Males’ trust and mistrust of females in Muslim matrimonial sites

Yeslam Al-Saggaf
Charles Stuart University, Wagga Wagga, Australia

Abstract
Purpose – The aim of this study is to examine interpersonal trust in Muslim matrimonial sites (MMS) from a male perspective. Specifically how users perceive interpersonal trust in MMS; what are the signs of lack of trust in MMS (if any); and what strategies do users adopt to handle the lack of trust in MMS.

Design/methodology/approach – This empirical qualitative study used ethnographic techniques to collect data. In addition to briefly observing five MMS, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with ten participants, who were all males, between the ages of 25-35, and residing in different locations, including the USA, the UK, the UAE, Australia and Bahrain. While the interviews focused on participants’ experience in MMS, the analysis of these interviews focused on the issue of trust in these sites.

Findings – The analysis has revealed that participants associated trust with “risk taking”, “reliance” on one’s abilities, “self-confidence” and honesty with the first three being the major themes that transpired from the analysis of data. The analysis has also revealed three signs of lack of trust in MMS. Users expressed concern over a large number of members’ profiles being fake; they appeared suspicious about these sites and approached them with caution and felt intimidated by the unrealistic expectations members placed on them. However, it was found users adopted several strategies to handle the lack of trust in MMS including using their communication skills to study others carefully, doing “police work” to uncover any inconsistencies in their statements, “interrogating” them using a pre-developed list of questions and involving their family members in their negotiations.

Originality/value – Despite MMS immense popularity within the Islamic world, with the exception of a few articles, there are not many articles available in the academic literature on them. This article seeks to address this imbalance.

Keywords Trust, Communication technologies, Computer ethics, Dating sites, Matchmaking sites, Matrimonial sites

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction
A recent Google search revealed that there are hundreds of thousands of matrimonial sites that specialize in assisting singles with finding partners. Ever since they appeared more than two decades ago, their popularity has continued to grow with many matrimonial sites having millions of members each (Ahmed, 2013, p. 12). Matrimonial sites’ popularity is principally owed to the “shopping effect” they are able to create in the minds of users, which is the perception that there is a huge amount of potential...
partners out there (Jha and Adelman, 2009, p. 6). By being able to change the requirements that one is looking for, deceives members into thinking that there is an endless number of spouses available to choose from. Clearly this is not true since a site that has a 1,000 members will continue to have a 1,000 members, regardless of the different members being displayed when search requirements are changed. Matrimonial sites have attracted considerable academic attention (Shako’s (2004) study on South Asian matrimonial sites and Jha and Adelman’s (2009) and Pal’s (2011) studies on Indian matrimonial sites.

Despite their immense popularity within the Islamic world, with the exception of a few articles, such as Bunt (2004), Lo and Aziz (2009) and Ahmed (2013), there are not many articles available in the academic literature on Muslim matrimonial sites (hereafter MMS). This article seeks to address this imbalance, by focussing on MMS. Specifically, the article will examine interpersonal trust in these online environments, another area in which research is scarce.

Indeed, much of the research on online trust has been devoted to studying the relationship between users and web sites or other online services, that is, users’ trust in the technology (Bailey et al., 2003; Beldad et al., 2010; Bouwhuis, 2006; Kracher et al., 2005; Friedman et al., 2000; Mukherjee and Nath, 2007; Wang and Emurian, 2005). Few studies, by comparison, have concentrated purely on the issue of trust between users, or interpersonal trust online. Lankton and McKnight (2011, pp. 32-54), for example, who investigated whether interpersonal trust beliefs are, in fact, separate and distinct from users trust in the technology (e.g. social networking sites (SNS)) did not focus exclusively on the issue of trust between people online.

Moreover, to the researchers’ knowledge, no empirical analysis of interpersonal trust in MMS or matrimonial sites in general has been undertaken to date. Given the similarity between matrimonial sites and other online environments, such as dating and matchmaking sites, examining interpersonal trust in MMS can make a significant contribution to a growing body of empirical research on trust in online environments.

The aim of this study is to examine interpersonal trust in MMS from a male perspective. Specifically:

RQ1. How male users perceive interpersonal trust in MMS?

RQ2. What are the signs of lack of trust in MMS (if any)?

RQ3. What strategies do they adopt to handle the lack of trust in MMS?

To achieve this aim, an empirical qualitative study that used ethnographic techniques to collect data was carried out. In addition to observing five random MMS, ten semi-structured interviews with male members from two different MMS were conducted. The article is organised as follows. First, MMS are briefly discussed. Second, relevant work on the notion of trust, trust online and interpersonal trust is reviewed. Third, the methodological aspects of the empirical study are explained in detail, while the results are dealt with next. Finally, the contribution of this paper to the knowledge about interpersonal trust in online environments is discussed in the conclusion.

2. MMS

Marriage in the Islamic culture is an inevitable part of life and equates to half of one’s faith (Ahmed, 2013, p. 7). Before the arrival of the internet and before the mass exodus...
of skilled labour from Muslim communities, such as those in India and Pakistan, to the USA and Europe, marriage in Islamic societies has traditionally been arranged through parents or families (Ahmed, 2013, p. 32). However, times are changing and young Muslim men and women, particularly migrants within western societies, are increasingly finding themselves in charge of searching for a spouse themselves. One reason for this is because Muslims are a heterogeneous community, consisting of individuals who come from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Lo and Aziz, 2009, pp. 1-20). Thus, just because two (a man and woman) share the same faith, it does not make them suitable partners for one another. This issue makes finding a spouse from within one’s cultural and ethnic background, particularly for migrants, a complex and a problematic affair (Lo and Aziz, 2009, pp. 1-20). To overcome these religious, spatial and cultural barriers, some Muslim marriage seekers, particularly those living abroad, are turning to MMS.

MMS offer young Muslim adults an attractive option. Given pre-marital relationships are condemned in Islam (Ahmed, 2013, p. 7), which, for Muslims, is not just a religion; it is a way of life (Al-Saggaf and Begg, 2004, pp. 41-54), and young Muslim adults are prohibited from “dating” (Ahmed, 2013, p. 7), since “dating” is incompatible with Islamic principles, young Muslim adults cannot join sites that offer dating services. MMS offer young Muslim adults a relatively safe environment to meet other marriage seekers and converse with them with the intention to find a marriage partner, while observing their religious obligations. The situation is different in western societies as most online sites facilitate dating that does not necessarily lead to marriage. A search within a dating site does not mean one is searching for a suitable marriage partner; the intention could be to find a boyfriend or a girlfriend.

Indeed, while dating sites are similar in several ways to MMS, they differ mainly in the purpose of their use. For example, the former focus on “dating” or enabling two persons to meet and engage in mutually agreed upon social activities, the latter focus on bringing together two people who share a serious intention of getting married. An analysis of several user profiles in several MMS revealed that most people register with the intention of marrying, as this is often explicitly stated in their profiles. However, both dating sites and MMS offer users the opportunity to browse the photos and profiles of millions of potential partners from the comfort of one’s chair and facilitate this activity in a safe and anonymous manner.

MMS offer users many features in addition of course to the opportunity to browse the photos and profiles of potential marriage partners. While some MMS do not allow potential users to access profiles until they sign up, others allow potential users to access a limited number of profiles before requiring registration, others allow potential users to freely browse an unlimited number of profiles. Like SNS, upon registration and acquiring a membership ID, users are able to create a profile and upload their photos. Once a profile is created users can “quickly” search profiles based on gender, age, religion and country criteria. MMS also provide an “advanced search” option in which more requirements such as marital status, ethnicity, education, occupation and height can be specified. Criteria such as the level of devoutness, the use of a scarf to cover the head (hijab), the maintenance of a beard, and the commitment to pray can also be specified in the advance search area. Members are also able to contact other members, privately via the internal email system. Most MMS are not free, but some exempt females from payment[1]. However, marriage seekers must use the
service appropriately. They must adhere to modesty guidelines including the requirement on women to appear in their photos wearing hijab. They must also refrain from profanity and obscenities.

Despite the attractive nature of MMS, however, and even though today’s generation has grown up with technology and come across more individualistic than previous generations particularly when it comes to freedom of choice, users approach MMS with extreme caution. Fewer females register in these sites compared to males (even though some MMS offer them this service for free) and females who register put up fewer photos of themselves compared to the number of photos men upload. In addition, given the desirable matches that MMS create, when members search profiles, depend on the desirable qualities that the members claim to have, it is common for members to say things about themselves that are not necessarily true or accurate. These issues suggest there may be an interpersonal trust problem in MMS. On the other hand, while it is true that the online environments may not be safe and people are aware of how easy it is to lie and misrepresent information on the internet, this can also be said about most other activities that people do online these days, including banking, teaching, learning, shopping and making new friends, suggesting that the trust concern may not be warranted.

3. The notion of trust and trust online

3.1 The notion of trust

One of the respectable accounts on trust in the literature is Weckert’s (2005, pp. 95-117) philosophical account. Weckert argues that trust is central to human flourishing and is necessary for the successful functioning of communities and for maintaining relationships such as love and friendships. On an individual level, according to him, trust is linked to self-esteem and subsequently self-respect, because when people are trusted, they feel better about themselves and also feel autonomous. In terms of the nature of trust, Weckert elaborates on different meanings to, or explanations for, the concept including reliance, goodwill, risk taking, beliefs and expectations about others’ trustworthiness and trustful deeds, affects and emotions. However, the one meaning he argues strongly for is “trust as seeing as”, which is about seeing a behaviour as trustworthy, doing what one is saying, being reliable, acting with the interests of others in mind and has some goodwill towards others.

Linguistically speaking, trust appears in many places in our day-to-day speech. For example:

I trust that your stay has been a pleasant one.

I trust Ellen Goodman on women’s issues.

In God we trust.

John does not trust the local garage to fix the electronic timing on his car.

Mary trusted me with her jewelry while on vacation.

Harry trusted his old Honda.

I trust my son (Devries, 2011, p. 3).
According to DeVries this is the general trust type, which he explains: if he trusts his son or his car, he need not trust them in every way, on every matter. For example, he may trust his car to take him to his work, but he would not trust it to drive to another city.

Culturally speaking, the Islamic/Arabic cultures place high emphasis on trusting the word of an individual. In the Arabic culture, for example, it is said that a person’s word is like the blade of a sword; it commands respect. To ask for proof can be taken by some as offensive. That said, trusting the word in Islamic/Arabic cultures cannot be used in lieu of evidence. Indeed, the notion of evidence is strongly embedded in the Islamic religion. The “book” inside which the assigned angles record everything that a person says or does and which Allah will use on the day of judgment as evidence to hold people accountable for their actions is but one of many examples of the importance of evidence in the Islamic religion.

Religiously speaking also, the cultural characteristic of trusting the word of an individual is not inconsistent with the religious expectation on the Muslim to be truthful. In fact, “truth-telling” is a cornerstone in Islam as evidenced in the Saying of the Prophet (Hadith) narrated by Bukhari in which Prophet Mohamed (pbuh) said:

Maintain truthfulness, for truthfulness leads to righteousness, and righteousness leads to Heaven. A man continues to maintain truthfulness until he is recorded in Allah’s book as truthful. Refrain from lying, because lying leads to blatant evil, and evil leads to the fire. A man continues to lie until he is recorded in Allah’s book as a liar.

There are also several verses in the Quran in which Allah requested those who believe in him to be honest and truthful including:

O Allah will say; this is a day on which the truthful will profit from their truth: theirs are gardens, with rivers flowing beneath, – Their eternal home: Allah well-Pleased with them, and they with Allah: that is the mighty triumph (The fulfilment of all desires)[2].

The Quran’s verse above clearly emphasises the importance of telling the truth. It shows how Allah perceives those who tell the truth and portrays the great reward for those who were truthful on earth (Al-A’ali, 2008, p. 33).

3.2 Trust online

Trust in online environments is important, according to Weckert (2005, pp. 95-117), since an increasing proportion of our lives is being spent online. His reasons for this are because it can enable online businesses to reach their full potential; it can discourage opportunistic behaviour; and can encourage businesses to make investments necessary for information exchange; among other things. Trust is also vital for online personal relationships such as friendships (Wallace, 1999, p. 84; Preece, 2000, p. 192). Weckert (2005, p. 2) agrees arguing:

I trust that my friend will have, at least to some significant degree, my interests at heart. Without that, it is difficult to know what to make of friendship, a sentiment, it seems, that would be endorsed by Aristotle.

However, according to Weckert, there are four obstacles that the online environments pose for trust:

1. Given trust flourishes within localised communities with shared norms, online, there are many communities with many different values.

2. Online, where interaction takes place, the contexts are unfamiliar and unformulated, making assurance in the trustworthiness of others difficult to ascertain.
Disembodiment or the absence of our true identity online, affects our abilities to present ourselves online in the way we wish, given the control we have over information about us.

The security measures that are utilized online leave little space for trust.

Weckert also discusses two solutions to these problems. One solution is to treat trust online as a technical security issue by making, for example, a network secure. The other solution is to create an online environment that instills confidence in people by adopting, for example, integrity and reputations systems like those used by eBay.

Trust in online environments can take two forms: trust between people online or interpersonal trust, which is the focus of this study, and users’ trust of web sites with which they are interacting. With regards to users’ trust of web sites with which they are interacting, according to Wang and Emurian (2005, pp. 111-112), there are four features of online trust: trustor and trustee, vulnerability, produced actions and subjective matter. Wang and Emurian (2005, pp. 111-112) further elaborate:

- **Trustor and trustee.** In online trust the trustor is typically a consumer who is browsing an e-commerce web site, and the trustee is the e-commerce web site.

- **Vulnerability.** Because of the high complexity and anonymity associated with e-commerce, consumers are vulnerable to specific trust violations: loss of money and loss of privacy.

- **Produced actions.** Consumer trust in online merchants generates two specific forms of action from the consumer: (1) making a purchase online from the merchant and (2) “window-shopping” at the merchant’s web site. To engage in such activities, consumers must be confident that they have more to gain than to lose.

- **Subjective matter.** Like offline trust that is associated with individual differences and situational factors, online trust is inherently a subjective matter. The level of trust considered sufficient to make transactions online is different for each individual.

On the other hand, interpersonal trust, which is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as the “assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something” or “one in which confidence is placed” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2013), is established differently from how it is established offline. This is not surprising, given communication in the online world is different from communication in the offline world (Al-Saggaf and Begg, 2004, pp. 41-54). Although anonymity makes people generally trust each other less (Dyson, 1998, pp. 70, 295-96), trust online is not impossible (Weckert, 2005, pp. 95-117). Trust online is built when participants have good stereotypes about each other which they form over the months that they spend together (Wallace, 1999, pp. 216-217). In other words, trust online is built when members understand each other well, and show some level of tolerance and positive expectations. Online trust can also be established through the revelation of real names, and the regular face-to-face meetings (Al-Saggaf and Begg, 2004, pp. 41-54). Preece (2000, p. 189) adds that there are three conditions for trust online to be established:

1. There must be a high probability of future interaction.
2. During interactions, members must be able to identify other individuals.
3. There must be a record of past interactions.
3.3 Interpersonal trust online

3.3.1 Perceptions about interpersonal trust online. The usual verbal and other physical cues we rely on in deciding whether or not to trust someone in face-to-face relationships are absent when it comes to online interaction (Cheshire, 2011, pp. 49-58). Despite this, the factors thought to be involved in interpersonal trust online are strikingly similar to those understood to be involved in face-to-face interactions. In face-to-face interactions, trust is usually formed after overcoming the initial risk and uncertainty as to the other persons’ predictability and dependability; more specifically, trust in another person requires belief or faith in their reliability, competence, good will, etc. based on evidence from past interactions (Good, 2000, pp. 31-48; Rempel 1985, pp. 95-112).

These characteristics of face-to-face interpersonal trust are very similar to those identified by Friedman et al. (2000, pp. 37-39) as features that must be satisfied in order to fulfil the conditions for online trust, e.g. reliability and security of the technology; knowing what people online tend to do; misleading language and images; disagreement about what counts as harm; informed consent; anonymity; accountability; saliency of cues in the online environment; insurance; performance history and reputation. Lankton and McKnight (2011, pp. 32-54) have suggested that the chief conditions for fulfilling interpersonal trust online are, belief in the other users’ competence, integrity, and benevolence or good will, characteristics that again concur with those suggested as important for trust in face-to-face interpersonal interactions.

Interestingly, the study by Lankton and McKnight (2011, p. 47), which examines both the interpersonal and technological trust of users of the SNS, Facebook, has led to the suggestion of a possible third kind of online trust relationship: that between the user and the technology (in this instance Facebook) as both a technology and as a “quasi-person”. Participants appeared to exhibit interpersonal trust relations with Facebook both as a kind of “person” or agent, and as a technology, in terms of functionality and reliability of the web site.

3.3.2 Factors that strengthen or weaken interpersonal trust online. Nothing has been found in relation to signs of lack of interpersonal trust online. Much of the literature has focussed on the factors that strengthen or weaken interpersonal trust online. In this sense, while it is generally acknowledged that in order for online interpersonal interactions to flourish there needs to be trust between users online (Feng et al., 2004, pp. 97-106), findings from a study by Dwyer et al. (2007, p. 8) on users trust in Facebook and MySpace, revealed that trust may not be as important to developing online relationships (at least in SNS) as it is for face-to-face interactions. The authors attributed this to users’ confidence in being able to evaluate the online profile or persona presented by others in SNS, even those who presented exaggerated or less than truthful profiles.

In any event, lack of trust in face-to-face interaction is usually suggested by the inability to believe in the reliability, competence, and benevolence of the other person. Similarly in online interactions, such as those interpersonal interactions in SNS, lack of trust is signified by the absence of these central trust beliefs (Lankton and McKnight, 2011, pp. 32-54). Reputation is also an important factor in deciding whether or not one should trust another person, this is obviously based on past experience, either personally or word-of-mouth (Good, 2000, pp. 31-48). In online interpersonal interaction, however, gaining knowledge of another user’s “reputation” might be problematic, especially in potential interactions between unknown users.
Empathy, or one’s ability to perceive and sympathise with another person’s feelings, has also been suggested as an important factor in interpersonal trust online, and that how well or how accurately one is empathising significantly influences the success or failure of trust between users online (Feng et al., 2004, pp. 97-106). In their study of participants, who interacted via a customised online Instant Messaging software, Feng et al. (2004, pp. 97-106) report that users who talked to their “communication partners” in an empathic and supportive way were most trusted by other users, suggesting a lack of empathy or ability to empathise accurately contributes to lack of trust in online interpersonal interactions. The findings of this study highlight several signs of lack of interpersonal trust in MMS, making this study especially significant.

3.3.3 Strategies for dealing with lack of interpersonal trust online. Nothing also has been found in relation to strategies for dealing with lack of interpersonal trust online. However, though not precisely a strategy for resolving lack of interpersonal trust online, the ability of SNS users, for example, to disengage or “cut off” an online relationship that lacked necessary trust, by ignoring messages and blocking access to profiles and personal information, allows SNS users to minimise risk and uncertainty in their online interactions (Dwyer et al., 2007, p. 8). This is a similar strategy to suspending face-to-face interpersonal relationships.

The issue of online interpersonal trust is clearly related to the issue of online privacy, the latter often involving elements of trust both between user and technology, and user and other users. But could it be rightly inferred that strategies for dealing with lack of privacy online – i.e. control over access to one’s personal information and its presentation – might similarly be employed for dealing with lack of trust between users online? It seems that trust and privacy are distinct in this sense, that a violation of trust and a violation of privacy involve different things, because the former primarily involves faith in the behaviour of others, and the latter faith in the technology to facilitate one’s measures taken towards securing information (Friedman et al., 2000, pp. 37-39). The findings of this study highlight several strategies for dealing with lack of interpersonal trust in MMS, which is another reason why this study is particularly significant.

4. Conceptual framework
The review of the literature has shed light on a number of resources that can be used to inform our understanding of interpersonal trust in MMS. The various meanings for trust that Weckert (2005, pp. 95-117) provides, such as reliance, goodwill, risk taking, and “trust as seeing as”, will be used as the lens to interpret the perceptions about the interpersonal trust in MMS that the participants in this study construct in their minds. Similarly, given the importance that MMS members in general place on their religion, the religious associations with trust, particularly the notion of truthfulness, will be used to aid the interpretations of the constructions of interpersonal trust in MMS.

Weckert’s (2005, pp. 95-117) observation that trust is linked to self-esteem, because when people are trusted they feel better about themselves, should be checked later on to see if the participants in this study report improvement in their self-esteem as a result of being trusted by others. At the same time, Dwyer et al.’s (2007, p. 8) finding that trust may not be as important to developing online relationships as it is for face-to-face interactions should also be checked later on to see if users used something in lieu of the need to trust others online.
While nothing has been found in relation to signs of lack of trust online, the studies that looked at how interpersonal trust is established online may provide clues. The factors that have been discussed in these studies, in the context of how interpersonal trust is established online, such as anonymity (Dyson, 1998), stereotypes (Wallace, 1999, pp. 216-217) and face-to-face meetings (Al-Saggaf and Begg, 2004, pp. 41-54) can be explored to see if they underpin the signs of lack of trust in MMS. Also, Preece (2000, p. 189) three conditions, i.e. that there must be a high probability of future interaction, during which members must be able to identify other individuals and there must be a record of past interactions, will also be referred to when exploring the signs of absence of trust.

In addition, while nothing has been found in relation to strategies for dealing with lack of trust online, Dwyer et al. (2007, p. 8) study is a good start. The study suggests that the reason that users do not seem to be concerned about the lack of trust in SNS is because they are confident they are able to evaluate the online profiles, regardless of the truthfulness of these profiles. This finding will be useful in determining whether, or not, the participants use their confidence in their abilities as a strategy for dealing with lack of trust in MMS.

5. Method
The aim of this study is to examine interpersonal trust in MMS from a male perspective. Specifically:

RQ1. How male users perceive interpersonal trust in MMS?

RQ2. What are the signs of lack of trust in MMS (if any)?

RQ3. What strategies do they adopt to handle the lack of trust in MMS?

The study conducted telephone interviews via Skype with ten male participants. However, the interviews, did not focus on these three research questions; rather, they focused on participants, reporting their perceptions about their experiences in MMS in general. For example, the participants were asked during interviews about their reasons for joining MMS, the seriousness of the MMS members, the authenticity of MMS members’ profiles, their levels of optimism in regards to finding a spouse through MMS and the reputations of these sites. It is the analysis of the interview’s transcripts that focussed on answering the research questions. Seeking answers to the research questions in an indirect manner was done, so as to avoid any bias that may result from the participants, feeling obligated to give the answers they feel the researcher wants to hear.

Upon completing a Google search using the phrase “MMS” as the search term, the first five MMS returned were selected for the observation. These were: www.muslima.com, www.singlemuslim.com[3], www.nikah.com, www.salaamlove.com and www.qiran.com. In order to become familiar with the culture of MMS, these sites were browsed for several hours observing their general structures, services available, statistics, success stories, attitudes towards guests and registered members’ browsing of their profiles[4], methods of searching profiles, the criteria used in the search of profiles and their privacy statements.

The participants were recruited from two different MMS of those five selected above for observation. They were contacted and introduced to the project and its purpose via
the messaging system within their MMS. After the participants agreed to be interviewed, they were sent the informed consent forms via email. Following sending the signed informed consent forms to the researcher via email, they were interviewed. The participants were all males, between the ages of 25-35, and residing in different locations, including the USA, the UK, the UAE, Australia and Bahrain. While the sample size is not large, for qualitative studies where the interest is not to generalise to larger populations but rather understand in depth the perceptions of participants, regarding trust in MMS, this purposive sampling, which is commonly used in qualitative research (Williamson, 2000, pp. 225-234), is appropriate for this study.

The participants were then interviewed via Skype to report their experiences in MMS. Telephone interviews via Skype were not only used because of the difficulty of conducting interviews face-to-face and the high cost of land-line telephone interviews but also because of the convenience they offered to the interviewees (who only had to speak and not type, as text chat was not used) and because of the effectiveness of this technique in getting rich descriptions. The interviews were not recorded so as to spare the interviewees any possible discomfort that is associated with being recorded and to allow them to speak freely while the researcher typed their responses.

The interviewing followed a semi-structured format, because it was considered more appropriate than other forms of interviewing in revealing the perceptions of participants. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted approximately an hour each. The interviews relied mostly on open-ended questions to allow the interviewees to express themselves freely and in their own words.

Data analysis was completed with the help of QSR NVivo 8, a software package for managing qualitative data. First, free nodes (i.e. nodes not organized or grouped) were created based on keywords in the interview notes. The nodes represented themes that revolved around the main ideas in the interview notes or a specific concept that emerged from the data or a pattern or trend in the data. Similar text within the interview notes was then located and assigned to these nodes after thoroughly reading through the interview notes and ensuring the text assigned captured the theme that the node represented (the themes, which emerged from the text, were the same as the nodes in NVivo). Finally, these free nodes were further divided into tree nodes. It means that broader categories were developed to group the free nodes.

6. Findings
6.1 Perceptions of trust in MMS (trust associations)
Several themes transpired from the interviews with the participants, in regards to how they perceived interpersonal trust. However, one of the major themes, as constructed by six participants, is associating trust with “risk taking”. Their comments include “When it comes to technology, nothing is safe and that’s a risk we have to take[5]” (Participant 1, 31[6]); “You have to trust somehow, maybe 60 or 70 percent, if not 100 percent, and then you go from there” and “but somehow you have to trust someone if you want to move forward. You have to trust someone; that’s the bottom line I think” (Participant 3, 33); and “But don’t you think people could lie on the streets as well? If I was to walk down the street […] they could still lie to me” (Participant 4, 27). These comments reveal that despite the concerns over safety online and the possibility of being deceived in MMS, these participants are still willing to take the risk. Perhaps this is because, as Participant 4 noted, the online environment...
is not much different from the offline environment in terms of the risk associated with trust, a view echoed also by Participant 5 (29):

[...] you want to marry to this guy who's in your family, what will give you any kind of forecasting that this guy is gonna be turn out to be the way you think? No, it's a total risk. End of the day, he can change next day; he can change after a year; he can change after ten years when you, might be you have kids and everything going on fine and after ten years, no I'm going on other way. So it's all a risk so no matter how good or bad you are, you are always taking risk.

Weckert (2005, pp. 95-117) also spoke about trust in relation to risk taking. Weckert said that there will always be risk and uncertainty associated with trust and that the greater the trust, the greater the risk.

Another major theme that emerged from the interviews is associating trust with “reliance” on one’s abilities. Five participants’ comments provide evidence of this. One participant, for example, said “if you get a piece of information, don’t just believe it cuz it’s given to you. Research it and find out for yourself and then believe it or not” (Participant 4, 27). Another participant added:

I mean, I can talk to anyone for 30 minutes and I can find out if that person is lying or not so you have nothing to lose; you can always talk to a person and find out if the information in the profile is in line with what the person is actually telling you (Participant 6, 29).

This association is also consistent with Weckert’s (2005, pp. 95-117) view about the relationship between trust and reliance. Weckert argues that reliance is part of trust but the two are different, explaining “I rely on my glasses to see, but in no interesting sense do I trust them” (p. 99). One question that can be asked is whether or not there is an association between reliance in one’s abilities and the strengthening of trust in MMS. This is a project for future research.

A third major theme that this qualitative study has revealed is the association of trust with “self-confidence”. Five participants’ comments support this finding. One participant, for example, noted:

I mean, if I was a person who didn’t have much confidence then maybe yeah, I’d say yes to that but personally, I think I’m quite confident and I know if I want something, I can get it if want it [...] if someone turns me down, I’m like ok, fair enough and I just carry on (Participant 2, 30).

Another participant argued “ok I think this site is really good for people with low self-esteem, low self-confidence and someone that’s really busy in life that doesn’t have time to meet someone” (Participant 4, 27); while a third participant explained:

We are all insecure people. You see, we have insecurities and that is built in you know. It’s nothing that one day it happens, we wake up and we are the most confident person on this world. No, it’s not like that. We have built in insecurities and we need to cover them up and end of the day, we all have our rough experiences and somebody tried to use our insecurities or weaknesses so we all lie (Participant 5, 29).

The connection between trust and self-confidence has also been explored by Weckert (2005, pp. 95-117). Weckert noted that there is a connection between trust and self-esteem and subsequently self-respect. He concluded that “we feel better about ourselves when we believe that we are trusted” (p. 98). One area that could be explored by future research would be, whether or not confident people are more trusting of others in MMS and if there is an association between being confident and being truthful in MMS.
In addition to these three major trust associations, three participants associated trust with honesty. One of these participants explained:

I’m trusting people because I see people who have written that they are divorced or they have kids. There was this lady who messaged me and she was divorced with a kid and she was honest so that’s good on her. When you see a person like that, then you somehow trust people (Participant 3, 33).

Another participant added:

I remember talking to a girl yesterday and she went on to tell me that she had previous boyfriends and she’d been drinking and smoking so she was very open with it and I actually appreciated that she was being honest with me and told her that might not acceptable to my family so I would not like to carry on but she was very honest and she said instead of hearing it from someone else, she’d like to tell this information herself so I really admired her honesty (Participant 7, 31).

The construction of the association of trust with honesty is probably religiously inspired as the comments from one participant provide evidence for this observation “if they’re deceiving people, they’ll answer to Allah” and “if people want to deceive others, that’s their choice because at the end of the day, we’ll all answer to Allah” (Participant 1, 31). This connection highlights the importance of being truthful as the verses from Quran and the Saying of the Prophet, discussed above, have shown.

6.2 Signs of lack of trust in MMS
The interview transcripts revealed several signs of lack of trust in MMS. Concerns over members’ profiles being fake, as commented on by six participants, is an example of one of these signs. This is consistent with what Ahmed’s (2013, pp. 29-30) study has found. One participant said:

[...] most of the people aren’t serious and their profile is not true or maybe they are looking for some source of income by blackmailing people, but some people, they do trust, e.g. I met 2 or 3 from UK but as I lived there, I know their attitude and their things and how they’re talking and what they provided to me so I caught their lies easily (Participant 8, 30).

A second participant, who did not necessarily think as Participant 8 did, that most members were not serious, also expressed his concern over fake profiles:

Mostly they are serious but I find some of them are fake IDs. They are basically boys making some female IDs and teasing boys; a few of them, not all and some females who I met are very serious (Participant 9, 31).

To a third participant, however, “it does not matter if someone is fake, because he will eventually find out the truth as he can’t marry someone and then find out they’re fake” (Participant 1, 31). This was the case with Participant 9 (31) who received two invitations from two different profiles (several days apart) that expressed interest in him, however, they both mistakenly used the same email address to communicate with him. This evidence enabled him to detect that at least one of these profiles must had been fake, if not both. This confirms Dwyer et al. (2007, p. 8) finding that trust may not be as important to developing online relationships as it is for face-to-face interactions because users are confident in being able to evaluate other users online profiles.
Another sign of lack of trust in MMS is the suspicious attitude that six members exhibited towards MMS. To illustrate one participant said:

I think everyone is apprehensive. They are playing it very safe and so, most of the girls I’ve spoken to didn’t want to give out their IDs which is perfectly fine. Even I don’t tell my name on first time so I think the issue here is everybody has heard different stories about the internet and how people use this medium for their benefit which isn’t very good so I think that is always playing on your mind when you’re chatting with someone. I guess this is the main thing which is stopping everyone or holding everyone back (Participant 6, 29).

One participant provided a clue regarding the suspicious attitude which suggested that it might be stemming from the feelings of uncertainty surrounding this medium:

I used to talk to a girl and she would always involve her brother-in-law and sister and everybody has a sense of bad security about the website because you never know who you’ll bump into and the worse fear is that somebody is a fraud (Participant 7, 31).

Another reason for the suspicious attitude could be the stigma surrounding MMS (Ahmed, 2013, p. 13). A third driver for the suspicious attitude could be the online medium itself, particularly the anonymity element inherent in the medium. The degree of anonymity affects the behaviour in important ways. It can cause de-individuation – a state where the normal constraints on behaviour are removed, which may lead to dis-inhibition (Joinson, 1998, p. 44). Dis-inhibition is a term that denotes the lowering of the normal social constraints on behaviour which is opposite to “inhibition” – when behaviour is constrained or restrained through self-consciousness, anxiety about social situations, worries about public evaluation and so on (Joinson, 1998, p. 44). The below comment made by Participant 5 (29) clearly illustrates this point:

I think online is a bit more safer because normally people do lie in their real life, they have a particular mask that they put it on and don’t want to show their real faces; online, they know they are hidden and everything so they plus/minus tell you the truth and what they are all about. So in a way, I think you can trust more online rather than in person in the beginning, of course.

As this participant indicates, the anonymity may encourage self-disclosure only at the beginning, but once the members start communicating via phone or face-to-face, the dis-inhibition ceases to exist, because members are no longer anonymous.

A third sign of lack of trust in MMS is evidenced in feelings of intimidation that members experience when other members’ expect too much from them. Participant 5 (29), for example, argued that members in MMS are immature because they are seeking a perfect match as can be seen from their use of the advance search option, which allows them to specify additional criteria, but he says in real life a perfect match is not possible. Participant 1 (31) gave an example of the problem with expecting too much: “if a guy says I want you to wear hijab, she won’t marry him and she’ll say you’re not allowing me to live freely”. Participant 9 also shared a similar sentiment “actually, they wanted a doctor and as I have a problem, his daughter didn’t accept me”. But the problem with expecting too much from individuals is compounded with inconsistency in values. Participant 1 (31) comment below succinctly articulates this view:

[...] both parties, men and women are confused in the reality of this world and what they should be seeking in a partner. It’s the response people return, they come across so Islamic, yet they are bias on race, language, ethnicity, all the things Islam prohibits.
Participant 1 argues that these are not the only problems; with expecting too much and having a long list of criteria, come also higher rates of divorce, because these criteria are often not fulfilled. Expecting too much from a partner is not consistent with Islamic values. Prophet Mohamed (pbuh) said:

If there comes to you one whose religious commitment and attitude please you, then marry (your female relative who is under your care) to him, for if you do not do that, there will be tribulation on earth and much corruption (narrated by al-Tirmidhi).

6.3 Strategies for dealing with lack of trust in MMS

It appears members in MMS utilize several methods to control the information about themselves including by lying about their details, uploading fake photos (i.e. photos of others as if it is theirs), agreeing with the person they are communicating with about all the statements in discussion and without being genuine, also deliberately ignoring the questions they have been asked by the other party, as Participant 1 (31) has noted:

They try to ignore questions because they feel like you’ll red flag them if they answer the wrong way but if you ignore it, I won’t think good of you.

That said, the study showed, participants employed several strategies for dealing with the lack of trust inherent in MMS, with the most popular strategy being used was their communication skills, as the interview transcripts of four participants revealed.

The use of communication skills was mentioned several times within the interview transcripts. Examples of these comments include “Everyone writes the good things but when you communicate, you see their flaws straight away”; “We can never really know a person unless we live them but we can try to determine as much as possible by communicating” (Participant 1, 29); “You have to meet, you have to be in person, meet in a public arrangement, have something to do together to know really what kind of personality you are” (Participant 5, 29); “That’s how you proceed further and take it to your personal e-mail ID. People chat on MSN or Skype or Yahoo and then find out what the deal is” (Participant 6, 29); and “You will come to find out at some point how things are about the other person [... ] you really find out more information about them” (Participant 7, 31).

Another strategy that the participants adopt to deal with the lack of trust in MMS is by doing “police work”, as this participant’s comment points out:

I guess I probably quiz them a bit, ask them some questions. Uh, I mean, the third, no sorry, the second person I spoke to, had a profile picture up and it wasn’t her real profile picture. So I worked that out. Obviously when I got talking to her, she seemed all genuine and everything but then digging deeper, things start to come out which you think hold on, this doesn’t seem right cuz they’re saying something different than what their profile actually says (Participant 2, 30).

While Participant 2 quizzes the marriage seekers he is interested in and digs deeper in the conversation while cross checking information from multiple sources, Participant 3 (33) said he developed his own list of questions:

I have got my own list of questions in my mind because I know what I’m looking for, so I usually ask those questions and if there’s a tick mark on all the questions, then I really follow up with maybe another conversation the next day or the day after.
In addition to having a list of questions, it was found that participants also used standard criteria to guide their “search”:

If you think the person you’re talking to meets your basic criteria and everything seems fine, let’s say when you’re talking to a person and everything seems fine in the first 10 or 15 minutes, you’ve exchanged the basic information about each other and then you see if there’s a fit (Participant 6, 29).

Participants also in many occasions used their “sixth sense”, “gut feeling”, “heart” and reciprocal sharing of personal information to deal with the issues of trust in MMS. The adoption of the above strategies again confirms Dwyer et al. (2007, p. 8) finding that trust may not be as important to developing online relationships as it is for face-to-face interactions because users are confident in being able to evaluate other users online profiles.

The analysis also revealed that most of the participants who were interviewed, involved members of their family to progress negotiation with a potential marriage partner, when the communication had reached to an advanced level or to a serious point with females using this approach more often than males as the interviewees have indicated. Interviewees’ comments in support of this include “So I think if you like their picture, then you’d go see them with family” (Participant 1, 31); “Oh, I’ll confirm it before I say yes to anyone and of course the families will be involved. I’m not going to do it on my own” (Participant 3, 33); “In fact, I did meet someone and my family went to meet them”; “Oh, I just get some basic information from the profile and let my family know this and then they go and meet them”; and “I usually give my e-mail address and phone number and if somebody is able to communicate with me on that, then I involve my sister who I’m living with” (Participant 7, 31) and “I got a message from some lady in Saudi Arabia and the girl’s sister contacted me and she wanted to know some more information from me” (Participant 9, 31). The involvement of a family member in the search of a potential marriage partner reflects the return of those who adopt this strategy to their cultural roots and the impact of the offline culture on the online environment (Al-Saggaf and Begg, 2004, pp. 41-54).

7. Revised conceptual framework

In this study, trust has been associated with “risk taking” and “reliance” on one’s abilities. Both of these associations are consistent with Weckert (2005, pp. 95-117) philosophical account on trust (see Section 3.1). Given that Dwyer et al. (2007, p. 8) study has raised doubts about the importance of trust online because users tend to rely on their abilities to judge profiles, it is possible that associating trust in this study with “reliance” on one’s abilities is not very precise as it may be that users perceive “reliance” on one’s abilities as a substitute for trust. However, before formally hypothesising this, it is better if more data is gathered to give confidence to this hypothesis. In addition, trust in this study has been associated with “self-confidence”, which seems to suggest that confident people are more trusting of themselves. However, while this association is also consistent with one of the meanings that Weckert (2005, pp. 95-117) gave for trust, it is possible that users perceive “self-confidence” as a substitute for trust online rather than another meaning for it. Again it is better if more data is gathered to give confidence to this assumption before it is formally hypothesised. Trust in this study has also been associated with honesty, which is religiously inspired as evidenced by the verses from Quran and the Saying of the Prophet that talked about the importance of truthfulness.
The study revealed three signs of lack of trust in MMS. The first sign is concern over a large number of members’ profiles being fake, which is consistent with what Ahmed’s (2013, pp. 29-30) study has found is predicted given anonymity (Dyson, 1998) makes it easy for users to put false information on their profiles, particularly if users do not expect to encounter others in the future (Preece, 2000, p. 189). The second sign is feeling suspicious about these sites and approaching them with caution. Again this was expected because of the stigma surrounding MMS (Ahmed, 2013, p. 13) and the negative stereotypes (Wallace, 1999, pp. 216-217) that users hold about others. The final sign is feeling intimidated by the unrealistic expectations members placed on them. Nothing in the literature was found to explain this; but, religiously speaking, the unrealistic expectations are inconsistent with the Islamic values.

Users in this study adopted several strategies to handle the lack of trust in MMS. Two of these are using their communication skills to study others carefully and “interrogating” them using a pre-developed list of questions. Both of these strategies align with what Dwyer et al. (2007, p. 8) study has alluded to, i.e. that lack of trust online may not be a concern because users are confident about their abilities to judge profiles. Another strategy is doing “police work” to uncover any inconsistencies in users’ statements. One of Preece’s (2000, p. 189) conditions for establishing trust online provides a hint. Her condition that there must be a record of past interactions, suggests that one way to find out if users are truthful about what they say in their profiles is to check for inconsistencies in their statements. A final strategy that users adopt to deal with the lack of trust in MMS is involving their family members in their negotiations. This strategy clearly reflects the influence of culture on the business of finding a spouse as Ahmed’s (2013, p. 32) research confirms. Ahmed concluded that “traditional and cultural methods of finding a partner still hold a level of importance, which respondents cannot oust completely” (Ahmed, 2013, p. 32).

8. Conclusion

There is a paucity of research on how trust is established in dating sites in general and matrimonial sites specifically. In addition, research on MMS is scarce and to the researchers’ knowledge no empirical analysis of trust in MMS or matrimonial sites in general has been undertaken to date. This empirical qualitative study used ethnographic techniques to collect data. In addition to briefly observing five MMS, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with ten participants, who were all males, between the ages of 25-35, and residing in different locations, including the USA, the UK, the UAE, Australia and Bahrain. While the interviews focused on participants’ experience in MMS, the analysis of these interviews focused on the issue of trust in these sites. In particular, the analysis focused on how users perceive interpersonal trust in MMS; what are the signs of lack of trust in MMS (if any); and what strategies do they adopt to handle the lack of trust in MMS.

The analysis has revealed that participants associated trust with “risk taking”, “reliance” on one’s abilities, “self-confidence” and honesty with the first three being the major themes that transpired from the analysis of data. The analysis has also revealed three signs of lack of trust in MMS. Users expressed concern over a large number of members’ profiles being fake; they appeared suspicious about these sites and approached them with caution; and felt intimidated by the unrealistic expectations members placed on them. However, it was found users adopted several strategies to
handle the lack of trust in MMS including using their communication skills to study others carefully, doing “police work” to uncover any inconsistencies in their statements, “interrogating” them using a pre-developed list of questions and involving their family members in their negotiations.

The research findings need to be considered in light of the following limitation: the results are limited to the sample used and cannot be generalised to the population of MMS users as a whole. That said, generalisations were not sought in this study. The aim was to examine males’ perceptions of interpersonal trust in MMS. Despite the above limitation, this study is significant in that hopefully it will pave the way for future research about the topic. For example, it would be useful to investigate if there is an association between reliance in one’s abilities and the strengthening of trust in MMS. It would also be useful to examine in more depth whether or not confident people are more trusting of others in MMS and if there is an association between being confident and being truthful in MMS.

In addition, Muslim singles are not like singles in the west; their religious believes forbid them from dating. That said, Muslim singles are not exempted from using the online technology to seek and find a “marriage partner”; but by the use of matrimonial sites rather than dating sites. While dating sites and MMS share certain characteristics, because singles in the west are different from Muslim singles and because the two types of sites differ in the purpose (i.e. casual relationship versus marriage) trust is probably established differently in these environments. Thus, a study in which the establishment of trust in dating sites is compared to the establishment of trust in dating sties will be useful.

Notes
1. The fact that females in the studied MMS do not have to pay is one of the reasons this study focussed on males’ perspective.
2. The Holy Qur’an, Surah 47, Verse 119.
3. One of the popular MMS in Britain (Ahmed, 2013, p. 12).
4. The researcher registered and created a profile in all of these five MMS.
5. Participants’ comments are not edited to maintain their originality.
6. Years old.

References


About the author
Dr Yeslam Al-Saggaf is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics (CAPPE) and a Senior Lecturer in information technology at the School of Computing and Mathematics, Charles Sturt University. He holds a Bachelor’s degree in engineering (with honours) in computer and information engineering, from Malaysia, and a Master of information technology and a PhD from Charles Sturt University, Australia. His research interests lie in the areas of privacy in social media and ICT ethics. He has published in those areas in peer-reviewed journals extensively. Yeslam Al-Saggaf can be contacted at: yalsaggaf@csu.edu.au