

Digital romance: the sources of online love in the Muslim world

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Ramina Sotoudeh

Princeton University, USA

Roger Friedland

New York University, USA

Janet Afary

University of California, Santa Barbara, USA

Abstract

Social media creates new virtual public spaces where young women and men living in socially conservative non-Western societies can communicate in order to meet and engage in forbidden intimacies. In this essay, using survey data on thousands of Facebook users from Muslim-majority countries, we look at the relationship between romance in public physical spaces and cyberspaces. To what extent do Facebook users make use of the Internet to pursue romance? And what are the attributes of individuals who use it in this way?

Keywords

courtship, gender, Middle East, Muslim, public spaces, romance, the Internet

Social media creates new virtual public spaces where young women and men living in socially conservative non-Western societies can communicate in order to meet and engage in forbidden intimacies. In this essay, using survey data on thousands of Facebook users from Muslim-majority countries, we look at the relationship between romance in public physical spaces and cyberspaces. To what extent do Facebook users make use of

Corresponding author:

Ramina Sotoudeh, Princeton University, Wallace Hall, Charlton Street, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA.

Email: sotoudeh@princeton.edu

the Internet to pursue romance? And what are the attributes of individuals who use it in this way?

Cyberspace and forbidden intimacies

Is cyberspace an alternate space for young people where the laws of social gravity do not apply, where they can pursue forbidden behaviors? Do young people in countries with more conservative social norms about young, unrelated women and men meeting in public space use the Internet as an alternative space to interact and engage romantically? In their comparative study of Brazil and India, Arora et al. (this volume) find that young Indians use Facebook to find romantic partners and interact with the opposite sex outside of the circle of people they know, while Brazilians more commonly use it as a tool to keep in touch with friends whom they know offline. The authors attribute this to the more conservative nature of Indian society, especially its widespread disapproval of ‘immoral’ courtship behaviors in public spaces. Facebook, they argue, and social online platforms, in general, create an alternate public sphere that allows for the recalibration and re-gendering of norms and interactions. In such places, the digital space becomes an alternative public arena for young people to interact, court and love.

This accords with the work of Chakraborty who argues that Indian women in the slums use the Internet to seek mates, defying norms of arranged marriages. This works, in part, because online space grants women corporeal safety in ways that meeting a man in person would not (Chakraborty, 2012). Similar arguments have been made about young people in the Muslim world. The Internet allows young Moroccans to have intimate communications between males and females without transgressing physical boundaries (Pourmehdi, 2015).

Here, we analyze Internet use for dating in five Muslim nations in the Middle East and North Africa, all places where social norms restrict intimate interactions between unmarried individuals. We will explore three questions: First, to what extent does the use of the Internet to pursue male–female intimacy reflect general norms of social interaction in the physical public sphere? Second, to what extent does the actionability of romance and courtship depend on the use of the Internet? And third, what individual factors explain Internet dating?

Methods

Using Facebook banner ads, we collected survey data on more than 20,000 Facebook users from seven different Muslim-major countries – Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, Palestine, Tunisia, and Turkey – on topics including intimate relationships, marriage, religious belief and practice (Friedland et al., 2016). In Iran, our respondents were drawn overwhelmingly from the blogosphere and are not considered here. Egypt, our first survey country, also had to be excluded because we did not then ask single people about the criteria of marriage.

Facebook is the world’s largest social network. According to *The Economist*, Facebook had 1.6 billion monthly users in 2016. ‘Around 1 billion people, nearly a third of all those

Table 1. Intimate Internet use.

	Pakistan	Palestine	Algeria	Turkey	Tunisia
Access to online dating sites					
Female	3%	21%	24%	29%	29%
	(10)	(55)	(326)	(182)	(226)
Male	8%	37%	38%	11%	40%
	(41)	(167)	(407)	(33)	(136)
Arranging dates					
Female	2%	12%	6%	30%	10%
	(6)	(31)	(84)	(191)	(83)
Male	5%	25%	15%	7%	20%
	(41)	(167)	(407)	(33)	(136)
Total female	301	261	1381	629	791
Total male	862	662	2768	483	697

on the planet with access to the Internet, log on every day' for an average of over 20 minutes each (The Economist, 2016: 21). For many young poor people, Facebook *is* the Internet (Marani, 2015). All respondents in our sample are Facebook users who are enrolled in the country's Facebook and who speak the country's language. It should be noted that the respondents do not necessarily live in these countries.¹ Our sample is in no way a representative sample of young people in these countries, but there is no reason to believe that it is not a representative sample of their Facebook users. Given that there is a substantial gender gap in Internet access, particularly private Internet access, our sample has more men than women, but not systematically greater than that found among the countries' Facebook users.

We asked respondents whether they used the Internet to access online dating websites, and to arrange dates. In the Muslim world, online dating has increasingly taken its place among other mate selection strategies (Hatfield and Rapson, 2015).² Online dating usually refers to an online matchmaking platform with user profiles that remain anonymous until the matched individuals decide to meet offline. Online dating stretches beyond the individuals' social network as a platform for strangers to meet. Using the Internet to arrange dates, on the other hand, implies that the individuals already know one another. The Internet, whether Facebook itself or instant messaging services, is used as a tool to bring people together offline who at least know of each other.

Table 1 shows the proportions of men and women who use the Internet for such purposes by country. In every country in our sample, except Turkey, men have a higher percentage using the Internet in this way.

How restrictive are the country norms facing these young people? We have no data on the general population; we only look at the stated beliefs of other Facebook users – both single and married – from their country. First, what percentage of Facebook users in their country believes that women should wear the hijab, which betokens a commitment to modesty? Second, what proportion disapproves of unmarried women holding hands with men in public?

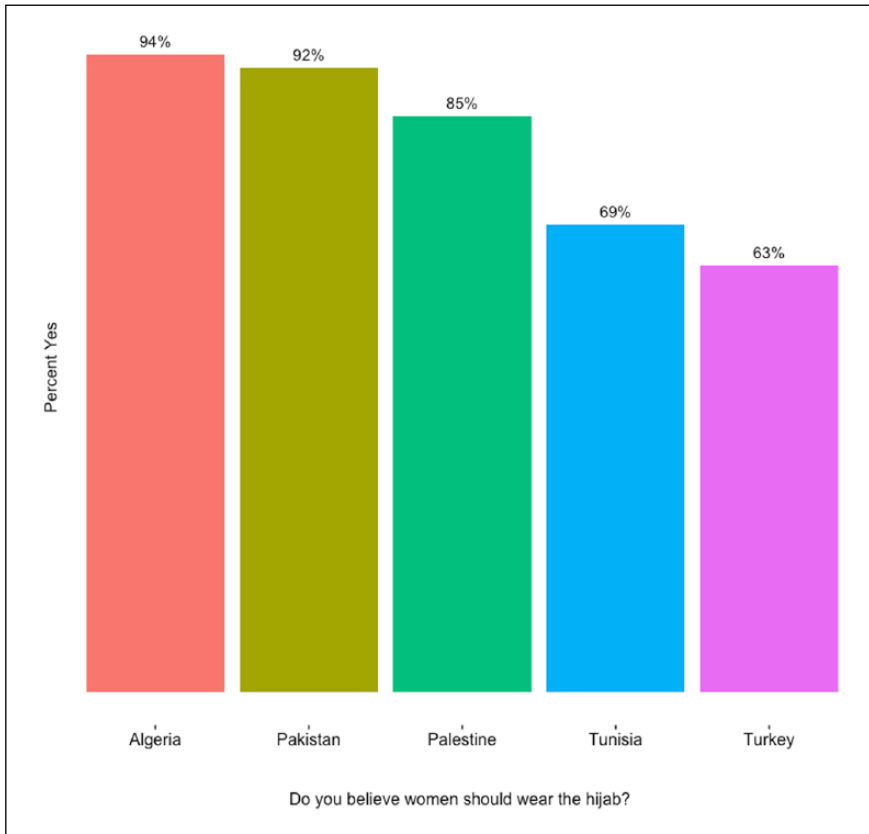


Figure 1. Support for wearing the Hijab.

Our sample of young Facebook users is not composed of secular, Westernized libertines. As shown by Figure 1, overwhelming majorities believe the hijab is obligatory for women. Algeria and Pakistan have the highest overall level of belief that women should wear the hijab, whereas Tunisia and Turkey have the lowest.

Looking at our sample of Facebook users, there is no systematic relationship between a country's aggregate levels of restrictiveness and singles' use of the Internet to seek out members of the opposite sex for dates. Aggregate levels of disapproval for holding hands parallel country variations in support for the hijab (Figure 2).³ Pakistan and Algeria have the highest relative rates of disapproval, and Turkey and Tunisia the lowest. It is striking that rates of disapproval for unmarried hand-holding are consistently and dramatically lower than rates of approval of the hijab: 94% support the hijab versus 47% reject hand-holding in the case of Algeria, for example. This suggests either that for many, the hijab is a marker of piety and Muslim identity, but does not translate into commitments to conventional modesty norms, or that young Muslim attitudes about the modest implications of Islam have liberalized.

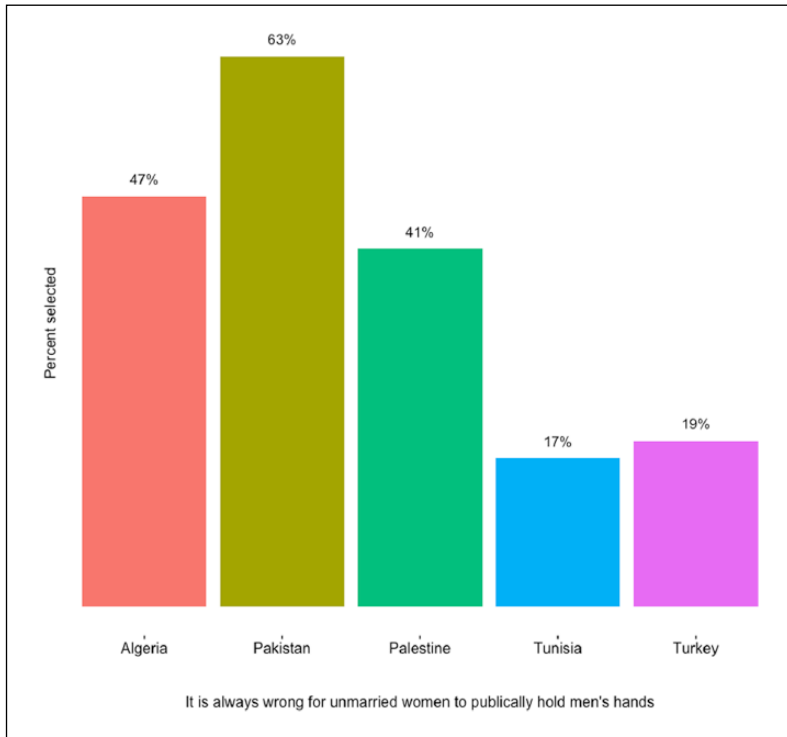


Figure 2. Disapproval of unmarried women holding hands in public.

The Internet as a venue for love

Observers argue that in more traditional societies, the Internet allows young people to pursue love as a basis of marriage and defy the norms of arranged marriage (Chakraborty, 2012; Pourmehdi, 2015). We asked respondents whether they considered love important in choosing a partner for marriage. Is such love-seeking powering the use of the Internet for courtship? Indeed, among those single people who use the Internet to arrange dates, 77% want to marry for love (Figure 3). If arranging of dates through the Internet is a media for the pursuit of love-based marriage in these societies, it does not necessarily follow that the pursuit of love depends on it. In fact, those singles who want to marry for love do not typically turn to the Internet to arrange encounters with their beloveds. In Figure 4, we see that 84% of single people who think love is important *do not* use the Internet to arrange dates. The pattern is the same for women and men.

Transgressing boundaries in the public sphere and in the cybersphere

Arora et al. (this volume) argue that the Internet creates an alternative public space in conservative countries where physical public sphere is too restrictive and does not allow

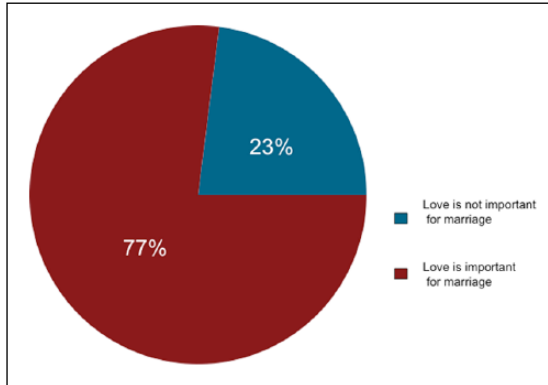


Figure 3. Singles' Internet use for dating and wanting to marry for love among those who use Internet to arrange dates.

for young men and women to meet, interact and engage in courtship practices. Comparing Brazil and India, they write,

While the Brazilian context has more relaxed social norms on sexuality and dating among the sexes, Indian youth are still subject to arranged marriages and there are strong protocols and barriers in communicating with the opposite sex. This creates high motivation for Indian youth to reach out to the opposite sex who are strangers on line (Arora et al., this volume: xxx).

Hindu religious conservatives attack these cyberspaces as sites of immorality and 'sluttiness'.

We have seen that countries with more restrictive modesty norms do not necessarily have the highest levels of Internet use for dating. But what about individuals? Are individuals who believe in modesty more likely themselves to use the Internet in this way? Beyond their opinions about the hijab, we also asked respondents both their opinion about holding hands in public and whether they themselves have ever done it. If young people use cyberspace because they are unable or unwilling to use physical space to pursue intimacies, we would expect individuals who hold hands in public to be less likely to use the Internet to meet and to court members of the opposite sex.

The results are the opposite of what the repressive hypothesis would predict. Table 2 shows that out of the single people who have held hands in public, 55% have arranged a date online, compared to 8% of those who have not held hands. The chi-square test at the bottom of the table indicates the difference between the distribution of responses in each cell from what one would expect based on the marginal distributions, the row and column counts. The low probability of the chi-square statistic tells us that this is a significant difference. The Internet is not an alternative virtual space that young people resort to when they can't or won't partake in intimate behaviors in the physical public space.

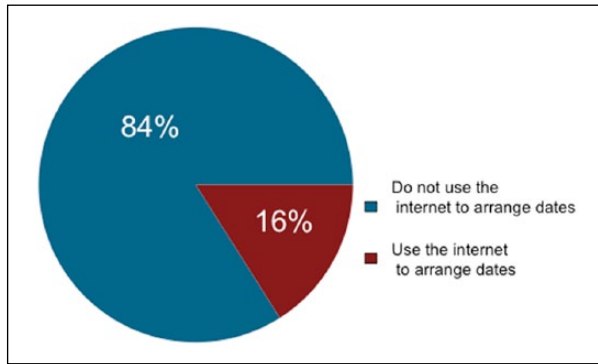


Figure 4. Singles’ Internet use for dating and wanting to marry for love among those who think love is important.

Table 2. Holding hands in public and arranging dates online.

	Not held hands	Held hands	Total
Not arrange dates	90% (3233)	78% (1623)	3596
Arrange dates online	10% (363)	22% (458)	2081
Total	4856	821	5677
Chi-square test	150.29		
P-value	0.00		

Who engages in Internet courtship?

What are the individual characteristics of single people who use the Internet for either online dating or arranging dates? Using logistic regression (an analysis based on a logistic, as opposed to a linear, function), we can parse out the effect of each variable, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. We report the effects in terms of odds ratios (Tables 3 and 4) – which indicate the ratio of odds of the outcome happening given the presence versus the absence of an attribute. The odds ratio is the percentage effect on these odds of a one-unit change in the independent variable. An odds ratio coefficient of less than 1 indicates a negative relationship; a ratio of more than 1 indicates a positive relationship.⁴ For example, in the first regression, having held hands in public increases the odds (not percentage or probability) of an individual online dating by 38%.⁵

Although the effect sizes of the two are different, the significance and the sign of the coefficients are similar across the models, suggesting that the determinants of both Internet uses, conditional on all the other variables, are similar.

Table 3. The determinants of online dating, singles.

Using Internet for online dating		Odds ratios
Female	0.526***	(0.437, 0.632)
Living West	0.280	(0.063, 0.894)
Love matters in mate choice	1.275*	(1.052, 1.547)
Held hands in public	1.379***	(1.143, 1.662)
Approval of holding hands	0.994	(0.933, 1.059)
Attitude toward hijab	1.110	(0.860, 1.435)
Use internet to listen to music	3.730***	(3.089, 4.519)
Pakistan	0.127***	(0.085, 0.184)
Palestine	0.696**	(0.533, 0.906)
Tunisia	0.920	(0.730, 1.159)
Turkey	0.424***	(0.286, 0.618)
Living West × Female	6.620*	(1.665, 33.856)
Constant	0.242***	(0.166, 0.351)
N	2964	

Confidence intervals are in parentheses.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. The determinants of arranging dates online, singles.

Using Internet for arranging dates online		Odds ratios
Female	0.471***	(0.368, 0.601)
Living West	0.691	(0.184, 2.109)
Love matters in mate choice	1.194	(0.923, 1.552)
Held hands in public	1.656***	(1.308, 2.099)
Approval of holding hands	0.997	(0.918, 1.083)
Attitude toward hijab	0.867	(0.641, 1.180)
Use Internet to listen to music	5.321***	(3.978, 7.233)
Pakistan	0.280***	(0.162, 0.455)
Palestine	1.671**	(1.220, 2.276)
Tunisia	1.275	(0.944, 1.717)
Turkey	1.216	(0.781, 1.862)
Living West × Female	4.608*	(1.214, 20.170)
Constant	0.052***	(0.031, 0.086)
N	2964	

Confidence intervals are in parentheses.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Gender matters. As we saw in the descriptive statistics, men are more likely to use online dating and to arrange dates using the Internet, consistent with previous research

that finds men are more active on these media networks in talking to and seeking romantic partners (Arora et al., 2017; Chakraborty, 2012; Hatfield and Rapson, 2015).

Romantic practices in the cyberspace are associated with romantic practices in the physical space. Having held hands in public has a significant positive effect on both online dating and using the Internet to arrange dates. Those singles who want to marry for love are more likely to have used on-dating sites. Individual attitudes about religious modesty do not explain people's 'immodest' behaviors online. In both regressions, attitudes toward hijab and holding hands in public are not significant.

We included a measure of Internet use for downloading and listening to music. This serves two purposes. It allows us to control for the intensity of Internet use, in which case using it to make dates would just be an indicator of such use. But it also allows us a first approximation of whether the Internet is a vehicle for the global transmission of romantic ideals and normative practices. Cyberspace in the Near East is filled with romantic music videos. We find that Internet listening to music has a large and positive effect on arranging dates and online dating. Whether this is due to intensity of Internet use or the romantic affordances of Internet music we cannot say.⁶

Strikingly, living in the West has no significant effect on online dating. However, when we look at the effect of living in the West by gender, we see it makes a huge difference. We included an interaction term between gender and living in the West. The results show that the odds of women living in the West using the Internet both for arranging dates and for online dating platforms increases by 360% and 560% relative to men. There are many reasons this might be so. Emigrants use these media to find potential mates from their home countries where their numbers are sparse and informal social relations through which such couplings are traditionally arranged are absent.⁷ Not only is there a double standard which makes women more vulnerable to sanctions for immodesty in their home countries and women are less likely to have private access to the Internet, making dating online much more dangerous for them, but dating itself is a much riskier activity for them, rendering them potentially unmarriedable in the event they are discovered and the match does not lead to marriage. It is clear that for women who originate from these Muslim countries, living in the less restrictive West affords new opportunities for Internet romance.

To get a visual sense of this gender difference, Figures 5 and 6 show the predicted probability of Turkish men and women using the Internet for romance for those living in Turkey as compared to those living in the West.⁸

Discussion

These preliminary findings suggest the Internet has become an important vehicle for the pursuit of romance in the Muslim world. There is no doubt that young people's desire for love under conditions of gender restrictiveness is driving its expansion. But our data indicate that individual Facebook users who breach these norms in cyberspace tend to be the same people who breach them in actual physical space. In the Muslim world, these romantic cyberspaces differentially afford the romantic agency of men. When women from these countries find themselves outside this world, they dramatically increase their use of the Internet in pursuit of partners.

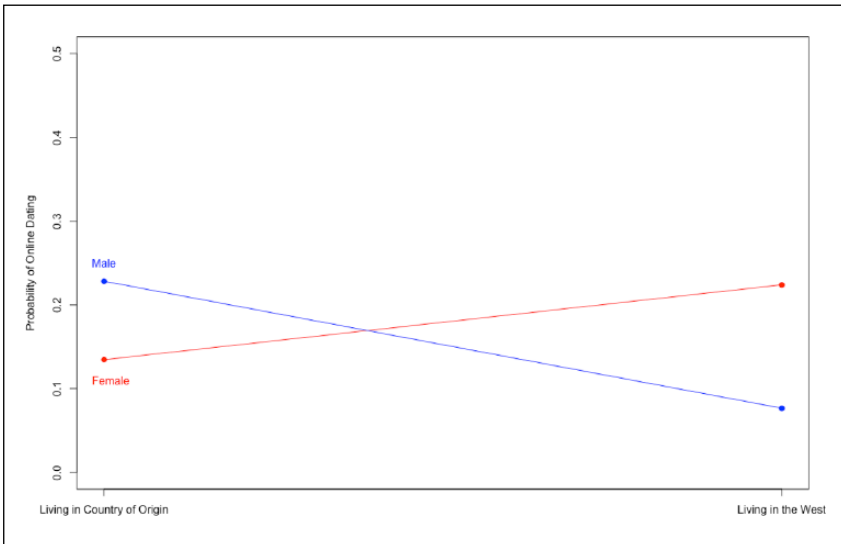


Figure 5. Predicted probability of online dating and living in the West.

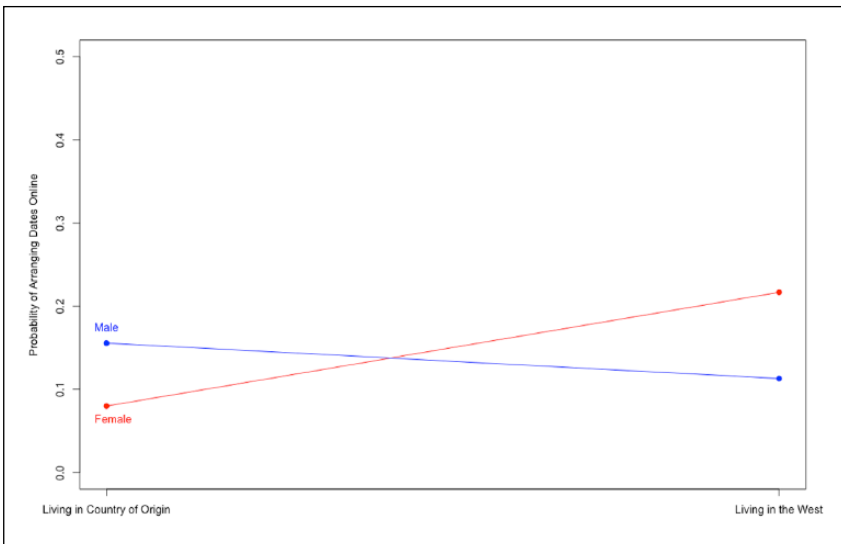


Figure 6. Predicted probability of arranging dates online and living in the West.

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Notes

1. A total of 1.2% of Algerians, 1.6% of Palestinians, 0.6% of Tunisians, 3% of Pakistanis, and 22% of Turks in our sample live in the West, which we define as United States, Canada, and Europe.
2. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30397272>
3. Our five-point scale survey question asks the respondent 'How do you feel about the behavior of an unmarried woman in the following circumstances? For a young man and woman to hold hands in public'. The responses are ordered: never wrong, almost never wrong, only wrong sometimes, almost always wrong and always wrong. Here, we only consider the most extreme response.
4. You make the odds ratios interpretable by subtracting the coefficient from one and multiplying it by a 100: (i.e. $|1 - OR| \times 100$). This gives us the percent change in the odds of the outcome happening given the presence of the attribute versus its absence.
5. Confidence intervals, which are a measure of estimate precision, are reported in the parentheses. A large confidence interval around the odds ratio indicates lower precision of that odds ratio.
6. This problem is ameliorated by the fact that our whole sample is administered through Facebook and thus taken by Facebook users. Nevertheless, there might be individual-level differences in the degree to which other online venues, other than social media, are used. For instance, drawing on Mirani's 2015 article in Quartz, Arora et al. (2017) argue that Facebook is the Internet for many people in the developing world.
7. This is not due to differences in how long women have been living in the West. In separate analyses, we found those Turkish women born in the West have more or less the same profile as those who emigrated there. Emails from Pakistani and Tunisian friends (8 April 2016).
8. For calculating the predicted probability, we set every other variable at its mean. Our Turkish sample has the highest population of single people living outside of Turkey, so we use Turkey's case to illustrate, although we observe similar trends for other countries as well.

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