of divorce. Calling for a romantic chat among Muslim married women is also a sort of online struggle against the unilateral and arbitrary male divorce right in Islam that Muslim married women have found an opportunity to change by means of the Internet. It can be called a cyber-disobedience designed and organized by disobedient (Nashezeh) women.

On the other hand, some of the participants used to chat before they got married. When they realized their marital relationships had become boring, they used chat as a treatment for their boredom and loneliness. In the beginning, they considered it a

mere daily hobby and funny entertainment, but it gradually turned into a romantic chat and an inevitable cyber-addiction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The majority of the participants referred to the role of android phones and mobile Internet, which have provided more opportunities for the participants. The role of new mobile applications is mentioned in previous studies. For instance, Bosch (2011) referred to the role of social networks in expressing sexual identities. Hjorth and Lim (2012) focused on fleeting relationships, displaying sexual emotions, and communicating the feeling of intimacy and a temporary desire to have fun. Skype, WhatsApp, and Facebook were the most popular applications for online dating (Benotsch, Snipes, & Martin, 2013; Hand, Thomas, Buboltz, Deemer, & Buyanjargal, 2013).

In the present study, the existence of empty rooms, monotonous atmosphere, and routine relationships led housewives more than other groups toward online dating. The majority of the participants stated that their husbands disagreed with online gaming and entertainment because of their potentially addictive nature and online infidelities. Thus, anonymity was used as a very important strategy to facilitate online sexual activities among partners who were in committed real-life relationships (Helsper & Whitty, 2010; Sharaievska & Stodolska, 2017).

According to the participants, "secret cyber entertainment" has much more excitement and variety. They often want to hide their real identity to protect themselves from family, authorities, and criminals. The online environment has become an alternative public arena for interaction, courtship, and love (Abbas & Al-Bahraini, 2016; Chakraborty, 2012; Pourmehdi, 2015). The process that is the opposite of disguised identity is self-disclosure. It is considered a key aspect of developing closeness and intimacy with others, including friends and romantic partners. It includes revealing personal and intimate information about oneself to others (Schlosser, 2020). The participants in the present study were so concerned about the dangers of self-disclosure that they had trouble opening up and revealing intimate details about themselves, even in the non-sexual contexts. Consequently, they avoided any kind of disclosure concerning their marital status, real family, or personal identity. By contrast, they were only willing to share trivial information about their appearance, characteristics, tendencies, and sexual demands with their online partner.

There is a rich literature on gender and self-disclosure differences. While most men are concerned with being rejected and their online partner's fake information, women were afraid of punishment, family disapproval, and disgrace (Brunell, 2007; Hatfield & Rapson, 2015). Accordingly, Wheeler (2007) points to the role of cyberspace in highlighting the resistance of Egyptian women, which transformed their lives. Ebrahimi (2008) points to online communications as a rising form of dating and building a relationship with the members of the opposite sex through bypassing the Islamic regulations in Iran. In the present study, the participants with early marriage, non-indigenous participants, and participants with no children showed a significantly greater tendency to have secret online entertainment. For the participants who spent their time at home for long periods, cybersex served as a safe opportunity for entertainment and sexual intimacy outside of a committed relationship.

CONCLUSION

In this study, romantic chat for Muslim married women was described as resistance under the shelter of virtual space during the COVID-19 pandemic. Conceptual model No1 shows digital romantic chats process by Muslim married women during COVID-19 pandemic (Fig. 1).

In the final analysis, it is found that women's hatred, during the COVID-19 pandemic, toward routine married life as well as their objection to the injustice of Islamic marriage laws, has pushed them into the dating sites. The participants in
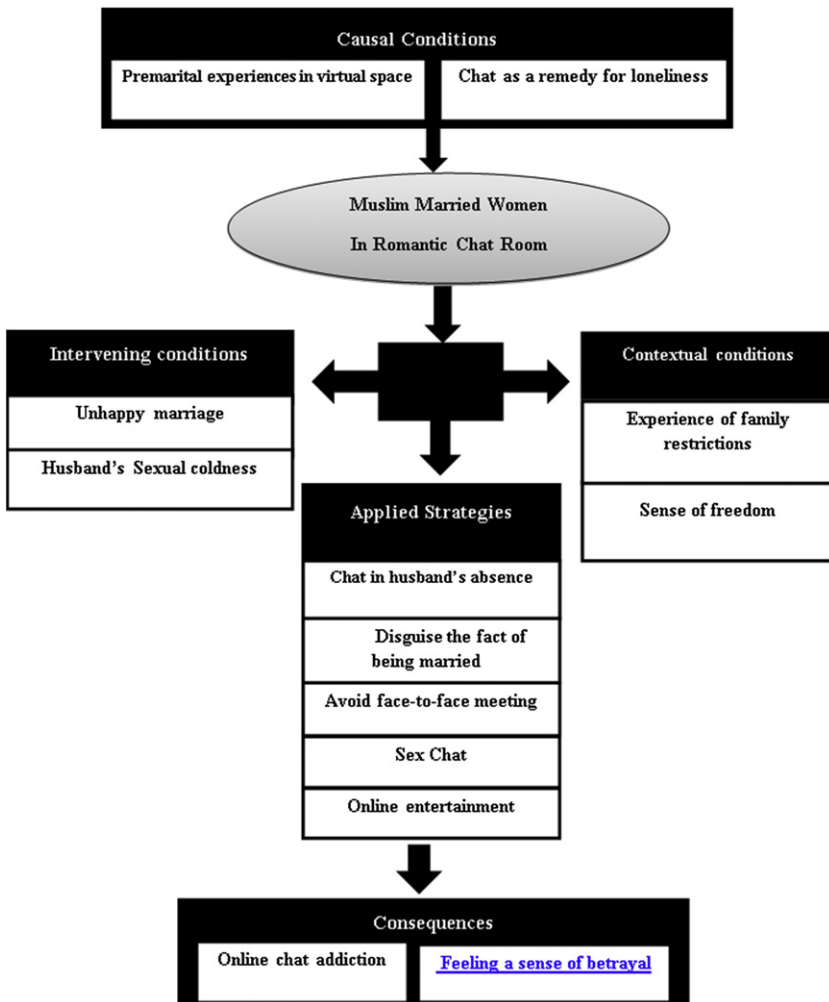
Fig. 1.   Conceptual Model 1. Digital Romantic Chats by Muslim Married Women during COVID-19 Pandemic.

cyberspaces had some sort of inter-subjective resistance. They are able to subvert most religious and traditional male hegemony and to present their true and desirable selves to others without having to face strict Islamic and familial punishments. In online spaces, especially in Muslim countries such as Iran, sexual and romantic expression by women tends to be controlled either by society or the state. Thus, based on Foucault's power/knowledge theory, Muslim married women decide about their style of entertainment to shape and change the dominant cultural and religious hierarchy through the Internet (Foucault, 2020). The Internet is a source of power and holds the possibility of social practices through resistance. The findings also support the concept of reflexivity by Giddens (Giddens, 2013). According to this concept, moving to a post-traditional culture leads individuals to understand their identities as an active and reflected subject. The participants establish their biographical narratives as they go through life. They treat their identities as a project; something that they actively construct and are ultimately responsible.

LIMITATIONS

The present study has not included the views of Muslim married men as the most influential factor in Islamic societies. Considering the diversity of sexual minorities and various religious tendencies, the results of this study cannot be generalized to other religious and sexual groups such as Sunnis and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA).

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

FUNDING

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID

Naima Mohammadi: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1062-8400.

REFERENCES

Abbas, N. F., & Al-Bahrani, R. H. (2016). The search for identity in online chat. *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies (IJHCS) ISSN 2356–5926*, *2*(2), 8–15.

Abu-Lughod, L. (1998). *Remaking women: Feminism and modernity in the Middle East*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Akuta, E., Ong'oa, I., & Jones, C. (2011). Combating cybercrime in Sub-Sahara Africa: A discourse on law, policy, and practice. *Journal of Peace, Gender and Development Studies*, *1*(4), 129–137.

Alim, M. A., & Islam, Z. (2019). Cyber harassment through visualization against women in Bangladesh: An anthropological study. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. Available at SSRN 3427956.

Amir-Ebrahimi, M. (2008). Transgression in narration: The lives of Iranian women in cyberspace. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, *4*(3), 89–118.

Bargh, J. A., & McKenna, K. Y. (2004). The internet and social life. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *55*, 573–590.

Benotsch, E. G., Snipes, D. J., & Martin, A. M. (2013). Sexting, substance use, and sexual risk behavior in young adults. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *52*(3), 307–313.

Ben-Ze'ev, A. (2003). Privacy, emotional closeness, and openness in cyberspace. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *19*(4), 451–467.

Bird, M. H. (2006). Sexual addiction and marriage and family therapy: Facilitating individual and relationship healing through couple therapy. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *32*(3), 297–311.

Boonmongkon, P., Ojanen, T. T., & Samakkeekarom, R. (2013). She met her (boy) friend online: Negotiating gender identity and sexuality among young Thai women in online space. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, *15*(10), 1162–1174.

Bosch, T. (2011). Young women and 'technologies of the self': Social networking and sexualities. *Agenda Journal*, *25*(4), 75–86. doi:10.1080/10130950.2011.630579

Brunell, A. B. (2007). *Self-determination and sexual experience in dating relationships*. Doctoral Dissertation, Department of Philosophy, University of Georgi, Athens.

Buchanan, T., & Whitty, M. T. (2014). The online dating romance scam: Causes and consequences of victimhood. *Psychology, Crime and Law*, *20*(3), 261–283.

Cali, B. E., Coleman, J. M., & Campbell, C. (2013). Stranger danger? Women's self-protection intent and the continuing stigma of online dating. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, *16*(12), 853–857.

Chakraborty, K. (2012). Virtual mate-seeking in the urban slums of Kolkata, India. *South Asian Popular Culture*, *10*(2), 197–216.

Chesler, P. (2010). Worldwide trends in honor killings. *Middle East Quarterly*, *17*(2), 3–11.

Cohen, J. S., Kromann, P. K., & Reeve, T. S. (2008). Systems and methods for conducting internet content usage experiments. Google Patents.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). Strategies for qualitative data analysis. Organizational Research Methods, *3*, 614–617.

Crimmins, D. M., & Seigfried-Spellar, K. C. (2014). Peer attachment, sexual experiences, and risky online behaviors as predictors of sexting behaviors among undergraduate students. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *32*, 268–275.

Daneback, K., Ross, M. W., & Månsson, S.-A. (2006). Characteristics and behaviors of sexual compulsives who use the internet for sexual purposes. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, *13*(1), 53–67.

de Pedraza, P., Guzi, M., & Tijdens, K. G. (2020). *Life dissatisfaction and anxiety in COVID-19 pandemic*. GLO Discussion Paper. Essen Global Labor Organization.

Dew, B., Brubaker, M., & Hays, D. (2006). From the altar to the internet: Married men and their online sexual behavior. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, *13*(2–3), 195–207.

Drouin, M., Miller, D., & Dibble, J. (2015). Facebook or memory: Which is the real threat to your relationship? *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, *18*(10), 561–566.

Ebrahimi, M. A. (2008). Transgression in narration: The lives of Iranian women in cyberspace. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, *4*(3), 89–118. doi:10.2979/MEW.2008.4.3.89

Edwards, R., & Holland, J. (2013). *What is qualitative interviewing?* A & C Black. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Elmasry, M. H., Auter, P. J., & Peuchaud, S. R. (2014). Facebook across cultures: A cross-cultural content analysis of Egyptian, Qatari, and American student Facebook pages. *Journal of Middle East Media*, *358*(3038), 1–28.

El-Nawawy, M., & Khamis, S. (2012a). Cyberactivists paving the way for the Arab spring: Voices from Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. *Cyber Orient–Online Journal of the Virtual Middle East*, 6(2), 4–27.

El-Nawawy, M., & Khamis, S. (2012b). Divergent identities in the virtual Islamic public sphere: A case study of the English discussion forum 'Islamonline'. *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*, 5(1), 31–48.

El-Nawawy, M., & Khamis, S. (2012c). Political activism 2.0: Comparing the role of social media in Egypt's "Facebook revolution" and Iran's "Twitter uprising". *CyberOrient, Online Journal of the Virtual Middle East*, 6(1), 8–33.

Emmel, N. (2013). Sampling and choosing cases in qualitative research: A realist approach. In *Purposeful sampling* (pp. 33–45). New York, NY: Sage Publishing.

Epifani, I., Wisyaningrum, S., & Ediati, A. (2021). Marital distress and satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic: A systematic review. In International Conference on Psychological Studies (ICPSYCHE 2020), Atlantis Press, Amsterdam.

Foucault, M. (2020). In S. Seidman & J. C. Alexander (Eds.), *The new social theory reader: Power/ knowledge*. London: Routledge.

Giddens, A. (2013). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age* (Kindle Edition). Cambridge: Polity.

Glaser, B. G., & Holton, J. (2004). *Remodeling grounded theory*. Mill Valley, CA: Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung; Forum: Qualitative Social Research.

Grant, A. M. (2019). Bringing the daily mail to Africa: Entertainment websites and the creation of a digital youth public in post-genocide Rwanda. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 13(1), 106–123.

Habermas, J., & McCarthy, T. (1985). *The theory of communicative action: Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press publication.

Hand, M. M., Thomas, D., Buboltz, W. C., Deemer, E. D., & Buyanjargal, M. (2013). Facebook and romantic relationships: Intimacy and couple satisfaction associated with online social network use. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 16(1), 8–13.

Hatfield, E., & Rapson, R. L. (2015). From pen pals to chat rooms: The impact of social media on Middle Eastern society. *SpringerPlus*, 4(1), 254.

Helsper, E. J., & Whitty, M. T. (2010). Netiquette within married couples: Agreement about acceptable online behavior and surveillance between partners. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 26(5), 916–926.

Hetzel-Riggin, M. D., & Pritchard, J. R. (2011). Predicting problematic internet use in men and women: The contributions of psychological distress, coping style, and body esteem. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 14(9), 519–525.

Hjorth, L., & Lim, S. S. (2012). Mobile intimacy in an age of affective mobile media. *Feminist Media Studies*, 12(4), 477–484. doi:10.1080/14680777.2012.741860

Jaiswal, N., & Bahedia, A. (2016). A gender study on the leisure time activities (LTA) pursued by the youth. *Studies on Home and Community Science*, 10(1–3), 26–33.

Jewitt, C., Price, S., Mackley, K. L., Yiannoutsou, N., & Atkinson, D. (2020). Touch presence, absence, and connection. In *Interdisciplinary insights for digital touch communication* (pp. 73–88). Cham: Springer.

Kenney, J. T., & Moosa, E. (2013). *Islam in the modern world*. London: Routledge.

Kokabisaghi, F. (2018). The role of the male guardian in women's access to health services in Iran. *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, 32(2), 230–249.

Kratcoski, P. C., Kratcoski, L. D., & Kratcoski, P. C. (2020). Perspectives on interpersonal relationships in the family. In *Juvenile delinquency* (pp. 99–118). Boston, MA: Springer.

Larsson, G. (2016). 'Do not engage in unnecessary chatting': Fatwas on internet Etiquette for Muslims. In *Muslims and the new media* (pp. 155–176). London: Routledge.

Lawrence, B. B. (2005). *Islam in the digital age: E-Jihad, online Fatwas and cyber Islamic Environments*. In G. R. Bunt (Ed.). London: Pluto Press, 2003. 237 pages, index, glossary, bibliography. US $24.95 (Paper) ISBN 0-7453-2098-8. *Review of Middle East Studies*, 39(1), 113–115.

Manning, J. C. (2006). The impact of internet pornography on marriage and the family: A review of the research. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, 13(2–3), 131–165.

Martens, B. (2016). An economic policy perspective on online platforms. In *An economic policy perspective on online platforms*. Working Paper 5. Institute for Prospective Technological Studies Digital Economy.

McKenna, K. Y., & Bargh, J. A. (2000). Plan 9 from cyberspace: The implications of the internet for personality and social psychology. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *4*(1), 57–75.

Mills, L. (2000). Woman abuse and child protection: A tumultuous marriage (part I). *Children and Youth Services Review*, *22*(3–4), 199–205.

Mir-Hosseini, Z., & Hamzić, V. (2010). *Control and sexuality. The revival of Zina laws in muslim contexts*. London: WLUML.

Morgan, P. M. (2010). Applicability of traditional deterrence concepts and theory to the cyber realm. In Proceedings of a workshop on deterring cyberattacks: Informing strategies and developing options for US policy.

Newman, N., Fletcher, R., & Kalogeropoulos, A. (2019). *Reuters institute digital news report 2019*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Osur, J., Ireri, E. M., & Esho, T. (2021). The effect of COVID-19 and its control measures on sexual satisfaction among married couples in Kenya. *Sexual Medicine*, *9*(3), 100354.

Papp, L. M., Danielewicz, J., & Cayemberg, C. (2012). "Are we Facebook official?" Implications of dating partners' Facebook use and profiles for intimate relationship satisfaction. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, *15*(2), 85–90.

Parker, T. S., & Wampler, K. S. (2003). How bad is it? Perceptions of the relationship impact of different types of internet sexual activities. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, *25*(4), 415–429.

Piela, A. (2010). Muslim women's online discussions of gender relations in Islam. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, *30*(3), 425–435.

Pitt, L., Ewing, M., Teo, F., & Phau, I. (2015). The use of the internet as a subjective leisure experience a study of Australian university students. In *New meanings for marketing in a new millennium* (p. 257). Cham: Springer.

Pourmehdi, M. (2015). Globalisation, the internet, and guilty pleasures in Morocco. *Sociology and Anthropology*, *3*, 455–463.

Rollero, C., Daniele, A., & Tartaglia, S. (2019). Do men post and women view? The role of gender, personality and emotions in online social activity. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, *13*(1), 1–15.

Sakr, N. (2004). *Women and media in the Middle East: Power through self-expression*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Schlosser, A. E. (2020). Self-disclosure versus self-presentation on social media. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *31*, 1–6.

Schneider, C. S., & Kenny, D. A. (2000). Cross-sex friends who were once romantic partners: Are they platonic friends now? *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *17*(3), 451–466.

Schneider, J. P., Weiss, R., & Samenow, C. (2012). Is it really cheating? Understanding the emotional reactions and clinical treatment of spouses and partners affected by cybersex infidelity. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, *19*(1–2), 123–139.

Shalhoub-Kevorkian, N. (2003). Reexamining femicide: Breaking the silence and crossing "scientific" borders. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *28*(2), 581–608.

Sharaievska, I., & Stodolska, M. (2017). Family satisfaction and social networking leisure. *Leisure Studies*, *36*(2), 231–243.

Shaw, M. C., Forbush, K. T., Schlinder, J., Rosenman, E., & Black, D. W. (2007). The effect of pathological gambling on families, marriages, and children. *CNS Spectrums*, *12*(8), 615–622.

Sotoudeh, R., Friedland, R., & Afary, J. (2017). Digital romance: The sources of online love in the Muslim world. *Media, Culture & Society*, *39*(3), 429–439.

Thomann, M., Grosso, A., Wilson, P. A., & Chiasson, M. A. (2020). 'The only safe way to find a partner': Rethinking sex and risk online in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. *Critical Public Health*, *30*(1), 53–67.

Tijdink, S., de Graaf, H., Hehenkamp, L., & Laa, E. (2020). Sexual complaints and ethnicity: Ethnic differences in a help-seeking sample. *Journal of Sexual Medicine*, *17*(9), 1676–1686.

Van Manen, M. (2016). *Writing in the dark: Phenomenological studies in interpretive inquiry*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Wackenhut, A. F. J. S. P. (2020). Revisiting the Egyptian Uprising of 2011: Exploring the role of relational networks within the Cairo-based political opposition. *Social Problems*, *67*(2), 342–357.

Wagner, K. M., Gainous, J., & Abbott, J. P. (2019). Gender differences in critical digital political engagement in China: The consequences for protest attitudes. *Social Science Computer Review*, *39*(2), 211–255.

Wheeler, D. L. (2007). Empowerment zones? Women, internet cafes, and life transformations in Egypt. *Information Technologies and International Development*, *4*(2), 89–104.

Zhang, G., Yang, X., Tu, X., Ding, N., & Lau, J. T. F. (2020). Prospective relationships between mobile phone dependence and mental health status among Chinese undergraduate students with college adjustment as a mediator. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *260*, 498–505.

Zitzman, S. T., & Butler, M. H. (2009). Wives' experience of husbands' pornography use and concomitant deception as an attachment threat in the adult pair-bond relationship. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, *16*(3), 210–240.

Žumárová, M. (2015). Computers and children's leisure time. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *176*, 779–786.