

The “Mail-Order-Bride” (MOB) Phenomenon in the Cyberworld: An Interpretive Investigation

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Information technology (IT) is often an enabler in bringing people together. In the context of this study, IT helps connect matchmaking service providers with those looking for love, particularly when a male seeks to meet and possibly marry a female from another country – a process which results in over 16,500 such ‘mail-order-bride’ (MOB) marriages a year in the United States alone. Past research in business disciplines has been largely silent about the way in which this process unfolds, the perspectives of the participants at different points of time, and the role of IT underlying the MOB matchmaking service. Adopting an interpretivist stance, and utilizing some of the methodological guidelines associated with the Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM), we develop a process model which highlights: a) the key states of the process through which the relationship between the MOB seeker (the man) and the MOB (the woman) unfolds, b) the transitions between states, and c) the triggering conditions for the transitions from one state to another. This study also highlights key motivations of the individuals participating in the MOB process, the effect of power and the role it plays in the dynamics of the relationships, the status of women and how their status evolves during the MOB process, and the unique affordance provided by IT as the relationships evolve

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1. INTRODUCTION

Consider the experiences of two different women who found their loved one from a far-away land. Notably, at the inception of the search process, they knew little about their mates, which continued to be the case even after the women had started their married lives overseas.

“David² is a well-educated, middle aged man whose first relationship ended in a divorce. During his initial attempt at dating locally, he had difficulty finding a woman that provided the right ‘spark,’ a woman with compatibility. He discovered a matchmaking service which helped pair men in the U.S. with foreign women, and decided to give it a try. David scanned the hundreds of women with images in the catalog, looking for someone special. After contacting different women from all over the world, he found one person in particular with whom he felt a connection. David and Corazon continued to write, and over time a relationship *developed*. After approximately one year of correspondence, David travelled to meet Corazon and her family in Cambodia. They were soon married, and are now in what Corazon describes as a ‘beautiful’ marriage, even after 12 years. “

“Anastasia³ grew up in Russia. At 19, she was a bright student, well versed in music and culture, and had stunning looks which caught the attention of modeling

¹ All authors contributed equally. The authors would also like to take this opportunity to state our sincere appreciation to all the interviewees who permitted us to go into their private lives, to learn about a socially and culturally sensitive issue, in order for us to develop a deeper understanding of this global IT phenomenon.

² At the request of the interviewees, and out of respect for their privacy, the names of the participants as well as some key identifiers have been changed.

³ This account was created using news articles about this relationship.

agencies. Anastasia's parents, seeing potential in Anastasia which would be hard to achieve in Russia, supported her when she decided to include her profile in matchmaking catalogs. Soon, a man began pursuing Anastasia, ultimately flying to Russia and meeting her and her parents. While the attraction was not a physical one at first from Anastasia's point of view, she was attracted to the suitor's professional experience – he held an MBA from an elite MBA program in the US, was a former Eagle Scout, and had taught as a college instructor. The two married in 1998, she enrolled at a university, and beamed in her letters home about life in America. About a year later, a police report described a domestic violence incident resulting in scratches on Anastasia [Kamb and Jamieson 2001]. A little more than a year later after the incident, Anastasia went missing, and her husband was arrested and charged with her murder [Fisher 2002a]. He was ultimately convicted by a jury and sentenced to 29 years in jail [Fisher 2002b].”

These two stories represent perhaps the two ends of a possible continuum of outcomes – one woman experiences abuse and a premature end to a promising life, while the other experiences a fulfilling life with a loving man and a ‘beautiful’ marriage. While they end in extremely different ways, they start with the same beginning – a quest for a spouse from a distant country and culture, aided by the services of a third party ‘matchmaker.’ This is where this research project begins, with the following broad questions: How does the entire process unfold, from getting signed up with an agency to ultimately getting married? Given the ability for information technology (IT) to serve as the underlying mechanism for possible love connections, how might one's use of technology improve the entire process? While these may not be easy questions to answer definitively, we believe they need to be explored. Yet, there is little (if any) research to date to address the above questions. Given the lack of previous research, we turn to a *predominantly inductive approach* for our research.

2. THE “MAIL-ORDER-BRIDE” (“MOB”) PHENOMENON

Studies from other disciplines which investigate the MOB phenomenon refer to international marriage brokering agencies as mail order bride services. Indeed, even the popular press has referenced the services as such; with one recent Business Week Magazine headline stating, “The Mail-Order-Bride Trade is Flourishing” [Wayne 2011]. “Mail order brides,” otherwise known as the potential bride-to-be, are typically from the developing world (e.g., Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia) and often come from less privileged backgrounds. These women register with MOB agencies in the hopes of finding a suitable marriage partner [Angeles and Sunanta 2007; Kojima 2001; Robinson 1996]. Interestingly, while there is widespread recognition that the term “mail order bride” is demeaning, the term continues to be used in the popular press as well as in the academic literature. Perhaps, in part, this highlights the existence of unequal power relations between men and women involved in the exchange process. Indeed, scholars point to unequal relationships as playing a role in the commoditization of the women involved in this marital exchange [Sciachitano 2000].

Mail order bride services date back to the early settlers of North America, where men would write to Europe in hopes of finding a wife. Later, during World War II, American GI's wrote letters to women whom they had never met and arranged marriages through letter correspondence. While culturally we find that an arranged marriage is not a new phenomenon, the mail order bride “business” is a recent phenomenon [Tolentino 1996]. In the early 1980s, for-profit matchmaking agencies were established. Originally, they provided their male customers with paper catalogs containing pictures and short biographies of women, mostly from developing countries. Customers would then pick a number of potential mates and send them letters. This letter-writing process could take years until finally the partners felt comfortable with one another and decided to meet. With advances in information technology, these mail order bride agencies began to offer services online. These IT-mediated services offered customers access to more profiles, more detailed information on potential brides, instant messaging, web cam communication, e-mail options, and 24/7 customer support. Indeed, the popularity of the service seems to have been aided by the role of IT.

In the words of [Schaeffer-Grabiel 2006 p.331], “When the mail-order bride industry shifted from using a magazine format to operating over the Internet during the 1990’s, the number... providing matchmaking services exploded.” It is estimated that in 2007 more than 16,500 U.S. marriages were MOB related [Wayne 2011] though the size and scope of the IT-mediated industry worldwide is perhaps underestimated if just US marriages are considered. Lynn Visson, a former professor and author studying MOB, says the number of MOB firms operating in the United States alone has grown from “a handful to roughly 600” in the past decade [Harris 2005]. Without representative industry associations, the size of the mail-order-bride industry is somewhat difficult to ascertain. However, several sources and reports help to piece together an idea of the size and trends within the industry. A recent report on MOB in Bloomberg Business Week reported that international matchmakers (MOB agencies) in 2010 earned more than \$2 billion dollars [Wayne 2011]. As such, mainstream media has recently been talking about MOB matches, with the ABC show Nightline dedicating an entire show to the topic (August 18, 2011), as host Bill Weir traveled to the Ukraine to shadow American men during their MOB experience [Thompson and Lovett 2011]. In their overview of the industry, BusinessWeek highlighted the story of Joseph Weiner, who owns an international matchmaking agency with 30 offices throughout the world [Wayne 2011]. These sources suggest that the MOB industry is growing, and attribute a big part of the growth to the online nature of the services and search opportunities. Indeed, the size and scope of industry is substantial, the role of IT is significant, and social implications are profound, warranting a need for research in this area.

There are, in addition, three interrelated characteristics of the MOB phenomenon that makes it worthy of investigation. *First*, the MOB phenomenon represents the morphing of a seemingly social tradition into one that is inherently socio-technical, perhaps exemplifying the increasing pervasiveness of IT in modern society. *Second*, in its current avatar, the phenomenon demonstrates a marked evolution of form and character from the past, when paper-based catalogs and letter-based interactions were central. Today, the IT mediation offers the possibility of incredible speed and richness of interaction for participants.. *Third*, this phenomenon represents a socio-technical interaction that is very distinct from the apparently similar phenomenon of online dating. A few key aspects distinguish these two phenomenon – a) MOB websites typically do not use matching algorithms, a common trend in online dating website; b) the distributed and internationalized nature of the interaction makes the MOB phenomenon more exclusively online and IT mediated than online dating (where individuals may progress offline, face-to-face interactions after the initial online introduction); and c) the MOB services typically provide a number of different service extensions (e.g. sending flowers, coordinating travel arrangements for international visits, etc.) not expected or even required by individuals using an online dating service.

3. BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite being a fascinating and rapidly-growing industry that has several sociological, psychological, and business implications, the MOB phenomenon has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. With a few exceptions in the marketing and IS literature, which have sought to shed light on related themes such as on-line dating [Frost et al. 2008] and evolution of on-line relationships [Fernback 2007] (though not for MOB), studies in business disciplines have chosen to be generally silent on this issue. Thus, we develop our pre-understanding in this area based on scholarly work on MOB in other humanistic disciplines. The first point that struck us is that the existing literature in general adopts a critical outlook on MOB, highlighting themes such as domination by men and commoditization of women, and portraying MOB as a response to feminism and also as a new form of colonization. We briefly highlight these themes next. For example, it has been suggested that web based tools such as instant messaging and web cam options allow a focus on external features, which effectively turn women into commodities and a type of personal brand [Hughes 2000]. In this context, cyberspace is viewed as a male territory and new information and communication technologies as men’s toys [Angeles & Sunanta 2007]. To elaborate further, on one hand, with the assistance of the MOB agencies, women from third world countries who seek to escape from their harsh local circumstances are viewed as “selling” themselves. On the other hand,

some Western men are said to be looking for women from other cultures, particularly Asian, to avoid dealing with Western women who they (these Western men) believe are under the influence of feminist values. In the view of these men, the feminist influence results in women focusing overly on their own individuality, which, in turn, leads them to ignore the needs of the husband and the family.

Scholars argue that websites of the MOB agencies construct women as the “sexual and racial other” [Angeles & Sunanta 2007] who are beautiful, significantly younger, and, more importantly, “unspoiled by feminism.”⁴ Some researchers have even suggested that the Internet demonstrates a growth that resembles colonization and a power imbalance between Western and developing countries that is difficult to overturn [Sciachitano 2000]. In this asymmetric relationship, mail order brides are mere commodities for sale, and western men are privileged purchasers [Pehar 2003]. In other words, MOB is portrayed as involving unequal power in the relationship between the man (the “buyer” from a wealthy developed country) and the woman (the “seller” from a less developed country), at least at the beginning. While such research highlights the negative connotations inherent in the phenomenon, we believe that it is important to investigate why individuals, particularly the women, continue explore and participate in the MOB process.

Our literature review also reveals that much of the research in business and computing is limited to the online dating phenomenon which, as we previously highlighted, is markedly different from the MOB phenomenon (see Table 1). Further, none of the existing studies take a holistic approach or offer a longitudinal account of the phenomenon, where the reader is able to see how the entire process unfolds. Also missing is an inquiry into the experiences and understanding of the individuals involved in the process. And, finally, a surprisingly underemphasized element is the critical role of technology, with existing studies in closely related areas primarily focused on exploring the stylistic aspects of online dating sites [Ellison et al. 2006; Fiore and Donath 2004], the interactions between partners [Fernback 2007], and the typology of services/goods perspective [Frost et al. 2008]. The present research seeks to fill some of these gaps in the literature.

⁴ Quoted from <http://www.eastern-europe-women.com>

Table I. A summary of recent literature

Source	Overview	Theory/Concept	Method	Key findings	Critique/Comments
Ellisson et al. (2006) in the <i>Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication</i>	Authors take an inductive approach in examining self-presentation processes in the online dating environment.	Social Information Processing (SIP) theory: SIP suggests that Internet users develop impressions of others with the cues available online. Users adapt to these limited cues in order to make decisions about others.	Semi-structured interviews of members of an online dating service. Iterative content analysis.	Stylistic aspects of messages (e.g. timing, length, and grammar) in online interactions are crucial (when nonverbal cues are not sufficient, the remaining cues become more salient to users). Technical constraints of the site may have enabled acts of misrepresentation (design of websites is extremely important).	Article focuses on online dating at one point in time. Does not take a process approach, and is limited to a review of one online dating service.
Fiore and Donath (2004) in the <i>Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems</i>	Discussion on styles of online personals ads (e.g. searchable profile listings, personality matching, and social network systems).	No specific theory is employed.	Review article.	This article provides an overview of how demographic and behavioral data can be utilized to improve the experience of using online personals.	An overview of the online dating services. No in-depth inquiry or analyses are provided.
Fernback (2007) in <i>New Media & Society</i>	An interpretive study of 'community' in cyberspace.	Symbolic Interactionism: people act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them; and these meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation.	Semi-structured interviews.	Online relations also evolve (like ordinary relationships), and commitment is key in such relations.	The focus is on online communities (online dating or MOB is not a focus).
Frost et al. (2008) in the <i>Journal of Interactive Marketing</i>	Exploration of online dating.	Experience goods vs. search goods. Search goods have objective and tangible attributes. Experience goods, in contrast, are judged by the feelings they evoke. Online dating should be studied with an experience goods perspective in mind.	Survey.	People are "experience goods." Thus, online dating fails to meet expectations.	A fresh look at the online dating service. However, the focus is still on online dating.

4. OVERALL METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

We adopted an interpretive approach [Walsham 1995] in conducting our empirical inquiry. Our research objective, as mentioned earlier, was to develop an in-depth understanding of online international marriage services (or MOB services). While the MOB phenomenon has received attention from other research disciplines, the IT-mediated modern avatar has been less explored. Therefore, the context of our research can be seen as fertile ground for exploration, particularly from an IS perspective.

4.1 Data Collection

Given the nature of the phenomenon of MOB, it was important to capture the subjective experience of MOB participants along with the emotions and symbolisms surrounding the experiences. For this study, two main sources of information were identified and utilized.

4.1.1 Personal Interviews

During our study, it became clear that MOB has a certain stigma associated with it (at least for some individuals), and thus it is not easy to recruit subjects who would be willing to reveal their inner thoughts and emotions in interviews with a research team. While we approached well over a dozen individuals and couples who utilized the services of an MOB-related agency, many declined to be formally interviewed, some pointing to the low social desirability associated with the process. Nevertheless, we were able to personally interview 11 subjects in depth, most of them identified through a snowballing approach [Patton 1990]. All interviews were conducted in the US. Each interview lasted for 1-2 hours. The recorded interviews provided important insights into the process, ranging from those currently active in the search process to those who had met and married via a MOB service. We also gained valuable insight about the stigma and the state of relationships through informal conversations with some of those who declined to be formally interviewed.

4.1.2 Internet Sources

Further, we examined many MOB websites and blogs. Realizing that there are far too many websites and blogs that could be potentially relevant, we followed the following sampling approach initially. We utilized a search by relevance on Google, typing in keywords (such as 'Mail Order Bride Blog,' 'Mail Order Bride Warning,' 'Mail Order Bride Russian', 'Mail Order Bride Asian', 'Mail Order Bride Legal', 'Mail Order Bride Success') and reviewed several of the top sites from each search. As our analysis proceeded, and we found gaps in our understanding, we deliberately sought out new relevant sources and revisited data we had coded earlier, consistent with the principles guiding our analysis (we elaborate on the same in the next section).

We would like to note that as with any interpretive activity, there are myriad of "texts" available on a topic in the universe, and it is neither feasible nor desirable to collect/analyze all the relevant texts to develop a valid understanding [Chalmers 2004; Sarker and Lee 2006]. Within the interpretive perspective, any understanding is provisional, subject to revision and reformulation; thus, our claim regarding our findings is closer to the notions of plausibility and coherence, rather than to the ultimate truth [Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2009; Sarker and Lee 2006]. Table 2 summarizes our data sources, and Table 3 summarizes interviewee profiles.

Table 2. Data Collection Summary

Source and Type of Data	Nature of Data Collected	Sampling Strategy	Challenges in Data Collection
Personal Interviews: Direct MOB Experiences	Conversations regarding experiences (positives and challenges) with service experiences and method of search for mate. Some discussions on hypothetical scenarios as well.	Initially based on geographic criteria (e.g., part of the world from which brides originated), aided by snowballing and referred sources. Also included inquiries to websites for interview sources.	Few people/couples were willing to talk about their experiences due to stigma, though rich content was received from interview sources.
Internet: International Marriage Websites	Web presentation for men and women, site content, layout, testimonials, service extensions and U.S. state related communication.	Identified key sites which were popular in their geographic area (e.g. Russia, Asia, etc.). Searched by relevance and ranking as identified by Google.	Many sites are subscription based and hidden behind registration or log-in screens.
Internet: Information Websites	Information about international marriage requirements (fiancé visa, travel, etc.), fraud warnings, and personal experiences.	Sites identified by keyword search and as recommended links from related content sites.	Sources for website information are quite diverse and not centrally available.
Internet: Blogs	Comments, testimonials, perceptions of users and non-users.	Sites identified by keyword search and as recommended links from related content sites.	Other than service providers, we found few web-based blogs with centralized information.

Table 3. Interviewee Profiles

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Country of Origin	Mail Order Bride stage
#1*	Female	38	Philippines	Married (10 years)
#2	Male	29	USA	Looking for a partner (6 months)
#3	Male	30	USA	Looking for a partner (2 months)
#4	Female	30	Thailand	Married (1 year)
#5	Female	29	Thailand	Married (2 years)
#6*	Male	48	USA	Married (10 years)
#7	Female	28	Thailand	Married (3 years)
#8	Male	60	USA	Looking for a partner (10 years)
#9	Male	42	USA	Married (3 years)
#10	Female	34	Thailand	Married (1 year)
#11	Male	52	USA	Married (few months)

*Interviewees 1 and 6 are married to each other.

4.2 Analysis – Approach and Assumptions

Research suggests that there are two interrelated components underlying interpretation in qualitative studies. The first involves the qualitative text that serves as the empirical input to the analysis process. This process aims at breaking down the text and recombining the emerging theoretical themes into a rich theoretical narrative. The second component relates to the idea of using theories as lenses to facilitate the interrogation of data and the revealing of meanings that may otherwise be hidden from the observer’s or researcher’s view [Sarker et al. 2012; Walsham 2006]. The literature also suggests that the role of theory is instrumental in the formation of the author’s assumptions and his/her conceptualization regarding the nature of the theoretical output. One would argue that effective interpretation of data depends on the choice of the analytical technique and theoretical lenses, and the harmonious interpretation that is able to blend the two elements. Therefore, we felt that decisions about these were critical and ensured that our choices were a result of a careful examination of our context and the wisdom of methodologists we revere. We elaborate on these decisions in the following sub-sections.

4.2.1 Data Analysis Technique

Walsham [2006, p. 325], a leading interpretive researcher in information systems (IS), suggests that “In terms of learning from the data itself, grounded theory offers one way of doing this...”. We note that this point is not unique to Walsham. Indeed there are several instances of well-regarded research that have utilized grounded theory coding procedures to analyze data within the framework of interpretive research [Lehmann 2001b; Maznevski and Chudoba 2000; Urquhart 2007], each

study adopting varying degrees of openness and subjectivity in analyzing data. There have also been indications that such combinations of interpretive studies and grounded theory methodology (GTM) can be very fruitful. For example, Lehmann [2001a, p. 87] comments, “Applying Grounded theory to case study was very successful. It produced a prolific amount and yielded a great richness of information...”. Finally our own familiarity with this methodological approach led us to adopt GTM procedures for aiding the analysis/interpretation of our data. We should mention at this point that we use GTM in this study as a tool for guiding data analysis; *we do not claim to have carried out a full-fledged GTM study*.

A secondary choice is the need to decide on the particular variant of GTM. This is relevant as accumulated knowledge on GTM research and applications resemble a tapestry that is both abundant and “contested” [Bryant and Charmaz 2007, p. 3]. There are documented variants such as the Glaserian school, the Strauss and Corbin school, and the Constructivist school. These variants tend to adopt different assumptions and emphasize different methodological procedures and practices [Birks et al. 2013]. Also, owing to the fact that “... progenitors of GTM have changed, modified, or eliminated major methodological strategies themselves” [Bryant and Charmaz 2007, p. 9], orthodoxy regarding the core elements of GTM is difficult to sustain. Indeed, GTM researchers such as Urquhart [2007, p. 354] acknowledge this point, suggesting that appropriation of this methodology is deeply contextual to the researcher’s particular investigative endeavor. In particular, we primarily draw upon Strauss and Corbin’s [Strauss and Corbin 1990] overall methodological guidelines as they relate to the conduct of GTM coding procedures. Strauss and Corbin describe and elaborate on a sequence of coding procedures including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding [Strauss and Corbin 1990]. These coding procedures allow the researcher to fracture the qualitative data and recombine it into a rich theoretical narrative. In our adoption of the coding procedures, we followed the principle that methodology is contextual in its use, and adaptations maybe applied without violating the fundamental principles of GTM [Bryant and Charmaz 2007]. Therefore, while we have been faithful in utilizing the underlying logic of the coding procedures, we have adapted the procedures as necessary [Sarker et al. 2001; Charmaz 2006].

First, our data analysis and theorizing involved induction as well as abduction. Reichertz [Reichertz 2007, p. 225] observes that “GT (in the variant of Strauss and Corbin) *contains an abductive research logic*” (emphasis added), where referring to the research logic as “abductive” acknowledges the fact that conceptualizations do not result from a mechanical coding process but involve “an intellectual act, a mental leap” that is at the very heart of a “cognitive logic of discovery” [Reichertz 2007, p. 220]. Specifically, in our study, induction played a predominant role in our open coding, while the role of abduction became more evident during axial and selective coding.

Second, instead of using the paradigm model offered by Strauss and Corbin [Strauss and Corbin 1990], which some researchers have found uncomfortable in developing theoretical models [Kelle 2007; Sarker et al. 2000; Urquhart 2007], and in line with Kelle’s [Kelle 2007] suggestion to construct contextually relevant coding paradigm consistent with the researchers’ objectives and traditions, we adapt the vehicle of state transition diagrams that are often used to describe the behaviors of finite state systems [Booth 1967], to model the social process underlying the MOB phenomenon. This primarily involved conceptually describing the different “states,” and identifying the triggers for transitions between the states.

4.2.2 The use of theory in the interpretation of data

Theory plays a critical role in interpretive analysis, particularly in enabling the researcher to make sense of the data [Walsham 1995]. The use of theory in interpretive research is varied, ranging from its use as meta-theoretical scaffolding within which the contextual narrative plays out, to its use as a lens to develop deeper and sometimes different insights about emerging theoretical themes. Walsham suggests that the choice of a theory may be subjective and based on the researcher's own background and interest, as long as he/she is able to justify its relevance to the research context. We agree whole-heartedly with this viewpoint and also suggest that it is important to also ensure that the choice and use of theory is commensurate with the particular methodology chosen.

Therefore, given the importance of being able to successfully weave theoretical perspectives into the data analysis, it was also important for us to assess the nature of theory usage in GTM-supported interpretive studies. In the GTM approach, significant importance is placed on the idea of grounding and the role of theoretical sensitivity. Glaser and Strauss [Glaser and Strauss 1967] emphasize the need to avoid preconception or forcing of existing concepts or theory, and instead let concepts emerge from the data; however, Strauss and Corbin [Strauss and Corbin 1990] explicitly acknowledge that “the construction of theoretical categories, whether grounded or not, cannot start *ab ovo*, but have to draw on [some] existing stocks of knowledge” [Kelle 2007, p. 197]. A similar perspective was also put forward by Urquhart and Fernandez [Urquhart and Fernandez 2006, p. 460], who state that “Like most myths [related to GTM], the idea of the researcher as blank slate, has at its base a kernel of truth. However, it is more accurate to say that grounded theory research does not start with a theory to prove or disprove” (parenthesis added). Suddaby [Suddaby 2006, p. 634-635], a leading scholar of GTM in Management, also labels as “myth”, the belief that “researchers [must] enter the field with a blank mind or researchers must defer reading existing theory...” so as not to contaminate the researchers' perspective. This points to the importance of theoretical sensitivity without which the relevance of raw data to the theoretical project may become difficult to recognize [Strauss and Corbin, 1990], and the researcher is likely to then focus on *description* rather than on *abstraction* (the goal of this study).

We have therefore enriched our interpretation of data with theoretical insights from different existing theories, in a way that is consistent with interpretive case research and GTM guidelines. The choice of theoretical lenses was influenced by the underlying objectives of the research and our assumptions about the phenomenon. Our research objective was to investigate and reveal how the social interaction underlying the MOB phenomenon evolved within a technological environment. A specific focus within this broad objective was to highlight the role of technology. Therefore, our theoretical lenses were identified and drawn from research in social psychology and IS. Within IS, we focused on research on areas such as e-commerce, Human-Computer Interactions (HCI), technology usage and adoption. In particular, our analysis has been influenced by the perspectives provided by Social Exchange Theory [Thibaut and Kelley 1959], Self-discrepancy theory [Higgins 1987], frameworks on internet and web technology features [Kim et al. 2002; Laudon and Traver 2007] and the concept of *functional affordance* of technology [Markus and Silver 2008]. We provide detailed descriptions of these theoretical perspectives in our theoretical appendix (Appendix A).

At this juncture, we would like to clarify how we have drawn on these theoretical lenses. First, the exploration, identification, and use of the theoretical perspectives

were iterative and linked to the outcomes of the multiple rounds of data analysis performed by the research team. Second, we have been careful in ensuring that our use of theoretical perspectives did not contravene the core values underlying GTM based analysis. Specifically, we have been conscious in our efforts to ensure that pre-existing theory was not forced on the data for the purpose of proving or disproving it, as this would be against the spirit of any GTM variant [Suddaby 2006]. For example, while Social Exchange Theory sensitized us to the idea that individuals enter relationship with particular motives and expectations of rewards, the specific goals and objectives of the participants and the patterns of processual evolution captured in our theoretical model emerged directly from our analysis of the data. Similarly, while the concept of *functional affordance* sensitized us to a possible relationship between the individual goals and technology features, the specifics of the relationships and the actual nature of the perceived functional affordance as well as the narrative that tied the affordances to the states in the process emerged from our data and were not forced by pre-existing theoretical perspectives. Moreover, it was the data that prompted us to look for suitable concepts that would allow us to theoretically discuss the emergent patterns about IT use, and this led us to adopt the affordance perspective in framing and narrating the process. We believe that our use of the theoretical lens allowed us “to render the new theory in the context of existing knowledge and thus making the theory more valuable” [Urquhart and Fernandez 2006, p. 461], and in turn, develop a deeper and more coherent understanding of the phenomenon.

5. A THEORETICAL ACCOUNT OF THE MOB PROCESS

In this section, we outline the process model that emerged through our investigation. The model traces the evolution of the participants’ journey through the MOB process in terms of two key elements: (1) states, and (2) transitions between these states.

The states depict a configurative representation of the key elements of the socio-technical interaction that underlie the MOB process. Specifically, each state embodies the participant’s goals, their perception of functional affordances provided by the technology, the key technology features that serve to provide notice of the potentiality of the affordances and goal fulfillment tasks/actions. We would like to explicitly note here a few key aspects of the process: a) the participants’ goals and the corresponding goal fulfillment tasks change, as they proceed through the different states of the MOB process, b) the goal fulfillment tasks are facilitated by a contingent set of affordances and technological features, and c) the contingent set provided by the affordances and technological features changes for each state (see Figure 1). The evolution of the MOB process is captured through the mechanism of state transitions. A transition from one state to another occurs, for example, when the participant successfully attains the goal(s) relevant for that state, or when a certain critical conditions become true. In the following sections we describe in detail each of the MOB states that emerged from our empirical analysis (please see Figure 2, Table 4 and Table 5 for a summary of the states). Figure 2 shows the states with their descriptions in the rectangles connected to the states with dotted lines, along with the state transitions (arrows). Table 4 describes the different state transitions, highlighting differences between the conditions relevant to men and women. Finally, Table 5 shows an integrative view of the process model, with goals/objectives of each state, the macro and micro features of IT relevant to each

state, the perceived functional affordances and the goal fulfillment actions distinctly for men and women.

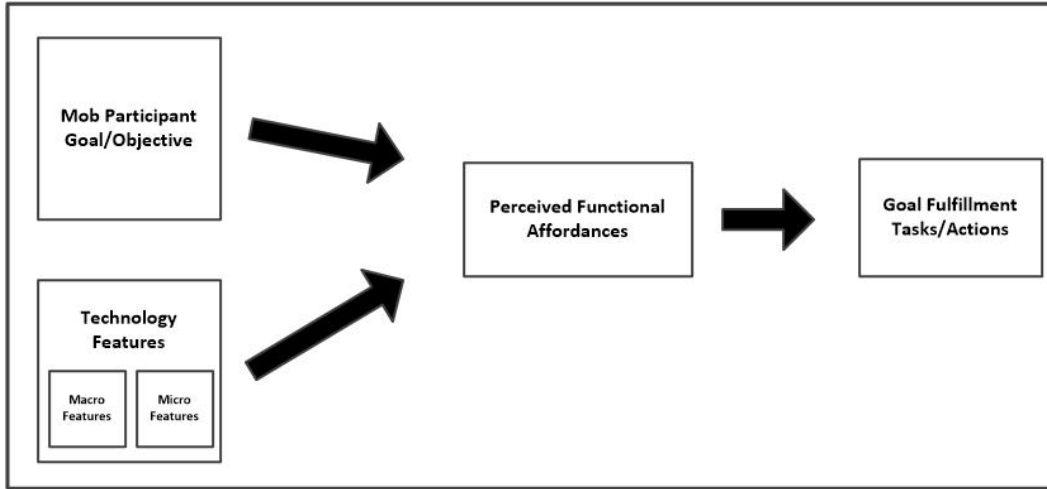


Fig. 1. The MOB State

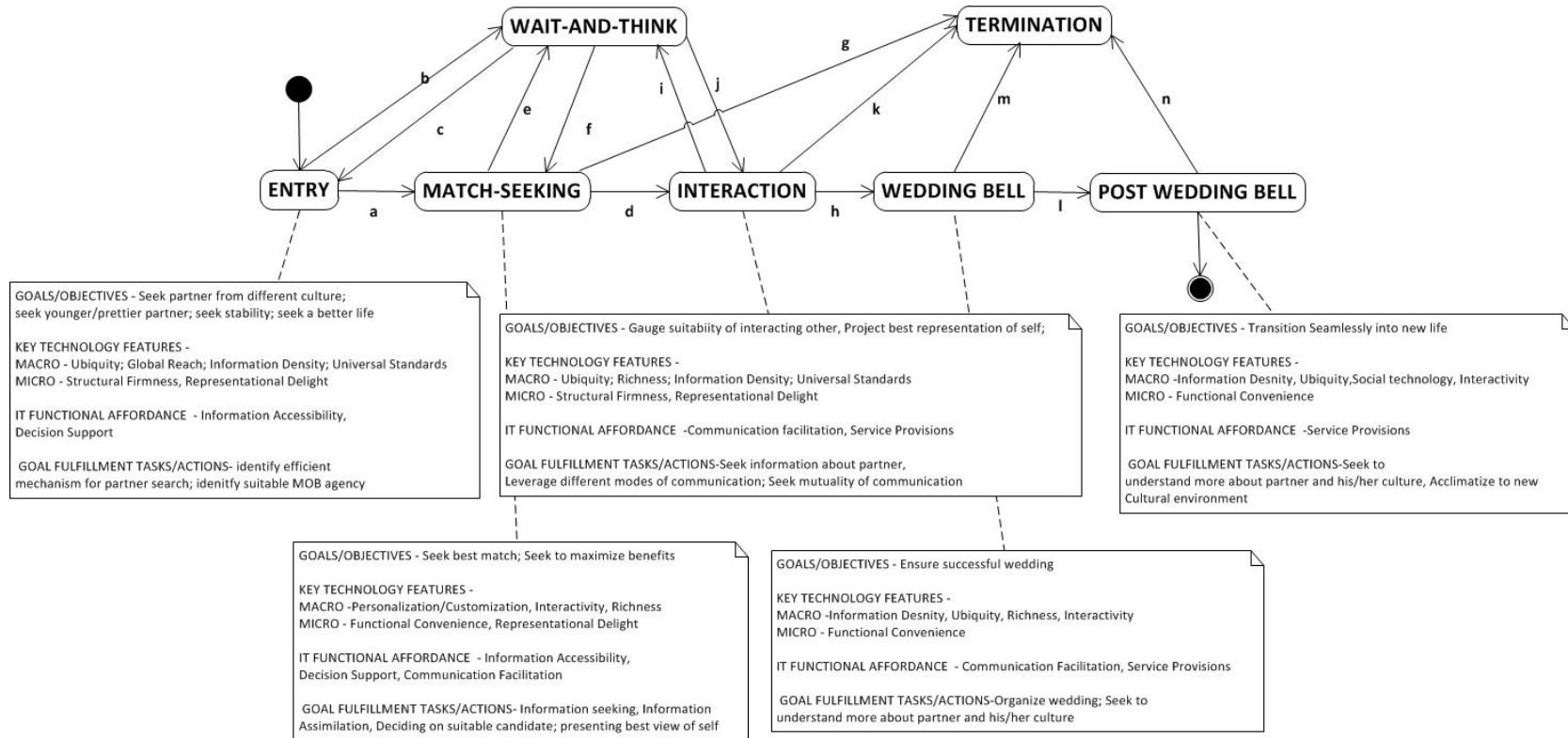


Fig. 2. The Process Model

Table 4. Interviewee Profiles

Transition label	Transition Description	Triggers
a	Progression to Match-Seeking State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For Men and Women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Identification of a preferred MOB website ○ Conviction that the MOB Agency/Website provides appropriate services and environment to meet their objectives
b	Progression to Wait-And-Think State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For Men <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Peer pressure discouraging the search for brides through this channel ○ Perceived stigma associated with being a client of MOB service provider ○ Lack of confidence on the service provider, often as a result of an unprofessional website ○ The inability or unwillingness to pay the fees demanded by the website • For Women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Peer and societal pressure to consider traditional alternatives ○ Awareness of MOB-related horror stories • For Men and Women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Lack of computer self-efficacy
c	Transition back to Entry State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For Men and Women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The transition occurs when one or more conditions triggering state transition “b” changes
d	Progression to Interaction State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For Men <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Identification of one or a set of candidates that matches preferred criteria ○ Willingness to initiate communication • For Women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Acceptance or inclination to initiate communication with individuals who have made an overture
e	Progression to Wait-And-Think State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For Men <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Inability to identify a suitable candidate
f	Transition back to Interaction State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For Men <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Re-assessment of their initial criteria for identifying suitable women ○ Availability of a new pool of women ○ Switch to a different, more suitable MOB Agency
g	Transition to Termination State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For Men <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ A high level of frustration with the process ○ Perception or realization of a lack of

		alignment with their objectives and the process mechanisms
h	Progression to Wedding Bell State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For Men and Women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Achievement of mutuality through interactions ○ Development of shared frame of reference regarding need complementarities ○ Physical attraction ○ Emergence of perceived interdependency
i	Transition to Wait-And-Think State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For Men and Women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Mismatch between need and expectancy – OR- ○ Failure to achieve mutuality of communication, shared frame of reference and interdependency ○ -AND- ○ Retention of a hope in the process despite setbacks
j	Transition back to Interaction State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For Men and Women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Renewal of effort with other candidates previously identified while in the Match-Seeking State
k	Transition to Termination State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For Both Men and Women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Mismatch between need and expectancy – OR- ○ Failure to achieve mutuality of communication, shared frame of reference and interdependency ○ -AND- ○ Loss of faith resulting from frustrations with the process
l	Transition to Post Wedding Bell State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For Both Men and Women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Completion of wedding and immigration formalities
m	Transition to Termination State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For Both Men and Women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Disagreement regarding wedding ○ Misunderstands arising within friends and relations leading to breakdown in relationship ○ Gross misrepresentation of relevant information
n	Transition to Termination State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For Men and Women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Disillusion with spouse due mismatch in expectation • For Women especially <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Inability to acclimatize in new environment ○ Abuse and cultural repression

Table 5. Gender based perspectives of the MOB state

Gender	MOB States	Goals/Objectives	Technology Features		Perceived IT Functional Affordances	Goal Fulfillment Actions
			Macro Features	Micro Features		
Men	Entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek partner from a different culture • Seek younger or prettier partner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ubiquity • Global Reach • Information Density • Universal Standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural Firmness • Representational Delight 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information Accessibility • Decision Support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find an efficient mechanism to search for suitable partner • Choose a particular online MOB agency
	Match-Seeking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify partner best matched to preferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalization/ Customization • Interactivity • Richness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functional Convenience • Representational Delight 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information Accessibility • Decision Support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information seeking • Assimilating information • Decision-making with regards to suitable candidate
	Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better gauge suitability of potential partner • Project best representation of oneself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Richness • Ubiquity • Universal Standards • Information Density 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functional Convenience • Structural Firmness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication facilitation • Service Provisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking new information about potential partner • Leverage different modes of communication • Seek mutuality of communication
	Wedding Bell	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure successful wedding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information Density • Ubiquity • Richness • Interactivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functional Convenience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication facilitation • Service Provisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize wedding • Seek to know more about partner and her culture
	Post Wedding Bell	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition seamlessly into new life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information Density • Ubiquity • Social Technology • Interactivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functional Convenience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service Provisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek to know more about partner and his/her culture • Acclimatize to new cultural environment

Women	Entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek partner from a different culture • Seek stable relationship • Seek a better life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ubiquity • Global Reach • Information Density • Universal Standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural Firmness • Representational Delight 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information Accessibility • Decision Support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find an efficient mechanism to search for suitable partner • Choose a particular online MOB agency
	Match-Seeking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximize the potential of meeting/being chosen by the most suitable partner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Richness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functional Convenience • Representational Delight 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication Facilitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presenting personal information in the most attractive way
	Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better gauge suitability of potential partner • Project best representation of oneself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Richness • Ubiquity • Universal Standards • Information Density 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functional Convenience • Structural Firmness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication facilitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking new information about potential partner • Leverage different modes of communication • Seek mutuality of communication
	Wedding Bell	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure successful Wedding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information Density • Ubiquity • Richness • Interactivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functional Convenience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication facilitation • Service Provisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize wedding • Seek to know more about partner and his culture
	Post Wedding Bell	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition seamlessly into new life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information Density • Ubiquity • Social Technology • Interactivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functional Convenience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service Provisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek to know more about partner and his/her culture • Acclimatize to new cultural environment

5.1 Entry State

The Entry State refers to a context where the individual participants, influenced by different sets of factors, decide whether or not to sign up with the MOB service provider. In the context of this inquiry it is important to understand the factors that motivate or influence the decision to initiate the process. Social Exchange Theory (SET) suggests that the expectation of a reward encourages individuals to interact with each other [Thibaut and Kelley 1959]. SET proposes that men and women seek to maximize their returns. Individuals look for the best alternative, given a set of options. Sensitized by this perspective, we focused our empirical investigation on understanding the motivation of the individuals from the perspective of expected benefits and resources that they bring into the interaction.

We found that in most cases the male participants are aware of their relative strengths with respect to resources (financial, psychological, etc.), and expect some benefits (i.e. a wife of his dreams) in return. Further, our interviewees also indicated that their choice of potential mates is influenced by factors such as a desire to father children, for which they would like to be married to younger (and, in some cases, “prettier”) women. For example, one of our interviewees stated:

“I started this when I was 50 years old. I was divorced and ... I wanted to have biological children of my own. I am the last male in this particular family. I wanted...I guess it’s very selfish but I wanted my very own children....”⁵

Yet another interviewee confessed:

“...Definitely...I want to get married. I am serious about that. And I think there is a better chance of finding someone prettier if you use the so called mail order bride services.”

Another common theme that emerged was a sense of dissatisfaction with western women and their values. As one our interviewees stated:

“I am not happy with the existing relationships. I wanted something different. American women are too individualistic. Downside of feminism...I cannot really say that women’s liberation and feminism really benefited family life.”

Such dissatisfaction regarding values often leads to a desire for partners within cultures that embody a different set of values (i.e., a more “spouse-centered” and “feminine”). For example, a respondent who has travelled extensively in China admitted that he had perceived a number of admirable qualities in Chinese women.

In the case of women, our empirical analysis indicated that although there were those wishing to search for their ‘soul mate’ from afar, more commonly, the motivating factor is the wish to escape their present circumstances by marrying a man (even without a “perfect” match), who could provide a financially and psychologically secure and/or wealthy future. For example a respondent, for whom and his wife the MOB process had a very happy culmination, stated:

⁵ We would like to state here, that the quotes have been used for illustrative purposes. In addition, the meanings apparently being conveyed by these quotes represent the respondent’s perspective, and not our viewpoints as authors.

“... she gets what she wants, a new life, a better life, and a different trajectory for her daughter. She was not in poverty or really needing to get out of her region [in China], but she had a broken heart and a broken family. She just wants a happy home life, and to continue her current path of parenting and nursing as a profession.”

Another respondent also reflected on this issue:

“I think women had an idea of that America is a promised land. Economic opportunities...they think they will have a better life here.”

Respondents also suggested that such marriages could potentially enable the MOB to help her (extended) family, especially parents and siblings. Other motivators mentioned included social climbing — in most of the cases we encountered the women was expected to marry “up” in terms of economic as well as social standing. Such a rise in standing would generally not be likely within their own culture because of societal norms and barriers, their own/family backgrounds, and/or geographic restrictions. A lot of times the desire to look for a partner from another culture seemed to have been accelerated by a perception that the woman was entering an age where she would not be considered a suitable bride within her culture:

“...I was 29...then I looked for more serious relationships. In Thai culture, women should marry before 30. My mom really wanted me to get married.”

Sometimes the women were attracted to the MOB process because of previous experiences of their acquaintances. For example a respondent from the Philippines stated:

“Well, I have relatives that have done the same thing... I felt like it was my destiny to find a person outside the Philippines.”

Similarly, another respondent reflected on her own life as follows:

“Initially, I did not think that I was going to marry an American guy. In Thailand, I did not meet a nice [Thai] guy. They did not keep their word. I did not seem to find the right guy. Friends are happily married. They encouraged me to join Thailovelinks.com.”

MOBs offered certain valuable resources within a potential exchange. These include desired qualities of a younger age, physical attractiveness, potential for child bearing and the creation of a new family, and a perception of being more devoted and committed to the husband. This idea was highlighted by one of our interviewees, who stated:

“In my experience, some guys on the site are very old... they have to marry to a Thai girl...somebody to take care of them.”

However, many MOB-to-be appeared to have a very romantic (perhaps unrealistic) view of being married to a man from far away, and living their life filled with novel experiences in a distant culture.

From the preceding discussion it seems reasonable to conclude that the MOB process suggests itself as an attractive forum where the individuals can maximize the return for the resources they bring into the relationship. At the same time, we found another distinct pattern that is also extremely illuminating about the motivations of the individuals. Our respondents were uniform in their indication that they were deeply dissatisfied with their current image of their self. Most of our respondents represented men and women who had unsuccessfully attempted to find love using traditional ways of meeting partners (e.g. at a social gathering, through an acquaintance or through a lack of opportunity).

Most of our interviewees had also failed to find a suitable match using more traditional online dating services. The majority of men indicated that they were not content with potential Western partners. Interviews revealed complaints about Western women being too individualistic and not fitting the expectations of these men. Previous experiences with online dating were described as follows, for example::

“Some women were only looking for intimacy, a one-night stand. They did not care about a long term relationship. This really shows the women are totally liberated. Traditionally, this is not how a woman should be... I did not want an intimate relationship that I knew wouldn't last long. It's emotionally destructive. I didn't want to tear my mind off... “

Likewise, the women from the so-called “third world” or developing regions, on the other hand, often perceived the men from their country as not fitting to be devoted husbands. Sometimes the desire for a partner from a different culture was also predicated by previous relationships that were broken and/or based on their self-assessment that they had little chance of finding a suitable partner within the same culture. For example, one of the respondents talked about the perspective of his Chinese wife who had a previous failed marriage:

“A divorced woman in China has little chance of re-marriage, a woman older than 28 has a difficult time to remarry, and a woman with a child (especially, a girl) has [even lower] chance to remarry. So in addition to her not wanting to remarry a Chinese man, she was at a great disadvantage being from a broken marriage.”

Women, choosing the MOB route, endorsed traditional values of the need to have a stable family, marrying a man who could give a “dowry” to their parents (particularly in the case of Thailand), and could care for them and their children. Indeed, we found that in many cases, men and women engaging in MOB processes wanted to fulfill their dream of a happy marriage in its most “traditional” sense -- our subjects indicated that there was a longing for a genuine relationship where conventional roles for women and men are maintained. Somewhat unexpectedly, Internet-based mail order bride services seemed to contribute to making it more effective for such individuals to find the right partner from a broader set of candidates who apparently shared similar needs and expectations.

In the entry state (and indeed through the entire process), IT plays an important role by facilitating the tasks that allow the individuals to achieve their goals. In this state, the individuals were motivated primarily by the perceived need for searching for a partner from a distant culture. The fulfillment of this need is facilitated by a more precise task objective of identifying an efficient mechanism for this process (the MOB websites being perceived as suitable means) and deciding on a particular MOB agency. IT facilitates this by providing two distinctive functional affordances – information accessibility and decision support. First, it affords the individuals a rich, interactive, easily accessible environment that provides uncomplicated and speedy to access to a rich set of information. Second, it provides a potential for aiding their decision-making process in identifying the most suitable MOB agency. The above functional affordances of the IT are in turn identified by the contingent set of features embodied within the technology. These features include both those of the overarching technological environment (macro features) and those (micro features) of the more specific interface (the website). The attractiveness of these affordances was reflected upon by one of our interviewees:

“Well, I figured I could get to meet someone that I would not otherwise. More options... I am looking for something specific and online catalogs can provide that for me.”

The information accessibility affordance of the IT during the Entry State is facilitated primarily by the macro features of the technological environment such as ubiquity, global reach, and universal standard. An important aspect of the IT being used in this context is its ubiquitous nature, which makes it available any time and from practically anywhere. Ubiquity reduces transaction costs for the individuals [Laudon & Traver 2010], and allows them to initiate transactions at a time and place of their choosing. This provides the individuals making a plunge into the MOB process the flexibility of maximizing their personal level of comfort while embarking on a potentially uncomfortable process. One of our respondents discussed the ease with which the process could be initiated:

“It started for me in January 2011... and I just typed in..’Find a Chinese wife’... I admired [Chinese spouses] that I had met...and I found all these websites.”

Further, universal standards represent an aspect of the technological environment which allows individuals to interact seamlessly with the interfaces, irrespective of the nature of the underlying technological infrastructure (Laudon and Traver 2010). But perhaps the most attractive feature in this context is the affordance provided by the environment’s global reach spanning across national boundaries, to search for partners beyond one’s own cultural milieu. As a respondent stated:

“Something that I cannot easily find here in the US...eHarmony? Match.com? They are still part of this culture. Cherry Blossoms [a MOB website] seems like a totally new avenue.”

During the entry state, the individuals are also pre-occupied with the task of choosing a particular MOB agency, while at same time trying to minimize personal risk. Functional affordances of IT enables this task by providing critical support to

the decision making process. This role of IT is again enabled by both the macro and micro features of the technology. At the macro level, the inherent information density of the internet environment supports this decision making process by making relevant, contextually rich, information abundantly available. This easily accessible information provides the individual with choice regarding MOB agencies, reducing the individual's search cost [Laudon and Traver 2010] because pertinent information such as recommendations, reports, and experiences of similar individuals were easily accessible. One of our interviewees acknowledged this point:

“Once MOB businesses went online, they did a better job at helping me to find the right person....”

The micro-features of IT are also significant enablers of the decision making process at this state. HCI research has frequently indicated that individuals search for signs of credibility [Pavlou and Gefen 2004; Pennington et al. 2003] when initiating an interaction with a particular website. This is predicated by of an overwhelming urge to reduce personal risk in an environment of information asymmetry. As individuals commence their interaction with a particular website, their perceptions of credibility is enhanced by interface features such as design look, information design/structure, perceptions of security/trust guarantees, information focus, information accuracy, etc. [Gefen et al. 2003; Liu 2005;McKnight et al. 2011]. In other words, an interface that provides an indication of the integrity of the information architecture and navigation, provides an aesthetics that appear professional, provides markers that assure safety from external threats are considered preferable [Pavlou and Gefen, 2004]. Therefore, two categories of micro features that become salient at this state are structural firmness and representational delight by providing evaluative interface features that allow the assessment of internal stability, external stability and the quality of the system interface. The overall impression provided by these features (if positive) enable an individual to decide on a particular MOB website, and progress further in the process to the match-seeking state. On the other hand, a negative impression leads to the rejection of particular MOB agency and renewal of search. Along these lines, one of our respondents stated:

“They look unprofessional... that really repels me... the language on these websites... is generally poor. I don't trust these services, I also did not like the way the website is designed. I do not want to feel like I am shopping for girls.”

In fact, continued negative perceptions regarding various MOB agency websites might undermine an individual's perceptions about the MOB process in general and trigger a shift to the wait and think state:

“Some of these sites ... the pictures are definitely fake. All the girls look as if they are out of a modeling agency. I want to see real women.”

For technology to enable a smooth transition from the Entry State to Match-Seeking State, two issues emerge as being salient: 1) The websites need to be professionally designed, and 2) They need to provide a clear sense to the potential client about the services offered and the user experience they can expect on the website. As a respondent stated:

“Unless you pay, it is hard to see what they have to offer. I don’t want to pay for something that is creepy.”

Moreover, the signing up for the services should be easy, professionally managed, and reasonably priced. An expectation regarding reasonable price is evident in the following quote:

“...I paid \$125. Not that much. There are other agencies out there that asked for \$2,000 to match me with a person here in the__. They asked for \$2,000 only for 5 names!”

The transition from the entry state to match-seeking state (noted as path (a), please see label of transition in Figure 2) is indicated when the individual formally signs up with the MOB service provider (we use terms such as MOB agency, MOB process mediator, and MOB service provider synonymously). However, in some cases, individuals seemed to transition (b) to what we refer to as a Wait-And-Think⁶ State. Conditions triggering this transition to Wait-And-Think State include, for men, (1) peer pressure discouraging the search for brides through this channel, (2) perceived stigma associated with being a client of MOB service provider, (3) lack of confidence on the service provider, often as a result of an unprofessional web-site, and (4) the inability or unwillingness to pay the fees. For women, factors include: (1) a solution for their economic hardship becoming available, (2) peer and societal pressure to consider traditional alternatives, and (3) horror stories of MOB. For both men and women, a lack of computer self-efficacy is an obvious factor leading them to the wait-and-think state. Changes in these conditions would lead to the reverse transition (c).

5.2 Match-Seeking State

The match-seeking state primarily involves the male participant actively searching for a female partner who best matches his preferences. Men select and contact women from an online listing of potential brides. The men are usually the ones to initiate conversations. Most men at this state have very definite ideas about the attributes they look for in a partner. As one of our respondents stated:

“If someone said having a good time, traveling, partying, etc... [was important to them] I don’t want that. What I found especially with Asian women, they wanted a responsible person, who cared about family, care about children. They wanted to raise kids...”

⁶ We would like to note here that the *Wait-And-Think* state and the *Termination* state that we refer to later in the discussion are somewhat different in nature to the other states (e.g. Entry, Match-Seeking). These states do not explicitly represent complete states that epitomize a stage in an individual’s evolution through the MOB process. In both these states, the individual exits from the actual MOB process, either temporarily or permanently. One could say that the Wait-And-Think State represents a holding state, where the individual contemplates re-entering the process, while the Termination State represents a premature and permanent exit. Therefore, we feel that these represent punctuation points within the process, and we have therefore conceptualized them as pseudo states. These states help us understand disruptions with an individual’s progress but are of not of core interest to our theorizing. Consequently, we have not explored or discussed these states as elaborately as the others.

Another respondent noted:

“I did not reply to everybodyI had an idea what I wanted...certain age group, profession...education level...you get a lot of response...you have to use your filter... I searched, and I found a certain set of people to contact that met my criteria...”

The role of the woman is relatively passive in this state, in that she most often waits to be picked by someone. Of course, there is some volition in the female agreeing to interact with an interested male, but in many cases, such volition is not exercised, given the implicit power differences between the two groups of participants (i.e., men over women). The power difference is perhaps a direct result of the significant asymmetry with regards to information available to the men and women. The information asymmetry is generally due to the fact that the women post (because they are required to do so) a significant amount of information about them, while men post very little, if any. Thus, women proceed (or do not proceed) with the MOB process based on the little information that may have been disclosed by the man in question. For example, one of our respondents describes how she initiated conversations based on impressions made for posted pictures:

“When I saw his face...I decided to write to him. He looked so ... friendly and sincere. I looked at the men’s pictures.”

This suggests that the women often have to decide whether to interact with interested men based on very incomplete and often unrealistic view of the man and/or his culture. A few of women in our study told us that their views on American men were based on Hollywood movies where men are generally depicted as passionate, committed, and considerate. Information asymmetries at this state of the MOB process create number of challenges for the women by making them the more vulnerable participants at this stage of the relationship.

In the Match-Seeking State, the goals/objectives for male and female participants are somewhat distinct. The men in this state actively search for their prospective partner in the online catalog of brides provided by the MOB agency. Their primary objective is therefore to search for and identify a candidate that best match their preference. The goal fulfillment actions that facilitate these objectives are information seeking and decision-making.

“I think having a good partner is the ultimate goal. I don’t mean beauty or sexual appeal...someone to go through life as your best friend and your lover.”

For the men, therefore, the significant functional affordances here are Information Accessibility and Decision Support - these provide support for the men to perform the tasks or actions that would allow them fulfill their objectives.

The women’s motivation at this point is to leverage the technological environment to present information in a manner that would maximize their chance of meeting a suitable partner, while competing with the other women. The functional affordance that assumes significance during this state is that of Communication Facilitation. A unique aspect of the website (as an environment) is that it offers a rich communication interface that contains within itself capabilities of a heterogeneous set of communication media. These offer communication with

varying degrees of synchronicity. Media Synchronicity Theory (MST) suggests this to be a desirable quality of a communication environment [Dennis et al. 2008]. This state can be perceived as the one in which the first overtures of a dialogue are enacted by the participating individuals. Such an overture can be characterized as one-way, in which the potential brides provide information about her through a variety of media, for the purpose of impression management, without the option of receiving reciprocal information. The goal of the communication process is inherently the conveyance of information. In addition, the nature of the information processing by the recipients (i.e., the male participants as they attempt to find a candidate with most desirable qualities) is slow and retrospective. This process for men is very aptly characterized by one of our respondents, who, when reflecting on how he picked the woman he would write to, stated:

"I had the feeling she was really concerned about her parents. She was obviously a woman that cared about family. That's what attracted me. If she cared about her parents, family, she'd care about me too..."

Another respondent described his feelings on this matter:

"They can post pictures... they post some words about their career...some words about their past...where they live... sometimes put a little video...It is very touching to read these bios..."

MST suggests that, in circumstances related to such communication, media of low synchronicity allowing for high rehearsability and high reprocessability is preferred. One of our respondent echoes this:

"... videocam options are great but I would definitely want to chat and e-mail for some time until I decide to do the webcam thing."

IT (in the form of a website) facilitates the communication by providing a wide choice of low synchronicity media in this state (e.g., photographs, audio clips, video clips and text presentation with high customizability).

The macro-features of IT that enable the key functional affordances in this state are richness, interactivity, and personalization/customization. The richness of the media allows the information central to the communication process to be presented through a variety of media (text, audio and video). For the women, these media offer flexibility of presentation of their information. Further, because of the high rehearsability offered by the media, there is an inherent opportunity for increasing the quality of their self-expression. For men, the same set of media, allows for a high level of reprocessability making it conducive to the retrospective nature of their information processing. Such reprocessability was found beneficial to the men not only in identifying the partner of the choice, but also in assessing the authenticity of the site. For example, one of our respondents commented on this issue of (the lack of) authenticity:

"I did read about [someone seeing] ...the same photo of a model in three different websites under three different names... I remember a guy telling me that he wrote to girl for about 6 months and then the lady wrote...that by the way I am not her...this is my photo..."

Another respondent also expressed his reservations because of the doctored photos on the MOB websites:

“There is a lot of sketchiness...well I did drop this site [name withheld]..because what they do is that they take photos of these women and they do something with Photoshop... So this website...I mean they are portraying the women the best they can...but it’s kind of...a trick...So I did drop the website because it was unreal...and false advertising...”

This issue seems to be quite prevalent, and some of our respondents found a way of dealing with the situation by taking advantage of the communication richness of the media by proposing a video chat or asking the potential partner to send them pictures from more realistic setting:

“... so one of the tricks I learnt was to say please send me a recent photo of you in the park or something...and then very often the person does not look the same. “

The capability of the media is further enhanced by technological capabilities of personalization/customization and interactivity. Personalization/customization allows the men the capability of creating information filters, thereby tailoring the information presentation to suit their preferred criteria. One interviewee stated:

“There is a query. You can actually put in things about the women...region, education level, profession, age, number of children, height weight and few other little things...smoking, non-smoking, single, divorced...”

Further, interactivity allows for instantaneous customized information presentation based on the filters and criteria set by the users. These features provide critical affordances to the individual’s decision-making process.

The micro-feature during this state (as also in the others) facilitate the social interaction by instantiating the capabilities offered by the macro features, through the provisions of (1) seamlessly instantiating of the various communication media capabilities, (2) providing easily comprehensible access to media, and (3) presenting information dynamically based on personal requirements (as an aid to decision-making). At this point, the salient categories are functional convenience and representational delight. The former allows the assessment of how well the interface provides affordances for information transmission and information processing that are aligned not only to the specific goals/objectives, but also to the requirements of the communication mode (i.e. facilitates decision-making and makes low synchronicity media available). Our respondents offered their views regarding features for better presentation and decision support that could be valuable at this point:

“I think what would be nice is to be able to compare a couple of girls based on certain traits. ... Just like Amazon.com, it would be really good if there are recommendations. Something like...’you seem to be interested in this girl, here are others who you might also like X, Y, Z”

Other features that were also suggested were "short video clips of women introducing themselves" and "personality tests for identifying matches" among others, similar to the algorithms used by online dating services.

Representational Delight enables the process by ensuring a certain level of quality of both the system interface (information presented in a manner that is readable and comprehensible) and the communication interface (variety as well as capability of seamless use). Our analysis indicates that progress to the interaction state occurs when the MOB agency website provides adequate affordances for information seeking and information processing tasks and assists the individual's decision making. One should also note however, that attaining of personal objectives for the individuals would only occur when the individuals leverage these capabilities appropriately and in a manner conducive to the communication goals.

The identification of potentially interesting women and the willingness of the chosen women to communicate with the interested men results in the transition (d) to the interaction state. Of course, at this time, some of the men may not be able to identify someone suitable. One of respondent shared his experience:

"I am specifically looking for Japanese women and these websites do not seem to be listing any Japanese women."

In such a case they would transition (e) to the Wait-And-Think State, where they would re-assess the criteria they were using or whether they should pursue this channel at all. At a later time, they may always return to Match-Seeking State (f), when additional women may have signed up with the agency, and/or their own initial search criteria had changed somewhat, or sometimes, even by switching to a different MOB agency. In some cases, the participant may also feel frustrated with the process, and transition directly to the Termination State (g). For women, the transition to Interaction State (d) typically occurs when they feel inclined to accept the initial communication overtures made to them.

5.3 Interaction State

The Interaction State involves the "getting to know each other" activities, where both parties engage in impression management regarding who they are as a person, assess need complementarities, and imagine (as well as co-construct) how the future would be together. This state exemplifies reciprocal or relatively balanced exchange relations. In the Interaction State, men and women with different backgrounds exchange e-mails, chat, and get to know each other. They tell each other about their lives, culture, and even troubles. The final aspect of the Interaction State is often a visit to the woman's country by the man (often, aided by the MOB agency) to gain more insight regarding his future partner. This also gives a chance for the woman to gain a better understanding of her potential husband prior to accepting a proposal for marriage (if it follows). As one respondent pointed out:

"...Then he wrote to me and said, 'I am coming to Thailand.' He contacted five women from Thailand so when he made the trip to Thailand, he booked hotels in other provinces so that he could meet [the] other girls too. But I was lucky to be the first one. We met and got along so he never went to the other provinces to meet four other girls. If I had not been the first one, he may have picked another girl."

The face to face visits also provide the women some indications about the authenticity of intentions of the man. One of our respondents recounted this conversation with his wife:

She said ‘well I have been talking to different men but you are the first one that came to China. You are sincere... a lot of men just want to flirt.’

From our data, we also discerned that power *shifts* in the relationship of the MOB partners, from dependency to that of interdependency (or perceived interdependency) mark a crucial point of punctuation in determining the success of the relation forged during the MOB process. Indeed, interviews reveal that partners of successful MOB marriages took time to learn about each other for an extended period of online chatting and even face-to-face visits. One of our women respondents elaborated on this issue:

“I and my husband corresponded 1 year and 2 months before we finally met and got married. We were already involved. After 1 year, I called him. On Valentine’s Day. We exchanged phones [phone numbers]. Yes, after a year! Then he came over.”

Meaningful friendships are formed in this state where both parties become indispensable part of the each other’s lives. Inability to achieve perceived interdependence often can lead to the shifts to Termination or Wait-And-Think State (k and i in figure 2). The entire idea is to move from communication wherein both the man and woman may be communicating *past* each other to mutual communication, wherein they communicate *with* each other [Sarker and Sahay 2003]⁷. Often, the achievement of communicative mutuality, a shared frame of reference regarding the need complementarities of the two parties (e.g., economic security for the women, and the possibility of having children for the man) in addition to physical attraction, leads to the transition (h) to the Wedding Bell State. In other words, social exchange at this stage prepares the foundation for the possibility of an emerging “perceived interdependency” in the relationship, and at this point, the partners feel they complement each of other and can proceed to the next state.

Because of the nature of communication made possible in today’s internet age, both individuals have an opportunity to get to know each other faster, and arguably better, during the Interaction State. One of our respondents recalled:

“It took us a year to get to know each other through letter correspondence and sometimes through phone. Online service is definitely faster and more efficient.”

Many respondents indicated that while looks were important, values and language/education were very critical; something that could not be really assessed without such communication. For example, one respondent mentioned:

⁷ We note that while mutuality in communication between two individuals in a virtual context can be enabled by synchronicity of the media [Dennis & Valacich 1999], it is possible for two parties to communicate synchronously in a way where there isn’t a shared focus, and a respect for one another’s interests and perspectives – required conditions for mutuality in communication [Sarker and Sahay 2003]. Likewise, asynchronous communication need not necessarily lack in mutuality. In other words, mutuality is not determined by the media, but the nature of social relationship between the interaction participants.

“...they should look pretty. Next...language. Language is important. If their English is good, then it means they are pretty educated. Then, I’d decide to continue the online relationship, otherwise I’d quit.”

Another respondent focused on “seriousness” noting that he found that Asian women in particular “wanted a responsible person, who cared about family and cared about children. They want to raise kids,” which is what he was looking for, rather than those “having a good time, travelling, partying, etc.” Whenever such mismatches in needs and expectations became clear, or conditions in their personal lives changed significantly, there would be a transition (i) to the Wait-And-Think State or the Termination State (k) (the latter occurring when the participants were so fed up with the channel that they would not be interested in participating in the MOB process any more). Interestingly, we did encounter such a case, where a man’s ex-wife persuaded him to come back, and he terminated the early interactions with an Asian lady whom he was getting prepared to visit. Thus, there could be situations where the individuals may later re-transition back to the Interaction State (j) and resume efforts at meeting the ideal partner with other candidates.

The two functional affordances that gain in salience in this state are – communication facilitation and service provision. The motivation on both sides is typically to gauge better the prospective partner’s suitability using information, and other cues not realized or made available earlier. Further, the nature of communication process can be characterized as being focused on convergence, with information processing characterized by faster speed, negotiation, adjustment, and verification [Dennis et al 2008]. According to MST, such communication situations are facilitated by media of higher synchronicity. The technology features provide Communication facilitation through a range of possible high synchronicity media (e.g., text chat, voice chat, video chat), thus matching the media capabilities with the communication objectives. The variety of synchronous media made available at this juncture creates a communication environment characterized by high transmission speed and a variety of symbol sets, are considered important for high synchronicity media [Dennis et al 2008]. The communication environment provided by IT allows the individuals to initiate dialogue, again using a variety of media, and attempt to reach a stage where the communication exhibits mutuality and results in a shared understanding about each other. The communication environment further facilitates the process by providing a virtual space that is inherently neutral, and accessible to the individuals based on their preference of time and space. This state arguably allows the participating women attain a relatively high zone of comfort, particularly in comparison with the lower power status they appear to have in the previous states. The multiple channels of communication and the capability of comparing information through them also enable IT to facilitate and fine-tune the decision-making of the individual. Finally, IT affords service provision, by facilitating access to important services (e.g., travel arrangements, background checks, visa application etc.) if individuals are close to making a decision and take the next step of meeting face-to-face.

The macro-features of ubiquity and universal standard facilitate the affordance of communication facilitation by supplementing the communication options offered by the technological feature of richness. In addition, information density of the environment which makes a wide variety of services to be easily available enables the service provision affordance of IT, during this state (in terms of MOB websites

this is achieved by providing information or links to relevant and reputable service providers). The micro features of IT, that are salient at this state, belong to the functional convenience category. The extent of functional convenience exhibited at this stage depends on how well the features facilitate the individuals' communication by making high synchronicity communication capability, as well as appropriate services/information easily available. Such services could include counseling regarding the interactions by the MOB agency staff, translation services facilitating the communication, and security mechanisms (including background check services) available to reduce vulnerability, both physical and financial (for example, some of the men have been asked for significant sums of money by the women in order to continue interactions). In addition, IT-enabled support for travel, visa assistance, and apartment booking services are useful, as the man plans a trip overseas to see his potential bride.

While technology provides critical affordances within this state, we feel that we should also point out how participants can somehow also be frustrated by its limitations. A frequent stumbling block of the interaction process in this state relates to language. The women often are not adequately conversant in the language and the communication is therefore facilitated by translation services provided by the MOB agency. Such translation services are typically human mediated. While such human mediation can often help bridge cultural distance and minimize misunderstandings arising from such distance, they can also introduce frustration because of delay in communication, a perception of reduced privacy, and costs incurred for human translation. One of our respondents commented on both aspects of such mediated communication:

“Chinese women are not very risqué ...the most she will ever say is that you make me feel warm. But an American men can often say really lewd things...for many of these the mediated transactions, this mediation is good, because the translator pulls out these and rephrases these things because it is very easy to scare away a Chinese woman... even if you say [‘my god you are so hot..’ that could put them off.”

At the same time, another respondent lamented about this problem and wished for improved technology that would speed up the translation process:

“Rather than write a letter and then wait two days to get a letter back... it is kind of gut wrenching when you like somebody and you have to wait the interpreter to do their job...”

Another respondent added:

“I don't know if a woman writes her true feelings if she knows that a third person is reading her letters. So I think I think if IT needs to grow and help people like me...the IT could have a live translator like Google translate...but the translation softwares are not so good now... I just wish that I could go to a website and type in the chat program and I get it in English and she gets it in Mandarin.”

Yet another respondent highlighted differences related to interactions that a machine translator may not be much help with:

"Things like little phrases ... [my wife said to me] 'you always make trouble for me' and I was taken aback..., I had to ask my [friends] 'how serious was it?' They told me that it was just a phrase... [I learnt that] there is a whole side to Chinese women called soft complaining which is a call for attention. But if you just take the words it a sound harsher...that's the support I need."

A related but different theme that emerged was a tendency to continue the IT-mediated communication outside the specific auspices of the MOB agency website. One of our respondents noted that more often than not, such a move is predicated by a desire to reduce expenses, and also to utilize technology platforms considered more convenient (and not offered by the MOB agency). One respondent stated:

"The five dollars a letter [for translation services] adds up fast so I asked my wife to send me email in her language and I just forward to friend [who knew Mandarin] and they would just translate it for me. Then I would write a letter and my friend would translate it for me and I would send it back to her...we switched from a paid service...we moved out from the site."

5.4 Wedding Bell & Post Wedding Bell States

The commitment to have a future together as man and wife signals the transition (h) to the Wedding Bell State. This is the "coupling" state, and a formal wedding must be organized. Among other issues, spouse visa must be obtained as part of preparation for the woman to move overseas. When dealing with Asian cultures especially, the man needs to be introduced to (and be somewhat integrated with) the larger family of the bride. While we did not encounter a situation in our cases (i.e., those whom we interviewed) where a transition occurred from the Wedding Bell State to a Termination State, other evidence suggested that a last moment disagreement regarding the wedding can arise, with misunderstandings arising as friends and family from both sides get involved. Further, a gross misrepresentation of relevant information (e.g., marital status, financial stability) by either party can be discovered, and this would lead to the transition (m). Otherwise, the completion of the wedding and immigration formalities signals the transition (l) to the Post-Wedding state, when the couple settles down to their new life. One respondent stated:

"The young lady over there [Philippines] was good at computers. I received a couple of messages every day. Of course internet makes things easier compared to catalog days. More access... of course, CB [the MOB agency] [has] got more sophisticated...in a good sense. My experience with CB was very pleasant. They helped me a lot. You can get information on immigration, law, for an additional fee, they help you with your immigration forms. But even before that, they give a lot of information... for free... They were tremendous. They charge you around \$600 after you decide to take that route. They can arrange your travel plans and everything. You can buy an immigration package and they arrange everything for you and her."

The Post Wedding State captures the different issues that arise after the woman moves overseas as a bride. These include getting integrated with the culture and society, and for many, coming to terms with the fact that developed countries are not necessarily as perfect as she may have dreamt of or been led to believe. For

example, for some, the “American dream is actually a nightmare,” due to changes in the financial and job situation, abuse, significant mismatch with the spouse (especially the language), and cultural repression (e.g., not being allowed to cook food from native land), due to which yet another transition (n) to termination can occur⁸. On the positive side, many brides experience a fulfilling life, one that is better than they ever had imagined. In this state, although interdependence is evident, actors still exercise control over each other’s actions. Power does not adhere to any particular position in the dyad but rather expresses the capacity of one actor (man or woman) to control the financial, psychological and social resources the other seeks [Burke 1997, p. 149]. We note that control and power in this context do not refer to domination. What may be seen as “exploitation” may in effect be a question of whether the partners perceive it to be the case. At the outset, men seem to be the sole controllers of financial resources. Women live in a foreign country with little or no social support and are forced to adapt within an alien environment. We argue that the imbalance in a relationship should be seen in combination with partner’s perceived comfort and expected value. For example, the initial difficulties (e.g., difficulties associated with new language, foreign environment, little or no personal financial resources, no social network) can be offset by positive experiences (e.g., caring husband, secure life, happy family), which may effectively transform a potentially alienating condition to a novel exploration experience in her new country. If power, however, rests in one partner for a prolonged period of time, the more dependent actor may be exploited and will naturally be dissatisfied with the relationship. Such an unbalanced relationship, as it progresses, leads to less cooperation and a greater frequency of conflict. However, we argue that the assumption that a partner always will exploit the more dependent partner does not seem to hold true for all the MOB cases, as is evident from our interviews.

The salient functional affordances are somewhat similar for the last two states. During these states the role of IT becomes less central in certain ways, as the individuals have moved on from the virtual space to the physical domain, in terms of their interaction. During the Wedding Bell State where the primary preoccupation of the individuals is to organize the wedding, affordance that becomes key is that of service provisions, which facilitates the planning of the event. Useful support may be provided in the form of linkages to companies that organize/facilitate weddings in the bride’s or the groom’s countries, cultural orientation material for parties, and travel, legal, and immigration support services. Another possibility could be toward providing a channel of communication (with IT augmented by human agents in community internet centers or internet cafes) between the couple and the bride’s family, who may not be computer savvy or have access to a computer at home.

During the Post Wedding Bell State, the IT can continue to afford service provision, by facilitating the couple’s transition to a life together. These could, for example, take the form of information services that allows the women to learn more about the cultural environment in which they find themselves embedded. The service provisions of IT that would be beneficial at this state would be to enable a community, for instance, to offer social interaction with others with the following shared experiences: those currently in the same circumstances and originating from the same country, those having shared interests not readily satisfied in the new

⁸ It must also be acknowledged that the man can be the victim of abuse and fraud perpetrated by the woman. We did not encounter such a situation in our cases. In addition, we have assumed that the men, being embedded in their own cultures, have other support structure and coping mechanisms available more readily than do the women who are imported in through the MOB process.

cultural setting, sharing stories and lessons regarding the MOB experience, offering ideas of how to stay in touch with family and to send gifts back home, seeking help from, and providing help to, other members of the community, and providing mechanisms for exit from the relationship if that becomes necessary. Here the key objective of IT is to ensure that the bride does not feel a sense of isolation and helplessness in her new environment. For example, one of our respondents felt that MOB agencies perhaps stopped short of providing adequate service provisioning for marriage:

“The websites need to help you before the marriage... and then there is the prep for marriage, there is onsite marriage support. But there is a missing process here...that is post marriage. I don't think any company has the whole circle of relationship circle that my wife and I need.”

We feel that these systems can be very helpful for the brides who are in the process of adapting to their new environment. Perhaps an organization, governmental or non-governmental, could start thinking about support and exit systems that can help to safeguard the interests of the foreign bride, the MOB. As the above discussion indicates, IT continues to perform the role of communication facilitator during these two states.

During the final two states, the relevant macro-features are information density, ubiquity, richness, and interactivity. Information density and ubiquity facilitate the role of the service provider, while the other two shepherd the role of communication facilitator. The micro feature category of greatest relevance during these last two states is that of functional convenience, which allows the evaluation of the extent to which the website provides information regarding critical services.

6. CONCLUSION -- CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

6.1 Contributions

A particular contribution of this research, we feel, is the detailed theoretical elaboration of the phenomenon based on our interpretation of the empirical investigation. Our process model uses the notion of behavioral states and the transition across these states to provide a nuanced narrative of relationship development as it unfolds in MOB phenomenon. This is, to the best of our knowledge, one the first comprehensive studies of the online MOB phenomenon that includes the role of technology while exploring the social processes. As noted earlier, much of the work published in business journals is limited to online dating. In this paper, we clearly distinguish the MOB process from online dating. Though both involve IT mediation, unlike online dating, the offline component in MOB interactions is limited. Most interaction takes place online due to the often international nature of MOB relationships. Moreover, while most research on online dating views partners as equals [Frost et al. 2008]; our work focuses on mail order bride business, in which men — at least in the initial stages of the process — are often the ones in control. Although this phenomenon of MOB has been investigated in fields outside business (especially by scholars of sociology, communications and women's studies), most research focuses solely on *exploitation*. Previous research seems to reflect a perspective that emphasizes social construction of gender roles and view the mail order bride experience as an extreme case of oppression of women [Angeles & Sunanta 2007, Hughes 2000, and Sciachitano 2000]. While such research

has highlighted critical, and potentially important issues faced by women while participating in the MOB process, we believe our focus on uncovering the MOB process in its entirety, with an emphasis on the evolving role of technology during the process, provides a less explored and perhaps equally illuminating perspective. In other words, we believe that our research offers a granularity in the understanding of the MOB process and the role of IT within it offers an integrative view of the phenomenon that is unique and perhaps more inclusive than the previous perspectives.

Another interesting aspect of our theory relates to our focus on both genders. We have attempted to develop insight not only on the processual evolution of an individual's behavioral patterns, but how it was influenced by the individual's gender identity. We feel that our process model allows us to develop an understanding of how both women and men navigate through this process. While we realize that some of our readers may question our lack of criticality to the MOB phenomenon in general, and to the objectification and presumed exploitation of disadvantaged women through the use of IT in particular, we feel that our amoral stance provides an opportunity for alternative interpretations. We would like to clearly state at this juncture, that *it is not our intention to downplay the very real issues of exploitation and bias against women that sometimes underlie the MOB process, nor do we condone the unscrupulous behavior of agencies that abound the landscape.* In fact, it would be fair to say that our investigation begins by accepting (but suspending) the traditional view, and attempts to look *beyond* such a perspective. Our intention in writing the paper was not to develop a criticism of the MOB phenomenon, of which there are more than a handful of examples in the social science literature, but to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. In particular, we eschew being judgmental for the sake of developing a balanced perspective of manner in which the social interactions play out within a technology-mediated environment. While critical pieces are useful in informing the readers about the injustices and structural domination that many scholars believe to be implicit in the MOB practices, and offer a very valuable perspective to the phenomenon, the problem with many of these studies written from a moral high ground, is that: (a) they do not acknowledge that there is a real human need that exists, both among men who sign up to be clients and the women who sign up to be selected as brides; (b) they do not provide an understanding, from the subject's perspective, how the MOB participants experience the phenomenon (indeed, many women as well as men experience the MOB process and outcome very positively) since the authors are pre-committed theoretically-- such interpretations may be characterized as imposed, not emergent as a grounded investigation might lead to; and (c) thus, they cannot offer a map of how we address some of the pitfalls associated with the process, using IT for instance. We would further submit that our amoral, non-critical stance does not obfuscate the power asymmetry and the objectification of women that often characterize this process. In fact, we believe that the discussions on the MOB process clearly highlight the prevalence of these, particularly during the Entry and Match-Seeking States of the process. At the same time, our process model brings up somewhat newer themes. First, it suggests that even within the MOB phenomenon, successful and happy relationships are contingent on an evolution of the power dynamics from a dependent to a more interdependent relationship. Second, it also suggests rather interestingly that unscrupulous behavior, while predominantly male driven, may not necessarily be limited to them. Further, we feel that our model has some compensatory benefits in

terms of providing the potential bride and groom with certain safeguards. To start with, our explicit consideration of perspectives of both gender roles in the process model allows individuals to develop insights about the motivations and objectives of the other, and makes them aware of behavior that could signal potential harm to them. Next, our narrative highlights a number of attributes that reduce trust on MOB agencies. Thus, this can allow the MOB participant to develop rubrics and markers for gauging the reliability and trustworthiness of these organizations. To the best of our knowledge, none of the earlier papers have shed sufficient light on need complementarities of partners involved at each stage of the match seeking process, thereby providing an explanation of why individuals enter into such relationships while being aware of dangers of exploitation and the attached social stigma.

A third, and possibly the more relevant contribution of our research is our treatment of the technology-mediated environment in the MOB process. Our characterization of the process states as configurative representation of the participants' goals, their perception of functional affordances provided by the technology, the key technology features that serve to provide notice of the potentiality of the affordances, and goal fulfillment tasks/actions, allow us to explicitly situate the influence of technology within human actions. In other words, our study suggests that the technological features perceived and comprehended by an individual are not absolute but relative to the particular combination formed by their goals/objectives and the actions that they undertake to fulfill them. This combination gives rise to certain unique needs in the individuals. These, in turn, facilitate their comprehension of technology, allowing them to perceive distinct functional affordances of suitably aligned subsets of technology features. Our work suggests that the recognition of perceived affordances and their mapping to technology feature sets is dynamic and changes as the individual's goals/objectives evolve. We feel that this perspective explains human interactions situated within technological environments well, and can be easily applied beyond the confines of the MOB process.

We also believe that our focus on technology features and their perceived functional affordances has certain beneficial implications for the stakeholders. First, our identification of the various technology features and the functional affordances provides the stakeholders a clearer perspective on how to best harness technology features, not only to achieve their objectives, but also to safeguard participants from possible predatory behavior. Second, we feel that our identification of distinct functional affordances across the different MOB states along with the specific micro and macro features of technology that provides such affordances offer avenues for designing better IT systems. Our clear explication of the evolution of a path to success in terms of facilitating features can be useful in developing a clear architectural strategy regarding the implementation of technological feature bundles of MOB-facilitating technology. In other words, our theory allows insight that could help develop a prioritization of technology features and could also develop strategies of dynamically increasing their significance to individuals at various states within the MOB process. For example, our process theory indicates that website design focused on providing markers of security, implementing sound navigation mechanisms and developing an aesthetically pleasing interface will facilitate goal fulfillment actions of MOB participants in the Entry and Match-Seeking state. On the other hand, technological feature bundles that facilitate information search and transaction processing will facilitate the MOB participant's

action and their decision making in the Interaction, Wedding Bell and Post Wedding Bell States. Therefore, web design that makes such technology features salient to the users depending on their situation in the MOB process would increase perceptions of usability in MOB participants and, in turn, enhance the reputation of the MOB agency in their minds.

Finally, we believe that our specific approach to constructing the process model in terms of behavior states, their explication, and a description of their transitions offers a very effective way for developing process models. Our efforts in applying these constructs are not unique but we do provide an illustration of how such an approach may be adopted.

6.2 Implications for Future Research

The rapid rise in demand and supply of this global service industry deserves attention from academicians, public policy makers, and regulators. We hope that this research will help generate further research on this important topic by scholars from many disciplines beyond IS such as business law, marketing, social sciences, or humanities.

Future research should start with the remaining controversies, discussing and studying in depth the various ethical issues surrounding this phenomenon. For instance, we might ask “Is the MOB practice a fair social exchange process between a man and a woman who are now afforded a global opportunity to meet over the worldwide web, via the assistance of an IT-enabled matchmaking agency?” While our initial findings indicate that men do possess more control over the process, and women have some degree of control, we find the level of information that women have access to is often far less than what is available to men. Thus, ethical concerns center on this unequal amount of information. Future research and practice should explore ways to address the asymmetry and inequality of information availability to the two parties, since an informed decision has the potential to reduce abuse after marriage, an important goal for public policy makers, human rights organizations, and academicians alike. Similarly, policy and law makers would be interested in identifying the nature of responsibilities that the MOB agencies have toward the parties they serve. What is the best policy approach when many sites are foreign businesses operating their site from outside the countries (and hence outside the legal systems) of most of their clients (e.g., based in the United States, Scandinavian countries, and the United Kingdom)?

Our study also reveals a substantial change in the communication process as a result of the penetration of IT around the world. What once was conducted via catalogs and international mail between two people can now be conducted, thanks to technological advances, almost instantaneously. Great anticipation used to follow the sending of a letter when it was sent via mail, and we wonder if our IT-aided ‘instant’ message (and gratification) society is ultimately being helpful (or harmful) in the matchmaking process. While participants can now narrow a search for a ‘soul mate’ in a short amount of time, we wonder if the speed of the search and criteria matching, and impression management in a distributed setting actually aids (or undermines) a successful match process. With the availability of video chat and the immediate perceptions which can be formed, are those decision cues based upon initial impression as accurate as they would have been if formed through a handwritten letter or email exchange? Future research may help determine if the changing pace or method of communication tends to bring about some helpful

developments (and perhaps greater equality) in the search process, or if it creates some unanticipated challenges and asymmetries.

After reviewing the experiences of participants in active and past searches, as well as observing the portrayal of women on websites, we wonder if this IT-enabled portrayal and interaction could ultimately turn women from potential mates to a type of 'product' in the eyes of some men, which could have negative consequences downstream. Thus, an interesting question emerges – are dating websites (and the marketing of international relationships) enabling the 'commoditization' of women (and, perhaps, men)? Given the ease of searching by desired criteria (e.g. hair color, body type, attractiveness, professional/educational experience, the presence or absence of children, etc.), how prevalent is it that some men start thinking of women as goods or products rather than soul mates? Should this commoditization occur in the minds of men, does this then impact the quality of the ensuing relationship? Future research could help answer these important questions, as well as help determine if there are approaches or techniques regarding information display or the ensuing communication process that would lessen the potential of the commoditization of women. Perhaps a particular area such research could focus on is how technology could alleviate the opportunities for deception during online interaction, by providing participants with system based cues and/or training. Such research could build on existing research at detecting deceptions in online communication (e.g. Derrick et al. 2013).

Finally, now that we have a broad understanding of the mail order bride phenomenon through our study, we suggest researchers examine, in more depth, the social exchange process in this international relationship and marriage context, including some of the key social and financial benefits gained by both the men and the women. In addition to Social Exchange Theory, other theories and concepts that could be used as a foundation for expanding research in this area should also be examined, such as symbolic interactionism, self-concept, articulation theory, internal and external locus of control, and value-related theories.

In closing, we reflect back on the real and very different experiences of two women who were MOBs and showcased in the introduction to this paper. We have found the MOB phenomenon to be complex and one which raises questions regarding the lack of equality in the experiences of the men and women participants. However, we have also found that despite stereotypes and stigma, loving relationships and fulfilling futures are indeed real outcomes of this technology aided matchmaking process. We hope that our study helps stimulate interest and leads to further research with significant theoretical, managerial, and public policy contributions to this important global IT-enabled social phenomenon.

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ONLINE APPENDIX

The “Mail-Order-Bride” (MOB) Phenomenon in the Cyberworld: An Interpretive Investigation

A. THEORETICAL SENSITIVITY⁹

Our study of social interactions was informed by Social Exchange Theory (SET) [Thibaut and Kelley 1959], widely acknowledged as being among the most powerful conceptual paradigms for understanding social behavior. SET, with its capacity to explicate individuals’ motivations in initiating, continuing, and existing relationships, provided us with an overarching framework to gain further insights on the complex MOB phenomenon. SET suggests that the expectation of a reward will encourage participants to interact with each other [Thibaut and Kelley 1959]. This theoretical perspective directed us to focus our analysis on understanding of the expectations of rewards of the participating parties and enabled us to develop a rich understanding of premises that set up and perpetuated the MOB process.

While SET provided us with an excellent lens to examine the social interaction underlying the MOB phenomenon from the perspective of the attributes of the relationship, we also sought a theoretical perspective that focused on the psyche of the individual. This was important in understanding the factors that made individuals willing participants of the MOB process. Specifically, we drew upon Self-discrepancy theory [Higgins 1987], which focuses on three basic domains of the self: the actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self. The ideal self is defined as the type of self that one would ideally like to have, which is reflected in the aspirations of the individual (e.g., getting married, having kids, having a supportive, loving wife, etc.). The ought self is defined as what one believes one should (normatively speaking) have. When there is an incongruity in the sense of self, such as between people’s ideal selves (the attributes they wish to have) and actual selves (the degree to which they believe they actually possess those attributes), or between their ought selves (the attributes they see as their obligation to possess, such as the ability to care for and provide security for parents and siblings) and their actual selves, then individuals are driven toward a particular course of action related to the incongruity. Overall this perspective, bringing focus on the incongruity of different self-images, provided us with a complementary micro-level lens for investigating the phenomenon.

The social interaction in the MOB context is intrinsically embedded within a technological environment (e.g., the Internet and the MOB agency website). It was therefore of critical importance to understand in depth the role played by IT in facilitating this social interaction, particularly in terms of its appropriation by the users to achieve their goals. Our examination of this phenomenon was primarily aided by the conceptual lens of Functional Affordances. Functional affordances represent a relationship between a technology object and a specified user that “identifies what the user may be able to do with the object, given the user’s capabilities and goals” [Markus and Silver 2008, p. 622]. In other words, they provide the user with a sense of the potential of the IT and are seen to embody the necessary conditions for any appropriation moves by the user [Markus and Silver

⁹ The references for the citations in the appendix are included in the main reference section of the article

2008]. Further, for a specific IT, the functional affordances perceived by the user are contingent on the goal (or task objectives) of the user as well as features of the technology. Therefore, our theoretical lens for investigating the role of IT was additionally supplemented by that of technology features.

The IT environment of our context needs to be viewed at two distinct levels. At one level, this consists of the larger environment composed of the Internet (the telecommunication infrastructure and its associated protocols and standards) and the World Wide Web (the application infrastructure), which provides the reach, range, and responsiveness [Keen and Cummings 1993]. At another level, the IT environment is related to the interface provided by the specific website the individuals interact with. For our analysis, we distinguish between these two levels using the labels of macro features of IT and micro features of IT respectively.

IS literature has characterized certain unique technological features of Internet-based technology systems. These are: ubiquity, global reach, universal standards, richness, interactivity, information density, personalization/customization and social technology [Laudon and Traver 2010]. We consider these as the set of macro features of IT that are potentially relevant to the present context. Micro features of IT in this particular context refer to the interface characteristics of the MOB agency website. IS literature, particularly the body of work relating to ecommerce and human computer interaction, has examined these interface characteristics extensively and has found them to be strong indicators of a variety of consumer-related variables such as purchase intention, satisfaction, technology usage, and perceptions of website quality [Gefen et al. 2003; Palmer 2002; Pavlou and Gefen 2004; Pennington et al. 2003; Van der Heijden 2004]. To organize the micro features of IT related to the MOB websites, we use the framework proposed by Kim et al. [2002] as scaffolding.

The Kim et al. [2002] framework can serve as a lens for understanding the overall quality of the website (in the authors' terminology, architectural quality). The core of the framework is a coherent classification of a website's interface features. They propose three high level categories of interface features: structural firmness, functional convenience, and representational delight. At the second level, they propose a further six dimensions of perceived quality of the website, entirely contained within the higher level categories described before. These are internal stability, external security, information gathering, order processing, system interface, communication interface. The framework informs our understanding of the influence of the interface qualities on social interactions. The details of the macro and the micro features of IT are provided in tables A.1 and A.2.

Table A.1. Macro Features of IT (adapted from Laudon and Traver 2010)

Macro features of IT	Description
Ubiquity	Internet technologies are constantly available across time and space.
Global Reach	Internet technologies offer reach and range that span across national geographies and multiple cultures.
Universal standards	Internet technologies are characterized by one set of technological standards, making it easily accessible to all.
Richness	Internet technologies offer a variety of synchronous and asynchronous communication options that include video, audio and chat.
Interactivity	Internet technologies allow two-way communication, providing users control over the mechanism and the nature of communication.
Information density	Internet technologies provide users with plentiful information choices, reducing both search and transaction costs.
Personalization/Customization	Internet technologies allow personalization of information presentation and customization of product/services to suit individual needs.
Social technologies	Internet technologies provide opportunities for user generated content and enable formation of social network communities.

Table A.2 – Micro Features of IT (adapted from Kim et al 2002)

Micro-feature of IT (with definition)		Description of sub-dimensions
Structural Firmness The solidity of the system structure and its capability to counter expected and unexpected threat to the technological environment.	Internal Stability	Interface characteristics that influence perceptions of rapid access, quick error recovery and correct operation and computation
	External Security	Interface characteristics that indicate robustness to external threats, in terms of security and privacy safeguards
Functional Convenience The extent of availability of convenient functions that enable transaction of related tasks and activities.	Information Gathering	Interface characteristics that facilitates information seeking tasks of the individual by organizing information such that it is current, easily accessible and easily comprehensible
	Order processing	Interface characteristics that indicates interface’s ability to enable specific task related transaction processing in terms of efficiency, traceability, easy comprehensibility, and easy accessibility
Representational Delight The extent to which technological interface enhances the affect an individual feels toward to it.	System Interface	Interface characteristics that indicate the extent by which the interface affords pleasantness of interaction for humans
	Communication Interface	Interface characteristics that indicate the extent by which the interface facilitates human to human communication

We note that, consistent with Glaser’s view [1978], our theoretical sensitivity is derived from “broader” literature, and not from substantive literature of MOB and the role of IT in it.