Cultural Production in Virtual and Imagined Worlds

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Edited by

Tracey Bowen and Mary Lou Nemanic

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

This collection is dedicated to all the people in past and continuing conversations about visual culture and the internet and to the members of the Mid-Atlantic Popular Culture/American Culture Association.

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Introduction

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Tracey Bowen and Mary Lou Nemanic

> An average American guy, David Peck currently spends 8 hours a day as a blond, curvaceous woman named Britney Mason, Peck's avatar and visual representation within the virtual world Second Life. A CNBC video clip shows Peck as an entrepreneur who has built a growing consulting business as a woman in an imaginary world full of logos, branding projects, advertisements and beautiful people who appear to have been lifted from a glossy fashion magazine.[1]

Second Life experiences such as Peck's illustrate the increasing interconnectivity between visual culture and virtual existence. A great deal of scholarship in the fields of visual culture and Internet culture has emerged in recent decades, but generally these areas have been examined through separate, albeit related discourses, leaving the intersection of visual culture and Internet culture rarely addressed. Cyberculture aficionados such as Pierre Lévy, Andrew Ross, Sadie Plant, Sherry Turkle and Howard Rheingold typically view cyberculture as a network of communities many of which were constructed as a substitute for the lack of community in everyday life.[2] While they have created insights into the construction and the effects of virtual communities, these scholars, like so many scholars of cyberculture to date, utilize methodologies that are primarily text-based rather than image-based; and traditional text-based paradigms do not emphasize or address the distinctive aspects of cyberspace such as the ambiguity resulting from disembodiment and de-contextualization and how this is related to the construction of virtual communities.

In David Porter's anthology, *Internet Culture,* the author/editor describes the net as a "truly transnational public sphere" that has grown from a "fringe cultural phenomenon to a significant site of cultural transformation

and production in its own right."[3] Most recently scholars, who include David Silver and David Trend, have taken a complex, interdisciplinary approach to the Internet arguing against popular claims that it is a venue for cyber democracy—or at the other extreme—that it is merely a new form of commercial culture.[4] Other scholars, including Duncum, Hall, and Sturken and Cartwright examine visual culture as diverse representations seen through the lenses of film, television, and advertising.[5] These particular media entangle context in some sort of visual narrative that is often imbued with particular hegemonic value systems. However, what happens when the narratives are constructed through virtually based communities where contexts continually shift and value systems are visualized, disrupted and contested?

Significantly, this book foregrounds how the two important fields of visual culture and internet culture interact, exploring the intersections, overlaps and disparities in terms of how the two discourses illuminate our everyday negotiations as we become increasingly dependent on the Internet and virtual/visual imagery. Virtual worlds such as Second Life are underlined by a "visual-ness" that is increasingly challenging text-based communication as the origin of meaning making in the world. What is being examined here are the ways in which we use visual/virtual lenses to see the world both individually and collectively. How are our everyday negotiations affected by collective imaginations afforded by digital connectivity and how are visual representations affected by physical and ideological manipulation? These questions are further complicated by issues of access in terms of literacy and economics, and by diversity in terms of cultural histories that affect how we read these new and plentiful texts and make meaning through our interactions in their spaces. John Weaver contends that we actively frame our interactions and negotiations in order to make meaning. When information, whether text (word)-based or image-based, becomes fluid through digitization and the flow of that information is distributed across diverse networks, we are constantly working to re-frame, reconstruct and re-inscribe meaning in order to make sense of our experiences.[6] Both Weaver and W.J.T. Mitchell examine the affects of looking at visual culture through virtual lenses. Digital and virtual environments not only open up the opportunity for images to be reproduced on a much larger scale, increasing the possibility of access, but they also open the potential for plurality and diversity of visual representations – negating fixed frames and universal meanings.[7]

Generally the authors of the essays in this collection acknowledge the vast changes in our social environment, affected by shifting relationships between new technologies, art and media forms and the massive production

of images. While the field of visual culture encompasses all things visual it also contests traditionally set boundaries between high and low culture and materiality and virtuality particularly relating to the onslaught of digital imagery online. The internet has presented us with an overabundance of visual stimulation that we must negotiate daily, and the web, a much-touted site of hyper-stimulation, appears as a vehicle that primarily facilitates the values of commercialism and consumerism. Finding meaning in our experiences with these sites requires not only looking at individual texts and the contexts of their presentation but beyond to a much broader social and political arena.

Although the term culture is used in differing ways in various disciplines, our definition is similar to those currently used by scholars in anthropology, cultural history and cultural studies, among other disciplines. For them culture includes patterns of behavior, customs, traditions, values, and symbols constituting a way of life**.** Anthropologist Clifford Geertz expresses this clearly in his seminal work *The Interpretation of Cultures*:

> The concept of culture I espouse…is essentially a semiotic one…believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun; I take culture to be those webs and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.[8]

Geertz's anthropological definition rejects art history's traditional classifications of cultural forms and artifacts as high brow or low brow based on subjective values of taste. Scholars who adopt this contemporary view of culture typically see it as, in the words of Cultural Studies scholar John Fiske, "the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system."[9] Further they argue persuasively that cultures produce forms or artifacts referred to as cultural texts. Texts can range from books, TV programs and public celebrations to websites and virtual imagery among many others. In addition these scholars see the audiences of mass-mediated popular culture texts as diverse, fluid and dynamic. Thus cultural texts are constantly changing to stay relevant enough to attract and maintain the diverse and ever-changing mass audiences. In particular, Cultural Studies scholar Stuart Hall argues that visual texts online and offline can be interpreted or "read" for their various meanings like other non-visual texts.[10] Because cultural texts are open to multiple interpretations and various uses within particular time periods, they reflect both political and social tensions as well as the ambiguities of particular eras, and thus are typically complex sites of contestation.

Our critical approach to this study includes not only viewing internet images as contested sites of cultural production and activity but also as sites that advance ideologies related to cultural transformation. Although images have historically been taken as reflections of reality, viewing them as multi-layered cultural texts opens them up to diverse interpretations often unintended by their producers. Adding to the modern proliferation of images and their endless reproduction capacity, the internet removes imagery from local environments and current time periods and allows endless re-combinations of images across time and space.

Notably we would like to emphasize that the opportunity for multiple readings does not negate the power of normative values embedded in visual cultural texts on diverse and constantly changing audiences. Cultural texts are typically imprinted with both the normative and oppositional elements of a particular cultural era allowing audiences to choose to accept their "preferred" or normative interpretations or to use them as free spaces for alternative interpretations to derive pleasure from resisting, subverting or evading the status quo presented in them or to selectively accept some of the "preferred" interpretations in conjunction with alternative interpretations of their own. By choosing alternative meanings and individualized uses of cultural texts, audiences are seen as active producers of their own meanings and pleasures. This perspective contrasts with the classic Frankfurt School position that focused on status quo values imprinted in mass-mediated popular culture texts and the ways that the status quo is reinforced in audiences.[11] While these scholars have provided insight into hegemonic processes, their work emphasized power from the top down and audiences were typically viewed as monolithic and either cultural dupes or passive/mindless receptacles of normative values. However, a few concepts raised by the Frankfurt School theorists give us a starting point for grappling with the complexities surrounding our relationships to mass-produced popular texts, particularly those in the visual/virtual realm. These initial ideas themselves illuminate gaps in our understanding that have been further problematized by our role as culture producers and meaning disseminators across multiple worlds. W. J. T. Mitchell and John Weaver for instance explore the affordances of these other/virtual/biocybernetic worlds for producing and disseminating meaning through visual representations that question and contest the hegemonic values purported by scientific and political institutions. Catherine Hobbs extends Mitchell's thinking by questioning the mass reproduction of physical bodies as objects of manipulation and prompts one to recall earlier manifestos such as Donna Haraway's treatise on the cyborg.[12] These discussions are a precursor to Britney Mason's existence

and remind us of the possibility for trace elements of Marxist concepts such as commodity fetishism to emerge ever so slightly and oh so morphed into new obsessions with online living and image-projection.[13]

This book addresses yet another community that shifts and morphs over time and context. The Mid-Atlantic Popular/American Culture Association (MAP/ACA) has involved academics and independent scholars from around the world, meeting annually since 1992 to carve out spaces for a diverse range of conversations about the intersection of various "cultural" communities. The purpose of this book is to extend and update selected work presented in 2006, 2007 and 2008 at the conferences' Internet Culture and Visual Culture panels to explore the relationship between these two areas, to raise questions and to present points of departure for future scholarship in these relatively new and very rapidly changing disciplines. Our purpose also includes acknowledging the need for new interdisciplinary cross-media models for interpreting the different levels of complexity in cyber images to complement the linguistic model that has been previously applied to imagery analysis. These new models of analysis would be especially geared to the emotional, covert and universally readable aspects of images, specifically addressing the practices of looking, the conventions in different visual media, visual myths and stereotypes online and identity issues relating to gender, class, race and ethnicity.

It should be emphasized that visual and internet cultures not only have a great many overlapping areas, but they also have distinctive features. Visual culture includes non-digital offline components such as representations of identity through the body and through constructed spaces of living and working; or public and performative activities like parades in the public sphere. Visual culture involves the interaction of imagery with other communicative modes.[14] Similarly internet culture includes textual elements (other than captions), aural and kinesthetic modalities. A thorough discussion of the issues surrounding multimodal modes of communication in relation to the distinctive areas in each field is outside the scope of this book. Rather, we have chosen to limit our examination to the overlapping spheres of visual and internet culture as they have emerged from a series of contextualized conversations.

Because this book emphasizes both visual culture and internet culture, it might be criticized by traditionalists who feel that there are just too many "cultures" in contemporary scholarship—including popular culture, cyber culture, visual culture and material culture. Some typically contend that there are so many cultures that the term "culture" has become meaningless and that to remedy the situation these "cultures" should be

made "subfields" and folded into larger categories such as popular culture or cultural studies. While this would no doubt simplify matters, it would also misrepresent the complexity, diversity and dynamic characteristics of these two areas and could easily lead to reductionist thinking about them; thus continuing to neglect the particularly unique circumstances and functions of the *virtual/visual* inherent in both visual culture and internet culture.

Consequently this collection of essays explores two emerging scholarly fields focusing on the diverse forms of production arising from society's ongoing negotiations between the two. Because of the wide array of topics and issues in visual culture and internet culture, regrettably our selection had to be limited. Nonetheless this selection gives a range of the variety with particular attention to the important and often neglected aspects of race, class, gender, ethnicity and the development of virtual communities, that we hope, become an inherent part of the virtual visual or visual/virtual equation. This book is divided into three sections that represent smaller conversations. Part I: *Constructing Identity through Interconnectivity* addresses aspects of identity construction through interacting with others in virtual/visual spaces. Part II: *Redefining Ourselves through Re-creation, Re-production and Re-circulation of our Cultural Tools and Texts* addresses how we use various objects and representations to understand who we are and what we value in both virtual and physical contexts and Part III: *Looking at Each Other* examines how we are looking at others who are often looking at us. All three sections speak to issues of border crossing, identity construction, and value setting while negotiating the physical state of being in visual/virtual landscapes.

In Part I, Naveen Joshi examines an Indian marriage website that presents a regime of representation that diasporic individuals use to anchor identity negotiations. We see how race/ethnicity, class and gender issues persist in new media and how they are represented both visually and verbally in the application process. In the areas of religion and virtual communities, Pam Detrixhe's essay on a contemporary pagan online community examines the responses of a virtual community to the 9/11 tragedy. She provides insight into religious processes in action through interactive web-based technologies. Tracey Bowen's essay titled Lessons from the Facebook Frontier, uses current research and one particular student's self-study on the implications of constructing a "hoped-for professional identity" amongst the social-networking follies. Part II begins with Penelope Umbrico's essay on how we use visual constructions in cyberspace to create our own dreamworlds at home. She looks at the importance of how we represent who we are by the objects we use as

visual identifiers everyday. Monica Kjellman-Chapin opens up questions around the relationship between art as commodity, the capitalist environment fuelled and enabled by cyberspace and a new celebration of simulacra that is espoused by up and coming generations of cultural producers. Kjellman-Chapin not only questions the role of art in a digital world, but also what we value in the objects/images that we live with everyday. David Lester's work examines the construction of virtual identities on the Second Life websites relating to the Old West. He explores role-playing and issues of authenticity in the rise and fall of a virtual Old West town. Robert Trumpbour and Sam Wagner's essay on interactive advertising examines innovative corporate strategies for reaching consumers in the wake of pop-ups and spam blockers and other software that filters out internet advertising. These new strategies are redefining advertising and could change how individuals conceive their place in a fast-paced, ever-changing digital culture. Part III begins with Tara Milbrandt's essay that examines the various ways we are looked at and are looking at others via electronic mediating devices. Her essay raises a plethora of concerns about capturing and creating representations that contest issues of privacy in public spaces. Mary Lou Nemanic's essay explores the role of amateur photojournalists in the public sphere as digital technology has advanced and as pundits have looked to them to challenge mainstream newspapers online. It highlights the reasons for the failure of amateurs to realize this challenge questioning assertions by some of its amateur journalism's leading proponents that professional photojournalism is facing extinction as a result of inexpensive cellphone cameras and internet access. Scott Henderson also deals with aspects of looking at others online in relation to identity and agency. He focuses YouTube's commercialization and dissemination of hegemonic values, debunking some of the agency claims made about this popular site. Jody Morrison explores the issue of making the private/personal public and the consequences of broadcasting individual secret stories to an unknown audience. All of these essays have been selected and grouped into three distinct conversations that reflect the dialogue that has developed at the MAP/ACA conferences over the last few years.

    Generally the methodologies for these essays are interdisciplinary and emphasize the production and analysis of individual images as cultural texts as well as clusters of cultural texts and the cultural/historical contexts within which these images operate. Among our contextual interests are discourse, pleasures, meanings, reception conditions, technology and selective perception. Other concerns include conventions, representation, relationships of audiences to the subjects in images, changing connotations

of images, cultural practices of seeing, digital manipulation and the reproducibility of images.

In essence, this book is dedicated to the neglected intersections and distinctions between visual culture and internet culture, to how individuals and groups create virtual worlds and to the conversations that have begun between small groups of international academics at the MAP/ACA conferences from 2006-2008. It is our hope that this book will enhance our understanding of how the complexities of visual/virtual relationships affect us and will continue to affect us as we become increasingly dependent on digital technology in a multimodal world. Finally we also hope to inspire reflection about and construction of new interdisciplinary cross-media paradigms that highlight the distinctive characteristics of these volatile and constantly changing fields.

Notes

[1] http://blip.tv/file/535458/ CNBC video clip on Britney Mason.

[2] For details see Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism for the 1980s," *Socialist Review* 80, vol. 15, no. 2 (March-April 1985): 65-107; Paul Levy, *Collective Intelligence* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1997); Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women + the New Technoculture* (New York: Doubleday, 1997); Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Virtual Frontier* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1993); Andrew Ross, "The New Smartness," in eds. Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckery, *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology* (San Francisco: Bay Press, 1998);
Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1995).

[3] David Porter, *Internet Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1996), xvii.

[4] David Silver and Adrienne Massanari, eds., *Critical Cyberculture Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2006) and David Trend, editor, *Reading Digital Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001).

[5] Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 2002); Marita Sturken, and Lisa Cartwright, *The Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Paul Duncum, "Visual culture: Developments, Definitions, and Directions for Art Education," *Studies in Art Education*, 42, no. 2, (2001): 101-113.

[6] John A. Weaver, "Digital aesthetics," *JCT*, *21*, no. 1 (2005): 77-95.

[7] W. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) and W. T. Mitchell, "The Work of Art in the Age of Biocybernetic Reproduction," in *Modernism/Modernity* 10 (2003): 481-500.

[8] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

[9] John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1989), 23.

[10] Hall, *Representation*.

[11] Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Cultural Subjects*, Allan Gedalof, Jonathan Boulter, Joel Faflak, Cameron McFarlan, eds. (Thompson Nelson, 2005), 51-63.

[12] See both Catherine L. Hobbs, "What do pictures want (of Women)? Women and the Visual in the Age of Biocybernetics," in Kristie Fleckenstein, Sue Hum, and Linda T. Calendrillo, eds., *Ways of Seeing, Ways of Speaking: The Interegation of Rhetoric and Vision in Construction of the Real* (Indiana: Parlor Press 2007), 155-178 and Donna Haraway, *Simeons, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

[13] http://blip.tv/file/535458/ CNBC video clip on Britney Mason.

[14] Paul Duncum, "Visual Culture Isn't Just Visual: Multiliteracy, Multimodality and Meaning," in *Studies in Art Education* 45, no. 3 (2004): 252-264.

PART I:

CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY
THROUGH INTERCONNECTIVITY

CHAPTER ONE

THE "QUALITY SINGLE" IDEAL:
CYBERTYPES AND MARRIAGE ON SHADI.COM

NAVEEN K. JOSHI[1]

In 2002, Lisa Nakamura asked, what happens to race, ethnicity, and identity on the internet? In *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* she coined the term "cybertype" to explain the "distinctive ways that the Internet propagates, disseminates, and commodifies images of race and racism."[2] For Nakamura, cybertypes are more than a mere relocation of stereotypes online, but are created in dynamic ways through collaborative efforts between computer interfaces and the ideologies that users bring into cyberspace, a network that stretches across borders and nations. A year after Nakamura's claim Arjun Appadurai, in his analysis of global cultural flows, asked, "how do small groups, especially families, the classical loci of socialization, deal with new global realities as they seek to reproduce themselves, and in so doing…reproduce cultural forms themselves?"[3] Appadurai examines the fluidity of identity in a diasporic context, where in critical life choices one searches for "steady points" of reference against the backdrop of the nuclear family, the "microcosm of culture."[4] He introduces "mediascapes" as "image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality" that provide scripts or "steady points" of reference for diasporic individuals.[5] It is Appadurai's "mediascape" that helps to inform Nakamura's claim. In this chapter I bring together the global realities that Appadurai raises through using the cybertype as a concept to understand diasporic populations who use the internet to negotiate identity and reproduce cultural forms.

This chapter uses a case study of a US-based major international matrimonial website, Shadi.com to explore the online visual representation of South Asian identity in a North American diasporic context. For the purposes of this chapter, the term diaspora refers to the scattering of people with a connection through collective memory to at least one homeland.[6] Shadi.com started in 1997, making it one of the first online

matchmaking services on the internet. A decade later there has emerged a "Quality Single" ideal on Shadi.com that is a cybertype, helping to maintain Shadi.com's brand identity of having quality singles.[7] Examining South Asian cybertypes, represented by the "Quality Single" ideal, highlights cybertypes used by the South Asian diaspora to maintain a commitment to specific values between generations and across diasporic fields in the search for "steady points" of reference. Cybertypes maintain Shadi.com's brand identity of having quality singles, while explicitly demarcating status symbols that are revered in the South Asian diaspora, revealing that marriage is still an important institution in the negotiation of identity. The "Quality Single" ideal is represented through the images of males and females and the application form on Shadi.com.[8]

A decade later, as the website has evolved from focusing on NRI (Non-resident Indians) and NRP (Non-resident Pakistanis) living worldwide who are searching for potential matrimonial candidates to its present manifestation focusing on matrimonials, matchmaking, and personals geared towards individuals living in Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, United States, and all the Asian countries, cybertypes on Shadi.com represent a commitment by the South Asian diaspora to privilege fair skin, class, heterosexuality, and stress the female subject through the "Quality Single" ideal.[9]

What follows is an analysis of some of these visual representations throughout the years on Shadi.com and a textual analysis of the categories used on their application form.[10] The application form contains are series of drop-down menus, radio button selections, and a "Comments About Myself" free textbox, where individuals can type a minimum of 100 and a maximum of 1000 characters. The categories on Shadi.com's application form include "Complexion" and "Family Status," among a host of others, reinforcing the visual representations on the website. The categories on their application form are cybertypes encompassing what Nakamura describes as "the user's racial identity within the paradigm of the 'clickable box' – one box among many on the menu of identity choices."[11] These "menu-driven identities" are South Asian status symbols that are negotiated in the process of self-presentation.[12] The application form and the visual representation of males and females on Shadi.com present a matrix of South Asian identity, interpellating individuals as quality South Asians, economizing identity through the limited space of self-disclosure.

The "Quality Single" ideal is an amalgamation of cybertypes that help us to better understand how Shadi.com maintains its brand identity, revealing a commitment to fair skin, class, heterosexuality, and gender in the diaspora. Media Studies scholar Adam Arvidsson points out that

brands condition consumers to specific values and expectations that "pre-structure or anticipate possible actions or experiences of actions."[13] The visual representation of males and females shows the type of people whom the website caters to and that complexion and class are still important markers of a quality person. Shadi.com are self-proclaimed pioneers in online matrimonial services, maintaining this brand identity by presenting a regime of representation, better understood as a "Quality Single" ideal interpellating users as quality South Asians. The visual representation of males and females, along with the application form, presents users with numerous occasions to compare themselves to this "Quality Single" ideal. The "Quality Single'" ideal, Arvidsson stresses, helps to facilitate users in the process of self-disclosure (they are able to orient their biographical data based on this ideal) and gives the website its brand image which is access to quality people.

Through the "Quality Single" ideal, cybertypes operate as filters for self-presentation and marriage marketability, demarcating status symbols that are important in the diaspora. However, while the idea of the cybertype is an important and timely construct in the study of online identity, a consideration of South Asian matrimonial websites differs from Nakamura's consideration of cybertypes. Nakamura notes, "people of colour were functionally absent from the internet at precisely the time when its discourse was acquiring distinctive contours."[14] In contrast, South Asians have used the internet from the on-set. Communication Studies scholar Rohitashya Chattopadhyaya examines how the Bharitiya Janata Party appeals to diasporans through the internet for nation-building purposes in India.[15] South Asian Studies scholar Vinay Lal examines the spread of Hindu nationalism through re-visions of history on internet websites.[16] Margaret Walton-Roberts, Geography and Environmental Studies scholar, explores how the internet is a crucial part of community development projects in Palahi, a village in Punjab.[17] Communications scholar Madhavi Mallapragada explores how websites in the 1990s targeted NRIs (Non-resident Indians) and POIs (Person of Indian Origin) in the United States to form the 'Indian-American' web.[18] The aforementioned examinations, among others, coupled with the fact that Shadi.com is one of the first matchmaking websites, commencing in 1997, a time when the internet was just beginning to penetrate homes, point to the South Asian diaspora as a key player in the rising popularity of the internet in North America and India. While Nakamura considers how the Other is represented on mainstream websites, I examine how South Asians are represented on a website geared specifically to South Asians. With this being said, certain values take on different connotations on Shadi.com that

would not necessarily be the case on mainstream websites. For example, skin colour is not seen as an ethnic marker *between* different races on Shadi.com, as it would be on mainstream websites. Skin colour on Shadi.com is considered *within* a specific race and hence the term "Complexion" becomes more appropriate as a status symbol.

Specifically, I explore how visual representations of gender, sexuality, race, and class reproduce conventions of South Asian self-hood. The analyses offered consider how Shadi.com disciplines users by limiting selection choices and emphasizing specific visual representations in the process of rhetorically and digitally constructing ethnic identities.

Ladies first: gender, focus, and placement

Shadi.com first used an image of a female and/ or a male on January 20, 2002.[19] From this point there has always been an image of a female and/or a male on the website showing its dedication to the matchmaking process. A quick survey of images on the website illustrate how over the years Shadi.com has transformed from a site that dealt with India, Pakistan, and Other matrimonials, to an online shopping website, to a website geared to NRI (Non-resident Indian) and NRP (Non-resident Pakistani), to its present-day incarnation, focusing on matrimonials, matchmaking, and personals. Although the website has evolved over the last decade, the visual representations and the application form have remained relatively static, revealing a commitment by individuals to privilege fair complexion, class, heterosexuality, and gender, namely females in the marriage process. For example, the application form still asks an individual when they would prefer to be married, giving them the selections of "Soon", "Within 12 Months", and "No Fixed Time." It becomes clear that the "Quality Single" on Shadi.com wishes to be married, reinforcing the importance of marriage as an institution, a "steady point" of reference in the diaspora.

The "Quality Single" ideal stresses females' roles in the matchmaking process, as females are presented as the keepers of tradition.[20] The visual representation of males and females predominately focuses on the female subject. This could mean that the site ensures male users that there are quality females currently available on the site and/or the site could orient female users to what an ideal female South Asian partner should look like. Only representations of heterosexual couples are shown, revealing a commitment to heterosexual marriage in the formation of the "Quality Single" ideal. Also, the visual representation of males and females is always accompanied by a Shadi.com slogan. The images from November

18, 2005, November 24, 2005, and November 30, 2005 illustrate how the strategic placement of grooms to the right of the image with the words "The most important decision of your life made simple at Shadi.com" covering his face shifts the focus on and emphasizes the visual representation of the female, who is dressed in traditional South Asian matrimonial attire complete with head-piece and jewelry. [21]

In the first-ever image of a male and female on the website in 2002, the focus is on the female, as she is sharply focused complete with glistening gold jewelry, whilst her male counterpart fades into the background, as his jewelry seems to lack the luster of his bride. [22] In the images from May 25, 2003 the visual representation focuses on the male subject, as he is wearing a traditional headpiece, but, even in this case, the female is always prominent, as a banner showcasing a collage of mainly brides dressed in traditional matrimonial attire and a large image of a traditionally dressed bride centered in the middle of the page accompanies this image.[23] Likewise the image from August 5, 2003 depicts a bride dressed in traditional matrimonial wear accompanied by the groom.[24] The male is never shown alone stressing the female subject through the "Quality Single" ideal.

The present-day representations exhibit how the website has shifted from depicting brides and grooms in traditional matrimonial dress to showing younger individuals in Western-style clothing accompanied by a new slogan "dreams into reality." The representation of males and females shifts between three different images as a user refreshes the page; yet present-day representations reveal how the focus on the female subject has essentially not changed. While a refreshed image from April 28, 2008 appears to focus on the male, with the female set to the right and fading from the right, the other two images focus on the female.[25] In the second refreshed image the male stands behind the female with his head down, protecting her, as she looks directly at the user.[26] In the third refreshed image the male subject remains in the background whilst the female subject is superimposed onto the foreground, blocking out the male.[27] Even though this is done ever so slightly, it is done with enough emphasis to shift the focus on to the female, indicating that, even though Shadi.com has updated its visual representations of males and females to appeal to more a "modern" user, the "Quality Single" ideal is more pertinent to females. This is not to say that the male subject is not included in the "Quality Single" ideal, but that his role is secondary to his female counterpart. The "Quality Single" ideal on Shadi.com emphasizes the female subject in the marriage process and a commitment to the idea that females are the keepers of tradition and values in this process.

Light like me: complexion, the model minority myth, and the privileging of fair skin

Whilst the visual representations tend to focus on the female subject, analyzing complexion on Shadi.com shows how skin colour is still an important attribute for both males and females in the diaspora. The "Quality Single" ideal privileges fair-skinned individuals as more desirable than darker skinned individuals based on the menu of identity for Complexion as well as the visual representations. Psychologists T. Joel Wade and Sara Bielitz point out:

> Skin colour affects perceived attractiveness and attractiveness leads to halo effects, where attractive individuals receive the 'best' personal evaluations (perceived as possessing the socially desirable traits).[28]

The representations of males and females promote halo effects, where Shadi.com privileges fair skinned individuals as quality singles. Although the representations on Shadi.com have changed through the years the privileging of fair complexion has remained static. All the images present the likenesses of males and females who have fair skin and in some cases have white skin. Even the image from January 20, 2002, the first ever image of a bride and groom on Shadi.com, still represents the male and female as fair skinned, despite using only the colours blue and white. [29] The privileging of fair skin is not only limited to its dominant images, but also evident on the buttons labeled "Tips and Advice" and "Brides and Grooms Wanted." [30] The "Registration" banner on the "Registration" page and the "Single Again?" page also reinforce the privileging of fair skin, as darker skinned individuals are generally lit with high key lighting to lighten them up, emphasizing individuals who have fair skin and in some cases, as in the case of the "Registration" banner, individuals who barely resemble South Asians at all.[31] The "What Everybody Ought to Know" page is another prime example of the privileging of fair skin, as even framed with a long shot the bride and groom are still effectively depicted as two fair-skinned individuals in the process of marriage.[32]

Sociologist Roksana Badruddoja points out that South Asians, and in particular South Asian women, have internalized the "ivory skin model," privileging fair skin as the axiom upon which beauty is built.[33] Badruddoja states, the "ivory skin model" is prevalent because of the influence of the Indian entertainment industry, which includes the Bollywood film industry, English language Indian magazines such as *Femina*, and skin whitening products such as *Fair & Lovely Cream* and *Shahnaz Herbal*, which are promoted by Bollywood film stars. Other theories present the

privileging of fair skin as a by-product of the caste system, where Brahmins are revered for their light skin as compared to their lower caste counterparts who have darker skin.[34] Another theory places British colonization as a direct influence on beauty and skin colour, as white British women were perceived to hold more power than their Indian counterparts.[35] And yet another theory states that the privileging of fair skin is a direct product of the diasporic context, which labels South Asians as model minorities.[36] The model minority myth frames South Asians as allying themselves with white middle-class (North) America by their willingness to promote social and economic status, assimilation, and anti-black prejudices, where South Asians attempt to distance themselves from blackness, "which has come to be represented as a reminder of the failures of the Western middle-class dream."[37] Clearly, the theories concerning the privileging of fair skin are many and the origins of the concept are, at the least, debatable. Despite this tension on the origin of openly privileging fair skin, the cybertypes on Shadi.com tap into this desire through the visual representations and the menu-driven identities on the application form. The "Quality Single" ideal on Shadi.com privileges fair complexion, emphasizing skin tone as still an important determinate in defining beauty and negotiating identity in the diaspora.

The menu of identity for "Complexion" on the application form reinforces the privileging of fair skin in the visual representations. Users are forced to select between "Fair," "Medium," "Dark," and "Wheatish." I use the term forced, as there is no option of "will tell you later" in the menu of identity for "Complexion." Users must select their complexion, explicitly stating how close they come to the "Quality Single" ideal. The inclusion of the term "Wheatish" reinforces the privileging of fair skin on Shadi.com. The exact origins of the term wheatish are unknown. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, wheatish is "of the complexion…that is (or is held to be) of the pale golden colour of ripe wheat; light brown, pale skinned."[38] What is known is its direct relation to South Asian matrimonials, as it is "characteristically found in Indian newspaper advertisements describing prospective brides."[39] Notably thewebsite's emphasis on the bride's complexion echoes my previous observation of females as the focus of the marriage process. The power of the term wheatish lies within its ambiguity, as a medium or dark individual may present himself or herself as fairer than they really are, thus bringing them closer to the "Quality Single" ideal.

Marketplace theory helps us to better understand the relevance of the term wheatish.[40] Marketplace theory stems from exchange theory, where specific physical characteristics are revered as assets within a society and

exchanged with others for something of value. [41] Wade and Bielitz point out: "Individuals are rated in terms of how their attractiveness is compared to other most attractive individuals or an attractiveness standard (the attractiveness marketplace)."[42] The "Quality Single" ideal on Shadi.com is the attractiveness standard that privileges fair skin, and so it makes sense that fair-skinned females, for example, will exchange their fair complexion for an upper-class male with a good occupation. Consequently, a darker skinned female may wish to maximize her marriage marketability by selecting "Wheatish" in hopes that the ambiguity of the term may present her as fairer than she really is, increasing her exchange capability. Although further research is needed concerning how individuals use the term "Wheatish." one thing that remains clear is that through an examination of cybertypes on Shadi.com, one is able to see that users still have a commitment to complexion in the matrimonial process.

Status symbols: class, cars, wine and women

Shadi.com's visual representations foreground how class constitutes the "Quality Single" ideal. Class is most strongly indicated by socioeconomic status and is evident on the refreshed images from April 28, 2008 depicting fashion as an indicator of socioeconomic status, as the males and females are dressed in couture fashion. The first refreshed page from this date depicts two individuals sharing a pair of white headphones. White headphones represent the I-pod, which is emblematic of the hopes and the dreams of the middle-class, as through the I-pod quality singles are able to come together. The quality single on Shadi.com is not only fair skinned, but also affluent, up to date, and stylish, all indicators of class status in society. This quality single is best understood through the model minority myth, which sociologist Bandana Purkayastha says "separates middle-class South Asians as a 'cultural group' from others within the South Asian community who don't fit these middle-class standards."[43] Shadi.com solidifies this distinction with the menu of identity for "Family Status," where a user is given the option of "Rich/Affluent," "Upper Middle Class," and "Middle Class." Again, the user is forced to make a selection, as there is no option of "will tell you later," as there is for a menu of identity for "Annual Income," for example. Moreover, the menu of identity for "Family Status" reveals that not only is socioeconomic status an important factor in the formation of the "Quality Single" ideal, but that individuals still have a commitment to the concept of family honour or *izzat* in the diaspora. *Izzat* refers to family honour, pride and respectability.[44] The menu of identity for "Family Status" indicates that