1. Introduction

Marriages join together families and create new ones, resulting in new generations to whom tradition, culture, and knowledge can be transmitted. “Marriage signifies more than two strangers getting together. It signifies a combination of interests far beyond the boundary of the couple, which relate to the sustainability of the patriarchal structure” upon which modern society is built. But what if one cannot find a suitable mate? Many men around the world are turning to foreign brides to fulfill their dreams of marriage and family. An international mail order bride industry has formed to feed these men’s desires, producing a new kind of marriage market in which both brides and love are for sale.

Although the act of matchmaking has existed since ancient times, the type of matchmaking facilitated by the modern mail order bride industry differs greatly from that facilitated by traditional matrimonial brokers and matchmakers. The Mail Order Bride (MOB) is a woman who, after communicating with a man over letters, email, messaging services, or the phone, agrees to migrate to the man’s place of residence for the purpose of starting a new life and perhaps improving her social and financial arrangements through marriage. The MOB phenomenon has been facilitated by matchmaking agencies around the world, which are dedicated to helping men and women find “love”—regardless of their geographic location—for a price. These matchmaking agencies bring together “men from the wealthy industrialized countries of Western Europe, North America and Australia and women from the Third World and Eastern Europe” in order to create commercially profitable businesses, and, hopefully,

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1 Kojima, 208.
successful marriages.\textsuperscript{2} To be clear, matchmaking agencies are not selling the brides themselves, but rather the brides’ addresses and information; they are paid by the men to help facilitate conversations and meetings between the men and women. The women are never forced to meet the men, enter the bridal process, or marry. They are free to accept or reject any proposals they receive.\textsuperscript{3}

Although much research has been conducted on the MOB industry over the past century, much of this research has focused on the reasons why women choose to become MOBs and on why men turn to the MOB industry to find a wife. Additional research since the 1980s has focused on the impact of the MOB industry on the sexual exploitation of women, specifically on the use of MOBs in the sex industry and in sex trafficking. These studies have depended on interviews with matchmaking industries and clients, but there has been little in the way of statistical analysis. The way the MOB industry is organized is not conducive to the gathering of statistical data: marriages with MOBs fall under the general category of marriage with foreigners. Thus, it is incredibly difficult for nations to track the number of MOBs that immigrate to their countries for marriage. Moreover, because this industry is inherently transnational, there are few international governing bodies that have the authority to enact laws or regulations to control the MOB industry, and among the few laws that do exist, loopholes abound. For these reasons, much of the evidence that is collected about the industry is based on self-reporting, either by the MOB agencies or the customers themselves, meaning that there are no definitive statistics available for any aspect of this industry.

Additionally, there has been little analysis of how and why the MOB industry has changed over time. By analyzing these changes, it may be possible to predict the direction that

\textsuperscript{2}Luehrmann, 862.

\textsuperscript{3}Johnson, 9; Lloyd, 351.
the industry will move in, so that international lawmakers can draft legislation to better regulate the industry and institute safeguards for both male and female customers. It is my contention that the proliferation of the Internet and computer technology in the 1990s has allowed the MOB industry to grow into the international, multi-million dollar industry that it is today. By analyzing the impacts of technology on the MOB industry in the former Soviet Union, future researchers will be able to use the findings to conduct a comparative analysis of the growth of the MOB industry in different regions across the world. They will be able to investigate whether factors local to a specific region—social, cultural, economic, or otherwise—have changed the trajectory of the MOB industry there.

The former Soviet Union, particularly Russia, is one of the regions that has experienced the most growth in its MOB industry since the 1990s. This paper will analyze how the Russian MOB industry has responded to new innovations in technology over this period. In order to answer this question, this study will analyze interviews, review the available literature, and conduct an analysis of data on MOBs and the use of technology by matchmaking agencies. In addition, this paper will discuss how the Russian MOB industry has grown in comparison to the industries in other regions, concentrating on the fact that the Russian MOB industry came into existence after the fall of the Soviet Union, which coincidentally corresponds to the same time that the World Wide Web began to proliferate. By answering this question and analyzing these topics, this paper attempts to predict the ways in which the MOB industry will continue to grow and what this will mean for Russian women who seek to become MOBs in the future.

2. The History of the Mail Order Bride Industry

The MOB industry began to develop in the United States in the 20th century with the circulation of bride catalogues. The social constructs that allow for such an industry to exist,
however, trace back thousands of years to the mediated marriage arrangements that were common in ancient times. For Asian brides especially, it was not unusual for a marriage to be arranged through a contract between families. Due to this history of mediated matchmaking, modern arranged marriages in Asia do not have the same negative social stigma attached to them as they do in the West—they are simply a means to an end, a way for a woman to start a family when she runs out of other prospects.⁴

The MOB industry in the United States grew rapidly when American men fighting in Vietnam came home in the 1970s. These war veterans were unhappy with the feminist American women produced by the 1960s women’s movement, yearning instead for the exotic but docile women of Southeast Asia, lauded for their beauty and old-fashioned values.⁵ Not only did American soldiers want the exotic women that they saw while stationed overseas, but Asian women that wanted to marry Western men had no qualms about moving overseas for a husband they had never met. Advertisements from this period for MOB catalogues in the United States could be found in newspapers and magazines (see Figure 1). From these advertisements, men could order a bride catalogue with photos of "Gorgeous Pacific Women" and "Pearls of the Orient," from which men could purchase contact information of women in order to start correspondence.⁶ Each of these catalogues was “filled with pictures of women from Asia, South America, and Eastern Europe, complete with information on each woman's age, weight, height, and interests” (see Figure 2).⁷ Because of the page limitations of print catalogues, the amount of women pictured and amount of information available about each woman was extremely limited.

⁴Kojima, 199; Larsen, 20.
⁵Chun, 1159.
⁶Ibid., 1155; Johnson, 8.
⁷Chun, 1155.
As print technology developed, catalogues advanced from black and white to full glossy color, growing in both page count and circulation. Although these catalogues can still be found in publication today, much of the MOB industry has now moved to the Internet: the catalogues now take the form of online matchmaking sites. Matchmaking websites have allowed the MOB industry to expand rapidly so that men may now find women from virtually any nation on these websites. Despite the fact that the MOB industry is historically based on connecting American men with Asian brides, European, especially Russian, brides have also grown popular in recent decades.

3. Why Russian Brides?

Although Asian women dominated the MOB market for centuries, in the late 1980s the market began to see an influx of advertisements by Eastern European women. But it was only when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 that the Russian\(^8\) bride market exploded. The collapse caused the economies of Eastern Europe and the former USSR to fall into disarray, forcing a decline in living standards and causing its inhabitants much worry and uncertainty about the future. Soon after the collapse, travel restrictions were lifted and immigration policies liberalized, allowing women to turn to the MOB market in search of new opportunities for more stable lives elsewhere and foreign men to travel to Russia to meet Russian women.\(^9\)

In addition to the lift on travel restrictions and relaxation of the immigration policies in the 1990s, there are several other reasons why Russian women continue to choose to enter the MOB industry today. The first reason is the inability to find a husband at home. For women of marrying age, “the deaths of male soldiers in the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya (and for an

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\(^8\) The label of “Russian bride” is commonly used by the MOB industry to identify any woman from a former Soviet nation. This is comparable to the way the MOB industry groups brides from all parts of Asia and the South Pacific as “Asian brides.”

\(^9\) Ibid., 1173.
earlier era, World War II) have been of particular concern for decades because these deaths have had an egregious effect on Russia’s demographic profile. Alcoholism and disease have also led to higher mortality rates for men than for women: as of 2014, life expectancy was 64.37 years for men and 76.3 years for women. Male war-related death, combined with high male mortality rates, has resulted in a demographic with a low male to female ratio in the marrying-age population over the past several decades (see Table 1).

Even if a Russian woman succeeds in finding a Russian husband, the chances of that marriage ending in divorce, leaving the woman financially unstable and unable to support any children resulting from that marriage, are extremely high. According to data from the United Nations, Russia had the highest divorce rate in the world in 2012: approximately 1.87 marriages for every 1 divorce. This is especially relevant when reviewing the age brackets of divorcees: “people 35 and under account for the highest percentage of divorces.” Moreover, within the former USSR, “Russia has a disproportionately large number of women who are single, divorced, or widowed and also has the largest proportion of single-mother households, which is partially reflected in the number of Russian women on the websites who have children.” For women in these situations—unable to find a husband or struggling after divorce—becoming a MOB may be the only way to achieve financial stability and independence.

The second reason Russian women become MOBs is the relationship between age and social expectations for reproduction. Although modern medicine in America allows women to bear children safely through their 30s and even 40s, in Russia, cultural and societal standards still put pressure on women to bear children in their 20s. For this reason, Russian women who are

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10Patico, 316.
11“Russia Demographics Profile 2014.”
12Nazdracheva.
13Johnson, 58.
still single in their late 20s may have additional difficulties in finding a Russian husband. Instead, they turn to MOB agencies to find American husbands who are less concerned about their reproductive age. According to a 2011 study conducted by researchers at Astrakhan State University, “It is mostly young women who leave the country, 60% of them—under the age of 30 years (including 7%—younger than age 20), 30%—aged 30 to 40 years. The average age of ‘marriage migrants’ is thus 28 years”—well within American childbearing standards.14

The third reason why Russian women look abroad for marriage is that they are looking for a financially stable husband—not one who will drink or gamble away his money the way they believe many Russian men tend to do, but one with a legitimate job and good economic prospects. In the present Russian economy, with unemployment rates soaring to over 8% within the past decade, job stability is hard to come by.15 Because of this, contemporary MOBs are looking for a husband who will take them away from their troubles: “Women thus see the matchmaking system as a chance to cope with difficult situations by finding (financially) appropriate companions.”16

Fourth, “many women perceive U.S. men (as opposed to local men) as more equitable companions in marriage, who value women’s contributions to the home and family and who offer women opportunities to enjoy a stable, middle-class lifestyle.”17 This is in contrast to modern Russia, where society is shaped by different sexual values and women are often pressured to be homemakers first and breadwinners second. Although MOBs are expected to be homemakers, their perception is that in an American home, there will be a more equitable

14Выезжает в основном молодые женщины, 60% из них—в возрасте до 30 лет (в том числе 7%—моложе 20 лет), 30%—в возрасте 30–40 лет. Средний возраст «брачных мигранток», таким образом, составляет 28 лет. Maksimova, 161. Note: All translations throughout this paper are my own.
15Johnson, 53; “Russia: Unemployment Rate.”
16Kojima, 200.
17Schaeffer-Grabiel, 332.
partnership. In general, Russian women have the perception that American husbands are “better husbands” in every sense—that these husbands will love them, treat them fairly, provide for them and their children, and offer them opportunities and adventures that no Russian husband would ever allow or be able to afford.  

These four main reasons have turned Russian women to online dating and matchmaking services to connect them with foreign men. Through the course of the 2011 Astrakhan study, a survey of 200 students found that even the young, college-aged generation agrees that migration for marriage has many alluring qualities: “5% of the respondents described marriage with a foreigner as fashionable and prestigious, 13% said this sort of marriage seems promising, 2% and 4%, respectively, called marriage to a foreigner desirable and successful.” More importantly, when asked “Are marriages with foreigners popular?” 73% answered positively. This sort of social acceptance is indicative of the fact that the negative stigmas associated with foreigners in Russia are diminishing and that independence through marriage is becoming a realistic goal.

It is easy to empathize with Russian women who are looking for foreign husbands, but how can we understand the mindset of an American man who chooses to go through an international matchmaking company to find a foreign bride rather than finding love at home? Who are these men that turn to the Internet to find themselves a woman from abroad? They come from a variety of backgrounds, but tend to be white professionals in their 40s and 50s, although in recent years there has been more variety in professional, class, and ethnic backgrounds.

Many of these men turn to the Internet because they believe that these sites will increase the odds

18 Scholes, 7.

19 5% опрошенных охарактеризовали замужество с иностранцем как модное и престижное, 13% оно кажется перспективным, 2% и 4% соответственно назвали брак с иностранцем желательным и удачным. Maksimova, 161.

20 “Популярны ли браки с иностранцами?”

21 Ibid., 161.

22 Patico, 319; Schaeffer-Grabiel, 348.
of them finding a wife.\textsuperscript{23} Moreover, the women available on MOB sites are purportedly of better quality or ostensibly meet higher standards than American women, according to users of MOB sites. Some MOB agencies go as far as saying that their women have “the right biological makeup and cultural grooming, making them more feminine, traditional, docile, and better mothers of the family.”\textsuperscript{24}

But what specifically makes Russian women so attractive to American men? Firstly, Russian women, unlike most other MOBs from Asia or the South Pacific, are white. This simple physical characteristic helps them to fit into American society and their husband’s social circles: “women in Russia seem to offer all the traditional values men used to look to Asia for, but fit more neatly into the racial hierarchies of the US, and may be less readily recognized as ‘mail-order brides’ when appearing with their husbands in public.”\textsuperscript{25} Russian women’s whiteness, paired with the whiteness of an American husband, will produce children that fit into American society more readily than mixed children, especially in conservative areas.\textsuperscript{26}

Most crucially, Russian women have traditional values. An emphasis on the importance of traditional values is part of the foundation of the MOB industry. MOB websites portray American women as women who “are not content to be wives and mothers, but seek personal satisfaction through their own careers and interests, while the foreign woman is happy to be the homemaker and asks for nothing more than husband, home, and family.”\textsuperscript{27} Unlike American women who have been purportedly “tarnished” by liberal ideologies and radical feminism, MOBs are marketed as being family-first, tradition-oriented feminine women who care more about keeping their husbands happy than having a career. Russian women tend to be associated

\textsuperscript{23}Patico, 320.
\textsuperscript{24}Schaeffer-Grable, 341.
\textsuperscript{25}Luehrmann, 863.
\textsuperscript{26}Johnson, 43.
\textsuperscript{27}Scholes, 3.
with this stereotype. They are lauded for “their beauty, femininity, domesticity, and undemanding patience,” as well as for their youth and ability to “place family concerns before career advancement.”

According to MOB agencies, “Russian women are supposedly less career oriented and more likely to focus on home and family than the typical North American or Western European woman,” which put them in direct opposition with the values espoused by American feminist and women’s empowerment movements.

This statement is also a direct contradiction to the women’s expectation that they will have more opportunities and less of a homemaker role in America. Although life in America is marketed to MOBs as full of opportunity and marriage equality, in reality, the men are often specifically looking for a housewife to handle all of the domestic responsibilities. However, many MOBs are fine with this arrangement in the long run because they are still able to enjoy more opportunities and a higher quality of life than they would if they were married to a Russian man.

Furthermore, Russian women tend to be well-educated. Many Russian MOBs have technical degrees and have completed university education. In comparison to MOBs from other nations, Russian brides are better educated, as witnessed by a female literacy rate of 99.6% and school life expectancy of 15 years. In contrast, MOBs from other regions, such as rural Asia, are more likely to drop out of school to help support their families. Additionally, Russian values emphasize that a cultural education is equally as important as a technical education, so many Russian MOBs are well-read, having grown up on the literary works of Tolstoy, Pushkin, and Dostoevsky, are knowledgeable about theater, music, and the arts, and value opera and other aspects of high culture. Compared to MOBs from third-world nations who are less educated on

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28Patico, 311; Sahib et al., 62.
29Ibid., 65.
30Index Mundi literacy definition: person over age 15 who can read and write.
31“Russia Demographics Profile 2014.”
32Johnson, 69.
average, Russian brides may thus be seen as having more knowledge to contribute to conversation, making for better partners (once they learn English).

4. The Impact of the Internet

From print catalogue to cyberspace—the MOB industry has now taken to the World Wide Web. Although computers were being used as early as the 1960s to match individuals with potential mates, it was not until the explosion of the Internet in the early 1990s that internet matchmaking really took off.33 The advent of the Internet breathed new life into the MOB industry right as the Soviet Union collapsed, allowing Russian women and American men to take advantage of the new online matchmaking sites and relaxed travel and immigration restrictions. As a result of the incidental concurrence of these two events, the Russian MOB industry followed a different growth trajectory than other regions’ MOB industries.

As MOB agencies moved from conducting their business via print catalogue to the web, they quickly realized how much more the internet had to offer. Suddenly, information could be spread more rapidly via text, photo, and video; there was more room for description; catalogues of women could be kept more up to date; everyone could hide under the guise of anonymity; and it became even easier to spread the word about MOBs through a keyword search on any online search engine. In comparison to monthly or even quarterly catalogues, online matchmaking sites could “be updated regularly, inexpensively and with higher quality than print,” and they could reach “a wide global audience faster and more cheaply than any other medium.”34 Computers and the Internet have transformed MOB catalogue services into the multi-million-dollar industry that we see today.35

33Ibid., 12.
34Pehar, 171.
35Chun, 1155.
Furthermore, online matchmaking websites are even more profitable than the original print catalogues. Websites can be constantly updated to show ever-growing directories and ‘fresh’ pages of possible brides. One online agency, ‘A Foreign Affair,’ describes how running an online agency leads to greater efficiency for the company and lower costs for the customer: “Unlike other data bases, especially magazine formats, we are able to update our system on a daily basis [...] Also, due to the fact that we have no publishing costs our overhead is less than that of our competitors, enabling us to pass the savings on to [the customer].”36 Moreover, profile pages can include not only pictures, but videos and sound clips, all in vivid color and high definition, with little added cost to the MOB agency and indeed with an increase in profit, since agencies can charge additional fees to view supplemental media. To find and communicate with women on matchmaking websites, men must pay for every interaction, allowing the agency to profit even more. For example, on AnastasiaDate.com, men must purchase credits, which:

Are priced on a sliding scale, starting at $15.99 for 20 credits, and going up to $399.99 for 1,000. Each minute of simple, instant messaging-style chatting costs one credit. Special, premium smilies—like a vibrating, multi-color “LOL”—cost extra. Cam share (audio not enabled) costs six credits a minute. Video chat with voice costs even more.37

Essentially, every minute a man spends on a MOB website and every item that he clicks on will cost him money.

The anonymity of the Internet—that is, the ability to hide behind a username and a computer screen—also plays a role in the success of internet matchmaking, making it easier and less intimidating for men and women to sign up on these online matchmaking sites. In a way, the anonymity of the Internet helps to quell fears of self-disclosure: “By first meeting and communicating on the Internet, couples hope to filter out unsuitable partners in an anonymous

36Ibid., 1165.
37VanderMey.
setting.”

But more importantly, the privacy of the Internet helps men and women to be themselves. For example, when hidden behind a screen name, a man has no reason to fear any possible social stigma associated with his preferences in women: there is no one to pass judgment on him other than the woman he is interacting with.

Moreover, MOB internet sites are convenient. For the average American customer who has a time-consuming job and busy life, it can be difficult to find a wife in the ‘traditional’ way. This is why MOB sites are so popular, especially among the employed and educated. MOB sites are accessible from any internet-enabled device, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This aspect of MOB sites is highlighted in the findings of one study: “Western male customers can shop for women anytime, anywhere, in the easiest and fastest way. They can just click to view the women and then click to choose and order.” To find his future wife, all a man has to do is scroll down pages of beautiful women, without ever leaving the comfort of his home. Furthermore, the man can correspond with multiple women simultaneously, thus making more efficient use of his time as compared to traditional in-person dating. There is also the added convenience of real-time communication through the Internet. Gone are the days of writing letters and waiting for international mail to arrive. Communication through MOB websites, using channels such as email, instant messaging, and calling services, are all easy to use and offer instant results, provided that one’s communication partner is also online.

The most significant aspect of MOB websites, developed through years of computer programming innovation, however, is that, unlike their print catalogue counterparts, MOB

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38 Sahib et al., 62.
39 Rege, 494.
40 Johnson, 51; Rege, 494.
41 Angeles and Sunanta, 24.
42 Lloyd, 347.
43 Sahib et al., 62.
44 Angeles and Sunanta, 24.
websites are searchable. Advanced search engines can be programmed to ‘scientifically’ match men and women through the use of proprietary algorithms. A man can also take this search into his own hands—search tools on each website allow for customers to define and narrow down their preferences using many different parameters: new brides of the week, brides from a certain city or region, brides with specific physical or social characteristics such as ‘under 25 years old,’ ‘under 5’5” tall,’ ‘blonde,’ ‘no children,’ ‘Christian,’ ‘speaks English,’ et cetera (see Figure 3). Regardless of how one refines their search, the results are “page after page of small thumbnail images of women […] waiting to write to […] a future husband in North America, Europe, Australia, or New Zealand.” These sites seem to offer an endless amount of beautiful women right at one’s fingertips. All one has to do is register and pay a fee to find the love of their life—the ease of use of these sites makes them far more appealing than print catalogues.

5. How Have Websites Changed the Mail Order Bride Industry?

The MOB industry has grown dramatically since the proliferation of the World Wide Web in the 1990s. Through their websites, MOB agencies have successfully commercialized the practice of international matchmaking. The most striking change brought about by the transition from catalogue to website has been the sheer amount of information that can now be exchanged as a result of the multimedia capabilities of the Internet and innovations in computer programming. Since these interactions are now virtually instantaneous, relationships can develop at a faster pace than they previously could with letter writing. The amount of time it takes from the initial website registration, to finding a partner, to completing the fiancé visa paperwork has

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45Rege, 494.
46Angeles and Sunanta, 23–24.
47Johnson, 9.
48Jackson, 899.
decreased as the MOB industry has shifted from print to online. As a result, there is now a higher turnover rate for both potential brides and grooms.

As more and more couples have been brought together by MOB agencies, the industry’s popularity has increased. There are now hundreds, if not thousands, of women listed on every agency site. Consequently, by listing all of these women’s profiles in a single scrollable list, MOB websites have been able to create the illusion of an infinite number of foreign women searching for love (see Figure 4). Print catalogues have a set number of pages that is dictated by the cost of producing the catalogue, but there are no physical limitations to listing infinite numbers of women online other than the storage space of servers.

Because of this boundless expanse of women, there is also the opportunity for fictitious women, as well as fictitious men, to fraudulently take part in the MOB industry. The opportunity for scamming and ‘sweetheart swindles’ has always existed in this industry. However, the infinite breadth of the Internet, combined with the anonymity of MOB sites, has made scamming on MOB agency sites even easier than with MOB catalogues. Many men fear that the women in this industry may try to exploit them—that they are just looking for a fiancé visa and a way out of the country, while women fear that men are not as they describe themselves to be and that they could be poor, abusive, or could sell them into sex trafficking. There is even a fear of “being ‘scammed’ by professional letter writers who place fake photographs on the web in order to obtain money from a large number of men”—a fear which is mirrored by men who can analogously be scammed into sending money and gifts to fictitious women overseas.49 These are valid fears for both parties, and MOB agencies do what they can to ensure their customers’ safety and security. Some agency sites offer ‘trust ratings’ or ‘trust certificates’ on each profile (see Figure 5). However, the reasoning behind these trust ratings is usually not explained, so it is

49Luehrmann, 859.
difficult to understand why a profile has received a high or low rating. Nevertheless, having some sort of trust rating system is better than having no system at all.

Moreover, because the MOB industry is inherently transnational and conducted over anonymous Internet sites, it is difficult to impose rules and regulations on the industry, and even more difficult to obtain background verification checks of brides, grooms, or marriage brokers. If “victims do come forward, they are rarely offered any assistance from law enforcement agencies. Issues of vagueness in jurisdiction, lack of international collaboration, and low priority of dating scams work against victims of sweetheart swindles.” For American men who have access to money and private investigators, conducting a background check on a potential bride is a fairly easy task. But for Russian women with no funds, conducting a background check on a potential husband may not be a viable option: “a recruiter is difficult to distinguish from an honest broker, and if you encounter such a person, promising that soon your life will miraculously change, you need to take special care and thoroughly check all their promises.”

An additional change brought about by the movement of MOB services online is that modern MOB websites now often provide resources to help prepare both men and women as to what to expect when they find a successful match. Today’s online agencies offer tips on letter writing, setting up a profile, information on visas, and on the history and culture of the region the bride is from. It was previously impossible to provide this information in the print catalogue era because of the costs associated with publishing such a large amount of information. Some online matchmaking organizations have even developed entire inclusive enterprises, ranging from the

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50 Rege, 505.
51 Ibid., 506.
52 Так бывает, что вербовщика сложно отличить от добросовестного посредника, и если вы столкнулись с таким человеком, обещающим, что скоро ваша жизнь чудесным образом изменится, необходима особая осторожность и доскональная проверка всех обещаний. Bokontaeva and Isakova, 2.
53 Chun, 1166.
actual set-up and maintenance of the website to language courses, photography studios, translator services, and travel agencies. In this way, these matchmaking organizations have created the perfect one-stop-shop to market oneself to find one’s perfect husband or wife.54

One such example of a one-stop-shop MOB agency is the Virginia Matchmaking Agency (VMA) in Yoshkar-Ola, Russia. The VMA was “founded literally months after the first internet server was made available in the city in 1996,” and offers its clients “local and international employment contracting, visa service and flight tickets for both foreign citizens visiting Russia and Russians traveling abroad, a digital photo studio, a real estate agency and a language school.”55 The services offered by the VMA, however, are partitioned from the actual process of matchmaking. VMA has a separate subcontractor, Maksim Introductions, which conducts all of the matchmaking business. This subcontractor places its “customers' photos and biographical information on Virginia's website and use[s] Virginia's bank connections to receive payments from abroad (in exchange for a commission which usually amounts to 50% of the sum transferred).”56 Thus, VMA is an umbrella organization that works with multiple subcontractors to provide everything their clients need. Its strategy has been:

To become the one intermediary necessary for establishing relationships between Western men and Russian women, bypassing further intermediaries in the West and outdoing post-Soviet competitors by offering the greatest diversity of services and the best precautions against fraud.57

By separating each of its services while still keeping everything under one roof, the VMA is better able to monitor the actions of its customers, weeding out any potential scammers or persons looking to use the agency to aid in sex trafficking practices.

54Luehrmann, 858–59, 870.
55Ibid., 858–59.
56Ibid., 858–59.
57Ibid., 860.
6. Successful Online Profiles

To stay competitive in today’s online bride market, hopeful brides must learn how to market themselves to attract the best suitors by creating successful online profiles. This is no easy task. In fact, “there is an entire science to it: how to take the pictures to accentuate certain characteristics, what order to list your priorities in a partner, how to characterize yourself, what types of contact information to give out, even what specific site to use.”58

The typical online profile is broken into four parts: photos, basic information, description of self, and description of what the woman is looking for in a husband. The photos showcased on each woman’s online profile are the most important part of the profile page. Each woman has one main headshot which is designed to attract men to click on her profile, and may have other photos available that require a fee to view. The way these photos are shot helps to further the stereotypes of Russian women: “close-ups of the face and upper body shot slightly from above—create the impression of submissive, vulnerable creatures waiting to be rescued from their hard life.”59 A professional photographer will show the MOB “how to hold her head and hands, and how to stand so that her chest and hips [are] accented and the light show[s] her thin yet curvy figure.”60 Most online matchmaking sites even give tips for taking the best photos possible. One agency’s page states, “No matter how sad you may feel, try to smile. The smile is an integral element [. . .] of Western culture, and without a smile you will receive far fewer letters. Do not transfer your problems onto your potential grooms.”61

The use of cosmetics and certain types of clothing in these photos is also encouraged. One agency’s site recommends using one’s clothing to underline one’s attractiveness to the

58Ibid., 858–59.
59Ibid., 862.
60Johnson, 79.
61Luehrmann, 870.
opposite sex. Simply put: “A woman in a dress attracts men more than in trouser[s].” There is also special attention paid to set apart Russian women on these sites from the American women that would-be husbands see in their day-to-day lives. Women are encouraged to wear makeup to heighten their femininity and accentuate their exotic features. Moreover, the women are told to wear multiple outfits in their photos, ranging from sexy lingerie or swimsuits to more matronly, church-appropriate clothing, in order to show that the potential bride is compatible to every aspect of American life.

The importance of these photos cannot be overstated. While some women do include amateur or candid shots of themselves, most of the pictures are professionally taken. There are even photography studios that specialize in MOB pictures, at which a woman can rent clothing for the photo shoot. In the words of one hopeful Russian bride, Valentina, “I think that’s the only thing that matters, really, a good photograph. Everything else, including your age and whether you can speak English or not, is unimportant, as long as you have a good photograph. Then you’ll get lots of letters.”

The basic information section of the online profile contains data on the woman’s name, date of birth, age, weight, height, city of residence, marital status (single or divorced), religious affiliation, educational background, and occupation. Some sites even offer breast, hip, and waist measurements. Several of these factors can greatly affect a bride’s marriage success. Stating that one lives in a major city is associated with greater success in the marriage market, even though living in a large city would make the bride more cosmopolitan and arguably less conservative and traditional than a bride from a village—the exact characteristics that men

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62Ibid., 871.
63Pati, 316; Johnson, 10.
64Ibid., 10, 51.
65Ibid., 78–79.
66Sahib et al., 71; Angeles and Sunanta, 23; Pehar, 171.
repeatedly state that they are searching for. Speaking English well also increases the chance of a woman finding a partner. Additionally, men prefer thinner women who are also shorter than them. Interestingly, “factors such as the woman’s age, previous marital status and the presence of children make little difference to whether or not she is successful in finding a partner.” This is in counterpoint to the fact that most agencies stress the youth of their brides on their websites.

The self-description section contains information about “the woman’s knowledge of English, her attractiveness, her feelings towards children and often a mention of her hobbies and interests.” There are several recurring themes in this section: ideas about family life, domesticity, femininity, and loyalty. A typical self-description reads: “I am intelligent, kind, faithful, tender, loving, caring, romantic, cheerful and I love children. I have a son age 10.” These descriptions are very structured, comparable to a department store's listing of merchandise, and further exemplify the commercialization of the industry. The amount of similarity across these descriptions indicates that mentioning certain hobbies like cooking, knitting, and aerobics garners “a positive response from the audience they [are] addressing.”

The profile section devoted to the description of what a woman wants in a husband varies across different agency profiles, but some common themes are “the attractiveness of the partner, his ability to fulfill a ‘provider’ role, his feelings for children and often a request for someone

67 Sahib et al., 75–78.
68 “The average woman who does not speak good English has an 8.5% chance of finding a partner, compared with 14% for women who do speak good English.” Ibid., 75.
69 “The average woman, who is 56 kg in weight, has a 10.7% chance of finding a partner; if her weight is 54 kg, her chance of finding a partner increases to 12%.” Ibid., 75.
70 Ibid., 77.
71 Ibid., 71.
72 Ibid., 11.
73 Lloyd, 346.
74 Johnson, 11.
who is interested in marriage.” Many of these descriptions specifically ask for men “who can fulfill the role of being financially supportive and caring providers.” Some examples from this section include: “I would like to meet an honest, sociable, strong and caring man (aged 25–40) with whom I can enjoy life,” and “I wish to meet an honest man, courageous, faithful, sincere and kind. Up to age 43.” Furthermore, if a woman mentions in the comments section that she is looking for a physically attractive partner, she is more likely to find a partner than a woman who does not mention this trait. This may be explained by the idea that “men may reject profiles that do not mention the attractiveness of a partner as a signal that the woman is overly eager to find a partner, and therefore not very discriminating.”

Notably, the information in these last two sections, the self-description and description of what a woman wants in a husband, is information that was not always readily available. In print catalogues, there was no room to publish this much information, and as such, men would have to write letters to the women, hoping that they would answer all their questions. By publishing this information online, the first few letters’ worth of information is already available to the men, so that they do not have to waste time communicating with an unsuccessful match. This further expedites the process of finding a bride and allows for online MOB agencies to have a higher customer turnover rate than with print catalogues.

7. Impacts of Money Transfer Technology

One of the innovations prompted by the advent of the Internet has been the development of money transfer technologies such as PayPal, Western Union, and MoneyGram, as well as the development of trust certificates that allow one to enter his or her bank or credit card information

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75 Sahib et al., 71.
76 Ibid., 64.
77 Johnson, 11.
78 Sahib et al., 75–77.
online to make a payment. These technologies have made it easier than ever before to send money to MOB agencies or directly to the women themselves. They have also aided in the commercialization of the industry and changed the way brides are “bought.”

Across both the print catalogue and online agency platforms, there are several ways in which money exchange can occur. The first is through subscription fees. Most catalogues and certain Internet agencies charge a flat subscription fee for the men to view their listed brides. The second form of money exchange is through purchase of individual items. This system of payment is more common for Internet sites that “charge customers based on the number of women they wish to contact, often offering bulk rate discounts for customers who select numerous women,” with average prices ranging from $2-10 per woman for an address.  

The way these money transfer companies operate also helps the MOB agencies disguise how much the customer is actually paying. For example, with PayPal, a man only needs to sign in to his account once to activate a “one-click” payment system, so that he does not have to enter his bank or credit card information each time he wishes to make a purchase. MOB agencies exploit this, offering many low-cost items that a man can purchase to send to women, such as gifts for them and their children, flowers, and calling cards. However, when the total bill comes, it can be astonishingly high—current estimated total costs of bringing a foreign bride to America range from $3,000 to $20,000. This total cost is made up of:

The costs of presents, flowers, telephone calls, postage for certified mail services, translating services, possibly a computer and Internet connection for the woman in Russia, the airfare for the trip over to meet her, plus the costs of visa fees and staying in Russia for the man, and the expensive application fees, official medical exams, trips to the capital for embassy interviews for the woman, [and] her travel to the States.

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79 Lloyd, 347; Scholes, 7.
80 Johnson, 134; Chun, 1167.
81 Johnson, 134.
Each purchase allows MOB agencies to skim off the top. In fact, “it is estimated that mail-order bride companies make as much as $6,000 to $10,000 per client, with some agencies claiming to serve as many as 15,000 clients per year.”

Such high profit margins allow agencies such as AnastasiaDate.com to reap over $110 million in profits each year.

82 Lloyd, 345.
83 VanderMey.
84 Lloyd, 345; Pehar, 172.
85 Patico, 307.
86 VanderMey.
89 “Сколько российских женщин выехало за рубеж, заключив браки с иностранцами, неизвестно: точная статистика на этот счет отсутствует” (Maksimova, 161).

87 Conclusion

The number of brides that make their way to America with the help of MOB agencies is sizable. Although there is no box to check on a fiancé visa for a MOB, thus making official tallies impossible, unofficial tallies estimate that 2,000-4,000 American men find foreign brides through the MOB industry each year. According to the Moscow Center for Social Aid to Migrants, it is estimated that from 1993 to 2003, “75,000 Russian women had emigrated to the United States in order to marry.” Moreover, by reviewing United States immigration statistics, the Tahirih Justice Center estimated that internationally, between 10,000 and 15,000 marriages resulted from the work of 400 MOB agencies in the year 2010. Nevertheless, these numbers must be taken with a grain of salt. Because the MOB industry is inherently transnational, “the amount of Russian women that have gone abroad, marrying foreigners, is not known: precise statistical data on that is lacking.” Since there is no real way to track these marriages, especially once fiancé visas expire, it is difficult to gather accurate statistics.

Furthermore, because the MOB industry is based on gender and racial stereotypes and the exploitation of women, there are certain negative aspects to the industry that must be noted. Although there are happy couples that start families and enjoy long and prosperous marriages,
there are also some couples that have abusive and unhealthy relationships. Just as the women may be taking advantage of the men for their wealth and financial stability, the men may be taking advantage of the women’s docile character and dependency:

Marriage for the purposes of exploitation (including the use of the “mail order brides” system), includes:
- For the purpose of using the person in the household (maid);
- For the purpose of forced pregnancy and childbirth;
- For the purpose of caring for sick and elderly relatives, children, etc. 88

Likewise, abuse and domestic violence are unfortunately common for couples brought together by the MOB industry. This is one of the tragic results of the way these women are marketed by the agencies: as beautiful dolls ready for purchase from a faraway land. After all, in order to marry a MOB, a man must literally add her to his shopping cart. 89

Conjointly, for all the good that MOB agencies do in helping to set up correspondence and guiding new couples through the visa and marriage processes, they are also to blame for perpetuating unrealistic stereotypes. According to one MOB agency’s website: “It’s much easier to teach English to a Russian lady, than to teach an American woman how to be a good wife.” 90

The unrealistic stereotypes of docile housewives that MOB agencies propagate often do not mirror the personalities of the street-smart, educated Russian women that find their way to America. In fact, many MOBs can be described as “skilled professionals with bank accounts and cell phones, who enjoy both material and social assets to take with them on their migration

88“Браки в целях эксплуатации (включая использование системы «невесты по почте»), в том числе:
- для использования человека в домашнем хозяйстве (домработницы);
- для принудительного вынашивания и рождения детей;
- для обслуживания больных и престарелых родственников, детей и т.п.” (Bokontaeva and Isakova, 3).
89Johnson, 9.
90Ibid., 116.
routes.” They are brides with a goal: to find a man who can aid them in migration to the West and the creation of a stable life.

Although the dating and marriage process has changed dramatically over the past century, there are some aspects that have changed very little. Marriage still serves a utilitarian purpose in creating the social networks on which families are built. It is still meant to be a union based on love and trust, promising to last ‘forever,’ ‘till death do us part.’ As more and more men and women struggle to find ‘true love’ and the romantic partner of their dreams, the MOB industry continues to grow, with no end in sight: “There is no evidence that the practice of ordering mail-order brides in the United States, nor in other consumer nations, is slowing down.” As new technologies continue to make it easier and less expensive to communicate, the MOB industry will continue to evolve, attempting to keep up with market forces and changes in customers’ preferences. But one aspect of the MOB industry will remain forever: there will always be women looking to run from their problems, and there will always be men willing to pay for a beautiful wife.

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91 Del Rosario, 267.
92 Lloyd, 358.
9. Appendix

Table 1<sup>93</sup>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>% of Total Population</th>
<th>Total Males</th>
<th>Total Females</th>
<th>Male to Female Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-14 Years</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
<td>11,980,138</td>
<td>11,344,818</td>
<td>1.056 : 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-24 Years</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>7,828,947</td>
<td>7,482,143</td>
<td>1.046 : 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-54 Years</td>
<td>45.8%</td>
<td>31,928,886</td>
<td>33,319,671</td>
<td>0.958 : 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64 Years</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>8,408,637</td>
<td>11,287,153</td>
<td>0.745 : 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 + Years</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>5,783,983</td>
<td>13,105,896</td>
<td>0.441 : 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1<sup>94</sup>

Ad from front page of Dallas’ Southern Mercury newspaper, June 5, 1890.

<sup>93</sup>“Russia Demographics Profile 2014.”
<sup>94</sup>Bosse.
Figure 2:

Pages of a black and white bride printed catalogue.

Figure 3:

Screenshot of search parameters for “Russian Brides Club” matchmaking site.

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95 Civillini.
96 “Search Parameters.”
Figure 4

Screenshot of main photo gallery of “A Volga Girl” matchmaking site.

Figure 5

Screenshot showing low “trust level” from “Russian Brides Club” matchmaking site.

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97 “Main Photo Gallery.”
98 “Profile of “Your_Shyly_Smile.””
Works Cited


