

BREAKING THE TABOO: THE CASE OF MARRIAGE EDUCATION COMMUNITIES IN SAUDI ARABIA

Yeslam Al-Saggaf

School of Computing and Mathematics

Charles Sturt University

Locked Bag 675

Wagga Wagga NSW Australia 2678

ABSTRACT

This study aims to provide a rich description about marriage education communities in Saudi Arabia. The study used silent observation to observe two marriage education communities over a period of more than two years. To report the perceptions of users in relation to their experience in these communities the study also used a descriptive survey which was conducted online using a questionnaire that included mostly open-ended questions. The study concludes that despite the fact that talking about sex is considered shameful according to the Saudi society's culture and tradition, the anonymity and the reduction in the individual awareness of public self, which can make people feel un-inhibited, enabled Saudis to discuss sex online freely and openly.

KEYWORDS

Marriage, online communities, Saudi Arabia, observation and online survey.

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of online communities in Saudi Arabia has enabled males and females to communicate with each other in ways not previously possible. Not only have Saudi males and females found a way around long established customs that prevent them from having casual conversations with the opposite (unrelated) gender, but these online communities also allowed them to discuss sex¹ with each other which is a taboo topic according to the culture of their society.

There are 6.2 million internet users in the country (Internet World Stats, 2008) out of 28,161,417 which is the total population (CIA World Factbook, 2008). A large number of the internet users in the country participate in online communities, which became popular immediately after Saudis gained access to the internet in the beginning of 1999 (Internet Services Unit, 2008). One of their reasons for joining online communities is probably because the facilitation and extension of contacts is one of the most important things to them (Hofheinz, 2005).

This study aims to provide a rich description about marriage education communities in Saudi Arabia. The study used silent observation to observe two marriage education communities over a period of more than two years. To report the perceptions of users in relation to their experience in these communities the study also used a descriptive survey which was conducted online using a questionnaire that included mostly open-ended questions.

2. A QUICK REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

While the literature is rich with studies about online communities (see, for example, Preece, 2005; Preece, 2000; Kollock and Smith, 1999; Wellman and Gulia, 1999), there is no agreed upon definition of online community (Preece, 2000). That said, for the purpose of this paper an online community is defined as consisting of:

(1) People who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles such as leading or moderating. (2) A shared purpose such as interest, need, information exchange or service that provides a reason ... [for the shared social interaction]². (3) Policies in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules and laws that guide people interaction. (4) Computer systems to support and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness” (Preece, 2000, p.10).

This definition is appropriate for understanding the online communities that are the focus of this study because these communities also consist of members who interact with each other on a regular basis to discuss all sorts of issues related to married life. Members in these communities are also governed by rules which state clearly the behavior that is permissible and that which is not.

The literature indicates that people behave online in ways that differ from their behaviour offline. According to some Internet communication researchers, the degree of anonymity can cause people who communicate via computer screens to experience some reduction in the effects of normal constraints on their behaviour (Joinson, 1998, p.49). This reduction may hinder reflection about the consequences of actions, which in turn may lead to uninhibited, or even anti-social, behaviour.

Moreover, an individual’s awareness of the public aspects of self, which is induced by situations in which an individual is aware of the possibility of being evaluated, is reduced as a result of interactions online, which can also lead to uninhibited behaviour (Joinson, 1998, p.51). Wallace (1999, p.239) adds that people can act in uninhibited ways when they think no one can find out who they really are. This lack of self-awareness is related to the thinking that, because individuals may not encounter others in their offline life, they need not worry about being evaluated and thus tend to easily disclose things about themselves (Preece, 2000).

3. METHOD

3.1 Context and Design

A recent Google search revealed that there are hundreds of Arabic web forums that specialize in educating people about marriage. Due to time constraints only two of these forums were selected for observation and analysis³. One of the reasons for selecting these married life forums was because they were the most popular and widely read forums on the Arabic internet.

There are 256,852 registered members in the first married life forum who, so far, contributed 16694 articles and 3,373,212 replies to these articles. At one time (23 July 2008) there were 11,750 people present on the forum, from both members and guests, a statistic which suggests that this forum is no doubt very popular. In the second married life forum there are 251384 registered members who, so far, contributed 189522 articles and 3,669,345 replies to these articles. At one time (20 May 2008) there were 10,787 people present on the forum, from both members and guests, again a statistic which suggests that this forum is also very popular.

The study used two techniques to collect data. The first was silent observation of two marriage education communities; the second was a descriptive survey. Silent observation, which began on 19 March 2006, was conducted over a period of more than two years. The descriptive survey was conducted online using a questionnaire that included mostly open-ended questions. Findings obtained through these techniques were triangulated to assist in establishing the trustworthiness of the research results (Bow, 2002; Maxwell, 1996; Lincoln and Guba, 1987). This triangulation of data will also give the reader the opportunity to critique the truthfulness of the results.

3.2 Silent Observation

With regards to how data were collected, first article titles were copied and pasted into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. This was done for every article in every page. To record observations, additional fields were added to the spreadsheet, including the page on which the article was found and a field to record observations about readers' comments on the article. The process of observation began by clicking the article on the original page where it was located and closely reading its contents and the contents of the responses to it. Observational field notes were taken for each individual article and the responses to it.

Data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach similar to that detailed by Strauss & Corbin (1998). The field notes were organized into broader themes based on the general concepts and ideas they addressed, so that a broader sense of the results could be gained. For the purpose of producing a summary of the data, statements that encompassed the developed themes were written. These statements were combined to formulate the results presented in the following sections of this paper.

3.3 The Descriptive Survey

To report the perceptions of members in relation to their experience in these communities a descriptive survey was also used. The reason a descriptive survey was used instead of using online interviews is because all the members who replied to this author's invitation for interviews strongly refused to be interviewed, which is understandable given the sensitivity of the issues discussed and the concern about losing the anonymity they enjoy. Upon reflection, conducting the survey online was probably the most appropriate thing, due to issues such as convenience, cost, time and accessibility (Wright, 2005).

The survey questionnaire was administered online, which means participants filled the questionnaire and returned it over the internet. To invite participants to take part in the survey, the researcher, posted a short article in the observed communities. The article contained, in addition to some information about the purpose of the study, the web link to the survey.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts: the demographic section which sought information on each participant's age, sex, education and so on and the survey questions, which were of the open-ended type to allow a complete expression of a view. The questionnaire consisted of 15 items altogether. Only 22 responses were received and 18 were found to be usable for analysis. The reason for this low response is because either members lacked the incentive to participate or were very concerned about losing their anonymity.

Before the survey responses were analyzed, they were first coded to ease and facilitate analysis. Each response to a question (of the open-ended questions) was assigned a category from a list of categories developed after the responses were thoroughly read and informally coded as suggested by Neuendorf (2002).

4. RESULTS

4.1 Issues Discussed and Reasons for Joining

There were all sorts of questions raised in the observed marriage education forums. For example, one member asked others if they were aware of a sex position that is suitable for his seven months pregnant wife; another asked others if they would do it if their wives asked them to make love to them in the desert, where no one is watching; a third person asked if the size of the penis affects the quality of the intercourse. Females also asked these sorts of questions. One female, for example, asked others if masturbation would make her lose her virginity, another asked men about the sensitive areas in their bodies (so she could please her husband better), a third asked other women about the kinds of underwear she should wear if she was to attract her husband's attention.

In addition to asking questions and receiving answers, members also wrote articles to offer advice. One member, for example, gave advice on how to treat the wife in bed. His article emphasised the importance of kissing, hugging, and touching; and being romantic, affectionate and compassionate to the wife particularly before and after the sex. Females also wrote articles that offered advice. While some of their articles provided ideas for a happy married life, others provided detailed recipes for a great romantic night. An example of this is an article written by a female in which she described in detail what she did to surprise her husband after he returned from an overseas trip.

The question about the reason for participating in marriage education forums was raised a few times in the observed forums. In one of the forums, one member in one of his articles asked why sex occupies a lot of space in our forum, and the answer came quick: "because the net is the only place we can talk about it. We can't talk about it elsewhere" said a female member. Another female replied: "because a woman can't face her husband and talk to him about these things. It is also difficult for her to discuss these matters with her mother or sisters." A third female answered: "because most of the time people come to this forum because

they have a problem and want a solution to it. The girl on the net is anonymous; she is not known to anyone; that is why she is not shy”.

Respondents to the study survey reported a number of reasons for participating in marriage education forums; but the main reason, according to them, is because they are interested in learning from the experience of others so that they live a happy married life. Their comments included: “to learn about marriage”; “I love learning and living a happy married life”; “some members have a lot of knowledge about married life and so I wanted to benefit from it before I get married”.

4.2 The Good and the Bad

The biggest advantage, according to a number of the survey respondents, is the solutions they find to many of their problems and the knowledge they gain in how to treat their spouses. One female member said: “it makes me put up with a lot of my husband’s actions”; another said: “if it had not been for Allah and the advice of the great minds in the forum, my marriage would have collapsed”; a third added: “to learn what the wife wants, particularly in bed”.

There is no doubt that members benefit greatly from their participation in marriage education communities. Male members who are about to get married ask questions about what to do in the wedding night and what to do if they could not get an erection. Some male members search for solutions to their quick ejaculation or staying power problems. Women who are about to get married ask questions about the pain they heard women experience when they lose virginity in the wedding night. All these members were observed receiving detailed explanations that, according to them, made them more aware and less nervous.

The biggest disadvantage of participation in marriage education forums, according to several survey respondents, is offering advice that can have serious implications for the relationship between husbands and their wives. One respondent, for example, said:

Sometimes those who reply to a person’s problem don’t have any experience or do not understand the problem which can lead to a bigger problem like when one sister advised another, who was complaining about her husband, to leave him because his action was unacceptable according to her.

This raises the question: to what extent does participation in these forums affects marriage relationships? For example, does it encourage members who are unhappy in their marriages to get a divorce or fall in love in the forum with members from the opposite sex? These questions need further research that delves into the effects of such forums on the society.

Respondents also expressed several other concerns with respect to the effects of participation on their lives. One respondent said: “my addiction to this forum was about to destroy my marriage”; a second, a female, said: “I was sexually harassed (verbally) on the private [internal messaging service] by some men who knew I was single”. Others said they felt very bad when they saw some members go into great depth when describing their sex lives because they took offence at the obscene and indecent descriptions of sex.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Members use euphemism to describe the things related to sex that they say or do. Instead of, for example, using the colloquial terms to talk about the private parts, they would use words that are written in an anatomy book. Doing so does not only avoid those who talk about sex embarrassment but also allow them to detach themselves from the emotional connotation associated with what they say. Using formal words to describe the sex acts or the recipes for ‘great sex’ probably detach these things from the context they are often placed within. Nevertheless, many members found what has been said in these communities embarrassing and offensive.

Talking about sex is considered shameful according to the society’s culture and tradition. Not only parents shy away from discussing sex with their children but also at school children are not taught anything related to sex. Additionally information about sex is difficult to get through other means like TV, magazines or even the internet because of the strict censorship the Saudi government exercises. On these marriage education communities, Saudis were able to discuss sex online freely and openly.

There is no doubt that the anonymity and the reduction in the individual awareness of public self, which can make people feel un-inhibited, allow people to discuss sensitive issues they would not feel comfortable discussing with people they know and also saves them from the embarrassment they may experience if they used other means to learn about sex. The anonymity associated with the internet makes even women, who are encouraged by their religion and culture to be shy and modest, to be less shy and less reserved.

Most of the content in these marriage education communities is placed within the context of educating oneself about sex. This is evidenced by the fact that whenever a member describes, for example, a sex position, the responses from other members come in the form of a religious prayer (as a way to thank that member). That is, members would often pray for that member for educating others about this important topic.

Findings from observation indicate that members in marriage education communities shared their most intimate details with each other. Among the things they discussed were how often they had sex with their partners, what they did if they noticed that their partners are lacking the desire to become intimate with them in a particular day, what they did if they discovered that their partners keep photos of others (opposite sex) in their mobile phones. Most of the time they just discussed their response to a particular situation like discovering that their partners are in love with someone else or 'what works and what does not' in bed.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that despite the fact that talking about sex is considered shameful according to the Saudi society's culture and tradition, the anonymity and the reduction in the individual awareness of public self, which can make people feel un-inhibited, enabled Saudis to discuss sex online freely and openly.

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¹ Sex before marriage is forbidden according to Islamic religion.

² Words in brackets are not attributable to the author who is quoted

³ The names of these forums will not be mentioned to protect members' anonymity.